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Faux, Flawed, Failed: Alice Fulton's Fuzzy Poetry and Poetics

on *Cascade Experiment* by Alice Fulton

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The concept of identity is one of the most fundamental elements of classical thinking, classical logic and mathematics. From the premises that A is not not-A and that 1 is not 2 all manner of successful syllogisms and solutions have developed. The twentieth century, however, introduces fuzzy thinking, fuzzy logic and math, a form of conceptualization in which the strict rules of identity do not apply. A and not-A, 1 and 2 are no longer separate but interfused, even joined, perhaps paradoxically, by their difference, by the gap between. Though fuzzy thinking, a highly technical tool of logicians and mathematicians, may seem some sort of verification of deep, spiritual truths—that there is no set boundary between Self and Other, that, as Hindu religious writing proclaims, "Thou art That"—it should be remembered that such fuzzy thinking will be said by those logicians and mathematicians to work only if it performs well, if it more accurately can hit a target, if it can turn a larger profit. The spiritual version of the fuzzy should have the same demands; the fuzzy must perform well, encourage better insights and deeper understanding, to be valued, to be called thinking, rather than dreaming or a delusion, at all. Without such a check, some huckster will use fuzzy math to convince some sucker that 2 + 2 = 5. And someone else will use fuzzy logic as an excuse to not think, to not care about the other who is, after all, just a part of oneself. Without such a check, the fuzzy becomes not a lever for enlightenment, but a mere excuse for the same old routine.

Alice Fulton is a poet and a theoretician who, for over 25 years, has tried to make much of, and even to occupy, this new fuzzy space. As many of her notebook entries (collected in *The Poet's Notebook: Excerpts from the Notebooks of Contemporary American Poets*. Ed. Stephen Kuusisto, et al. NY: W.W. Norton, 1995) attest to, Fulton refers to and privileges the gap, the between. One entry mulls over the possibilities opened up by fuzzy logic, stating, "Conventional logic is based on the idea that a statement…is either true or false. Fuzzy logic deals with the degree of truth, expressed 'as an assigned value between zero and one.' The choice is no longer zero or one. Non-duality is a continuum rather than an either/or." Other entries extend this interest by noting a preference for "thirdness rather than binary thought" and clarify, quoting Marjorie Garber's Vested Interests, "'third'—describes 'a space of possibility…challenges the possibility of harmonic and stable binary symmetry.' Third questions the idea of one: of identity, self-sufficiency, self-knowledge." Fulton confirms her beliefs and makes them even a bit fuzzier in a later interview with Christanne Miller (in *Contemporary Literature* 38.4 (Winter 1997)): "One of the things I like about the notion of betweenness or third space—actually, it doesn't have to be third; it can be fourth, or fifth, or thousandth—is that it stands outside of polarity and dualism."

A main dualism Fulton herself has long been interested in standing outside of is the dualism created by the either-or debate that raged in American poetry in the last two decades of the twentieth century, the debate between disruptive, dense, theoretically-oriented Language poetry and the more mainstream tradition of transparent plainspoken verse. In a notebook entry, Fulton makes clear her particular betweenness, stating that she is "…neither

a 'language' poet nor quite in the mainstream." Clarifying her stance in the Miller interview, Fulton states that she "love[s]" the mainstream, the "lyric tradition," even while she shares with the Language poets "an interest in critical theory and philosophy—in ideas and linguistic issues, the powers of language, language as structure…," and she concludes, "And so I'm between two worlds. Neither-nor."

Fulton has been greatly rewarded for her explorations of, and self-positioning in, the between. The author of six books of poetry, including Dance Script with Electric Ballerina, Palladium, Powers of Congress, Sensual Math, Felt, and, now, *Cascade Experiment: Selected Poems*, and a book of essays, *Feeling as a Foreign Language*, Fulton has received many prestigious awards, including an Associated Writing Programs Award in Poetry for *Dance Script with Electric Ballerina*, a National Poetry Series book award for *Palladium*, the 2002 Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry from the Library of Congress for Felt, six inclusions in *The Best American Poetry* series, a Guggenheim fellowship, and a "genius grant" from the MacArthur Foundation. She has judged numerous poetry prizes, including the National Book Award, the Lamont Prize, Sarabande Books Award, and the Walt Whitman Award, and she has taught at the University of Michigan and now teaches at Cornell. Attendant upon such appraisals and promotions, Fulton' work has been lavishly praised, linked with luminous predecessors; a review of Sensual Math in Publishers Weekly claims that "in many ways…[Fulton] may be Dickinson's postmodern heir" (Fulton website. Available: WWW: http//www.people.cornell.edu /pages/af89).

If in part excused by the persuasive power of cultural context and Fulton's self-representations, such estimations of the value of Fulton's work still are radically mistaken, terribly over-inflated. It is true that, in a time when an either-or debate raged between Language and more mainstream poetry, the examination of the seemingly largely excluded middle was a strong, smart, and necessary approach to thinking about and writing poetry; the middle ground had to be explored and exploited, and, thus, Fulton, who dwells in and even theorizes that space in her poetics, can seem a confident, intelligent dweller there, someone making a significant contribution. However, seen away from these debates, with the advantage of distance, investigated closely as it cools outside of its context, Fulton's work suffers, revealing itself for what it is: not a significant third option, but merely a messy amalgamation of Language and plainspoken poetry, a work not of someone who has made an important discovery but of someone who is radically self-divided, who writes dramatic monologues but distrusts voice, who writes about immersion, but whose jumpy poems enact and so encourage little lingering, who writes arguments but distrusts, or cannot manage, logic. Fulton does not so much dwell in the third space of possibility so much as waver and hedge there. She admits as much in an interview with Barbara J. Petoskey (in *The Writer's Chronicl*e (May/Summer 1998)), stating, "I've always had the desire…to unveil, to be very truthful and naked…in the poems. And then there's also the desire for self-preservation that's very deep in humans, to pull back, to be more guarded. The battle between estrangement and engagement has been there since my first book." This battle, in which Fulton's theory is the worst perpetrator and her poems are the most damaged victims, can be seen more clearly once Fulton's self-representations, her theory and the selected poems themselves, are examined.

As Fulton's poetic theory is a central site for her self-representation, and as she in fact states in her collection of essays *Feeling as a Foreign Language: The Good Strangeness of Poetry* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1999) that she is working out her theory in her poetry, a close look at the theory is important. In two separate essays, "Of Formal, Free, and Fractal Verse:

Singing the Body Eclectic" and "Fractal Amplifications: Writing in Three Dimensions," Fulton puts forward her theory of "fractal poetry." In "Fractal Amplifactions," Fulton states:

In the seventies, the mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot found that certain structures once thought to be "chaotic" contained a deep logic or pattern. The communication between roots and leaves; the oscillations of cotton futures; the movement of spiraling funnel galaxies; the branching of arteries and veins; and the curved, nonlinear structure of space-time itself are examples of chaotic phenomena found to contain fractal designs. Mandelbrot coined the word fractals (from the Latin fractus, meaning "irregular or fragmented") to describe such configurations….I proposed [in the previous essay on fractals] that we view the eccentric yet beautifully structured forms of nature as analogues and call the poetry of irregular forms fractal verse.

Fulton repeatedly makes clear that fractal poetry is the poetry of the between. Citing architect Nigel Reading's "Dynamical Symmetries," which states that "'Pure Newtonian causality is an incorrect (finite) view, but then again, so is the aspect of complete uncertainty and (infinite) chance,'" Fulton points out that "[t]he nature of reality now is 'somewhere… between.'" Fulton also states, "Just a fractal science analyzed the ground between chaos and Euclidean order, fractal poetics could explore the field between gibberish and traditional forms. It could describe and make visible a third space: the nonbinary in-between." Elsewhere, Fulton states that the fractal poem exists "[o]n the ground between set forms and aimlessness…."

At first, Fulton's theory sounds promising. A real departure from organic theories of poetry, it could help to privilege a new kind of poetry, a hyper-repetitive or incremental poetry perhaps analogous to the fugue—a structure Fulton mentions in her essay, "To Organize a Waterfall"—that might approximate the not-quite and both chaotic and self-similar—"[a] self-similar mechanism is, formally speaking, a kind of cascade, with each stage creating details smaller than those of the preceding stages"—aspects of the fractal. The fractal, one could say, replaces the paradigm of the musical score with the paradigm of the loop. With poetic roots in medieval choruses and hymnal refrain, and in Modernist constructions, including T.S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" and much of Gertrude Stein's oeuvre, the fractal poem could be embodied in masterworks such as Paul Celan's "Deathfugue" and John Taggart's "Slow Song for Mark Rothko," each poem growing by slow, repetitive accretion.

The trouble with Fulton's theory is that none of this happens. Instead, Fulton makes a mess of things, bleeding her potentially interesting theory dry by turning it into at best a lightweight surrealism or at worst a trite descriptive tool. That fractal poetry is actually a vague surrealism is evident in Fulton's distinction between two kinds of fractals: geometric and random. According to Fulton, geometric fractals are a type of fractal that "repeats an identical pattern at various scales." This notion of the fractal, however—even though it is the popular notion of the self-repeating fractal—is not sufficient for Fulton, for such a definition might allow a seemingly regular poem, "a sonnet or an ode," to be a fractal poem. To avoid such a problematic result, Fulton dictates that a proper geometric fractal poem must be spiced up with some surrealist juxtaposition: "But let's suppose that the poem's rhythm is also oxymoronic: that a smooth, regular line is purposefully followed by a rambunctious or jagged utterance. If repeated throughout, this juxtaposition would constitute the poem's form." The random fractal takes this process a step further. According to Fulton, "Random fractals…introduce some elements of chance," and an example of

random fractal composition is "opening a book at random and using the metrical pattern happened upon as a contributing factor in your verse." But this process is really no different from surrealist methodology with its wild associationism, juxtaposition, and automatism; the only difference is Fulton's insecurity and prudishness: some elements of chance, the assumption one writes around books, the fact that she doesn't ask us to open a vein at random.

Additionally, fractal poetry doesn't encourage revolution so much as ask for analysis. Fractal theory wants to help readers see deep form in the seemingly free, to remind readers to take free verse seriously. According to Fulton, for whom "…asymmetrical or turbulent composition may be the essence of twentieth-century aesthetics," the notion of the fractal "should encourage us to search for patterns within the turbulent forms of art." She continues, "Fractal form may allow a more precise measure of those poetic shapes that aren't governed by the strategies of prosody….We must develop our ability to recognize subtle, hidden, and original patterns as well as the more time-honored (and more obvious) metrical orders of prosody." Paradoxically, though, because Fulton includes in her discussion of fractal poetics a long list of over thirty "formal schemes" to look for in poems, ranging from "allusions" and "conceits" to "the poem's visual form on the page" to "asyndeton" and "polysyndeton," it seems that just about anything, whether geometric or random or sonnet or exquisite corpse, described in enough detail could be a fractal poem.

Fulton, though, never seems to see her contradictions, her confusion of descriptive and prescriptive goals, and at the end of "Of Formal, Free, and Fractal Verse: Singing the Body Eclectic," she simply lumps together all of her conclusions in "a tentative exploration of fractal precepts" without realizing that many of her precepts are at odds with other parts of her argument. Even though she states that "any line when examined closely (or magnified) will reveal itself to be as richly detailed as was the larger poem from which it was taken," Fulton still gives directions on how to write a somehow proper fractal poem. But even these directions are confused, doing away with the different demands—to repeat or not to repeat—of the geometric and the random. While Fulton maintains some link with the geometric fractal by stating that "the poem will contain an infinite regression of details, a nesting of pattern within pattern (an endless embedding of the shape into itself, recalling Tennyson's idea of the inner infinity)," she allows and even calls for working against such repetitions by stating that "all directions of motion and rhythm will be equally probable."

Though Fulton's fractal theory is vague, contradictory, and unhelpful, and though the Language and plainspoken debates are losing power and interest, fractal theory, strangely, is still considered significant. A review of Feeling as a Foreign Language in The Missouri Review (on Fulton's website) states that the book's "lasting contribution…lies in the theory of 'fractal verse,'" and a chapter, called "Fractal Amplifications," written by Fulton, appears in a new poetry writing handbook, An Exaltation of Forms. There are many possible reasons for this—including a desperate desire for some new theory, any new theory, after the lively debates of the 80's and 90's, a growing cult of personality, and a decline in rhetorical literacy—though, of course, none of them is good. Regardless of the reason, the result is the same: Fulton's accomplishment has been to prettify surrealism and resell it. Doing little to actually create the taste by which she will be judged, Fulton, herself once an advertising agent, has repackaged the taste for surrealism, given it a flashy, somewhat sophisticated—"fractal," rather than, say, "fuzzy"—academic, even—ooo!—scientific label, and put it on the market.

Whatever others get or think they get from fractal theory, it's clear what Fulton gets: the license to not have to work on voice in poetry. According to Fulton, while "[b]oth

organic and fractal form compare poetry to structures in the natural world," the forms differ in that "[o]rganic form…extends [the] prizing of nature to imitations of the 'natural' speaking voices" and fractal poetry "regards voice as a construct: a consciously made assemblage of dictions, meters, rhetorics, gestures, and tones." Though Fulton claims that this path was consciously chosen—in her interview with Christanne Miller she states that she "decided" that the quest to "find a voice," so often suggested in the 70's would not be hers, that she would instead deal with language "as a construct"—Fulton's oeuvre makes clear that the turn from voice was a necessity. Fulton has long had trouble with voice in her poetry. Nowhere is this clearer than in her attempts to do other voices in dramatic monologues that, while concentrated in the middle books, permeate her body of work. While many characters—including a deep-sea diver, a stripper, and Apollo, just to name a few—speak in Fulton's poems, the most striking feature of the monologues is that they all sound and behave alike, and very much like Fulton when she is writing in the third person about her own life or other subjects. Though Fulton states in an interview with Alec Marsh (*TriQuarterly* 98 (Winter 1996-97)) that part of her poetic training was copying out Shakespeare's and Keats's soliloquies, her poems, dramatic monologues or not, are rarely engaged with one particular incident or object; rather, they often are more panoramic, and read like checklists that contain bad humor, puns, reference to detailed, often scientific knowledge, critique of organized religion, and some comment on the plight of women.

Though, according to Fulton's interview with Christanne Miller, the poem "Fuzzy Feelings" contains some true autobiographical information, including "[her] niece's funeral, an occasion of real, rather than 'fuzzy' feelings," the poem is largely a dramatic monologue of someone in a dentist's office daydreaming, perhaps under the influence of novocaine. Even in a poem about a supposedly altered state, the ingredients are all there: there's the title's pun, and bad humorous suggestions—"Is beige a castrate of copper, pink, and taste?"—there are scientific facts about emeralds—"natural / emeralds have defects / known as inclusions"—and the universe—which "was smooth before it loomed / itself to a jacquard / of defects known as textures"—and there's mention of troublesome men—including one with "over 364 girlfriends / and seduction rooms in every shade" and one who thinks of sex like football, "[t]o stick it through / the uprights"—and the panoramic treatment one might expect from a drugged, wandering mind. The trouble with Fulton's work is that many others of her poems tend to meander similarly.

In "For in Them the Void Becomes Eloquent," a poem in the third person that critiques religion by showing women's plight, comparing the work of a "light housekeeper" to the work of God—"In Him the void became eloquent"—are the expected puns—the housekeeper "stressed the light / in her job title" so that she came to think of herself as "[a] lighthouse keeper"—bad, sporadic humor—as in this awful line break: "Once she'd worked for a Home: the old stowed away / their mashed potatoes in the dresser drawers"—a little science—when told the girl uses her pay to buy records, the reader is informed that "[o]ne day light would scalpel into grooves / and make a cleaner music"—and, again, the poem feels like a contrived checklist. For example, the mention of the Home, not at all integral to the poem, seems an excuse for a line break that simply couldn't be discarded, and while the compact disc refers to the poem's theme of light and is a transition to thinking about the young woman's future, it is not at all tied in with concerns for the woman—readers are never told that this housekeeper is privy to any visions of the future, let alone those including new developments in sound recording technology. Certainly, as Fulton claims in an essay, "[t]o approach otherness, not clinically but heartfeltly, is difficult," but it's not clear the other has really even been considered in Fulton's work.

In "The European Theater," the first section in Power of Congress's "OVERLORD" (unselected), a longer poem in which a World War II soldier speaks, again are gathered all of the elements listed above. Puns? Well, the section title contains the word "theater" and the poem opens, "During the staging…" Check. Bad humor? Ironically, the men "were watching a flicker called 'Is Everybody Happy?'" Check. Reference to detailed knowledge? The soldier admires "the plane's fuselage, / graceful as a Powers model / in the line of female pulchritude / with bands of black-and-white / distemper to signify her Allied status." Check. Some meditation on the difference between men and women? "[F]emales paint their faces / for attention, and men paint theirs / to disappear." Check. Critique of organized religion? After a "last low Mass" a Colonel holds up a bayonet and "hoped to God he'd plunge it / in some Nazi bastard's heart…" Check. Panorama complete.

Though Fulton claims in her interview with Alec Marsh that when she was writing "OVERLORD" she tried—in her own words, like a Keatsian "chameleon poet"—"to imagine [her] way into the consciousness of a soldier in World War II, who found himself in that particular historical predicament" and "to engage with sensibilities and thoughts that [she] wouldn't have encountered otherwise," "OVERLORD" largely is one more projection of Fulton's consciousness, the limited set of sensibilities and thoughts Fulton—who claims in an essay, "[M]y poems are always about several things; they have ostensible and embedded subjects, occupations and preoccupations"—regularly has. She admits this, oddly, among her claims to the contrary, but without any sense that this constitutes a contradiction or a failing; she states plainly in the Marsh interview that "[m]ore deeply, the poem's concerns had nothing to do with character," revealing that the poem was only one more vehicle for her concerns and involvements, thinking "about the connection between childbirth and warfare as triumphant spheres of human endeavor." Since it is quite clear that the voices in Fulton's dramatic monologues are all mouthpieces lipsyncing Fulton's words, it seems Fulton is much less a Keatsian chameleon poet, and much more a poet of what Keats calls "the egotistical sublime," a poetry that has a palpable design, a domineering intent, for its readers.

Because Fulton's work always has too much in it, she can't—even though she hopes in her essays that others might, as a result of reading her work—think deeply. A central casualty of this inability is the ability to make a successful argument. This is clear in "Cascade Experiment," or "Shy One," as it is retitled in *Cascade Experiment*. "Cascade Experiment" is a poem about belief that tries to argue, it seems, toward the final stanza's idea that "believing a thing's true / can bring about that truth." To get to this point, Fulton states theories about faith—"Because faith creates its verification," "Because faith in facts can help create those facts," "Because truths we don't suspect have a hard time / making themselves felt"—then supports them with some information from the sciences. For example, as evidence of the third proposition, she states, "[A]s when thirteen species / of whiptail lizards composed entirely of females / stay undiscovered due to bias / against such things existing…."

In a discussion of this poem, in the essay "To Organize a Waterfall," Fulton herself is divided about what this poem does. Fulton sees the poem as, and wants the poem to be, both free flow and organized, logical structure; she wants the poem to "pour down the page," yet, to describe the poem, she uses terms that suggest logical connection and sophisticated rhetoric, stating, "The poem's cause-and-effect movement goes like this:…amendments, clauses, augmentations." And even while Fulton says elsewhere that her poems aren't strictly about anything, she notes that this poem has some "real investments," including "the way our present beliefs affect or distort our future knowledge; the unreliability of human perception; the old-fashioned question of whether consciousness might in any way

continue after death." In fact, Fulton calls the poem an argument, though "one slim argument," for the survival of consciousness after death.

To whatever extent this confusing poem is an argument, it is an unsuccessful argument, and a bad, shopworn one at that. Consider the poem's first stanza:

> Because faith creates its verification,
> And reaching you will be no harder than believing
> In a planet's caul of plasma,
> Or interacting with a comet
> In its perihelion passage, no harder
> Than considering what sparking of the vacuum, cosmological
> Impromptu flung me here, a paraphrase, perhaps,
> For some denser, more difficult being,
> A subsidiary instance, easier to grasp
> Than the span I foreshadow, of which I am a variable,
> My stance is passional toward the universe and you.

There are many problems here. For example, the first line may be, to whatever extent it is, convincing due not to fact but mere word choice. This line persuades only to the extent that one already believes in or has faith, spiritual faith. It is much less convincing if faith is replaced by a much more secular "imagination," or an even less poetic "perspective." Additionally, Fulton practices in this stanza what is known in philosophy and religion as "theology of the gaps," an old ploy that tries to install God in whatever gaps science has left in its description of things, like Fulton's cosmological spark, leaping from the unknown—"Mystery exists"—to unfounded conclusions like "God exists"—Fulton elsewhere confirms that this stanza's "denser, more difficult being" is God. And, once God exists, all things become possible, and one can easily skip to further conclusions, such as "An afterlife exists."

However, the deep problem with any supposed logic in this poem is that the poem mixes two different kinds of arguments: the deductive and the inductive. The first stanza is the beginning of a deductive argument. That is, this initial stanza—unlike the next two stanzas, which offer some evidence for their claims—employs numerous clauses, not to argue that faith creates verification but merely to assert certain facts, simply claiming as true many features of the universe. In it, everything, including God, is given. One would assume the rest of the poem might draw conclusions from this premise, and, in fact, the poem's conclusion—which states, "…let my glance be passional / toward the universe and you"—is largely a repetition of the assertion of the conclusion of the first stanza. However, the rest of the poem is an inductive argument, employing evidence, like the fact that those all-female whiptail lizards really do exist, to try to make the case that "faith creates its verification" actually is true.

This mess has some use. The poem's opening is more likely to be accepted as an assertion rather than a conclusion. If the first and third stanzas are switched, as they should be in an inductive argument—to be somewhat logical, the poem should start with the notion that "truths we don't suspect have a hard time / making themselves felt," then argue that "faith in facts can help create those facts," then "faith creates its verification"—it might be more difficult to accept that "faith creates its verification" for it would have been shown to not—faith didn't verify that there were thirteen species of all-female whiptail lizards; the careful scientific studies after initial perceptions were corrected did that.

According to Fulton, the term "cascade experiment" refers to "a kind of domino effect in which each event incites the next." Though Fulton likes the idea of the opening gambit of creation being a mistake, a flaw—she likes to cite her teacher, A.R. Ammons, on this: "About the only thing we can look to to break up our standard patterns…is an accident or a mistake….A mistake is obviously a point where originality can begin"—and though a flaw may be a mark of authenticity—as Fulton notes in "Fuzzy Feelings," "Simulants // tend to be flawless, while natural / emeralds have defects / known as inclusions, imperfections / with a value all their own"—flaws can also be trouble. Fulton herself notes in an essay that "…this idea (like most ideas) is dangerous in that it can be used to condone careless or self-indulgent writing. Some mutations are harmful, after all. For every 'mistake' that lets originality creep in, there must be a thousand that repeat errors of the past." "Cascade Experiment," like many other Fulton poems, opens with error and simply devolves into being mistaken. Its main rhetorical device is this: a bad opening is presented, and if a reader is gullible enough to continue reading the poem, Fulton knows she can convince that reader of pretty much anything.

In part, Fulton gets away with making such mistakes by employing in her poems another rhetorical maneuver she takes great pains to dismantle in her theory: the either-or. Very often, Fulton will include in her poems some alternative to the poem or to her aesthetics generally, and she makes that alternative unappealing by making it a straw man. For example, Fulton's secular faith often is contrasted to more orthodox, and therefore more obviously problematic, forms of belief. So, in "603 West Liberty St.," a poem in which Fulton tries to explain her beliefs and aesthetics, the fact that even though her own beliefs might be problematic and contradictory—Fulton states that "[a]t best [she] could believe / in the quantum world's array of random // without chaos"—her lower-case "faith" still sounds better than the upper-case "Faith" with which it is contrasted, with its "Sin" and "Penance" and "State of Grace" that all serve to do away with "aberrations," leaving one to feel "insipid," like "a dimestore creche."

Fulton also employs the either-or to avoid or short-circuit criticism. In "Dance Script with Electric Ballerina," the speaker describes her wild aesthetic, comparing it to kids "waving sparklers," or the dance of an "action painter." Embedded in the poem, though, is a double either-or. The electric ballet is better than its pretty, conventional alternatives, such as "sleeping / beauty sprouting from a rococo / doughnut of tulle, a figurine / fit to top a music box," and it just has to be better than the vapid criticism about it, criticism included in the poem:

> …unsympathetic
> in several minds flat and hollow
> at the core shabby too
> flaccid polishes off her pirouettes with
> too assertive
> a flick ragged barbaric hysterical
> needs to improve
> her landings technique bullies
> the audience into paying
> attention…

By including critics' disjointed verbal sneers—a technique that is repeated in *Powers of Congress*'s "Point of Purchase" (unselected) in which the critics are various readers who have

added to the text of the poem, in handwritten marginalia, brief notes of ineffectual and often insipid commentary—the poem portrays these critics as capable of only kvetching, as not really having any good insights or arguments. And, so, one might as well be a crazy ballerina if the only other options are a tutu-wearing Barbie Doll or else a petty, sniping critic. One might as well go along with Fulton and prefer a "poem [that] is wayward—even to the point of…error" if the only other option is poetry that pulls "the familiar rhetorical strings." Of course, there's a massive excluded middle here—nowhere in "Dance Script" are Nijinsky or Martha Graham, those embodied cascade experiments, ever mentioned. And nowhere in her theory is mentioned the interesting middle ground of earned surprise—which demands that familiar rhetorical strings be pulled for unexpected ends. Such ideas seem beyond Fulton, who, as a theoretician of betweenness, should know better.

Noting that "[t]he dominant culture is as invisible as it is invidious: We partake in it assumptions unthinkingly," and that "[u]nless we write mindfully—interrogating received beliefs—the imagination of American poetry will serve the 'traditional system' or 'party line' of American culture," Fulton seems to want to participate in a sophisticated counter-culture; however, she writes a poetry perfect for American consumer culture. With its leaps of logic, its jump-cuts, its lack of connectedness, Fulton writes a poetry similar to the pure products of America: her poems are music videos, and when they include criticism they are as deeply insightful as VH1's "Pop-Up Videos." And Fulton admits as much. In "Vanishing Cream" (unselected), a poem in "My Last TV Campaign: A Sequence," an advertising executive, laying down the "TV rules," notes the benefits of adding a touch of surrealism to your sell: "Unflirtatious / clear and smooth—straight / gin goes down like water. But stir—strain— / add a twist—delicious." When the tree speaks in "Turn: A Version," a poem in "Give: A Sequence Reimagining Daphne and Apollo," it is a spokesperson for odd juxtapositions: ""The suckers love a weird wedding.' That's what / [Daphne's] father said when / she called on him for help….People get a kick / out of ambivalent / betrothals and collisions full of give."

Fulton's Cascade Experiment is itself a weird wedding, made to better market and sell Fulton's poetic project. Appearing in the guise of a conventional, unproblematic selection, the book is actually a clean-up job, a subtle attempt to try to show some development in Fulton's writing. Fulton hasn't tried anything obviously radical with her selected, such as mixing up her poems like a geometric fractal, putting a poem from Palladium next to a poem from Felt to see what that juxtaposition might spark. Instead, Cascade Experiment conventionally offers up poems from all her previous works, organized largely as they are in the original publications. This use of the standard selected format brings along with it all the typical troubles of a collection of selected poems. For example, the poem's lose their specific contexts and what might be called, or typically thought of as, the quirks of publication, including, for example, typographical details. Though the loss of context and detail potentially is a trouble for any selected, it is especially troublesome for Fulton, whose aesthetics are so inclusive and so detailed. For example, though Fulton might prize mistakes and errors, though she'll quote Marianne Moore as saying "[Y]our flaws are the best part of you," a selected, which implies assessment, judgment, and hierarchy, shows this simply is not true.

Additionally, because in Fulton's aesthetic positively anything and everything could be really significant—she states, "Fractal poetics is composed of the disenfranchised details, the dark matter of Tradition: its blind spots, recondite spaces, recursive fields"—it is strange and telling to see how quick Fulton is to dump certain details, to seemingly give up on this idea. Even though, for Fulton, transparency is a problem—in the Petoskey interview she states,

"The wish for transparency is a wish to forget language. To forget that you're reading something that has lines, has stanzas, that's an artifact"—and even though she recognizes that punctuation is often subsumed in transparency—in a poem titled "= =," Fulton writes, "…a / comma seems so natural, you don't see it / when you read: it's gone to pure / transparency. Yes but. / The natural is what / poetry contests"—Fulton still does away with some of her own typographical devices. In Sensual Math, a divisor sign, a " ÷," is used to separate titles from poems. While this seems a potentially significant typographical device—multiplied five times as "÷ ÷ ÷ ÷ ÷,"it is also used to divide sections of "Splice: A Grotesque" (unselected)—it is not employed in the poems from Sensual Math included in Cascade Experiment. Additionally, a sort of distended plus sign used in Felt's "About Music for Bone and Membrane Instrument = =" is transformed into three, small, innocuous black diamonds in the poem as printed in Cascade Experiment. Though Fulton thinks we must be mindful of the often unrecognized, including "the poem's visual form on the page" in her essays, it's clear she also thinks some specifics can simply be discarded.

The use of the standard selected poem format is strange for Fulton who is against "transparency," who wants to break our reading habits, to make us see the wayward, the offbeat detail. However, it's not so strange if it is considered for what it is: a cover for a problematic argument. There is some manipulation of order within the included volumes. Perhaps the most significant, or, at least, telling, of these rearrangements is the rearrangement of the order of the poems in Dance Script for Electric Ballerina. Cascade Experiment opens with a sonnet, "What I Like," and contains in its next four poems another sonnet, "Second Sight," and a sonnet variant, "Yours & Mine." However, these works appear in the fourth and final section of Dance Script with Electric Ballerina. The reason for this conscious reorganization seems clear: it shows, and even argues, that Fulton's work has been progressing. If Fulton's oeuvre starts with form, her later work largely can be seen as a brave, experimental fracturing of form. Thus, readers are encouraged to see Fulton's work as developing from set form to original fractal rather than see the fractal as an ongoing trouble with or evasion of voice. This is confirmed by the fact that, as might be expected, many problematic dramatic monologues have been excised.

The downplaying of voice and argument in Fulton's work is also accomplished by excluding some good poems, most noticeably Felt's clear, tightly controlled sonnet-like "Passion Vote" and "By Her Own Hand," a poem spoken in the voice of a woman who has committed suicide, one of Fulton's best dramatic monologues. "By Her Own Hand" contains many of the elements one expects in a Fulton poem: woman's plight—"Have you ever been embarrassed / by a frugal kiss? I died of it"—scientific reference—"Just say I sublimed. / Snowflakes do this all the time"—critique of orthodox religion—"The human yen for angels is depraved. / It decorates death with heaven, longing / for the note I never left"—and punning—the title refers both to the act of suicide and the act of writing, or not, a suicide note. However, "By Her Own Hand" brings these elements together in a poem that is tense, strong, dire. Though there's one voice in the poem, that voice ranges convincingly through various emotions and speech acts, from biting sarcasm—"If you believe you would have caressed every lash / and freckle that I was / but for decorum, I appreciate the thought"—to bold confession—"It is embarrassing to live. // My love for my husband was all balled up / with mothering. I had compassion for any flesh / trying that hard to be iron"—to final summation—"I am not without regrets, / picayune as they may seem or plain / grotesque. I do regret the writhing. / I wanted to be self-reliant. / I wanted to reach up and shut / my own eyes just before I died." In this poem, Fulton most nearly approaches Dickinson, famous for her spectral and fierce poems written in the voices of the dead.

In the poem "Sequel," Fulton writes, "To think is to exercise / godheat." "By Her Own Hand" is one of Fulton's hottest poems. It must be unselected only because it is too revealing. Not even Cascade Experiment's persuasive structure could have stopped it from showing up the other poems, raising questions about the quality of the dramatic monologues that are included and about the tepidness of so many of the other poems. Additionally, it probably is excluded because it suggests a different trajectory for Fulton's work: not a smooth transition from form to fractal, but instead Fulton's long, ongoing struggle to uncover her own ferocity. Fulton prizes and seeks the feral. In her essays, she refers to Dickinson's sublimity as a "profligate, lovely feral force…." And, as she makes clear in her interview with Christanne Miller, she wants this for herself: "I like occasionally to say something feral, something that's outside the realm of the genteel or the assumed." There are moments of ferocity in Fulton, especially in Felt. For example, "World Wrap" (unselected) describes an amazing, intense, feminist aesthetic in which "women were making a rampart / from tricycles and diaphragms, / maidenheads and mind: an otherscape / that holds without a rivet or a bolt. / They were mixing mascara with spit / to get the right consistency." The trouble is, this does not describe Fulton's work so much as the work of other writers, such as Olena Kalytiak Davis and Chelsey Minnis.

Fulton knows this, and, at times, berates herself for avoiding such emotions, such power. In Felt's "Garish" (unselected), a poem largely about loss, and likely about the death of one of Fulton's beloved aunts, the poet-speaker regrets her lack of feeling—the poem states, "I wished I'd loved her—well = = with more immersion = ="—chastising herself for not being able to capture or live up to the deceased's final gesture, "the scandalous flash she chose at last," and feeling doomed to make only a repetitive, typically Fultonesque response: "Given a chance, no doubt I'd find a way // to do the same damn dumbly rational scared thing / again: seeing her as a gem in a solution / meant to cut the light's eccentric torque and give / an insight more destitute…" This self-critique is not new; Fulton has long known that her poetic technique, so fought and argued for in her theory, is really an avoidance strategy. In the face of strong passion, the speaker of Palladium's "Works on Paper" recoils: "How I pull back, swear / to clothe myself / in jokes. Graft the properties of blandness // to the social handshake / and we'll have it: how to get through / this world intact." Fulton has gotten through the world not only intact but in style. However, this getting through has come at a price; as is confirmed by the selections in Cascade Experiment, Fulton traded in deep immersion, engagement, and passion for facile, mostly only theoretical success. This is a shame, for instead of creating a body of work with poems that could, as Dickinson said they should, blow off the tops of our heads, Fulton's work most often leaves us only scratching them.