Three or Four Things I Know About Charles Bernstein

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Charles Bernstein begins his poem "The Klupzy Girl" (in Islets / Irritations) like this:

> Poetry is like a swoon, with this difference:
> it brings you to your senses.

Having begun with a proposition, he immediately proceeds, not to qualify it or even to draw out a philosophical discourse from it, but to test its truth empirically:

> Poetry is like a swoon, with this difference:
> it brings you to your senses. Yet his
> parables are not singular. The smoke from
> the boat causes the men to joke. Not
> gymnastic: pyrotechnic.

Each sentence has the effect of one of those sudden jolts as you drop off to sleep, a step that suddenly isn't there. The "Yet" of the second sentence prepares you for an antithetical statement, but what comes is a non-sequitur. Or is it? Who is the "he" whose parables are not singular? The poet? Are the parables the sentences of the poem, and if so in what sense are they "not singular"? Sentence three plunges you deeper into troubled uncertainty: the smoke suggests the boat is burning (burning deck?), but if so "the men"'s response appears singularly inappropriate. Sentence four suggests a way of reading the foregoing: don't worry trying to puzzle it all out (mental gymnastics), it doesn't work that way, it's a firework show (hidden echo of the fire on the boat, foregrounded aural echo in "gymnastic / pyrotechnic"). The poem continues:

> Not
> gymnastic: pyrotechnic. The continuousness
> of a smile – wry, perfume scented. No this
> would go fruity with all these changes
> around. Sense of variety: panic. Like
> my eye takes over from the front
> yard, three pace. Idle gaze – years
> right down the window. Not clairvoyance,
> predictions, deciphering – enacting.

The fixed smile of complacency ("continuousness" is consciously awkward, echoed several lines later by "deliberateness") can't be sustained "with all these changes around". To try and recuperate such variety into a unified meaning would certainly make you go fruity. (The poem's final coherent sentence before snapping off into seven unfinished phrases is "Get off in Boston and everything / seems to go crazy.") But, the reader is reminded, the poem's meaning is what it is, not what it points to.

From this, and the ensuing four pages or so of the poem, it will become clear however that there is constant pattern-making in Bernstein's work, counterpointing the renewals, startings from zero, questionings (Barthes' "who is speaking?" is a perpetual teaser), to give an effect something like moiré. Or it could be described as playing with focus. In his essay-in-verse "Artifice of Absorption" which forms the whole of Paper Air Vol. 4 No. 1, Bernstein quotes the Klupzy Girl's proposition which begins the above poem and continues:

The oscillation of attentional focus,
& its attendant blurring,
is a vivid way of describing
the ambivolent [sic] switching, which I
am so fond of, between absorption &
antiabsorption, which can now
be described as redirected
absorption. The speed
of the shifts ultimately becomes a metric
weight, & as the pace picks
up, the frenzied serial
focussing / unfocussing enmeshes
into a dysraphic whole – not
totality – an alchemical
"overlay and blending"
as Piombino notes,
forming what he terms a
"combinatorial", or, in Forrest-Thomson's words,
an "image-complex".

Like most of Bernstein's work, the essay seeks to demonstrate by its very form that which it is expounding: an adaptation of Veronica Forrest-Thomson's theory of poetry in Poetic Artifice (Manchester University Press, 1978). The "dysraphic whole" or "image-complex" is not a totality in the sense that a single meaning cannot be distilled from it, and yet its novel coherences say something about how coherence is made and functions. Those who persist in identifying Bernstein with something called "non-referential poetry" – whatever that may mean – are thus wide of the mark indeed. "Dysraphism", by the way, is the title of one of the poems in Bernstein's most recent collection The Sophist, which he glosses in a footnote as "a dysfunctional fusion of embryonic parts – a birth

defect". "Raph", which literally means "seam", has the same root as "rhapsody". As for reference, here is the beginning of the essay "Semblance", originally contributed to my own magazine Reality Studios in 1978 and reprinted in Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984:

> Not "death" of the referent – rather a recharged use of the multivalent referential vectors that any word has, how words in combination tone and modify the associations made for each of them, how "reference" then is not a one-on-one relation to an "object" but a perceptual dimension that closes in to pinpoint, nail down (this word), sputters omnitropically (the in in the which of who where what wells), refuses the build up of image track/projection while, pointillistically, fixing a reference at each turn (fills vats ago lodges spire) . . .

Bernstein's subject being the workings of language, or rather the interactions of language and consciousness, it's no accident that he uses Forrest-Thomson in "Artifice of Absorption". In Poetic Artifice she asserts: "I should never deny that poems may be about subjects other than writing poetry, but I do deny that they can be about other things without also being about writing poetry, in the sense of employing Artifice in their organisation. And I think that the 'other things' are apt to take, rightly, second place to the organisation of the poem."

In an attack on the self-conscious obscurity of a Wallace Stevens poem she writes: "What one objects to is . . . the tendency to make the already-known or already-thought the point of arrival, to make poetry an obscure and figured statement which one understands by translating it into the already-known. If poetry is to justify itself it must do more than this; it must assimilate the already-known and subject it to a reworking which suspends and questions its categories, provides alternative orderings."

Forrest-Thomson criticises the Imagists (or rather, the stated theory of the Imagists, from which she attempts a partial rescue of Pound) for seeking in their poetry to reveal a world beyond language; an impossible transcendence, she argues. Bernstein likewise denies the possibility of escaping from language into the world in this way; the palpable clash of discourses in his work is therefore not a rejection of the world but rather the reverse: a foregrounding of the linguistic constructions which shape that world's meaning. The kind of poetry Bernstein writes has most come under attack not from arch-traditionalists, I suspect, but from those who conceive their poetry as springing from Imagism; for whom notions of transcendence and authenticity are inseparable from poetry. From this perspective, Bernstein would seem to be always shifting his ground, interrogating every utterance; as though each line, each sentence, were in invisible quote marks. Bernstein constantly uses "I", but the I is constantly on the move, non-attributable; where is the self in all this?

These are important questions, and despite the high comedy in much of Bernstein's writing they are seriously answered. The self, he would say, is multiply constructed and language plays a central role in each construction: the self that writes an office memo is not the self that tells a joke is not the self that reads (or writes) a novel is not the self that says "I love you" is not the self that watches screen actors say "I love you." Yet value-free ironic detachment is not what Bernstein is after; there is irony in his work, but it is always accompanied (the absorption / antiabsorption duality) by engagement with the reality of the construction: "if a self is anything it is what that self does with its body . . . does with its mind . . . and that . . . responsibility is for what you do . . . not for what you go home at night and think what you'd like to do if if if one day . . . some time . . ."

That quote is from "Three or Four Things I Know About Him", the first piece in Content's Dream, which typically subverts the reader who expects a book of literary essays by launching (following a quotation from Marx:

". . . the task of history, once the world beyond the truth has disappeared, is to establish the truth of this world . . .") into a stream of consciousness about the alienation of working for a large corporation.

This heady confusion of modes was one of the great attractions of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, the magazine of poetics and politics Bernstein edited with Bruce Andrews from New York between 1978 and 1982. It reaches a fine pitch in his brilliantly executed The Sophist. The opening poem, "The Simply", continues the truth-testing of "The Klupzy Girl":

> Nothing can contain the empty stare that ricochets
> haphazardly against any purpose. My hands
> are cold but I see nonetheless with an infrared
> charm. Beyond these calms is a coast, handy but
> worse for abuse.

it begins, ironically enough as it would seem, but the poem builds up curiously moving resonances in its seven pages:

> That grown we weep for want of.
> SLUMPS AS IT PUMPS. "I've got my instinct trained
> to a rare morsel of respect." That is, that I can see myself.
> They produced thick tomato sandwiches, saying with pride
> that they were brought from Woolworth's.

and ending:

> "You have such a horrible sense of equity which
> is inequitable because there's no such
> things as equity." The text, the beloved?
> Can I stop living when the pain gets too
> great? Nothing interrupts this moment.
> False.

"Fear and Trespass" reads like a three-page extract from a slushily pretentious novel, pushed to a point beyond parody: "She inspected her thoughts like a fussy shopper holding up the seconds towards a fluorescent light thirty feet above the selling floor, pulling at the seams and poking the button holes, picking up new pieces as fast as, and as brusquely as, discarding the old ones, until, amidst what was perhaps a blue-plaid conjecture with too big a collar, he spoke her name, at first so softly that he might have been eating it as he rolled it in his mouth, and then, quite gradually, louder and more plainly."

"Entitlement" is a playlet featuring as characters Liubov Popova, a Russian constructivist painter, Jenny Lind, the Swedish coloratura soprano and John Milton. "I and the" is compiled from transcripts of an experiment to determine word frequencies in spoken American English; the first stanza (the poem uses words in descending order of frequency as recorded) is "I and the / to that you / it of a", and the last is "relevant independence shot / glasses support magazine / courses pardon results."

In a little fable headed "The Only Utopia Is in a Now" a small group of "those without any names in the story" arrive at a sign saying Utopia (the word covering over the words "private property"). A party is in progress, dominated by a very large man who threatens the group by shouting that this is the last place where emotion reigns supreme and "unemotional" types had better clear off.

One of the group asks a woman in the party what the man had meant by emotion. "'I can see by your asking a question like that,' she said with a smile, 'that you are an enemy of emotion. Generally speaking,' she quickly added, 'enemies of emotion are humorless, intellectual men.'" But then she turns into a purple glow which separates into blue and red lights; the blue speaks like an oracle: "'On this block . . . what is called "thinking" is absolutely forbidden in the name of what is called "emotion". You're only supposed to write and say what everyone else knows, and to write and say

it in the way everyone else has already heard it. In fact, they issue a manual, Acceptable Words and Word Combinations and everyone talks and writes only in permutations derived from this book. It's no use arguing, since anyone who disagrees is called anti-emotional and, regardless of their gender, is also called "male".'"

Sounds familiar? But fortunately the two lights recombine to fill the entire sky above the block, and the voice, which had reached a frenzy, is restored to a classical balance, or perhaps a Blakean reconciliation of opposites:

"'We talk about emotion but we are afraid of emotion, and when we finally come upon it we block it out by calling it "thought". When we hear the syntax of the heart, in words that may well seem new and strange to ears trained only to understand the old and familiar, we commune with the oneness of us-all that is our communal body, language. Don't be afraid, gentle writers, gentle speakers, that you won't communicate or will be too intellectual. Only when such concerns fall away, like calluses from our tongues, and we are left just to do and be, not trying to communicate out of a fear of being unable to, will language take its rightful place as love.'"

Publications by Charles Bernstein referred to:

Artifice of Absorption, Vol. 4 No. 1 of Paper Air magazine, edited by Gil Ott, Philadelphia, 1987
Content's Dream: Essays 1975–1984, Sun & Moon Press, Los Angeles, 1986
Islets / Irritations, Jordan Davies, New York, 1983
The Sophist, Sun & Moon Press, Los Angeles, 1987