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CHARLES BERNSTEIN:

Controlling Interests.

Roof, 1980.

The Occurrence of Tune.

Segue, 1981.

Stigma.

Station Hill, 1981.

by CRAIG WATSON

*It is through language that we
experience the world, indeed through
language that meaning comes into the
world and into being.... Our
learning language is learning the
terms by which the world gets seen.*

—CHARLES BERNSTEIN, "Thought's Measure,"
"L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E, Vol 4

Controlling Interests (Roof, 1980), like all of Bernstein's books, is organized thematically and not chronologically. Ron Silliman, in his essay "For Charles Bernstein has such a spirit" (The Difficulties, #3, an issue devoted exclusively to Charles Bernstein), maintains that this gives Bernstein substantial license to redefine his poetic activity "particularly if the formation of a subject is taken as the persistent content of the work." His largest volume to date, *Controlling Interests*, contains 17 works concerning the socialization of the individual by means of language. Because language is the constitutive force in thought and because the structures of language are acquired in the public domain, language is indeed a primary socializing force. In this book socialization is the focus of not only thematic content but compositional process as well. In the opening lines of "Matters of Policy" Bernstein states these intentions, characteristically referring to both the perceptual and constitutional processes at once:

On a broad plain in a universe of
anterooms, making signals in the dark, you
fall down on your waistband &, carrying your
own plate, a last serving, set out for another

glimpse of a gaze.

Syntax, which Bernstein defines in "Thought's Measure" as "the ordering of strings of words," plays an essential role in the articulation of values and relations. He uses a variety of devices, including various punctuation, line breaks, prose and blank space, to render the compositional act visible, as this selection from an untitled poem demonstrates:

So really not visit a remember to strange
A it's always finally seems now which ago
Long that by amazed guess I thing obvious of kind
Fell can weigh a has distance the off
That there it's then & you
While now which whatever point
Slipping constantly be to seems happening
Until fingers the like through sand
Staring there still on back look only can
Before yourself find the of window in thoughts your at

The tonal resonance of this piece, its lack of punctuation and continuous syntactical evolution, reinforces its semantic track of individual powerlessness and search.

Concern with the process of socialization also pervades the occasion of some poems such as "Standing Target," which is made from both "found" language such as camp counsellor reports on young "Charlie" and short biographies of corporate executives and the poet's syntactically varied response to this information. Similarly, "Sentences My Father Used" draws phrases from a conversation between Bernstein and his father as organizing elements in a text about time and relationships. The poem ends with:

Months sink into the water and
the small rounded lump accumulates its
fair share of disuse. Dreadfully private,
pressed against the faces of circular
necessity, the pane gives way, transparent,
to a possibility of rectitude.

The sense of being both in the world and looking at it, the interlocking of subjective and objective visions, continues throughout the book as in this line from the book's shortest poem, "Live Acts":

The closer we look, the greater the distance from which
we look back.

In "Matters of Policy," a text largely written about social controls and illusions, Bernstein exposes and critiques this paradox continually:

Take broom in hand & sweep the chestnuts off
the boulevard, not so much as a diversion,
which has long ceased to mute the facts, but
as a pantomime of what, some other time, you
might have done. Yet there was a life
without all this.

But if language is the socializing, constitutive force of experience, there may not be any "life without all this." "Island Life," the book's final work, extends and diversifies this question in a more substantial manner:

Except that we sail and quit the horizon. Desperate
or even remotely concerned, waves between
and the air a constant source of
the old jangle, musters for itself new conduits
restless maybe for the things we never use, a half
haze, half shadow, modestly a project of
absorption in time, cast about, contentment
its own course.

Here Bernstein seems to have encountered the problem which underlies the whole book, that is, the question of closure and reconsideration. Because the poems of *Controlling Interests* occur on the plane of immediate response in that they front thinking as the process of perception reaching for meaning, they don't attain an objective, statemental level. The poet is working at an edge of consciousness which forbids another, chronologically-deferred process of thought, that of formal organization and placement of information into an individual operating matrix.

Though written before *Controlling Interests*, *The Occurrence of Tune* (Segue, 1981) presents a possible resolution to this conflict through its use of individual, seemingly discrete lines and paragraphs in a larger frame. A single text, interspersed with Susan B. Laufer's striking photographs, the book uses "tune" to refer to both musical continuity and the process of consideration and formalization of ideas as in the expression "fine-tuning." The primary relation between textual elements is represented by their contiguity

on the page, divided by white spaces, so that interstitial relations are "like a spark jumping a break in the cable" (Charles Bernstein interview with Tom Beckett, *Difficulties* #3). Tune therefore emerges as the activity of the reader's mind linking one unit of articulation with the next as well as the effort to contextualize the whole poem. Laufer's photographs animate this disjunction by imagetically deconstructing and retouching photographs of objects and people. *The Occurrence of Tune* however does not resolve the issue of closure because, though the field is more concretely controlled, the reader retains a directing, constitutive role.

Bernstein is evidently aware of this issue and in *Stigma* (Station Hill, 1981) he proposes further resolutions in eleven short poems. Here Bernstein consciously explores closure as a value and weighs its implications as he tests the strain of each text in a limited field. Whereas tension existed in the earlier works as the resonance of movements in a broad context, *Stigma* presents poems that are condensed and precise and which presumably occur at a later stage in the cognitive process. From "March":

Refused for want of hurting, gain
Else that quiets, resisting standards
Partly for fear, ageless glowering
At shutter speed, or cancel without
Report. This legless hope, these brief
Returns.

As with "Island Life," this poem is confronting its own limits and the structural limits of language. In "Stove's Out" he presses the theme of self-defeat even further:

There is an emptiness that fills
Our lives as we meet
On the boulevards and oases
Of a convenient attachment.

The statemental nature of these lines is pointed and direct; although framing devices continue to be present, they are animated by a fluent, if not linear, track of consciousness. The image of the oasis, as both a point of concentration and rest, occurs in the title poem:

The quiet oasis of a stall
Whosoever gains, keeping the spring that

By petulance bounces quickly, a chord
Of speed, wake of manner to be
Numbed.

The book's title refers to the problem of closure and objectification versus processes of continuity and extension. Thought necessarily arrives at this point and, though it need not become fixed in a commodified state, perception does yield to a more stable, limited state of consciousness.

Bernstein's poetry is actively involved in the contradictions, reversals and tensions of thought and language. There are numerous other aspects of the work, including its political implications and place in literary history, that have not been discussed here, though all of these are based in his attitude toward language as a dynamic, as well as expressive, force. The relative success of these works lies both in their ability to draw the reader closer to the structure of language as a material and in their rich articulation of an individual mind in the process of conceiving itself. Δ

The Principle of Fit. DAVID ANTIN.
Watershed Tapes. 1981.

by ROBERT PETERS

In a recent issue of *The American Poetry Review*, Robert Dana asks James Laughlin if there is currently an avant-garde in American writing. "Well," replies Laughlin, a few writers "are doing something which is totally different from what your average, accepted, good writer is doing." Two such authors (both published by him) are the novelist Walter Abish, and David Antin. Dana confesses that he hasn't seen Antin's "stuff." Laughlin urges him to a library, and confesses that even he doesn't "entirely understand" Antin; but he finds him "so damned amusing" that he enjoys publishing him. So much for the interior decision-making processes of a famous publisher's mind!

Well, I've just listened for the fifth time to Antin's new Watershed tape, "The Principle of Fit. 2." It's both fun and maddening to listen to; Antin amuses with the liberties he takes with the talk-pie, and he irritates when