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As Slope of Mind

The Sophist
Charles Bernstein
Sun and Moon Press, 6363 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 115, Los Angeles, CA 90048; 1987; 179 pages; paper, $11.95

Artifice of Absorption
Charles Bernstein
Paper Air, Singing Horse Press, P.O. Box 40034, Philadelphia, PA 19106; 1987; 72 pages; paper, $5.00

Linda Reinfeld

In the wake of *Content's Dream*, two new books by Charles Bernstein now claim our attention; considered together, they exhibit the extraordinary intensity and range of poetry as form of life in America today. Bernstein continues to give shape to a uniquely American dream: nothing static, nothing stale, and though all the materials are of necessity second-hand, the poet makes it new. Nor does Bernstein's dream, like the dream of pure difference, fade with the dawn of language: Bernstein dreams eyes open, Emersonian—wide awake. His language articulates a poetics of vision and responsibility—vision without mysticism, responsibility without despair.

In *The Sophist*, for instance, Bernstein is as much concerned with questions of justice as he is with questions of aesthetics. The sophist, now as for Plato a complex linguistic figure, offers a rhetorical demonstration of Bernstein's social critique, his notion of person, and his "Dysraphism" (a mis-seaming of the psyche and of song): it is a collection of poems in which each poem is itself a collection of different bits and pieces, citational and citation-like. Even the lyric mode is composed of more than one tone, for a person is not singularly defined. The following adaptation of Elizabethan song, part 26 of a 26-part (alphabetically implicated) poem, insists that we notice its lack of originality, for it appears in the text with its title both italicized and enclosed in quotes:

> *"Come, Shadow, Come"*
>
> return to a shadow
> as slope of mind,
> veiled air,
> (the way a thought will turn
> with a gesture in its direction—
> *you are a thing*
> *your voices are unreal*
> blade, pool,
> paper, shavings
>
> its glassiness waving for us

Variations on a theme from Shakespeare (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*) also elaborated by Zukofsky: both the music and the multiple lineage appear as if (consider the pun) transparent. Yet, nothing is quite clear after all: invoke a shadow and what will it say? "You are a thing"? The past talks back; history addresses the poet as the poet addresses it, "its glassiness." Even its "waving" wavers—hello, goodbye. Love lyric and ghost story in such a scheme become inseparable. In the multiple discourse of the sophist, now and then, there has always been an error, and an other.

To write that writing begins always, in some sense, *otherwise*, is perhaps by now a truism. *The Sophist*, however, begins not so simply with a poem called "The Simply" (are names simples?), and we are led to expect a difficult trip: "Nothing can contain the empty state that ricochets / hap-hazardly against any purpose." Hardship is a given, intrinsic to the voyage: "The world deals with negation and / contradiction and does not assert any single / scheme." From the centralized manifestation of presence, the "this, here, now" at the outset of the book, we float all the way back into "The Harbor of Illusion" (apt location for what it means to be human) with its equivocating evocations of here and there, *fort* and *da*, the jubilant *je-jeu* ("jejubes") of the child (or "finicky" poet) at play. Hiding and finding a self in the mirror, hiding itself in finding us, this writing shines for us among the islands (or I-lands): perhaps the mariner may at last navigate light-heartedly, faring well and fearing no one at all:

> Though
> free to bore and load, let
> rail retail conclusion, finicky jejubes
> at waste of moor, or lord these
> tower, tour the template,
> thoroughfare
> of noon's atoll.

Vision without mysticism, responsibility without despair.

Here is a note of blessing, not a toll.

The structure, of course, is not the whole story. Along the way we may be drenched in much local color, many splendid wanderings (I indicate briefly what most interested me at first reading): "Entitlement," a verse play for artist Liubov Popova, singer Jenny Lind, and poet John Milton (new American turns to the Barthesian *Image—Music—Text*); "I and the," compiled, a note explains, from *Word Frequencies in Spoken American English*; "Amblyopia," which opens with a caricature of the critic taken in by what has been called "the hermeneutics of suspicion"; "A Person Is Not An Entity Symbolic But The Divine Incarnate," a 26-part poem that includes modes of discourse ranging from the previously cited "Come, Shadow, Come" and "Sonata for Unaccompanied Cello," signed by Bernstein's wife, Susan Bee, to the more disturbing "Behavioral Despair Model" and "'Billions for Bandaids': The Individuation of Sickness."

The poet's prosy *Artifice of Absorption* explicitly spells out his poetics and shows us how he reads both his own poetry and the poetry of his contemporaries. The questions to which the poem addresses itself, " 'absorption' & its obverses—impermeability, imperviousness, ejection, / repellence —both as a compositional question / & as / a reading value," are the very questions which have been raised by the perceived "difficulty" or "opacity" of much of Bernstein's allusive and intellectually challenging verse. In *Artifice of Absorption*, Bernstein introduces himself (more gently) as parent and guardian of the work of art; as ever, he is of necessity occupied with fundamental issues: what is the function of writing in relation to life? What is text? And what is the "infra-structure" of the text (I borrow the term foregrounded by Rodolphe Gasche in his reading of Derrida), specifically of the text that must, on the one side, absorb, and on the other, protect? A certain dryness, a degree of impermeability, will be required by the philosopher-poet. In this specific instance, it is appropriate that the text come to us through the technology of a press called Paper Air:

> & then there are the biological
> senses
> of absorption and excretion: the
> body's narration.
> Steve McCaffrey pointed out
> that having an infant around
> for the first time had had its effect:
> i had been changing a half-dozen
> superabsorbent
> diapers a day, ever in fear
> that they would not be
> superabsorptive enough
> & spillage would result. So *this*
> is the answer to that
> persistent & irritating question—
> has having a child
> affected your writing?

Ointment-like, such saying may prevent rash critical outbreaks. The question, like the answer, is multiple in meaning.

Nor would this tale mean what it means here if it were told in prose. It is precisely the verse form of the essay that may lead us to think of Pope as Bernstein's predecessor, and it is the form of the verse that acts to highlight the homey significance of time and change—the motion of *"this"* as "the answer to that," the story of generation from an explicitly male point of view.

A (somewhat less explicitly) male point of view informs the opening of the poem as well. The pretext or epigraph, by Edmund Jabes, directs our attention to what must rest unsaid, unfigured: *"Then where is the truth but in the burning space between one letter and the next. Thus the book is first read outside its limits."* And, from the start, we are challenged with silence and frustration: it is almost as if Bernstein addresses us, as Dante does, from the dark woods in the middle of the way:

> The reason it is difficult to talk about
> the meaning of a poem—in a way that
> doesn't seem
> frustratingly superficial or partial—
> is that by
> designating a text a poem, one
> suggests that its
> meanings are to be located in some
> "complex" be-
> yond an addition of devices & subject
> matters.

Bernstein takes on the task of making space for the kinds of truth he finds most "difficult": "Facts in poetry are primarily / factitious," he states, and immediately thereafter Veronica Forrest-Thomson puts in her first appearance:

> Veronica Forrest-Thomson, in
> *On Poetic Artifice*,
> notes that artifice in a poem is
> primarily marked
> by the quality of the poem's
> language that makes it
> both continuous and discontinuous
> with the world of experience:

And he goes on to cite her work, which is "both continuous and discontinuous with" his own: "Anti-realism need not imply, as certain French theorists might claim, a rejection of meaning. All that artifice requires is that non-meaningful levels be taken into account."

Such acknowledgment given by a poet to a critic—significantly, by a male poet to a female critic—is both unique and provocative. Veronica Forrest-Thomson, though she exists inside the book, must first be read, like the book itself, "outside its limits." Who is this sylvan creature? What is she? A literary theorist, first of all (I cite from the notes), whose work "carries Empson's criticism one step farther than Empson was willing to go—into the realm of . . . non-meaningful levels of language." A creature of more than seven levels of ambiguity (out-Empsoning Empson), she becomes the Muse, or the music, whose critical presence the poet would invoke. Bernstein comments:

> At times Forrest-Thomson's work is frustratingly claustrophobic; but its uncompromising, fierce, and passionate self-seriousness makes it an enormously moving experience to read. Forrest-Thomson, who published two books of poetry, died in 1975 at the age of 27, after receiving her Ph.D. from Cambridge.

A real story, but no less romantic on that account: it holds a hint of fine poetic rapture, an adventure of love and death.

Artifice—whether it is conceived as writing *Poetic Artifice* or *Artifice of Absorption*—frames and is framed by the material of daily life, "Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course / With rocks, and stones, and trees." Indeed, Bernstein exists in relation to Forrest-Thomson almost as Wordsworth to Lucy, or—to play literally on the meaning of their names—as "rock" or "stone" (-stein") to "trees" (Forrest-"). I too am much moved as I read along, though, like "certain French critics," I am less certain than either author that pure difference remains to be identified.

Both *Artifice of Absorption* and *The Sophist* are beautifully designed books. *Artifice of Absorption* exhibits a cover composed entirely of photos (black and white) documenting the play of

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an infant with what appears to be a sign: a plain dark ring attached to a plain white string. As Bernstein, after Heidegger, puts it in *Content's Dream*: "The givenness of language is the givenness of the world." The cover of *The Sophist* is somewhat more complex: it reproduces a painting by Susan Bee which depicts two figures at odds in a narrow, green-ceilinged room: one is a tall, top-hatted, smooth-faced, formally dressed fellow, too big for the little space in which he is portrayed; the other is barefoot, bearded, short, and clad most simply in a toga of classical design. The figure of form, whose activity seems to have already burst open the room and rendered it visible, appears about to evict the more casual figure of classic content. Stone floor, trap door, the light crossed and barred. . . . Perhaps we can leave the task of deciphering this allegory to Bernstein himself, who, according to the photograph on the back cover of the same book, regards us directly from the open window of his city apartment. He is leaning comfortably on the window sill, extending—happily—beyond the frame. ABR

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