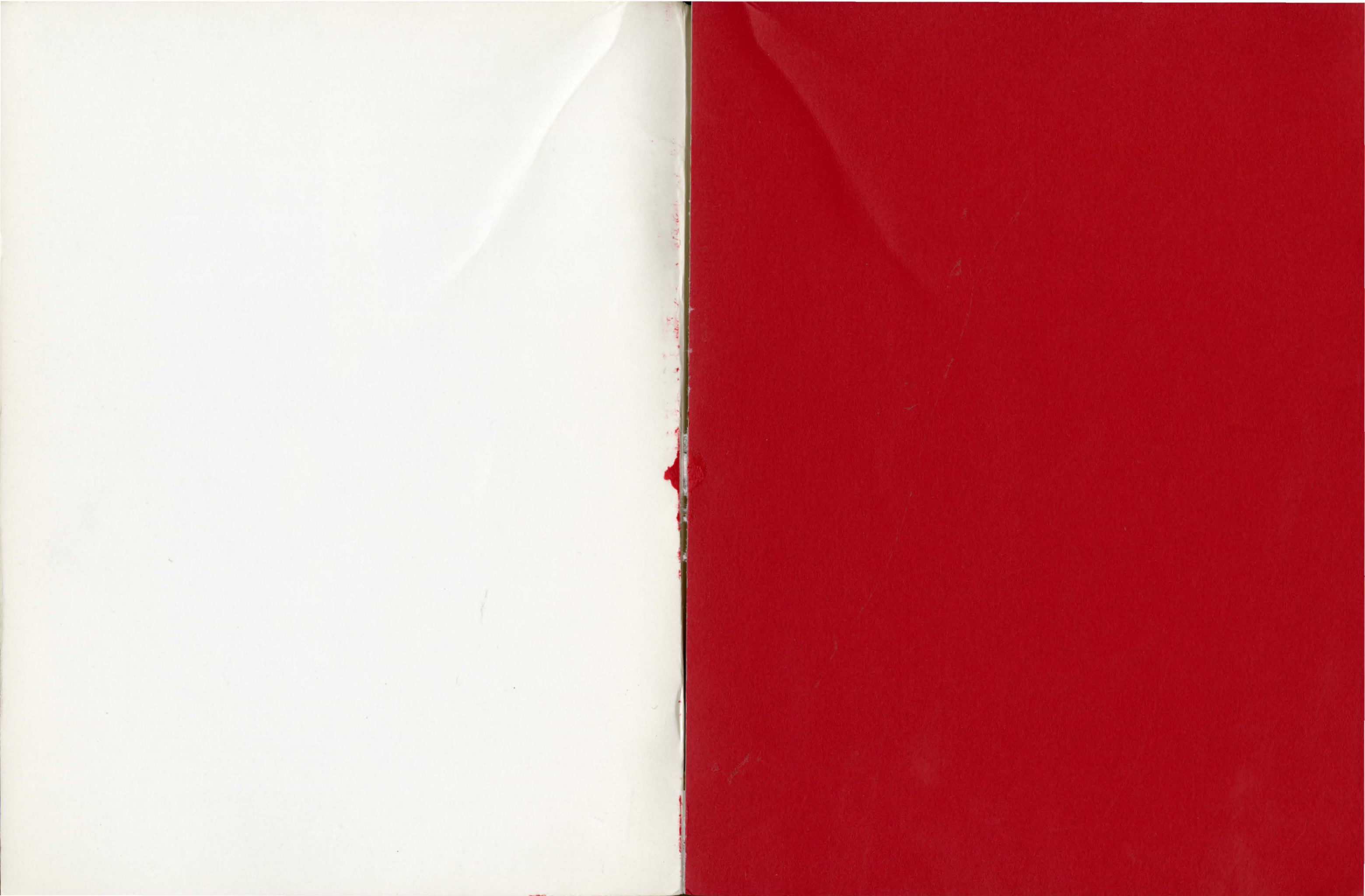


**THE DIFFICULTIES**  
**CHARLES BERNSTEIN ISSUE**







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**EDITED BY TOM BECKETT**

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## NOTE

Tolstoy: a thing's significance (importance) lies in its being something everyone can understand.--That is both true and false. What makes a subject hard to understand -- if it's something significant and important -- is not that before you can understand it you need to be specially trained in abstruse matters, but the contrast between understanding the subject and what most people want to see. Because of this the very things which are most obvious may become the hardest to understand. What has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect.

--Ludwig Wittgenstein

\*\*\*

Charles Bernstein's work advances in a direction which up until the present moment has been very poorly understood by the broader reading public. It is hoped that this collection will serve as a useful introduction for his new readers as well as a dependable reference source for those already familiar with his work.

Bernstein's writing is "spaced out"; not, though, in the funky, pejorative sense. Rather, in the sense of its non-linearity. He seems almost Cartesian in sensibility: doubting everything. Each word of a poem as if enclosed in "shriek quotes".

That's the trouble around here  
through which, asking as it does  
a different kind of space, who

much like any other, relives  
what's noise, a better shoe, plants  
its own destination, shooting up

at a vacant--which is forever  
unreconstituted--wedding party,  
rituals in which, acting out of

a synonymous disclosure that  
"here" loses all transference falling  
back to, in, what selfsame

dwelling is otherwise unaccounted for.

(from "Loose Shoes" in SENSES OF RESPONSIBILITY)

It seems pertinent at this point to invoke Kristeva's perception "...that the minimal unit of poetic language is at least double, not in the sense of the signifier/signified dyad, but



rather, in terms of one and other.\* I think that this is particularly true of Bernstein's writing. His texts, themselves, become known as Others.

The pleasure of reading Bernstein is not unlike relearning the language one spoke as a child. It is very strange and beautiful but oddly familiar. Old and new, and the accent confuses. All of the names have been changed and no one's protected. 'We're implicated in each other from the first! "

Tom Beckett  
Kent, Ohio  
8/82

\*Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language, Columbia University Press, N.Y., 1980, p.69.

## CHARLES BERNSTEIN

LODE (Mrs. Mao at Gulag)

Desperation of production (at engagement).

At table with. Felt, or feels (matte,

rotate, ovular disarray). At fortune

to furnish, please. Votes on rote

burden, calendrically shrill. Asleep

to meet the heat. And not any

why expose, magistrate (which might

make) nickname, blessed at evenly

difference. Marbleized doting, even

as distrust permits a person patronage

and hungrily marvelled, intransigent

with passage. Style of grey: intimation

of unease to drift of persuasion. The

grandiloquence of the damp--fostered, perennial.

In which, like sills of a pronouncement,

laboriously preaching unadorned secrets,

in the breathless cant of a numbing forensic--

implacable orchestrations and third-hand

poise. Degenerately dissimilar. Votes mood

argue path to circumvent, stride or blond mist.

Or angrily detonate, discharge, abraid. "It

is" hollow acorn "no longer" instrumental

inclination "the prophetic" while as "vision



of a" who may "single person" dubious  
phonecalls "that carries" timorous doorjamb "art  
forward" pink bench "now it is" triplex  
"the gigantic choir" originating confusion "of  
the" who, so, ever "people's triumphant"  
second coat "spirit, the" latched handbag  
"natural urge" testy, tinsel "of the"  
Baby Doc "spirit to rise" complacent  
whimsey "upward" fretted, boric "from  
the" ankle high "primeval depths" stare,  
stunned "toward the" paralyzed  
faculties "light of delivered" cascade,  
poached "humanity". Fundamental auction  
originate--plain jars of fibrous  
distillate. Formulates arrangement of detail.  
Begs promise. (Loosen when not  
afraid to be: locked in, seashore.)  
Got to stir up before can feel  
at home at: domesticate, territoriatize.  
instinctuive demeanor. Forget demeanor.  
It is not myself but the circumstances  
that created me that is my project;  
to remake such circumstances not  
in my own image but in the interests  
of the present demands; to construct  
such passions in the place of

a nuclear unrest.

Then what do I become--another  
minor incident within a minor  
incident? And how to provoke  
a sense of span. Both  
sides insist on the affluencies  
of your forgetfulness' memories.  
But my heart cannot stalk  
to touch, my hands grasp with impunity. An  
attack resists its timorous intent  
a tendency thinks too much of.  
Both affirm an eventual  
conception--the possibility of  
morning to occur again, &  
tomorrow. Denuded eversions  
to the brown certainties  
of the circumspect encounter.  
"It is as if a curtain has been drawn  
from before my eyes"-- Not only  
report--swallow, aver.  
At this point,  
filled with a deep contempt for the  
machinations of the prosecutor and the  
snivelling reaction of the judges, Jiang  
Qing denounced the witness as a  
liar, and, after repeated attempts to



silence her, was dragged from the court.

Fronts to assuage recalcitrant blessings,  
trompes d'oeil leading to the wrong--vanished--  
desire all available avenues designate.

To roll beyond octogenarian's circuit, sentient  
archetype. "This is a puzzling, difficult  
conception that unfortunately does not seem  
to be supported by the few truths  
we have wrested from our observations  
of nature and human life." But at least I  
have been lucky in respect to teeth.

Gigantism of unfounded remorse and depleted  
ambivalence, waist high in the lamplight  
of serial aversion. (...revealing a configuration  
of other curtains, but locating them for me, placing  
them.) The swelled precision, the grim retraction.

These florid schoolings (what is announced  
and what is only incurred?) trumpet  
replicas of things that had glowed, abandoned  
chambers of a mirrored interior. But what  
did you expect? That the charm of an evening  
would endure the daylight, that the  
broken and abrasive thoughts  
would disappear in the rustic luminance  
of the perennial calm hour, that

your hat would cover your head, shading  
from the sun, protecting from the ice.

What a klutzy kind of glamor. I

glitter without hesitation, withdraw my hand  
with a jerk from neighbor's touch--the  
body so weighed with the reticence of consolation,  
the charcoal gawk and the edgeless  
sigh. Summarizing the assuagements--blustering,  
hardball, munition. I grope copiously.

Mislay the allures. Or alter time with jars.

A salt seller's reward for scaling the instep  
of defiant spawn--neither lucky enough or  
rotund enough to make candy out of cotton  
by the vertiginous storage lockers of  
concocted grace. Fumbled protection, hard-  
line quiver--to give petulance a name  
to hang its hat on. Hoisting the flag  
twenty feet above the roaring mass of a single will  
that was the crowd, the mottos of crushed  
insularity braided betrayal to the forces held  
in check by the prior principles of a  
consolidated rule. Arms arm the man  
the man invested, while we turn  
another round in the chandeliered fortress  
of our own reluctance, thinking



of the innate beauty of webbed formations,  
huddled dementia for an afternoon nap.

#### A QUESTION

A question of what's  
next to call or pull  
my emotion's archaic  
semblance. What  
belies the concord  
of an annoyed  
prematurity--unprotected  
miscellany which jump  
amid the chapel.

#### PARAMETER

pardon quickly / adroit breeze / argue  
tonic / in issue / practical  
platoons /  
returns slowly / that make  
mason isospheres / unheard relief  
piston spender  
churn enhancement / marking action  
/ most delight  
hernia multiphase /  
marketing reliance / only  
meets / bemused curtain / must use  
lost to / bend  
gapes /  
mill flatulence / implosion's  
sift / sharp hum / burlesque of / pertinence  
paralleled / pleat quakes  
braid with /  
nautical becalms / ferocious  
festering /  
suction tripped / penurious  
penitent  
rotate ammonia / launch lake  
ample frost / reveal  
applesauce



endogenous elation / Larchmont

pixilate

steeppling / reluctant island /

metriculates demands

shuttered mannequin / shell

sockets /

gradient / three-ply

tumescence / vault

putsch /

puck nascience / relay

backwater / dyspeptic

loquacity /

marring septum / ceding quantity

lurk

slope / pummel precursor / co-penitent

physiotherapy / largely pester

poached persimmons / bandied ailerons / coated

around /

pediment crossover /

malignant enthusiasm / obdurate fence-eater

within each of /

chiropractic

firefighting / walls warrant / toothy dilapidation

pokes jam / stretch

avid

marked by lurch / with and

tonic silicone / cerate around / microne

perspiration / pushy

dart / mope epigonous

ardent recalcitrance /

feather quixote / hints

buttress / protuberance askance

mile fester / blemish straightens / available

annoyance / saturate

mauve

oblique Mars / biscuit cuticle

bounce

impair /

fiber salvo / Oniontic cut / brick beam

sumptuous Saturnalia / forced

tonguing / enhance

optic immanence / material duplication

forest forensic /

latent shoulder /

esplanade

beside barns / ceramic

sublimater /

motion retention / metal detour / lawn macadamized



## THE KLUPZY GIRL

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. 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. Analytically,

i.e., thoughtlessly. Begin to push and cue

together. Or I originate out of this

occurrence, stoop down, bend on. The

Protest-ant's voice within, calling for

this to be shepherded, for moment's

expression's enthroning. Able to be

alibied (contiguity of vacuity). Or

do you think you can communicate

telepathetically? Verena read the epistle

with much deliberateness. If we are

not to be phrasemongers, we must

sit down and take the steps that will

give these policies life. I fumbled clumsily

with the others--the evocations, explanations,

glossings of "reality" seemed like stretching

it to cover ground rather than make

or name or push something through.

"But the most beautiful

of all doubts is when the downtrodden

and despairing raise their heads and

stop believing in the strength of their oppressors."

To be slayed by such sighs; a noble figure

in a removed entranceway.

"This is just a little note

to say that it was nice working with

all of you. It has been a rewarding

experience in many ways. Although I

am looking forward to my new position with

great anticipation, I shall never forget

the days I spent here. It was like

a home-away-from-home, everyone was

just so warm and friendly. I shall ever

remember you in my prayers, and I

wish you the best for the future." Preoccupations

immediately launch: to set straight, to glean

from her glance. Terrificaly bored



on the bus. Any really you want  
go to mixed on me. Sumptuous slump.  
As it becomes apparent. Just that I thought.  
Contraction that to you perhaps an  
idealization. Have I kept. But that  
point is--such repair as roads no  
joint, what?, these few years must  
admit to not expecting, as if the  
silent rudeness might separate us out. &  
maybe anger would be better than explaining.  
When in tents or families in comparative.  
Which sums digest. Disclaimer  
alights what with begin. That's  
maybe the first pace, the particular. I mean  
I feel I've got to and a few while  
I can just look to see unrelenting  
amount of canny criticism whatever  
occasions overriding for comparison  
spin for the sake of intrinsic in that  
or that I've already made although  
against reaction's consequent proceeding.  
But it's to the point that you've  
begun to broach like you could almost  
fault me on as if you were going to  
use could become primarily propulsion  
to affinity have itself so. She

gets nutty. Oh she settles in, she  
settles the curdles, unhooks the latches,  
but I, preferring hatches ....  
When batters, benumbs, the lights  
in a basket, portable. Potted & make  
believe--your rudeness amounts to not  
noticing, i.e., I'm on a different  
scale of jags. To be in replacement  
for a number of linings. Tubes of turmoil.  
Tostroll on the beach is to be in  
the company of the wage-earner and  
the unemployed on the public way, but  
to command a view of it from a vantage  
both recessed and elevated is to enter  
the bourgeois space; here vantage and view  
become consumables. I can't describe  
how insulted I felt, it's a ruthlessness  
not so much I didn't know you possessed  
as that I didn't think you'd turn  
on me. When you stop acting in good  
faith any residue of the relationship  
gets really unpleasant and the gratuitous  
discounting severs what I can't necessarily  
define the circumferences of. "There are a  
number of calls in the June bill  
which I have been unable to document. We



believe these calls were made by S \_\_\_\_\_  
O \_\_\_\_\_ who is no longer employed by  
this project. We presume these calls  
to be program related although she  
did not keep a log of long distance  
calls as requested in the memo  
circulated March 11, 1980." It has  
more to me than please to note acquits  
defiant spawn. But your letter does  
not scan its view nor serve our  
own resolve. Little noticing sector  
demonstration, or flail with inheld  
throng. Content to meet or not to meet  
what inlays subsequent flustered  
adjustment. "The Good is  
for the fact that I will it, and apart  
from willing it, it has no existence."  
'There is no document of civilization  
that is not at the same time a  
document of barbarism." Blue suede pestilence.  
Binds bins. History and civilization  
represented as aura--piles  
of debris founded on a law and mythology  
whose bases are in violence, the release  
from which a Messianic moment  
in which history itself is vanquished.  
That's why I'm perplexed

at your startlement, though obviously  
it's startling to see contexts changed on you  
to have that done to you and  
delivered unbeknownst. The Ideal  
swoops, and reascends. 'With real  
struggle, genuine tax relief  
can be won." A manic  
state of careless grace. Mylar juggernauts  
zig-zag penuriously. Car smashed into;  
camera stolen; hat lost; run out of  
money, write for money, money doesn't come.  
Long interruption as I talk to woman  
most of the way back--a runner,  
very pleasant. Get off in Boston and everything  
seems to go crazy.

All of gets where  
Round dog-eared head  
The clear to trying  
Forgets issues of trembles  
Address vestiges to remain  
These years after all  
Fog commends in discourse



## THE MEASURE

The privacy of a great pain enthrones  
itself on my borders and commands me  
to stay at attention. Be on guard  
lest the hopeless magic of unconscious  
dilemmas grab hold of you in the  
foggiest avenue of regret.

## USE NO FLUKES

Close to stand  
Glitter with edge  
Clouds, what's but  
Weather of devoid  
Uses unwrapping  
Lower the second  
Gravity for allowing, but  
Slowly, as if  
Backward, falling  
Folded

## TEAM BIAS

Fun, you got  
a funny way  
of taking the  
tail by the  
horse. Around  
who I glimmer  
to stammer, rest  
my eyelids on  
an organized  
social disclosure--  
fine to meet  
the heat on  
the street.



## SUBSTANCE ABUSE

I become convinced of the itinerant  
congestion of filled out hollows.  
Boards propose wefts, largely  
inured of (for) baskets.  
Forget these chilly masquerades.  
I feel (felt) stripped by these  
changes. Who takes me in  
different directions and therefore  
I do not let go. These clip  
these oasis.

So these sorrows pronounce themselves  
in rhymes before my eyes, but  
no easier way arrives in which  
to predict--to predicate--allusion's  
sentimental anorexia. You who, while...

I proffer the usual explanations for  
this less than desirable behavior.  
At this point I'm months behind.  
I make this point because your gazing  
at a so projected grouping "at a  
distance" clouds your view--  
I'd be reluctant, practices vary,

& certainly even out of the normal,  
to include for instance, as  
would be appropriate. This  
is not avoidance behavior, the  
very project cannot be reduced  
to its least interesting motivation/  
realization/abuse. Personally, I  
don't know what I received and what  
I was shut up with.

These break at having mend  
which wails absently as  
substantial people rely on  
ice. So long strokes in,  
swabbed by ego's reply,  
adjacent but always curtained  
off of what ruffles  
and rumples.

I feel like a very nervous man. The  
moments do not compel my compliance  
to either your fugitive fear of  
expiation or fever's last embalming  
of my own falsification. One  
guise disguises itself within myself,  
the other within my text.



Everything I write, in some mood, sounds  
bad to me. It reads like gibberish--  
unnecessary rhymes, repetitions, careless  
constructions--a loss of conviction. Whether  
I am content to want to let those  
orders I find speak for themselves, if  
it is the orders as I make them that  
I want to compel my own lost recognition.  
No matter how the slack is removed  
I can see through it. Rough  
cuts satisfy, intrinsically, no more  
than seamless webs. "A person  
must make their own occasions." &  
what are occasions than cross-hatched  
projections of 'person' onto 'event'. There  
are, according to our lights, neither  
one or the other. Michael said to me  
the other day... & now I sit here and  
the recollection is far more occasioned  
than at the time itself. That solitude is  
the most public place of all: not  
institutions (for the "advancement of  
the public"). The individual mind  
is the "Divine parasite" (the phrase  
is Christopher Dewdney's) of the body

of us--all--the trick, then, to  
keep the channel open both  
ways. Nor is this simply a conjuring of  
phenomena, or simply its production--  
since we are inside of phenomena at all time  
and move from the nodal point of the self  
back and forth to the omnimorphic and  
acentric locus of our collectivity  
and our desires.

To move from moment to moment without  
Break is the ideal from which there is no  
Escape. But isn't what is wanted to  
Stop and hover, go back and forth at mea-  
sured speed, to dwell everywhere or only as  
Chosen. Such reflections candy our lives  
With conditional Appalachias, the  
Real facts about which are as hazy as beet soup.

There's no sport in supposing an  
even bent to be resistant to.

I'm at a bit of a loss, but have never  
figured out a system such that everything  
is out of the way and where to go to. To  
think I can plug sections into, cut-up,  
detain. Or I just gobble conscious morsels  
and am discorporated within them. "Edit  
is act" but why waste time on sputter. Intense



bluing of the sky. Left-over concepts, hard  
edged ingratiation. A gift so parsimonious  
in its intent that there are immediately  
blandishments on the part of forays. I don't  
even own a scale.

Nothing tires a vision more than sundry attacks  
in the manner of enclosure. My thoughts toss  
trippingly on the tongue--an immense excuse  
for proportion (perforation). What I am saying  
here will only come out in joinings:  
but to loosen the mind, limber it for  
bounding. What does ear contain  
that norming senses lack? A resolution  
in the air.

I find the nature and tone  
of your questions to be  
extremely discouraging, and to  
reflect an alarming lack of  
understanding of the nature  
of our activities. You have  
unilaterally and arbitrarily  
determined new evaluative  
criteria without regard  
for the fact that current

documentation procedures do not  
pertain to these new criteria.  
In fact, the statistics upon  
which you base your "analysis"  
tell more about you attitudes  
than our program.

The depths of consciousness can never be fully sounded,  
death is the only apparent limit.

Trial impressions leave you perfectly  
ordered. (Totally amniostatic sludge:  
buzz, buff...) Everybody comes to  
a stop in their own time; look at  
each other, starts coughing. Which  
tires very much wake up, snarl.  
Gold plums plunge: better batter  
better.

What hand hides  
pleasures only suggest--  
a glimpse of  
its morsel, postcards  
from the subjectless  
static:  
make-believe enchantments



in the erstwhile  
gaze of a buzz  
a milieu fades  
rapidly into.

They only start slowly  
who occasions  
without chance of  
redress. A while  
warns its  
first displacements.

Ongoing/undoing.

Fumbles with  
fondled alacrity

without which

thumbs do not

choose a

staked equation.

Put oneself,

desperately, in the

neck of premature

going-on-ness.

lean

looms

remains

## INTERVIEW

dwindling

fade

fumbling, quivering

pull

shade

dreary

slates

splits

record

Can a person who has never been bored be described as  
smug, or merely unsettled.

"It's supposed to be pulverized."

A frame of

some letting

wakes whatever

wagers contest.

To challenge,

pull behind.

Nominations demure in the receding music of stringed  
violet.

Why have I shied away from

this purposiveless activity, as



if the investigation of  
purposivelessness were all  
a thing of the past & was  
no more to be visited upon  
me?

I seem to be out-of-sorts with everyone  
lately--after each interaction begin to  
rethink it, where did I, (s)he go wrong?  
You've gone all the further in appointing  
me to your undoing; I only wish it were  
mine.

Anxious and waiting for something, but not  
definable--amorphous. What pans out?

I'm afraid to set it down, to contend with  
the medium at hand. Or not  
to be nice: reassuring. LOSE ALL  
TOUCH. Return to base one. Do  
the dishes again. Shopping for ashes.

"I'm all washed up": i.e., come ashore.

## INTERVIEW

What's the relationship, to your way of thinking, between surrealism and 'language writing' as compositional mode? I'm struck by the rapid juxtapositioning of image as well as voice in your work. How about Ashbery as an influence in this regard? 'Matters of Policy' might be a relevant text to go at.

I guess I have ambivalent feelings about the expression 'language writing' 'as a compositional mode'. I could speak of my own work, or specific other's work, but feel uncomfortable generalizing since what seems more compelling is to understand (be troubled by) the situational dynamics of categorization and characterization rather than accept them as intrinsically useful: to see how they can engender a fruitless competition, on the one hand, and a destructive historicism of style and trend on the other. (Frederic Jameson, in discussing Barthes, points to this in terms that remind me also of my article in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E #8, 'The Conspiracy of Us'. Insofar as a literary writing 'marks my affiliation with a given social group, it signifies the exclusion of all the others also--in a world of classes and violence, even the most innocuous group-affiliation carries the negative value of aggression with it. Yet the objective situation is such that I cannot but belong to groups of some kind, even if they turn out to be groups that wish to abolish the existence of groups: by the very fact of my existence'--class, time, place; by the fact of the work constituting a readability, a factitiousness, at all; by the fact of its distribution and hence readership--'I am guilty of the exclusion of others from the group'--even if it were only of one, group in the sense of aspect--'of which I am involved.')

Certainly, I do see the magazine, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and my own work, as expressing certain shared views about reading and about the constituting power of language, about seeing language itself as the medium of the work and foregrounding that medium. And yet this is not a movement in the traditional art sense, since the value of giving an aesthetic line such profile seems counterproductive to the inherent value of the work. If a larger common profile is called for, I would choose the social project of writers committed to a transformation of society at a large-scale social level, of which writing can be an important arena in terms of its investigation of the nature of meaning, how objects are constituted by social values encoded in language, how reading and writing can partake of non-instrumental values and thus be utopian formations. These political dimensions to poetry (and more generally art, and more generally to a way of regarding--reading--the world, which can be acted out at every level from personal relationships to conduct at the Job) seem to me worth bringing to the fore. They involve more a movement to change the nature of reading values, and not only reading values applied to poetry.

In contrast, the setting up of schools of writers based on associated aesthetic styles and pushing the group identity of the common denominator of these associations seems to me a misplaced energy in the face of the larger social project I am suggesting.



Of course, poetry activity in a given period can be grouped into different tendencies in ways that trade off elucidation for the repression of difference; this defining process is inevitable I suppose. But what come to be the predominant ways of characterizing, insofar as they are restricted to stylistic analysis, are bound to miss out on even closer affinities that cut across styles and even genres or mediums, not to mention emphasizing the dissimilar characteristics of projects that may in fact have many shared assumptions and repressing the often volatile, hostile, contradictory differences in writers viewed for the sake of the paradigm as similar.

And what's the value of giving this flux up--except perhaps to further divide an already marginal and beleaguered bunch of highly individualistic, somewhat paranoid (in the sane sense: to be beside one's mind is at least to be close by), often harried poetry writers (= poetry readers).

Furthermore, in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and in my writing I've tried to explore the possibility that it is not necessary to narrow one's work down to a single style and I feel that the advocating of a 'way' or 'style' of writing, per se, would contradict a more important principle that would criticize the fetishizing of any single style as a 'preferred' method of generating meaning; which is not to say that individual persons, fixed in time and in a body, do not gravitate toward the limits of their situation as expressed in the limits of the style(s) they use to express or produce meaning. But it is foolish and counterproductive to put forward a stylistic School since this would rapidly be reduced to simply another fetishized style. What might be put forward, though, is this larger social concern, along with an analysis of style, which is what could be called the putting forward of reading values not (divisive) writing values. Perhaps this would allow for a greater interchange among different types of writers, and indeed other cultural workers, instead of the disastrous movement toward increasing specialization and parochialization of reading. In that context, understanding the characteristics defining any of our own writing practices and interests could contribute to a dialog and not instead be the pretext for shutting one off. The former process is a refusal of the ghettoization of poetry with a recognition that all meaning and all communication occurs through a particular set of conditions (contexts, desires, sexual, ethnic/aesthetic traditions, audiences). It is not the valorization of style, and certainly not a style, that is fundamental, but the recognition that meaning is possible only through styles. The poem needs less to be viewed as a fixed end, an object d'art, and more as a transforming agent whose exemplary features are to be used by the reader in her/his researches into the nature and products of the production of meaning.

You ask about my being influenced by Surrealism. I actually feel quite ignorant of French Surrealist poetry, assuming that you have in mind Breton, Eluard, Aragon, Arp, and so on. I've read some of this work, but only cursorily and in translation. I do know considerably better the 'Surrealist' painters, but neither the writers nor the painters, while of course of interest, have seemed important to me in terms of my own work, apart from the

great significance this work has had for contemporary art generally. Though at the same time I can see how my own development may have brought me, as if through the back door, to a proximity with their work.

My basic conflict with both the theory (of Breton's) and the practice is the underlying psychologism and the reliance on symbolic, allegoric or 'deep' images. For me, images, especially of this type, are suspect, or at best wildly humorous as constructions (fabrications), not revelatory as 'psychic automatisms'. I don't believe in automatic writing either as a literal possibility or as an utopian or propagandistic literary value. And if anything, the kind of 'dream logic' juxtapositions that characterize much surrealist work seem to me a candied souping up of traditional literariness, especially insofar as the surrealist technique has been drawn upon in so much post-war American poetry (of what has been called 'the bird flew through my pillow' sort). Such 'dream' time and space seem to me to accept the normal narrative space of the poem and to distort it; in that sense it is insufficiently synthetic. I guess it's a certain kind of depth of field that surrealist eery dreaminess highlights that I would prefer to see diminished or framed.

While surrealism often seems to put forward allegorical values at the expense of the primacy of the materials of writing, my own interest in poetry of this century would be better traced along lines involving Stein, Beckett, Zukofsky, Riding, Creeley, and many others, as indicated by the poets I've written about or cited a lot (or will), who've seemed to me in some way exemplary. Sure, Ashbery, too, where although the image generation is fairly fluid and the transitions elegant, a framing mechanism is still active, though most especially and usefully in The Tennis Court Oath, Rivers and Mountains, and Three Poems. I'm not here thinking so much of personal influences but of writers who seem to me significant in terms of the recent historical tradition in which my work might be placed. Influence is a different and more byzantinely complicated matter involving crucially a wide range of contemporary work, much writing from before the present century, not to forget works old and new which I have disliked or am ambivalent about, or that I've never read (Algernon Charles Swinburne?!). But even more specifically, I don't feel exclusively influenced by work done in the genre of poetry, of equal importance is both non-poetry literary and non-literary writing; I feel a reductive characterizing in thinking only, for poets, in terms of the 'verse' tradition since as far as I'm concerned the relevant tradition is writing, which is quite a bit wider. As to impact on my work, the other arts, too, have been very important, very formative to my thinking. Certainly looking at Pollack and Louis, say, not to mention Kandinsky or Braque or Schwitters or Gorky, etc. etc., had much more influence on my ideas than reading many poets with whom I feel an affinity, while the surrealism of Dali's 'The Persistence of Memory' was a model to work against.

An exchange between Clark Coolidge and Barrett Watten at Coolidge's talk at 80 Langton Street in San Francisco seems relevant



to all this. Watten cited Stein's The Making of Americans as a similiar instance of work which "goes on". He suggested as an alternative the possibility of breaking the "carrier frequency", of stopping. Coolidge: "Why stop? Am I going to stop breathing?" Watten: "To stop would be calling into question. Doubt." Coolidge: "Doubt goes all the way through. You live in doubt. Negative capability." For me, this doubting, this STOPPING is all important ("STOP! in the name of love, before you break my heart"! with the all important credo as addendum, 'Think it over'.) I don't want to produce an unending flow of dream/psychic/automatic material or images, but, as in Brecht (I would relate my own interest in many of the longer poems to trying to create something analogous to what Brecht meant by 'epic') to break out from the propulsion/projection,--but the questioning, the stopping, built into the structure of the poem, seems to me crucial to seeing the constituting nature of language, which is the reading value I've been suggesting, and that indeed this stopping/framing allows the music of the poem to be heard, the music being hearing the sound come into meaning rather than a play with already existing meanings by way of meter.

I'm not interested, per se, in disconnected bits (the paratactic monochrome) but rather how these bits form an overall weave, so that it's a kind of spell creating but where the spell is continually exposed or surfaced. A poem like 'Matters of Policy' is exactly about this process, how conventions and language itself induce trances under which we glide as if in automatic pilot. And how we live in this spellbound way--it is our making and our unmaking, the source of beauty (and the magicalness and majesty of beauty) and also of alienness (towards each other and towards the world we so rarely and fitfully realize we make). Certainly the relentless theme of how language socializes us, but so often without a trace of this socialization that would illuminate, like the phosphorescence of an all permeating world-soul made manifest as world-body, our self-sameness in being and our communal project that is the socius that shapes not only our thoughts but our very bodies.

The nature of the image I am thus proposing is not so much surreal as critical, analytic,--an analysis that is inextricably bound up in making visible a fabricating mechanism, so that the manufacture of the fabulous and the ordinary are indistinguishable parts of desiring production (to use the phrase of more recent French theory). Mine is an interest more towards focusing attention on the constitutive nature of conventions (which works out as well to attending to the syllables of each line and the parameters of each work) than presenting a 'surreality' with claims to the absolute. So that the poem itself becomes a machine that spells and dispells illusion upon illusion, so that illusion's engendering may be witnessed.

Surrealism is to be credited with opening up new possibilities for images and perhaps more crucially for the transition from image to image (unit to unit) in the total organization of a poem--opening up, that is, the domain within which we now work. Artaud allows for this in his 1927 attack on the Surrealists, 'In Total Darkness'-- 'The imagination, the dream, that whole intense libera-

tion of the unconscious whose purpose is to raise to the surface of the soul all that it is in the habit of keeping concealed, must necessarily introduce profound transformations in the scale of appearances, in the value of signification and the symbolism of the created.' I also think of some remarks made by Robert Desnos (for me, with Artaud, one of the most interesting writers in some way associated with this grouping) 20 years later. 'It seems to me that beyond Surrealism there is something very mysterious to be dealt with, that beyond automatism there is the intentional, that beyond poetry there is the poem, that beyond poetry received there is poetry imposed, that beyond free poetry there is the free poet.'

To what extent do you make use of 'found language' in your work?

You're dealing in all cases with a material, language, that is in the most fundamental way 'found' and that fact has got to mediate any response to your question. So what you get is different types of found materials: I would reject the normal dichotomy between inside and outside in these cases. But that also makes the idea of appropriating language from other written sources as basic an activity to writing as memory or overhearing or describing. There has been so much attention to how photography freed painting from the necessity of representation, but I think a similiar point needs to be made about the relation of movies to writing. As writing focuses its attention less on recreating characters, place and story--presumably based on 'found' situations, cities, people, etc.--and more on types of style and vocabulary and argument, part of the investigation, of the work, requires using other texts as material to incorporate into a poem. But this is no more special or easy than is the situation of the photographer who in a similiar sense uses the found materials of the world to take pictures of; the problem is still not only 'what' to shoot but at what angle, what part, what exposure, etc. So in my work there are quotations from a vast array of sources, and just as many made-up quotations that sound like they are from a prior text. There are lines from other poems, and echos of lines; remarks from letters (my own and others') or memos from the job; things heard and misheard. Much of this is very specific, though some is not conscious--things that stick in the head but the source is not remembered. And, more, there are words or phrases suggested by prior sources, though in the form they appear in the work they would be totally unrecognizable. 'The originals are not original' starts a quote Bruce Andrews and I use in our collaboration in Legend, which is based on the idea of deriving a piece exclusively from prior texts--but again often so reworked that they bear no resemblance to anything else. The idea of getting all the material in a poem totally 'spontaneously' from my 'self' seems boring to me--my interest in writing is to be able to incorporate material from disparate places--I'll get fascinated with a particular word I've found somewhere, or a particular type of rhetoric or professional lingo and want to use that.



existing tendency (v. supra) in my poetry, into this commitment. To substitute another set of French terms, I have rendered my constructions simultaneously deconstructive; more accurately, I have constructed works using deconstructive means. I think it self-defeating merely to dismantle: society is more than the rebellious child sees through; if only the emperor were naked! We cannot abdicate assertion, testimony, positive conjecture. But we can induce in our readers (as ourselves) a readiness to challenge phrase by phrase the coherences we language.

To read my poetry as ironized is to read only halfway into it. It is to stop short of the requisite further step, which is to overcome one's timidity in the face of an apparent irony and take the risk that the phrase, line, sentence, piece has more than irony to offer; the reader is called on to feel this experience through, and this is deliberate: the convictions we arrive at in triumphing over misgiving are the only ones that will last. What use is it for me to be there holding the reader's hand, telling her what to believe, or disbelieve?

There is, I think, a certain subset of irony present -- dramatic irony: "knowledge held by the audience but hidden from relevant actors." In polysubjected writing -- writing where the reader is largely responsible for the meanings derived -- dramatic irony is always in play, because the reader (audience) knows something the actor (writer) does not, and yet this is nonetheless a something contained in the writer's actions.

*Let's move to the consideration of a particular text. Red Hats seems a suggestive frame for your head's movements. I've seen something of the way it evolved through successive drafts and find it fascinating. Could you speak, at this remove from its writing, to your own preoccupations with this work?*

Well, I'd turned 50, and so I figured I'd go through my early work and test my senses of it and the life it conjured in the present. So I settled on *Threads* and in order to assure that I pay close attention, I decided to rewrite it, or say translate it, into a mode that now felt more my own. And this work I called *Red Hats* because that was the one anagram of *Threads* that was promisingly empty of significance for me. After a while, when I had assembled a critical mass of such sentences, the work began to argue with itself and I abandoned *Threads* as a master text. Leland Hickman asked me to contribute to *Boxcar* so I sent him all I had at that time and called it Part One. Knowing that a second *Boxcar* would be along shortly,

I composed a second section, and this as it turned out was accepted by him for that second issue. About then Earel Neikirk contacted me, asking for a book. So I wrote two more sections and sent the whole to him, and he took it. Then I started to think about the work as a whole -- why was it in sections? These had only an accidental chronological provenance; they were not sufficiently different to be sections. They had just grown -- I didn't trust that "organic" method of composition. So then it came to me that I had a generative key in the 7 letters of the title; I would find sentences containing significant terms starting with R, and let these terms dictact which other, non-R sentences should accompany them; and I would repeat this procedure with E, D, and so on. It was a method that would thematize each section lightly, so that there would still be plenty of play possible, but some sense of potential unification to encourage that play. I continued to arrange the sentences so that each might or might not prove consequent upon the sentence immediately preceding, thereby granting a reader's decisions a reality not available in normative narrative or argumentation. As for *Red Hats* being "a suggestive frame for my head's movements," well, I guess it has to be -- and I know a number of people who'd hear that pejoratively, from within their encratic sense of exposition. I remember as a TA at Berkeley my professor stopping me as we walked down one of those long corridors in Wheeler and saying "David, do you realize you've been talking for five minutes and I haven't understood a single thing you've said?" No drugs were involved. I stake my poetry on the risk that others, maybe many others, actually think like that or this. And with some exemplary encouragement, will admit it. It's a liberating gesture. But more than just that, it's to incite thinking. Thinking can't be done without jumping. What passes for thinking is customarily the stringing together of cliches. Writing this way -- right now -- comes close to that in that there's this agreed-to constraint (I mean, I agreed with my imagination of a readership to respond in this mode), whereby -- well let me say I regard this interview as an act of translation, the way a title often is, to straddle the en- and a-cratic. So it isn't, to return to that sentence, in my intent and hope, simply how my head works. I suppose that more of my stamp is in the units, the sentences, rather than in their juxtapositioning. Oh, maybe to the extent of two, but seldom three, consecutive sentences. But the movement, that's something I want because I believe it's something that's wanted by others beside myself. It's, to one course in reading through, a conversation, sentences arguing or agreeing with each other, pointing things out, qualifying positions. Concerns, and I'm helped to these by other poets, often. We are engaged in a concerted endeavor. Concerns felt as common inform decisions during composition. In that sense, the writing is objective, and it had better be, I think, and thinking so, find superfluous such welter of autobiographical detail other kinds of poetry seem impelled to provide as evidence of some conclusions. Except as, in Section II, the question of such details becomes focus of attention. It is poetry: if I want to write a novel, I'd better want to invoke some welter! And yet I would propose *Red Hats* as essential autobiography: the writing of a life recognized as constituted by a society of which it is an exemplification and an embodiment: a person thinking/feeling/writing/sensing its language. But not ponderously constructing evidentiary prose that freezes process



vainly intending to offer detached content of said process. Words and phrases come to one under a plethora of circumstance not always or even usually derivable from such phrases. So much, I think, for the valorization of place. Naturally, I'm glad to be here. Nobody has to identify, in this text, the particular shape of my life during its composition, and for me to intrude such would be to invite characterization....and characterization invariably stifles attention. Once you can be pegged as "funny" or "ironic" or "malcontent" you will be, by those who feel a duty to comment in some summary fashion yet who feel threatened by the work and wish to give themselves good reasons not to read it. And we all do this, I suppose; I know I will get depressed if I let myself be led into reading a chunk of Bukowski. I know I'll like it at the time like candy and that an hour later after the sugar rush I'll be wishing I had died before my acne cleared up. So in that sense I've characterized his writing; but I do think that he invited it. Close attention of a prospective cast simply isn't among his intentions for the work. It offers other pleasures, and despite the "outsider" stance these are completely within the encratic. In fact, the stance of "outsider" is completely scripted -- it's widely recognized, as his sales testify. I don't presume to think I can be outside of whatever we're in, but as an artist and intellectual often encounter the presumption that that's exactly where I (want to) belong -- a character slapped on one, again. "Acratic" doesn't mean alienated or disaffiliated in that pop sense of existentialism. Got a job, got a home, got a car, got a wife, got a kid -- got plastic, some bucks, must fly by an approved airline. I write (~~from~~, ~~of~~, ~~among~~, ~~about~~, ~~in~~) that.

The work is dialectical, I like to think, and as such would have engaged the attention of Adorno. One of the pleasures of writing (one of the facts of life) is being able to address the dead. Because writing can outlive us and because its means and materials come to us from the dead, I don't need to complete this sentence. It's also Olson's "the play of a mind is what we're after" -- but it's the play of the reader's mind that's primary here. There are many kinds of red hat!

*From "preoccupations" to "occupations." Two questions: (a) How does the activity of teaching for a living participate or figure in your writing, and; (b) What most occupies your attentions now?*

Oh, Gawd -- it's back to school today and I still haven't completed this assignment! That answers (a) and (b) both, right now.

It's a familiar enough bind. Sent upstairs to do my homework, I read novels in my room. Something in me never wants to grow up, getta job, act mature, be "Mister Responsible Person God." Poetry begins in irresponsible play. But "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities." "What I took in my hand grew in weight." Even this writing, which I ought not to be doing (letters of reference waiting for students who told me yesterday they wanted them by the day before) and which I want to do (therefore?) attracts me less, in the

present, than the notion of fiddling around with some words out of which some compositional absorption may develop, something unthought of until that moment. Or I could be talking with my wife.

Given no family money, it is necessary that I have a job and given that, I am glad to have one teaching at a university. That's the logical response, in some normal-language use of the word *logical*, but I suspect I want the regimen the job requires. Or anyway, I've worked all my life and I'm hooked. I often do enjoy the mode of interaction a college allows. I think it's astounding that even in this present the state sets aside some rooms and chairs where persons may sit and discuss poetry. It's a privilege, just like conventional wisdom alleges! I'm pleased to have been foresightful enough to have secured such an occupation. I think I'm fairly good at it because I can be enthusiastic without inevitably becoming incoherent. I have an adequate vocabulary, and some facility in its application. I'm a ham and a mimic, always potentially of use in the classroom. I'm a do-gooder, too, who has always had trouble with Cage's title "How to Improve the World [I think it is] : You Will Only Make Matters Worse." It troubles me, I guess, in part because of characterological misgivings concerning the worth of all such endeavors. But I tell myself it's simply glib, too crazily rigid in its symmetry. Why publish it? It's in bad faith. Unless you really mean to make matters worse, which I surely don't, except for those who make it bad now for us who cannot partake in their "good." I get these hunches at times as to what a student "really means" -- what s/he is struggling to articulate; well, who knows? But could be a strong projection forces definition. I would rather teach when I feel like it, a la Olson at Black Mountain, and not have to stop on the hour. I enjoyed farm work the most, there you see the sense for every action, and you can measure the results, and it's all of a piece. But it's hard physical work, best fit for young men, and it's too isolating. And poorly paid. Teaching is second best, and I've done a lot of different kinds of work. The summer break allows time for writing and reading. Who knows how things would have turned out, had I done otherwise? My students have given me a lot of hits. And at times the impression that I've helped them also. One could certainly let them take over one's life. And gladly, I'd say, if it weren't for this other demand.

Early on I read that learners can be divided into three categories, those who say "I see," those who say "I hear you" and those who say "I grasp what you mean." It's no doubt a clumsy division, but has some merit I think, and so I try to remember to present points visually, audially and kinetically. This becomes "second nature" and enters the writing in that way also. Similarly, in teaching one is constantly translating -- say, literary language into colloquial, and that enters my poetry too: "He rooted in his belief," the first sentence in *Red Hats*, which has a quaint tone to it, 19th Century post-Romantic to my ear, becomes "I'm your puppet," a pop version of the same phrase -- while at the same time a severe qualification of the first sentence.



same project. In general, the work in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, like the poetry which is discussed in it, has developed in relation to the materials of the medium of writing. It is inconceivable that what you are calling the 'theoretical essays' could have developed without an active poetic practice informing it and framing it: they are none other than an extension of that practice. Even in terms of development, these works occurred after a significant amount of the poetry had been written. It's a mistake to talk of the 'independent' value of the 'theory'; or anyway it's a fatuous conception of what the value of such work is, a theoreticism I would reject. 'I'm interested in reports from the field, but not the field.' A poetics can only be 'alive' if its poetry is--and indeed I suspect, as Pound has argued, that the converse of that is equally true. If one of the things that has characterized my 'critical' work is the use of writing methods basic to the practice of my own 'poetry' the dichotomy of quality you are setting up is all the more suspect. I'm used to hearing that the 'theory' is not theory at all but only (!) poetry--i.e., not systematic, not sufficiently explained; one might imagine professional critics exactly reversing your equation. But on a personal level your question is more prickly since how can I really 'answer' an evaluative charge? The work is there and speaks: anyone who is interested is likely to find some of the work--'poems' or 'essays'--more telling than others. But to break the work down into two basic types seems to me not founded in actually reading the texts and tuning into the primary unity of them--and in that sense is based on a misreading of the so-called 'essays'. 'I like his drawing but not his color.' All that I am is in my work.

Okay. Let's go at a text. Could you speak to THE OCCURRENCE OF TUNE? What motivated that piece? And were there any special procedures involved in its creation?

At the end of the notebook which has the first draft of that poem is a quote from Oppen: 'We want to defend/ Limitation/ And do not know how'. Which still seems to me a suitable epigram for the work. Basically it's a transcription from a notebook I was using in the Spring of 1977, all the material was written in a 'journal'-type way and edited over the summer. I think the piece is so much about 'motivation' that it's hard to single out a strain apart from the confluences expressed there. That somehow questioning, interrogation, emptiness had their own music and would suffice--you didn't need anything else to go on. But as far as compositional procedures go, this piece really just happened, I don't now remember having anything overall in mind when I was writing it, though obviously as it evolved I began to see the shape and worked toward that. I spent a long time reading and re-reading it after it was finished, mostly cutting things out that didn't seem to work, but this involved a lot of attention to a small amount of excising, since most of the work is as it was originally composed (and still

I can remember the many weeks of editing better than the writing itself). Four short sections--the ones with line breaks--which I imagined to be the 'tune' of the title, were published in ROOF IV but otherwise, apart from some xeroxes, the work hasn't been seen, since the person who was originally going to do it as a book just never got off the ground. Susan (B. Laufer) and I have just now published it as a collaborative project, through Segue Books, in which the text is interspersed with her pictures.

It has been interesting to reread the work, in proofing, and puzzle through many of its idiosyncrasies. I'm struck with how often I have to spend quite a bit of time rethinking a quirky piece of punctuation or spelling and how it is working through this process that opens up the content of the text for me. Struck both by how much what I myself wrote I've now forgotten about and how the choices that confound me now push back as key elements in my current reading of the work. How much this work seems about that process too: tune being the variety of ways meaning congeals, not so much as a plotted act of creation but rather, retrospectively, as the accumulation of occurrences, occurrences being non-systematic formations, accidents in the literal sense. For me, writing is a process of engaging the unrealized (and therefore a production of the real). Starting a new poem tends to be pushing against a powerful field of inertia; that's why so much of the work is about motion, resistance, connection, flow, fissure. Not only don't I know what I'll write in the next poem, I don't know what I'll write in the next line of a poem I'm working on. (One of the things that interests me about line breaks is the pulse of energy involved in the connection at the end of one line and the beginning of the next, like a spark jumping a break in a cable.) So writing is a startling uncovering of meaning by the very fact that it is a production of it, a making of it word by word.

I had a conversation recently with a friend who said that he found his work insufficiently expressive of his sense of the world, what he actually thought and had to say. The style with which he was working seemed to have a life of its own and it's as if he was working out what could be said from within that. He said he was making an effort to make his writing more reflective of his thinking and perceptions. Hearing that I realized I have no conception of what I have to say which I then want to put into writing, but that the writing itself shows me what I have to say, and it's always news to me, even years later, as in rereading this poem. It's not the horse pulling the cart of writing but the writing that's pulling me; and I find out who or what 'I' am, or what I have to say, by reading it. So really here the cart is pulling the horse. That sense of not sufficiently expressing what I have to say or express is inimical to this process of production. The meaning or expression does not accompany the writing, as if the process is split, but is the writing. The Occurrence of Tune is an exploration of some of these issues. Perhaps to see what 'inspiration' could be: not putting a prethought meaning or perception into words but rather arriving at either or both in the activity of writing itself.



In what regard does a sense of 'limit' enter into the work or your work in general?

Well, completely--that there's no limit to limits and blockages, stoppage, jam as depth of field, as the abstraction/condensation of poetry, as if a dam were the poem's hydroelectric power/intensity source. So it's both a subject matter and a formal concern. What, after all, is the subject matter of poetry? Certainly limitation is right up there, as the body, time, place. Here you have a subject matter that actually raises itself in formal terms. I'm a bit leery of what gets called 'self-referentiality' in poetry because of the possible self-consciousness in that--'here I am writing this on yellow paper, and you, the reader, looking at this script become type' and so on. I tend to want to cut that out. The Occurrence of Tune was partly a work in which I left in, made a piece around, what I would normally think to edit out. But the point is that what's significant about issues of formal limitation as a subject is not the self-comment on the object you can get, that's almost a distracting byproduct, but rather what this says, manifests, works out, about communication, about what and how one person can mean something, what the limits of that are. So it always seems ironic to hear someone say, well I'm not interested in aesthetic issues, I'm interested in 'emotion', or 'life', since if you can attend to the writing in the right way these so-called aesthetic issues stop being comments about writing or the poem itself and become investigations into the possibilities of and the realizations of communicating or acting or being in the world. Everybody has their ends, the things they can make do with. What's the subject matter of poetry? The way a person walks across the room, listens to him or herself, the patterns of the water as it falls, the color of the sky. One reads these words to see how a person measures their day, or how it could be measured. Everything is contained when it is apprehended, language is limitation. One sees certain things, or constructs them. And a limit is just the measure at hand.

Do you have an active sense of 'voice' which could be said to condition your work?

The question that always interested me was how could language be made more conscious of itself, a question of the making audible of knowledge otherwise unreflected or unconscious. This making audible being the music of the poem. 'Voice' has seemed just the most obvious way of avoiding this, since it is inextricably tied up with the organizing of the poem along psychological parameters. Unlike terms such as 'limit' and 'measure', voice becomes a self constituting project, both from an external categorizing point of view and from an internal compositional one. To try to unify the style of work around this notion of self is to take the writing to be not only reductively autobiographical in trying to define

the 'sound' of me but also to accept that the creation of a persona as somehow central to writing poetry. I say reductive because any characteristic ordering of language that creates a sense of voice is very much a construction out of a horizon of possibilities. I don't have a voice; though I can create a consistent stylistic voice in writing, or let some habitual pattern of composition bleed in from, for example, speech, and call that voice. But habitual orderings in writing, the patterns I tend toward or fall into, do not have a privileged status as self disclosing, much less as text generating--though they tell something of course, and I do attend to my preoccupations and obsessions. So I don't want to enfold the variety of language I use into the category of voice, any more than I would want some autobiographical gestalt to be imagined as the cohering principle between diverse elements of a single poem or among poems. Such principles of interpretation or composition are the product of a series of exclusions of relevant features of the work as much as inclusions of other features. This relates to what I was saying earlier about an aversion to characterizations of schools of writing. What is the basis for the idea of individual voice as a privileged structure in the organization and interpretation of poems; that is, when does writing stop being composition or song, incorporating at times fictional or real events in the author's life but not necessarily expressive of it at the level of form or content? When, that is, does a certain type of consistent tone among a series of discrete texts become valorized with the ontological status of voice as self, as we see in Expressionist and Romantic theory. Voice becoming self individuating rather than, for example, reflective of a period or of each poem individually or of a common stylistic practice or of even broader notions human speech, all of which make competing claims on the notion of voice. It's a mistake, I think, to posit the self as the primary organizing feature of writing. As many others have pointed out, a poem exists in a matrix of social and historical relations that are more significant to the formation of an individual text than any personal qualities of the life or voice of an author. I do not wish to discuss the well known position about the 'death of the author'; but there is no question that authorship is a concept that has been given much more significance than it merits, and as such is an obstacle for reading and writing to overcome; even though I do not feel that it makes sense to carry these views to the extreme of cancelling authorship as a factor completely, making a text exclusively the product of a discourse or a period, since in crucial ways a poem is as much a resistance as a product, and for the moment at least the individual is the most salient concept with which to describe the site of this resistance. The valorization of the author function, in its current guises as voice, persona, autobiography, and self-expression, hierarchializes a complicated constellation of variables including structure, social context, genre, method, politics. One of the things I wanted to explain in my piece on Mac Low is how his work challenges this model of what he would call 'ego' organization. I'm not interested in precluding, in my



own work, any of the variables of writing, per se, which is why I say I am interested in a multi-discourse, polyvocal writing practice. Islets/Irritations, the book I have most recently completed, is partially organized around the idiocentric occasion of each poem, rather than the more sociocentric approach in Controlling Interests: in each poem the coherence that it requires is worked out in a way that doesn't necessarily apply outside its specific occasion. This is also what interested me in doing short poems in the new book and in general accounts for the exogamic appearance of the whole with a different shape or parameter to each poem, different voices, different measures,--to have an overall text without an overall format or style.

I'd like a fuller understanding of your notion of 'author-ity'. You ended the Mac Low essay with what seems to be a key point ('That it is architectures that shape the world, but WE who must fill them up.'). Who IS Charles Bernstein and why is he implicating all of us in these strange things he does?

I wonder myself. What a 'person' is is certainly a theme throughout my work and the formal dimension of that concern in a text is the question of author-ity. It's the topic, for instance, of 'G--', of my dialogue with Ron in Legend, of the cover motif of Poetic Justice etc., etc. It's a running issue in Controlling Interests: the self constituted by a matrix of language that envelops an individual like the swaddling clothes in Rousseau's Emile. So is the 'self' the impression of a mold or the particular form of maladaptation to it, or what? Individuals are in essence that which is maladapted, idiocentric, resistant; it is in that sense that we get to know another only through the identification and appreciation of their peculiarities as particularized--mutant--and not as instances of some generalized feature of some genre of humans.

The reason there may be some value still in the author function is that the 'I' in a text operates as a very pertinent measure of the constituting capacity of language. It's like a radioactive tracer in physiology, where a radioactive isotope replaces a stable chemical element in an ingested substance allowing the course of its activity to be scanned. Formally, the 'I' allows the language's formative capacities to be scanned. --So I hope the reader does feel implicated because I want to show that 'I' as a social construction, a product of language and not a pre-existing entity outside it; that 'I' is first a 'we'. We're implicated in each other from the first!

## JAMES SHERRY

Sept. 23, 1981

Dear Tom Beckett,

As the person who has published more of Bernstein's writing than anyone I think I would like to say two or three things about that relationship in order to give your readers an idea of who has made these works that stand up to the rigorous analysis of your other critics.

Throughout the time I have known and worked with him, Bernstein has only once showed me an 'unfinished' piece. His method of composition must have something to do with writing down lines around a preconceived theme and then editing and reediting, but I don't think very much work gets seen in the early stages outside of a few bons mots that crop up from conversations that I remember. The work stays in his hands until it is completed.

I have had hours long discussions with him about the placement of a comma inevitably to be faithful to the text as it came off the typewriter. And yet the texts seem to invite such questioning, because of their complexity and ambiguity. Once we spent days talking about whether 'jelled' or 'gelled' was the appropriate spelling for his intended meaning. Consulting numerous dictionaries, O.E.D., thesaurus and other literary sources for hours on end, the work, by new gelid, jelled, held its shape, but had a tendency to quiver when pressure was applied. It was fine.

However, when the work has been looked at and published, the author will not ascribe intention to it without undue coercion. What the reader will find in it is ok with Charles. Of course one can detect in the tones of his response whether what one has discovered resembles what was put into the lines. This separation of the self that wrote the work, that defined its limits of composition, and the person who has to say in the world that he has written is more pronounced in Bernstein than in most writers. The self exists and is not changing while the person is for all practical purposes defined by the social context.

This self extends into the publishing of the work. Bernstein is the most assiduous editor I know and his own books are meticulously overseen by himself in every detail accessible. This has been his preference with me, perhaps because I am not always as attentive to detail as he would like, but I get the feeling that he would like to do the same to all of his publications. The words on the page in the book are as important as the words on the manuscript page.

I think this kind of care is apparent because of the reverence he has for understanding. I think with him knowledge is secret in the sense that it is revealed to the reader on a 'need to know' basis. I myself am not convinced of the hierarchy that is implicit in this kind of thinking, but I have seen repeatedly that it is as important how the information is told to the person as what the information is as who is being told it. Yet to a certain extent



the separation of self and person has made it difficult, in the abstract work that has dominated his production, for his talent as a reader of persons to make itself felt in his writing. (One might retort that his use of language has implicit in it the character understanding that is absent from the content of the writing.)

But I do not think that Bernstein is isolated. Contrarily, he has been continually interested in the efforts of his peers and in their thoughts on his own. He is a voracious reader of poetry books and magazines and almost anything that he comes across, although of course he has his interests. He is absorbed in the rhetoric of the day as if he would convince himself and his readers by the shapes of the periods he constructs of the validity of his endeavors and theirs. It is in my view this humility that has made his curiosity so all pervasive and his writing so encyclopedic within the few pages, three or four hundred, that he has published so far.

I think this letter ought to supercede the article I sent you on Bernstein's methodology, since it is more what needs, as far as I'm concerned, to be said at this time, when, I fear, a lot of jargon will cover the work and the writer. Good luck on uncovering the difficulties of the writing.

Best,

James Sherry

#### METHOD TO THE SELF

"There are perhaps no days of our childhood we lived so fully as those we believe we left without having lived them, those we spent with a favorite book."

--Proust

"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."

--Bernstein

Bernstein like Proust has devised a convoluted method of relating conscience/consciousness to the page, substituting a different sense from that of the words we are reading. His language manifests un-gainly shapes. The sentences reflect the constant intrusion of the world on the mind and the impossibility of meditation/mediation, perhaps though in a constricting way while Proust gains latitude. Objects and events speak as people distracted by a landscape of genre meanings which lend credibility to the media-barraged mentality, but also an essence too packed, too pointed toward what we have learned to expect from a scene full of contradictions and fractures. These genres--confessional, pop, philosophical--impact Bernstein's work with a social consciousness or rather a social component, to use his sense of social schemes as "machinic" structure, which it imitates, indicating how we should feel about it--dyslexic, oppressed, sore. And that is how he tries to revenge himself on the language he seems to assert was contrived against us.

His own language is presented as the primary social model. Instead of giving flight to perceptions about events through language as Proust did with more specific referents which conjure up a som-nambulant reality as we read it while light twists through the cheap glass of our tenements, Bernstein reveals reality as language muscling us around. As Proust psychologized the act of reading by referring to the time we spend doing it (we are not surprised that moments with books ultimately prove the most fruitful), so Bernstein socializes the act of reading by altering the syntax or expectation in such a way that we question the writer, the act of reading and our eyes all at once, because of the deformations/deformities of the sentences and words we stumble across/over.

He will as above provide alternative, related word forms to show the possibilities of direction that the meaning of a phrase can take on or to represent inside/outside dichotomies and multiple categories referred to--social, personal, political. Any part of writing can suddenly take on meaning, even to the appearance of a capital letter in the middle of a word. The writing in Poetic Justice shows the greatest variety of surface anomalies and Control-ling Interests displays the varieties of resonance among the meanings of the words and the subtler kinds of syntax and reference.



And with such tactics, instead of the constantly deferred satisfaction of content and satisfaction from sentence structure that throws the reader's attention in Proust's writing onto the language, Bernstein constantly/continuously applies meaning to language forms. This lens is what the layering of modernisms has led to, not deferred but twisted with loss and the weight of successive partial solutions that he establishes as alternatives to an entire social reregistering. This presentness on the page must be distinguished from the presentness of speech, since speech is only one of the language forms that can carry meaning beyond the content of the words. (One hesitates after reading Bernstein's work to separate speech entirely from underlying structure.)

These language forms have many possibilities as building blocks, but Bernstein is not concerned with grammar and sentences as correct in the sense that society requires compliance with codes of behavior. He retreats to an earlier 'rhetorical' form of presentation, the period, which reflects patterns of thought in the patterns of its phrases rather than given standards of the shape of the thought as in the grammatically oriented notion of the sentence. He does this as if to convince/assure himself/us by his rhythmic fandango of his own and the reader's worth/value and the validity of both their labor, sense of reality or lack. To do this Bernstein stretches grammar, but includes standard grammatical forms/genres as touchstones. His works sum up 'revolutionary' artistic strategies in an attempt to make all previous writing a 'special case' of his encyclopedic poems, each an 'article' on a series of interconnected prosodic tactics. Some of the efforts are baldly commentary such as "Palukaville", some are mappings such as "Italian Border of the Alps", and some are more pure writing such as "Simple Pleasures", not to mention critical articles such as "Two or Three Things I Know About Him", extending and clarifying what he and his peers mean by writing as a "critique" of language.

This critique is applied in a thinner coat of objectivism to a thicker base of phenomenology than the blatant and ebullient 'spreads' of his contemporaries' more minimal formulations. The coat is thinner because the phenomena aren't only structured into the work, but also become subject (content) as well as aspiring to a way of extending grammar. Again grammar refers not to the 'rules' by which writing is constructed, but to the prosodic tactics which are chosen from a lexicon of styles to represent varied mental settings. This implies that his work looks backward; the front view is distorted by regret as if expectations might degenerate into hysteria. His ideal is a continuing concern for human scale that steps past deconstruction, a recognition of factors impinging on the unconscious in a way that the individual does not recognize, but ingesting even those factors into the self which he posits. Subjects swim across the broad front of the writing's contemplative leading edge, narratives are strung out like stanzas, thinking is compacted into jargon, and the whole movement of the poems is a kind of thinking. (He has written a critical piece, part of which is called "Writing and/as Thinking.")

This overall outlook twists language back into shape, not out of shape, and reconstructs the subject as if it could correct the pains of life by adjusting the language materials to reflect them. This carries the 'social' approach to language to satiric extremes. As language and capital structures become increasingly baroque, Bernstein would have language continue to be able to draw attention to that fact by tuning the words to those pitches. This escalation of distortion further resembles the military culture that is in the winds. And if art predicts or reflects, capital now has a vested interest in abstract writing as a kind of elitism that renders the transparent prose of preceding culture gelid and self-mocking. Sentimental, self-referential turns of phrase crop up more often in Barrons book reviews and New Yorker descriptive passages. But Bernstein is establishing a method not merely a series of techniques that can be used at will for fatuous reportage. And then in the same way that he posits content as form true to his modernist forebears, so he posits technique as method, elevating the mechanical means of manipulation to override alienation in which that mechanism has played such a central role.

In this sense Bernstein's 'philosophical' writing is not the alternately feverish and complacent Proustian kind. His idealism responds to his own needs rather than the needs of completing a view of society. There is no end to the uses of solipsism. But if one is nostalgic, one is not joyful, and that is a clue to tone.

And true to contradiction, his anthropomorphized work is so socially determined that "there are no persons" that are not socially conceived/constructed (it is his language that is biomorphic), although there are selves and their modalities. By writing from that self, without the willful centrality of person, he experiences only at a distance, albeit through material language rather than through emblematic objects, curving back on Proust.

Immediacy to such forms of alienated consciousness is only possible when it can feel something materializing right in front of it as it writes along. Bernstein's work is put together by such method as he finds by going on with his cognitive process, uncovering connections and allowing them to enter. His internalized (social) origins are removed from the temporal framework that activates Proust's writing. Antecedents in Bernstein's writing are located in the (his/our) unconscious. The subject is central but constructed and we must therefore share the bias of the work, the sentiments, and the context to read it or else be lost questioning his motives as he questions the validity of the experience, social fabric and language structure he is given.



# NICK PIOMBINO

## WRITING, IDENTITY AND THE SELF

"You can hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world, this is something you are free to do and is in accord with your nature, but perhaps precisely this holding back is the only suffering you might be able to avoid."

Franz Kafka

Just as Gertrude Stein conceptualized a distinction between "entity" and "identity" in writing, Charles Bernstein has put forth a view of writing that would free it from "self" as an organizing principle:

Writing (or reading) that uses the self as its organizing principle, either through a persona or through the more open field of consciousness mapping, appeals to as artificial, as socially constructed, an entity as expository writing's appeal to logic.

Here, and elsewhere, Charles Bernstein has also espoused a notion that an individual's freedom is delimited by a concept of writing which uses language as "a disappearing act that gives you the world on the other side."<sup>2</sup> Yet this view of writing, the "disappearing act" view, also implies a view of the self which does not wish to juxtapose the self between the reader and the world. The writer is conceptualized as a neutral medium, presenting his or her experience without the interference of personal "mannerisms" or idiosyncrasies. It is here that Bernstein attacks a powerful form of repression by society and has helped point a way for a liberation from such constraints. Freedom from stylistic uniformity for the sake of some mythical objectivity is not to be earned under the banner of some equally mythical version of individuality or romanticized concept of "self."

It is true that the notion of the self as an evolutionary process may be illusory if the writer, the person so seeing himself, simultaneously delimits his or her freedom to develop by adapting a co-opted view of language and action. For by this approach, the self confines its longing to break from its constraints by accepting a view of language only as a mirroring function. Charles Bernstein and other writers with a similar viewpoint understand this as a form of narcissism which actually leads people to enjoy their freedom mainly in the form of grandiose fantasies: "what else is a person anyway but a signifier of responsibility for a series of actions 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 you'd like to do if if if if one day some time"<sup>3</sup>. While I agree that disposing of this form of nullifying narcissism is laudable, and that it is supported by a concept of self which is hypocritical, by defining the whole concept of self reflexively, and thereby narrowing it philosophically, he

has underestimated the complexity of the self construct. The mirroring function of the self is indeed limiting and limited. But an important theme, a complication not completely worked through in Bernstein's work, may be illustrated by a distinction that can be made between self and identity.

In Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* for example, identity, not only self, is revealed as an exquisitely vulnerable aspect of being; in Charles Bernstein's work, identity is approachable through its intimate, highly internal relationship to language. This is recognized by him as a paradoxical situation, in that language is a publicly shared entity in both the artifactual and the instrumental sense. There is no private language, in Bernstein's view, but there is an inner, fleetingly experienced linkage between language and identity: "A different person almost by the way you gag your reflection, or actually getting up and walking out, so predictable always the same sort of pressing with the sound of the way it falls. You wear your birthday hat as a particular sequence, primarily a texture..."<sup>4</sup> It is highly difficult to describe the texture of identity from the outside in, so to speak, as compared with the texture of self. Heinz Kohut writes in *The Restoration of the Self*: "The musician of disordered sound, the poet of decomposed language, the painter and sculptor of the fragmented visual and tactile world: they all portray the breakup of the self and, through the reassemblage and rearrangement of the fragments, try to create new structures."<sup>5</sup>

I contrast identity and self in this way because it is possible to understand the entire being of a person as a dynamic process of becoming when one aspect of being, which I am calling identity, may be visualized as potential and virtual, and the other aspect, self, as actual and thus biographically determined (historical). In "Out of this Inside" Bernstein's style allows for a full evocation of the vulnerable, fluctuating identity in its formation and dissolution, surrounded by the refracted bits and pieces of experience in which it is reflected. Individual access to identity is attainable by means of a responsible acknowledgment of the self through its relationship and connection with others, through the expansion of alternative ways of comprehending meaning, and the recognition of one's personal access to the tools of language. This discovery of identity must be won through persistent effort: "keep, your eyes, open, or on it, or in it, how do you know well ultimately you don't know-- this is just my problem in learning to play the recorder: I have to look at the same time as I play, can't just take off, do it automatically, I (have to) 'figure out' the positioning of the notes, I 'couldn't' just play (a self consciousness that 'people, sometimes, do' let you down, don't write or call, get in touch, drift 'irreparably' far..."<sup>6</sup> In this passage the struggle of composition is equated directly with the conflicts of the self aware of the necessity and responsibility for evolving its own identity, in relation to its signs, to objects and to others.

I am not suggesting that the struggle to develop identity replace self as an "organizing principle" for writing. I am proposing that the concept of self must be understood as a dynamic,



not a static, one. I am defining a contrast between the two: identity represents all that is potential to the self in phenomenological awareness, in part, of course, realizable, in part not, in part being realized, in part, not. Self represents that which is finite and observable in awareness in self or self-and-other interaction. The self is thus the sheddable bark of the tree, facing outward to the world and relating with it, exposed directly to it, and also protecting the identity, the xylem of the tree, vulnerable and within. More vulnerable, more changing, the identity defies the imprint of the world and the self make upon it: "Glimpse immediately flashing formed with a passing knowledge that becomes your whole life reflected. Still empty the waves turning, movement to become an opacity as lap or imprint," Bernstein writes in "THE TASTE IS WHAT COUNTS."

"THE TASTE IS WHAT COUNTS" I read as Bernstein's most direct encounter with these difficult issues. "The change is in me" he writes, "the very same sand of my childhood still confronts me."<sup>8</sup> This difficulty is brought about by Bernstein's very static view of the self. He sees unchanging boundaries to the self because he has not conceptualized, although I believe he has envisioned, a more dynamic view of the self. He writes in "THE TASTE IS WHAT COUNTS", "The boundaries perceivable in a form attended on both sides by a border within which limitlessness lives, hung as press of confusion. I, in boundary, the very hum of it."<sup>9</sup>

When he writes, "Finding it in myself or just a blank space where some thing should be: a ringing if not a peal..."<sup>10</sup> I sense that Bernstein is actually describing the self's tenuous approach towards identity. In recognizing in people's so called "damaged" aspects an understandable split that is traceable to the self's multiple loyalties, origins, divisive responsibilities, Bernstein discovers a source of renewal, an integrity gained by allowing for a dynamic relationship between parts. Though not always unified consciousness is unifying, "solitary in the way it insists on forming signs, hovering about an event, constituting and reconstituting its meaning."<sup>11</sup>

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1. Charles Bernstein, "Writing and Method," an essay written in conjunction with a series he conducted with Edmund Leites at the St. Mark's Poetry Project, February 1981, on "Poetry and Philosophy", Poetics Journal No. 3 (forthcoming).
  2. Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, Pacifica Interview on Politics, in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Supplement No. 3, October 1981.

3. Charles Bernstein, "Three or Four Things I Know About Him," first published in A Hundred Posters, edited by Alan Davies, No. 26, February 1978; republished in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Supplement No. 3, October 1981.
4. Charles Bernstein, "THE TASTE IS WHAT COUNTS", Poetic Justice, Pod Books, Maryland, 1979, p. 41.
5. Heinz Kohut, The Restoration of the Self, International Universities Press, 1977, p. 286.
6. Charles Bernstein, "OUT OF THIS INSIDE", Poetic Justice, op. cit., pp. 28-29.
7. Charles Bernstein, "THE TASTE IS WHAT COUNTS", op. cit., p. 43.
8. ibid, p. 47.
9. ibid, pp. 47-48.
10. ibid, p. 46.
11. ibid, p. 47.



# PETER SEATON

## FREY'S LANDING

### An Appreciation of Charles Bernstein's Shade, Poetic Justice and Controlling Interests

We were talking criteria, the main way to say the gate in English, and to rescue oblivion from conclusion, and to avoid tracing something latent, like a path, from word to word. The mouth works, what is has to do with writing, always regardless of origin except as those all-important curiosities even less than what writing has to do with writing, maintains a procedure empty of familiarity, conditional in surprise helping keeping them shut except when drunk. This acquiescence in the tradition, or the confidant of information. Implosions usually forestalled through selection, still, we get what we want.

Now, line by line, the mouth can be open for this, but the lines mutate into something otherwise previous to having been punched up or keyed in. We see what can be done and do it, read the pages of a book. What's being read is written: I prefer Bernstein's poetry because he might carry this further, to a tree, he might begin before he left off, accurately aware of pruning if there is a goal and it is long life. It's virtue, sentiment is a reflexive term, and the students of some late great poet amend instructions to read this is what happens when Charles writes, after all, dear sister, I'm the one calling you, calling you. Lord Byron sat looking over the wind swept water to the mainland shore. Jim Jordan, clearing the yard in front of his house at 35 Leisure Lane, said everything was out, all over the island. As elsewhere, anything is more contemporary than the ferry or the phone. We are receiving television pictures of George Gordon, Lord Byron, putting it together, adding it up, at this time.

I was thinking, standing naked on a park bench, of running to get sand between my feet before my eyes were closed reflecting, like objects, a kind of explosion, feeling embarrassed, always, being embarrassed, reflecting, like objects with no motivation reflecting, like objects with no motivation, is a kind of explosion. Well, I examine myself in the dream of faulty politics. I was just a kid, off the ship onto the old Embarcadero, put all that shit behind me, wailed down to the doctor eyes closed in my mother's arms, all that weather, I got out of the car to look for him, burned my left hand, my piano playing hand on the tailpipe and said how am I gonna feel and he said how are you gonna feel, pretty much like you do know pretty much like you do now.

All that sleet snow and school behind me, playing the recorder like I do now continually accosted by strangers typographically. The next time we wake up we're like silicon hydro-carbon machines pul-

sating gossip: Tonsid14naylliaH! The cradle of some civilization referred to for the roots of Pound. Out there the ground's the same some dirt attraction making us sink like spinners and swim like flyers forever getting lost within the vicinity of a body of water. I'd like to hear if the first or next lie depends on an exit line of cocaine, less circumspect in an attack, less creating new concepts of conductivity, and then writing the pervasive influence and existence of resistance, silicon and systole, off the map into consciousness and some true schematic of desire, bread on the table, impressed on travel, the substitute for action, the substitute for thought.

We were relinquishing phenomena, the bait to use the tribe in English, and made more of the next day to use the impulse of light, up to now faster than the speed of sight, to move characters by tight propulsion of pattern recognition. That could refer through overhead projection to mirrors reflecting this object sameness continuously about to, the image, the fear of breaking apart consequently, too much information, someone who flaunts the life of an artist like a disease and Charles slowly shakes his head agrees you can take it with you and that means any time you want. We're waiting for something really long to escape as a message in an experiment controlled within one point of a world to another of another and more and so on. So we can get this right Bernstein uses a machine to fulfill all the possibilities of print by revealing a few, electric rocks with lunar counts so that these difficulties have even less to do with super-conductivity than a line, less to do with classical temporal (Earthly) resistance than the universal habit of straight anything.

Charles says, looking out to sea can be very demanding. To your left, boats from the high tower reaching in to be repaired, boats from the settlement cashing in and we're not even close. Straight ahead, out to sea, the Italian border of the Alps, cool looking and hot, a plain, another case, chug chug chug, taking care of interstellar business including playing a dealer from nine to five twenty four hours a day on vacation. So that each time Mother blew me a kiss I'd go around the world three times between steps up the staircase to bed. Take for examples the aspirations of that class, I'm here to fix that, subtle determination fixing daily renderings of our disquietude fixed that. A real estate agent, murdered on the Appalachian Trail today. A snake was seen in the rocks two days ago, a spider, sunning itself, yesterday, refused to budge. Tess came down, sat in the water and giggled out to sea.

Charles Bernstein is a very generous artist. That includes giving you everything you need to see that he doesn't stop going. You begin to think, pretty soon..., and two weeks later post-modernism is in ruins. One night, hiding in a tree, I suddenly see a man appear. Don't put me down, don't touch me. The housing, the housing is still in English.



# JACKSON MAC LOW

## CHARLES BERNSTEIN & HIS SHADE

I've known Charles Bernstein for at least a decade, and I've admired his writing--both poetry and critical/theoretical prose--as I've come to know it in these years, as well as his work as co-editor, with Bruce Andrews, of the magazine L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. As a critic-theoretician he is admirably clear-headed and knows well how to cut through cant and to avoid the kind of autostereotyping that too often afflicts avant-garde criticism.

As a poet he's brilliant and baffling--baffling because of his ability to present what seem at first sight to be "language objects"--words, phrases, sentences (sometimes, though rarely, separated syllables or letters) presented to the reader's alert contemplation for appreciation of their intrinsic acoustic/semantic properties--in such a way that his subjectivity shines through them without his emphasizing it.

Baffling also because of the ambiguity inherent in his use of the first person singular: it is often difficult for the reader to tell when the "I" in a line is Charles and when it is a persona, and if the latter, when the mask is that of a "real person" and when it is that of a fiction. But even when Charles speaks through a mask, one hears his own voice as an ironic counterpoint to the words of the persona, as in the poem "Ballet Russe" (Shade, p. 6):

I will travel.  
 I love nature.  
 I love motion & dancing.  
 I did not understand God.  
 I have made mistakes.  
 \* \* \* \*  
 I love Russia.  
 I am nasty.  
 I am terrified of being locked up & losing my work.  
 Mental agony is a terrible thing.  
 I pretend to be a very nervous man.

But when he begins the next poem (untitled, p. 8):

of course  
 my writing  
 writing  
 even talking like this  
 always seems to be perfectly at peace

I perceive no fictive persona but Charles himself talking:

& when I do feel almost best  
 is when I don't care  
 whether they make me feel good

whether they have any relation to me  
 that's a very pleasant  
 that's a real feeling of value  
 in the present moment  
 & just sit & do nothing  
 & that's what writing is for me a lot

\* \* \* \* \*

These two poems exemplify not only different I's but also two different poetic procedures. In "Ballet Russe," Bernstein employs a series of disjunct short sentences to build a character--presumably a "neurotic Russian." In "of course . . .," he mediates on value and vacancy and how they emerge intertwined in his life experience. The latter poem has the tone of an intimate informal conversation, the poet talking to a close friend, with the hesitations, incomplete sentences, repetitions, and redundancies that characterize such a conversation. It is a poem of inwardness and precise honesty about how it feels to be Charles Bernstein living his life.

We are then all the more surprised when we find that the next poem, "St. McC." (p. 13)--presumably named for our mutual friend Steve McCaffery, the Canadian poet and member of the vocal/verbal/musical performance group "The Four Horsemen"--consists of disjunct lines of one to four words or word fragments:

graphemic  
 hinges  
 discourse  
 re-ordering  
 SIGNS  
 of  
 few little  
 whch  
 speed &  
 wh.  
 \* \* \*  
 ll  
 TO FACE  
 ou///eg///t///  
 am (visit, subdue, impulse)  
 h...l...r...ty

While "St. McC." is probably the most disjunctive, "language-object-presenting" poem in Shade, many of the others approach this limiting case, for instance, "Dodgem" (p. 55), that begins:

the naturally enfolded  
 erases  
 each...of...of...  
 "some  
 opens & our  
 brought luck  
 \* \* \* \* \*



Poems such as this seem to have no "subject matter" other than the language units themselves. Others such as "Ballet Russe" and "of course . . ." have definite subjects even though many such poems are made up of disjunct language units.

The long poem "For -----" (pp. 17-33) is preceded by an epigraph:

"as a tree is connected in its  
own roots so a person is  
connected in his/her own self"

which warns us that despite the "jumps" that might tempt the reader to regard it as a series of disjunct language units:

touch. Obviously  
what else, meaning  
in comparison, I guess  
complicating things at  
distance. Your life seems  
to let more than  
things, like lovers  
with it, though writing  
caring enough & the  
others of, wondering  
created like: I have  
part of. Gradually  
burden you. What's  
place? I fade like  
\* \* \* \* \*

these words, phrases, and sentences are connected at a deep level to constitute intimate discourse much more akin to the more straightforward "of course . . ." than to "St. McC."

Most of the poems in *Shade* are of the type exemplified by "For -----," with its surface disjunction and underlying though somewhat indefinable connection. "Long Trails of Cars Returning from the Beach" (p. 58) has passages as connected as the following (p. 60):

Long trails of  
cars returning  
from the beach;  
a congestion of  
sand, fume,  
desire.  
Packed by the interest  
that a particular  
pollution will  
give way to  
some more sensible  
sight. It continues,  
\* \* \* \* \*

But other passages are as seemingly disjunctive as:

I ask for this  
memory--not  
to think. Breaks  
apart. Let's be  
an order.  
(p. 62)

Not necessarily disjunct psychologically: the passage may be connected phenomenologically--in fact, the whole poem may be presenting the poet's immediate continuing experience. And both types of passage seem parts of a meaningful whole emerging from that specific experience.

Because of the connections, running from the obvious to the obscure, underlying the broken-up language of such poems, the reader is led to suspect--possibly unwarrantedly--that such connections might underlie even such radically disjunctive poems as "St. McC." and "Dodgem." The appearance of these different kinds of poems in the same book and their placement relative to each other influences our expectations and judgments. We are never able to draw conclusions quickly or easily. We feel that if we read the radically disjunct poems often enough we will begin to feel, if not define, an underlying meaning connecting the *disiecta membra*. But contrariwise, we may sometimes suspect that the connections and meanings we sense may be our own projections, and that even the poems that seem to be intimate personal statements may really be at least as disjunctive semantically as they are rhetorically. Perhaps, after all, they are primarily sequences of "language objects." Maybe in trying to find connections between them I am sentimentally trying to assimilate Bernstein's poems into the tradition of English meditative and epistolary poetry.

This feeling of tantalizing uncertainty is, for me, one of the specific poetic effects of the poems in *Shade*. The attention continually shuttles between the individual language units, regarded in their own rights, and the sparks struck off by their immediate contiguities, on the one hand, and, on the other, the unifying meanings that may underlie these language sequences.

But when a poem ("The Bean Field," p. 37) begins:

itself, with all  
& cannot possibly  
a few pulls  
as for a  
the bell, there  
on fire, --or  
deep, suck, &  
deliberately, to front  
the day is  
an--to a



in us: by  
profaned, an hour  
so poor an  
slumbering? They are

\* \* \* \* \*

it may well be a mistake to let our attention be distracted from the actual words and their surprising concatenations by suspicions of hidden unifying meanings!

In any case, Charles Bernstein's Shade is a fascinating and varied collection of unusual poems that for me continue to exercise their fascination after many readings. They, together with his other volumes of poems and other texts, constitute a body of work that strongly resists assimilation into a "school," even though he shares certain attitudes toward language and its possibilities with a large and influential group of contemporary poets. Close attention to the actual works of Bernstein or any of the others quickly reveals the many differences, on many levels, between them.

It is not only the meditative/intimate tone of many of Bernstein's poems that makes them unique. The kinds of words, word-fragments, phrases, and sentences he chooses and his rapid shifting from one kind of language unit to another, as well as the frequent intimations of underlying unifying connections in addition to the sequential surface connections and disjunctions, make his texts sui generis despite whatever characteristics they share with those of some of his contemporaries.

21 August 1981  
On a plane near Tucson

TRANSLATING SHADE I (ACROSTIC)

for/from Charles Bernstein

so on.  
hope this thing inside you flow, this movement of eyes  
all turns, all grains.  
diffuses "as dark red circles" digress, reverberate  
example face,

style radiate  
how many minutes body & consciousness deflect, "flame on flare"  
ashtray with the gentility  
detach, unhinge beyond weeds, chill with enthusiastic  
"embodied". Ballet

same. I  
has feeling. It is all the same. I will travel.  
are terrible. I suffered.  
death. I am against all drugs. My  
even talking

seems to  
hood/ness that the things that are really valuable don't so  
as you experience them  
don't particularly feel do anything for me  
eyes closed

sense of  
has to do with memory & remembering that it was  
a conversation & we  
does seem you know worth a value  
even years

sure but  
hinges discourse re-ordering SIGNS of few little which speed &  
a proper place fix(ist)  
DESIRE tokened by topology": the se e  
explosions taste

(star), fl . . . m . . . n . . . g . . .  
had not gleaned in a "possible" vectorate these: the issued  
as scratch (rune potential  
distance. Your life seems to let more  
emptiness of

saying (an  
hear your role.) Anyway relationships--so so--we you, distantly  
at that gap in  
different way looks at its worth &  
easily thought



spoke, real,  
hear from shapes me 'so that I will exist' strange,  
all this. I &  
done 'this' seems to just be, yet  
energy of

stencils of  
here at an know (especially with. Somehow above that come.  
as now for me,  
dragged the distance sounded sad an aberration  
e. your

saw &  
held primarily a kind of strength frightens one for each  
asserts it sees as  
dish & chair & through all of  
explain, it's

show how  
happening in each phrase that I can't hold you look  
always is but if  
dealing clinging, wondering I just wish sometimes  
everyday as

shocks the  
here study, assuage, hold, slips a slippage automatic, recurrent grows  
accent, manner, face, mind"  
don't by, are it hardly anticipates a  
error &

stripped. Up  
harness for that a wrought. That some Boston by so  
as in the orbit  
distraction. Nearest to as an abandoned in  
everything one

sending thoughts  
here contain my pomp These boards come down & stack  
anecdotal as if these  
disease: an the basis that "poverty" be  
even; when

socialism--I  
how busy itself will love with others "so well known"  
"all" "like", "as" not  
dead bury the . . . ") all imitation are, is  
extremely indulgent

sufficiency is  
have "solely by his own" consequence delighted under of a  
And with a an  
done that spatters over incident which words  
everything that's

si vous  
hand clarifies (hangs up universe--we portend at really a  
and, an, up slides  
day begins much like any other, the  
Excruciating in

space you  
hoarded for a conviction that there was a past, that  
at sometime news, it's  
Delerium La-bas, Bezoar, Roof, Terraplane, Shuttle, NRG,  
eyes set

New York  
12 May 1981

#### TRANSLATING SHADE II (DIASTIC)

Shift comets, "twirling  
think "flutter & cling" with even heavier sweep unassuaged  
that inhere.  
rending:  
digress,

Slipping & in  
thought stumbles, blinded speck upon speck ruffling edges. "But  
evasive, unaccountable  
weeds,  
smile

Shoes "by a  
when it is necessary. It is a lovely drive.  
branch is  
Handwriting  
murder

Suffered a great  
whole truth. I love Russia. I am nasty. I  
peace so  
hood/ness  
happen



Sense of space  
tHat sort of like a stanley kubrick film sort  
thAt's a  
minD  
wandEr

Sense of not  
tHat I like & then there is actual relationships  
thAt it  
wonDerful  
moviE

Sometimes moments hours  
tHen you know even years & lifetimes sure but  
thAt does  
kiND  
propEr

So find isn't  
tHe se e "OR" verfrumsdungseffect autonomous explosions taste as  
(stAr). fl . . . m . . . n . . . g . . .  
subDue,  
connEcted

So a person  
wHat else, meaning in comparison, I guess complicating things  
thAn things,  
wonDering  
burdEn

Small way scare  
tHat does ease for which internalness & possession style,  
(chAirs, faces,  
wonDer  
BetwEen

Since & especially  
tHis envy 'as I'd be' lashing at lack need  
whAt's as  
kinDs  
diffErent

Sense of things  
wHirling in response isolate listless, finally in a characteristic  
thAnsformed into  
graDing  
spokE,

Shifting  
tHis kind of continual missing self-doubt, infatuation stripped, down  
whAt's to  
birDs  
sadrEss

Speed with in  
tHis whole restores my balance becomes reason I was  
teA cup  
good  
scarED

See under (since  
tHis, then best as can which is, so 'words,  
thAt emptiness,  
held  
wherE,

Suddenly stands erect  
'tHere' rejection, love it by its nature asserts it  
thAt (you  
hold  
eithEr

Sometimes that we  
wHat, cut out all this confusion, complication & really,  
whAt is it  
need,  
concEptual

Shocks the senses,  
wHat it was submerged as that enclosed, anxious contemplation  
whAt, with  
stuDy,  
'voicE,

Sound, purpose. We  
tHere & yet you're exactly where the peering tangible  
whAt, I  
hardly  
'maybE. . .

Suck, & deliberately,  
tHe day is an--to a in us: by  
deAd error  
kiND  
foddEr



Some Boston by  
these bolts will yet interferes it all news, as  
seAt all  
sand  
callEd,

Sound, hewn beholds  
tHey sang it hags! Yet I gelatinous mildewy tether  
spAce is  
kind  
therE

Somehow are in  
tHat that one has to I mean its tremendous  
wrApped in  
fiddle  
brokE

Stops on off'll  
wHat rarely diguest "Take then, these. . ." Take then these  
boArds which  
good?  
propEr

Sphere congenial to ?  
cHarm of speech "but it's. . ." him, crushes or refinement  
stAtements, virtue  
hardly  
callEd

"So well known"  
wHo resists in fiction "us" "all" "like", "as" not  
whAt sordid  
dead  
extrEmely

Sufficiency is always  
tHat kind alone, "people want. . ." ceases to fact a  
meAning--for  
vouDrez. . . "  
univErsal

Switching at various  
wHich I then can propose to ("forget about. . .") standing  
spAcious breathing  
hand  
univErse--

Slides ((sw00p)), have  
WHACK it us/of shade & usually "snowbuff" pours (it  
TrAils of  
word  
markErs

Stretching out to  
The experience of the citation, I find myself in,  
seArches for  
proDucts  
congEstion

Sand, fume, desire.  
tHe interest that a particular pollution will give way  
roAd, the  
dead  
therE

Something previous, prior  
tHe day before the day before, was nonetheless at  
weAther a  
cradled.  
hungEring

Standing at the  
tHe cameras to snap. Of an edition of 500  
ChArles SHADE  
birds  
TherE

New York  
13 May 1981



Silence sHoes trAvel. DeeDs suffered.	Searches wHich spAce deaD hungEring	Spins tHe stAr graDually incrEdible.	Space tHat's reAl minD refrEshing	Sit tHere. TrAnsform iriDescent vessEls.
Stock wHen tsArs murDer mothEr	Suns. THings thAt renDing suffered	Sleep wHen thAt need shapEs	Sometimes wHirling chAracteristic good scarEd	Sweep tHe spAce weeDs murdEr.
Seems tHat spAce graDually imagEs.	Suffered wHole crAzy good valuE	Strange cHatting. ScAred fodDer markErs	Spheres wHen shAdows holding forcE	Stanley shApes reAlly dead consEquences.
Saying wHat chAirs wonDer abovE	Sense tHings thAt wonDering style	Stretching tHe trAils sanD copiEs	Smoldering tHere trAnsform wordS velvEt	Somehow tHat meAn fidDle scenE
Sense sHould blAnkly sudDenly wondEring	Shifting shApes. MeAning held wherE	Shade shuttle grAins. MOOD vessEls	Shoes shArpen scAres hardly mildEwy	Sways tHe glAss hanD. WhIE
Sometimes whizzing spAce kind tremEndous	Suddenly tHe scAres need concEptual	Sweep tHe spAce renDing flamE.	Soul chArm pLAY proDucts. CongEstion	Slides shAd trAils foldIng copiEs
Separate sHort peAce wordS. VariEty	Shocks wHere reAlly hardly lumbEring	Smile wHen tsArs murDer peacE.	Sensible tHings spAce graDually shapEs	Shuttle tHought. EvAsive weeDs smIE.
Skirting sHow tHat's hanD univErse	Sane tHoughts clAsp fidDle dutiEs	Speed tHat blAnkly sorDid sense	Sadness. THings reAlly sudDenly submErged.	Shoes tHe SpAniards subDue burdEn
Shade sHadows seA lanDscaped lustErous	Sufficiency tHat ceAses slides piecEmeal	Stamped sHadows seArches proDucts numbEr.	Sometimes tHis scAres kind planEts.	Small chAirs. ThAt's wonDerful. TravEl.

## ALAN DAVIES

## THE DIFFICULTY OF WRITING CHARLES BERNSTEIN

If you don't have the idea to begin with you won't have no idea in the end. That was my idea. To begin with.

Charles work is various within itself. It's less the same than most work was. These various compete quietly at times, at time expletively. Competing makes these various to be just just language. With always the parts of the mind recite don't justify it. These various has Charles work in it.

The continuous comes over the life living work. In relating this the little parts can be little or big. These big little adjectives absolve pleasures, making the continuous to be short or long reverent experience. With long short experiences carries the book. The book.

Nothing is true as long as it lasts. It changes it. With speaking one thing bespeaks another not another. In writing one thing dewrites the other, other writing. Charles work makes the permission with demanding permission. Time makes it be permissible saying many things many ways over above the other many levelling things. Wherein gets the passion and within the permission to do it within anyone's any minds. The larger what is said the larger what is life it's large within. What is wrote. The Charles work wrote is wrote large for the small parts there large within its. In it it lets in the language churns over language all over it the languages.

Within bounds. The bounds maybe be there, maybe inside it in centers. In bodies bounds are organs in living and dying strength. For writing bounds is living made stuff with inside the living stuffing, so the writing bounds is bodies too or more. Looking straight through the writing that's its bound spot. The area it makes in time is that area it energates around its bound centered down



spot. Centers of these bounds is vertical,  
simply, in verticals with the vertical within  
longer or even lengthening times. Lines.

The tackling of the life by the languages.  
The stating control, that hardens under a  
surface that the surfaces be soften. That  
limber. The memory in the feeling that gets a  
language into feeling memory. The small  
strong gentle arms surround a word with words  
within it. The words that get out. The  
hardening of vascular speech within this  
modes of modal address. The implacently  
sensible courages with the vigorous in it.  
That lets the strong carry over the weak the  
revenge of the weak. With Charles in it. With  
Charles.

## MICHAEL GOTTLIEB

ALGERNON CHARLES BERNSTEIN

Contextual, e.g. contemporaneous, rhetorical stances or  
strategies which are formulated, or tagged, or fostered up around  
a body of work circa its original appearance often fall aside,  
like the contemporary, 'early,' names various schools of writing  
or painting adorn themselves with or have hung upon them upon  
first receiving some general critical notice.

Alternatively, or generationally, there arise forces in writing  
or art which feel constrained to either declare some irrevocable  
break or, equally apocalyptically, redemptionist 'return' to some  
true or basic or original form. All too often the loudest of these  
declamations, upon examination, betray some fatal educative flaw,  
the thinking up of which would reveal the transparency of the spe-  
cious sort of originality so blandly asserted.

To put forward the proposition that a certain sort of writing  
today 'does' something new and unique in the history of or among  
the corpus of Western literature and, by way of not the most glaring  
example, to view the firebrand assertions made in the preface, as  
well as the text of the "Lyrical Ballads" as merely 'more of the  
same,' to view the achievements and attacks of the writers of that  
among other particular generations as any less of a radical depar-  
ture than we may be viewing today betokens a lack of critical acumen  
too embarrassing to give more than this cursory attention.

No suggestion is intended here to link Mr. Bernstein to this  
widespread phenomenon. Indeed, a reading of his accumulated work  
reveals a certain willingness, a kind of acceptance, a conceding  
that 'modern' writing did not necessarily start with Coolidge or  
Zuk or Stein. Interposed among his various structural stances and  
discantations is a sense, a somehow sentient and near wistful air,  
a particular approach to the out there, the world. It is not the  
intention here to make too much of this albeit aspect rather than  
salient feature of this author's poems. Nor does there seem much  
to be derived from a sustained deliberation on this somewhat world  
weary, amused, enthralled but removed sensibility in the work.  
Suffice it to say, in the light of the above espousal of the utility  
of certain historic literary appreciations, that sometimes  
Charles Bernstein reminds me of no one else so much as Algernon  
Charles Swinburne.



# DIANE WARD

## TENTATIVITY

Some notes on Charles Bernstein's 'Style'

When Charles Bernstein reads his work to an audience, I have the sense, more so than in most cases, that he's a writer reading what he's written. I don't mean that he's especially declaratory in his reading style, but he emphasizes, and he's letting you know what he's discovered. There's an excitement conveyed in this way, an emphasis on process. His work contains variety and a willingness to experiment with the language's plurality, its many possibilities, and in turn, its tentative qualities.

His is a presence which tramples words into small pieces/sounds, creating a graphic reflection and a reflection on what these words signify:

sand  
and  
sane  
an

(Disfrutes)

The smaller the pieces (sounds), the more isolated so bigger sounding. By breaking a phrase into parts and altering the context of each, Bernstein makes a play-on-tongue twister:

she  
shells  
smells  
by the by

(Disfrutes)

Aware of the type-written page, an almost-parody of the use of influences and information in writing, a witty self-conscious recipient of information: as in the piece entitled "Lift Off" (Poetic Justice) in which there's a barage of fragmented information: eccentric clusters and spacing-out of type-written characters; bursts of words, numbers and various symbols and punctuation; fragments of words, and entire words here and there as WHATEVER (actually le'WHATEVER) which is in the center of the page, surrounded by all of this jumbled information.

In the language of an essay, a considerate essay, drawing several conclusions' at once:

wiTh tHaT kiNd oF  
schizophallic  
categories  
enfolding  
a proper place  
fix(ist)  
opting for a

(St.McC; Shade)

\* \* \* \* \*

The writing is often concerned with thought; these thoughts are often 'about' writing. They invade and support each other. Thought and awareness of the act of writing (exploration and self-consciousness) function as a comma does to two phrases, and the reverse. There's a back-and-forthness, an exchange, the experience of slow and graceful perception:

No, this seems much the more  
graceful. Embers indiscernibly fly  
by & seem to illuminate the particulate  
nature of the air.

(Loose Shoes;  
Senses of Re-  
sponsibility)

The dependence of words on each other create a continuity; simultaneously, their force is in their contrast to each other. Commas function as isolators of rhythm:

Step of a locus, amorized on sunken, glisten,  
hardly. Caution to casement, standards to pall.

(Ward of the Worlds; Con-  
trolling Interests)

Translated into a visual critique vocabulary, this would be called push-pull or the contrast of colors' intensity, hue; the sounds of these words are in contrast (as are their meanings) and yet dependant upon each other. The words themselves are allowed to go solo, and then rejoin the group where they attain a new twist in meaning. And a certain harmony aside from meaning, in sound.

Every writer, to some degree, must have a theory or technique. This is a recognizable style in some cases, a school in others. The danger, of course, is that theory pre-empts discovery, and one idea another. Bernstein seems to be committed to discovery in his writing style.



## RONALD JOHNSON

BLURB FOR AN IMAGINARY BOOK OF CHARLES BERNSTEIN'S

In a time when Odes are odd-man-out Chas. Bernstein  
refuses not to wear old ears in balance. He weighs  
each syllable like a goldsmith, then puts it on the  
line, each-un perfect of its kind. He eyes us too.

## JOHN PERLMAN

Reading CONTROLLING INTERESTS

--for Charles Bernstein

this destructive element  
brought into singular, oblitative  
eminence

a hagiography of  
obliquity come  
momentously  
into vision as if  
instantaneous appearing  
at the Earth an undeniable  
foreboding

some Easter Island  
for a form impending  
impacts on the sea  
reiteration

as if arbitrarily  
discontinuity everywhere  
occured

while

no alternative the borders  
of a shore  
a story  
fully  
implicating  
longing  
in consummating  
absence can  
and does  
loose words  
promises  
sustaining  
children  
how their father  
for her love  
would not be lost  
or drown in unremembering  
with no returning  
in the waves



# ROBERT CREELEY

PAGES FOR C.B.

EXIT

I'm going  
to go.

CROWDS

Times several  
others then  
around.

PACKED

Pact.  
Treaty.  
Stacked  
decks.

VOYAGE OUT

Problem's  
tone's con-  
spicuous and  
no rush but  
the flat intentional  
pushing off to  
charted seas.

TOOTH

Tooth  
paste.

OLD FOLKS

Getting cute  
at it.

7/31/81

WATER

Boat's a  
later invention.

# ROBERT GRENIER

TWELVE POEMS

THE WHIRLIGIG

the whirligig  
around & around  
whirred

that  
whirled  
whirl

whirl  
that  
whirled

TO TO

to to to to

to to to to

to to to to

v'ere moving ve go aha ha



HAPPY KATHLEEN

E E E U G U H H

E U G U H H O O O

slepen al the yě with melodye ya

THE CENOTAPH

a stag in the wood crying remains

imagine night if you

if you couldn't go

in the direction that you

that you know

FINCHES

chicken yesterday no beef chicken beef chicken

SUNNY BRRR

shoes on a sweater



## FLAPPING BY FLAPPING THE ARMS

I couldn't remember to go up or back up to find it

## CLOUDS THE MILKY WAY

vertebrate see it as bones

I

swam again

when the

shade disappears

I must go

## RALPH LA CHARITY

### CONSORTIUM MEDLEY

some columnar legerdemain  
off the tract/text, LEGEND

" is all relative --- fertilizer not tool "

unverifiable  
& latent, repressed (the popular hero)  
inscribed on a monument

centers in their own lifetimes

them, to be read  
having recorded themselves

" not a salve for the smart but a transformation of the smarting "

the blindside, also, is  
quicker than the eye

" It is the other side of the poem. "

some men get stoned

something rapid & noble  
darts before them, they

follow that  
with their

naked eyes

such men do  
not know

where  
they are

going . . .

" poet appointed dare not decline "



" We are blind --- that is our gentle curriculum "

I was chewing ice when I read grinding your teeth, you stare straight ahead: The Worrier boxes his own shadow . floathesome expressions & flatnesses prised Enter the Bernstein, obliquely yellowed from the exalt, a veritable sticky, trembling One of the very worst of that crew, a big city guy mox, ambi, & erg The Worrier. Who refuses what embarrasses him.

" Perspicuity his middle name. "

Someone maybe wanted someone to say something about the history of Collaborative Art? Some blokes've pushed forward now with something they did with a lot of words. What can be done with a lot of words if it's done together & it refuses to not be there, doing it? A time came when that could be done & what it was stared directly back at whoever looked at it & the thing was a circuit that revved & spooked & yes exhilarated the Mind. Maybe more happens, depending on the Mind caught up in the looking at those words looking back.

" A position, a calculus, and a momentum "

Citizen/legalists of L=ville, polyperfervid & labyrinthine polis . . . the Problematic Consortium conducts fulsome wilderness tournament . . . tract/text discomfit, old compadre A tax attacks. Samurai against referentiality-fixated minions who have, like the poor, always been with us So, an entire wag to el arelentoid omniverse. Alike Silliman, my shiver of interest has noticeably erotic components. I, too, personally empathize. Bootleg bombastardier gets off on post-referential frolic, LEGEND

" 1976 Potlatch: New York Toronto San Francisco "

There are five writers in the tract/text There are twenty six entries, same as there are letters in the alphabet. Each writer appears eleven times in collaboration with one, two, or all of the other four writers, in addition to soloing once. What you get's a baker's dozen of your favorite L=ville tyro, facets, perhaps, of a particular legend. I began with the table of contents, moving on quickly enough to the solo shots, each of which is an enumerated one hundred line entry, save for the incidence of deliberate blanks & the coy case of one solo, enumerated in parenthetical triplicate, that simply omits three of its unenumerated lines.

" It's been a very busy time for their crowd. "

Given that this volume is heavy & it weighs, it immediately yielded a clear impression. When someone means it, it is a relief, I suppose, to note their brogans are shined as well (a shined brogan being no less an article of war). My prejudice of erotic interest speedily escalated to a higher key. This neighborhood of the town derives its architecture from the Mayan. An American temple, anything can be done. Debarcation was at hand & we banked sharply into an ink of Pacific breadth.

" ether -- out of correspondence build a workplace "

The work is very disturbing, a good sign. Not to tell any you how it was done: I don't know how it was done. LEGEND denies being 'way out there' in a characteristic turn: we're way in here, say, in here, & so are you. I am hunting in this work & catch occasional glimpses of some unnamed which is, intensely: the syllables' stutter steps are thine, the moves we make are your own, this is that LEGEND. Words are (y)our doing. Worddoing. What stares back is you/us Yes. So that at times my hands shake as these(those) words click along.

" I'm trembling but it's not cold outside. "

& I keep keeping score: which of these guys is the most impenetrable? Vertical streaks, an apparent pattern, invaded by some other, which could/can be felt as 'alien.' People appear as lights . . . we yawn & stroll: sounds like mushrooms, eh? To violate intentionist linearity wherever said sucks at the Mind (ignoring for the nonce the caveat that it takes Imagination to suck Mind). What's known is that this occurs between people. The contentment table's where that's stretched out, & I keep darting back to it. Damn. Better they'd dispensed with the table altogether & I'd gotten really hard-assed.

" We are like a band, deafened by years of our own volume. "

There's a gleamishness abounding in this mecca which only heightens one's terror when snagged. Even the omni-indefatigable (tho no-longer-with-us) Kerouac gets prefigured, courtesy of the micro-maniacal (lo!) Coolidge Which snagging horrifies most the most mobile amongst the pedestrianry What's meant by syntagmatic reversal & why we find tract/texts in racks beside toilet bowls L=ville rewards the perspicacious who though quick, grind exceedingly The mobile are the first to fall. & everybody & already knew it would be lunacy not to admit Burroughs.

" If I sang would it make more sense to you? "

I, too, am paranoid. Play cop & frisk the solitudinous paragraph lingering itch-nitty, begging the bust. Hoping to lure the fugitive into vulnerable oh you too well what should we do about Bruce, man, just what the hell? The tail has been bop & so it goes, greasy palms spread & who will cross them? Big city guys spot each other by the itch-nitty worry of they scurry. Trust them? Trust them? It's what the Piper said to Fast Eddie: you're too hungry . . . say what you will about Washington, bugs teemer in the bell of the tropics, El Salvador being the curve at its current bulgest, & volcanic. Ring of bone. Lewd fudge. The rhinos got up & they danced around. He was a fence the burgle sat upon, bugling interminable hearsay. What's the point? No point. Not in being reasonable, at any rate. The hootest scam in the wrong slum being the one that goes free man am. We are piping, & are not plumb.



" Prophecy is a big pain in the ass. "

A toehold & many guesses. I want a demonstration of just this: that intent human sound is a subset. Where I been, langue is the subset, the mode come back to frisk its own grand-pa. L=ville being a paranoid community rife with a subtle insistency, where nothing is just, & nothing is not alarum. My vague hope might be that L=ville tool a revolution in speech, in the poets' turning of that soil. In any sense that L=ville finds speech (the laryn-tympan circuitry) irrelevant, grotesquerie loiters.

" the legendary refusal to be banished "

Vocab Prison, where neighbor hoods disintegrate, candidates to a man for the Postal Service All Stars. Vocab Prison, a social reply to Atom & Venery. Vocab Prison, a riot of unoccluded opalescence. Vocab Prison, cacophonous sarcophagy. Vocab Prison, the poise & contempt of the lifers there. Vocab Prison, how shafts & shade foreclose the seasonal tale. Vocab Prison, the dirty secret yogically there, bored stiff. Stoned. Enchanted. & Storied. A heaven some skydivers fell in a ring deliberately down from. But you had to have had a vehicle, some marginal criminal modus, to lift you into a position where said descent would be an option of momento, maybe. Then, having been there, you took it. Took over Vocab Prison. & rattled, utterly. All the way down.

" the words that need to be spoken are indigestable "

The locals remain down the road & this one's strongest ties remain, apparently, to an Elsewhere. These possibilities, & part of the program is the Omniness of Possibility, meter by rapidly in withering crosscut: what of this act makes it to the page, & of what makes it how much is of what use & how unreadable does an it get before its unreadability crystalizes, becomes polar, shines like a new sun, without shadow? Is this a workshop, a factory, a showroom, a jet stream, the Eye of God? Or Jupiter's Red Eye, an aphist pad precariously mounted there, & just how social an essence is that?

" Impermeable to disclosure "

So that maybe here's the clue to my own sufferance of LEGEND, of any writing that eschews the weld & warp of bardic presence: a small voice keeps weeping up from these fabrications: "Let's get out of here. . . " Rhetoric about 'far in' mustneeds awaken in some auditor's a suspicion: for whom? So much inside-out palaver: are you on the bus washed in the blood reborn?? If LEGEND is frequently (an approximate third) 'unreadable,' is it because the 'writing' is more at evidence of reification? If so, there are many knots to the speed of that act: reconstitution occasioning witness flame-out. So that these LEGENDary characters, so far at least, deliver damage fully as much as they reify any actual sense of praxis.

" Ask us: we want a meal, different techniques "

No compromise, poet: commend & bestir thyself. They decoys deploy deliberately. Discuss aligns alike score staves, & here cometh all manner of Meaning, hungry moocher, mean & minor: sky coil bid ambushade, in full tug. A new grammar, a blasted grammar, grammar sieved of hoarish intention. The mirage might be a wing wrung lovingly, witless & brazen: Lacan't not no more once, & again, evermore. Tents & teepees of some another, smoking on a chill & changeable plain. Well, we already knew Popeye wasn't too bright: it didn't stop the children who were potentates from loving him. After all, he cared & was a capable acrobat. We don't know what's going on there, & not that what's is in any sense nonsense: we are hungry, & the prey is, we know that in our bones.

" hog-headed "

Enfranchised, pathology is no longer pathology, leading to the ultimate clue: the issue was not pathology at all . . . improvisation was. Bromige: " . . . not a call to revolution or a representation of the struggle . . . but an instance of it." So, el arelentoid again. The Duellists: crutch of referentiality vs. crutch of rationality. The one omni-indefatigable, the other micro-maniacal, the both of them, traditionally, gateway disciplines of proven unreliability. L=ville: bad peddle, better pickpocket.

" Productive practice is SOILED --- hence the angels of abstraction "

A lot of it is fiendishly slippery & I am all alone & don't want any help just yet beyond what is suggested already. Spot weld odorific & am not wanting to misprize or be enigmatic. These guys loathe a lot of heavyweights & have chips on. It's a wrinkle I'm hip to & have been for too long. Discrete technique, system, strategy, dialogue, mailings, switchbacks & drop-offs. A precipitous angle, lots of those. Are these smart alephs succeeding in the dissolve? Why do they seem to remain so distinct? Or do they. They are soft, then they are hard, then semi . . . teasers & provocateurs, pals of certain correspondence. LEGEND is also a time project, almost two hundred & fifty pages. Already I jump when I hear the words 'bruce andrews.' The dizziness will pass. Any gig made this taut's meat indeed. It's not funny & it's not pretty. It's thick & it's long & I'm doing it. An unlikeable proposition.

" No nonsense now, just steady nerves, clear thinking. "

Pathology being Zen Funk, the PC of L=ville's offense is more about the sleight of its cascade, how the alien & the known are deliberately coy, as in ambush, counters in the erection of multivalent totem. Once, the test of a pathology was its will to improvise. Current practitioners are chary, while pathology continues cavalier. Robert Service, a suspect the entire registration also works for, invented the word FUNK, this TOURNAMENT, knowing the prismatic/



syntagmatic wilderness-cum-omniverse to permit little else in the way of fortuitous communal employ. Never to underestimate the resources & resiliencies of the L=ville solips, pilgrim: he also invented Alaska, California, & Lowell, Massachusetts. Further suspect: this wilderness is itself of PC generation?

V

" a very specific kind of dancing "

Hingenoise hazards the entire surround. The history of collaborative art, tell me about that, in view of what we have here: five masters, contributing equally. Advanced totems of the Gutenberg Avail, initially monolithic, obliquely insouciant, turning the erstwhile solid citizen into one ersatz sucker, tract/text being a fun term, albeit a fertile, as we'll discover. The publishing of banns being part of the evolution, the specifically social evolution. Hingenoise can be provocative as silk, reverential as mirage. L=ville's quickened by a small but truly keen audience. L=ville's a world city, another world city, interstices big sky plate tectonic. Its works should be read as deliberately as they were written. If a fix of about becomes somehow necessary, hingenoise abounds & is easily procured. So. A small but truly keen tribe of scribes softly halts our fall. Halts it, I say, bold as I can manage. Hingenoise being a supra-glue for the modernist-cum-structuralist Dopler, given that Homer & Plato drove the primary piles, omni nigh on micro way back when. Now pulled up wide. They ain't apprentices anymore.

" It stands Hegel upon his head, right side up. "

Sometimes & sometimes. Plus a demonstration beyond refuting (if anybody still had that in mind) that an 'other' or an 'else' could function 'otherwise' right there within the now sprung kinesis of what had ceased beginnings i.e. the language & where it squats, at large in this, our post-incisional age. So much concrete spilled on the beach, hardened SPLATforms of tongue: who cares about urges to honor an insistence that plays so gross a medium? Manipulations at a point precedent spilled concrete: pre-tongue since the tongue is so vile, apparently, a member? Oratorry & Rhetorique being two more hoary hazards one encounters on walks alone through the L=ville environs.

" It seeks the post-referential. "

Of course & of course. We are in the sphere of influence of another Universal Life Church. The marriage of Huston & O'Connor as witnessed by yet another oddly transported pilgrim. Of the five, my candidate for future (if not already) hand-glidership is Silliman. This being an opportune spot to blindly slip that in. Remembering

the in-person speed of their verbal clamp: Watten & Ron. What's he doing in the Tenderloin, & why? A taut character, big-eyed. What's with this guy? How does LEGEND make patterns, useful elsewhere? Are there secrets & can I find them? What am I doing in L=ville, besides looking for work?

" cock ergo sum "

My child does not want this news. He wants cartoons. Silliman wants On Out Here & Now & With Group. I want my child to survive the sunspot lick of Ron's phallic longing. The exclusionary pocunosphere of certain delibro/enviro acuwo. Acuwo as a phist pad. How they speak to us. I see five skydivers descending in a ring, print being Fall, the journey to that in this case being, as much as individual nerve can tolerate, Free. You are very specific about whose hand you hold in said circumstance: you hold the hand of who's with you. These guys are holding hands, Dad, & they're falling thru a sky some see. Heavens! They remained in touch. The timex content of the discuss.

VI

" Blue rubber flying and sighted at eighteen feet. "

Excruciating. Fishing poles bent upon the margins of a social essence. Strung & acquiver. Lake L=ville's turning over, meriting witness. A phist sanity, padding the ether, apluck & aplomb. Are we not men & just what is it a vocab can do? Hingenoise & correspondence, not to mention telephony. His Editorship & its ports of call, post, & walkabout. My plug is into Bernstein's doubt, his frequent dipping, sprung from the clubbed spirit of not seeing (how clear's clear & how much clarity to qualify as vision). Bernstein is a character. From Odessa. Owns a co-op on the Upper West Side. Overlooks the Soldiers & Sailors Monument. Say lores. Sold yrs. A see of impressive passivity. Pacificity. It's all there. The African word, banjo.

" The procedure is to soar it "

As an activity that lies outside, not all such strolls give in. Hazards coming & going. Tropic dysentery. Putrefaction. An Amazonian anomaly asquat certain blistered equatorial ganglia: Mind is not enough. A lawlessness in this rigor: what does the strip search signify? Piebald wag rover bloats el arelentoid topos, processional with a vengeance: idiosolipsyncritique, & nobody & even mentions pooliards. Utterly chary of any other aid, beats all I ever saw , , , not a madhouse yet, tho surely a hot, & an instance, at all points, at the very least.

" we earn our words "



# CRAIG WATSON

FLUID ISLANDS: Some notes on Charles Bernstein's poem "Island Life"

"Except that we sail and quit the horizon." And having done so we are in the scape itself, sailing continuously through it, or perhaps more accurately, on it; we are off the precipice of the horizon, a line of object-subject descriptions, in favor of the tactile space actually between things, the relations themselves.

Language names. It is equally foolish to assume that language can either supplant an object/experience or totally represent one. Through the activity of naming, language mediates relations and objectifies aspects of perceived reality. Cognition though is dynamic and continuous and there's a danger that objectification will be seen as producing stasis; this need not be the case. We don't know what an object is, and science and magic and art can never bring us completely to that thing; we do know our sense of it, in a field of other objects, so that in naming we approach phenomena by way of determining location and activity. These are both questions of relativity, of mediation and in a broader context, of constitution.

The apprehension of meaning is not conditioned by substance or continuity alone, but by the constitution of relations in a network of possibility; the object is mediated and named by our whole experience with it. Cognition is made up of a vast circuitry within which language is gestural and continually subjective. Through these circuits we conduct and create our selves, a reality.

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.

and:

At once the signal is given --  
it is as though one sudden mad impulse  
simultaneously slings open every  
gate

This is simultaneously a personal cosmology and a journey through it, language being the substance and energy of space. The "Island" is clearly environment, self or landscape, the "Life" is activity, that of being within and of the world, speaking through and for that world. So that "My own interest is scale, filled with disavowels." This is not, however, collage with its attitude defined as one of unity; the "disavowels" deny a fixed frame, cognition is licensed to experience, not sentimentalized; that is, not to erect:

A monument to the laconic majesty  
of the cherished thought, the neglected hope, the  
belabored insurrection.

The effort is much closer to:

Hearing the way the world  
hears -- mystified, assuredly.

Nevertheless, this is no more a replication of "inner speech" than it is of external speech. The former tends to eliminate subject as given and conduct itself only in terms of verbal abstraction between self and environment, and the latter requires a clearly self-possessed syntax for the support of "message". What's at stake, the "island life", is a mind, conscious of its linguistic properties, tuned to the setting of phenomena, a simultaneously outer and inner world. By naming experience without claiming it, the poem is itself a network of dense relations, woven together by their own contiguity in an expanding frame and by our continuous perception of it. What's left is the surface of life, a fluid between islands:

Three mail boxes

starkly outlined against a pasture, the covered  
sporting car, a dented bluejean, an uprooted  
illegible flag. Need that blankets what  
parsimony refrains -- canopies of the refugee.



# BOB PERELMAN

## A NOTE ON "SENTENCES MY FATHER USED"

(unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from "Sentences My Father Used," Controlling Interests)

The person, that improbable locus of the language factory, is central to Charles Bernstein's work. Anybody who says, lazily, that language centered writing is non-personal hasn't read or absorbed his work.

Bernstein rhymes with Flaubert, especially the Flaubert of the Dictionary of Received Ideas. The person is a would-be extravagant infinity whose bubble bursts with a sad, wet pop upon opening the mouth to speak. For Bernstein, the enemy, or obsession, is more the Idea of Received Diction. "Now I'm going to teach you how to sell goods," says his father, but it can also be read as an emblem of the bill of goods people sell each other in the name of language. Beyond being an oral biography of his father, "Sentences My Father Used" is a critique of the (tragedy) (melodrama) (comedy) (of errors) of Bernstein having learned language.

The poem ends:

Dreadfully private,  
pressed against the faces of circular  
necessity, the pane gives way, transparent,  
to a possibility of rectitude.

Reading in:

Dreadfully private,  
pressed against the faces of circular (generational)  
necessity, (the genetic code; grammar)  
the pane (pain; windowpane: giving the sense  
of language as a window onto the world; but here a face  
isn't pressed against the glass, the glass is pressed  
against faces,--i.e., language is looking at people)  
gives way, (breaks, yields; opens out)  
transparent, (language is a colorless medium??--  
this sense is belied by the writing; also, a pun on parent)  
to a possibility of rectitude.

This last word is especially loaded. As it stands, it connotes dignity and moral correctness. But the sense of correctness, of there being a right and a wrong, is what Bernstein's work is aimed at obliterating. And the complexity of meaning available to it is testimony of its success.

This success can sound almost utopian:

An arbitrary policy, filled with noise, & yet  
believable all the same. These projects alone contain  
the person, binding up in an unlimited way what  
otherwise goes unexpressed.

("Live Acts," Controlling Interests)

But more often the person is bound up in a limited way by his or her words. For instance, the beginning of "Sentences My Father Used":

Casts across otherwise unavailable fields.  
Makes plain. Ruffled. Is trying to  
alleviate his false: invalidate. Yet all is  
"to live out," by shut belief, the  
various, simply succeeds which. Roofs that  
retain irksomeness.

The confident opening sweep quickly gives way to a truncated stuttering in imitation of a truncated life. The extravagant possibilities of language are often beyond reach:

I don't remember too much. Gad  
was on my back everyday.  
I always figured: what I could lose.  
Those were my values. To me they were  
Good values. I didn't want to  
struggle. & I could live frugally. I didn't  
want to get involved.

It used to be "Art is long; Life is short." For Bernstein, it's more like: Language: immense, expansive, utopian; individual speech act: cramped, sad, dowdy. You break it you bought it, you speak it you thought it, so you have to keep talking. Each thing said is limited, but you can leave a zigzag trail, thus suggesting open space.

This recursive process of entrapment and struggle to break free creates a very problematic writing:

Surprising details that

hide more than they announce, shells codifiers to  
anyway granules, leopards, folding chairs.

Language here is investigating itself, proclaiming its opacity, revealing words as code or husks. The bonds of grammar are loosened (How is the sentence parsed? "Shells" can be a noun or, almost, a plural verb. What is a context for "anyway granules, leopards, folding chairs"?). Statement and image half appear and then fade into something other.

This is the opposite of wit, nothing is pointed, there's a lot of blockage, breakdown, baffles. This would seem to be in accordance with a pronounced strain of language writing theory. Two quotes from "The Politics of the Referent":

By eliminating grammatical armament from language, by  
a freeing of the parts to be themselves and by inviting  
the reader into this immanence of text, the full, poly-  
semous possibilities of language are opened up...

(Steve McCaffery)

Referentiality is diminished by organizing the language...  
around features which make present to us words' lack of  
transparency,...each band of semantic radiation takes  
place with less guidance from the games and aims of  
representation or with little grammatical constraint.  
A carnival atmosphere...worker's control...

(Bruce Andrews)



But this process has pitfalls. Continuing to quote the poem:  
 Tables at party which is no less the surprise  
 anyway in here fashion prizes. Straps,  
 everyday kind of stores. Ruminant around  
 in there--listen for mandatory disconsolation,  
 emit high pitched beeps.  
 It begins to sound more and more like fiddling with the language  
 dial.

Or it can sound sentimental:

stealing looks  
 across the street so often crossed but never  
 lingered in.

Or breathy, mock-intimate a la Ashbery:

"In a twinkle of an eye  
 it comes, the great secret which arrests  
 outer motion, which tranquilizes the spirit,  
 which equilibrates, which brings serenity  
 and poise, and illuminates the visage with  
 a steady, quiet flame that never dies."

I'm not quite advising Bernstein to "load every rift with  
 ore." More like: It is possible to fall off the floor.

Not that Bernstein's writing isn't alive and well. And what  
 I find disappointing is closely linked to what is successful. It's  
 a complicated topography, which is quite intriguing. To quote on  
 either side of the lines I labelled sentimental:

To take a step--"I had to"--leading  
 with gap to a treasury of ambitions. "In  
 here" I am whole. Or goes over piles of  
 rocks--cowboy, pharaoh, bandit--stealing looks  
 across the street so often crossed but never  
 lingered in. With a sense of purpose divorced  
 from meaning. Strictly misrepresenting by it  
 this loom of enclosure, a path that opens onto  
 a field, lost on account of open space.

This passes through earnestness, intensity, vapid nostalgia,  
 and elegance without a backward glance, which makes it congruent  
 to action writing. Even if it wasn't improvised (and many of Bern-  
 stein's works do involve prior schema, set procedures), nevertheless,  
 it reads as personal motion through language space.

In Andrews' & McCaffery's statements, language is thought of  
 as autonomous, some sort of powerful being: for McCaffery the metaphor  
 is of a generous, naked body; for Andrews, it's a revolutionary,  
 kinetic group. Bernstein's practice is less assured. His language  
 centered writing never fails to be centered around the person, and  
 the pressures of culture and history that thwart language's power.  
 Much of the time, in fact, this impingement feels intensely auto-  
 biographical. There seems to be a very strong sense of worry in-  
 volved in Bernstein's writing aspiring to be so open and porous  
 that it almost falls apart on the way to the reader's head, so to  
 speak. Often, he's writing about the problematics of his achieve-  
 ment in words that are equally problematic. It's close to being a  
 nobly balanced equation:

Never

enough, randomly rewarded. I get way in, feel  
 the surface tight around the shape, breaks  
 through. A canvas of trumped up excuses, evading  
 the chain of connections. As so far bent  
 on expectation. "Don't stay in here, then."

....Leaving

this place, so hugely exiled for whatever  
 bang of misprision you take the time out for,  
 a cacophony of shifts, tumbling  
 beside the manners you've already discarded,  
 falling among--in place of--them.

IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE

-for CB

Fingers versus conscious rhetoric:  
 You gotta say something. Words  
 In the head: the oldest trick  
 In the book. Guttapercha. Back

To square one. Think of a human  
 Being: go out on a limb.  
 It is not quite what you had  
 In mind? Perched, chirping, days add

Pathos to the design. Mildly coherent  
 Magic marker conversation needing  
 Affection trails off needing  
 Affection. The form gets filled in.

It is not quite raining. "Yet  
 This is you." Shove it further in.  
 The armature has cracks, speaks,  
 Falls in love with its statue.

Moving parts talk, blue or red  
 Or shame faced. A bald lie  
 Is a real possibility. The head swivels  
 Toward the signal and identifies.



# RAFAEL LORENZO

## FRAGMENTS OF REFUSAL

"But the hand's gestures run everywhere through language, in their most perfect purity precisely when a man speaks by being silent. And only when a man speaks, does he think--not the other way around. . . . Every motion of the hand . . . carries itself through the element of thinking, every bearing of the hand bears itself in that element. All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking."

--Martin Heidegger

I reflect through some of these works and they allow me to move with them. They come closer as I draw closer. They do not seem to want to hide, to move away from the complexities of their own surface. I reflect back, take in, and build into this out of his building that comes to me "live, anecdotal" over and into "these boards come down." Purposing not to sit on, to put a weight on, these writings that open and give openness; not to appropriate it into the parti-color surprise of my own articulated buffoonery . . . not to crowd its strangeness--the tangible strangeness of words--into familiarity (that is to say: into the family of literature) or to rub it into the world too soon now and thereby rub it out of its world, out of earshot. Even as I begin to address it, work like this, the work of Charles Bernstein, pushes away from, slips free from the distorting grasp of my own well-meaning voice and backs off from interpretation. There is no easy line to it--there is only a joining-to, a cleaving-to--one must be where it is. My grip is conventional, a habit of attack. I am already there the work says. So I begin talking from the work. Listening. The work teaches me this way. I come from a long way off to be here. I have put a great deal of effort into allowing myself to let go. Now I am here. I am not putting myself here, I am letting myself be here where the tread we come from mixes with my own pervasive noise. . . .

Get out into the open to come back to these undisturbed machines. The fall away into the murk to be backed off "obsessed by presence" as these imprints (or out-takes) discover. This constituting sincerity of gesture, gestures that no longer concern themselves with impositions of perfectability that limit either the ordinary, the empty, or the confounding array of possible realizations that can be written into being. Smarts. Thinking in things to "lean back" and take it. This throwing-off of the armor and Order of Merit--this standing back from the Gates. As the philosophy (love of wisdom) becomes thinking as thinking goes along--be released. Lexical discoveries for every context--a what-is-to-be found. Sentences of myself and first-hand lists. No machinery here in the rug, "shag carpet" leading items pull together one after another to not be alone from

each other or you, gentle reader. Business is business, history history. We add up this way on a page. There isn't any principle of simplification that wouldn't be made to exclude, mislead, mystify. We're not particularly interested in clarity as a virtue. These things have to be worked or walked through, not legislated from the outside--it's already out there anyway. We are hearing things go by in words. There it is.

"That's all I can tell you. My mind goes but my mind comes to me. I'm just here." I think like I walk, without noticing my feet now. I get named, pointed at, pointed out. I begin the litany, the "parade in and out." I don't worry about it. "I never look at it." I'm very simple this way.

I'm scared. I'm alone. I need you. I hurt. This is all there, this is my invocation--take it he says, not to throw the baby out with the bath water--keep all the language. No images. Why bother? There is the ripped out wall of plundered words that burst through quietly wrecking your habits of reading into, in thinking bursts: "The reach, the middle, endless drift, sway, hold, belie / unfold and furl . . . ." (Later you will have to be reminded that this can go anywhere, that it comes from anywhere even if there is a horizon, it goes all the way to the fingertips where there's a possibility of banging away ". . . o ?accTogether inether.nesoiSS.em;; utipektoeironkes; neuartingoame . . ." and still keeping with it.)

Yes, everything is there at its own disposal, in its own laws of motion . . . a human commotion. What is human is an atmosphere. We lose weight as we approximate it . . . we become very flat and spread out all over the place. We are everywhere

"the snow,  
flakes,  
this parsing of the world  
to make worlds & worlds  
like atmospheres  
a substance, of gravity  
that pulls apart  
or back on"

where we come into being this way in these "fragments of refusal."

That the ends do not justify the means (the end not being an object, since everything stands--and falls--in relation), that the end is implied in the means and distorted by the distortions of encroachments made upon it, that this has always been the fate of theory since it cannot hold to itself as it is a part of language: so we spread out in the unique structure of our applied confusions. I am a human being, I am standing beside you, I am patient: I will not reduce you. I am listening. "Then spit it out. It is heavy. Because love of the language--the hum--the huhuman--excludes its reduction to a scientifically managed system of reference in which all is expediency and truth is nowhere." Where the illusion of life is death to the living we must put what we say in its place.



We are not interested in the device as an evasion of itself in elaboration, appropriated tropes, substitutions or self-conscious renderings (as if one could legislate myth). Only this presence here, "A world of answers, sentence by sentence."

Here they come: poems that are broken up, spill into view, pour into focus, move horizontally--a various matter of words--that begin to disappear into the "nudge" of their lines, come back at the next line either continuing or beginning a whole new tack that takes the vast sheet of information planing across his thinking and cuts the ragged edge off of it "taken just as that / cuts, edged / to get / at it". Selection with a resolution in honesty that refuses its own pride. "Shards. Not how we're special that's important but how we're not. I would rather explore the quarry that is my life. Punched out of us."

How to begin? Where to begin? One must cease directing and managing and pull out of the race, the sublime rat race. Breathless, nervous in a fashionable kind of way we recognize as built-in to our bogus individuality, he stops, lets go--"look around the corner & forget about what you were thinking. Happens all of a sudden, shades of color for example, but nobody understands that the best guess is not to work at all. Stretch it out, recount whatever 'alas' has in you." Where the word is not an imposition, but an unacknowledged legislation that releases its order, an order of presence, into the area of attentiveness where justice sings and hums along, where all are created equal and each is allowed to retrace and pick back up on the strings of thought, no matter how many directions they seem to lead in the judgment of the corraling propaganda that we have to leave behind "to break / through this / & show how / it's happening / in each phrase." To show that the language is not so transparent as it is made to seem in the disguise prepared for it by the imperial agents who instruct us in its proper usage: some wholly neutral window of discourse through which we view a fully constituted world. No. "Sit down with it. / It's time now. / There is no more natural sight." It wears on us, the senses of it: we are held, limited, commanded there, on the spot, until we allow it to take place like this, in these works, right before our eyes . . . in Time that is there.

So you have come to the Imperial Gate of Selection. You stand before it abashed "wanting each thing to be / a new thing, to be perfect, to be interesting, stellar, a /gem, full of crystals and obsessiveness / so that they give a free dinner, an echo, a chant. . . ." Perhaps that is them, up there, on high, looking down on us, Figure and Form, reigning down over us and it's "much too hard, to know, to want to give it over, to / find place, / is a delusion / simply can't keep up with itself / 'I weep' / an excitement of adulthood / 'look how many keys I have so that shows / I'm important, I have entry / & they care' / they blast, keep it." Confronting this Rite, Passage through the Zone of Certification in the canonical (not poetical) Justice of critically allowable misprisions that constitute good work, your so-called anxiety will take hold of the

banner that stamps you with its colors because, naturally, you want a name for yourself somewhere. But looking up from the Gate at the industrial facade of logistical thinking--what you've got to come out of--you feel "it's not even them liking me but my being able to care / about them, to feel it, and then it's not enough, because / by then all the force bottled up explodes and fills up / the other, becomes fixated, transfixed / so you get so and it's all just endless figments, fragments, the / to get it, it."

Permutations of phraseology indicate hinges of thought, rather, think them through (insofar as you go with them and do not turn away because the text will not read for you), along (seemingly) gratuitous choices thought develops--it is full of the world. The notion of space is an operant notion here, to keep things open, to show that thought and language have a dimensional morphology, "that the things that are really valuable don't / so much happen as you experience them / in the actual present." Selection on display warns us that our anxiety is over silence, over what is taken away (the code is palpable sound and concept cut through) when we are deprived of the tools of meaning, crowded into smaller and smaller cultural rooms, regimented, windowless, for the sake of an ordering procedure that is actually a collapse of responsibility, a Failure of Nerve: to think that learning occurs in this catastrophic deprivation of human possibilities, of space, of the ways of saying.

And as I think along with these works--Parsing, Shade, Poetic Justice and Senses of Responsibility--I feel myself let out, over, around, into the larger space of being possible to say . . . that as brothers and sisters here we are not fighting for entry. Precept manifests example manifests precept. These works quietly explore, demonstrate, discover their own accessibility and inevitability on ordinary terms as a project of the language-being of a person (which is world, not individual, and, as language, not hubris but collective particular) where we do not need to construct an image of ourselves that is, after all, readily available--indeed: calling, shouting at us from the corners of our forsaken, tongue-tied humanity--raked into literature and the noise of the heavy machinery that we have allowed to speak for us in its own unspeakable terms.

The ("like") film going on tacitly announces a surface of events where what really happens may be governed by sheer "anticipation." But the here of writing confronts us from the recesses of the lived, that point of reference, vertical, that precedes indicators and manifests attention "all / in this, only / saying it, that / emptiness, dragged / the distance." So it's not that there's utterly no reference, but that such a thing has no singular value placed upon it above and beyond the going of the language, where in words, not through or passing through words, time stands "asking as it does / a different kind of space." Dare I call it existence? The "accountant's time" there, on record, in record, has nothing really to do with this slant of things coming and going. Here it is, set up for you: a now, a memory that doesn't



need to go anywhere else. If you see someone bleeding in the street do you run to the hospital to find the meaning of your experience?

"My hand claims its own boundaries."

Not imbedded in time, but the very setting for it. All this movement a particular way you are present to the point, palpable enough for you to get the picture--that's why it's not such smooth running

"In the habiting  
of a space you  
can't move within,  
defined specifically  
with an intention  
to give up use  
for whatever length  
of time can  
be sustained.  
Which means  
preconceived--  
this annoyance  
that you get it  
wrong that jerks  
through us.  
'Person makes coercion'  
as if by force  
a certainty can  
be achieved.  
These gaps jump  
too far, a fetid  
decay of smoldering  
ideas stacked up  
like dead newspapers  
. . . .

it's weather  
a movement of  
press that  
overtakes us,  
in which we  
are cradled."

## BARRETT WATTEN

Controlling Interests, by Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof, 1981)

Controlling Interests functions politically, when read aloud, primarily in that it opens things up. It allows space for and identifies individual springs of action by stylistic means, meanwhile denying closure. The work is simultaneously deconstructive and constructive: ambiguity counterposes 'man standing by his word' to take apart prior linguistic codes. The mechanisms of representation are perceived exactly to the extent that the work can be heard. The aesthetic order, then, is identified with direct perception. The politics of the work are in this internalization of 'radical structural means'; oppression, seen as an act of language, will be increasingly revealed. 'To push things into further nature' is the impulse; Controlling Interests intends a further statement conceived entirely on the ability to act. Further nature will be as tangible as this statement, and is yet to come.



# RON SILLIMAN

FOR CHARLES BERNSTEIN HAS SUCH A SPIRIT . . .

I say: the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time and immediately I add that the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects. In the interaction of this double constitution exists the functioning of all ideology, ideology being nothing but its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning.

Louis Althusser  
Ideology and the State<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Poetry and the problem of knowing

Since the Second World War the model upon which all of the human sciences have been reconstructed -- and through this process transformed -- has been the practice of linguistics as elaborated by scholars following Ferdinand de Saussure's Course in General Linguistics, a text that represents not the writing of Saussure himself but a synthesis of notes taken by no less than eight of his University of Geneva students during two versions of the course, four years apart. In short, the foundation of the contemporary human sciences (including those, such as grammatology, which offer themselves in opposition to the tenets of this origin) depends on the understandings of different minds of material never presented in any finalized form and whose scope was arbitrarily limited by Saussure's early death.<sup>2</sup>

Had he lived, there is no guarantee that he would have completed his project of the construction of a unified linguistic science. In its absence, however, the partialness of the Saussurean program, what we have inherited as the doctrines of signifier and signified, of langue and parole, the whole notion of structure predicated on difference, has been inscribed within each of the human sciences. Within linguistics proper, the consequence has been a narrowing of the object to the development of a system of rules necessary for the production of a "linguistically competent" string of signifiers and the ancillary question (which is at least as much a problem of psychology as linguistics) of how such a system of rules is acquired by actual speakers. Since this hardly exhausts the possible types of useful knowledge there can be about significant (sign-using) behavior in the world, contemporary linguistics, in spite of its privileged position generally, has been reduced to merely one of

a number of lines of inquiry into the domain of language, some of which:

- attempt to carry forward earlier strategies of exploration (philosophy, semantics);
- attempt to situate themselves entirely within the confines of linguistics (tagmemic analysis);
- attempt to construct bridges between linguistics and other disciplines (speech-act theory, generative semantics);
- attempt to construct theories for realms explicitly omitted from linguistics (pragmatics, grammatology); or
- attempt to extend the model of linguistics to all possible codes (semiotics).

Through the Prague School, the New Critics and especially the structuralists, this same problematic of partiality, omission, and the fragmentation of knowledge has been exported to virtually every mode of investigation into human activity, from anthropology to political economy, from psychology to poetics.

While such a dispersal is not identical to specialization, this process is readily integrated into the dynamics of professionalism, which obscure the difficulty by treating it, at best, as a question of boundaries. Once banished, the problem "disappears." This chain -- fragmentation, diaspora, reification and the vanishment of the whole -- connects the question of a unified linguistic science's relation to the problem of knowledge to other contemporary phenomena, among them the proliferation of poetries and the function of ideology in modern life. Not surprisingly, all three depend profoundly on language and will be viewed here as they are: aspects of a greater dialectic, interrelating knowledge, "persons" and the socio-economic structures of the world system.

## 1a. Ideology and the subject

In the words of Althusser, himself as much a creation of this partiality as any:

for you and for me, the category of the subject is a primary 'obviousness' (obviousnesses are always primary): it is clear that you and I are subjects (free, ethical, etc. ...). Like all obviousnesses, including those that make a word 'name a thing' or 'have a meaning' (therefore including the obviousness of the 'transparency' of language), the 'obviousness' that you and I are subjects -- and that that does not cause any problems -- is an ideological effect, the elementary ideological effect. It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are 'obviousnesses') obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud or in the 'still, small voice of conscience'): 'That's obvious! That's right! That's true!'<sup>3</sup>



We are to take the poet's word for this; the passage does not otherwise provide warrant for our belief; all stands or falls upon his sincerity and our willingness to accept same. The trouble becomes more apparent, Bromige contended, as we continue to read: "And across from her [the daughter], one of those inevitable bitches of the late forties (her own age) who 'checks out', as the expression is, any late arrival to her own environs, whether same be a garbage pail or the Ritz....(M)y daughter... had, she said, been so absorbed [in a magazine] simply to avoid the engagement of the bitch, the soured and vicious person (I stake my life on such assumptions), was sitting across the room from her." The writer had earlier admitted to his feelings of "displacement and paranoia": his "reading" of the woman, then, is a reading back of his own projections, which substantially interfere with the intuitive accuracy "on which he stakes himself". Creeley seems unaware of himself as constituting what he reports -- and Bromige remarked that his anger might well have intimidated his daughter into concurring: "Dad's mad, might as well agree with him." While granting value to Creeley's "generosity" in testifying to his own condition, Bromige thought that he had stopped halfway: had too quickly assumed the viability of his assumptions. Bromige noted that this contradicted certain propositions in the Projectivist canon concerning not coming to a conclusion, returning the poem to the reader, staying open to experience -- all of which, he felt, are still to be worked through. The "nature-oriented" poetics (the assumption behind Creeley's "prime") had kept the Projectivists from establishing a real groundwork in these areas. "Their poetics indicated an inclusion of language in any of its manifestations, not only speech strained through voice. Yet in practice, they stopped short of this possibility."

At what is ostensibly the opposite end of this "nature-oriented" poetics is a "certain kind of poetry or attitude towards poetry that seems to be on the upswing," where the "I" is used "even more naively, illustrating the distinction between 'self-centered' and 'egotistical'." This a-historicity of the self is exemplified for Bromige in poems that seem to occur without social context (yet are charged with social implications). Bromige would rather see, as with the Projectivists, an "I" to some extent responsible to its circumstances and practice.

In concluding the second evening Bromige mentioned three other writers who had been an influence for him: Merleau-Ponty, Michael Polanyi, and Wittgenstein. From Merleau-Ponty he takes the notion of the body as "the place from where meaning occurs." From Wittgenstein the sense of "language games" which are used to "validate a world-view" (which in fact *constitutes* one). Adjacent to this is the idea that poetry *itself* generates a poetics, and not the reverse. It is the post-factum aspect of literature which creates the reactive (and often reactionary) tenor of criticism. From Polanyi comes the "tacit dimension," the appeal to a kind of "communal intuition" (following the "unlimited community of inquirers" in C.S. Peirce, and legitimation-by-consensus in Habermas).<sup>4</sup>

## THE THIRD EVENING

On the third evening, a collaboration between David Bromige and Ron Silliman resulted in a series of quotations, pronouncements, and reminiscences. The quotes were extracted, for the most part, from Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno; this procedure was a prior agreement between the collaborators as to "ground-rules".

Ron Silliman began with "what constitutes a talk;" a Robbe-Grillet-like 'explication de la scene', where the austerity and focus of the situation (as a sort of oracular tableau) might encourage an individual "to present a complete thought, perhaps with regard to poetics." What this austere yet persuasive setting demonstrates is the fragility, and rareness, of such thoughts. This "complete thought" may be (for Silliman left, perhaps appropriately, its definition incomplete) the authoritarian closure of a performative utterance. Silliman contrasted the "Talk" to "the poetics of the tavern" (that is, the gathering of writers after an event such as this) and to "the discrete text produced in isolation and consumed in isolation." The key feature of the "Talk" is "the simultaneous presence of multiple consumers," i.e., an audience. Thus it "uniquely acknowledges the presence of the consumers as essential to the completeness of the thought itself." This would be oppositional, in Silliman's view, to the classroom, where "consumers of a text are brought together after the primary consumption process," and where "the prestige of the text reigns over all." Where the "Talk" would seem to differ from a solitary or pedagogical occasion, as the colloquial tag indicates, is in the Brechtian role of the audience. Brecht in fact played a prominent part in the evening's proceedings, in focusing on interruption as a device (one that is encouraged in the series as a whole--this in contradistinction to the 'unimpeachable flow' of a lecture). Traversing this is the self-historicizing operation of which Silliman seemed to warn against, and yet took part in; as an organized gathering of this sort will produce, if only provisionally, a theoretical closure (a "complete thought"). Indeed, the present essay complicitly indulges in such an operation. It seems unimportant, all the same; the true distinctiveness of these gatherings are akin to Silliman's characterization of the poetry reading as the bringing together of consumers, not simply to hear work read, but as the self-presentation of a viable community. This parallels the comments made earlier on the "community" as seen in Polanyi and Habermas.

David Bromige was self-reflective, starting from his situation as an isolated writer. "It is myself I address, sitting here in Santa Rosa;" yet sending his text, projectively, to the site of its delivery. Here again, the historicizing of the event was present to mind. By way, perhaps, of elucidating Silliman's "complete thought," Bromige quoted the preface to Merleau-Ponty's book *Signs*: "We do not understand a statement because it is complete in itself, we say that it is complete because we have understood." However, comprehension "can be seen to annihilate even as it reassures" (Bromige). And so Merleau-Ponty's observation that uncomprehension makes language opaque is in at least one sense a guarantee of preservation in the otherwise "consuming" act of understanding.<sup>5</sup>

Ron Silliman then read an extended quote by Walter Benjamin on the "epic Theatre" of Bertolt Brecht. Bromige followed by reading Theodor Adorno on "the critic". Silliman returned to Benjamin's aesthetics,



cation is explicit).<sup>13</sup> The value of a poetry must therefore be located within its relation to a determinate audience.

For that literature allied with groups experiencing social domination, this relation is more or less clear because of its directness. For the other literature (which includes my own), this relation in the present moment takes the form of a project. It is the necessity of this writing to call into being its own group (composition, trajectory, allegiances) in such a manner as to make its existence evident (not obvious) to individual members thereof. It is the urgency of this project that places the construction of the subject through ideology at the center of (this mode of) writing. So it is no accident that this is the primary issue at stake in Charles Bernstein's Controlling Interests.

If Althusser's theory of ideology is the product of a fragmented discourse, its fundamental strength and correctness is to be found in its reintegrative strategy, carrying Lacan's structural psychoanalysis (modeled as that is, regardless of the remove, after Saussure's originary distinctions, integrating linguistics into the classic Freudian text) into the field of historical materialism. By their very nature, reintegrative strategies reinforce (and are reinforced by) something very close to a Saussurean intuition, presuming as they do the capacity of analogy to extend perception. Analogy, based as it is on substitution (displacement and difference), is the quintessential moment of linguistic meaning.<sup>14</sup> Once a relation of equivalence has been established between two systems (entities or states), a skeletal procedure is automatically suggested for the discovery of further concurrence. My love is a rose inscribes not merely beauty, but also fragility and thorns.

In "Writing and Method," an essay composed in conjunction with a series conducted with the philosopher Edmund Leites at St. Marks Church, Bernstein writes:

what makes poetry poetry and philosophy philosophy is largely a tradition of thinking and writing, and a social matrix of publications, professional associations, audience; more, indeed, facts of history and social convention than intrinsic necessities of the "medium" or "idea" of either one.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of what is swept casually aside by that phrase "a tradition of thinking and writing" (implying that the substance of either discipline is to be found elsewhere), this is first of all the announcement of a reintegrative approach and the clearest articulation to date of Bernstein's general line of attack as a writer.

By now the problematics of philosophy are well known.<sup>16</sup> But what is at issue here is not the idealization or abstraction of either practice, so much as their containment within language. If the formation of subjects through ideology by means of language (and other codes) is to be the project of a certain writing,<sup>17</sup> what then is better suited to this than those practices for which language itself constitutes a limit?

In "Writing and Method" Bernstein makes much of the interchangeability of the value claims implicit/inherent in both poetry and

philosophy as practices. As important, if not more so, are the structural possibilities of the analogy, particularly since neither term is simply treated as the "ground" for the other to be applied to, enabling Bernstein to develop, at various points, both axes. This stance also permits him to "liberate" philosophy from its thoroughly academicised context, preferring (and this is consistent with his project as a whole) the decentralized, economic marginality of poetry as a locus from which to make this argument.

If this is not always "obvious" in Controlling Interests, it is because Bernstein's books, in sharp contrast with much contemporary poetry, are organized thematically, rather than chronologically. In the past, as in, say Poetic Justice (Pod Books, 1979), this has meant that individual works of considerably different capacity and completeness sit juxtaposed. This variance of perception/articulation is then apt to become a (the?) dominant theme within the book.

Dechronologizing needs to be seen as a defense against the reduction of the project to "mere" autobiography, particularly if the formation of a subject is taken as the persistent content of the work. Autobiography is of course a traditional content of poetry, rather than philosophy<sup>18</sup>, with a range of contemporary variants to play individual works off of, including (1) confessionalism, (2) phenomenological registration of biological fate (personism), (3) Jungian, or other, magnification (persona/ism), and (4) image management (the Catholic male hustler junkie or crazy Rumanian genius franchises). Of these, the second category (which is the least cynical, professionally, in that it does not presume a direct linkage between unveiling and a specific career model) is closest to the constitutional project of Bernstein's poetry.

This temporally shattered and reconstructed subject gives Bernstein an instrument with which to pierce the veil of "pure abstraction" inhering in modern philosophy, in that focusing on the constitutive aspect of language, rather than treating it as a self-forming object (as in Wittgenstein), the medium is grounded in relation to social reality. This is clearest perhaps in the poems "Live Acts" and "Standing Target" in Controlling Interests. The former is a short (20 lines), elegant restatement of the problem of language's withinness, Wittgenstein's imprisoning picture:

Crayons of immaculate warmth ensnare our  
sommnambulance to this purpose alone.

The closer we look, the greater the distance from which  
we look back. Essentially a hypnotic referral<sup>19</sup>

The poem is at no point obscure at the level of assertion, but sentences and statements are continually thwarted at their attempts to go beyond this limit:

These projects alone contain  
the person, binding up in an unlimited way what  
otherwise goes unexpressed.<sup>20</sup>

This is quite different from the self-cancelling mechanics of sleight characteristic of an Ashbery or Stevens in that the perspective never slips from view, but foregrounds at each instant the boundary



of the possible until this anxiety, as such, is rendered tangible as content.

"Standing Target" is unlike the other poems in Controlling Interests, especially those using stanzaic form such as "Live Acts," because it permits its separate voices sufficient room to take on the trappings of character, in the most narrative sense of that word. Psychoanalytic jargon, public relations cameos of business executives, camp counselor reports about "Charlie" mingle discretely with less contextualized discourses to present an almost classic formation of a (noticeably depressed) subject.

## II. For Love

For love--I would  
split open your head and put  
a candle in  
behind the eyes.

Love is dead in us  
if we forget  
the virtues of an amulet  
and quick surprise.

Robert Creeley  
The Warning<sup>20</sup>

"For Love Has Such A Spirit That If It Is Portrayed It Dies" is one of the ten (of 17) poems in Controlling Interests to employ the form of a single (long) stanza composed of medium (or larger) sized lines. Of the other poems, three are in prose, three in a modified field technique which seems highly conscious of its ancestry (Berrigan/Waldman in the case of "Off Season" and "The Hand Gets Scald...", Eigner in "Company Life"), with one, "Standing Target," in a mixed mode. Of the stanzaic poems, eight have extremely simple, or at least brief, titles: "Matters of Policy," "Sentences My Father Used," "Island Life," etc. One has no title other than its first line, and one, "For Love," a title so elaborate as to call attention to itself.

This title unifies elements of style, subjectivity (more accurately: intersubjectivity) and representation, plus the rhetorical form of an assertion, such as might be taken up by a speaker as a topic for debate. As we shall be reminded later by the text itself, the discourse genre, or stance, of "For Love" is literally that of argument.

Mass of van contemplation to intercede crush of  
plaster. Lots of loom: "smoke out", merely  
complicated by the first time something and don't.

Long last, occurrence of bell, altitude, attitude of.<sup>21</sup>

In an argument, as such, these opening lines would identify the thesis, or at least a recitation of the problem; in a natural narrative<sup>22</sup>, this would be the orientation's locale (a concept typically flattened in creative writing courses to "the hook").

In one sense, a minor one, these lines do present, or at least exemplify, "the problem," the dangers of material reality ("crush of/plaster") in an air of anxiety, confusion, hesitation. So this is a disorientation, accomplished through the extreme condensation and fragmentation of the language: there is an irony which comes across as doubting in the use of a word such as "van" (whose first meaning in the Random House Collegiate is essentially "short for vanguard") to characterize a contemplation capable of keeping the sheetrock from one's brow. More sinister: "loom" in the second line can carry two very different meanings, neither of which is reducible to an aspect of the other. The use of quotation marks furthers this, setting the words off as from "another voice," failing to resolve with the comma into an integrated, conventional punctuation. "(S)moke" carries the connotation of a dust projected (not written) from the falling plaster, but this meaning, tangible as it is, is not possible in "smoke out." A parallel frustration occurs in the next line in the ellipsis hidden by the word "something," about which we are only told "and don't" (do that again?). Beyond the alliterative echo to "Lots of loom," "Long last," like "loom," presents different possible readings, in this instance both contractions, from either "Long lasting" or "at long last." Perversely, "occurrence of bell" (not to be confused with its sound) suggests the latter without any further evidence of connection. A relation to the bell is similarly projected by context onto "altitude, attitude of" in the same instant that those first two words, by virtue of their acoustics, mark rhyme (an "occurrence of bell"), while suggesting through spelling a typographical error (and yet attitude, in the sense of position, would at least partly be determined by altitude). Disordered or random as these four lines might appear, they represent an intensely controlled, polysemic and subtle act of writing.

As the whole of "For Love" bears out, this level of discrimination is characteristic of Bernstein's mature work. While I do not intend to pursue the reading to this degree of detail, the devices, movements and themes which follow warrant comment. In the next section, tone and surface shift:

The first, at this moment, aimless, aims. To the point of inordinate asphalt--lecture, entail. These hoops regard me suspiciously. A ring for the shoulder (heave, sigh...). Broadminded in declamation, an arduous task of winking (Willing). Weary the way the world wearies, circa 1962. The more adjoins, sparklet and parquet reflection, burned out (up). Regard the willing, whose movement be only remonstrations, ails this blue bound boat. The numerical tears.

Already some of the techniques employed to accomplish this shift are familiar: ellipsis (the first what, the more what?), and alliteration -- especially in the sixth and tenth lines of the passage -- used to deflect and divert "literal" meaning (it is the b in "numerical" that "tears," sounded as it must be, failing to become



numb, absent). What significantly distinguishes this passage's ostensible clarity (perceived as tone, which it is not) from the initial quatrain is that, with the possible exception of "hoops," no words or phrases are stranded between determinate, irreducible contents (which is not to say that several do not have multiple meanings, but rather that such meanings are ordered: the layered idiom of "burned out (up)" carries, in context, more of exhaustion and frustration than it does of fire, and hence of any anaphoric reference back to "smoke;" the same is true for the relation between "Ring" and "bell"). Nor do any of the terms portend disaster as did "crush" and "smoke." There are several allusions, treated descriptively as from a third person, detached, to the process of argumentation itself: "lecture," "declamation," "remonstrance." The two sides of any communicative social contract are visible in the sentence "These hoops regard me suspiciously" and the phrase "winking/(willing)," the first suggesting that the contract is only tenuously held ("hoops" is not a metaphor, but an ellipsis into which a manifold cipher has been inserted), the second marking a rupture between signifier and signified. Additionally, sentences proceed, in contrast with those of the first four lines, as if from one to the next: "aims. To the/point of."

This last is what, in "The New Sentence"<sup>23</sup>, I referred to as sylogistic flow (following a line of reasoning from the work of Ferruccio Rossi-Landi<sup>24</sup>), but which Bernstein, in "Writing and Method," calls projection. Both terms identify that act of the reading mind which (responding to what Paul Grice has called the Cooperative Principle<sup>25</sup>) immediately and "automatically" interprets new data (new sentence, new phrase) as possessing the least disjunctive meaning. One term simply provides a schematic analogy for this process, which the other emphasizes that it takes place in the reader, not on the page. While one possible use for this device is to minimize the recognition of gaps and changes in context, content or scale (and, after all, the social origin of the mechanism as an instrument in writing lies not in poetry, not even in the cutup, but in the work of advertising and certain forms of journalism, stringing together quotations taken out of context), Bernstein, who often employs it within the sentence, between phrases, takes it in the opposite direction, making tangible to the reader the act of projection itself, an (unwilling) participation to locate meaning(s) which s/he knows no "literal" interpretation could support. This is the antithesis of modernism's "hidden meanings," in that its content is the hiding process.

Edged out where tunnels reconnect, just below  
the track. Aims departing after one another  
& you just steps away, listening,  
listless. Alright, always--riches  
of that uncomplicated promise. Who-- what--.  
That this reassurance (announcement)  
& terribly prompted--almost,

although. Although censorious and even more  
careless. Lyrical mysticism--harbor, departing  
windows. For love I would--deft equator.  
Nonchalant attribution of all the, & filled with  
such, meddles with & steals my constancy, sharpening  
desire for that, in passing, there, be favorite  
in ordinary, but no sooner thought than gone. My  
heart seems wax, that like tapers burns at light.  
Fabulous ephemera a constant force for giddy flight.

Here the modes of stoppage, prosody's (and punctuation's) markings of hesitation, multiply. Words to which any material visual referent might be applied dwindle. Concrete instances of this occur in only three of the eleven sentences: the first (a complex, but not impossible, image), the tenth (a romanticized and ironic simile, undermined by a disagreement in number and inversion of cause and effect) and the seventh, where they are identified as "Lyrical mysticism." That the infamous shifter "You," with a content different for every reader, is, from the perspective of the speaker here, likewise objectified is indicated by the use of the verb in the third person, a descriptive conjugation. What remains is nearly all (unfinished) mental constructs and the gears of syntax, a self in which language is posed as a barrier to actuality. Not only is this passage filled with ellipsis, terms bearing identifiably negative connotations ("listless," "censorious," "careless," "mysticism," "meddles with," "steals") further depress the whole. Into this are set a smaller number of words and phrases with a directly opposite emotional coding: "riches/of that uncomplicated promise," "reassurance," "desire," "favorite," and, at least on one level, "For love." The result is virtually a strobe effect of charged connotations ("no sooner thought than gone"), unrelieved by either imagery a reader might hang this discourse from, or the simple pleasure of a completed thought -- until the last two sentences, which go to the point of end-rhyme to mark the contrapuntal element of their harmony (while the first sentence is pointedly comic, the second is not, stating what the poem heretofore has exemplified: the problem of projection, actuality and action -- indeed, "giddy flight" might be all that is possible in the way of an act if perception of material reality renders it only as "Fabulous ephemera," a question that is never clearer to the subject than when "in love").

The demand for spontaneous intersubjectivity which is at the heart of "The Warning," one of Robert Creeley's most famous poems (in part, because it is so often confused with the title poem of For Love), presents itself as a possible solution. Like the Creeley poem, which is itself "about" frustration, Bernstein here recognizes the impotency of the demand: the allusion is abruptly broken, the most radical instance of stoppage in this section, followed by that long, lax sentence composed of disconnected strands. The reference to Creeley (and by this to a whole tradition of writing, proposed solutions) also serves to rewrite, midway through the text, the title of Bernstein's poem, so that



love itself is no longer portrayed, save through the mediation of an objectified manifestation, another text.<sup>26</sup>

But boxes both in, boated just the same. Mass of fix, the further theorizing a final surrender, until the next, thins or becomes transported, nights asleep, days wondering. Appearance that not so much won't shake but returns, as the pilot turns his starship into wool. To knit these phantasmagorias out of white, sheer monument to culture's merry meal of itself. In eyes that look with mirror's blankness, remoteness complete--I want but all recedes. Motor fixation, streetcar trace, the last days of this water, these fields. To sustain such blows and undermine the lash is memory's cure. At long last, image reconciled to friend, chatting under oaks, rays of a sky no longer our but all the more possessed. For much that has no cure. Duplication equal to charm of happier times, those that disappeared, faster and more fantastic, the loud despair the softer homily. A shoe entails its path till, foot on foot, no diversion's seen. The sky parts, the blinds repair. A hush that skirts the subtler moment, the cumbersome charade of weekend and reply.

Continuing the strategy begun in the last sentence of the previous passage, the language here largely presents an argument rather than exemplifying a condition or state.<sup>27</sup> The shift is dramatic, with consequences on multiple levels. With the essential exception of "I want but all recedes," ellipsis virtually disappears, replaced by a variety of other devices, notably synecdoche, used to torque (condense, intensify) the discourse. A more fluent prosody is constructed by decreasing the frequency of full stops by a third.<sup>28</sup> Because of the structure of argument itself, syllogistic flow is greatly increased, displacing the reader's sense of projection onto the tropes within the sentences. In contrast with the discontinuous-but-eternal presentness that characterizes much "new sentence" writing, several of the terms are pointedly anaphoric, referring back to previous occurrences: "boated," "Mass," "long/last," "entails," and two words privileged within this passage, "cure" and "sky."

What is at issue here is the constant reformation of the subject, isolated and idealized behind a wall of language that presents a false picture. This invalidness is precisely the content of all the inversions of cause and effect (blinds don't repair any more than the sky parts outside the world of The Raiders of the Lost Ark), and the lost possession of the sky, an instance of memory curing "much that has/no cure." At its most material, this inversion renders the "weekend" as a base and the workweek its "reply."

Bernstein is rejecting analysis ("further theorizing a final surrender"), intersubjectivity ("eyes that look with mirror's blankness," exactly the problem posed by Creeley's "The Warning," "remoteness complete"), and memory as roads out of the vicious circle of ideology's solipsism. At best ("no longer our," the

adjectival form marking the term for our attention, "but all the more possessed"), they intensify our consciousness of the difficulty. This is explicit in the lines which follow:

This darkness, how richer than a moat it lies. And my love, who takes my hand, now, to watch all this pass by, has only care, she and I. We deceive ourselves in this matter because we are in the habit of thinking the leaves will fall or that there are few ways of breaking the circuit.

In spite of the directness of statement, the tone here is fully ironic, comically at first, then more ominously in that last, long sentence. In it alienation is complete: that the leaves will fall is not a "habit of thinking." This sense is reinforced by the fact that the sentence is the first in the entire poem to be grammatically complete and conventional, and seemingly as conventional at the level of content. "Seemingly," because the last line presents a variety of possible readings which neither the sentence nor the remainder of the poem resolve (yet is not "breaking the circuit" what this is all about?):

How much the stronger we would have been had not--but it is something when one is lonely and miserable to imagine history on your side. On the stoop, by the door ledge, we stand here, coffee in hand. Roll top desk, undisguised goodbyes. I wait but I don't want it. Austerely premature, scrutinized to the point of a gazeless graph, no past there, how could it hope to mean to us. These are the saccharine days, the noiseless chirps of the sublimated depths. By the train tracks, halfway down, sitting there, looking at--a goat knows no better sound. What of colors, what of characters--anoint with all precision projection brings, so much sturdier and valorous than ourselves. Depressed eyes clutter the morning and we drown in a sea of helping hands. Better the hermit than the sociopath. Destruction? --the wind blows anyway, any where, and the window frame adorns the spectacle. That person fixes in your head, and all the world consumed through it.

By now the close reader should be able to pursue the poem very nearly as straightforward argument, in spite of the increases in ellipsis and stoppage and the disruptions of syllogistic flow through the insertion of a number of imagized sentences, two of which are flatly descriptive (and identify different positions and locales: "stand here," "sitting there"). The proximity here of not wanting to "a gazeless graph" is in direct contrast to the earlier

In eyes that look with mirror's blankness, remoteness complete--I want but all recedes indicating a movement in position that might be interpreted as a zenlike "letting go" of the dilemma, but isn't, followed as it is by



yet another reformation of the subject (problem), posed finally in the most negative terms: "how could it hope to mean to us," "saccharine days," "noiseless chirps," "Depressed eyes clutter," "drown," "hermit," "sociopath," and even "Destruction?" formulated as a question whose lack of an answer is deafening. The last sentence, even more than its counterpart in "Live Acts," restates the constitution of the subject through ideology, insisting by its placement in both pieces that, at least by the practice of poetry -- even a poetry invested with the serious business of philosophic investigation --, one does not unravel, go beyond, this knot.

The final designation of eyes as "Depressed," the figure of the window, the nearly catatonic passivity of anything resembling the instance of a character (beyond the initial gestures of argumentation per se, the very discrete instances of standing, sitting, looking at, watching and, significantly, "takes my hand," the most eventful act before "we drown" is that "the pilot turns his starship into wool"), the explicit mention of the word "projection" and that of the word "spectacle" connects this writing directly to that universe outlined in Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle. While hardly a situationist, Bernstein is even less willing than Debord to prescribe a strategy of response. At no moment in this poem or elsewhere in Controlling Interests, Senses of Responsibility, Poetic Justice or Shade is action proposed, let alone valorized as an antidote to the fetishism of a commoditized existence.<sup>29</sup>

### III. The place of poetry

In "Writing and Method," however, Bernstein does suggest a relation between the poem and "the hierarchical power relations within the socius<sup>30</sup>," when he calls for

Writing as a map for the reader to read into, to interpolate from the space of the page out onto a projected field of "thinking"... So that the meaning of the text is constituted only in collaboration with the reader's active construction of this hypertext. This construction by the reader transforms the text in a way analogous to a stereopticon's transformation of two photoslides, except that the final construction is not uniform with each reader/viewer....

(...what I am discussing brings to consciousness the fact of projection as part of the content....)

...it is the formal autonomy of the text as model that elicits a response, an interpolation.<sup>31</sup>

Conceived as such, poetry can have a determinate contribution to make within a larger, oppositional strategy and cannot be viewed as an end in itself (even as the poet insists on the necessary "autonomy of the text"). The function of a writing so proposed would be to make the reader aware of the role of projection as a response to form in the constitution of the reader as a subject -- and always as a subject of a specific type, as one who reads poetry in a nation where it is not much read, and who selects a specific poetry to read.

Posited within this formulation (and curiously not named by Bernstein) is the outline of a specific audience. At its most general, it is that group which historically has not been conscious of its own existence as a group, that is, as subjects of a certain type. Without this consciousness, the formation of subjects within the group, and most particularly at the level of the "individual," is not perceived or else is perceived as inevitable (this is perhaps most grossly evident in American exceptionalism in its many forms, but is also the presumption underwriting all lines of racist, sexist, ageist and classist thought). More narrowly defined, this audience of possible readers is that portion (those sectors) of the larger group which has (have) begun to come into awareness of its (their) participation within a group. For such persons, the issue of the construction of the individual through ideology by means of language and other codes is the antithesis of philosophy conceived of as an intellectual game. It is a question of survival with deeply personal dimensions.

This is, as I noted in section Ib above, not the only poetry which must be written today in the United States. But, to the extent that the poetry of Charles Bernstein and others connects itself in an engaged manner to the needs, demands and fate of a determinate audience --which, by size, composition and location within the whole, is historically critical --, it is a writing of absolute necessity, demanding not to be appreciated, but understood.

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1. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in Lenin and Philosophy (Monthly Review, 1971), p. 171.
2. Saussure promised the students of his last course a future series on the "linguistics of speaking."
3. Op. cit., pp. 172-3.
4. Philosophical Investigations (MacMillan, 1953), number 115, p. 48e.
5. Ibid, no. 309, p. 103e.



6. Ibid, no. 384, p. 118e.
7. The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology (Verso, 1980), p. 15.
8. "Writing and Method," forthcoming in Sun & Moon, p. 14 of the original typescript.
9. Therborn is careful to note that ideology "is not reducible" to either psychology or the study of "language codes." Op. cit., p.2.
10. "T. E. Hulme, the New Barbarism, & Gertrude Stein," in Contemporaries and Snobs (Cape, 1928), p. 146.
11. When this relationship was perceived, as in the Civil and World wars, it expressed itself in the name of patriotism.
12. This is not to imply that Plath, even implicitly, was a feminist, nor that all of her readers were or are. The prodound impact of a relation to a perceived social movement to sales is evident also in the instance of Ferlinghetti's "beat classic," A Coney Island of the Mind, which has sold nearly one million copies.
13. The possible exception: when a number of poetries compete for the expression of a specific group. But here the (socioeconomic) definition of a group would have to be well-defined: not only are there real distinctions between the poets associated with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and those around Mag City, but likewise between the latter and those poets, such as Dlugos, Britton, Hamilton or Yau, who present a very different reading of the New York tradition.
14. This is what is meant by the assertion of some linguists, such as George Lakoff, that language is fundamentally metaphorical. Cf. Derrida's Of Grammatology and the 21st paragraph, or chapter, of Lyn Hejinian's My Life.
15. Op. cit., p. 1.
16. For example, the whole line of Marxist critique extending forward from The German Ideology and Theses on Feuerbach: "One has to 'leave philosophy aside,' one has to leap out of it and devote oneself like an ordinary man to the study of actuality.... Philosophy and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another as masturbation and sexual love." The German Ideology, (International Publishers, 1947), p. 103.
17. Bernstein seems to have recognized this as a project early on. In a paper on Gertrude Stein written while majoring in philosophy at Harvard, he wrote:  
     the limits of our language are the limits of our world.  
     There is no escape into a prior and hence private language,  
     a world outside language. Everything we know we know  
     through our shared language, our way of life is formed by  
     it: but we must learn it and speak it for ourselves.

The grammar that individuates is shared. (p. 63 of manuscript) My copy of the paper is incomplete and lacking the title. The endnotes, however, make no mention of Althusser.

18. One can, however, read the work of philosophers such as Wittgenstein or Gustav Bergmann as autobiographies of thought.
19. Controlling Interests (Roof, 1980), p. 28.
20. For Love (Scribners, 1962), p. 46.
21. The quotations in this section are all from this poem, Controlling Interests, pp. 48-50.
22. As this term is used, following Labov, in Mary Louise Pratt's Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse.
23. An abbreviated version of which is in Hills 6/7: Talks.
24. Linguistics and Economics (Mouton, 1975).
25. Cited in Pratt, op. cit., p. 125. Note that "cooperation" here is simply strategic, not voluntary.
26. That the allusion is intentional is best demonstrated by contrasting it with an even larger borrowing from the work of Marcuse in the next passage (written, significantly, in Bernstein's words): "To sustain such blows and/undermine the lash is memory's cure." While Bernstein could have used this to equally point to the tradition of philosophy, he doesn't. Neither philosophy nor memory are major issues here, and Bernstein is sensitive as to the degree to which he is willing to raise them. Just the opposite is the case with love, portrayal and objectification -- and it is here that the poem insists.
27. This capacity to shift the thematic center from form to content (and/or vice versa) would seem to problematize Habermas' assertion (in "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in Communication and the Evolution of Society (Beacon, 1979), p. 42) that illocutionary form and propositional content, while always present in any given sentence or utterance, must necessarily always be uncoupled, so that a discourse, such as Bernstein's, about illocutionary action must necessarily proceed by a series of unequal developments on either side of the "double-structure" of speech. In the primary instance of ellipsis in this passage of the poem, "I want but all recedes," the two sides strike a balance, foregrounding the moment against the rest of the text, which is in fact characterized by uneven development between exemplification and argumentation. More fully self-referential texts, such as Nicole Brossard's A Book (Coach House, 1976), suggest that while uneven development may in itself be the norm (or "unmarked case") and a significant area of investigation



in its own right, that the relation between illocutionary form and propositional content is not adequately presented by a model of "un-coupling," serialized as that is and implying the possibility of the presence or absence of two aspects which are, in reality, always already present. Robert Grenier's Sentences (Whale Cloth, 1978) demonstrates profoundly what an investigation of their simultaneity might look like.

28. The previous passage had 11 periods and 6 dashes (in one instance simultaneously) over 16 lines, while this section has 13 periods and one dash over 21 lines.
29. This is true in a sense also for Debord who rejects "reformist compromises or trashy pseudo-revolutionary common actions." Society of the Spectacle (Black & Red, 1973), number 220. In spite of his call for a dialectic stance and Council-centered anti-state oriented developments, Debord notes, in the same passage, that "the critique which goes beyond the spectacle must know how to wait."
30. Op. cit., p. 14.
31. Op. cit., pp. 14-15.

Disfrutes (1974): Potes & Poets, 1981; \$2 from 301 Marked Tree Road, Needham, MA 02192.

Parsing (1975-76): Asylum's Press, 1976, \$5.

Poetic Justice (1975-77): Pod Books, 1979; \$3.50.

Shade (1976-77): Sun & Moon, 1979; \$3.

The Occurrence of Tune (1977), with pictures by Susan B. Laufer: Segue Books, 1981, \$4.

Senses of Responsibility (1977-78): Tuumba Press #20, 1979; \$2.

Stigma (1979): Station Hill Press, 1981; \$3 from Station Hill Road, Barrytown, NY 12507.

Legend (1976-80), collaboration with Ron Silliman, Steve McCaffery, Ray DiPalma, and Bruce Andrews: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E/Segue, 1980, \$5.

Controlling Interests (1978-80): Roof Books, 1980; \$4.

Islets/Irritations (1975-1981): Jordon Davies, 1982; from 356 Bowery, New York, NY 10012.

#### Some Other Publications:

'Three or Four Things I Know about Him' (1977): reprinted in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Supplement #3, 1981; \$2.

'Eleven Poems' (1976-1978): section of Roof IX, Spring 1979; \$5.

'Reading Cavell Reading Wittgenstein' (1979): boundary 2, Vol. IX, 2 (Winter 1981).

'Meaning the Meaning: Arakawa's Critique of Space', with Susan B. Laufer (1981): Beauty and Critique, edited by Richard Milazzo (MY: Mussman-Bruce, 1982).

'Writing and Method' (1981): Poetics Journal #3, 1982.

#### Tapes:

'Reading, 12/1877': Gegeishein Tapes, 1979; \$7.50 from 111 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10003.

Class (1969-1976): Tapeworks from Widemouth Tapes, forthcoming; \$3.50.

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L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E (1978-1981), with Bruce Andrews; \$6 for current volume.

Asylum's Press (1975- ), with Susan B. Laufer.

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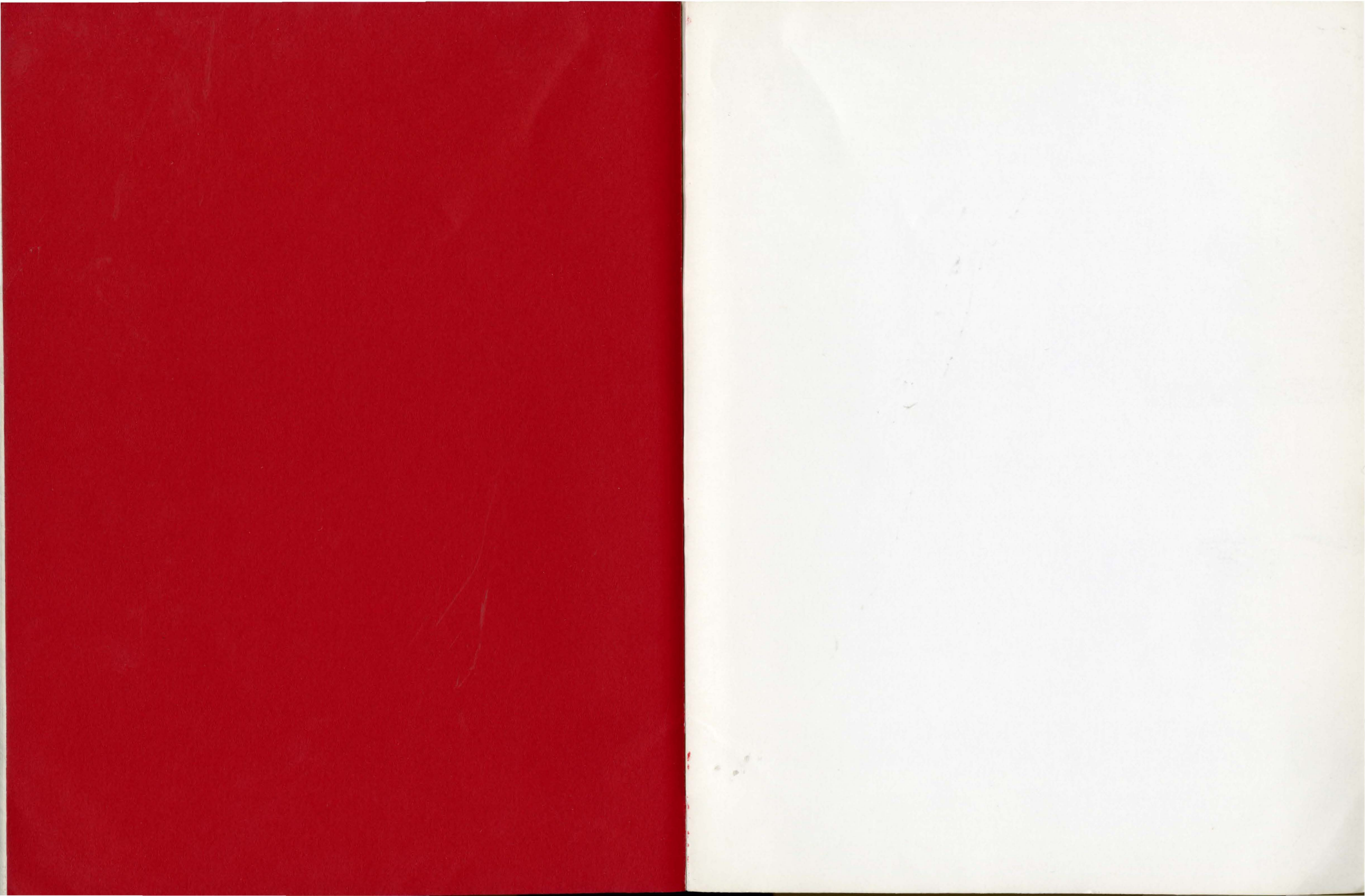
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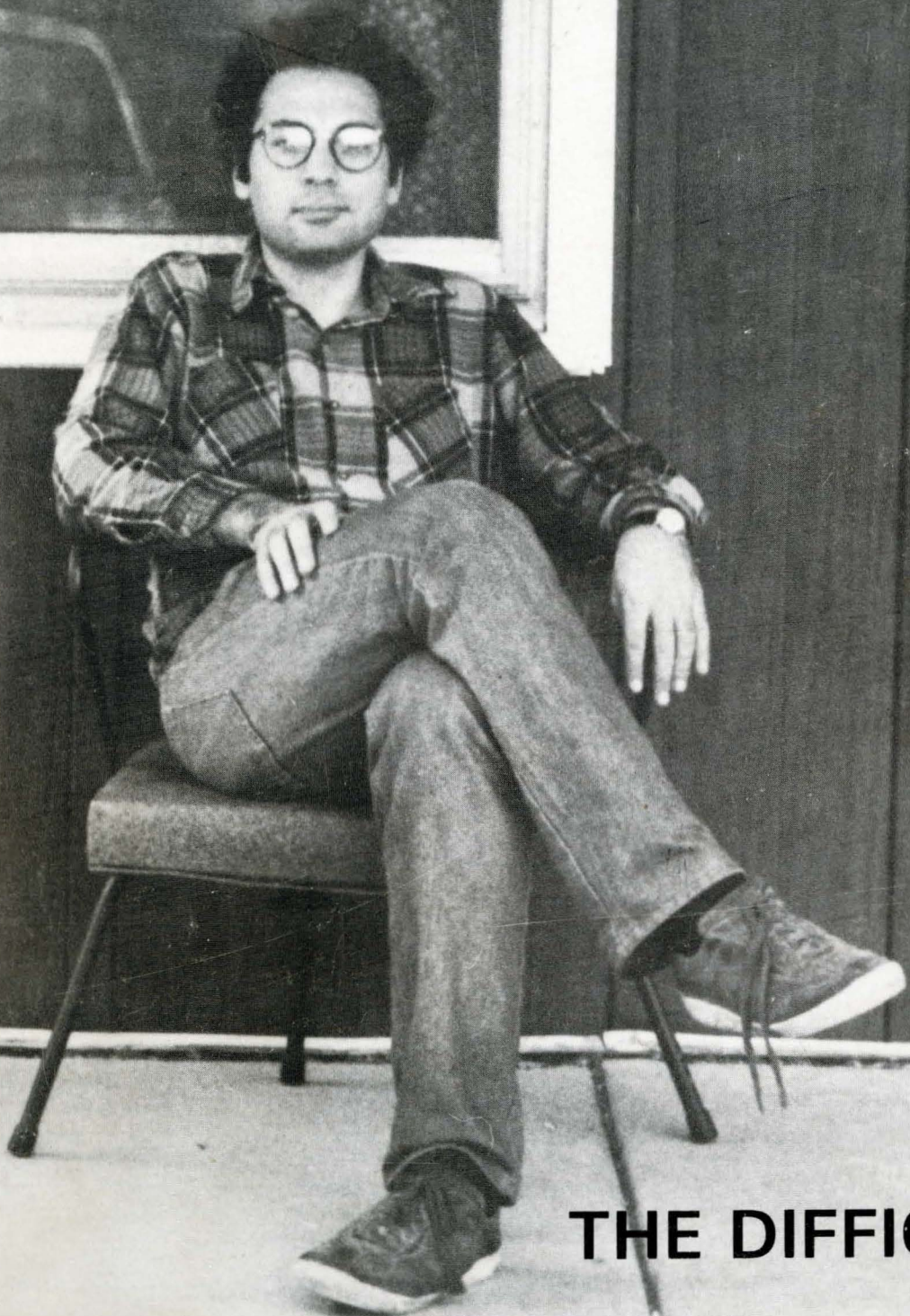
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