

A Hundred Posters

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Charles Bernstein:

THREE OR FOUR THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HIM

1. "...the task of history, once the world beyond the truth has disappeared, is to establish the truth of this world...."--Marx

2. its like a living death going to work every day sort of like being in a tomb to sit in your office you close the door theres the typewriter theres three or four maybe three hours of work to be done between that nine oclock and five maybe i listen to the news on wbai if i didnt get it the night before that comes on at nine oclock i read the newspaper i do anything to distract myself sometimes i sleep til around eleven i put both feet up on my desk and i put my hand against my head and i close my eyes the time passes if i listen to the radio i type a letter i write an article that would make the article that i wrote for that medical newspaper seem like proust in comparison or sometimes i think initially the job seemed more bearable more to the point of just a diversion and source of income for a while until i got unemployment not now but mostly its just that i'm taking things in a bleaker way i'm not quite sure why that is of course the writing writing even talking like this always seems to me perfectly at peace so that i was thinking i dont know this could be my own you know this could be sort of the the source of my crazy hood/ness that the things that are really valuable dont so much happen as you experience them in the actual present a lot of what i experience is just a tremendous sense of space and vacant space at that sort of like a stanley kubrick film sort of a lot of objects floating separately which i dont particularly feel do anything for me give me anything make me feel good and when i do feel almost best is when i dont care whether they make me feel good whether they have any relation to me thats a very pleasant thats a real feeling of value in the present

moment to just sit and do nothing and thats what writing is
for me a lot or just sitting sometimes when i i sit in my
office with my eyes closed on my chair and let my mind
wander theres a certain sense of not caring and letting it
just go by that i like and then there is actual relationships
you know sometimes touching whether its listening to a
piece of music sometimes or talking to somebody a lot being
with certain people sometimes but a lot of it has to do with
memory & remembering that it was it was something that
somehow the value seems to lie historical i look back and
see things that really do seem worthwhile and worth it for
instance the way i behave if i try to behave well decently
or justly or whatever it is that we take to be what we judge
ourselves by when we have a conversation and we say thats
fucked and thats not whatever we go by in that sense i mean
making that happen building that it does seem you know
worth a value funny refreshing nice wonderful or a
movie sometimes moments hours days months and then
you know even years and lifetimes sure but something
in the actual experiencing of it that does seem
vacant in the way that a lot is vacant but also the
way yeah okay new mexico is vacant
really i'm you know completely gone just after working by
the time i get to this but i am able to concentrate and remember
the different things ive said so far that seem disconnected
see i'm sort of condemned to be disconnected and seem disjointed
and sort of stupid but really i can remember all the different
things ive said i'm sort of i dont know its almost a motif
thats a major preoccupation with me writing the way a
relationship is much the way my relationship with susan or
kimberly or my job more than my job altho it creates an
enormous number of hassles for me its really as bad as you would
imagine it would be to work for this mindless healthcare provider
bureaucracy and the reason why you dont want to work for it is
because its exploitive of you you are used your body is used
my writing and in that sense its an unsettling experience for
me to have to sit day after day in an office and be exploited
what really bothers me tho in addition the rub is the
attitude of the other people that somehow they could do whatever
it is they had to do during the day they could be managers
they could be bosses they could order people around let the
women answer the phones and criticize me for typing and say i
should let the secretaries do all the typing they could basically
serve this large corporation to the best of their ability to
serve it and to further its particular interests this was
actually a non profit corporation and then sort of go out at
lunch or on the side and on a personal level say to you
that really who they were at the job the way they behaved at
their job what they did all day was not them that the real
them the real person was somebody different who went home
at night and had liberal values was critical of what the company
was doing what the job was making them do that they really

werent what they did at the job they were somebody else that
the self that went home at night and watched television and
went to the movies went out dancing socialized that was the
real that was the real them and that sort of public self the
job self was really just a pretence that was necessary to secure
a decent living for their families for themselves or a
chance to have some kind of social power here again that
tremendously distorted notion of what a person is and its this
concept of a person which makes me question the whole sense
that we generally have of what a person is that you can imagine
that what you do socially that the acts you perform are not
you youre really this private thing that doesnt do anything this
sort of neutral gear but that whenever you put that gear into
operation when you put yourself into gear thats not you or
thats only you under conditions when you want to say well i like
that and so i'll say well that is me but when youre actually
doing things that have some effect that isnt you the real you
is this personal self and you even get this situation where you
have colleagues or professional work friends as opposed
to personal friends well he's a personal friend of mine this
person is simply a job friend this constant distortion this
constant avoidance that you are what you do that insofar as a
self is anything its how it acts in a social situation 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
what you'd like to do if if if if one day some time it
creates at the job place this tremendous vacancy of person this
tremendous lack of connection with anybody because if people
dont really think theyre being them all day long in their suits
and shaved faces and their very reduced mild language and
their reduced middle of the road opinions which they feel is
the safest way then theres no way to get a connection with
anybody everything is just so neutralized that you can work
in a place for years and years and really feel no no clicking
with anybody else no contact with anybody there you can go
out to lunch at the same time as if with ghosts there is
no escape from what you do and even if you feel you dont mean
what you do dont mean what you say dont mean the way you dress
dont mean the kind of business letter language you use dont
mean the division of labor you go along with or that you
institute dont mean the kind of attitudes you have competitively
toward your co-workers dismissingly to the secretaries that
one does mean these things whether one wants to or not that they
can be taken to be intentional to be you are you who you are
and they can be read as being you theres no escape from the
nine to five self by claiming that the five to midnight self or
the midnight to eight self is not really like this we become
selves just because we do different things and its a very hard
thing hard to accept that you are what youre forced to be when

you go to work and not many feel that they want to get behind the products of their job but we are behind them and i'm not saying well obviously munitions workers are not responsible for the war but its this avoidance of acknowledging the tracks of exploitation and of course for the ambitious for the managers and upper clerks well that conjuring trick of projecting a self outside of ones own actions is practically a way of life

3. Toilet Paper Consciousness.

"Should never say should."

You're not responsible. You may be white. You may be male. You may be heterosexual. You may be American. You may be working for the government. You may be President. But you are not responsible for anything but your own ass. And if you keep your ass clean--to the best of your ability--it's cool, it's groovy, it's okay.

4. "'Scientism' means science's belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we no longer understand science as one form of possible knowledge but rather must identify knowledge with science."

--Habermas

5. COMIC INTERLUDE

It is the imperialism of the bourgeois psyche that demands a reduction in the number of words able to assume the weight of depicting the world picture. Nouns, because of their proletariat pristineness as least distorted by the invasion of bourgeois consciousness into the language, as, in fact, the claim goes, repositories of the object residue of material existence, are the principal word type favored under this assumption. Viz: classism, ruling class, third world, exploitation, revisionist, capital, profit, worker, means of production, alienation. 'Verb'al forms emerge mainly in the application of this--uberhaupt--principle structure--'exploiting', 'profiting', and also, 'struggling*'. Individual actions are depicted as reified instantiations fixed by the intersection of a variety of theses. It is, then, our thesis that political writing becomes disoriented when it self-views itself as description and not discourse: as not being in the world but about the world. The hermeneutic indicts the scientistic with the charge that it has once again subverted the dialogic nature of human understanding with its behavioro-empiricism.

*'Struggle' retains the active principle and is thus undistorted by the noun fetishism that marks infantile forms of Marxist thought. It is the 'verb'al weight of 'struggle' as shift and

dynamic that is the essence of a re-hermeneuticized Marxism.

6. a fun is what i want to avoid the work of sitting down & m'um the cheezy. it's a hundred and forty five miles. you don't go for no reason. couldn't stop thinking about it. wanted to go to sleep so bad. under. stuff, thing. whats that gnawing, keeps gnawing. switch, fug, cumpf. afraid to get down to it. avoidances: movies. i think it's rather boring already dAncInG with LaRRy rIvers. markINGS: not done by a machine. hAnDcRaFt. so you get into a scene and you say to y'rself--this is it, is outside it, & y'guys all know whats going on. Daddy-0 you a hero. OHH. can't even get tired. what is it--dead--very wrinkled anyway. quiet...i cld hear the very 'utmost of m'heart. EEzzy. its fear that eats away the.... i'm totally afraid of what it will sound like. flotsom. a \$1 transcript. stomach sputters. noise, interference, & i can't work. TeAz THE MeEk. we're'iz'iz puliticks? poised: there is no overall plan.

7. In general I think I have since I was about 12 tended to subdue any sentimentality or strong emotional expressions of weakness, fear, etc., I might have expressed except in the cases of the women I was sexually relating to. At that time, I began to see how my parents demanded expressions of sentimentality, of commitment, of caring, of happy birthday anniversary chanukah, in a way that repelled me from any such expressions. In the family situation such expressions seemed oppressive, they served to lock me further to the jealousy/possessiveness/control by my family. I completely lost trust in the natural place for depending on other people--because I knew I did not want to depend on my parents. I extended my feelings about my parents to others--which could show up as my seeming detached, cynical, cold, intellectual, cool. I learned that this distance from others was actually a tool for social power by manipulation. I learned to think that my only security was in what I could do by myself, alone--i.e. get good marks, do well at work, write a good proposal, do good writing. My security was in what I personally had complete control over. (This is in general a "male class priveledge" since a woman--commonly on her own--with kids is forced to depend on others just for survival while I could basically say fuck everyone else I'm in it for myself.) In fact, this keeping personal control on one's life, keeping distance, really does get social power--it's harder to pin such people down, it's harder to get to them. Anyway, even realizing this I found it hard to find security in relating to other people instead of by being in personal control of my life. I find it scary to give up that other security (which is power) by really trusting/needing/relating to others. The thing is that in making relationships my security/home I do lose my own control--because there are definite limits to my power, I may have to do something I dont want to or that isn't in my interest, I may get hurt, I may be powerless to prevent someone

else from getting hurt. In other words, in relating to other people, I have to accept their needs/perceptions along with my own. Is this too abstract?

The thing is I still can feel my coldness/distance with other people. I find it hard to break that down. I become defensive (self-protective) or acerbic/witty (self-assertive). Some people get through that, see me through it. But I think it can be unnecessarily alienating. I don't think I give people comfort that much--that is, seem to them warm, nurturing, supportive. Don't, I sometimes feel, give people a feeling of getting "shelter from the storm/cold" but rather can be the cold that people seek the shelter from. I have a technique of bathing people in that cold, a puritan conviction that people should know the world is hard, and they should face it strong and stern. (& what happens to even good politics expressed this way?) And people should know that, but only sometimes can I transform that realization, go beyond it, and show that one shares that hardness with others, who care. That I am one of them. One of us.

8. "There are those who worship loneliness--I'm not one of them; I've paid the price of solitude but at least I'm out of debt." A precursor here: the worship of loneliness, of being alone, as a way of being whole in the world that demands personal fragmentation as the price for fitting into society--the cult of Thoreau, Kierkegaard, etc, in the best and worst sense. So here the rejection, the realization that to worship being alone condemns one to isolation. But but, the reward of solitude is yet to be out of debt; to owe no one anything, the self made man, on your own and in control--the delusion of security in isolation, if you keep yr ass clean kid you'll be okay, look out for yrself, yr numero primo. And so the ravages of the world have forced us to be warriors, ravaged we take control of our individual lives fighting for the warmth of inside we've had to give up. "Come in she said I'll give you shelter from the storm." She she she, waiting: ready to comfort, to nurture, to support our shipwrecked egos. And so we take the comfort, but without transforming ourselves--she simply comforts, offers shelter, but we remain in the world of "steel eyed death" (a steeley idea that) --exchange no words "between us". There is "little risk involved" because we have held fast to our isolation, simply allowed it to be warmed. "Come in she said I'll give you shelter from the storm." But there can be no shelter each for the other together. Without that there will always be "a wall between us; then the steeley idea triumphs: "nothing really matters, it's doom alone that counts". And yet and yet: "love is so simple, to quote a phrase, you've known it all the time I'm learning it these days"--so simple and yet so seeming sentimental to say, as if sentimentality was the curse that prevented us from knowing how simple love is in our repulsion to its being demanded by our families/country/society at the price of self-abnegation. And so

in our flight from the oppressive obligations of sentimentality, of polite hellos and demanded, guilt ridden, love, in our retreat into the isolation and security of personal control, needing no one, we lost our native sense that love is so simple, to quote a phrase, that we are each for each other shelter from the storm, if we are not afraid to come in, or take another into where we are. But still all this while the secret has been known ("you've known it all the time") if only we had "spoken words between us", had taken that "risk". The words sound sentimental--I love you I miss you it hurts me so bad with a pain that stops and starts--words of separation, of closeness, of hurt, of joy--we choke on them: there is no depth here, no unique sensibility: everyone says them. But still the curse can be broken by their utterance. "I can change I swear." "It's the price I have to pay." The commitment is to "cross the line" from the "foreign countries" that each of us inhabit. Someday someday someday. --We're big boys all the way.

9. "It's like spelling. You know that whole sense that spelling things right in English is really sort of an aristocratic notion. You could tell the educated few by the fact that they spelled the same. Which I'm told is a lot of their system of education... because in Shakespeare's time he spelled his own name a lot of different ways, not to mention other words. You know, it was really like a body of material that would identify you as one of the educated people. Think of all the time we've spent in school spelling things right. Sort of a tremendous waste of time." --Coolidge

10. Ethics & aesthetics become increasingly "out there". Dress & syntax & right behavior are copied from presented models, a process of emulation rather than interpretation. Clerks & secretaries spend their time typing neatly, removing idiosyncracies from the language & presiding over a tan neutrality--"unobtrusive" --with the smoothness of flow allowed by explanatory transition.

Topic sentence. However; but; as a result. Blah, blah, blah. It follows from this. Concluding sentence.

Meaning, coherence, truth projected "out there" as something we know not for ourselves but as taught to us. (One day, maybe, we will be experts.)

It goes like this. "Clear writing is the best picture of clear thinking." Providing a clear view. (An imperial clarity for an imperial world.) An official version of reality, in which ethics is transformed into moral code & aesthetics into clean shaving, is labelled the public reality & we learn this as we would a new language. (Orthography & expository clarity are just other words

for diction & etiquette.)

Imperial reality has as its essential claim not so much that it is a version of reality but that it is the version, i.e., (imperially) clear. That the composition of reality is suprapersonal: the mistakes & plain takes of a person are not an essential part of reality's composition. Standardized spelling, layout, & punctuation enter into a world of standardization--clocks & the orbit of the moon & the speed of light. A social science epistemologically self-conceived on the model of the natural sciences becomes possible & grammar becomes a social science. Language is thus removed from the participatory control of its users & delivered into the hands of the state. Text is no longer regarded as requiring interpretation: rules for appropriate spelling & syntax are determined by consultation with generalized codes of grammar removed from their contextualized source in a text. (The Hebrew handwritten text required interpretation not only in respect to the meaning of its ethical & ritual tenets but even for the placement of vowels.) Decontextualized codification of the rules of language enforces a view that language operates on principles apart from its usage. These rules are not "picked up" but taught. Failure to produce appropriate language is regarded not as misperception but as error. The understanding begins to be lost that we are each involved in the constitution of language--that our actions reconstitute--change--reality.

It's a question of who controls reality. Is reality "out there" (as scientism tells us) or rather an interaction with us, in which our actions shape its constitution? Prescribed rules of grammar & spelling make language seem outside of our control. & a language, even only seemingly, wrested from our control is a world taken from us--a world in which language becomes a tool for the description of the world, words mere instrumentalities for representing this world. This is reflected by the historical movement toward uniform spelling and grammar, with an ideology that emphasizes non-idiosyncratic, smooth transition, elimination of awkwardness, &c, --anything that might concentrate attention on the language itself. For instance, in contrast to, say, Sterne's work, where the look & texture--the opacity--of the text is everywhere present, a neutral, transparent prose style has developed in certain recent novels where the words seem meant to be looked through--to the depicted world beyond the page. Likewise, in current middle of the road poetry, we see the elimination of overt rhyme & alliteration, with metric forms retained primarily for their capacity to officialize as "poetry". (That older texts are closer to a handwritten & oral tradition is partial explanation for this, but having machines for uniform printing necessitates neither a uniform writing nor the projection of a suprapersonal world.)

Much of the spirit of modernism has been involved in the reassertion

of the value of what has come to be fantasized as subjectivity. Faced with an imperial reality, "subjectivity" is first defined as "mere idiosyncrasy", that residue of perception that is to be discounted, the fumbling clouds of vision that are to be dissolved by learning. But in just this is the ultimate subjectivity of a people: stripping us of our source of power in our humanness by denying the validity of our power over language, over the constitution of our world. The myth of subjectivity & its denigration as mere idiosyncrasy--impediments to be overcome--diffuses the inherent power in the commonness of our alienation: that rather than being something that separates us, alienation is the source of our commonness. I take it that this is why Marx saw as inevitable that a proletariat conscious of its alienation would be able to develop human relations--solidarity--which would be stronger than any other human power.

The poetic response to the imposition of an imperial reality has been to define subjectivity, by a kind of Nietzschean turn around, not as 'mere' but as exalted. The image of the poet as loner & romantic continues to condition this response. An unconscious strategy of contrariety develops--that the official manners & forms are corrupt & distorted & only the private & individual is real. Beat--to abstract & project a stance, acknowledging the injury this does to the actual poetry--is an obvious example, as is Surrealism, itself & as an influence. These two modes--for the moment letting them stand for a much wider variety of literary response--are grounded in reaction. Beat poetry, as such, could go no further than the dramatization of alienation; the genesis of much of its considerable & indispensable formal innovation is (quite justifiably) *épaté la bourgeoisie*. (The rhapsodic other side was, at the least, pastoral romanticism; at its best it put off the theatre of vision for the language of presence.) Likewise, Surrealism, in itself, could do little more than theatricalize our alienation from official reality, since it is completely rooted in bourgeois spatio-temporal perception: it simply distorts it. Both Beat & Surrealism are essentially poetries of gesture, viz: reality is different from our schooled conceptions of it, more fantastic, more ----- . In these modes, to use Stanley Cavell's phrases, the moment is not grounded but etherialized: alienation is not defeated but only landscaped.* What is needed, now, is not the further dramatization of far-outness but the presence of far-inness. These modes have shown a way. Surrealism & Beat broke open syntax & placement of words on the page, they widened the range of content & vocabulary, they allowed shape & texture & hover of consciousness to become more important than description. Unfortunately, much current poetry goes no further, fixated on the idea of establishing the value of the interior world of feeling, irrational (whimsical) connections, social taboos, the personal life--over & against "official" reality.** As if we didn't already know that "bad grammar" can speak more truthfully than correct grammar, that learning & expertise don't really

impart knowledge, that private fantasies don't coincide with public propriety. It's not that we don't need to hear these things again & again, anymore than that that is the objection to socialist realism, but that there is so much more we can do than simply underline the fact--& describe the conditions--of our alienation, of the loss of the world's presence to us. (As if it were enough to simply mourn & not organize.) The promise of the return of the world can (& has always been) fulfilled by poetry. Even before the process of class struggle is complete. Poetry, centered on the condition of its wordness--words of a language not out there but in here, language the place of our commonness--is a momentary restoration of ourselves to ourselves.

*Likewise, this is true of the avant-gardism & conceptualism, taken for themselves as a stance, which pervades much of the seventies art scene.

**This helps to explain the almost ideological anti-intellectualism --"dumbness"--that runs through some poetry circles.

11. "At home, one does not speak so that people will understand but because people understand." --Fuchs

12. & obviously we're committed to political struggle, to the necessity of changing current capital distribution, to making the factories & the schools & the hospitals cooperatives, to finding a democracy that allows for the participatory authority of each one to the extent of the responsibility we place on her or him. there are no prefixed means & the answer is in us struggling & discussing & deciding as groups & acting. & it troubles--isn't this incessant writing & questioning writing a diversion? isn't the business...? well, but language is our business, fully as much as 'acting'. anyway, how do you presuppose to separate out the deed & the reflection? you might say we've got dual responsibilities, & one doesn't take us off the hook of the other. writing, by itself, does not further class struggle. "it is a fertilizer not a tool." pound's politics don't in any way diminish the power & significance of his writing. nor do they limit the aesthetical/political value of the work. but that in no way absolves the man from his own political responsibilities. social credit--to be a little silly & talk about measuring it--is really a multiplication of the "dual" responsibilities. & a zero multiplied by even an astronomical figure doesn't get you very far. i'm not saying the "private" literary activity is separable from the "public" conduct. i'm saying a person's got a variety of responsibilities (if to say 'dual' then only when speaking of a particular conflict)--& it's not okay to be a bully just because you're wearing a pretty

dress. there's no end to responsibilities. & poetry, well, it's in a sense an additional responsibility--as a man or a woman you'd not lose 'credit' for not doing it. it's not that aesthetic consciousness & political consciousness are essentially different, quite the opposite, but really this is the goal: reunification--in practice--of what we now face as multiple demands. the power of poetry is, indeed, to bridge this gap--for a moment--by providing instances of actualization. it is a glimpse. but, sadly, for us, now, no maker is able to reap the legitimate rewards of his or her labor. & so our responsibilities remain multiple & we are called on to fulfill all of them.

13. We imagine there is a gap between the world of our private phantasies & the possibilities of meaningful action. & so it becomes easy to talk & talk on what is lacking, to discourse on end, & yet feel impotent. 'What's to do.' But this gap is the measure not so much of our desires or depression or impotence but of ourselves. It has been the continual failure of Marxist aesthetics to insist that this gap is simply another illusory part of our commodity lives. It is at the root of our collectivity.

14. The essential aspect of writing centered on its language is its possibilities for relationship, viz, it is the body of 'us'ness, in which we are, the ground of our commonness.

Language is commonness in being, through which we see & make sense of & value. Its exploration is the exploration of the human common ground. The move from purely descriptive, outward directive, writing toward writing centered on its wordness, its physicality, its haecceity (thatness) is, in its impulse, an investigation of human self sameness, of the place of our connection: in the world, in the word, in ourselves.

15. The situation, the relations, the conditions under which. The task of unchaining & setting up. They hankered to & the people proclaimed an abbreviated stroke no more than a ruffling of the surface. An entire people: that by means of a revolution had imparted itself a power of motion suddenly finds itself back to the old dates the old names a dim burning lamp fastened to the head behind a long whip. Men & things seem set in sparkling brilliants till a pale casts over. The riddle is not solved by turns of speech, the fixed idea of making gold, which in the press fall victim to the courts & even more equivocal figures. An array of passwords maintained against a wider one. Placards are posted on all street corners. The priests appear & wail about the necessity of moral reform. A drive against the schoolteachers. (Even bourgeois liberalism is declared socialistic.) Its gladiators find their ideals wholly absorbed in products & Caesar

himself is watching over. Antediluvian colossi disappear into sober mouthpieces with suitable up to date manners knocking feudal manners like someone who has just learned a new language always translating back into the first. "Property, family, religion, order." The bureaucracy is well gallooned & well fed. The individual turns in stupified seclusion & the peasants dwell in hovels. A bunch of blokes push their way forward. --When the real aim is achieved & society is accomplished. As when we find our way in it without thinking in terms of the old. The event itself appears like a bolt from the blue.

Other Publications
P. O. Box 415
Kenmore Station
Boston, Mass.



Alan Davies
33 St. Marks Place
N.Y. N.Y. 10003