

Design Elements in *Nude Formalism* and *Fool's Gold*

Susan Bee

Charles Bernstein and I have worked on several books collaboratively as well as many books separately. Today I'll be focusing on two of the books we've worked on together — *The Nude Formalism* from 1989 and *Fool's Gold*, which we worked on in 1990 and which was published in 1991. I won't be discussing *The Occurrence of Tune*, another collaboration from 1981, which involved altered photographs by me with a full-length poem by Charles.

The Nude Formalism was created as part of a series of 20-page offset books published by Sun & Moon Press in Los Angeles, which is mostly a poetry and fiction press. The book is very small — 5 by 7½ inches. In it I've set a series of Charles's individual poems in different type styles including advertising display fonts, text fonts, decorative fonts, and various types of ornamental borders, mostly clip art. This book was not done by computer. This was pre-computer. It was pasted up by hand. The idea of the book was to frame

Fragments from the Seventeenth Manifesto of Nude Formalism

by Hermes Hermeneutic

Away with the study of flotation!

Articulation is more than an manner of gritting the pendulum!

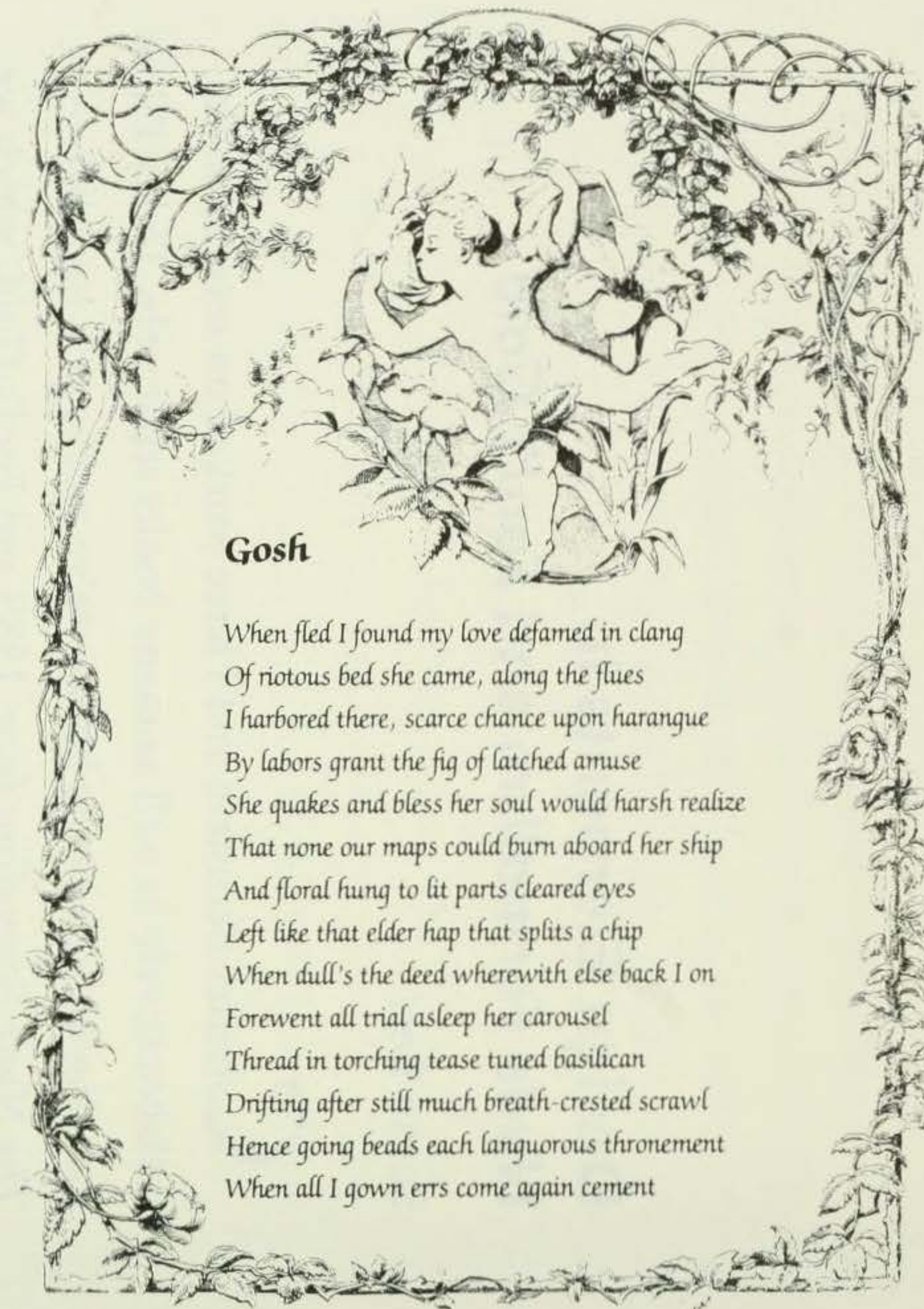
Down with all authentic formulations of these theses! Down with
Adolescent Sublime! Down with Abstract Confessionalism! Down
with Empathic Symbolism! Down with Symbolic Empathism!

All good poetry is the forced constriction of feelings of
powerlessness.

Poetry is not the erasure of personality but a caprice of personality.
But of course only those who have caprices will know what it means
to want to pursue them.

Poetry has as its lower limit insincerity and its upper limit
dematerialization.

Use absolutely no word that contributes to the direct sense of a thing
seen.



Gosh

When fled I found my love defamed in clang
Of riotous bed she came, along the flues
I harbored there, scarce chance upon harangue
By labors grant the fig of latched amuse
She quakes and bless her soul would harsh realize
That none our maps could burn aboard her ship
And floral hung to lit parts cleared eyes
Left like that elder hap that splits a chip
When dull's the deed wherewith else back I on
Forewent all trial asleep her carousel
Thread in torching tease tuned basilican
Drifting after still much breath-crested scrawl
Hence going beads each languorous thronement
When all I gown errs come again cement

each poem differently and to play with the formal elements involved.

The first slide shows the format of the book. Bernstein: This is the front title page. Bee: The scale is huge compared to the book. These are the epigraphs from the first page. Maybe the author will tell us what he did. This one is called “Fragments from the Seventeenth Manifesto of Nude Formalism.” Bernstein: And I’ll read this; it’s by Hermes Hermeneutic.

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Bee: O.K., so that was the manifesto. It is set in a bold display type and sets the note of the book. On the next page the poem is set in a decorative “Gosh” cursive type and is framed by an ornamental romantic border. The poem is a

Emma:

Man with no clothes trapped
in a zoo with a bird
trapped in a zoo with no
clothes. A fire engine hurt
the man's head in the
engine.

A wave broke on the man's head.

Red red

wave with circle, mirror, little
green purple washing face.

And also:

Two eyes with sunglasses. A big
circle with a belly and two knees
and two feet with two lines with
feet on the bottom. And a little
little
tiny circle
and those are the ears.
With a nose.

sonnet that plays in a humorous way with the constraints of the poetic form, including bizarre rhymes such as “thronement” and “cement” and “clang” and “harangue.” The archaic, lyric, and the humorous quality of the poem is echoed further by the page layout of the poem.

The next two page spread also involves nineteenth century engravings. The title of the poem is “A Soul, Foiled, Abjured.” I chose a picture of souls going up to heaven on the left, as well as an angel for the text. It’s in a kind of a wedding invitation font which seems to suit the poem.

Bee: The poem titled “The Cost of Doing Business” is surrounded by two ghoulish, medieval creatures — one holding a stick and the other a bag of coins. I didn’t want my designs to be too literal or just illustrative of the poems, but rather to form a counterpoint and setting for the texts. The title, which is a contemporary vernacular phrase, is set in a gothic type. The illustrations suggest a darker undercurrent that runs through the poem and also suggests the yoking of older forms of iconography with extremely contemporary ones which is at the heart of this particular project.

In the center page of *The Nude Formalism* is an inset illustration of a book, opened to its center which forms the border for these poems.

Most poetry books are set in neutral type — so as not to call attention to the graphic elements of the work. In this book, in contrast, we wanted to create a continuing dialogue between the typefaces and the poems. This poem is a villanelle



Water Poem

The lakefront view wets
its sea, sanded in beached
out acquiescence; a continueless
(continentless) wading
(blinking)
cast against blatant
horizon on a blue
bloat buoyed by wind and
surf's ripple (forbearance
among) pool-dry thirst:
drowning our tears in liquid
water.



— a highly structured French form — with the unlikely title of “Ding Dong You’re Wrong.” It’s set in an advertising display font which like the content of the poem marks a sharp contrast from the pastoral origins of this poetic form.

Bernstein: I recently worked extensively with composer Ben Yarmolinsky writing librettos for music theater pieces or operas. It seemed to me in this project especially, as well as others that I have done with Susan, that the relation of the poems to the books is one of setting, much in the way in which Yarmolinsky will set a libretto to music syllable by syllable. I see the typographic and book process as a way of setting the poems. I don’t see the poems as existing independently from the setting and so the typography gives the poems a visual meaning that doesn’t exist otherwise. This is “Ding Dong You’re Wrong” and I dedicated it to President Clinton’s rousing visit to the Twin Cities yesterday [April 8, 1994].

President Kennedy’s brain is missing!
He dreamed that he was walking in the fields
Mistakes took for purpose, senses steaming

If not IRT, BMT’s moving,
By which to say your plate is sealed
President Kennedy’s brain is missing!
As if by chance I fell to stammering
Kept lush about my deck, nor grudged me wields
Mistakes took for purpose, senses streaming.

It won’t break, it’s not yet even speaking
In one rude clatter done had broke his heel
President Kennedy’s brain is missing!

Exulting, trembling, raging, fainting

As slides become slips, necromantic squeals
Mistakes took for purpose, senses steaming

Remote still exaction's circus straining
Abbie Hoffman's pain was masked by shields
President Kennedy's brain is missing!
Mistakes took for purpose, senses streaming

Bee: The following poem, "Horses, Necktie, and Water Fountains," is written in a simple, childlike language and is surrounded by an extremely elaborate narrative border with many characters, which alludes to some of the possibilities inherent in the poem.

In the next page an astronomer looks through a telescope to a point outside of the book's margins — while the poem talks of "No way" and "My mind is like a steel trap — once something gets in/It never gets out." The border, however, suggests a possible escape from the page.

"Thrush" is a sestina — a highly constricted French form — often thought of as somewhat frivolous. Here it's set in a decorative script.

The next spread involves more of a Surrealist motif, with an opposition between the poem, "Freud's Butcher" and a tiny bird on the hand.

"Water Poem" has a decorative initial cap with a playful sprite atop it. The poem itself alludes to the ever-present water imagery in the suburban landscape poems of *The New Yorker*. This is all part of the same book, obviously, although it seems like a totally diverse style.

On the following page, the text "Mother, please, I'd

rather do it myself,” a line taken from an aspirin ad of the 70s, is framed on a memorial stone and flanked by two women and two babies. Here’s an example where the text alone has many possible interpretations but this setting gives a very specific reading not foregrounded in the original.

Bernstein: In the original ad the line was said like this: “Mother, please, I’d rather do it **myself**; I’m suffering from tension . . .”

Bee: In the final image from the book, a suited gentleman sprints over the text to vault to the end of the book while staying within the poem’s borders.

I’m just going to show one other book that we did together. *Fool’s Gold* from Chax Press was done for Charles Alexander in Tucson during a Chax Press Residency in January 1990. In it, a multitude of short texts by Charles Bernstein are set upon and played with by me. This book is in an accordion, long, fold-out format in two colors, black and gold, done on a letterpress. The visual elements are ink and brush drawings and an arrangement of assorted clip art and collage elements. The texts are set in various type sizes and a variety of shapes to complement the visual elements.

This first four pages of the fold-out involve a scissors and a bird as primary elements. One of the lines set is “I’m as nervous as a bear at a square dance,” and another is “If you step out a door & there’s no floor you may fall & never hit bottom.”

Bernstein: Below a crossword puzzle it says “The fact is also a figure of speech as in he cuts quite a figure, or you can

figure it out, but I'm getting more dumplings."

The text on the left is like a children's-type text:

Once there was a pobble who had no toes & he had no
name too & he was lying down on a big rock & then
he saw reindeer & then he saw so much he
couldn't believe it. & this is what he saw. He
saw a wizard too. & he saw an astronaut.
& then he saw a policeman who came
by to greet him. & then what he did
was he went back to his office &
then what he did is. & yester-
day the last day the police-
man said he found a name
that was "flower cloud."
& then what he did
yesterday he found
some toes to
wear.

The poem, "Trill" is printed sideways:

My voice
which last lost
loses lightness.
Lovely to see you
reeling by the
lane you never
made — lovely
to risk
reticence, reverence
recircuit resources
in the wrapped
apricoterics, rusted
edges, succeeding
song.

Bee: The next four pages feature a flying witch, a hand
tossing a ball, a leaf, and some abstract, brush-drawn

elements. I conceived of this book as I would a painting with compositions composed of many elements with the page serving as a blank canvas. Some lines are “let go of your tongue” and “O! O! I’m in an O! tree” — next to the leaf and “You took the mouth right out of my words.” The design is meant to complement and emphasize the whimsical humor and exclamatory character of the texts. Thus, the different type styles create a visual counterpoint to the collaged and drawn elements. The words floating, going sideways, and set at right angles, emphasize the nonlinearity of the texts — something particularly unexpected in contrast to the ways in which most poetic texts are organized, in which even the most disparate elements are brought into more uniform visual alignment.

This is the transition between the middle and the end of the book — the last four panels. A prominent line from this section is “Efficiency without reason is desperation.” Above this line a couple is boating. Below at the bottom of the page it says in gothic script, “My memory is short, but my anxiety is capacious.” I think this sums up much of the feeling of this book.

After the initial sketch was completed, and when it came time to print this book, many additional design decisions were made by the printers, Charles Alexander and Lisa Bowden. So, ultimately, this book became a four-way collaboration. I’m very grateful to them for helping us make this book.