EXCHANGE

Pure Products

Editors' note: "Pure Products" is the first of a series of exchanges in which we are bringing poets of different aesthetics together to discuss new books. The format is as follows: each poet chooses a book he or she can wholeheartedly support and writes an eight-hundred-word review of it; the exchanges follow the completed reviews, and the poet who has chosen the book under discussion gets the last word.

Girly Man, by Charles Bernstein.
The University of Chicago Press. $24.00.

ANGE MLINKO:
The irony of *Girly Man* isn't the one depicted in the cover art: bespectacled intellectual as King Kong, curvy Fay Wray in his hand. The irony isn't in the backstory: Arnold Schwarzenegger's deprecation of Democrats, in 2004, as "girly men," which Bernstein embraces in a chant dedicated to his son:

> So be a girly man
> & sing this gurly song
> Sissies & proud
> That we would never lie our way to war.

No, the irony is that Charles Bernstein, founding member of the language poets and author of at least thirty books, is one of the least girly poets in English. He can bench press A.J. Ayer.

Clichés, idioms, ad slogans, municipal signs: they are for Bernstein, a lifelong Manhattanite, what landscape and weather are for the rest of us. "I think language, along with outer space, is the last wilderness, the last frontier — our collective inner space," he has written. Natural too are vinyl tubing, mylar, electric blinker makers, test tubes, and Java applets. And as a poet in a city of eight million souls, all denizens of a street grid whose visual chastity inspires its carnal opposite, he populates his work with anaphoric abandon:

> A Filipino eating a potato
> A Mexican boy putting on shoes

A Hindu hiding in igloo
A fat girl in blue blouse
—From *In Particular*

Refracting his place and time—just before September 11 and through the Afghanistan and Iraq wars—*Girly Man* is, by any measure, autobiographical work. But it is an account of relations mediated largely through social, not private, language. There are nursery rhymes for his daughter, in-jokes for his colleagues, works commissioned by artists and composers. For each section of the book, and for many individual poems, Bernstein includes endnotes detailing the circumstances of its creation and dedication. Poems come from somewhere, he seems to be saying, and it's not a Rilkean angel or a Spicerian Martian.

Indeed, if an angel appears in *Girly Man*, or an anima, or an animal, it merely highlights its own conventionality, as in a pastiche of song lyrics: "Don't you know I've missed you so/Wherever angels go/I will take you there to glow." And in a lighthearted twist on the "dead animal poem"—investigating the semantics of shooting a horse—"Language, Truth, and Logic" performs a little thought-experiment on the philosophical distinction between accident and fact, which determines the truth or falsity of a statement. Bernstein implicitly ridicules Ayer's assertion that moral judgments have no meaning.

You
know you acted wrongly
in stealing. Stealing

money is wrong.

This, to Ayer, would have about as much truth value as a unicorn, and it's funny to watch Bernstein simultaneously turn a philosophical unicorn and a poetic dead horse into a—hang onto your hats—yes, veiled commentary on truth, lies, and the Bush administration. It's one of my favorite jokes in the book, next to the one that plays on capris and caprice.

"Marriage on rocks.—Nothing like Coke./.../War toll tops 100,000.—Get your mind off it, switch to reality TV": TV lurks in the backstory of the backstory of *Girly Man*—Schwarzenegger borrowed the phrase from the *Saturday Night Live* skit "Pumping Up with Hans & Franz" — as well as in the prose dispatches from September 11 called "Some of These Daze," and also in the tour de force, "Slap Me Five, Cleo, Mark's History." This poem, commissioned by the University of Rochester Press, delivers an ekphrasis on Bernard Duvivier's 1789 painting, *Cleopatra*. But perhaps that's too lofty a word for what Bernstein does here, for not only does he impersonate the character Michael Anthony from the fifties television drama *The Millionaire*, he also makes him a descendant of the royal corpse in the painting. A ludicrous lecture / monologue follows, studded with factitious anecdotes about John Beresford Tipton (the millionaire in *The Millionaire*) and Marie Antoinette. "Slap Me Five, Cleo ... " is a riposte to Cleopatra's upraised hand as she is seized by a Roman guard. A background figure seems to have "Excedrin headache #49." Snippets of art historical and political commentary breeze real questions past the bizarrerie, but it is all orchestrated into a performance designed to make our heads explode — both in the Emily Dickinson and the Looney Toons sense. Bernstein famously declared, "There's more innovation and more cultural acumen in any episode of *Ren and Stimpy* than in any of the books of our last trio of (American) poet laureates." The man who upped the ante tips his hand.

By all accounts, Bernstein the teacher and reader is a riveting performer. Not for nothing did he title a book of essays *Close Listening*, against the prejudice for the page. It may be that *Girly Man* is a score best performed "in front of a live audience," as they used to say in sitcoms. And yet, the book is rewarding precisely in the ways in which poetry is *not* mere entertainment, but a sustained interrogation of cultural values. Bernstein would be an ideal public intellectual if, in American public discourse, poets were not indefinitely benched.

DAVID YEZZI:

I wish I liked *Girly Man* as much as I like Ange Mlinko's crisp, smart review of it. Cracking jokes is a worthy goal in a poem, but they should at least be funny; instead Bernstein prefers to *teach* us. (I'd prefer to get the notes from a classmate.)

His rant on "accessible" poetry, "Thank You for Saying Thank You," is so ironic it curdles:

This
poem, like all
good poems, tells
a story in a direct
style that never
leaves the reader
guessing.

Well, that's not anyone's idea of a poem, so chalk up an easy win for Bernstein and his aesthetic. "This poem/has no intellectual/pretensions," he jibes, yet look what can result when one does—shrill self-satisfaction.

I'm impressed that Bernstein could write a poem on 9/11, what with so many zombie-like people streaming uptown. His prosy notebook-style entries are touching, but what Bernstein most wants to talk about is politics. Take "A Poem Is Not a Weapon," which reads in its bracketed entirety: "[THIS POEM REMOVED FOR INSPECTION AND VERIFICATION.]" Having inspected the poem, I am unable to verify that it is one. That's not because all kinds of things can't be poems, they just shouldn't be this banal. *What, you're unhappy with the Iraq war?* Even William F. Buckley is unhappy with the war. Bernstein should stick to being obscure. When he's not, he's so painfully obvious.

If Bernstein's goal is to write, as Mlinko suggests, "a sustained interrogation of cultural values," then perhaps he has done it. After all, it's no great trick to ask the questions. But must all of his questions be so self-conscious? So many of his poems, when they are not being downright silly, are choked off by the weight of his "concerns."

ANGE MLINKO:

Charmed, I'm sure! But this reminds me a bit of the brouhaha over whether Stephen Colbert was "funny" at the White House correspondents dinner. Satire is nothing if not a way of revealing position, an especially unpleasant affair if you didn't think you belonged on the map in the first place. Hence all the journalists who were surprised to find Colbert so unfunny.

Likewise, Yezzi thinks that Bernstein is "painfully obvious," whereas someone else, say from the Buffalo Poetics List or the Poetry Project, might be surprised to read "give evil nothing to oppose/and it will crash the program." Bernstein, a humanist! (You didn't know we are supposed to be evolving away from humanism, did you?)

I won't try to recap Ron Silliman's (Google-able) close reading of the subtleties at work in "Thank You for Saying Thank You," which is not an ironic poem; it is a conceptual poem about the deceptiveness of face value. It too hinges on a consideration of context and position: Who is speaking? How can you tell what's ironic, what's authentic? Given this, Yezzi fails the task the poem set for him. By not asking "How should I read this poem?" he reveals his position. That is to say, he doesn't believe the question "How to read?" has more than one answer.

The poems Yezzi points to are didactic, but others are beautiful: "Death Fugue (Echo)," "The Beauty of Useless Things: A Kantian Tale." Bernstein is a professor. I think it's wholly appropriate that he wear the mantle in his poetry (he does more than wear the mantle; he simultaneously makes a shtick of it and *means it*). How much more refreshing than those scads of poets who teach and so obviously, so desperately, wish they didn't.

DAVID YEZZI:

Now I'm confused. Mlinko says that "Thank You for Saying Thank You" is not ironic, then refers readers to Ron Silliman's blogpost, in which he explains that the poem is... um, ironic. "When does the reader 'know' that at some level this plainspoken text is ironic"? he asks. If Bernstein's name were written at the top, he continues, would the poem become ironic "even before getting into the text?"

If I answer "yes," does that position me further? And isn't "positioning," as Mlinko suggests, part of what the poem is up to — separating the postmodern sheep from the traditionalist goats? Silliman states that one of the "true," i.e. non-ironic, lines in the poem is the opener: "This is a totally/ accessible poem." Does having to wade through 1,200 words of blog-gloss make it so? Do two ironies make an earnest?

Let me position myself some more, with a quick anecdote. An Ivy League professor (not a colleague of Bernstein's at U. Penn, I should add) once explained with a twinkle in his eye that the critic Helen Vendler was OK, if you liked "the beauty people." His point was that aesthetic beauty was old hat. If "Thank You for Saying Thank You" is a "conceptual poem," then, as with so much conceptual art, I find it sacrifices aesthetic pleasure to cerebration. It's not the same as thinking in poems; it's more like thinking outside of poems: no *things* but in *ideas*.

"Death Fugue (Echo)" may be beautiful to many. I will not doubt it, though I will point out that the footnoted explication is longer than the poem itself. Bernstein's cut-and-paste of two lines from Paul Celan's masterpiece "Todesfuge" in this "response" to Marjorie Perloff underscores the wanness of his concepts beside a work of genius.

ANGE MLINKO:

I'm confused too — I thought I was one of the "beauty people." I also exalt masterpieces, though excessive veneration leads to a house cluttered with Metropolitan Museum gift shop tchotchkes.

Nobody should experience anything they don't need to; if they don't need a poetry of ideas, bully for them. But even "aesthetic pleasure" has left a fossil record. Every aesthetic decision is a wager. It's generally a poor bet not to look forward.

Or even sideways. I admit to wondering what Yezzi makes of the city where he lives, the Manhattan that once spawned Modernism and now spawns Google and hedge funds, where law professors and philosophers and actors and designers angle fiercely for jobs and apartments even though they won't live nearly as well as they could elsewhere. Why? Because it is, as Rem Koolhaas called it, "a Galapagos Island of new technologies." How is it then that we are at loggerheads over one of its pure products, *Girly Man*?

Field Knowledge, by Morri Creech.
The Waywiser Press. $15.95.

DAVID YEZZI:

Thomas Hardy tried "to write on the old themes in the old styles" but to do it a little better than those who went before him. Poor Hardy, a great poet, but hopelessly uncool. Contemporary traditional verse tends to wobble along like Samuel Johnson's dog on hind legs: one is surprised to find it done at all. Very occasionally, a young poet demonstrates some life in those old bones. Rooted in the past but grown in the present, Morri Creech's second collection mingles linguistic sweetness with a bone-dry thematic melancholy. Frost said it of Edwin Arlington Robinson, but the same holds for Creech: he is "content with the old-fashioned way to be new."

Creech is the inaugural winner of the Anthony Hecht Prize, and his work recalls Hecht's sonorous rhetoric and baroque mastery, while remaining soundly itself and winningly up-to-date:

> Amid such dense detail
> it's easy to miss the moment when Atropos
> bends close with her shears
> to cut the taut threads, until their tensions fail
> and time's grip turns loose;
>
> easy, in Eden's commerce of sunlight,
> wild fruit and stippled wings,
> to miss the cormorant bristling on the bough.
> So once a man lost sight,
> near Pompeii, of history's beginnings,
> caught in some lavish *now*
>
> of appetite — the flush of sex, the steam
> rising from his bathwater —
> in all that languor failing to note the wind
> stir the trickled streams
> along his flanks, the mountain sound its thunder,
> or those first warm snows descend.
>
> — From *World Enough*

Those flakelike ashes condense the poem's theme: that the wages of a careless sensualism is death. Creech's poems, like the above *vanitas*, regularly take on poetry's biggest theme of all: saints die, sensualists die, women are brutally murdered, skeletons in ossuaries are tricked out like the living, a black man in the South is shot in the face, Job's sons and daughters are stripped from him. As Creech warns in "Windwriting," "The wind is writing down a few more names." This is rather morbid stuff for a thirtysomething poet, but that may just be an occupational hazard he shares with the likes of Hecht and Yeats and Dickinson and Hardy and ... gosh, it's a long list.

"The Canto of Ulysses" imagines the Italian chemist and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi rereading *The Divine Comedy* in his apartment in Turin. Set two months before Levi's suicide, the poem is a model of affecting understatement, its tone, imagery, and allusiveness all conspiring to foreshadow Levi's tragic end. Creech's careful layering of literary reference (the title nods to a short but resonant chapter from Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*) ups the poem's emotional torque:

> His own canticle of pain
>
> is, after all, finished. The past is nothing new.
> And the present breaks over him like the dream
> of firelight, plush eiderdown, and hot stew
>
> a prisoner will sometimes startle from
> who has lost hope of retuning to the world,
> blowing upon his hands the pluming steam
>
> of breath, in which a few snowflakes are whirled.
> Or, nodding above the passage where Ulysses
> tells how the second journey ended — hurled
>
> by a *fierce squall,* till *the sea closed over us.*

At one particularly haunting point in the poem, shades whisper — or perhaps beckon — on the stairs (down which, though Creech doesn't say it, Levi will later end his life). By awakening the circle of reference — from Levi to Dante, Dante to Homer, and back to Levi — Creech allows allusion to perform much of the heavy lifting in the poem. In touching the past, Creech affirms poetry's "lavish *now*."

Creech shares a number of Hecht's more sober concerns (the Holocaust is one), but also, I'm delighted to say, Hecht's scabrous wit and stiletto humor. "His Coy Mistress" treats Andrew Marvell to a shellacking, much the way Hecht tweaks Matthew Arnold in "The Dover Bitch." Creech's canny lass responds to Marvell's seductions this way:

> So, now that the better portion of the night
> has packed its moonlit props in and gone home,
> before the morning dew lies flushed and plumb
> tuckered out where it settles on the lawn,
> scrawl your number on a matchbook lid —
> I'll ring you later. Time will find us out

in any case, my Dear. And since the sun's
not likely to stand still, I'd better run.

That "time will find us out" nags at Creech (and powerfully at the reader) even in his more slapstick moments: it's a way of being humorous without being frivolous, a vital and telling distinction.

It's astonishing how much of a punch "the old themes," if they're handled well, can still deliver and how accurately they continue to describe our lives. In a sense, it's the riskiest gambit of all: to find, as Creech has done, new utility in timeworn tools and make them shine.

ANGE MLINKO:

Allusions, allusions: Yezzi leaves out Orpheus, Weil, Giotto, Leonardo, Newton, "A Guide to Rousseau," and a "Variation on a Theme of Keats." Not to mention "Little Primer of the European Romantic Tradition." Bernstein is not the only one teaching.

I'm not sure what there is to gain from insisting that these poems are "new" and "up-to-date." They're not, and they don't want to be. Why confuse their intended audience?

Is it true that "poetry's biggest theme of all" is wretchedness? That's just moralism. It's hard to argue with someone's inborn temperament, but Creech treats our world as fallen — a Christian concept — and evinces much disdain for the, shall we say, sublunar sphere. It reaches a pitch near the end of the book, in a run of poems beginning with "Discourse on Desire" through "Slow Time." In the former poem, he gainsays a line from Traherne — "By the very right of your senses you enjoy the world" — with a graphic depiction of a rape and murder (representing "desire"!). In "Variation on a Theme of Keats" he gainsays "Beauty is truth" with "the clean, swept streets of Theresienstadt." And in "Slow Time," after the story of a black man "shot point blank in the face," I read again, "sun on a feed store's windows/so beautiful we know it isn't true." If "His Coy Mistress" isn't shrilly anti-sex, what is? Perhaps the lines Yezzi quotes from "World Enough" —

the flush of sex, the steam
rising from his bathwater

— where "flush," intentionally or not, conjures "toilet."

I think I will go mad if I have to read one more poem about Pompeii. Intellectualizing suffering is bad enough, but moralizing on a natural disaster from centuries ago is just a way to score "big subject" points while politely sidestepping the big doo-doo we're leaving all over the globe.

DAVID YEZZI:

Let's sidestep big doo-doo for a moment. (We can come back to it.) Mlinko rightly identifies the seriousness of Creech's subjects (surely death is poetry's big theme over wretchedness), but seems put off by his moral concerns. "His Coy Mistress" is in its satiric way suspicious of Marvell's brilliant, sexy come-on, but anti-sex is too strong. Creech's response is a bit of wry topsy-turvydom. He delights in letting the air out of Marvell's heated plea, while poking serious fun at our baser impulses.

Even with a two-millennia head start, there can't be as many bad Pompeii poems as there are bad 9/11 poems. The only way to score "big subject" points is to write a poem that one wants to return to again and again — not only for its subject but also (and more importantly) for the memorable, indelible, and ultimately mysterious web of sound and sense that constitute its expression. If Creech has not succeeded in writing immortal poems, the roadsides, as Mlinko suggests, are littered with attempts. I'd say he at least is on the interstate.

Back to doo-doo: Is Mlinko suggesting that, by engaging with the past, a poet is distracted from the crucial work of addressing the "doo-doo we're leaving all over the globe"? Apparently, the poetry of ideas has become an idée fixe. Can't the past speak meaningfully to the present? Perhaps Auden was wrong to repudiate "September 1, 1939," given its recent resonance. He was undoubtedly right, however, to wonder if certain lines weren't dangerously sentimental. (Auden's moral touchstone was particularly good at testing for twaddle.) "The Shield of Achilles" speaks even more eloquently about man's inhumanity to man, despite the classical references Mlinko might find woolly.

ANGE MLINKO:

I'm an "In Praise of Limestone" sort of gal, actually. It resembled nothing that had come before it (but I imagine John Ashbery springing fully formed from it!). From moment to moment, I thrill to its qualities without a clue as to where the poem is going, nor where it will end. And that is exactly what I feel is missing in *Field Knowledge*. Poetry should be an adventure. "Speaking eloquently" will get you a sinecure and a dedicated line to your very own espresso maker.

So it's mildly appalling that I've been driven to defend topicality! But that anonymous Pompeiian (Creech supplies not a shred of detail that would suggest he is anything other than a symbol) — he bores me. I suspect that elegists on Pompeii have an ideological stake in representing this particular scenario of helplessness, even though much human suffering has nothing to do with random acts of God. It's worth interrogating *which* references from the past we plunder for our ditties, isn't it? And really, which *past*? There are so many… But Creech's aesthetic choices speak louder than his references. His engagement with "the past" is *specifically* an engagement with genteel, staunchly mid-century Anglo-American formalism.

I hear warm approval in Yezzi's review of *Field Knowledge*, and maybe that's entirely appropriate for a book that starts and ends with warmly remembered patriarchs. A monolithic lineage, tradition, you name it — it's all part of the package. But guys, it's 2007. There's clear plastic shrinkwrap over these strange… I think they're wineskins!

DAVID YEZZI:

Fireworks: it must be *peroratio* time. Mlinko works so hard to establish her progressive bona fides that poems get a bit lost again. But how can the feelings produced by poetry hope to compare with the warm-fuzziness of right-feeling (or feeling that one is right)?

It is 2007, to be sure, but the same old shibboleths: distaste for the "patriarchy," check; Anglophobia, check; lip-service paid to "human suffering," check; equating the tradition with a "monolithic lineage," check. And the whole Buffalo Poetics List nods assent. Or does it? Surely innovative poetry has more to offer than this boilerplate of warmed-over rallying points. The best poets are wily, not dogmatic: they take what they can from wherever they can, even if it's from the tradition. (And if John Ashbery doesn't write like a warmly regarded patriarch, I don't know who does.)

Tradition is not the monolith Mlinko supposes; rather, it's akin to the limestone landscape she admires in Auden, formed by the many poems flowing over it, shaping it, imprinting it with human hands.

Mlinko devotes a lot of space to what is, I think, a misreading of "World Enough." The poem doesn't relegate the cause of human suffering to an act of God; it is, as I have said, a reminder that one's teeming, sensual life can end without warning. It follows in the tradition (alack the word!) of George Herbert's "Church Monuments": "That thou mayst fit thyself against thy fall." But that's just moralizing, as Mlinko would say. And Herbert was English. And he died in 1633 ... boring, boring. Creech clearly knows what Mlinko seems impatient to forget: how quickly one's most tightly held assumptions can pass away.

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