

## Sourcing the Text: Robin Seguy in Conversation with Charles Bernstein

*Robin Seguy: Maybe, as a starting point, or a preliminary one – since I believe you're as much of a Marxist as I am, though certainly in different ways – it would be a good thing that you tell me/us what you believe the relation of the work with an explicative discourse coming from its author should be. In other words, do you believe that texts (and, if so, all? or some?) require an accompanying discourse to be properly understood, or can benefit from it (I am thinking, for instance, of the example of Grenier exegetizing in a mock-serious way his drawings-writings), or, on the contrary do you believe, like Valéry, that once a text is launched in the public sphere, the author has no claim to a privileged point of view, and that all readings are equally valid?*

Charles Bernstein: My early books were published with minimal framing: no description, blurbs, author photos, notes. At the time of those books, when I gave reading I didn't say anything between the poems: I hated the way some poets would explain away the poem before you even heard it, as if anything the listener didn't understand was an obstacle rather than an opportunity. (I loved the way Creeley's comments didn't explain but extended the poem, but that's something different.) I valued the experience of being thrown into the poem and being taken up in its opacities and rhythms: explanations were a form of rationalization and as such antipathetic to my poetics. Framing is part of the poem and the absence of framing is also a frame. At the same time, nothing is meant to be hidden or hermetic, though the texture of hiddenness of hermeticism might be just the ticket. If I start to explain one reference there is no clear place to stop, given the kind of poems I write. So I just go on and write another poem or write an essay. Still, I love paratexts and after a while those paratexts became a formal dimension in my poems, a kind of counterpoint. Should there be wall labels in museums? Yes in respect to the year of composition, title, materials, artist (though also interesting to withdraw those). I am more skeptical when an interpretation is offered alongside, even if good; too often the ones I see have are unhappy and the more well intentioned, the more unhappy – less public education than aesthetic prophylaxis. (Then again I find it frustrating in shows of classical Chinese art not to see the poems translated, as if the words are just decoration.) I loved when Richard Tuttle inserted into an audio tour of a big group show: I prefer my work to be seen in silence. At Amy Silliman's Boston ICA show this Fall, I gave a gallery talk in which I read poems written with the images, part of a collaboration with Silliman, and that seemed perfect. But after all I am a midrashic antinomian: there is only commentary on commentary.

I don't feel all readings are of equal value any more than I think all poems are of equal value but each reader/listener has, at first, to interact with a work in her or his own way, often making wild leaps. I want my poems to be a place for such leaps and lapses. I can offer information about a poem from the point of view of the maker, but that is just the starting point for the poem. What it means is beyond my making, anyway if the poem is any good.

*Do you feel that the situation of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, generally considered a "theory-inflected" or "difficult" movement/body of works creates a particular setting in that respect? How does your position inside L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E differ or has it*

*differed from that of the other poets of the group? And has it changed across time (especially in respect to your own poetic development)?*

I wanted to create nonexplanatory essays that, like poems, avert rationalization. Certainly, that made for a valuable contrast between *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and *Poetics Journal*. But I've written essays that did plenty of explaining too. As we get to almost forty years of work by a group of people who are mostly idiosyncratic, iconoclastic, and resist herding, you find some deep affinities and lots of superficial ones, many partings of the way, many poets who stopped being all that interesting to me (which is not to say ceased being interesting) and most viscerally for me the emergence of poets who either started to publish in the past 30 or 20 years (or less), or whose work I was not as fully aware of initially, who have come to be as crucial for me as any of my immediate early company. Saying that, it is still remarkable how intensely engaged I am with many of the poets who I first got to know in the 70s and early 80s.

*What is the publishing history of "Asylum."*

My first book of poetry, published in 1975, when I was 24 or 25, is called *Asylums*. Susan Bee (Susan B. Laufer at the time) and I created our own press – Asylum's Press – for the occasion, though in this first book the press name is given on the back of the last page of the book as Asylums Press. I have always liked the association of poetry with the press of asylum, though whether lunatic or a sanctuary remains an open question.

The earliest poem in the book is "Asylum," which is entirely taken from Erving Goffman's book, *Asylums*, which is a field report on closed worlds like insane asylums, prisons, and monasteries—social spaces that are closed-off from the outside. "Asylum" focuses on the beginnings and ends of the sentences in Goffman's text. So every line is a kind of trapped or frozen transition. And the visual arrangement suggests an Olsonian "field" style.

"Asylum" was written in March 1975. *Asylums* included other works from 1975, written in New York, and one work from 1974, written in Santa Barbara, "My/My/My." *Asylums* had a press-type cover by Susan Bee printed on light grey card stock, with a blank back cover. It was 48, 8½-x-11-inch pages, xeroxed from the (Remington) manual typewriter manuscript of the five poems included: "Asylum" (March 1975), "Lo Disfruto" (August-September, 1975), "Ipe" (March 1975), "Out of This Inside" (February-March, 1975) and an untitled 15-page poem that consists of a continuous progression of two-word lines, each beginning "my" (July 1974). The binding was sidestaple. There is no table of contents or title page, just the typescripts of the five poems. And initially there was no date given for the book publication, though each of the poems is dated. There is no colophon. There were very few copies of the book made, perhaps 40 in all, some in 1975 and some in 1976 (those 1976 copies have a © for that year, the earlier ones were undated). I published *Parsing*, also via Asylum's Press, in 1976. These works were privately circulated; none were sold. At that time, no press would have been willing to publish *Asylums*. Ron Silliman, though, included "Asylum" in *Tottel's* 16, along with another poem, "Beck at Bam," which I never reprinted. It was one of my first published poems (outside of publications in college).

*What precedents for using found text were you aware of when writing "Asylum"?*

Jackson Mac Low's diastic ("reading through") works would have been one precedent of which I was aware, though with "Asylum" I was selecting the passages not using a text-selection algorithm. I was also interested in William Burroughs and was aware of his (and Brion Gysin's) cut-up works, though *The Third Mind* was not published till a few years later. John Ashbery had made a grand cut-up in "Europe" and used found texts in other works.

There was also Jack Spicer's sense of the poet as a radio receiver getting signals from the "outside" and even more Robin Blaser's idea that a poem could be composed entirely of citations, which brings to mind Benjamin's Aracades project (but that work was not yet published). (I met Robin in 1973; his great essay "The Practice of Outside" was published in 1975, around the time I wrote "Asylum.") And then there was Zukofsky's "Poem Beginning 'The' " (and other works of his I'd discover later, such as "A"-24, from Shakespeare). I didn't yet know Reznikoff's *Testimony*, nor was I aware of Tom Phillip's *A Humument* (1973) or Åke Hodell's *Orderbuch* and *CA 36715 (J)* (from the mid-1960s). Related work such as Heimrad Bäcker's *Transcript* and SEESTÜCK were one and two decades in the future.

Perhaps also in range was Steve Reich's "Come Out" from 1965. Gavin Bryar's "Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me" was first recorded in 1975, just as I was writing my poem, though I didn't discover it till years later. I could also point to a number of works by John Cage. But let me also note the related tape works I was doing in 1975 and 1976, which involved extensive audio sampling {[writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Bernstein-1975-76.html](http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Bernstein-1975-76.html)}; in particular "Accused," from the same year as "Asylum," has a similar approach to the source material, though in that case I read the entire document (a politically volatile faculty report), circling back over the sentences to create an overlay.

Echopoetics is my *modus operandi*, or anyway one of them.

Aesthetically, my focus was to create the sensation of quotation: citation as device. I have many passages in poems that sound as if they are quotes – but I made them up. That was something in the air in the mid-1970s: cutting up and recombining found materials and appropriated language – beyond literary allusions, and including all manner of books, technical manuals, ads, song lyrics, letters, conversations, memos and documents from work, etc.; typically mixed in with nonappropriated language. A collage aesthetic. The emphasis was on using verbal material as "stuff" to make a poem, material that could be taken from anywhere. The idea was that you could greatly expand the range of poetic composition by using a variety of source material and not give primacy to things you wrote from scratch out of your own head. At the same time, there was a sense that the difference between the found and made was not as great as it was presumed to be: we wanted to break down the binary.

The emphasis, as Norman Fischer put it in a recent conversation, was on the resulting poem, not the source text. "Asylum" was published in 1975 without a note on its source. This was also true of Ronald Johnson's *Radi os* (1977) from *Paradise Lost*; Menick's *Men in Aida*, a homophonhic translation of *The Illad* (1983); and Bob Perelman's use of Mozart's letters (among other things) in "An Autobiography" in *7 Works* (1978), as well Ashbery's "Europe" from a decade earlier. (And it provides a

contrast to Mac Low, who provided detailed source and compositional notes.) The *Tottel's* issue that included "Asylum" started with Mac Low and the other poem of mine in there sampled a talk given by Julian Beck at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, hence the title, which, like "Asylum," referenced the source.

In the Fall of 1975, I wrote "Sentences," the first part of *Parsing*; almost every line in those poems is taken from either Studs Terkel's interviews in *Working* and the similar *Yessir, I've Been Here a Long Time: Faces and Words of Americans* by George Mitchel, as well as constellation of Emily Dickinson first lines. "Roseland," the final poem in *Parsing*, sampled/excerpted a talk poem by David Antin. *Parsing* was published by Asylum's Press in 1976 (xeroxed from a typewritten master); Craig Dworkin published a facsimile at Eclipse. In my next book, *Shade*, the first Sun & Moon Press book, published in 1978 (facsimile available on-line at Eclipse), there are several poems that are entirely based on a single source text: "Ballet Russe" is from Nijinsky's diaries, "The Bean Fields" is from *Walden*, and "Soul Under" is from Oscar Wilde's "Soul Under Socialism," the latter two using an approach similar to "Asylum." One poem in *Shade* use as source texts my letters ("For –") and another uses an essay of mine ("of course ..."). Bruce Andrews and I riff on all this in our entirely quotational collaboration in *Legend* (1980): "a very specific form of dancing."

As I say, I wanted to let the work speak for itself: anything else seemed either too fussy or too distracting or too literary. I was going all out for an immanent aesthetic experience, the words making their own meaning, not alluding to a prior meaning that you would need to know or look up in order to understand. But this experience necessitated foregrounding the device to thicken verballity (or wordness). This is not deconstruction so much as morphogenerative reconstructions. Jumping ahead five years to 1980, I was left cold by the Walker Evans appropriations of Sherrie Levine and skeptical about the critical apparatus that surrounded it; for the most part, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* presented a decisively different aesthetic from both the Pictures Generation and *October's* efforts less to lay bare the device than to commodify the idea.

Some of my poems include scores of citations and references, low, high and neither. Maybe now it'd be interesting to note them, to create a kind of *Pale Fire* poem; well maybe Zukofsky already did that by making the list of sources so prominent in "Poem Beginning 'The,'" which was intended as a parody of Eliot's "The Waste Land." There is a long history of back and forth here regarding the advisability, or not, of footnotes, not just the printing of the notes but the need for them. Thinking also of the absence of attribution in popular music "sampling" (as it emerges at the same time as "Asylum") but also the assumption that some of the sources would be known or, to be more perverse about it, known to those that know them and to others, just let it go. (The placement or erasure of source or explanatory notes – the framing of the poem – is itself an aesthetic decision that becomes a part of the work.)

But after all, much of the frisson of a plunderphonic poetry is the aversion of explanation: it stops being "playgerism" (to use Raymond Federman's terms) if every act is documented. It's not secrecy that is valued but larceny and repression.

In *Tottel's* 16, there is almost no paratextual material at all, not even the date of the issue (probably 1976). While these works were not in private circulation, the readers were imagined to be small in number and potentially in touch with one another. Key facts about the work circulated by word of mouth. One of the things we did in

*L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (starting in 1978) was to begin to provide additional commentary and perspective on these works.

When I included "Asylum" in *All the Whiskey in Heaven*, my selected poems from 2010, I did print the source note for that poem and a number of others, as I also did when I announced Craig Dworkin's digital edition of the *Asylums* in 2006 ([english.utah.edu/eclipse/projects/ASYLUMS/asylums.html](http://english.utah.edu/eclipse/projects/ASYLUMS/asylums.html)). I am happy that "Asylum" has a life outside its first publications and part of that life is changing the context of its publication and moving to a greater focus on the play between the poem and the paratext as well as the poem and its history of publication.

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