

From Sight to Shenandoah

from Jerome McGann, *The Point Is to Change It*
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A few years ago the editor of the *Bellingham Review* proposed the following two works—a passage from Scalapino and Hejinian’s *Sight*, the text of Bernstein’s “Shenandoah”—as representative examples of contemporary experimental writing.¹ What kind of commentary, she asked, “might help a general audience understand these poets’ tactics a little better”?

The academic commentaries in the earlier chapters of this book address the editor’s question. But that kind of writing isn’t what the editor wanted. Why? So that a professor with academic credentials might come to the rescue of some estranged readers? Perhaps. I’ve never known. But the assignment made me think that such a question is always in play, even for our traditional poetic inheritance. Has it used itself up? Was Byron talking about more than himself when he observed:

I have spent my life, both interest and principal,
And deem not, what I deemed, my soul invincible.

—*Don Juan*, canto 1, st. 213

And yet how inspiring that expression of bankruptcy! Several years earlier, when he was shoring up his ruins with a bolder front, he put the same point very differently, imagining himself as a Promethean figure,

Triumphant where it dares defy,
And making Death a Victory.

—“Prometheus,” 58–59

Not only is there a time for every purpose under heaven, there is a style as well. Even among enlightened and professional critics, we who are trained and “presumed to know.” *Nous sont une autre.*² Then what of “we who love to be astonished”?³ How do we express ourselves when our astonishment tells us that “an adequate mode of expression is senseless”?⁴

There are ways, as we know from the writings of Lewis Carroll, Swinburne, Wilde, and any number of twentieth-century writers, not least Gertrude Stein. Sometimes these astonished styles come seriously engaged, as in the commentary on Goethe that culminates H. D.’s *Tribute to Freud* or as in Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson*. Sometimes it is playful and even outrageous, as in many of Bernstein’s critical works. In any case, the style requires that nonnormative procedures be made a regular feature of the critical method.

Here then are the two pieces of “experimental writing” chosen by the *Bellingham Review* editor. They took me by surprise because I had no hand in their selection. That surprise, I would later see, invited a less enlightened style of commentary.

I begin in full astonishment mode, this time on your behalf, by getting out of the way of both yourselves and the poetry

from *Sight*

by Leslie Scalapino and Lyn Hejinian

I find myself listening to music as if struggling against inevitability—it and I are (as) one, at the limit, and I’m about to make one of those ludicrous false steps that fell one. That’s fate: I can’t go on (with remorse and regret). Like the philosopher I must say, I’m no one’s guilty conscience, and certainly not my own

—rain freezing on slick asphalt, people falling,
perhaps I’m feverish, I want to see—I seem to be the only one
who isn’t cold—but then a suicidal riderless horse dragging its
reins appears, eyes wide, neck broken, head bent to the right,
chest straining, it moves against orders—every struggle for
thought pits the ponderous against the fast—yes, well, so as to
hide but also so as to see, they eat into each other’s lips, that’s
what it’s like to say inevitability can’t be unemployed—
in a struggle.

The successful struggler must constantly add positions.
She jumps graciously out of the field with her skirt up and into

an interval. This event has its own duration—it doesn't "unfold over time," it remains in its fold, employed—
her great neck wet with sweat from pulling.

(LH)

The suicidal riderless horse wide-eyed, neck broken already, is the emanation of one to oneself in exhaustion but appearing to others "inevitably"—who are unemployed in the sense of happening by chance to be seen there also, not "for a purpose."

The struggler in the state of exhaustion is the observer within that one—"within" is what unfolds though not appearing to, not caused by exhaustion, separately transpiring to a clear aim (not in apprehension). (Is the exhaustion the same as the illness?—sense of it not being)

The viscous wet neck after it is dawn—one having missed seeing dawn/separation—has its own duration, apart from that observer

the eyes are not of the neck
wide-eyed the neck being a "mere" appendage
flapping

(LS)

The neck of a sibling being is visible in the shadow under the chin of the leaning rider who keeps his consciousness of choices (the rider feels the weariness of false choices)

Faltering

visibility *makes* the being
lean over

"marking out form"

Coupled to visibility's trembling form

Eyed by inevitability

But, really, inevitability is what accumulates ahead of false continuities

(LH)

Visibility makes what is seen—?—Empty careening head that is in angry circular rushes, where there isn't substance for

these it occurs anyway—as its physiological habit.
ghosts are only during life.

Accumulation ahead of continuities: a woman who was going to be married had been murdered by a prowler, leaving her boyfriend wrecked by this event.

Two days after her death as if a wind she entered and passed through the house at dawn to the bedroom of the couple who had been going to perform the ceremony. The woman of the couple shot up in bed in fear, the man saying to be calm the dead one would pass on. The intense presence was restless and in disturbance. She passed through the wall and left the house.

So they're making the life going on past occurrence.
Which could be then pleasurable.

The wild motions in one are seen and their former substance or origination is a "visibility" itself—which may be hardly remembered or remembered with utter clarity—but the tortured
wild motions in one would occur anyway.

Without what bothers one. (Yet one is tortured.)

The Romantics either European or Japanese were perhaps the discoverers that one is living-ghosts as being present activity—not being of dying—dying seems utterly separate.
fear is expanded—

(LS)

A ghost comes of its own volition "to work on the wall." This would be very expressive activity for the living previous person, the one existing before it cast its ghost, but the ghost is, as it were, working on the wrong side (the outside—*beyond the limit*) of the wall.

The sound it makes is too loud, but this work is a past occurrence—carried out by someone very beautiful (in "wild motions") and thus too much looked at (shown up).

But one cannot offer the ghost a smile of recognition.

Jalal Toufic says the great problem for the dead is that of continuation (unfinished business). (The ghost) it has the problem of not being there where it hasn't been—a problem of regret, yes, but also of self-replication: (the ghost) any self is constantly remaking the person from which it was cast to no end.

The sudden (shown up) death of a youth (unfinished) is separated from him by a narrator: a preliminary comment: a great number of stories are based on errors: the lover is mistaken for a thief: the (plucked) necklace turns out to have been the simplest form of plot construction: handsome and innocent, your head will forever sleep on your hands.

(LH)

We're on the level here of winter light only—no one out—yet in it trees enflamed in a red leaves sea.
the one dead isn't fatigued

Whereas work in jobs for living—generates more and more of itself only. There is a sole consciousness existing in winter light, so that is apart from one too.

The sole consciousness, of ones, that begins to exist in red leaves sea aflame only—outside—isn't part of a dead person or one

self-replication—a double which is also sole, empty
fear that in living ones working on the wrong side of the wall with those others (dead) being on that side, the same side of the wall—and can't be to be there

a double membrane—who may be one—though can't be with them

people clamor as in a bureaucracy—for more and more events—the one without a soul isn't drunk—In loneliness and beached—the wild motions do not meet up

yet—Occur—as them—attentiveness to oneself, who is not existing

faculties aren't dulled in winter light separating—there's a sole consciousness at one time or another

(LS)

Shenandoah (for Ben Yarmolinski)
by Charles Bernstein

Oh Shenandoah, I long to near you
Through fogged and fumbling shallows
Oh Shenandoah, why don't you hear me?

Astray, I'm bound to sway
Midst these stifling borders

Oh Shenandoah, why must I trample
All that I behold before me?
Oh Shenandoah, I wish no other
No other than to sway
Near your wobbling borders

Oh Shenandoah, I'm only moisture
Only fog and fumbling shadows
Oh Shenandoah, I'm all deception
Astray, I'm bound to go
Midst these heaving waters

Oh Shenandoah, why don't you take me?
Engulf me in your weaving?
Oh Shenandoah, why must I lose you?
To lose, to lose myself
Near, so near, your borders

Oh Shenandoah, I long to near you
Past the wobbling endurings
Away—beyond the steaming shadows
Away—I'm bound away
Bound to these stifling borders

Oh Shenandoah, I hear you coming
Come and go and never touch me
Oh Shenandoah, I'm more than moisture
Swept away swept away
I'm more than moisture swept away
From your enduring

Oh Shenandoah, I've traveled far to hold you
Don't deny my desperate pleadings
Oh Shenandoah, I wish no other
Other than to sway
Other than to sway
Other than to sway
Within your rolling borders

Oh Shenandoah, let me forget you
I want no image of your teeming valleys
Oh Shenandoah, let me forget you
Forget the promise, forget the promise
Of your hollow heaving

What makes this writing difficult? Is it that the poetry seems to lack a clear subject or theme, like Yeats's "The Second Coming" or Lowell's "Skunk Hour"? Not all poetry proposes to be about something. Are Edward Lear's best poems about anything beyond the pleasures of their texts? Or what *about* Stevens's "The Emperor of Ice Cream" or Ashbery's "Farm Elements and Rutabagas in a Landscape"? T. S. Eliot urged people who had no Italian to read Dante in Italian. Dante, that most intellectual of poets! Eliot thought such a regimen would help train one to read poetry better.

Some poetry, it's true, emphasizes ideas or other referential content—known or rememberable conditions or persons. It needn't do so, it might deal in nonsense or pure fantasy, it might play games with images or sounds. And then there are poems that plainly deal in content—*Sight* is an excellent example—but they mean to hold their content in pure prospect. *Sight* is a poem that doesn't face backward, as it were, but forward. It begins in a discovery ("I find myself") that passes immediately into a figure of desire, a figure "listening to music as if struggling against inevitability." These are words that strain forward precisely because of the "limit" they experience. They are their own limit, these words, and so the heard melody of desire transforms itself through its desire and becomes—another sense, "sight": "I want to see." Desire being the law of this text, desire gets fulfilled in the revelation of the "suicidal riderless horse." And so it goes, careening through its transfor-

mations. As the text passes on its words, it discovers (we discover) that the passage produces further ranges of “meaning.” (“The successful struggler must constantly add positions.”) And so “content” accumulates along the way as the messages are carried out (carried forward). *Sight* is a text going through that kind of discovery of meaning.

“Sight,” seeing—what is it? You fix your eyes on something and then, you think, there it is. A definite thing, defined? Yes, but only for a brief moment. If you keep looking you will keep seeing it change, you will see it differently. It changes because the act of seeing alters what is seen just by imagining a defined site of seeing. In that act of definition we are forced into a dialogue with what we have imagined to be the case.

Sight is a site of dialogue, an exchange. It keeps going on, and as one goes with it, one sees and sees again. The metamorphoses of the riderless horse, visible forms that come back as ghosts, “wild” words and their associates. And what we see turns obscure even as it grows defined. Words seem to slip away from themselves in their intercourse with each other. Shapes change as well as the negative spaces of the shapes. And through this process a world you hadn’t imagined continues to reappear, you see it unfolding, emerging from what you saw and from what you didn’t see, from what was said and from what was left unsaid, from what was called attention to and from what wasn’t. (“Any self is constantly remaking the person from which it was cast to no end.”)

Shelley once urged poets to imagine what they know, and that is an important way to write. It isn’t the only way, and Shelley himself often wrote in other ways. In ways that are closer to the way of *Sight*, where we read poets trying, as another contemporary poet puts it, to imagine what they don’t know. The dialogue of this text is the dominant sign of that effort. One poet writes and evolves a discovery of words. Then the other looks at that discovery and writes from what she saw what she comes to see. And that writing is then looked at, and the discovering gets replicated anew, from the other side of the dialogue. The chief figure of that endless dialogue, in this text, is “the wall.” It is a figure that stands for the page bearing the text, for the spaces between the words and the characters, for the “double membrane” of the dialogue itself.

This text does not want its readers intimidated by what we don’t know or understand. Socrates was judged a wise man because he knew he didn’t know. So the text, in midst of other woe than ours,⁵ says to

us: read on, go on, keep your eyes open, watch what happens along the way, watch the changes. *Sight* is a textual condition that is imagining what it doesn't know. It means to include us in its revelatory passages.

And so does "Shenandoah" but in a very different way. Here's a poem carrying baggage, a poem facing backward, like Benjamin's angel. Its whole text bears remembering, "Shenandoah." And not just remembering either! Bernstein's "Shenandoah" seems a kind of travesty of the old song. Does it read like doggerel? It *is* doggerel. If that's a problem for the reader, it shouldn't be.

Many people, it's true, think doggerel's not poetry. But what's "poetry"? That old song? A famous poem by Byron or Pope? They're only documentary records; they have to be kept alive in the present. Do we want to imagine there are kinds of writing that would be, by definition, unpoetical. Pornography, perhaps? Well, Lord Rochester (among others) has shown us otherwise.

The truth is what Marianne Moore (among others) thought: that a poem might be better for including apparently unpoetical material, like business documents. Making poetry out of doggerel might be a good idea—just the sort of thing an ambitious poet could get interested in. Like choosing a difficult form arbitrarily. Browning, I seem to remember, said he always had a fascination for doggerel.

Or how do you make poetry out of all those poetical documents that come down to us—out of Yeats, or Crabbe, or "Shenandoah"? It isn't so easy; they've come to breathe such an official atmosphere. Far simpler to turn them into cultural objects—what Bernstein here calls "teeming valleys." Things of beauty that may be thought joys forever, images of the best that has been known and thought in the world. The old beautiful songs. But none of that "is" *poetry*.

Bernstein's "Shenandoah" sets about thinking through all those issues. So Bernstein begins with an old song he takes to be a pure product of America, at once figure and expression of its deepest desires. It's a sailor's song about a river that never reaches the sea. And he treats it emblematically, identifying the song, the river, and his own immediate writing, all of which have the same name. The name of a river that never reaches the sea.

The old song moves, like the new one, through incremental repetitions. It has only three stanzas, and each stanza has five lines: the first line gets repeated in the third line, while the second, fourth, and fifth lines get repeated in each of the three stanzas. This means that the

song as a whole has only six integral linear units. Each stanza has one unique line, the first:

Oh Shenandoah, I long to hear you
 Oh Shenandoah, I love your daughter
 Oh Shenandoah, I'm bound to leave you.

These three lines sketch the song's simple structure, which is a narrative of romantic longing. In Bernstein's "Shenandoah," however, romantic longing returns as impeded desire: "Bound to these stifling borders" and the "weaving" (wobbling, swaying) networks of this writing, as well as the writing on which it is written.

A kind of palimpsest, the poem is a "reading" of the old song. In this reading the impediments are seen as internal to the desire itself, functions of a song that is (contradictorily) "bound to leave." So when Bernstein's poem undergoes the old song, a revelation may develop that encompasses more than the elementary words of the text. But the revelation begins at that elementary level, as we see in the double meaning and paradoxes that Bernstein's text enforces: "I long to near you" (I long too near you); "to sway" ("enduring" as well as "wobbling" and "weaving"); "bound" (as in being doubly "bound away / Bound to these stifling borders"). The poem is constructed from these kinds of self-conscious replications of the old song, which undergoes a critical—even a satirical—visitation. But Bernstein's is no facile debunking, for the parody, like the parodies of Carroll and Lear, is every bit as sentimental as the original song—perhaps even more sentimental, its sentimentality being so self-conscious.

Oh Shenandoah, let me forget you
 I want no image of your teeming valleys
 Oh Shenandoah, let me forget you
 Forget the promise, forget the promise
 Of your hollow heaving

But of course the poem cannot forget, the old song runs forever in the poem's head—as it must, by the rule of this undertaking itself. "The promise / Of your hollow heaving" is partly a social and partly an artistic promise, both of which Bernstein inherits (as an American, as a poet). It is the promise of loss:

Oh Shenandoah, why must I lose you?
To lose, to lose myself
Near, so near, your borders

These borders are the equivalent of the “wall” in *Sight*. They turn Bernstein’s poem into a kind of political map whose subject is American history, the land of the lost and “hollow promise” whose failures (our failures) only regenerate the call to promise.

And doggerel is the poem’s governing sign of this perpetuated loss and betrayal. Bernstein’s doggerel returns to the sentimentality of the old song and makes a rhyme with it. Here is one (here are many) whose name is writ in water:

Oh Shenandoah, I’m only moisture
Only fog and fumbling shadows
Oh Shenandoah, I’m all deception
Astray, I’m bound to go
Midst these heaving waters

“Midst”: the poetical archaism is perfect. “Engulf me in your weaving?” And so it does. Bernstein’s burlesque and doggerel moments enact those engulfments, where poems are reborn—old songs, new poems—in a comical despair of their possibility.