

Reading Eye Lets

Islets/Irritations, by Charles Bernstein (New York: Jordan Davies, 1982)

to proper to behindless weigh in a rotating, rectilinear our
plated, *embosserie des petits cochons* pliant feint insensate,
round bands of immense release fell, a crudity form of the
assignment—increase by venture populace animated by appeal
to which ends, almonds, lacquered unguents embrasure

These words begin *Islets/Irritations* both as the first poem (the title poem, “Islets/Irritations”) and as bright violet letters on the beautiful cover painting by Arakawa. One hundred one pages, 30 poems, the book seems more a field of possibilities than a “book of poems,” a language whose vocabulary ranges from technical jargon to *TV Guide* synopses to truncated letters addressed to former co-workers. A reader familiar with Bernstein’s previous books will delight again in yet another ocean of signification to move around in; thankful again for a chance to work as co-producer in the making of the texts’ meanings—not that it’s all up for grabs; themes of ‘person’ in relation to objects and signs, identity and the constitution of the self, and insanity in relation to incarceration are, among other things, evident in the text. A voice, one which seems many, at times meditative, at times complacently manic, weaves in and out—while at the same time almost comprised of—motors and pulleys in an “empire of sudden letting” (“Lift Plow Plates”). Where *Islets* differs from Bernstein’s previous work is that in it a new concern is evident—that of placing poetics and ruminations about subject matter itself directly into the poem:

Everything I write, in some mood, sounds
bad to me. It reads like gibberish—
unnecessary rhymes, repetitions, careless
constructions—a loss of conviction. Whether
I am content to want to let those
orders I find speak for themselves, if
it is the orders as I make them that

I want to compel my own lost recognition.

—“Substance Abuse,” lines 47–54

This is not simply an instance of a writer confessing his difficulties, for the text itself, later in the poem, denies the authenticity of both ‘person’ and ‘event.’ (And as well, any reader familiar with Bernstein’s work knows there is at least a tablespoonful of irony in this passage.) If it does not “abuse” substance (meaning subject matter) it at least brings it to the foreground and puts it in question; the question being a methodological one: how shall subject matter (derived from the world which is—at least in this discussion—language) be dealt with in the poem; or, how shall the writer edit.¹

Since most of Bernstein’s work is constructed so as to allow a maximum number of meanings per statement or image, a question of editing arises on the part of the reader; the reader, having assigned a particular meaning to a particular passage, sees this as an act of editing in that she may wonder what she left out, what meaning(s) she didn’t choose. As well there is the question of what Bernstein edits out or leaves in the poem:

To move from moment to moment without
Break is the ideal from which there is no
Escape. But isn’t what is wanted to
Stop and hover, go back and forth at mea-
Sured speed, to dwell everywhere or only as
Chosen. Such reflections candy our lives
With conditional Appalachias, the
Real facts about which are as hazy as beet soup.
—“Substance Abuse,” lines 81–88

So, to the phenomenological extent that I can assign “Charles Bernstein” any ‘responsibility’ for this statement (even given irony), the “real facts,” if facts are a course to action, are “hazy”; “to dwell everywhere” would be the indeterminate option, and to “go back and forth ... [in writing] ... as chosen” would be determinate. Which path does Bernstein’s method point to?

I’m at a bit of a loss, but have never
figured out a system such that everything
is out of the way and where to go.
—“Substance Abuse,” lines 91–93

If “system” can equal “process of editing” or “method of writing,” then Bernstein’s method is indeterminate. But this is no fault—this is a choice based on the belief that the agent of determination, the self, is a construct, and therefore is something to be exposed as such, rather than trusted or taken for granted (—exposed more in the sense of a sham or a crook than a bleeding heart). Such a belief leads him to say in “Lode (Mrs. Mao at Gulag)”: “It is not myself but the circumstances / that created me that is my project”; hence a doubting of, a full use of, and a playing with the “author function,” without, in the long run, giving in to the candy that that function offers; for, first and foremost, that function, that “I,” is in question.

It is because of these beliefs (*informed* beliefs based on the investigations of existentialist and language philosophy) that Bernstein is also against characterization,² both in the broadest sense of the word (say, a categorization of individuals) and in the particular sense of the development of a characteristic (i.e., distinctive) self in the poem.³ He is successful in carrying out this intent throughout *Islets* and in his previous work, yet towards the back of *Islets* a poem appears, one “Lapidary Entropy,” which clearly characterizes the speaker in the poem as a “New York School” influenced poet—it is full of references to that “school” and directly (and consciously) apes Ted Berrigan’s style. The poem is in seventeen parts; number 11, for instance, subtitled “*For Ellen*,” reads as follows: “michael & bruce / & ray / & rae / & susan & jane / & betsi / & gale & charlie / & steve / & alfred / & ted.” Many of Bernstein’s readers can immediately assign last names to these (e.g., Ray DiPalma, Rae Armantrout, and certainly Ted Berrigan—or Ted Greenwald), thus characterizing them; the poem’s technique is a parody of Berrigan’s “name list” poems as well, so it characterizes itself. Further, “Lapidary Entropy” takes on the voice of a single, categorizable poet, thus, in a sense, diffusing any destabilization achieved by the other poems in the book (e.g., a reader might then dismiss a poem such as “Islets/Irritations” as being merely “quirky,” thinking: “Phew, well, it’s okay, because I can find *Charlie* on page 63”). So I question the inclusion of “Lapidary Entropy” in *Islets*—it is too “stable,” too characterizable for the equation I thought *Islets* was out to propose. But what is its reason for being there? Is Bernstein including it so that readers such as myself can’t characterize him in the way a poem like “Islets/Irritations” would lead us to? Has he foreseen even my act of characterization?

It has been Bernstein’s practice always to have destabilized poems dominate his books, which is to say that the “stable” ones are there to yelp and fend for themselves—there as some sort of measure of contrast. It could be argued that “Lapidary Entropy” in *Islets* functions in exactly the same way as “of course ...” does in *Shade* (College Park, Md.: Sun & Moon, 1978), that is, as a stable element among the unstable.⁴ Yet “Lapidary Entropy” seems to tip the scale too far in favor of “stability.” Stabilization and destabilization, in terms of style of writing and as views of the world, are poles. Bernstein’s method is to oscillate between the two, and in *Islets* this oscillation reaches extremes in the form of “Islets/Irritations” (destabilized pole) and “Lapidary Entropy” (stabilized pole); the poles move farther apart and yet appear in the same book.⁵ The question, in terms of method, is what the next step will be: will his future writing adhere to one of these extreme poles, or is there a possibility of synthesis: can these two poles meet?⁶ Their oscillation leads to a state of indeterminacy and doubt; synthesis would bring the poem into a more determinate stance in relation to the world.

To frame this problem in terms of characterization: if we at all points resist characterization, then we enter into a state of indeterminacy where action and statement are immobilized, in a sense frozen that we might investigate them (e.g., as linguistic elements and as possible views of the world or courses of action, both of which in Bernstein’s work are riddled with doubt). The other option is for the voice in the poem to allow itself to be characterized (if only for a moment) that something determinate might be said about the world. Yet to take this action is in a sense to compromise, for in doing so one doesn’t acknowledge the fictional, constructed nature of that voice, of that ‘authority.’⁷ Yet to remain indeterminate is to remain immobilized, to be held back from a course of action, a stance within the poem. This is the quandary in which Bernstein’s method exists, wrestling, as it were, with one of the most difficult dilemmas facing post-postmodernist (?) writers today; his integrity is highlighted by his willingness to face this dilemma head-on.

Despite this quandary and its attendant problems (that it might only reflect and hence prolong a state of indeterminacy in the “modern” psyche when it addresses an indeterminate, truncated [existentialist] modern world), the resulting manifestation of this method, the book itself, is admirable if in nothing else than its scope and the brilliance and color of its constructions—its success

as production *per se*. Few writers ever achieve as rich a combination of image and statement as Bernstein does. Where a methodological “philosophy” enters into the work is precisely at the point of balance between the aforementioned poles of stabilization and destabilization; and, in a sense, between the indeterminate and the determinate. The nature of that philosophy seems an active practice of inquiry into possible modes of action and interpretation at the moment of choice in the process of editing. *Islets/Irritations* suggests points of isolation personae inhabit and the attendant “irritations” of sensory phenomena (felt concretely as language) which brush across such an eye. It is a dazzling kaleidoscope whose method determines what is allowed passage through the eyelet of the text, and how that will be, and is, transformed into

Crystalline visual planes
bowling over with fresh
fruit. The very tenuousness
of it, pulses.
—“Signs of the Particularities,” lines 26–29

NOTES

1. In a talk titled “Characterization” at 80 Langton Street, San Francisco, on January 24, 1983, Bernstein spoke of editing as an act we do at all times, and not just “on the page.” I’m applying this definition of the word “edit” throughout this paper. Such a definition might more concretely mean the editing of sensory phenomena—the subordination of certain phenomena to others in a hierarchy of allowable perception. As well it could apply to what is allowed (by choice or by force) to be said and heard in a given linguistic framework.
2. In the “Characterization” talk, he also suggested that one should “avoid characterization at all points.”
3. In an interview with Tom Beckett in *The Difficulties* (vol. 2, no. 1, 1982), Bernstein stated that he was against an overriding autobiographical gestalt as an organizing principle for writing.
4. “of course / my writing / writing / even talking like this / always seems to me perfectly at peace / so that / I was thinking / I don’t know / this could be my own you know / this could be sort of the / the source of my crazy hood / ness ...” (lines 1–11).
5. To see the degree of this oscillation in his earlier work, compare “of course ...” in *Shade* to “Soul Under” in the same book.
6. “Part Quake,” the last poem in *Islets*, is to my mind what such a synthesis might look like. Here a stable and constant argument grounds the destabilized linguistic constructions and images. The poem progresses towards a resolution; a determinate stance is evident.

7. Even when speaking in the poem with what seems a characterizable voice, or a voice of authority, Bernstein undermines such authority with large doses of irony.