

Reading poetry as a puzzle

ISLETS/IRRITATIONS by Charles Bernstein (Jordan Davies, 356 Bowery, New York, N.Y. 10012: \$6.50, paperback; 101 pp.)

Charles Bernstein is a remarkable and demanding young poet—associated with what is loosely termed “language writing,” an avant-garde tendency pursued by more and more interesting writers. “Language writing” is beginning to nip at the heels of American poetry’s worn status quo with more perseverance than anything else in more than 20 years.

In 1978 Bernstein, a philosophy student at Harvard and now a medical editor in New York City, co-founded L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E, a pamphlet/podium for review and discussion

Reviewed by Kenneth Funsten

between poets interested in, among other things, “reference” and its political implications for new art. Since then, a small group of common tendencies and intentions have been clarified into what may be the foundations for a major change in the way we write—and read—poetry.

As the book’s title implies, “Islets/Irritations” is frustrated with personal isolation—but also irritated with “eyelets,” or any tight limits imposed from outside. It is Bernstein’s seventh book, and the style is enjambed, idiosyncratic, calculated, undoubtedly seeming to many more like a puzzle than a poem.

*These sitting here, percolated collations
and inevitable, bound to be, reshape
at. Lost interest in resolve, counts
out on slipped. For instance. . .*

Shifting contexts, syntactical displacements, disruptions of the rational or syllogistic flow of thought, difficulties and ambiguities in and for themselves, purposeful polysemy, no absolute resolutions, fragments: These are devices Bernstein uses regularly. His vision, he writes in the newest number of *Poetics Journal* (2639 Russell St., Berkeley, 94705: \$4/issue, paperback), is of “a multi-discourse text, a work that would involve many different types and styles and modes of language in the same “hyperspace.” Like avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen in his now famous work for five shortwave radios, “*Kurzwellen*,” Bernstein attempts to create an inclusive and universal space by transcribing the transpersonal and instantaneous chunks of matter—language in his case, sound in Stockhausen’s—that surround us in contemporary human society every day: what he calls “postcards / from the subjectless / static.”

Without preconceived intention or interference from the artist’s self-documenting ego, the material is theoretically allowed to define its own space, inform us of its own limits and intentions. An image of the poet as a sort of dissolving vacuum cleaner emerges: “I can plug section into, cut-up, / detain. Or I just gobble conscious morsels / and am incarcerated within them.”

Many have asked why anyone would want to write this way. Others call “language writing” poor surrealism or bad “automatic writing,” in either case, “old hat.” To understand these poets and what they do offer that is new, one must be prepared to grasp the “de-centering” gesture at the heart of their writings and its ideological origins.

Bernstein is downright bleak about the present social order: “Are / the working masses, then, to become / broken and wretched slaves / crushed under the iron heel / of police terror and rac-

ist / gangs?” He’d like to offer a resounding “No” to these concerns but fears the answer is almost certainly affirmative.

Taking his cue from Karl Marx, that the activities of a society determine its way of thinking and not vice versa, Bernstein attempts to change society by attacking the predominant stylistic activity of today’s poetry: the reference of an ongoing “self” maintained behind the language of the poem, in a larger sense, its continuity. Accordingly, Bernstein’s “de-centering” tools focus on disrupting all that we might easily or uneasily presume about a poem’s focus or focusing agent. For instance, in “Force of Habit,” the initial “de-centering” itself signifies that “chaos of already presupposed forces,” today’s easily held notion of personal order or “sequel logic”:

Fanciful as might otherwise attest.

Accuracy

implicate on horizontal load zone fu

sion.

Freckle motorizes bejesus spanking tall

tarpaper. Along then, brain in hands,

sail

the mechanism three times beyond

sight of house, rolling

unconsciously in chaos of already

presupposed forces,

winding way into all the more inap

propriate

breach of already insufferable

attitudes. . .

Three other strategies Bernstein consistently uses to “de-center” reader and text are: disrupting the poem’s content into as many modes, dictions, vocabularies, orders, etc., as possible; using syntax as an internalized meter; and “cutting off a sentence or phrase midway,” as Bernstein himself describes in an essay in L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E, “and counting on the mind to complete where the poem goes off in another direction, giving two vectors at once.” The last strategy is evident, for example, in the fifth line of “Neutral Density Filter”:

Lips move on top of quiet

nor do I harbor preclusions

though they define me all

the same. Still can’t get

off that, left in the

that ends up being more

a sense of wanting to

With every “de-centering,” a reader is forced to re-establish meaning, to resituate himself in the process of reading the text. In doing so, a reader must participate, attempt her or his own tangential searches to see what applies, and, together with the text, construct meaning that wasn’t there a moment before. Meaning’s reliance upon the immediate context given by the reader is thus foregrounded, reinforcing not reader passivity in front of the assumptions of text but participation in unfolding the mysteries of its multiple meaning. This activity of free participation is what Bernstein hopes his work will help engender in the society at large.

Readers who wish to find more about American “language writing” and its other practitioners can consult any one of three different recent national poetry magazines, each containing large, diverse selections of writers from both coasts: *Boxcar 1*, (Box 39466, Los Angeles 90039: \$4.50); *The Paris Review 86* (45-39 171 Place, Flushing, N.Y. 11358; \$5); and *Ironwood 20* (Box 40907, Tucson, Ariz. 85717; \$3).

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