

Sulfur, 1985

not which poems one "prefers" but one's willingness to see the larger ground of *Ground Work*. And that larger ground, curiously enough, concerns the reader—the degree to which he or she is willing to go along with the sweep and flow of Duncan's unfashionably eclectic intellect.

MICHAEL DAVIDSON

Resistance

Charles Bernstein
Awede, 1983

Sighted as a marker of his process, Bernstein's title, *Resistance*, suggests at least two reciprocally informing models of how his language will function in the text: first, that of a language resistant to—a stressed force countering—the generation of a singularly resolute standard of meaning; second, that of a language sabotaging the dominant linguistic codes, particularly the moral base of the rhetorical, which define and formalize a method of discursive thinking (reading, writing) grounded in the appeal to certainty, or rectitude. As such, any determinate reading of this work is consistently undermined by the fluctuation of meanings occurring within it. The question for Bernstein becomes where, as readers, do we—can we—stand in relation to a text which ceaselessly destabilizes our position in it. Thus, one of the dialectics fronted is the certainty of a reader's response to any given compositional unit in one poem as it is juxtaposed against his/her uncertainty of response to the variable recurrences of that unit in another poem, or within the same one. In the opening of the first piece, "Consideration," and the beginning of the fourth in the sequence, "Fever Of Case," Bernstein broaches these two poles of readerly response to the work:

Feelings that grant promises
alone am cured of. A salient
detonation, tangled and flickering, to
up till vexed, mottled plum
that stands at guard, gorged
by the pensive percussion I
develop all too slowly out of,
implicitly to maroon a
mobile flare—the slant
of any rest, afloat with
wonder, heaves.

(from "Consideration")

Slowly has this levelled up a certain feel
 Under always so of palliation
 Hardly pressing more to want
 Had surged reluctance constant
 Fairly clouds of swirls
 Moved to finally only
 Yesterday's evidentiary pole

(from "Fever Of Case")

Between these poems, as throughout *Resistance*, meanings fluctuate through a variable duplication of terms and tones. For instance, the statemental sound of "Consideration"'s first line paradoxically guarantees a rejection of "feelings that grant promises," or guarantees (of definitive meanings perhaps?) With the padded impact of "a *salient detonation*"—two terms striking the same semantic note twice—these "feelings," if they *are* the referential points here, emerge "tangled and flickering," spontaneously and seemingly undefined. Yet one has to be careful here, since "detonation" implies a calculated act, one which requires and develops out of "a pensive percussion." To compound the reader's problems, the first line of "Fever Of Case," unlike "Consideration"'s opening, tonally registers as an indefinite grasping on the level of intuitive order while semantically retaining, in the phrase "a certain feel," "Consideration"'s suggestion of "feelings" as uncertain, unspecified gestural acts outside the frame of a logically received meaning. There is, however, the other sense of "certain" to consider here, making the "feelings" which assured nothing in "Consideration" now "certain" of themselves as producers of meaning and also, by implication, inseparable from the meanings they produce. To further destabilize the reader's perspective, Bernstein lets the words "cured of" in one poem be recalled and muted by "palliation" in the other, suggesting that the "speaker" who was "cured of" certifying his emerging "feelings" is now only relieved of doing so and thus prone to contextualizing them. Resemblances between the two poems continue as "to up till vexed" is mirrored by "hardly pressing," with one sense of the latter phrase effortlessly, softly sustaining and undermining the earlier "vexed" note—as if what were "vexed" turned into a "hardly [barely] pressing" matter—and another sense of it reinforcing the troubled, forcefully "pressing" urgency of "to up till vexed."

The value of such work lies in its capacity to challenge the reader's assumptions about what constitutes meaning at each point in the compositional process. In the title "The Sheds Of Our Webs," for example, the reader's eyes are entangled in an exchange of meanings projected from the page, so that the "sheds," as structures or framing mechanisms, are seen to be shedding and stacking their parts to form "our webs." Here text is perceived as fabric (textile, web), composing and decomposing its (de)signs, with the process of re-making it new always apparent to Bernstein's imagination. Also apparent, as the poem begins, is the manner in which time is composed:

Floating on completely vested time, alacrity
 To which abandon skirts another answer

Or part of but not returned.
 Confined to snare, the sumpter portion
 Rolls misty ply on foxglove, thought
 Of once was plentitude of timorous
 Lair, in fact will build around
 It. Shores that glide me, a
 Tender for unkeeping, when fit with
 Sticks embellish empty throw. Days, after
 All, which heave at having had.

(from "Fever Of Case")

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Caught in its own unravelling, the language here draws attention to itself as subject by first seeking to clothe or "embellish" what it speaks of—i.e., fitting time—and then by abandoning or skirting a method of poetic speech that would dress up its subjects ("vested time," "abandon skirts") to fit its message, or "answer." In proposing questions as to how language contextualizes and metaphorizes experience, this poem enacts a response to readers and writers who still see poetry, in Creeley's words, "insist[ing] on those forms," and who "wouldn't know it was a woman unless she was wearing a dress." Located in economic terms, "The Sheds Of Our Webs" sustains one motif registered throughout *Resistance*: sighting words as "floating" capital—[legal] "tender for unkeeping," de-centered, resisting fixed values of meaning—and projecting a sense of how their meanings accumulate (are composed) and depreciate (shed).

It is precisely this quality of fluctuation between gain and loss of meanings which will attract one to *Resistance*. The reactive nature of the language consistently records an unsettling, buoying effect on the reader's senses and redirects any movement to place the reader would momentarily make. One reason for this can be located in the engaging pull of the rhetorical—elevated, stately—tonal markers scattered throughout the text: signs which have traditionally presupposed the impulse to authoritative statement and representation as grounds for their univocal meanings, but which here function as devices "fit [to] . . . embellish [the] empty throw[s]," or the meanings spotted circumferentially around an unspecified, lost center of meaning. Bernstein's use of moral intensifiers to hollow out the rhetorical sweep encompassing these honored message-centers is, at times, comic, as in this from "If There Were A God She Wouldn't Expect Us To Believe In Her":

Who honors these
 chicken feed
 anyway, torqued
 by the lacquered
 arguments, trumped up
 out of shuttling—
 bystanders? (my emphasis)

Elsewhere, as in "Bulge," these intensifiers shape a rhetoric which concretizes, contracts, and conditions the emergence of meaning from even the most morally paradoxical of situations, only to make its case:

Or part of but not returned.
 Confined to snare, the sumpter portion
 Rolls misty ply on foxglove, thought
 Of once was plentitude of timorous
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Elsewhere, as in "Bulge," these intensifiers shape a rhetoric which concretizes, contracts, and conditions the emergence of meaning from even the most morally paradoxical of situations, only to make its case:

The reward for
 love is not
 love, any more
 than the reward
 for disobedience
 is grace. *What*
chains these
 conditions severs
 semblance of
 a hand, two
 fists, in preemptive
 embrace with
 collusion. (my emphasis)

The rhetorical models Bernstein sets up and deflates obviously function as pointers to the societal power structures they help perpetuate. Accordingly, language in *Resistance* is tapped from various traditionally "non-poetic" sources—political, legal, medical, economic—in order to supplant the moral appeal to certainty which their jargons explicitly attempt to "embellish" and propose. Bernstein exposes their message-centers as morally empty and exhausted, and his writing embodies them only to immediately betray any claims to certainty they would intend. It is a writing which does not delimit its labor in exchange for the reader's unequivocal comprehension, or possession. From "Forensic Gastronomy":

The internal logic
 of possession of
 what can not be
 known about
 or gardened
 governs
 all the habitudes
 in a congenital
 series of
 absolute distractions
 flushed with patency
 and pestered
 dumb with
 the breeze.

Considering this rhetorical discourse, I find it difficult to understand how Gerald Burns, in his criticism of Bernstein's work published in *Sulfur* 9, cannot locate a "sustained tone" in *Resistance*: "It's just that [sustained] tone [as can be found in Lewis Carroll's *Snark*] your methods make impossible, and your methods make it impossible by destroying context as the *matrix* of reference." Readers of *Resistance* will find just the opposite to be the case, and they will no doubt hear a sustained—the more accurate word would be buoyed—rhetorically moral tone as one of several tones registered and re-contextualized from line to line, from word to word, in the text. Either Burns can't hear well or

he's not read the work as thoroughly as he's claimed. If he had, he would have also noticed that *Resistance* resonates with the "almost-caught meaning[s]" he denies "language-centered" material in general and Bernstein's writings in particular. (See, for instance, the first line of "Fever Of Case" quoted above, and how the word "levelled" in "levelled up a certain feel" suggests a certain *field* in the process of being raised and "levelled"—like a fever brought down to case—but always fluctuating.) Clearly, in "How to Nonread," Burns has mounted a specious attack on Bernstein and other "language-centered" writers which is based on misguided assumptions about their poetics rather than informed perceptions of their disparate practices. His criticism is evidence that the only way to "nonread" a text is to do precisely what he's done: not read it. And this he has done eloquently, privileging himself not to follow Bernstein's texts into the world.

For those who do not "nonread," the pleasures afforded by *Resistance* will be striking. Like a pressure sensitive needle, the language in this book records a confluence of semantic values as it constantly shifts the reader's focus on the material. In generating a syntactical order built on the compound senses of a word, Charles Bernstein has discovered a site where language is concentrated and projected as a ceaseless multiplication of displaced signs, and where the reader is drawn into the text as one of those signs. This is a territory where, as Edmond Jabes has written, "every word unveils another tie," and where language, in Bernstein's words, appears as "indelibly repurcussive." The misspelling of "repurcussive" brings to mind Williams' words in "The Descent of Winter," which no doubt address the effect Bernstein's work here can sustain:

There are no perfect waves—
Your writings are a sea
full of misspellings and
faulty sentences. Level. Troubled...

This is the sadness of the sea—
waves like words, all broken—
a sameness of lifting and falling mood.

Let the faults of other writings be equally well mined.

BENJAMIN HOLLANDER

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