

South Atlantic Modern Language Association

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *On Equal Terms: Poems* by Charles Bernstein, David Ignatow, Denise Levertov, Louis Simpson, Gerald Stern by Hank Lazer, Charles Bernstein, David Ignatow, Denise Levertov, Louis Simpson and Gerald Stern

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eration of this poem. Cowart was evidently aware of the seriousness of his omission, for he has since published an essay on Gardner's poetry in which a major portion is devoted to *Jason and Medeia*.

The interpretative quibbles of a cranky reviewer notwithstanding, Cowart's *Arches and Light* is an uncommonly fine book, representative of the best literary criticism being written these days. It will remain a standard work on Gardner for a long time to come.

Jeff Henderson, *University of Central Arkansas*

□ *On Equal Terms: Poems by Charles Bernstein, David Ignatow, Denise Levertov, Louis Simpson, Gerald Stern*. Edited by Hank Lazer. University, AL: Book Arts Program, University of Alabama, 1984. 54 pp. \$48.00.

Since the price is just under a dollar a page, let it be noted that each page is ninety-nine square inches, and the press run is only 275 copies, distinctively printed from handset type. The poems, two each by the five poets, earn luxury of presentation by having been unpublished when read at the 1984 Alabama Symposium "What Is a Poet?" Hank Lazer, symposium director, notes in his succinct introduction that it was Walt Whitman who invited readers to come to great poems "on equal terms"; the collection as well as the symposium are intended to demonstrate the "variety and excellence" of poetry in America 130 years after *Leaves of Grass*.

The dominant poem is "Surface Reflectance" (11 pages, 332 lines), by Charles Bernstein, customarily classified with the "language poets," writers who crave the attention given to a complex wine or an outrée entrée (by that phrase, an introduction to Bernstein's antic ear). His purpose, as has been said elsewhere, is "to construct a density that demands a commitment to reading," which sounds unremarkable but does acknowledge a sad truth: the norm for published poetry in the United States is a throwaway anecdote that cannot be misread even with half-attention. Bernstein, resisting quick disposition, relishes words like "emblematicism" and "maxiserve," cares for American artifacts (Studebaker, Tarzan, Xerox), likes limp alliteration and low-energy puns ("Poetics / makes stained bedfellows"). Still, this is a poem of the mind in the act of fending off what will surprise—once we reach hi-tech "screen prompts" and "plug-in-plug-out systems" we gather that his current of consciousness will occasionally arouse amazement/amusement but will sustain interest equivalent to a newspaper page of five years ago ("the hermeneutic ovoid crashes in / on the Pesto Principle").

David Ignatow follows, with a short and clever poem, "What," which

asks with vigorous good humor what to look forward to once the children are born. Today's answer is divorce, but Ignatow, less in thrall to the moment than Bernstein, sees ahead to the disintegration of the physical body and hopes meanwhile we can fly, and while we can, we do. "If We Knew" is longer, also on aging and making do, "purpose" of life being "withheld" and thus forcing humankind to "celebrate its possibility." There is a sort of human faith that death is "our climactic happiness," and therefore we "consecrate" all of life: youth, manhood, and age. It is a fine, deep song, not showing off or fending off.

The first of Denise Levertov's poems, "St. Peter and the Angel," effectively restates the paradox of "freedom and joy" as "more frightening" than arrest and imprisonment. "Grey Sweaters," addressed to her publisher, James Laughlin, briefly meditates on how an object lost or given away can become present again by being "conjured" into art.

Louis Simpson, in "A Bramble Bush," imagines himself imprisoned for months in winter brambles, clutching the dog he went outdoors to find, until the two become skeletons. "But this was not my kind of story." He hurls himself backward until loose. "Lifers" takes place in a small plane passing over Huntsville Prison and a national park; the prisoners have a rodeo, and, being "lifers," "they don't care what they do," explains the pilot. The pilot appears somewhat as God, the poet as part of the Void, and so forth.

Although constructed in unmetred, unrhymed three-line stanzas (whereas the other poems heretofore mentioned have less or no regularity), "Lifers" is much like Levertov's poems and like Ignatow's "If We Knew" in voice, in calmness of diction, and in effort to suggest the Large while concentrating on the specific. There is thus less diversity in the book than there doubtless was in the symposium itself.

Then comes Gerald Stern, who with Whitman's long lines, unabashed anaphora, and oratorical rhythms achieved by repetition and by parallel series ("tie / yourself to the kitchen table, hold your left hand / over your mouth, concentrate on living / a week at a time"), reminds us that there *is* variety in American poetry—a vital variety contrasting with prosaic speech and with Bernstein's cardboard circus animals. The source of the mandates just quoted is a Mexican mosquito, in "Baja." Stern, having killed on the wall a couple of the creatures, is exuberantly imagining the advice they have for him. It is a highly successful fifty-six-line performance, getting at the Large by means of the surprising and the ludicrous, with sufficient length to present a dramatic situation. "Villa-Lobos," depicting a house on a hill, under a blue sky among "ancient leaves," its tenant outdoors tenderly fingering a cello, feeling every day the same "great sadness" or "great joy," is a

rich, fitting conclusion to a sumptuous and unusual sampler.

Charles Vandersee, *University of Virginia*

□ *German Intonation*. By Anthony Fox. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. 120 pp.

In this short work, the author addresses a feature of German pronunciation that language teachers often ignore. Intonation is certainly one of the more elusive aspects of prosody. In modern linguistics, Michael Halliday, among others, has written extensively about English intonation, but little is accessible to the instructor and learner that describes the differences between German and English. An exception, of course, is the now dated, but still useful volume by William Moulton, *The Sounds of English and German* (1962), but Moulton devoted only one chapter to intonation. Among textbooks, only Lohnes/Strothmann, *German: A Structural Approach* (3rd ed., 1980), provides an accurate description that is pedagogically useful. Fox seeks to fill this gap for the instructor and the advanced learner and therefore avoids theoretical discussions and exhaustive bibliographical references (preface v-vi). His work is based theoretically on the "British" (his term) tradition of descriptive linguistics; he collected his own data.

The book is divided into fifteen chapters, including an introduction. Fox argues that "intonation is not just a meaningless accompaniment to speech" (1); it provides additional meaning to every utterance and therefore may work as a barrier to communication for the non-native who does not understand the intonation patterns in the second language. Fox believes that intonation can be taught, but presents his own analysis as only one of several possible approaches. This pedagogical intent represents the most problematic aspect of the book, as will be seen below. The standard for German is Northern German speech, for English, the so-called "Received Pronunciation."

While American Germanists can easily accept the use of Northern German speech as the standard of German intonation, the references to decidedly British pronunciation disturb the language instructor who probably has never studied intonation or British speech. Fox encourages his readers to contrast his analysis of English intonation with their own speech patterns, but it will probably be difficult for non-linguists to make the transfer. The book is thus primarily directed to British readers, and the lack of a parallel analysis of American speech restricts its usefulness for American German instructors.

The other chapters can be divided into two major sections: 1) the