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DON WELLMAN

Islets/Irritations by Charles Bernstein.
Jordan Davies, 1983. 101 pages. No price listed. Paper.

... and a nose of bold free prominence, the even line, the high finish, as it might have been called, of which, had a certain effect of mitigation.

—Henry James, *The Ambassadors*

When I first read this sentence, I despaired of finding the sense of it. The physical description is clear. The “as it might have been called” sets a tone, inviting imitation, while the “of which” floats, creating uncertainty. Where does it attach? What will follow this convolution of the syntax? The consummate stroke, the phrase that identifies the writing as James’ is the last—*mitigation*—a word offered after ample consideration of its consistency and tenderness. The exact purpose underlying the choice remains obscure to me, but the effect—delaying the definitive—is part of the sensibility of the novel. The word is not meant to be measured by its imagistic applicability to the nose in question. A first reading’s fond expectation of clarity has given way to an understanding of larger purpose.

There is much writing that loves to give such a fillip to a phrase. When contextualized in a great modern or late modern novel, the reader may either notice the effect or pass over it in pursuit of other enigmas such as the plot or the symbolism. At first glance, contemporary experimental poetry seems to totally decontextualize such phrases, presenting the language for the love of the sport. For instance, the opening lines of Charles Bernstein’s “Lift Plow Plates”:

For brief scratches, omits,
Lays away the oars (hours).

Yet there is sense—an uncanny logic at work here, unravelling a series of suggestions. The pun: “oars (hours)” reflects the

sensibility, identifying the poem as Bernstein's. After initial puzzlement, it becomes clear that "(hours)" is a thematic choice, not an accident or chance association. Each phrase in this poem, it will be discovered, depends in some way on the foregoing. Again "oars" at first seems to be a piece of found speech. Threading the way back through the accumulated suggestions unlocks the situation the poem is attempting to discover. Holding the collection as a whole at arm's length, the referent "oars," along with other key phrases, repeats itself, adds contours to a situation for which there are ultimately no words. These "given" terms, to use an old phrase, recurring as if by chance, suggest a matrix, prompting the imagination as it gropes for coherence.

So the first line of "Lift Plow Plates" flows from what appears to be a random choice of title. It's unlikely though that Bernstein would be reading a manual on farm-equipment operation. The title sounds found. Yet one can bring to it a context composed of the many discussions of Homer's famous metaphor: the ship plows the waves. Of course, lift oars or they will drag, slow the motion of the ship, add hours! The stress falls on the hidden or omitted terms, which (according to the common analysis) must be suppressed if the metaphor is to give a convincing image of speed. Bernstein's writing decelerates the metaphoric process, lays bare the poetic. Unlike Pound who first broke song into fragments of sausage and mint, Bernstein does not work with suggestive sounds, a screen of melopoeia superimposed on a fabric of images. Instead, he exposes sounds' suggestions, making what might be called anti-poetry.

Is it then fair to expect of such poetry what used to be called form? Reading it, we allow the strands of association to unravel until they peter out. Pound was always tying knots, "patterned integrities" Kenner calls them after Buckminster Fuller. However, Bernstein is not one to leave the ends of his shoe laces dangling on the sidewalk. He loosens the strands of everyday language so that he can walk without constriction, but hopefully with purpose.

What follows the opening of "Lift Plow Plates" then allows associations to proliferate, giving at the same time a sense of integrity:

Flagrant immersion besets all
the best boats. Hands, hearts
don't slip, solidly
(sadly) departs.

The vocabulary continues to display a maritime cast. Decontextualization is not the goal of this forward movement. For that a

truly chance methodology were more fruitful. Instead fragments follow the lead of sounds, measuring the perceptions which are the poem's occasion. The result is unexpected connections, not simply puns *per se*, but paradoxes: "slip, solidly." This plus "sadly," as sound opens the poem to new possibilities of interconnectedness, gives the image of Bernstein's sensibility.

Another aspect, identifying this poem as his, is the play with cliché via substitution: not "flagrant *violation*," the expected, but "immersion," surely suggested in sense by the plowing metaphor, a counter movement from laying away the oars—another measure of the paradoxical sensibility at work.

The division of the material into lines also highlights these motions of the sense: "the best boats. Hands, hearts"—there is delight in the logic that interrupts a series with a period. The poem as a whole takes its shape from sounds' suggestions, especially from the "o" in *plough*, *omit*, and *oars*, as it recurs deliciously in *orientation* and *amortize*:

Empire of sudden, letting, soaks
up flaps of fumes, these (his)
fumes. When in the midst
of—days, chartered
whether or not. And suits.
Simple things (thugs)
poisoned with inception.
Such tools as
amount to ill-bred
orientation. Mrs. X
urging Mr. Z to amortize Miss
O. The snowperson snowed
under. On beam, off target.

Has the integrity of the poem at this pass finally unravelled irreparably? The reputed purpose of too much experiment: anatomizing the working parts of the language—no longer holds sufficient sway in itself. For me, there must be some evidence of compositional value.

Bernstein's sensibility has some similarity to Ashbery's, especially in the longer, syntactically continuous snippets. However, unlike Ashbery or Stevens, he does not perpetually suggest then retract an argument for the intelligibility of phenomenon. He records what he hears, as he hears it, allowing contours to surface rather than willfully imposing, then withdrawing them. In this poem, for instance, the concluding paradox sounds good, while the "(his)" is obscure, seeming a part of some other composition. The reference is missing, though it may define itself in what might be the cigar smoke of the social drama involving X,

Z, & O. The gross outlines of what might pass elsewhere as moral allegory are parodied, the tone suggesting soap operas, comic books, or Russian novels—a sententiousness that confuses morals with property values. A virtual motion emerges, pulling impressions one way, then another, until the compositional possibilities inherent in the poem climax. The casting of the penultimate line is brilliant, of the last—deflating. The effect is wry but not mannered, poking fun at language clichés ranging in scale from metaphor to plot, perceiving reality off-key but playing it by ear.

In addition to short poems like "Lift Plow Plates," the collection includes longer efforts such as "Substance Abuse" and "Asylum." The titles seem to cue the vocabulary as though it were on tape. Allowing the language of the situation to scatter its impressions, the poet discovers a series of propositions, each challenging his purpose in a world that is both too anonymous and too personal. Once attuned to the ways of Bernstein's hearing, the reader senses a larger coherence underlying the insistent permutations of possibilities. The shape-changing of this sensibility, composing itself in stages, leaves unmistakable imprints not only on individual poems, but also on the course of the collection as a whole.

Somewhere Zukofsky asserts that the major form of *The Cantos* is in its musical not its thematic values. But Pound obviously had a compass—and a destination to which the music is a guide. Would that the musical landscaping which he engineered had been the sole purpose of this work! Bernstein, perhaps more inspired by Creeley than anyone else, allows his idiosyncratic music to lead him toward his discoveries.

"Islets/Irritations," the title poem in the collection, focuses the issue that concerns me most in such "open" or "process" based poetry. Just how do the phrases, seen as individual fragments, create a coherence, give a sense of satisfaction or integrity to the assemblage of parts. Each poem tests this problem, is a version of an answer. Key phrases recur, adjusted or torqued to probe different situations. The first poem, in fact, questions the compositional strategies which will allow such an undertaking. The solution however appears not to be hidden within individual phrases, or at the heart of the poems they compose. Bernstein's sensibility, slowly and deliberately sorting through a mass of seemingly unrelated impressions, sustains the writing of this book. "Islets/Irritations" is geared to finding the words which will allow this sensibility to declare itself. Paradoxically, but in keeping with his cast of mind, the effort is self-cancelling.

Each line of "Islets/Irritations" consists of between one and four bits. There are signs of enjambment, as a phrase ending a line will sometimes continue in the next. For instance, at the bottom of the first page, continuing to the second:

short, that it, & then cushions of soda pop frizzing
out of all proportion grandied apples, candied glasses

Commas mid-phrase create pauses; phrases wrapping around the margin (as in prose) allow the reader to go on. These elements effect the pace, move counter to the rhythms indicated by the use of white space, this play reflecting a well thought-out prosody. Similar devices would have allowed the phrases to be stacked in columns and printed in a style more usual for poetry. But visual restraints regarding line length would then apply. Also, if lines are very short, one tends to pause too much. The form here then allows the voice to describe its own contours. Each poem in the collection, by one device or another, aptly tests a variety of such possibilities.

Bernstein's tropes also follow sounds' suggestions, for instance, substituting *frizzing* (which usually applies to hair, though possibly to cushions) for the expected *fizzling*, confuses the prose sense of the phrasing, halting it by introducing what seems to be a hidden narrative. The strategy gives us just so much meaning before pulling up short, sending us off in another direction. These are prosodic values applied to the development of sense, leading to understanding—not of words, but of what this poem calls "inaudible paroxysms."

"Islets/Irritations" outlines the motions which the book as a whole attempts to substantiate. It contains an invocation: "propose, then purpose"—each effect raising a question. The comma here skews the sense toward clarity: propose before conclusions; rather than begin with purpose, discover it. With characteristic irony, the poem defines its motions: "topiary delights, topological regressions"—and its contents: "exquisitely contoured schmuck," the writing insistently questioning its purpose.

Islets/Irritations is more than a collection. There is ample evidence of a constructed whole, running the course from the extremely fragmented style of the first poem to the final poem "Part Quakes" which has a curious way of breaking into plainly stated understatements:

Still even now you cling to
your habit of music.
They ridicule revolutionary theory

and sneer that having a correct
position is sectarian. . . .

The writing probes the soft edges of accepted rhetoric; it moves counter to the lull of accustomed phrasing, discovering the erosion of the societal landscape—the impact of a semiotic which suppresses individual speech or action:

Disregarding
disgruntlement, akin to principal semi-structure
the hawking or the having, gears its semiotic
pitch to the blank physiognomies of the
undermasses. A road impossible to ridicule.

To Bernstein's sensibility, no poetic metamorphosis will transform these subterranean apparitions into "petals on a wet, black bough." An examination of the language that has worked its way into the bread, the air, the water, . . . yields, if not a way out, at least an understanding.