

A trust in rapture and transport.
What is the desperation under that.

Freelance design and production. It broke.
Laotians are stealing the weeds.
With a great mis-trust of intellect, take
heart where it's not but its red flag is.

How many inches from trailer park pride.

How many scotches in region nine

where bells go in the sauce to give the
appetite its anonymous service
anonymous terms. To feed it.

BENJAMIN FRIEDLANDER

Notes on Political Poetry

for Marcus Coelen

Premise: Content has no intrinsic role in the definition of poetry, though poetry as such cannot exist without it. Through this initial compromise of pure aestheticism, poetry makes its unavoidable entry into the sphere of the social.

What is most poetic about a poem is only indirectly a matter of content. A poem must say something, but *what* a poem says matters less than *how*. And this is so notwithstanding the fact that our treasuries of poetry are also books of wisdom. In this sense, the scandal of "political poetry" is less its compromise of pure aestheticism, than the fact that this compromise is accepted as more than a mere convention.

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Premise: There is no political poetry without content.

This is, I would guess, a tautology: the political poem does not exist as such independent of its extrapoetic concerns. What Charles Bernstein calls "the politics of poetic form" is in effect a reframing of the question of form in terms which privilege content. This is not an original notion. Robert Creeley's well-known dictum, "form is never more than an extension of content," overturns the priority given the aesthetic in all post-symbolist poetics (epitomized in Valéry's notion of *la poésie pure*) by acknowledging that the social determines the manner in which the aesthetic makes itself known.

Bernstein goes beyond this, perhaps to the point of undermining once and for all form's solipsistic claim to provide the very measure of the poetic. When Bernstein insists, for example, that "stylistic innovations be recognized not only as alternative aesthetic conventions but also as alternative social formations," he necessarily redefines formalism as a practice in which

"sexual, class, local-historical, biographical, prosodic, and structural dimensions of a poem" all have their say. Since, however, in formalist poetics structure is itself dimensionality, Bernstein would seem to have ceded form's *poetic* sovereignty for the right to share power in a bigger, more influential kingdom. No longer the locus of a "purely structural interpretive hermeneutics," form has become, in Bernstein's conception, a metaphorical mode of sociality, its meaning now dependent on extrapoetic elaborations.

In practice, perhaps, Bernstein has merely formalized the language of social content in order to rescue his notion of "stylistic innovation" from an oblivion of social irrelevance; in theory, however, by robbing "style" of its definitional specificity, its autonomy as an object of study, he has impoverished the very notion he would save. Stylistic innovation—poetic form—only has meaning now when set within a critical context.

Some might argue that form's autonomy has always been a fiction and that Bernstein is simply clarifying a muddle, but if this is so, wouldn't it be more honest, intellectually, to abandon the form-content distinction altogether, to develop an all-new terminological approach? Why does Bernstein resist this? Why do I?

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Premise: Formalism construes the world as a contingency that the poem cannot but help take into account. Creeley, by contrast, construes the world as a form of necessity. Blurring these two views, Bernstein construes form as a contingent world where necessities are nonetheless called to account.

Do I agree with this blurring? Yes and no. Chalk it up to my fascination with deconstruction, with a philosophy that takes up conditions of possibility (and impossibility) as the starting point for all serious analysis: I resist on principle fuzzy definitions. My dogmatism (if I may call it such) is principally terminological—the opposite of Bernstein, whose terms are open-ended and whose "dogmatism" is instead evidenced in usage, in his actual interests as a teacher, editor and critic. Thus, while I *define* poetry purely, i.e., as a function of the poem's formal attributes only, in practice I am drawn by the

impure, by the way a poem dirties itself with non- and antipoetic attributes even in the attempt to wash its hands of these attributes altogether. In this sense, my work embraces social and political content precisely for its parasitic quality—for its apparent extraneousness, which is only an exaggeration of something typical of all poetry.

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Premise: If Robert Frost was right and poetry is what doesn't survive translation, then the pure poem resists translation entirely, and translation is nothing more than an analysis of impurities.

Pyrrhic victory of a poem that would wage war on its own translatability. Success at the cost of communication: David Melnick's *Pcoet*.

Heroic failure of a language that would safeguard the poem's *untranslatability*. Melnick's *Men in Aida*: pure distillation of Homeric song foamy with the bawdiness of English.

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Premise: Poetry's greatness derives more from poetry's failure than from its success, from its inability to root out impurities rather than any attainment of what Zukofsky called its "upper limit," music freed from all the vulgarities of speech.

In any case, because this upper limit is unattainable, poets remain responsible for their vulgarities—for the subjects they choose to glorify with a music always already compromised by the fact that their instrument, language, is above all an instrument of speech.

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Premise: Poetry is "music" compromised by "speech;" "form" compromised by "content;" "contingency" compromised by "necessity;" "eternity" compromised by "history."

Compromise under duress edges into resistance. Resistance, understood as pure form, renders death itself beautiful. The parable of Mandelstam's Stalin ode—the one that got him killed.

Resistance under duress edges into compromise. Phillis Wheatley's famous couplet

"Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join the angelic train"

is scratched by Valéry in all the jim crow cars in heaven.

4 July 1998
Buffalo, NY

THE PURE PRODUCTS OF AMERICA . . .

Like an infant beauty queen
strangled in her basement, the poem
lies inert in its [. . .
. . .] surrounded
by snow, with no sign
of forced entry
and no footprints
and a phony note.

DANIELLE COLLOBERT

from Notebooks 1956-1978

translated by Norma Cole

1956

June

Mountains above Sacro Monte — light air — light curves of
red mountains scraped white wounds — deep — a song — far
away — high toward the horizon. The heat disperses little by
little — fatigue — anachronistic foreground — telephone poles
crossing in front of the entrance to the caves —

Grenada — the forge —
el yunque — the anvil — peaceful noise — regularity of the
blows — hammer — sound of metal — the rhythm intense,
powerful — dark workshop — hanging on the walls — straps
— twisted iron bars — metal shapes — so many shapes — piles
of chain — ploughshares — horseshoes — the giant human
form unfurling and striking — movement of the light — the
smell —
