

The Sophist

CHARLES BERNSTEIN was born in Manhattan in 1950. He has published 27 collections of poetry including *With Strings* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), *Republics of Reality: Poems 1975–1984* (Sun & Moon, 2000) and *Controlling Interests* (reprinted by Roof in 2004). His essays are included in *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago, 1999) and *Content's Dream: Essays 1975–1984* (reprinted by Northwestern University Press, 2001). Bernstein is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Author page: epc.buffalo.edu.

The Sophist

CHARLES BERNSTEIN

Introduction by Ron Silliman



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The Text, the Beloved? Bernstein's *Sophist*

By Ron Silliman

In 1987, when Sun & Moon Press first published *The Sophist*, Charles Bernstein was already one of the dozen or so best known poets of his generation, having gained an enormous amount of visibility as co-editor of the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (1978–81). In the eleven years since he first self-published *Parsing* under the Erving Goffmanesque imprint of Asylum's Press, Bernstein had published ten additional books of poetry, a collection of essays, *Content's Dream*, co-edited his journal, plus an anthology based on it published by Southern Illinois University Press, as well as features on language poetry & environs in both the *Paris Review* & *boundary 2*.

In retrospect, it's almost hard to remember the primitive nature of some of those earliest publications—not only was *Parsing* basically photocopied and stapled, its cover the dark blue stock you would get for a report cover at Kinko's, but *Shade*, Bernstein's first “large” collection from Sun & Moon was stapled & Xeroxed as well, the first volume in that press' Contemporary Literature series, an edition of just 500. With the exception of the S.I.U.P collection from *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, Bernstein's publications up to 1987 had all the features of any poet in the small presses. Some came from presses that disappeared quickly, such as Pod Books or Awede. One, *Islets / Irritations*, was initially published by Jordan Davies, who, in lieu of having a more formal imprint, simply listed his name as publisher. Others were either slender suites suitable for chapbooks, such as *Stigma*, or, in the case of both *Legend* (co-authored with Bruce Andrews, Ray Di Palma, Steve McCaffery & yours truly) and *The Occurrence of Tune*, contained just one poem.

Regardless of how or where they were printed, Bernstein's first three large collections, *Shade* (1978), *Controlling Interests* (1980), and *Islets / Irritations* (1983), were impeccable instances of the well-constructed book of poems. Indeed, after the publication of *Controlling Interests* by Roof Books, Bernstein's reputation as a major American poet has never been in question.

An unwritten premise of the well-formed book of poems has to do with the self-similarity of its contents. The poems tend—that verb's flexibility is important—to look alike. They're approximately the same size, the line lengths and stanzaic strategies similar from poem to poem. If the poems are all relatively short, there may be one or two longer ones, or a suite of linked shorter pieces, that constitute the organizing works around which the book is built.

In the 1950s and '60s, the form was so set that the Wesleyan poets of that generation in particular appeared to have come all from the same cookie-cutter, regardless of any differences otherwise between poets: the "major" work could be a poem between six and 15 pages long, surrounded by shorter pieces that tended to be one or two pages each. That's a form that John Ashbery would caricature mercilessly in his "award-winning" pseudo-academic period of the 1970s & into the '80s.

By the 1980s the form has loosened up a little, but only just. There are more books with "longer" poems—five or six pages apiece—but self-similarity is still the organizing principle underlying the construction of most books. Louis Zukofsky, whose longpoem "A" represents the most thorough meditation on part:whole relations within the poem, touches on this aspect ever so lightly with "A"-16, a four-word text set alongside others that go up as high as "A"-12's 135 pages. But it appears that it never occurred to Zukofsky to stick a section of "A" in amongst the poems that will eventually be compiled into *Complete Short Poetry* when they appeared in individual collections. Similarly, Olson never thought to mix *Maximus* & non-Max poems into a single volume, tho generally only the most devoted Olson acolyte could tell what constituted a Max & what did not. The volumes of Robert Creeley, Frank O'Hara, Jack Spicer, whomever, all follow these same unwritten rules.

As do virtually all of the early volumes on the language poets.

Consider, for example, alternative genres. CDs (or, earlier, tapes & records) from music, or gallery exhibitions of visual artists. A painter may work in different modes, but generally a given exhibit is going to focus on just one, or possibly two that are very closely related. Mickey Hart is not about to bring his anthropological explorations of drumming to his recordings with the Grateful Dead. Brian Eno & Gabriel Byrne put their sound collage pieces onto a single album, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, rather than their own records. Part of what made Harry Partch, the hobo composer who worked not only with invented instruments but his own 72-tone scale, seem like such a nutjob was that some of his self-issued recordings included not just his works, but dry, even tedious lectures about his theories of music.

The Sophist is a jumble, a jungle, a jangle of—dare I say?—overdetermined elements hodge-podged together. If it has an antecedent—there are in fact a few—perhaps the most direct is the conservatory at Citizen Kane's Xanadu, an interior shot for which the ever-resourceful director Orson Welles (a man with more than a little of the Bernstein in him, or vice versa) matted in footage from an old RKO pre-historic adventure. Thus in the background of this too-lush garden one sees a pterodactyl in flight. Work after work in this book proceeds likewise, the obvious & the impossible in a constant, slightly frenetic mambo, not by virtue of reinforcing & building upon the unwritten law of self-sameness, as books of poems *are supposed to* but rather just its opposite—as if each text were antithetical, pushing as hard as could be to establish a new space not announced or even fathomable from what's come before.

Bernstein himself says as much at the outset of the opening poem, coyly titled “The Simply”:

Nothing can contain the empty stare that ricochets
haphazardly against any purpose. My hands
are cold but I see nonetheless with an infrared
charm.

Sentence after sentence in “The Simply” skates always in different directions—*ricochets* is very literal here, as is the claim that *Nothing can contain* this—until, seven pages downstream, one arrives at an equally straightforward denouement:

“You have such a horrible sense of equity which is inequitable because there’s no such thing as equity.” *The text, the beloved?*
Can I stop living when the pain gets too great? Nothing interrupts this moment.
False.

As is always the case in Bernstein’s work, that which appears as if written “haphazardly” is in fact obsessively scripted—*equity* in that first sentence in all of its conceivable meanings, including in that last instance real estate. Similarly *Nothing interrupts* is not the denial of action, but rather the naming of its actor. It’s a dizzying performance, intended I think to connect the reader with the Bernstein of his earlier books, familiar in his lushness, dazzling in the constant display of jaw-dropping devices, drenching us in the humidity of these tropes.

It took me more than one reading of *The Sophist* to understand why, at the conclusion of “The Simply,” Bernstein takes a step back rather than going forward. I think it is to lure readers in, particularly those who have not yet sipped from the langpo Kool-Aid. On the surface, at least, “The Voyage of Life” is a simpler, more traditional poem than “*The Simply*,” whereas the works that immediately follow thereafter:

- A dense prose piece bordering on a story entitled “Fear and Trespass”
- The daft one-act play entitled “Entitlement” (it might have been called “Seven Scenes in Seven Pages”) whose characters consist of Liubov Popova, Jenny Lind, and John Milton
- A poem titled “Outrigger,” whose text comes across as carefully bonkers, its lineation—its key relationship to the

principle of self-sameness—extra leaded, literally, lines spaced more or less at “one-and-one-half spaces”

- “The Years as Swatches,” a long single stanza composed of very short lines—only one line runs four words long, only six run three
- Another story, “The Only Utopia Is in a Now (Another Side of Gagenga . . . frent)
- A 16-line two-stanza poem entitled, “From Lines of Swinburne”
- Another poem, “Special Pleading,” that opens up its lineation
- A poem entirely composed of short bits divided by asterisks in the manner of Ted Berrigan
- “Dysraphism,” one of Bernstein’s signature poems, roughly in the manner of “The Simply,” whose title Bernstein explains in a rather chatty footnote
- “By Cuff,” a poem of just five lines
Flew, then flew
through the hall
then flew
a wasted monument
recalled to perfidy
- “Hitch World,” a three-page poem of dense, but not necessarily deep, stanzas
- “Like DeCLArATionS in a HymIE CEMetArY,” which begins
WheTHER oriented or RETurned tO
sTAndiNg poSTurE
ACCUMULAtED
advicement and bASicALLY

Try sneaking that one through spell-check. The purpose of this list, which characterizes the first 50 of over 170 pages, is to give a sense of how like a gyroscope *The Sophist* proceeds, perpetually off-balance, lunging, lurching from text to text, its only “center” something that each of this works conceivably points to but which proves impossible to nail. It is somewhere in between all of the above.

Seventeen years later, after books like Charles Bernstein's *A Poetics* and *My Way*, *The Sophist* doesn't necessarily look as radical to the eye as perhaps it once did. Significantly, both of those texts are more apt to be characterized as critical—collections of essays into which poetry “intrudes.” Bernstein's own books of poems, such as *With Strings*, have in fact moved back to something closer to what we might expect from a “normal book.” At least the selfsame principle appears more visible there. That something that has taken deeper root in Bernstein's “professional” writing than in his “creative” work should have shown up first here in *The Sophist* is itself worth thinking about.

As are precedents. The two I think are most visible are William Carlos Williams' *Spring & All*, a volume that appeared nearly 50 years before anybody was ready to “get it” back in 1923, mixing Williams' most deeply condensed poems into the hot broth of the most radical poetics text that had, at that late modern moment, been written. Williams' book sunk more or less without a trace, odd enough under any circumstance but positively bizarre given just how famous some of its poems—“The Red Wheel Barrow,” “The Pure Products of America”—later became, tho largely due to being read in WCW's various collected editions. It wasn't until Harvey Brown produced what may have been a pirate edition of the original volume in 1970 that a much later generation of poets found themselves dumbstruck at the brilliance of Williams' total project. I would argue that the organization of *The Sophist* follows *Spring & All* not in its “linked verse in a critical frame,” but rather because the construction of the book itself is understood by its author as a critical act. Which is why it follows that this principle follows Bernstein into his prose more than into his later poetry.

The second source is one that Bernstein sort of half gives away in a title's allusion amidst the poems I listed—Robert Duncan, particularly the Duncan of *Roots and Branches & Bending the Bow*. In many respects, *The Sophist* is very nearly a direct descendant of Duncan's project, mixing as the San Francisco writer's did prose, plays, individual poems, translations, as well as—contra Zukofsky, contra Olson—sections of his ongoing long works, *Passages* and *The Structure of Rime*.

But whereas Duncan understood his commingling of divergent texts as part of a larger organic relation that could be traced back to his life (with some fudging as to chronology in the process, especially in the first of his trio of books, *The Opening of the Field*), the New Yorker Bernstein doesn't buy into the mystical self-justifications—a defensive wall more than anything else—that Duncan erected around his work. Bernstein's text in this sense forms an argument, not an autobiography. It is worth noting that in the opening of "Outrigger," the piece that immediately precedes "The Years as Swatches," Bernstein adapts a device taken directly from Duncan's "The Fire, *Passages 13*," a little grid of phrases apparently with no connection one to the other that nonetheless build tonally.* "The Years as Swatches" appears more Zukofskian with its hyper-narrow lines than the echo of Duncan's *The Years as Catches* might suggest, but its concerns with speech & the ontological status of language directly address this question:

Voice seems
to break
over these
short lines
cracking or
setting loose.
I see a word
& it repeats
itself as
your location
overt becalm
that neither
binds nor furnishes:
articles of
cancelled
port

* Bernstein will return to it again later in the ninth section of "A Person is Not an Entity Symbolic but the Divine Incarnate."

in which I
see you
&
changed by the
mood
return to
sight of
our encounter.
My heart
cleaves
in twos
always
to this
promise
that we
had known but
have forgotten
along the way.
Maze of chalice
gleam a
menace in
the eyes
clearing
once again.
Gravity's loss:
weight of
hazard's probity
remaindered
on the lawn's
intransigent
green.
Funds deplete
the deeper
fund within
us lode no

one has
found.
And yet
as if, when all –
should current
flood its
days
& self
renounce
in concomitant
polity.

This is one of those moments, and poems, in which one might say Bernstein is being startlingly literal. *He means this*. The argument here between politics (the market) and the self (“the deeper / fund within”) comes down clearly in favor of the Enlightenment, even if it is an Enlightenment thoroughly conditioned with a hard-earned cynicism. It is precisely this commitment that will enable the most comic poet of his generation to be, in the same moment, one of the most political.

The Sophist in this sense is a hinge text, for Charles Bernstein & for poetry.

The Simply

Nothing can contain the empty stare that ricochets haphazardly against any purpose. My hands are cold but I see nonetheless with an infrared charm. Beyond these calms is a coast, handy but worse for abuse. Frankly, hiding an adumbration of collectible cathexis, catheterized weekly, burred and bumptious; actually, continually new groups being brought forward for drowning. We get back, I forget to call, we're very tired eating. They think they'll get salvation, but this is fraudulent. Proud as punches—something like Innsbruck, saddles, sashed case; fret which is whirled out of some sort of information; since you ask. We're very, simply to say, smoked by fear, guided by irritation. Rows of desks. *Something like* after a while I'm reading my book, go to store to get more stuff. "You're about as patient as the flame on a match." After the ceremony lunch was served by Mrs. Anne MacIssac, Mrs. Betty MacDonald, and Mrs. Catherine Macleod, and consisted of tea, bannock, homemade cheese oatcakes and molasses cookies. We thank the ladies. Waste not, want not; but there's such a thing as being shabby. Which seems finally to move the matter, but in despair seeing "lived experience" as only possible under the

hegemony of an ideology, an “imaginary”. Started to do this, I corrected, he (they) demurred, I moved aside. Don’t look up but she goes off. “Pleasant Bay news really hasn’t dropped out, it was just on holiday.” To bare it, make it palpable—but not so it can be transcended, rather circulated, exposed to air, plowed, worked until fertile for inhabitation. All huff & puff. Is having a party and wants us to. House burned, possessions destroyed, death. Wind howling in the background, Neil drives over to say there’s an urgent message. Get into it, move through it. These vague reproaches—a handkerchief waved at the tumultuous facade, returning the look with an altogether different effect of discounting. Over and over plagued by the dialectic of such Messianism—tied as it is to a conviction in a primeval totality of word and object, each echoing the truth of the other and the very contours of the cosmic. County Clerk Connie Murray told council that packing dogs had “pretty much wiped out MacPhee”. But why this paralysis of terror and extreme guilt feelings that he had to go out of his way to help us? “For he was working it for all it was worth, just as it was, no doubt, working him, and just as the working and the worked were, as

one might explain, the parties to every relation: the worker in one connection the worked in another.” We’re in Sydney, Nova Scotia, maybe hospital cafeteria. Tendenciously insipient, flaccidly ebullient: transmogrified pullulation. Woman says she’s very busy but will try to look into it when its turn comes up. The landscape has so much the power to overwhelm; walking back some yards in the yard, up a small hill, the vista extends to the ocean; the sky is immense, total; the rolling hills rock into a reverie of place that is sometimes just distracting, at others like some dream of the pastoral as living presence. Took elevator to 3, then walked to 4. The sin of pride, positivity. “I don’t think they make people like him anymore—tough as a boiled owl.” On July 31 Fred Timmons, Bayne and Hattie Smith, Mary Sutherland, Margaret Hartford and Lizzie Daniels enjoyed a treat of strawberries and cream at the home of Grace Kendziora. I am particularly susceptible to the stuff about angels: do you really think so? Intrusion of event blasting through to, exaggerated by, standing in so much more than. 464 moved to side entrance of 101. This would be the ‘now time’ of the communicative moment, reducing as it does to an idealization

of nonhistorical, nonspatial—which is to say—antimaterialist possibility. At some point, later, she meets with an other official. Though my dreams fail me, surely you will not. Nothing brought him so sharply, so roundly, to a sense of his condition as this and no sooner had he outlined the limits he could, he would, reproach himself for; it was in a manner of agreement with this new perception that he was determined to venture onto the scene, equipped, as he would have it to himself, with the sturdiness of conviction, however recent, to match with any presented persuasion; it would not “do” that he had simply donned his views, as one simply “takes up” the morning papers, his assessment took well in hand the need to add recalcitrance to the equipage of his stand; and so it was with sanguine resignation that he departed. The bugs practically get the better of you. “For all that we have not up to the present noticed any more Religion among these poor savages than among *brutes*; this is what wrings our hearts with compassion, if they could know themselves what they themselves are worth, and what they cost him *who has loved us all so much*. Now what consoles us in the midst of this ignorance and barbarism, and what makes us hope

to see the Faith widely implanted, is partly the *docility* they have shown in wishing to be instructed, and partly the honesty and decency we observe in them: for they listen to us so diligently concerning the mysteries of our Faith, and repeat after us, *whether they understand it or not*, all that we declare to them.” In the current debate, idealism is greatly endangered by the common claim among “Marxists” that indeed *it*, as the cultural the social is the material base; surely the task must be to salvage idealism from such ravages. Why not, under a sway so profoundly gentle as this, give the act a credence that, in other light, seemed to demand disapprobation, the account of which, at odd measures, might even be taken if the alarm first not sounds that, painstakingly no more the proviso than encampment, only to force full well the recondite consideration that what is by such confrontation supposed to later allow is just what by deference, accomodation to vitiate, would be then available? Adventure film with poison arrows, seated in front. By objectifying, that is to say neutralizing one’s regard, allowing the integrity of the other and all that it cedes by its

dominion. The world deals with negation and contradiction and does not assert any single scheme. New signs on the federal building, they say FEDERAL BUILDING. Or whether you're dreaming or just thinking to yourself. The isolation, the boredom; the quiet, the space. Why am I not a soul at rest, at peace? Already around the corner _____ are _____. *But* it's not pain *but* the fear of pain that is terrifying. And what price to be so peaceful that nothing is felt or noticed or perturbs. ANXIETY IS MORTALITY. Is everything, then, prey to your cannibalizing search for material? Such visibility suggests radar patterns, launching pads. "Sketchily clustered even, these elements gave out that vague pictorial glow which forms the first appeal of a living 'subject' to the painter's consciousness, but the glimmer became intense as I proceeded to further analysis." *They call me Mister Tibbs*. It is the taint of positive value itself in the mythological structure; to question, that is, all current correspondences even the most luminous, lustrous. **False**. Today turns so that I'm trying, only which helps to explain, now ensconced, as any place has so much fully to; in any case we're makes more count as to

getting, still it will be good to see what's waiting.
She shirks complexion, resents having had. Vague
feel of it but no recollection. *Ex dulcit figitur omnibus
plectum semperis delecto, obit relentere moribus dixum.*

For I have wintered in the fields of the Hesperus and tasted
of the starling; this, too, unbears my trial. Though
the question is, how can you lose something you never had?
Accumulation of accomodation, inherent entertainment an
muddled portion. *That grown we weep for want of.*

SLUMPS AS IT PUMPS. "I've got my instinct trained
to a rare morsel of respect." That is, that I can see myself.
They produced thick tomato sandwiches, saying with pride
that they were brought from Woolworth's. One screw
missing, but you can air condition us all; some kind of far
away village, behind it. Don't you find it chilly
sitting with your Silly? Yet things
beguile us with their beauty
their sullen irascibility: the hay of the
imagination is the solace of a dry soul; which
is to say, keep yourselves handy since
you may be called on at any hour.

One wants almost to shudder (yawn, laugh . . .) in disbelief
at the hierarchization of consciousness in such a dictum

as “first thought, best thought”, as if recovery
were to be prohibited from the kingdom;
for anyway “first thought” is no thinking
at all. There is no ‘actual space of’. So
quiet you can hear the clouds gather. Weep
not, want not; but there’s such a thing as being
numb. “As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.”
I’m screaming at somebody or being screamed at, not
interesting enough to wake up for. Slurps
as it burps. FIRST BURP, BEST BURP. “You take it very well,”
he says admiringly. “I don’t think I would have been as
cheerful if Uncle Bill hadn’t given me money.” The
Case of the Missing Coagulate. *Emphysema* / Nice to see ya.
‘Some such succor’ ‘monozite don’t treat
me right’ ‘infestation of prognostication’.
“You have such a horrible sense of equity which
is inequitable because there’s no such
things as equity.” *The text, the beloved?*
Can I stop living when the pain gets too
great? Nothing interrupts this moment.
False.

The Voyage of Life

*Over the remote hills, which seem
to intercept the stream, and turn
in from its hitherto direct
course, a path is dimly seen, tending
directly toward that cloudy Fabric
which is the object and desire
of the Voyager.*

-THOMAS COLE

Resistance marries faith, not faith persist-
Ence. Which is to say, little to import
Or little brewed from told and anxious
Ground: an alternating round of this or
That, some outline that strikes the looking back,
That gives the Punch and Judy to our show.
If it be temperate, it is temper-
Ance that make us hard; by strength of purpose
Turn Pinocchio into ox or gore
Melons with pickaxes, which the fighting
Back in turn proposes slugged advantage,
Slumped discomfit: rashes of ash, as
On a scape to ripple industry with
Hurls, the helter finds in shrubbing stuns. We
Carve and so are carved in twofold swiftness
Of manifold: the simple act of speak-
Ing, having heard, of crossing, having creased.
Sow not, lest reap, and choke on blooming things:
Innovation is Satan's toy, a train
That rails to semblance, place of memory's
Loss. Or tossed in tune, emboss with gloss in-
Signias of air.

Fear and Trespass

I have no deep respect for words—they're my business, after all.
—ROSS MACDONALD

"Give me your cold seas, I will warm them in mine."
—GIORGIO DE CHIRICO

The physical inadequacy of his kiss didn't really matter. He had come from a great distance in the night, through the stormy surf and silent fields, driven only by a vague but persistent pull toward that balcony overhanging the vacant and astonished garden where memory or the memory of memory called like an Alsatian train ascending from the plateau to the mist above the treetops. Under the palm trees and midnight sun, she thought of her father—an apparition from what could have been a primeval era, filled with shadows, abrupt noises, and looming disembodied faces—and had to admit that she hated him; and yet the word hate agitated her and her uneasiness splashed into the sultry evening, reminding her of Tampa summers eating clams by the shore and the children shouting indecipherable expletives at their mothers as they gurgled down their pop and hot dogs. There was not, for either of them, any hope that they would get back what they had lost, fitful as that had been, under the depthless expanse of the starless night, so that the distance that separated them, measured in feet or years, was a gaping void neither dared fling itself into and yet both hoped—a hope as stippled with dissuasion as desire—to be hurled into it despite themselves, their reticences and singular dismay. There would be no further news—the hideous secret that rended their emotions when it resurfaced, as momentarily as a glimmer in the eye of a police sergeant, only to plunge deep into the subterranean forest of remorse and willed blindness—no witless explanations and bathetic excuses, only the tortured insolvency of the moment breaking like a single wave against a sea castle, habitude of the lost or lingering souls of Atlantis, dream-precursors of the Maya, and of their Olmec destiny.

The summer would end, as seasons always did, the shopkeepers boarding up their windows and salting their pork for the larder, the reproachful church masters preparing for the last

sermon and the stiffer breeze that would blow away the time, or cast it like a fisherman's rod or cadet's brimmed hat; the summer would end, but not as soon as the night.

Where was this place in which they wrapped their eyes—two trains rattling through a long-deserted tunnel at the end of a prairie—in which their hope was buried miles under the sodden earth and encrusted boulders? Who were these people, recklessly engaged in a reconciliation neither could possibly understand or sustain, drawn together as if by a flame on a matchbook match that was already flickering when ignited, ignoble bannisters on the stairway to eternity's pale encroachment, mutilated by the passage yet hypnotized by the terrain? They could no more turn back than they could push on, puppeted by distractions too indistinct to visualize and too intoxicating to shake loose, nor would such a course impose itself on either of them, dumbfounded as they were by the mention of ideas or places or hearts. They stood on the balcony, mute witnesses to a reality beyond their, dwarfing their, aspirations and compromised despair at the same time as exposing them to the brute alchemy of a dependence to which they knew neither the address nor the cure.

If at the point of death the soul has a power to reach into itself and restore a psychic balance previously held in check for that moment, ready cash for the inevitable reckoning of life's grosses and nets, then such a power could also be tapped at penultimate moments when if not life's end then life's means were in sway—or it was with such an intuition that she drew into herself a deep and troubled breath. She inspected her thoughts like a fussy shopper holding up the seconds toward a fluorescent light thirty feet above the selling floor, pulling at the seams and poking the button holes, picking up new pieces as fast as, and as brusquely as, discarding the old ones, until, amidst what was perhaps a blue-plaid conjecture with too big a collar, he spoke her name, at first so softly that he might have been eating it as he rolled it in his mouth, and then, quite gradually, louder and more plainly. The sound of his voice broke her reverie and she shook her head to clear what gray matter

still floated behind her eyes before looking in his direction without, however, looking at him, an irritating habit she had picked up in order to avoid being bothered by strangers but one which, try as she might, informed all her encounters whether with coworkers or local merchants or now with him. Still, the sound, or really sounds, of his voice jolted her and she squinted her eyes in a strained and transparent effort to find his face, which was hard to distinguish from the air or the sound of the radio from the neighbor's patio on which she had grown accustomed to depend for news and relaxation during the long days with no one around except the tradespeople to whom she would sometimes turn for conversation as well as provision. Though convinced of the futility of the visit, it did not occur to him to regret that he had come, or to begin to resent it; sentiment was for people who could afford it, like country clubs and champagne and lobster suppers by a lake, not for someone whose repertory of feelings began at recalcitrance and ended with indifference, who was as oblivious to the unexpressed pain of others as he was to his own chasm of unrequited desperation and chained venality. Neither did he choose to indulge in desultory speculation about the failings of his childhood, if only his mother had soothed him more and reprimanded less he might not have had to do what he had to do, the thought of his mother, of whom he had no conscious memory, sending cold chills into his stomach and down his legs until his knees buckled with the force of his introspection and the increasingly frigid night air. He left as he had come, unknown to the place where he arrived and ungiving to it, a hawk descending for a view of a prey projected by a hunger he does not recognize and so never ceases to indulge, gracefully and indigently.

Entitlement

Cast:

Liubov Popova (1889–1924): Russian constructivist/futurist painter, who abandoned easel paintings in 1921 in favor of a productivist concern for industrial and theatrical design. She died of scarlet fever contracted from her child.

Jenny Lind (1820–87): Swedish coloratura soprano. Under the management of P.T. Barnum she toured the U.S. as the “Swedish Nightingale” (1850–52).

John Milton (1608–74): Puritan revolutionary and radical anti-monarchist, served as propagandist and minister in Oliver Cromwell’s government (1649–60). After the Restoration, now blind, he was forced into retirement where he returned to his early interest in poetry.

1/

POPOVA

Galoshes moan that the tree has
abandoned them to tourniquets—

LIND

Amorous as tumbles—

POPOVA

Forget-me-not disturbance in
quarrelsome monument, oblique
to fall at pitted—

LIND

Loneliness, like a sealed dove in the rain—

POPOVA

Monarchs darting rapaciously, sit at
resemblance in their own chair—

LIND

Like ice, amiability passing away as a perfume—

POPOVA

Boraxed to the clouds—

LIND

Automatic as the hoof of a camel—

POPOVA

Entrained, insouciant—

LIND

Sagacious as a raw oyster—

POPOVA

Sagacious as a dog, blind and befouled, in a meat shop!—

LIND

Bashful as the foam swept off the broad blown sea—

2/

MILTON

Bent is the promise
But that out of Certainty renders up to blame;
Our climate prim, this sullen tide of Talk,
Weak to throttle, garners us
Severely, and butchering officious Hail
Gales over us, disarms all reason.
These tribunes, if any pout, the sentence dormant
Of florid Calm pesters daily
Flouncing or with agile succession of mundanity
Peruse idle in that dented token.

LIND

“Beaten as a road”: her beauty masked like
Cripples at a cross. Blameless as your
Hat, blunt as dawn.

MILTON

What though the tones be frost?
All is not frost; the bearing Frowns
And lair of chrome, embossed swivel,
And sceptre never to flay or haunt:
And what is else to be not tongued?

LIND

Bottomless like liquid lead.

MILTON

That Thorn obdurately advances its pallid purpose
Entranced by who, cascades and barks among a
Crackling trance, but suit its serenade
That to a parcel in this Wrap so schools.

LIND

Play violence like a harp? Engaged
As jewels to their brocade
Snare violet as remorse's gold?

MILTON

That I have also heart to give you steel
If of that heart I vex which maws
What I might have to lend in whom I turn
And curiuser crouch above this thrall
Shunt to what is rounded pain,
Should not you sing your vaunted gall?

3/

POPOVA

Perfuses relatively reluctantly when out at bend
redounding doubly to the throw. Makes
wires stretch illumined pore where bulbous
warmth revamps. Into these sneeze—waffling,
sluggish brutes decided in their noise.

The crank is spin or castanets
brighter for the toll they take then
echelons to mandate alms detected
tracks insolvent fraught with

larks advantaged tract vigilance
for violent qualm.

Strums fortune to maintain the sort employed
in lore:

Production mounts embued
equation, force of ceremony
given way to rite of use.

*Though I could never claim
that left, the place alone
I made in my recoil. Nor
by mere fever do I die—the
scarlet marks of what we
have engendered, machine
that rolls without a trace
of that that sparked it.*

4/

LIND

Brainless as a biscuit, the buds of May
Content as stubble at the eventide
I, a rich pavilion like meadow's glow
Fade—the soap in heaven's day-long wash
Fainter than the joys once doted on
Like to the prick of midnight's dour canoe—

POPOVA

Away but walk or what in having, without
a for our blood a blush, portrayed
betrayed to live among, the reclamation of
is of and only once to stare or state—

LIND

Astute as elbows, chirps like
Smoke of some commoded
Caliban, the journey like the
Gourds in cellars
Unfits the bounty, degrades
Like long entrusted ponies
To their palisade—

POPOVA

Or dimming shade—

LIND

Like as to as—

POPOVA

The hearse disperses—

LIND

Hearer like the tunes they crawl—

POPOVA

In force of lined trajectory
a space for pall.

5/

LIND

Patina breaks and under more patina
A clown to pry away the labor
Slates like water without drinking
The eye alone while organ lacks
A measure to the scopes of show
And hearing not but only like

The world revolves as giddy barber's
Pole around a numinous hollow
For which to see pay tenth your sense in the
Timeless opera of a circus tent.

6/

MILTON

For still she prospers, yet mopes and sprawls
A crystalline confusion to confer these Stalls,
Which I not willing, stored,
What could I, a piece of chalk, but scribble
In determined fright, or stand enmazed?

POPOVA

Yet by force of space delineated
made nets to catch a fall
themselves that trapped us.

LIND

Batty as the day is thronged, loops
Eyelids like a sabre from its sheath
Moaning like an apple fraught with frost.

POPOVA

And turning spin, and spinning die.

7/

MILTON

How soon has my encumbrance, Thought deluded
Plagued this doilied Crew, the shelter of deferral
Till deferral curbs anew: surely verges all obtain,

Absorption, our grasp no judicature might unblend
Impatiently ordained to board-shaped brands
Impatiently for quench of surge, yet thrives my vapor
Within facades, what this vellum could contain;
Leaden which engorged the starts to rend.