

Fighting Language with Language

In his essay titled “Absorption and Impermeability”, language poet Charles Bernstein discusses the way readers formulate meaning through language and text. Exploring both absorption and impermeability, he writes, “Absorption and antiabsorption are copresent in any method of reading or writing, although one or the other may be more obtrusive or evasive. They connote colorations more than dichotomies” (16). Bernstein uses these two categories of processing language in varying levels to create awareness of structure and convention in poetry and prose, with the aim of inviting new relations and meanings into the text.

In an excerpt from his language poem “The Klupzy Girl”, Bernstein breaks down modern literary conventions to expose the true character of knowledge and how readers have been trained to extrapolate meaning from text. “Poetry is like a swoon,” he writes, “with this difference: it brings you to your senses”. This almost dichotomous view of poetry suggests that each individual reader will find varying elements of a poem absorptive and impermeable. After the opening line, Bernstein proceeds to both absorb readers with conventionally familiar lines and references and expel them with seemingly nonsensical structure and unusual pairing of words. Repelling lines such as “The smoke from the boat causes the men to joke” and the abstract structuring of academic language call attention to the way readers have been trained to process text. “Part of its meaning lies in its having exposed the fact that we expect poems to “mean” in certain ways,” argues literary critic Anne Mack (Mack 442). Like Barth’s unfinished sentences in “Lost in the Funhouse”, readers have been hardwired to expect certain meaning from text, and such training only distances them more from the author’s language.

“The Klupzy Girl”, among Bernstein’s other works, intends to expose the underlying structures behind language that predetermine and delimit our experience; however, once meaning is deconstructed, what is left? Literary critic Anne Mack calls Bernstein’s work a “travesty of “meaning” because it flaunts its own deliberate wreckage of meaning” (Mack 441). Critic Bob Perelman agrees that Bernstein targets “normative language” in his writing and loses readers in the process: “Dismissing normative writing leaves no other role for poetry than the negative one of reacting against the center” (Perelman 309). If an author abandons convention, the text loses its absorptive quality: how, then, can language poetry reach its aim of destructuralization and introducing new meaning into words?

Bernstein’s language poetry highlights one of the great ironies of postmodern thought: authors can only destructuralize convention and normative language within the standardized realm of words and symbols. If we use language to structure experience, and language is anticipated and predetermined by convention, then we have essentially predetermined experience. Language poetry and other forms of postmodern literature aim to amend this impairment of thought. However, destructuralization is at best a slippery slope: an author can only cause so much discomfort and unfamiliarity in readers before his or her work becomes inaccessible. Criticism of postmodern literature focuses on its discomfiting ambiguity, simply because readers have been trained to expect certainty and coherence in a “good” work of literature. Only through a careful balancing of “old” and “new”, ambiguous and recognizable, can postmodern writers address the problematic status of language and change the way readers extract meaning from literature.

Works Cited

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- Perelman, Bob. "Write the Power". *American Literary History*: Vol. 6, no.2 (Summer, 1994), pp. 306-324.