The Language of the Sublime: Finlay & Bernstein

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Abstract

In 1971 the Egyptian/American philosopher and critic Ihab Hassan observed a paradigm shift in the cultural consciousness of the West, for which he preferred the term Post-Modernism.[1] Since then, critics and thinkers have been puzzling over the era's experiments in the arts.[2] Some, such as Frederich Jameson, Terry Eagelton and Jürgen Habermas, have argued for the end of creativity itself, accusing postmodernism of Euphoric temporality[3], inherent triviality[4] and nostalgic conservatism.[5] Others, such as Jean Baudrillard, Peter Bürger and Jacques Derrida think of it in even worse terms; as resembling an anti-realist phobia[6], basing an altered consciousness[7] and putting an end to the cultural 'Self'.[8] This paper suggests differently. By comparatively analysing the aesthetics of some of the most prominent experiments in contemporary poetry, it will attempt to show that postmodern cultural sensibility characteristically offers its own highly individualistic, though intrinsically multi-dimensional, aesthetic praxes, requiring similarly particular critical outlooks capable of revealing its rich complexity and positive poetics.

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principal governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*.

Jean-François Lyotard [9]

Every phrase I write, every juxtaposition I make, is a manifestation of using a full-blown language: full of possibilities of meaning & impossibilities of meaning. It cannot be avoided.

Charles Bernstein [10]

I cannot derive from the poems I have written any "method" which can be applied to the writing of the next poem; it comes back, after each poem, to a level of "being", to an almost physical intuition of the time, or of a form, to which I try, with huge uncertainty, to be 'true'.

Ian Hamilton Finlay[11]

As the above lines indicate, the works of both Charles Bernstein (a key figure in the theory and practice of the American Language poetry group), and the late Ian Hamilton Finlay of Scotland (generally known as 'the father of concrete poetry'[12] or as 'Scotland's greatest concrete poet'[13]) seem to invite a particular kind of comparison not only in terms of their public social and cultural ideals, but, more specifically, in terms of their aesthetics'

emphasis on Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the 'Sublime' in his <u>The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge</u> (1984). Rather than simply identifying Finlay and Bernstein within a single school of experimental poetics (Finlay with Concrete poetry, and Bernstein with Language poetry), this paper suggests that comparison of their aesthetics in terms of Lyotard's concept of the 'Sublime' helps to re-define their positive postmodern significance.

Building upon my completed thesis on Finlay as a post-modern poet whose verbal / visual strategies transcend the contours of Concrete poetry to explore various definitions of the post-modern 'Sublime', and upon my completed thesis on the aesthetic of the Language group whose 'anti- and non-narrative'[14] linguistic strategies similarly manifest the subject of the 'Sublime', this article will also suggest that, although seemingly different, the work of both Bernstein and Finlay share significant parallels in terms of their artistic practices and public ideals.

For example, Bernstein's rejection of what he terms as 'the poet's identity' or 'the prosthetic self'[15] in the poem corresponds to Finlay's refusal of what he terms as 'the poetry of anguish and self'[16] in which poets' identities are projected as 'extensions to themselves'.[17] In the same way, Finlay's belief in the poem as a 'model of order'[18], thereby resisting the linearity of discursive traditional poetry corresponds to Bernstein's insistence on a concept of 'order' in writing that does not only suggest 'sequence'

but also 'mode / shape / form / structure' resisting any sort of natural speech-derived syntax, or 'logic'- derived discursiveness'.[19] By the same token, Bernstein's belief in the 'repressive societal conditions reflected in grammar'[20] echoes Finlay's rejection to his culture's increasing repressive 'secularization'[21] and commercialism.

In this sense, Bernstein and Finlay seem to differ only in terms of the tools they each choose to express their particular oppositional poetics. In Finlay's case, this opposition takes the shape of actual legal battles against aspects of authoritarianism or what he sees as 'the secular terror'[22] practiced by his culture's institutions whereas in Bernstein's case it takes the form of theoretical and philosophical opposition against methods of 'control'[23] practiced by his society's economic and political systems. For example, Finlay's well-publicized cultural wars (as in the case of his legal battles against 'Strathclyde Regional Council' over the taxing of his Garden 'Little Sparta'), imply the kind of resistance that Bernstein indicates in his opposition to what he terms 'language control = thought control = reality control'[24] of late capitalism or, as Finlay puts it, 'the secular terror of contemporary culture'.[25] Significantly, Finlay considers these legal battles as 'artistic tools' contributing as much to the 'composition'[26] of his art as the materials he uses for his poetic installations. Similarly, Bernstein's poetic strategies; his principle rejection to any form of 'normative standardization' in the poem's construction, seem inseparable from his commitment to critiquing any hegemonic proscription of the 'rules' for 'the 'clear' and the

'orderly' functioning of language' imposed by his culture's political and economic systems.[27]

In short, as the above quotation from Lyotard suggests, both poets are, indeed, 'working without rules' in order to discover the 'rules', of 'what will have been done'. As the following pages will demonstrate, their work, while utilising different formal configurations and tools, is decidedly similar insofar as it aspires to the kind of meanings that Lyotard defines as 'Unpresentable' (PMC. 78) and associates with the postmodern sensibility. In this sense, Lyotard's concept of the 'Sublime' offers a particularly helpful model for re-defining the positive post-modern impulse in the works of both Finlay and Bernstein.

II. Lyotard and the Postmodern Sublime

In his essay entitled 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism' of 1983, Lyotard defines his concept of the postmodern 'Sublime' by critiquing what he terms as the modern 'nostalgia for the whole and the one', for 'the transparent and the communicable experience', and for 'the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible' (PMC.81- 82). For Lyotard, the sentiment of the 'Sublime' is a 'strong equivocal emotion' in which 'pleasure derives from pain' (PMC.77); 'the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept' (PMC. 81). It develops as a 'conflict between the faculties of the subject, the faculty to 'conceive' of something, and the faculty to 'present' something'

(<u>PMC</u>.77) and emerges only when the imagination or sensibility 'fails to present an object which might, if only in principal, come to match a concept' (<u>PMC</u>.78). In other words, when the distance between a subject's conception of a meaning and her or his ability to present that meaning becomes such that it cannot be bridged by a corresponding experience in language. Lyotard concludes:

We have the idea of the world (the totality of what is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it ... we can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to 'make visible' this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are ideas of which no presentation is possible. Therefore, they impart no knowledge about reality (experience); they also prevent the free union of the faculties which give rise to the sentiment of the beautiful; and they prevent the formation and the stabilization of taste. They can be said to be unpresentable. (<u>PMC</u>,78)

Elaborating this definition of the aesthetic of the 'unpresentable', Lyotard distinguishes between the two human faculties - 'the faculty to conceive of something, and the faculty to present something' (<u>PMC</u>,77) - which, in his view, give rise to the sublime paradox of the emergence of perceptual pleasure from perceptual pain. The faculty to present is 'the nostalgia for presence felt by the human subject' and 'the obscure and futile will which inhabits him in spite of everything', yet it is painfully 'powerless' in its inability to match what is conceived (<u>PMC</u>,79). In other words, Lyotard argues that the faculty to present is not always

capable of matching in presentation what is perceived by the sensibility, yet its persistence and its nostalgia for presentation are equally very strong. On the other hand, the faculty to conceive - 'the power of the faculty to conceive' - works independently from the ability to present what is conceived, 'since it is not the business of our understanding whether or not human sensibility or imagination can match what it conceives' (PMC,80). For Lyotard, then, the faculty to conceive is thus seen as fundamentally arbitrary, resolutely capable and inescapably subjective. Accordingly:

The emphasis can also be placed on the increase of being and the jubilation, which result from the invention of new rules of the game, be it pictorial artistic or any other. (PMC,80)

As I shall suggest in more detail in the following pages, the aesthetics of Finlay and Bernstein characteristically enact this conflict between the two subjective faculties; 'the faculty to conceive of something, and the faculty to present something'. Indeed, Finlay's highly individualistic synthesis of poetry, sculpture, architecture, painting and gardening, and Bernstein's equally particular combinations of poetic, philosophical and political discourses, 'destabilize' the known 'rules' of the artistic 'game' and assume a quality of transcendence over any simplistic artistic categorization, and could therefore be said to constitute what Lyotard calls 'new rules of the language games' (PMC,53).

As the following lines indicate, Lyotard defines the 'modern' in art in terms of this dialectic relationship between the conceivable and the unpresentable:

I shall call modern the art which devotes its 'little technical expertise', … to present the fact that the unpresentable exists. To make visible that there is something which can neither be seen nor made visible ... Kant himself shows the way when he names 'formlessness, the absence of form' as a possible index to the unpresentable. He also says of the empty 'abstraction' which the imagination experiences when in search for a representation of the infinite (another unpresentable): this abstraction itself is like a presentation of the infinite, its 'negative representation'. (PMC,78)

For Lyotard, the 'unpresentable' in modern art can thus be evoked in two ways, by 'empty abstraction' and 'formlessness'. The former is defined by the avoidance of 'figuration or representation', and the latter by the absence of 'recognizable consistency of form'. In Lyotard's terms, modern art thus confuses the presence and the absence of vision:

It will of course 'present' something, though negatively; it will therefore avoid figuration or representation. It will be 'white' like one of Malevitch squares: it will enable us to see only by making it impossible to see; it will please only by causing pain. (PMC,78)

More specifically, Lyotard differentiates modern and post-modern art in terms of the ways in which they articulate the concept of the sublime.

Modern aesthetics is an aesthetics of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure ... The post-modern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself: that, which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. (PMC,81)

The modern, for Lyotard, combines both the sublime and the coherence of form; a uniformity, he suggests, that offers spectators the pleasures of recognition and 'identity'; when the unpresentable is identified as the missing part in presentation. For Lyotard, the post-modern, on the other hand, deprives spectators of such pleasure and simply offers painful allusion to form; an absence of identifiable coherency, and at best, the implicit unpresentable transcendence of negative forms.

Lyotard's differentiation between modern and post-modern aesthetics in terms of their relation to the aesthetic 'unpresentable' anticipates the difference between the aesthetics of Finlay and

Bernstein and those of their immediate historical contexts. In Finlay's case, such context would be the work of Gomringer and the Noigandres Group, as it would be 'the American workshop poem'[28] in the case of Bernstein. While Gomringer and the Noigandres Group advocate a 'sublime' aesthetic, insofar as the form of their work often offers 'matter for solace', the 'recognizable consistency of form' (PMC,81) and a communicable, easily 'deciphered' (PMC,74) content in what they repeatedly term as 'faster communication'[29], Finlay's emphasis upon purity, harmony and order co-exists with the kind of painful absence of coherency and identifiability that Lyotard associates with the post-modern modes of the sublime.

By the same token, while 'the workshop poem' generally advocates a 'sublime' aesthetic which offers recognizable meanings' structures and forms that arrive easily 'at the consciousness' of their reader's own 'identity' (PMC,74), in such cases as William Stafford and Galway Kinnel, Bernstein's insistence upon 'anti-absorptiveness' and 'the artifice of language'[30] as a self-contained, worthy of contemplation objects co-exists with the kind of inconsistency and non-recognizability of form that Lyotard identifies with postmodern manifestations of the 'unpresentable'. In this sense, the work of both Finlay and Bernstein often invites the contemplator to enjoy a more profound and, paradoxically, more pleasurable pleasure of transcendence over 'visible' forms, offering the invisible or 'unpresentable' meanings implied between the visible 'lines' of their work. The following part of this paper will consider these poetic

manifestations in more detail with reference to Ian Hamilton Finlay's poem 'how blue' and Charles Bernstein's poem 'Renumberation'.

III. The Language of The Sublime

The variety of techniques and methods of composition which both Bernstein and Finlay respectively employ in their work seem significantly resistant to claims of final definition. Their work seeks not so much to achieve finality of structure or completion of meaning but, to use Lyotard's terms, 'to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable' (PMC.81). For example, one of Finlay's early poems 'How Blue' (1965) was recently re-orchestrated from its original card version into a sand-blasted glass version (1990) incised on two sheets of glass standing on a wooden plinth. The text of this poem reads:

how blue ?   how blue !

how sad ?   how far !

how small ?   how sad !

how white ?   how small !

how far ?   how white !

Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'How Blue', glass poem ,1965 /1990.

Although visibly tangible, the general formal juxtaposition of materials in this work appears to avoid offering a 'recognizable consistency' (PMC,81) that might be identifiable to the viewer or

the reader. There is no figuration or representation of any specific object. There is no visible proximity to any certain symbolic shape; no single obvious direction of thought, and no focus upon any single particular subject. In short, this work appears to deprive the reader or the viewer of any referential coherence which might allow them to 'decipher images and sequences quickly' and so - in Lyotard's terms - to 'arrive easily at the consciousness' of their 'own identity' (PMC,74). In this sense, this work makes open-ended allusions to ideas and thoughts which, in Lyotard's terms, 'impart no knowledge about reality (experience)' and 'prevent the formation and the stabilization of taste'; in short, ideas which 'can be said to be unpresentable' (PMC,78).

Resisting any one definitive reading, this work 'presents' as many readings as we can imagine. For instance, one might conclude that the general formal quality of 'How Blue' represents the duality of thought. While the word 'how', alluding to the 'manner' or the 'method' with which something is being done or thought of, is repeated in all phrases on both sides of the text, all other words are repeated twice; once in each column of words. This duality is further emphasised by question and exclamation marks, and by the two sheets of glass whose opaque quality suggests a sense of vagueness and illusion. Five adjectives appear in this poem: 'blue', 'white', 'small', 'far' and 'sad'. The descriptions 'small, far, sad' seem to suggest both three-dimensional physical qualities: 'small and far', alluding to size and distance, and the psychological condition 'sad'. At the same time, 'blue and white'

seem to suggest the colour of seawater and reflect metaphorically on the colour of the glass whose general appearance suggests a blend of precisely these two colours. In this way, the work seems to allude metaphorically to the idea that there is some kind of duality in man whose 'sad', 'small' and 'far' figure is further emphasised by questions posed by his own dual and misted thought.

The visual thematics of 'How Blue' are derived from the metaphorical use of the transparency of the two sheets of glass, which suggest both vision and illusion, and intensify the impact of the text, which similarly asks vague questions. How blue or white is something? How far or small is something or somebody? How sad is somebody? Whether exclamations or questions, such statements seem to resist any definite meaning or answer. Considered more generally, this work seems to emphasize its sense of relativity by its formal evocation of a Gray area in which nothing appears decided upon or even fully visualized, and yet whose tangible form attracts the viewer's attention by the intensity of its presence. In Lyotard's terms, it 'enables us to see, only by making it impossible to see', and in this way offers pleasure, but 'only by causing pain' (<u>PMC</u>,78).

Bernstein's short poem 'Renumberation' (1987) seems to achieve the same effect by images and words that 'how blue' obtains from its use of words and sheets of glass:

Premises grant feelings

alone to flicker

and tangled

at stands that

float, or rest

on an hung.

Traced in tongue, barer

in most what pucks aboard

amiss, screening option's

ken, drops point

deposit of vagueness

nearly minded or

clamped.[31]

Like Finlay's 'how blue', Bernstein's 'Renumberation', 'denies itself the solace of good forms' and prevents 'the consensus of a taste, that will make us share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable' (PMC. 81) which Lyotard associates with modern versions of the sublime. It puts forward the 'unpresentable' not as 'the missing' part in presentation, but as 'the presentation' (PMC. 81) itself. More specifically it offers no familiar discursive linearity of language, no representation or metaphorical figuration of any specific object, no single obvious direction of thought, no description of a time or a place, and no specific focus on any particular subject. Instead, it offers densely compact layers of images and metaphors complicating one another in a continuous sequence of non-sequential, non-referential representations of the unpresentable. In other words, the disrupted narrative in

'Renumberation', like that of 'Finlay's 'how blue', deprives its readers of any 'recognizable consistency of form' minimizing self-identification, and maxmizing 'experimentation' (<u>PMC</u>. 74) offering open allusions to the 'conceivable which cannot be presented' (<u>PMC</u>. 79).

As such, this poem seems to offer many readings. For example, one interpretation may be that this poem generally questions and attempts to define the relationship between human beings and places, between reality and concept, between mind and matter. Man with his unstable 'flickering' feelings that are often full of contradictions (stands / float, rest / hung), and with his rigid (barer), mistaken (amiss), and 'vague' thought (traced in tongue) is 'granted' his being by the places around him, by the reality around him, by the 'matter' of which he is composed, and thereby reflects his being on these places, this reality and on the matter that composes him. Resisting any one final interpretation, this poem presents its meanings not so much as statements but as implicit questions about the extent to which such meanings might interact, re-formulate and interpenetrate one other in order to present that which though conceivable about the relation to reality, about the definition of reality, is inherently also 'unpresentable'.

In this sense, the general formal qualities of 'Renumberation' follow two different, if dominant, strategies. The first is grammatically vague, allowing the meaning of its vocabulary and

phrasal structures to remain open-ended in a perpetual tension of interactive undecidability alluding to the sort of meanings that transcend the accumulation of these phrases' and vocabulary's normative gestures, in much the same way as Finlay's metaphorical use of glass in 'how blue' contributes to its open transcendence over the intensity of its physical presence and into areas of meanings and ideas 'unpresentable' in any familiar way.

This strategy culminates in phrasal opacity such as the word 'flicker' in the second line: 'alone to flicker'. Is 'flicker', here, a noun, a verb, or an adjective? Does the third line, 'and tangled', define 'flicker' as an adjective, being added to it? Better still, does the word 'tangled' itself form an adjective added to some absent noun; or is it simply used as a verb's past tense? Moreover, does the adjective 'alone' in the second line describe 'premises' in the first line; or does it describe 'feelings' as well? likewise, does the word 'hung', the past participle of 'hang', in the sixth line, present itself unvaguely as an adjective? If this were the case, what would it be describing? Indeed, what do most of these virtual adjectives / verbs describe or define? Such grammatical vagueness is itself a tool with which Bernstein, like Finlay before him, puts forward the 'unpresentable' 'in presentation itself' (PMC.81). It becomes the 'negative presentation' of that which 'can be conceived' but 'can neither be seen nor made visible' enabling us to see 'only by making it impossible to see' (PMC.78). As Lyotard observes 'the grammar and vocabulary of literary language are no longer accepted as given; rather, they appear as academic forms, as rituals

originating in piety (as Nietzsche said) which prevent the unpresentable from being put forward' (<u>PMC</u>. 81).

The second strategy of this poem's evocation of the aesthetic 'unpresentable' embodies its use of multiple images that reflect metaphorically on one another, and intensify each other's connotations and significances. For example, while the image 'aboard amiss', suggesting, perhaps, that mistakes can be seen to 'carry' people or feelings, is both as complex as it is unusual, the phrase, 'barer in most what pucks', in turn, further complicates its allusions by adding even more abstraction to its gestures, counterbalancing any hint to closure or completion of meaning. Almost every word and phrase in the poem is effectively charged with connotations pregnant with metaphoric gestures to the extent that it becomes hard for the imagination to depict their ultimate image.

Again, the combination of 'deposit' and 'vagueness'; of tangibility and abstraction, in the image 'deposit of vagueness', alludes to more than the simple accumulation of their immediate meanings and into areas of meanings and ideas for which, in Lyotard's terms, 'no presentation is possible' (<u>PMC</u>.78). The following image, 'nearly minded or clamped', adds another even more complexity to the paradixicality of this image by re-defining such 'vagueness' as confined or 'clamped' and the preceding image, 'drops point' offers the same paradoxical unfamiliarity re-

defining both the images 'deposit of vagueness' and 'nearly minded or clamped' adding even more complex abstraction to their 'unpresentable' connotations.

In this sense, 'Renumberation', like 'how blue', offers the kind of 'empty abstraction' which 'the imagination experiences when in search for the unpresentable' that Lyotard associates with the postmodern interpretation of the 'sublime' (PMC. 78). Its highly paradoxical and complex images and metaphors combined with its fracturing of normative linguistic continuities, such as grammar and discursive linearity, offer the 'unpresentable' by means of presentation, and by the painful presence of its unqualified reality.

Transcendental and paradoxical, the work of both Bernstein and Finlay offers variations of the post-modern sublime, relentlessly searching for new aesthetic possibilities not in order to supply reality with illusions of seizability and realizability, but in order to undermine its imperical authority with allusions to alternative realities. The aesthetic of both Finlay and Bernstein instructs us to re-examine the seriousness and the positive impulse of postmodern creativity. As Lyotard observes:

Those who refuse to re-examine the roles of art, pursue successful careers in mass conformism by communicating, by means of "the correct rules", the endemic desire for reality with objects and situations capable of gratifying it' (PMC. 75).

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13 Charles Jencks, 'Aphorism in the Garden of an Aphorist' (1986), Wood Notes Wild, p.107.

14 Jerome McGann, 'Contemporary Poetry: Alternate Routes', Critical Inquiry, vol. 13, no. 3, (Spring, 1987).

15 Charles Bernstein, 'Socialist Realism or Real Socialism', p. 416.

16 Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Pierre Garnier, September 17th, 1963, Image, no. 2, (December, 1964), p.9.

17 Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'Letters to Ernst Jandl' (1965), Chapman, no.78-79 (Edinburgh, 1994), p.12.

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19 Charles Bernstein, 'Thought's Measure', in Content's Dream, pp. 75-76.

20 Charles Bernstein, 'Socialist Realism or Real Socialism' , in Content's Dream, p. 418.

21 Ian Hamilton Finlay interviewed by Paul Crowther, Art & Design, no. 36, 1994.

22 'The Death of Piety' Ian Hamilton Finlay interviewed with an introduction by the author, <u>Jacket</u>, no 15, (December 2001, Internet journal, http://www.jacket.zip.com.au/jacket15/

23 Charles Bernstein, 'The Dollar Value of Poetry', <u>Content's Dream,</u> p. 60

24 Charles Bernstein, 'The Dollar Value of Poetry', p. 60.

25 Ian Hamilton Finlay interviewed by the author (2001).

26 Ian Hamilton Finlay interviewed by the author (2001).

27 Charles Bernstein, 'The Dollar Value of Poetry', pp.58-59.

28 Bob Perelman, '<u>The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History'</u>, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 12. According to Perelman, post-war American poetry has been dominated by writing workshops in numerous creative writing departments throughout the United States, substantiating large networks of legitimation; publishing, reviews and awards, and forming the general poetic background of Language poetry's emergence in the late 60s and early 70s in America. Modelling itself after confessional poets such as 'Plath', 'Lowell' and 'Berryman', 'the workshop poem' takes the poet's 'identity' or 'self' as the primary organising feature in writing. In addition to what he terms 'the automatism of the poetic I', Perelman associates 'the workshop poem' with 'hostility to theory and intellectuality', and dependence on traditional concepts of 'authenticity' 'identity' and 'craft', pp.12-21.

29 See Eugen Gomringer's manifesto 'From Line To Constellation', and the Noigandres Group 's 'Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry' in <u>Concrete Poetry: A World View</u>, Mary Ellen Solt (ed.) (Bloomington / London: Indiana University Press, 1970).

30 Charles Bernstein, 'The Artifice of Absorption', in <u>A Poetics</u> (Massachusetts / London: Harvard University Press,1992).

31 Charles Bernstein, <u>The Sophist</u>, (Los Angeles: Sun &Moon Press, 1987), p.88.