A CONVERSATION WITH CHARLES BERNSTEIN by Elizabeth Burns

In his first full-length collection of new poems in seven years, Charles Bernstein indeed reroutes his poetics. Yet, in *Recalculating* (The University of Chicago Press, $25), the reader hears the familiar elements one has come to expect and hope for in Bernstein's works: the humor, the philosophies, the wake-up calls. But don't look for solace: this collection steers us away from classic elegy.

I studied with Charles Bernstein in the early 1990s in Buffalo, and his poetics have had a profound impact on my writing. The following conversation was inspired by my reading of *Recalculating*. Although I originally intended to create an essay on elegy, the conversation created its own form.

Dear Charles,

I started reading *Recalculating* at three a.m., and by five a.m. was a wreck, and had to stop reading. My mum died three weeks and four hours ago. Grief, death, loss make me a subjective, deviant reader. I read your Emma's name in Bob Perelman's epigraph, and I put the book down. Then up again. Then get to the James quotation in "The Truth in Pudding": "The ladder urges us beyond ourselves. Hence its importance. But in a void, where do we place it?" So, Charles, the loss of your daughter: I can barely anchor this reading, or any questions to you; I cannot place a question, a reading, a ladder. Over twenty years ago, you and I began our conversations about language deflected from, funnier than, experience itself. Now I have your poems in my hand. And they are experience, not just of language, but also of grief. How does grief now anchor language in a way that it had not been anchored before?

Love, Elizabeth

Dear Elizabeth,

*Recalculating* is structured as a journey, with many digressive paths and dead ends. While Emma is present throughout, and isn't that the magic of imagination?, and her loss felt throughout, and isn't that the power of elegy?, the book is not "about" Emma or her death and many of the poems cannot (reasonably) be read through the frame of her death. Emma's death is something that occurred in the course of a time that is chartered in the book. It is also something that is beyond my reason.

So your letters, charting your own reading in and around the book, your own projections and associations, empathsies and griefs, openings and closings, putting aside and returning... all that is part of what I imagine for this book. That is, to be like a well (a hole in the ground with pool of water at bottom); a well that you return to but also turn away from, but also that turns toward you (you hear your echo there). In other words, how can such a series of poems as these be read? How can you bear the reading? Moreover, can the book be a *baring* as it reflects its *bearing* in the world.

What do elegies do? Why do we turn (and re-turn) to them, but also turn away (for example, to the relief of things that are indifferent to our suffering)? What do elegies do? My answer is not console.

David Antin just wrote me this note about the book:

Something startling in the way you provoke or tempt the reader to skirt away from the poem he's reading to the ideas they're glancingly touching on and to turn somewhat reluctantly back to the poem, which moves cheerfully but remorselessly onward. It seems to turn the poem into a kind of brilliantly illuminated bulletin board in which ideas light up the screen and then disappear. But the poem isn't a toy, or, rather, it is a toy that bears thinking about, composed as it is of valuable distractions that make reading a guilty pleasure.

Charles

Dear Charles,

I wanted some Virgilian repose, relief. Instead, I reached the end—or should I say, the last poem in the book, "Before You Go"—and was all ripped up again. Oh, but back a few pages in "Recalculating" I read: "As in the poem plays you or you play the poem." I forgot to play. I just sat back and expected to come out okay.

You tricked me, you bastard.

Elizabeth

Dear Elizabeth,

No tricks up this sleeve.

Charles
Dear Charles,

About suffering, they were never wrong, those Old Masters. That’s a return to that poem that does not console, but in a way says Yes, we always turn our backs on the suffering. BUT says Virgil in The Aeneid, “Every fortune is to be conquered by bearing it.”

The glancing off, as Antin says, sounds like the way poetry, and elegies in particular, can be a relief. Book V of Virgil’s Eclogues is created in dialogue both personal and political, and contains specific lament and elegy. It’s antiphonal. Elegy creates a “community.” Is there not consolation in community? I know that word “community” is overused. But the word conversation itself is “versing with.”

I have always, always felt that your work proceeds from fearlessness. You allow a baring towards grief, so you don’t look for consolation, while I am trying to find ways to stop it up.

Elizabeth

Dear Elizabeth,

I guess it’s stoicism, but I would transform Virgil’s Superanda omnis fortuna ferendo est to Superanda omnis infortunium ferendo est. You are bringing me back to my high school Latin. I guess fortuna is more like “fate”—but just to nail a nail in the coffin.

Charles

Dear Charles,

Yes, I agree. I was thinking the same about fortune—not necessarily “good fortune.”

Well, all of Recalculating is bringing me back to Virgil. I hope you don’t mind that. But the parallels happened the minute you referred to “epic” and “elegy,” and the Aeneid is what happens when you put those two words together. So when Aeneas leaves Troy, he recalculates. And he has to go down into—not Hell—the world of Dis, the underworld. This descent occurs when he reaches Italy. And it is during this descent that he reviews the past and present and future. Political, personal. But you know all this. Still, on your page 83: “A sentence is just a sentence” and its felicicous pun of a sentence in time, as in doing time, and at the same time merely a statement—in Book VI of Virgil’s Aeneid the souls are “sentenced” and Virgil has them in “sentences.” On p. 84 the ITALICS (Italian!) declare: “This is not a sentence.” So, we are not stuck in the time of sentences, the structure of words? We can travel out of them?

(BTW—Do you remember that on 5th floor of Clemens Hall in Buffalo, Ray Federman had that pipe drawing on his door, with that sentence: “Ce n’est pas une pipe”?)

Elizabeth

But of course maybe this is its own form of. But again the hope: maybe not.

Charles

Dear Charles,

In “Recalculating,” you write:

We are gathered at a site of dialogue. As chaotic as our discussions may sometimes seem, we are always making patterns with them.

Most of those patterns are lost in the dark matter of the mystic writing pad.

When I say ‘we’ I don’t mean everyone, or perhaps anyone else, just a sense of collectivity beyond myself.

I am thinking that a collection plate is really just for phone numbers or emails, not for $. You know, let everyone dive in. How can I possibly read this beyond elegy in my own grief? I would read a fucking phone book as an elegy right now. But I also read the grace in your translations. Still, even the sliding across implied in trans signifies to me a way of recreating experience after loss. But everything occurs after something.

Dear Elizabeth,

It’s odd that I just got an email from a young editor starting a new magazine that quotes the exact passage you quote here. It came in two minutes before your email. Of course I always think of Duncan’s much quoted “responsibility is the ability to respond”—so just noting something you know all too well: let’s not stigmatize the inability.

Love, Charles

Dear Charles,

I do hope that p. 140, “Won’t You Give Up This Poem to Someone Who Needs It?” is available. I should like to marry it.

Love, Elizabeth

Dear Charles,

I don’t know what to say. Part of my hope is that some of the poems cannot be read as elegy? Maybe that is not possible. On Levinas: sometimes I think the danger is that poetry is imagined as ethical or responsible. I don’t think of Recalculating as responsible. See “Morality.”

Elizabeth

The poem is not yet available; I will let you know. But as for this conversation: let’s call it a wrap.

No looking back.

Love, Charles