

## *What Are You Fighting For?*

Leslie Scalapino, ed., *War and Peace*. O Books, \$14 (pbk)  
Charles Bernstein, *World on Fire*. Nomados, \$12 (pbk)

Charles Bernstein's early poem, "Matters of Policy" proposes that "love of the/ public good is the only passion that really necessitates speaking to the public" and both Bernstein's chapbook *World on Fire* and the anthology *War and Peace*, edited by Leslie Scalapino examine the role of poetic language in a culture of the political sound bite. These volumes interrogate ideas of poetic responsiveness, political responsibility and the often problematic relationship between rhetoric and an ethical enquiry. A question posed by Fanny Howe's poem "Vigilance" aptly summarises the problems faced by poets responding to the Iraq war: "How can I ask about the value of poetry in a world dominated by the military industrial complex?" To a greater extent these poems consider the status and efficacy of the written word in a world of pyrotechnic warfare. Invariably these issues of representation and address have haunted American poetry and poetics of the twentieth century. Michael Palmer writing on the initial Gulf War drew attention to the prevalence of the controlled imagery of news broadcast on CNN:

We look at the powerful poems of witness of this century and they are not about newspaper reports, and they are not about proposing one's particular *point de repère*, point of view, position, so much as facing something that may even overwhelm the poetic sign in its multiplicity of meanings, something often horrible. The American tendency is to read our politics out of these distant events and then to write some almost self-congratulatory oppositional work.

Many of the poets featured in *War and Peace* are associated with the emergence of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing in the seventies, poets such as Leslie Scalapino, Fanny Howe, Robert Grenier and Jackson Mac Low. Others have a tangential but strong affiliation with the tendency such as Juliana Spahr and Alice Notley. Lyn Hejinian proposes that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing emerged as a response to the Vietnam War and the “fraud endemic to the political culture of the times”. While it is tempting to view L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E as a post-Vietnam “school” of poetry we must also be reminded that the poets featured in *War and Peace* are building upon the tactics of syntactical disruption and linguistic defamiliarisation of an earlier generation of American poets. One has only to consider the examination of atomic and linguistic warfare coupled with the evocation of Whitmanian address in Robert Duncan’s “A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar” written in 1960.

The phenomenal success of *100 Poets Against the War* has prepared the ground for a so-called “innovative” poetry anthology such as *War and Peace*. Certainly it is an inclusive anthology and showcases naive art drawings by Kiki Smith, sculpture by Simone Fattal, as well as line compositions by Robert Grenier; the texture of the writing extending from poetic notes, diary entries, long performance sequences, recollective passages, essay fragments, to conversation pieces and prose poetry. Self-congratulatory this is not. The shift in rhythm, form and texture allows for a response to war which is neither didactic nor self-serving. It is of course simplistic to equate poetic experimentation with a redress of the role and function of poetry, particularly when considering anti-war poetry. But in *War and Peace* the range and challenge of the poems aspire to ideas of multiplicity and complexity as opposed to rhetorical posturing.

Some of the poems in the anthology attempt to reconfigure poetic history. In “They’re Ruthless and Inept” Jackson Mac Low tackles the figure of Robert Lowell as the “fire-breathing Catholic C.O.” of *Life Studies*, giving us the thumbnail history of Lowell’s “Memories of West Street and Lepke”. Norma Cole’s “from new notebook” uses found citations as the basis of her writing; references range from Dante to Blake to Eisenstein and the collage artist Jess. Her poem examines the idealisation of narrative continuity and begins with a questioning which evokes an apocalyptic landscape: “Did the fire/ blaze on? The tree, the book/ bark cher-

ries/ The moon, half, powder/ blue”. Alan Davies’s “Bad Dad” is an extended sequence relying upon tactics of juxtaposition to orchestrate a sustained tempo. Ideas of responsibility, differentiation and an ethical responsiveness are put into a sharp if chilling focus:

Smug affirmation after smug affirmation  
that we  
are we.  
The high priests of war torn porn  
Tube.  
(hello.)  
Supplies of food and water  
Are a kind of gentle reminder  
There  
When they are there.  
Flagrant drift walkers  
Fragrant  
Under air.  
Crematorium over there.

The conjuring of the television’s “war torn porn tube” is evocative of Allen Ginsberg’s formulation of “hydrogen jukebox” to convey the fear of the atomic age in *Howl*. Through this pared down—if not minimal—sequence, Davies creates a text that is a palimpsest of conflicting cultural histories, news reports and political diatribes.

The role and function of public language is further scrutinised by Scalapino in her “Can’t is Night”:

“dis-placing” terror by killing. not movement dis-placing  
language  
the Kurds just move in that space  
waves on a line across it (“we’ve”) courted to fight and  
dropped them to be, were, slaughtered again  
court  
to have them attack on the lands  
where they’re slaughtered then wave on lines on one  
side in  
space “we”

label them freedom fighters on the line's other side the same  
ones "we" label terror  
ists

as words labels space

The collective framing of "we" is placed into ironic ridicule. Scalapino considers the formulation of categorisations, borders, definitions and nomenclatures. Her enquiry considers how fraudulent such formulations often are in public language and their manipulation for convenient political shortcuts.

Bernstein, in his essay "Three or Four Things I Know about Him" proposes that a critique of convention is a legitimate method for revealing an authority which perhaps does not serve "the love of the public good". The poet states that the disruption of established rules of grammar and syntax is linked with a political agency; in effect opening the text to an affirmation of language as a shared commonality:

Prescribed rules of grammar & spelling make language  
seem outside of our control. & a language, even only  
seemingly, wrested from our control is a world taken from  
us; a world in which language becomes a tool for the  
description of the world, words mere instrumentalities for  
representing this world.

Bernstein suggests that the eleven poems in *World on Fire* can be read as a poetic sequence and indeed the individual titles could read as a somewhat skewed Johnny Mercer lyric listing: "One More for the Road", "Stranger in Paradise" and "A Flame in Your Heart". Given that Manhattan is his birthplace and home, it is inevitable that this sequence tackles the repercussions of 9/11. Bernstein is possibly the king of the tampered aphorism or the twenty-first century malapropism; tactics include nonsense rhyme, black humour, punning, grammatical slippage, and the rewriting of found citations and sayings. His humour is often reliant upon the reader's reciprocal awareness of mistakes, errors and linguistic slippage, as in "The Folks Who Live on the Hill" which begins with a deformed evocation of a scene from *Casablanca*: "It's still the same old lorry". He questions wryly, "What's the/ Use in clothespin when you haven't got/ Even the idea of a line?" Images of social disaffiliation and disconnection

constantly emerge, as in “Lost in Drowned Bliss”:

“Things are  
solid; we stumble, unglue, recombine”.

“Or what we see is no more part of  
Us than the baby who beckons from the  
Forest: we splinter the void to catch  
The light, then hail the sparks as paradise”.

To some extent these more recent poems seem less self-assured in using humour as a weapon of resistance. The suggestion of a lyric sensibility at the close of “Lost in Drowned Bliss” signals a certain nostalgia if not for moral certitude, then at least for an affirmation of poetry’s role in the public sphere. Paradoxically, Bernstein’s riposte to military authority becomes most cogent when he assumes a more dogmatic rhetorical refrain. This method creates an impression of call and response, or the intervention of a chorus in “Broken English” which questions, “*What are you fighting for?*” Moreover these interjections are interspersed with a sickening propensity for doctored media images and airbrushed photographs:

Brushing up fate pixel by pixel, burnishing  
dusk: the sum of entropy and elevation.

Tony takes it in his intestine, the sharp  
pain in the body like ripples  
in a sand dune, his face exquisitely detached

from any sign of the sensation.

Bernstein has recognised in “Comedy and the Poetics of Political Form” that “it is almost a joke to speak of poetry and national affairs”. Summoning Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* he affirms: “Poetry is one of the few areas where the right of reconvening is exercised”. This is possibly an ambitious ideal but one which the poetry of *War and Peace* ascribes to. At the less idealistic scale of the poetic spectrum these poems recognise the humility inherent in Ezra Pound’s admission at the close of the *Cantos* that the heroic enterprise is a seductive error; the directive, “To be men not destroyers”.