

EXPLAINING FRANK BIDART



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If you've never read Frank Bidart—if you don't know him at all, or know him only as *il miglior fabbro* to the bewildered and brilliant Robert Lowell of the *Notebook* poems—you may need reassurance when you encounter him for the first time. He is one of those American poets, with Whitman and Williams and Pound, whose poems on first acquaintance don't look at all like poems; to have recreated the spatial design of poetry on the page so late in the innovative course of poetry is the beginning of his genius. For many readers, though—for me, at first—Bidart's spatial innovations marked the end of comprehension. A given page of Bidart—take it almost where you will—won't lie flat; at times the lines are short and jerky, at times, like a kite flown at close range, then suddenly they are all billowing Whitmanian extravagance; then maybe a couplet worthy of Ben Jonson or James Merrill, then a tercet, everything giving way, finally, to a single, capitalized, even capitalized *and* italicized, *WORD*.

Like the following, a section from “The War of Vaslav Nijinsky” in which the dancer describes the second part of *Le Sacre du Printemps*:

The Chosen Virgin

accepts her fate: without considering it,

she knows that her Tribe,—
the Earth itself,—

are UNREMOVED

that the price of continuance
is her BLOOD:—

she *accepts* their guilt,—

...*THEIR GUILT*

THAT THEY DO NOT KNOW EXISTS.

She has become, to use
our term,

a *Saint*.

It is surprising, in a way, that no one before Bidart took seriously the expressive chances afforded by use of the full typewriter keyboard; Cummings of course experimented, but his typographical innovations end up mere jottings; Pound needed several keyboards, in the way an archaeologist needs several outfits, one for each dig. Bidart needs the full set of keys to speak, even to speak *in propria persona*; this is perhaps his signature difficulty.

But there are other difficulties. When Bidart published *Desire* in the US last year a reviewer at the *New Republic* chastised the book for including, among its subjects, incest; that the incest in Bidart transpires between two Ovidian characters, Cinyras and Myrrha, seemed of no consequence: there were proper and improper subjects for poetry. The charge was only secondarily an ethical one: the reviewer objected, as some have over the years, to Bidart's breach of decorum. Certain *pitches* of experience are wrong for lyric, and incest—no matter how supple and intelligent in the telling—is among them. Bidart's oeuvre is filled with such violations of decorum: a poem ("Herbert White") spoken by a child-murderer, one ("Ellen West") spoken by an anorexic; as well as poems about "phone sex" and other aberrant acts. In one poem the speaker is "a dog / sniffing" at the beloved's "crotch." Not to give a false impression: Bidart's collected poems, set beside an evening of network television, wouldn't shock the nun who taught me second grade; but in the drawing room of lyric poetry, it seems, all kinds of behaviour are still embarrassing. Anyone finding himself in Bidart's world for the first time, then, will want the reassurance of a guide.

The best guide, luckily, is the poet himself. Like Stevens, Bidart himself, in poem after poem, explains patiently how we should read him—without (as Frost did on occasion) explaining himself away. The passage I quoted above, significantly, is itself an act of explanation, or several such acts at once—Bidart's voice scoring Nijinsky's voice scoring the dancer's steps in response to his, Nijinsky's, score—and it is in such acts of complex and many-layered explanation that Bidart often comes fully and unmistakably to life. In his long elegy for a friend "The First Hour of the Night", the poet remembers:

During his life, both of us often insisted that our
philosophical discussions, ebullient
arguments, hydra-headed analyses of
the motivations, dilemmas that seemed to block
and fuel our lives,

were central, crucial:—

Indeed Bidart's subjects—the necrophilia, the incest—compel him not *in se* but only in so far as they constitute a “dilemma” establishing high, in many cases impossible, stakes for explanation. His child-murdering necrophiliac “Herbert White” explains how, after many dark nights of violence, guilt suddenly broke over him:

—But then, one night,
nothing worked...

Nothing in the sky
would blur like I wanted it to;
and I couldn't, *couldn't*,

get it to seem to me
that somebody *else* did it...

I tried, and tried, but there was just me there,
and her, and the sharp trees
saying, “That's you standing there.

You're...
just you.”

In a recent poem (“In Memory of Joe Brainard”) Bidart mourns the painter Joe Brainard, his intimate friend, in terms of an “undecipherable code”:

you had somehow erased within you not only
meanness, but anger, the desire to punish
the universe for everything

not achieved, *not* tasted, seen again, touched—;

The terrible word in the passage is “somehow”; Brainard died before the logic of his kindness could be uncovered. That Brainard himself wouldn't have asked for such an explanation is the poem's central irony: the poet, lacking his friend's mysterious kindness, can only complain. There *are* no moments of insight in Bidart without a subsequent act of explanation, no mental act without a verbal form; everything realized is given words, and the forms those words take—not only their dictional and syntactic forms, but also the stresses and emphases that lend them colour—are of special importance. In Sophocles, *anagnorisis* is followed always by an irrational act (a king blinds himself!), an act in excess of language. In Bidart all that excess, everything above and beyond words, wants to find its way down

into words. Brainard's kindness couldn't find speech; Bidart's grief over its sudden absence can and does.

Bidart is the first serious poet since Browning to claim the dramatic monologue as his primary mode; the choice of such a mode must be justified, since any poet who chooses it gives up as much as he gains. Even from "Herbert White"—the first poem in Bidart's first book—we can glean the poetics motivating such a choice, which go something like this: the *donné* of lyric is not, as it is, say, in Hardy, a crisis of the mood; or as in Lowell, a crisis in memory; or as in A.R. Ammons or Jorie Graham, a crisis in perception—but rather a "dilemma", a crisis in *behaviour*. I do something that I don't understand: I treat my body as though it were separate from my mind, or vice versa; I desire precisely the thing forbidden me; I continually renew, and never atone for, my own guilt. Such a crisis, though, in so far as it is a crisis, forces behaviour into consciousness—which, for a poet, means into the imagination. "Ellen West", an anorexic, becomes a figure for the awful necessities of the body; Myrrha (in "The Second Hour") comes to embody unlawful desire (and thereby all desire); guilt of whatever kind or degree finds, at its logical frontier, Herbert White's pony hitched to a post. The extremity of each figure's dilemma ensures that the dilemma will remain on stage, compelling the voice speaking to engage fully, by whatever means, in explanation. The problem for Bidart, as it is for Nijinsky in "The War of Vaslav Nijinsky" is to "join *MY GUILT / to the WORLD'S GUILT*." The guilt of Frank Bidart is a mere behavioural dilemma; the guilt of Nijinsky or of Herbert White or of Myrrha *as written* by Bidart becomes a philosophical one.

Since the dramatic monologue is Bidart's *via philosophia* every element of performance must be drawn with great precision, like the propositions of a Socratic argument. The poet's eccentric punctuation, especially in his earlier poems, reminds us precisely of the stakes of speech even while performing within and against such stakes: if the voice fails to make itself heard, if it remains inert or "textual", another soul is lost. The great annihilating din Bidart shouts over is what (in "Golden State") he calls "mere, neat poetry"—the background into which so many poems disappear, like grey figures against a grey wall. Bidart has argued, in an interview with Mark Halliday, for the necessity of his so-called "elaborate" punctuation:

Syntax—the way words are linked to make phrases, phrases to make sentences, even sentences to make "paragraphs"—has had a huge effect on the punctuation of my poems. Often the syntax is extremely elaborate. As the voice moves through what it is talking about—trying to lay out, acknowledge, organize the "material"—it needs

dependent clauses, interjections, unfinished phrases, sometimes whole sentences in apposition. The only way I can sufficiently *articulate* this movement, express the relative weight and importance of the parts of the sentence...is punctuation.

In the same interview the poet recalls writing a single sentence of Dr Johnson (“The mind must rest on the stability of truth”) over and over, “hundreds of different ways” to get its cadence right; leaving the sentence as he’d found it ignored the life it had taken on in his mind. In the end, he says, he scrapped the poem he’d intended the sentence for altogether; but the experience of scoring a Johnsonian sentence for contemporary voice left a lasting mark on his poems.

Bidart’s interest in “sentence sounds” follows Frost and follows, thereby, a generation of American critics who were influenced by Frost and by Frost’s Amherst and Harvard colleague, Rueben Brower. Bidart was an instructor in Brower’s famous Harvard course “Humanities 6” and was part of a circle, organized around Brower, that included at one time or another, poet and translator David Ferry, critics Richard Poirier, Helen Vendler, William H. Pritchard, Anne Ferry, William Nestrick and Paul DeMan, among many others. The course taught “close reading” as it is still called; whole class hours were devoted to just the kind of minute rewriting of text Bidart practices in his poems—rewriting aimed at making the semantic self of lines and sentences (their “meaning”) face up to other, sometimes repressed, selves—the tonal, the syntactic, the dictive, the imagistic. Bidart’s poetics, then, began as a critical praxis, and many of his poems have performed, as a secondary function, stunning acts of criticism. Of course all imaginative writing is rewriting, the transubstantiation of found to made; but poets usually attempt to conceal either the made-ness of the found (leaving, as Pound does, Confucius in Chinese and Archilocus in Greek) or the found-ness of the made (Narcissus goes unnamed in Frost’s “For Once, Then, Something”; Louise Glück’s poem “Mock Orange” conceals its debt to Genesis). Bidart, though, presents his *trouvailles* as re-written—they neither float, as in Pound, nor dissolve, as in Frost; his “elaborate” punctuation ensures his—Bidart’s—presence in the poem, a presence necessitated by their presence.

“*We fill preexisting forms, and when / we fill them change them and are changed*”, Bidart says in “The Second Hour of the Night”, his long poem from *Desire*. There the pre-existing forms are Hector Berlioz’s memoirs of his wife and Ovid’s tale of Cinyras and Myrrha: two *exempla* of what Bidart calls “fate embedded in the lineaments of desire.” Myrrha’s unlawful desire for her father ruins her and ruins her father; desire, the poem

argues, fuses and thereby heightens existing conditions rather than creating new ones. Ideal sexual union dissolves, for a moment, social identity, fate, age, health, even—especially—gender; but once (as Williams said) the “stain of love is on the world” the world returns to collect its debt. You are never more your father’s daughter than when you have just tricked him into sleeping with you, as Myrrha does; similarly, in the section from Berlioz, the moment the impoverished composer wishes for the love of his future wife, the actress Henriette-Constance Smithson, he creates the conditions of her painful “last journey”. The passage is as powerful as anything Bidart has written, and I quote it at length:

“....At eight in the evening the day of her death
as I struggled across Paris to notify
the Protestant minister required for the ceremony,

the cab in which I rode, *vehicle*
conceived in Hell, made a detour and

took me past the Odeon:—

it was brightly lit for a play then much in vogue.

There, twenty-six years before, I discovered
Shakespeare and Miss Smithson at the same moment.

Hamlet. Ophelia. There
I saw Juliet for the first and last time.

Within the darkness of that arcade on many
winter nights I feverishly
paced or watched frozen in despair.

Through that door I saw her enter
for a rehearsal of *Othello*.

She was unaware of the existence of
the pale dishevelled youth with
haunted eyes staring after her—

*There I asked the gods to allow her
future to rest in my hands.*

If anyone should ask you, Ophelia, whether the unknown
youth without reputation or position
leaning back within the darkness of a pillar

will one day become your
husband and prepare your last journey—

with your great inspired eyes

answer, *He is a harbinger of woe.*”

Of course some sceptics will dock Bidart for leveraging Berlioz to his own advantage; such nay-sayers belong in the dungeon with Keats-baiting Balboa fanciers and the twitchy “originality” fetishisers who thought *The Waste Land* was another Ossian. Berlioz falls in love with the majesty and sadness and wild gravity of Miss Smithson playing Ophelia; we attend to the strange, intense, comic, despairing spectacle of Bidart playing Berlioz.

Anyone who reads “The Second Hour of the Night” will find there, at the very least, intelligence, linear and prosodic innovation, tonal variation, and above all ambition; in addition to which I find innovative lyric beauty (especially in the dreamlike first and last sections), beauty unlike any other in American poetry and pointing its Platonic finger up at philosophic Form. In remembering his wife Berlioz elegizes a performer, not a composer, a person whose imaginative forms left, at least in Berlioz’s time, no trace of their own. The impossibility of bringing such performances down into language—Nijinsky’s foiled need to describe the dance—suggests the generative futility of Bidart’s own aesthetic programme, a futility as profound and terrifying as Stevens’s in “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction” and Eliot’s in *Four Quartets*. But the desire to transcend words has resulted, in our century, in the creation of several cunning and beautiful machines made out of words, and “The Second Hour of the Night” is one of them. Bidart’s newest poem (published in the *Threepenny Review*) is a celebration of another sort of machine, however: the kind that does work. “For the Twentieth Century” is its charming title:

Bound, hungry to pluck again from the thousand
technologies of ecstasy

boundlessness, the world that at a drop of water
rises without boundaries,

I push the PLAY button:—

... *Callas, Laurel & Hardy, Szigeti*

you are alive again,—

the slow movement of K.218
once again no longer

bland, merely pretty, nearly
banal, as it is

in all but Szigeti's hands

*

Therefore you and I and Mozart
must thank the Twentieth Century, for

it made you pattern, form
whose infinite

repeatability within matter
defies matter—

*Malibran. Henry Irving. The young
Joachim.* They are lost, a mountain of

newspaper clippings, become words
not their own words. The art of the performer.

Only within matter can matter be “defied”: something every poet must, at least unconsciously, believe. But Bidart has made such matter-defying matter *his* matter. For that you and I and Nijinsky and Ovid and Hector Berlioz—and even Herbert White—must thank him.