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Joel Bettridge, *Reading as Belief: Language Writing, Poetics, Faith* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 192 pp., \$75.00 (hbk)

Reading as Belief urges us to consider the latent religiosity in the world of Language poetry. To begin with, its evocation of the 'active reader' has 'roots' in the interpretive practices of Reformed theology, and arguments in its favour often use a faith-based rhetoric (p. 84). Readers cannot definitively prove its value any more than a Christian could prove God's existence or goodness to the unconverted. The value of such writing is personal, experientially created during the reading process, and an active faith may well be the primary bonding agent in a community of reader-converts. So as much as gender or class play a role, belief also determines a reader's response to Language poetry. Just as 'Abraham and the saints proceed as if God can be trusted' even when 'confronted with what they do not fully comprehend', readers of this poetry will not find 'a nonlinear, disjunctive style meaningful unless they believe it will be found meaningful' (pp. 44, 23–24). Bettridge argues that 'because I trust these literary works to be meaningful I can read them'; so trust is a necessary precondition for intelligibility (p. 49). Like prayer, faith draws things close, which makes connections, and '[o]nly by way of faith is understanding in a disjunctive world available' (136).

Six of the book's eight chapters construct a common ground for this poetry and this theology, the other two chapters putting it to the test through analyses of Charles Bernstein's *Shadowtime* (2005) and Bruce Andrews's *Lip Service* (2001). The book offers something of a manifesto on faith-based reading strategies, whether the text is the Bible or *Lip Service*, moving from Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards – in particular 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' (1741) and *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746) – to Bernstein's 'Optimism and Critical Excess (Process)' (1989) and Andrews's 'Meaning, Method, Motive' (2008). Bettridge identifies the ethical relation as paramount for these writers, it all being a question of how 'to occupy ethically the discordant world in which we are situated' (p. 14). While foremost in the Christian mind is the soul's relationship with God, and the Language-poet mind works to understand the self-language-other dynamic, they come together in their devotion to textual engagement. The ethical relation begins with how we read our sacred and poetic texts. Effort toward 'intellectual dexterity' in reading's imaginative space carries over to everyday life, with the aim being 'to interpret our texts and each other well' (pp. 11, 71). Where the Christian aspires to a more perfect heaven, Language poetry works toward an equitable social order.

Certain ideas exist 'outside the realm of the debatable' for both parties (p. 34). For the Calvinist, while sin distances one from God, faith in God's love evokes a bond; this faith is nurtured through immersion in the Bible. Calvin's justification by faith entails a 'less rational, more spirit-driven' approach to reading (p. 45). The Language poet, on the other hand, believes that poetic form and aesthetics in general 'are never a matter of taste, but always ethically and politically loaded' and that we 'negotiate a world of radical disconnection [...] in which we have given up on the idea that we can have a direct perception of things as they are' (pp. 3, 33). To broaden his analysis of this 'world of radical disconnection' and its implications, Bettridge incorporates the perspectives of Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations*) and Terrence Deacon (*The Symbolic Species*) on how language determines the limits of thought, and Wendy Brown (*States of Injury*) and Alasdair MacIntyre (*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*) on the troubled state of liberal democracy. In short, the possibility that language 'can connect us to one another and to the world' seems unlikely (p. 70). Bettridge argues, however, that the state of being forsaken, either by language or by God – our creators, depending on your belief system – reveals that wilderness of new beginning so magnetic to American writers and readers: there we can experience the 'loss of self that produces a new self' (p. 118).

So both parties carry their beliefs while also accepting uncertainty. The Christian 'predicament of needing to make individual knowledge insecure in order to find security in an intimate relationship with God' mirrors the predicament of the reader who seeks intimacy with a discordant text, although without 'security' as the telos (p. 99). According to Aquinas in *Summa Theologica*, to live with belief is actually to give 'assent to something one is still thinking about' (p. 29). The world has not concluded, nor has our thinking on it. In Bettridge's reading of Bernstein, we learn to see the word 'poetics' as his synonym for belief, or at the very least what he believes in. For Bernstein poetics is '*an ethical engagement with the shifting conditions of everyday life*' (p. 33). Belief and poetics thus welcome the unknown since only in a state of disjunction can the work of understanding begin. Bettridge writes: 'And if Aquinas "puts his heart" on God, [...] which is the move of faith, then Bernstein "puts his heart" on "the inevitability of metaphor, the linguisticity of perception, the boundedness of thought"', which is also a move of faith (p. 35). Where a Christian trusts in God's unbounded grace, a reader of Language poetry trusts in a text's grace, as it were: she creates meaning through a combination of 'readerly agency and textual discipline' (p. 84).

We do not get in *Reading as Belief* a genealogy of poets who have trusted in the active reader, poets such as Walt Whitman, who stated in 'A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads' (1891) that the 'reader will

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always have his or her part to do, just as much as I have had mine', or Gertrude Stein, who said in a 1946 interview that 'there is no such thing as putting [words] together without sense'. But Bettridge does cite her favourite undergraduate professor: the 'faithful poetics' of the Language writers 'calls to mind William James' insight that just because we 'give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself' (p. 37). In this paradoxical condition of faithful reading, we depend on an agile imagination. 'Where rationalist discourses seek to wean us from the imagination, innovative poetry and faith seek to increase our dependence on it' by fully acknowledging 'the tenuousness of our circumstances' (p. 10). As we flood the intellect with sensation and follow intuition, reading Language poetry becomes an extension of daily life: in reading and as in living, we certainly have our part to do.

'Living those poetics', Bettridge says, thus 'means assiduous talking and writing, reading and responding' (p. 35). Indeed, *Shadowtime*, a libretto on the life and work of Walter Benjamin, and *Lip Service*, which alludes to Dante's *Paradiso* in its structure, are both restless with talk and debate. Andrews's work may be 'the most disruptive of the poetry produced by writers associated with Language writing, and for this reason it provides a crucial test case for our ability to find language meaningful when it is knowingly divorced from a natural connection to the world' (p. 8). While unconverted readers will find *Lip Service* a clamour of white noise, believers will immerse themselves in its wash of various languages and identity-positions. Converted readers face a complex experience of self-disavowal coupled with self-acceptance: 'while we certainly do not exercise complete command over our psychological impulses, we do not escape the ethical implications of our words, desires, and actions' (p. 115). In that way, reading Andrews is not unlike hearing an Edwards sermon. Both writers compel us to accept 'occupation by another, be it a person, a poem, or God' (p. 118). This topic, the idea that Andrews's readers 'forego their autonomy' like Edwards's listeners 'surrender to God', will be the focus of my concluding remarks (p. 105). Bettridge asserts that with their depiction of the contingent self and its relations, Reformed theology and Language poetry offer critiques of liberalism.

Liberal democracy, or pluralism, offers 'a rights-based politics' and a pragmatic approach to government that involves a constant reassessment of policies (p. 23). In practice, liberalism has been divisive – separating people into groups while hiding their differences (inequities) with a rhetoric of equality – and has made a spectacle of policy debate. Discourse is too often generated for the sake of 'free' discourse and in a competition for attention: I win because you lose. Moreover, '[p]references flourish in the liberal arena, not arguments for particular notions of the "good"' (p. 143). In short, according to Brown and MacIntyre, liberal democracy

has fallen into a state of paralysis. And more to the point here, some critics have accused Language poetry of being a symptom of this situation rather than a corrective. For instance, Charles Altieri has said that it does not sufficiently demand 'that we try out identifications with how others construct meanings' (p. 20). From the Altieri perspective, Language poets have encouraged the liberal subject – the one who resists all authority, including that of the text, refusing to be told what to think – with a laissez-faire theory of interpretation. The Stein or Andrews covenant with the reader is too (in quotes) 'American'.

As Bettridge points out, however, active does not mean free; it means willing to risk who you think you are and, concomitantly, what you think language is. The implicated reader is not just a liberatory ideal but a fact: 'for meaning to occur readers must recognise that they shape it' (p. 17). Language poetry has at heart the social reader who recognises the limits on individual agency, in language, consciousness, and behaviour. Altieri would apparently have us believe in static positions for reader and writer ('we [should] try out identifications with how others construct meanings') and that they can be transposed. But they are fluid, and we are reading poems, not people, the meanings of which we help to construct – writing and reading are both intersubjective. Whether Bettridge calls it textual discipline or the move of faith, he clearly resists the unfettered skip of free association: like prayer, reading as a form of belief moves us close to the text. No Christian can afford a laissez-faire theory of interpretation of the Bible, and this book effectively links that requisite textual devotion with the ideals of Language poetry.

Bettridge's skilful handling of this large topic – the poet-text-reader relationship and American liberalism – represents well, I think, the lucid percipience we see throughout the book. Any shortcomings are mainly due to brevity. More could have been said on 'reading as belief' being so American, as well as on Emerson's notion of a faith-based reading, Alan Jacobs' and Martha Nussbaum's theories of readerly love, and the conversion experience itself. These topics were raised but quickly. In any case, I end with a return to that central question: does Language poetry engender ethical lives? To the extent that it functions like Reformed Christianity, says *Reading as Belief*, it does: 'Understood as a moment of mutual production, reading, undertaken in faith, makes readers and literary works responsive, and hence responsible, to one another' (p. 81). Or so we can believe. This is a provocative first book by a young poet-critic, and I am eager to see what he does next.

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