Trauma and Poetic Narrative in Frank Bidart’s Poetic Works

Katie Kinkel, Class of 2013

This summer, I read broadly in the poetic works of Frank Bidart, a contemporary American poet. My project began with a fascination with Bidart’s dramatic monologues—long poems written primarily from a fictional or historical subject’s perspective—and several questions that arose while reading. These forceful poems often explicitly or implicitly engage relations of trauma and violence, but manage to maintain an intimate, and even sympathetic, relationship between narrator and reader. As a learning poet and a student of contemporary poetry, I felt much remained to be written and researched about the cultural, literary, and historical origins of Bidart’s style and tone, and decided to spend the summer reading, researching, and writing on the subject.

After an extensive search of libraries and databases, I found little had been written on Bidart’s monologues, leaving a wide margin for research and analysis. I began with a rather simple series of questions, which I articulated at the outset of this project: How does a poet effectively represent violence and trauma in poetry? How does Bidart appropriate the postmodernist poetic ‘style’ to historical voices and perspectives, and how is the experience of trauma enriched by this sparse and commanding contemporary tone? How and why does Bidart apply personal traumas to larger ‘global traumas’? Finally, how does one ‘read’ the traumas of history through the voices and actions of specific figures in poetry? These questions formed a basic framework for my research, though I soon found myself captivated by other questions as well.

While reading through “The War of Vaslav Nijinsky,” one of Bidart’s longest and most extensive dramatic monologues, I was surprised by the many similarities in tone and subject matter to one of Bidart’s later texts, a book of poems entitled Star Dust. There seems to be a general consensus among Bidart’s readers that if dramatic monologues are formal threads throughout the poet’s career, there are two main poetic ‘interests’—desire and the act of making—that dominate the poems’ subject matter. Desire adopts many permutations in Bidart, from the expected sexual and explicit to desires for one’s self and mind. Making is an even more variable term in Bidart’s poems, but often has much to do with the life one creates for oneself, often measured in the making of art or writing. There seems to be a temptation to dichotomize the themes of desiring and making, restricting desire to the text aptly called Desire and making to the later Star Dust. In the earlier poem “The War of Vaslav Nijinsky,” however, I read a startling fusion of both themes that later became evident in other long poems and monologues, including the ‘hours of the night’ poems, and the often-paired monologues “Herbert White” and “Ellen West.” There seemed to be a common theoretical basis for discussing the themes of desiring and making in tandem, and I began to understand that this theoretical basis could also be a foundation for my writing and research on Bidart.

So, what began as an inquiry into largely formal questions about monologic representations of trauma evolved into a cross-textual study of the themes driving the forms—primarily, the Bidartian relationship between desiring and making. My first impulse—which lasted throughout my reading and writing this summer—was to search for some theoretical basis for a bodily relationship to making in Marxism. My first readings in Karl Marx’s The German Ideology and Wage Labor and Capital proved illustrative of several of the tensions I was
interested in, and I wrote extensively on the relationship between these texts and “The War of Vaslav Nijinsky.” At Professor Coviello’s suggestion, I also read a few texts that deal with Marxism and Queer Theory, as an example of ways to look at bodilyness in relation to labor. Central to this investigation were Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*, Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* and Christopher Nealon’s *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall*. These texts provided a crucial framework for thinking about the ways in which Bidart himself retrospectively and sometimes libidinally attaches to his subjects of interest, relationships between bodilyness and art, and the often painful dynamics and schisms between the individual and his or her specific ‘place’ in historical moments.

My final and most important interest derived from an oft-quoted passage in Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*—and all of the theoretical background supporting that passage—in which he argues, “history is what hurts.” Many theorists and writers have offered their own interpretations of what this phrase might mean, but in the larger context of *The Political Unconscious* and Marxism more broadly, it has much to do with the challenge of embodying—in a quite literally physical and bodily sense—one’s particular moment in history. That is to say, the body is inextricably involved in the ways in which an individual relates to historical ‘moments,’ and history often “hurts” quite literally in its forceful reduction or minimalization of all that the body ‘is.’

After reading widely in Marxism and Bidart’s work, I think delving with such rigorosity into the difficulties of making and desiring within these terms is Bidart’s way of worrying over the complexities of inhabiting a historical body. What would it mean, he seems to ask, not just to resist the strictures of Marxist ‘embodiment’ through work—that is, to lend a larger degree of ‘meaning’ to one’s bodily production than Marxist capitalism allows or predicts—but to operate outside of these strictures? It seems fine enough, he seems to say, to talk about Marxism's benefits in a broad sense, but what would this kind of operation look like? What would an individual feel while trying to embody this 'new' physicality? Poems are Bidart’s way of demanding more of these questions; of showing that the ‘solutions’ may involve more complexities and difficulties than they appear.

One very important problem about bodilyness and history, Bidart seems to offer, is that the body is never sufficient to master or embody 'feeling.' Further, a heightened sense of bodilyness, or the body's capacity for work, is difficult to put into practice. It comes with its own torments and complications that may, in some ways, far exceed those created by capitalism alone. While questions the strictures and pains of capitalism and history, therefore, Bidart wants to spend time worrying over the ways in which the body relates to its making and desiring. If Bidart does in fact bend preconceived notions about bodilyness and work, he importantly does not fail to interrogate the problematic of changed relationships between these themes— and perhaps even makes these problems his central concern.

In these poems, then, art-the practice, in some ways, of almost all of his 'characters'- is a historical moment of insufficiency between bodilyness and intellect. Bending understood relationships between the two seems to be the space in which affect allows creativity. This might be, I tentatively concluded, one way of approaching Jameson's idea of "history as what hurts"- art, and 'pain,' as results of an attempted fusion between two senses of self that are, historically and/or internally, divided. If art is the space for individual exploration of these relationships, then deeply personal dramatic monologic investments in an artist’s life might tell us much about the

---

ways in which individuals relate their art to larger movements—political, economic, or otherwise—in history. The fragmented, violent, and often traumatic nature of Frank Bidart’s narratives is, in this sense, a commentary of the difficulty of making meaning of one’s work in the present moment; the poems are a creative representation of the self-perceived schism between the self and its making, and the larger structures that enable the schism.

Professor Peter Coviello

Funded by the Surdna Foundation