

**Cultivating inter-being:
human-plant society in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's *Hello, the Roses***

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This paper considers Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's 2013 collection, *Hello, the Roses*, as an example of poetry as social action. The poetry is social in the general sense that, as Theodor Adorno suggests of all lyric poetry, its language "establishes an inescapable relationship to the universal and to society", even when it "assimilates itself completely into subjective impulses" (43). Unlike the lyrics described by Adorno, however, and despite a recent review of *Hello, the Roses* in the *New York Times* claiming that "Berssenbrugge would be hard pressed to notice other people walking along the mesa," these poems don't make social withdrawal their rule. This is first apparent on their surface, in their engagement in a society of text: like much of Berssenbrugge's work, many of these poems are written "through" and in response to specific source texts. Most visibly in this volume she is working with Deleuze's *Pure Immanence*, and its descriptions of the work of David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche, but other texts quoted and paraphrased include Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* and Amit Goswami's *The Self-Aware Universe*.

While one might also pick out other defining interactions between humans (as individuals and groups) in the poems, this paper is primarily concerned with the poems' social action in defining and extending a further social realm: one with human-plant relations at its "verdant heart". These relations as Berssenbrugge explores them are themselves sociable, in that they are based in communication, in sustained conscious co-presence and, at another level, in unity of being. "Different species communicate and energies of environment and its inhabitants merge", she writes in "Winter Whites" (31). It is worth noting that the relations of different species within that shared being are essentially amicable in character, as the title of the volume suggests, calling to mind the Latin *socius* as indicating comradeship and

alliance; the relational quality characterised within the volume is cooperative, and indeed loving.

The poems are intently focused on awareness and communication within this realm of shared being. As they work through that focus they are often grounded in sensory description, but Berssenbrugge is not so much writing images as writing image movement within carefully devised systems of affect. The poems are informed by Hume's conception of the social and institutional role of the imagination as having the ability to extend individual passion beyond the partiality of egotistic self-interest. In Hume's thinking (as described by Deleuze in *Pure Immanence*) imagination has the power both to lead people into moral, judicial or political sentiments that can consider others, and to help cultivate the development of institutions accordingly (including the institutions of taste and culture) (*Pure Immanence* 47). The social action of these poems is part of that work: in writing an affective intimacy between humans and plants within a greater ecology, Berssenbrugge is inventing, naturalising and attuning a relational framework in language that alters some of the givens of the current social imaginary. Given that there is in most contemporary culture little sophisticated social imaginary that is inclusive of plants (however they might feature in our economic imaginaries), we can see where that alteration begins.

The poems invoke, define and extend several forms of relation between plants and human-animals across the volume. To explore these differentiations, and the work of the poems themselves as linguistic forms, it is helpful to invoke the idea of the hologram as an organising metaphor. While this metaphor might seem, at first glance, oddly exterior to the social-organic network being explored, it is proposed by the work itself, and has multiple functions as an image structure for the dimensionality of the poetry, and for the differentiating contexts that poetry offers for human-plant relations.

Etymologically, *holography* suggests a "whole image" or "whole writing" – something written in full, or all by one hand. Each of these semantic impressions is active in the text, but Berssenbrugge also uses the word for its concrete reference to holographic composition as a technical process for making a hologram. This process is worth describing further. A hologram is an apparently three-dimensional image of an object, which is recorded by splitting a beam of light into (at least) a couple of beams, one of which reflects off the object, and one of which is reflected around the object as a reference beam. The interference of the wave patterns as the beams meet again and cohere is informationally rich, and it creates a

code for the image-properties of the object. This code is recorded on the recording medium, the holographic plate. When it is reactivated by another beam of light (and the viewer's eyes and brain), the three-dimensional image becomes visible¹.

One can see Berssenbrugge inviting the reader into this process as a metaphoric structure in the following sentences, from the poem "Hello, the Roses":

A moment extends to time passing as sense impressions of a rose, including new joys where imagined roses, roses I haven't yet seen or seen in books record as my experience.

Then experience is revelation, because plants and people have in their cells particles of light that can become coherent, that radiate out physically and also with the creativity of metaphor, as in a beam of light holographically, i.e., by intuition, in which I inhale the perfume of the Bourbon rose, then try to separate what is scent, sense, and what you call memory, what is emotion, where in a dialogue like touching is it so vibratory and so absorbent of my attention and longing, with impressions like fingerprints all over.

(59)

At one level this passage, like so many in this book, seems to aspire to a "whole writing" in its fullness, its grammatical completion and elaboration through phenomenological turns and associative slides that open the sentence to angle after angle of an extended moment's communion with a rose. As she explores this moment, holography is invoked as a process image, in which particles of light become coherent and radiate out, and then are separated, before a receptive medium absorbs these vibrational imprints.

The metaphor has multiple layers of significance to Berssenbrugge's plant-human poetics. Light offers an image of a relation between subject, object and object-image. This is important precisely because it turns attention to the relational, rather than to any isolated term. That relation is both exterior to subject, object, and object-image, and inclusive of them (electromagnetically and at the level of function). This simultaneous exteriority and

¹ A simple but more detailed explanation and diagrams are available at <http://science.howstuffworks.com/hologram1.htm>

inclusion helps to construct the model of self-object or self-world connectivity Berssenbrugge writes in.

Holographic light is both coherent and diversified. Its beams are distinct and mutually necessary to a recording of an image that appears dimensionally whole. In other words, these beams are partial. Their relation can be considered as a figure for the structural arrangement of paradigms of relation in the poems, as I will discuss. Holographic light is also resonant as relational image for the phrase by phrase or sentence by sentence frame shifts in the work, and the way these tend to cohere, to “make sense” or syllogistically resolve (with interference) at levels higher than the sentence. (This terminology draws from Ron Silliman’s *The New Sentence*, which I will return to, but for the moment it is worth noting that it is precisely because of this movement towards syllogistic resolution that Berssenbrugge’s are not “new sentences”.)

In a recorded hologram, partiality may give the appearance of wholeness, an effect known as the principle of redundancy. This effect means one can cut away a piece of a recorded hologram and still see in it what appears to be the whole image. In fact such a cut results in a loss of resolution, but the image properties appear the same. One can see that kind of effect at work in the poems, in the way a shorter passage, such as the one quoted above, presents a microcosm of the ideas that are folded out over the whole.

Taking the metaphoric structure of the hologram back into discussion of how humans and plants associate in this work, it is possible to identify four streams, four paths of relation taken or made by the “light” of Berssenbrugge’s poetic seeing in language. Each stream is distinct, available to being separated out, but is also part of a coherent unity with others. In their independent partiality and apparent self-completion they are not always either compatible with each other’s terms, or fully separable; this is the paradox that makes the holographic process-image helpful.

The four streams to be discussed here are those of the material; of imaginative extension; of emanation and of immanence. As we shall see these relations are often mutually present. They nest within each other or they morph into one another, but they can also be seen in distinction.

The material

Berssenbrugge's work has been noted for its denotative descriptiveness². Certainly that descriptiveness is often applied in Berssenbrugge's work to what is sensorily perceptible, but the boundaries and definitions of what that might be are in constant dialogue and dissolution. Berssenbrugge's sentence work – including the reliability of the subject-predicate structures in her grammatical completions – is consonant with the work of description, but in those sentences what is material often appears as a term within a perceptual proposition, rather than as an object of stable identification. Identification is kept in motion through elaboration and association. A good example is the following sentence from "Green", which sees the concept of the objectively "real" in flux with the concept of the perceptible, both emerging from potentiality: "Birdsong exists in realizable terms; if I were deaf, song is still possible, or on my walk at night, green."(45)

Because the focus in this poetry is on a dynamic relation between the perceiver, the perceived and the possible, there's little to no description of static or "flat" sensory contents. This means that there's little here that resembles imagism or landscape as visual presentation; plants within a living environment are, like humans, relational participants, rather than objects. The material world exists, but wherever anything like flat or objective depiction appears, that depiction is presented as part of the dynamic of artifice itself, as a moment in a dimensional flow of action:

I photographed a tree growing from a stone; I photographed the bowed heads of two adults looking at a girl.

("Pure Immanence" 26)

I saw the screens of life as flat displays I could enter to empathize, experience, then come out to observe.

Today, "screen" is this corridor through trees, an actual passageway....

Before, I and mossy trunks or I and she did not inhabit the same space.

² See Charles Altieri, "Intimacy and Experiment in Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge's *Empathy*".

There wasn't depth between myself and trees, since I saw them from a place outside their world in the audience.

("Karmic Trace" 81)

"Audience" in the line above can be understood as those who hear, and in making herself part of the world of audience, along with the trees, Berssenbrugge challenges the received subject-object relations that attend the "natural" landscape and the poet who sees it. More unusually yet, part of what she hears from her position in the audience is intention:

The tree exemplifies nature as it relates with humans, feeling around the edges of our concepts, sensing openings in our awareness and forming alliances.

It enjoys contributing to our life, though there's no individual consciousness per se.

The "tree" just chooses to focus western juniper, volcanic basalt.

("Pure Immanence" 26)

In passages like these, with their affective attributions, one might question precisely where the line is between the sensibly material and the imagined. But the poems focus that line and dissolve it:

How does music assimilating in my body induce tiny muscles at the base of my hair to contract, alter consciousness?

Besides translating inner images into a painting, for example, we unconsciously translate inaudible sounds into images, or a spring peeper translates its multidimensions aurally.

("DJ Frogs" 41)

Here music induces, just as the tree senses and enjoys. The idea that the subject's imaginative extension of perception might be at the behest of the object of perception, rather than that of the subject, has some quite radical implications. For one, it begins to dissolve assumptions of exceptional human agency in thought and communication. The experience of looking is written as a mutually active process, and intentionality is therefore no longer the domain of

humans alone. Plants are not simply perceived, they intend their perceptual presence. This idea is grounded in quite materially specific terms:

When my fluctuating electromagnetic field touches that of another person, plant or entity, emotion is my perception of data encoded in that field.

So when a plant projects coherent energy, others respond and become more animated, open, connected.

....

You and I nest within many such fields from a rose.

(“Slow Down, Now” 54)

Imaginative extension

We can see that contact with material representation in this work readily draws us into other streams of ideation: into the imaginative extensions of sensations that lead into attribution of intention (both in humans and plants), but also into simile or symbol structures. This is visible in some of the examples already discussed; very often a sentence is completed through a simile, where associations of likeness open up conceptual parallels, or connotative substrates. Indeed, a simile is often a portal to a metaphoric, symbolic or fantastic structure that sustains implicitly elsewhere in the work: Berssenbrugge writes “love from others can look like one rose”, and the rose takes that specificity in each of its appearances across the text.

This stream also connects us to existing symbols in other works, and most notably in this example to the last cantos of Dante’s *Paradiso*, where Dante encounters the great rose of the Empyrean, where the “angel host”

like a swarm of bees who in one motion dive
into the flowers, and in the next return
the sweetness of their labors to the hive

flew ceaselessly to the many-petaled rose
and ceaselessly returned into that light
in which their ceaseless love has its repose.

(“Canto XXXI” 339)

Once identified, the “fullness” of Berssenbrugge’s formal method can be seen to correlate with this image: “Days are the colors of petals; sequence aggregates into a rosette (civilization) turning with the sun and what sun partakes of.” (“Verdant Heart” 56). One can see the proliferating phrases, the clusters of evenly separated sentences, the sequences of three or four or five sections in each poem evoking biological models – petals, flowers, inflorescences – that carry with them several civilizations’ worth of semiosis.

Emanation

The domain of imaginary relation might seem like the least mutual of all the relational pathways Berssenbrugge establishes, in that we don’t immediately see the plants imagining or writing humans in similarly elaborate ways. We have already seen, though, openings to the attribution of intentionality. Over and over, as the poems return to what happens between humans and plants in the process of perception, we see this intention manifest through emanation.

The moment it sees me, the violet grows more deeply purple and luminous to me.

Its looking collapses violet frequency into a violet in the world, cohering attention and feeling.

What I perceive as a flower in woods may be the shadow of a flower-being’s action in fairyland, a transcendent domain of potentia.

(“Glitter” 50)

There’s a neoplatonic overtone to certain of these descriptions, as in the way that, for example, the actual violet here is but a shadow of the ideal potential violet. In other places we see purposeful potential extant in something larger that manifests through the material and emanates from it:

Style, soul, is power through which matter is formed.

(“A Placebo” 16)

My soul radially whorls out to the edges of my body, according to the same laws by which stars shine, communicating with my body by emanation.

(“Hello, the Roses” 58)

Indeed, if we understand the Empyrean rose as an image of the “source” within a neoplatonic framework, it may be that in fact all the human experience and indeed all the plant experience described within these poems is a creation of the rose. In this configuration the form manifested through the human’s made material, these roseate collections of words, can only be a form of what Berssenbrugge describes as “the progenitor, shade inter-being with light *stepping down to matter*” (“Turquoise Shade” 74, my emphasis), within the limitations of human capacity in relation to the divine: “[A deva] communicates presence as my deep fulfillment I *attempt* with ants as appearance, word, reference, entangling event.” (79, my emphasis).

There are several evocations suffused through this “stepping down”. The holographic transmission of diversified light into image is present, but so too are the “light reaction” and “dark reaction” of photosynthesis, as they transform received energies into the sugars that compose plant matter and form growth. Also evoked is a contemporary monistic idealism that understands the “transcendent domain of potentia” (a phrase which arises in Goswami’s *The Self-Aware Universe*) to be consciousness itself – “the ground of being” of quantum potentia becoming matter (Goswami 59, 108). In Goswami’s formulation, consciousness and its products are not merely epiphenomena of “upward causation”, of interactions of particles of matter which generate effects at higher and higher levels of complexity. Rather, “consciousness can exert ‘downward causation’” (Goswami, *God Is Not Dead*, 22) as a unitary consciousness becomes materially manifest. It is interesting to reconsider Berssenbrugge’s poetics and their context with this in mind. Silliman identifies the “new sentence” of Language poetry as registering a resistance to grammatical and syllogistic resolution at higher and higher levels of order – a resistance he orients in socio-economic responsiveness. Berssenbrugge’s “whole writing”, by contrast, seems to register a bio-physical and spiritual orientation in the possibilities of unitary consciousness as source, an orientation which sees her working specifically with integrative explorations and extensions of linguistic order.

If emanation as “downward causation” suggests both unidirectional movement and degradation of energy, here it is imaginative extension which provides for replenishment by return to the source: “With symbol, I find my way through entropic time, exhausted space, to the garden” (“Immortals Having a Party” 90). Symbol and the holographic “creativity of metaphor” create portals to the sacred, to a state “saturated with being”, in a phrase

Berssenbrugge uses from Eliade (Berssenbrugge, “Immortals Having a Party,” 92; Eliade, 12) and a means for the writer as object of a greater source to participate in its work:

I hurry through woods to the water, anguished, lonely, inadequate to my work.

That place is a portal, a rabbit hole of inspired orientation.

I attend to the portal effect, sun doubling in a cloud reflection, array of filament recordings, and I'm attended as a portal myself.

Immanence

If it seems tempting, on the basis of depictions of emanation, to consider that all of the poems' premises synthesise to an idea of a transcendent source, there remains material within them that doesn't fully cohere with those terms, or that coheres only with interference. This becomes particularly apparent where the poems render sensation, and being itself, in the terms of a Deleuzian “plane of immanence”. Such passages reinforce the value afforded to the imagination, suggesting that imagination is, in a Humean model, the phenomenon which provides epistemological and ontological continuity to sensation, and upon which experiences of divinity must depend. Such passages articulate a “critique of innateness” to which both being and knowledge are subject. The engagement with Deleuzian “pure immanence” is fullest in the poem by that name:

It makes of my experience a critique of innateness, the way a pink plastic chair, a mannequin in a pink bunny suit holding a painting of sunset accretes virtual rouge defining a space that doesn't refer to objects or belong to me.

I could mistake it for something fractal, shattered; it's the opposite of that.

No matter how close two sensations, passing from one to another pink is the slice through.

Innateness spreads like sunset across mountains.

I connect with sensation now as to pink petals forming toward me, those who love me in another life responding to me.

There's no time, so at sunset love from others can look like one rose.

(22)

This passage places two systems of thought in imagistic contrast. Innateness moves with sensory presence, but without dimensional depth; immanence is the “slice through” the particulars of experience of the qualities that are continually evolving. In Berssenbrugge’s Deleuzian empiricism, knowledge, as experienced qualities of being, is not just remembered or uncovered in the Platonic model, it “accretes” through experience, the way pinkness in this passage accretes from individual experiences into a “virtual rouge” that is immanent. The “virtual rouge” is always “becoming” in the passage from one particular sensation (one pink) to another. In a conception held distinct from the “stepping down” of emanation, plants and humans, too, participate in this immanent becoming: “Form is part of my thinking this, like a willow seed’s intent, intrinsic focus on willow trees” (“Animal Voices” 4). Just as a willow seed is one moment of becoming-willow, the poet’s thought is a becoming-poem, its manifest form not a copy or a shadow, but a relational movement.

If we retain in this “becoming” the idea of human intention and plant intention as equally possible, then we see both poems and plants as part of a shared intention, a social and biological action of “cultivate[d] inter-being” (“Hello, The Roses” 61) made together:

My wishes aren’t separate from the environment, which is a portion of connectivity,
with new species emerging all the time.

(“Pure Immanence” 25)

As we have seen, the holographic image provides a structure through which *Hello, The Roses* itself can be imagined, holding together distinct paradigms of relation in its whole writing, allowing each part to reflect and subsume others yet also leaving distinction intact. It also allows itself to be seen one species emergent from a diverse ecosystem of matter and thought. Through this image, the emphasis falls again on the several conceptual models it offers for human-plant relations, each a rich contribution to the social imaginary in itself in its possibilities for “cultivat[ing] interbeing”. Of course, the image of book as species also suggests these models as ways of considering the connective social ecosystem of text, which includes readership and response – a shared becoming in which this paper gladly participates.

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