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INTERVIEW: BERN PORTER: AN ADVANCED THINKER SPEAKS OUT
By Barbara Kramer

It will probably come as a surprise to most of the citizens of Belfast that Bern Porter, their local eccentric and gadfly at large, has more than 95 titles of his life’s work in the Special Collection Department of the Bowdoin College Library, and that his walls are hung with posters advertising his many speaking appearances in cities throughout the United States. Preparing for this article, I called Mark Melnicove, publisher of Tilbury House, because he has worked with Porter on a professional level. He suggested that I read a book of Porter’s entitled “I’ve Left,” published by Something Else Press, Inc. of New York. “It is one of the few books of Bern’s where the sentences run from left to right, start with a capital letter and end with a period. If you want to know what this man believes, you should read this book.” I did and I was surprised to find that Bern was not only a poet but that he had far reaching ideas about the whole civilization that is twentieth century America. Eighty year old Porter has had a long involvement with the literary history of the United States and also with part of the darker side of what our country has produced—the atomic bomb. He became visibly shaken when talking to me about that part of his life. A biography of Porter by James Scheullo, entitled “The Roaring Market and the Silent Tomb,” is scheduled for publication by Tilbury House Press in 1991. His house, set on several acres in downtown Belfast, is the location for his “Institute of Advanced Thinking.” A walk around Porter’s property would be a good test for visual acuity because, as you walk, you become aware that there are sculptures visible through the leaves of trees and others that can be glimpsed in the woods that are part of his land. He took me around the property and pointed out pieces of sculpture by well known Maine artists—Stew Henderson, Dennis Pinette, and Gretchen Luchesil, among others.

BK: Tell us something about The Institute of Advanced Thinking.
BP: The environment here started in 1973. The Institute is concerned with the fusion of physics and the humanities. By profession I’m a physicist. The Institute is based primarily on the fact that I worked on the atomic bomb.

BK: What do you mean?
BP: My conscience directed me to do something constructive with physics. I felt that physics could do something more useful than destroy, and that’s the basis of what we do here. There are thirty-two scholars connected with the Institute.

BK: How do you get to be a scholar here?
BP: In order to be a scholar here you cannot be connected to a university. You have to submit, on one side of a piece of paper, your beliefs and your idea for a project that you want to carry out, and describe your ability to carry out that project in physics. I’m in the process now of writing a book about the Institute and what we do here.

BK: And how will that be distributed?
BP: The publishers will distribute it. I have five publishers now and I need three more.

BK: Why?
BP: Well I’m the author of 84 books. I turn out 4 books a year.

(He goes over to the refrigerator and takes some papers out of the freezer.)

BK: Bern, would you please tell me why you keep your papers in the freezer?
BP: It’s not a freezer. I use it as a desk for storing my papers.
BK: I didn't know until I read your book "I've Left" that you were interested in all these things. I thought you were just interested in art and poetry, but in "I've Left" you talk about architecture, and clothing and food and manufacturing and the whole world we live in. You graduated from college as a physics major. How did you get into the other part of your life, the art and poetry?
BP: I always did those things, but I was good in physics and got science scholarships when probably I should have studied literature or, by inclination, should have quit school in the eighth grade. What I did do was spend 26 years in school, for what I'm not sure. So in a way I'm a victim of circumstance.

BK: You graduated during the depression.
BP: It was a very difficult time. In my class, the class of 1932, there were about 120 of us, only two got jobs, and those were with their families. The rest of us were thrown to the winds. I got a scholarship to go to Brown and after I left Brown, I worked as a window trimmer in New York. When I was in New York, I took in all the theaters and art museums, went to art school at night, and I did the same thing when I was in Berkeley. I've been very fortunate to have this interplay between art and culture. These 84 books of mine are a side interest to being a physicist.

BK: When I talked to Mark Melnicove, he told me that the man who is writing your biography must release it, and that it was absurd.
BP: It's a video tape. You put this in a VCR and sit in front of the television for six hours a day and they will be fed visually. They do not have time to read so I have no need to use words. A book of mine is intended to be opened at random. The 'reader' selects three or four pages, looks at them, then puts the book away. And you spend a year with these images. Some you remember, some you don't, some you react to strongly, some dredge up memories of the past. So it is visual because the eye is the greatest interpreter of our world.

BK: Where do you go?
BP: Last summer I went out across the Pacific to Australia and met some of the scholars who are on the board of the Institute of Advanced Thinking. I just came back from a memorial to Kenneth Pachen, I'm his publisher. I also publish Gertrude Stein, James Joyce. I've been a publisher for 61 years. I specialize in experimental press, people who do not fit into the ordinary commercial brew.

BK: How does that work? Do you have to get permission from their estates?
BP: Well I went out of my way to meet Gertrude Stein, Edith Sitwell, Leonora Carrington.

BK: It says in "I've Left" that you were the first person in America to publish Henry Miller.
BP: There's some debate about that. It's an interesting thing about America—it's so important who is first, who is first. I published Henry Miller in Huntsville, Alabama in 1943. Someone claims they published his work prior to that in Connecticut.

BK: So "Tropic of Capricorn" and "Tropic of Cancer" were published in Paris and then bootlegged into this country?
BP: Right.

BK: What did you publish?
BP: A short piece called "What Are You Going To Do About AI?".

BK: How did you get to do that?
BP: By the simple method of going to him and saying, "Look, I'm a scientist. Do you have any manuscripts? I'd like to publish them." And I've published 17 of his works.

BK: Under what imprint?
BP: Bern Porter Books.

BK: What are you working on now?
BP: I'm working on about five things. Last night I was working on something for a publisher in Illinois that has the fantastic name of Plastic Cramp. They are working on a book of mine about mail art and Xerox art.

BK: What do you call your books?
BP: Visual expression.

BK: I have seen your books, but how would you explain them to our readers?
BP: According to me, people no longer read. They will sit before a television screen for four to six hours a day and they will be fed visually. They do not have time to read so I have no need to use words. A book of mine is intended to be opened at random. The 'reader' selects three or four pages, looks at them, then puts the book away. And you spend a year with these images. Some you remember, some you don't, some you react to strongly, some dredge up memories of the past. So it is visual because the eye is the greatest interpreter of our world.

BK: I have two of your books. One is "The Manhattan Telephone Book" and the other is "Here Comes Everybody's Don't Book".
BP: "The Manhattan Telephone Book" is a satire. It goes from A to Z, and each page is a laugh and a duplication of the telephone book. In fact, I understand the telephone company was going to sue me.

BK: Why?
BP: Well, all they want is their bill paid every month, not someone making fun of them. Another thing I finished recently is one of my greatest inventions, a book of the future. This was invented over an eight year period in Belfast. It's a video tape. You put this in a VCR and sit in front of the television for 60 minutes, and the pages are turned, and all the thinking is done for you.

BK: It says ""Why My Left Leg Is Hot" a Bookvideo by Bern Porter with filming and soundtrack by Aquatics Ever tarnished".
BP: There are more than 200 images in that. It took me more than eight years to collect the interviews and develop the principle. The interesting thing about this is as the author-inventor, I don't have the equipment to see it myself.

BK: Why are you called a poet?
BP: I use poetic principles to study nature. According to me, a poet and a scientist are one and the same thing. What a theoretical physicist goes through is no different than what a poet goes through.

BK: Do you feel any guilt in having worked on the atomic bomb?
BP: Yes. In fact, everything I do is a rebellion and an act of conscience.
Return to Belfast, Part II

(The Long-Suppressed Bootleg Version)

(Installment 3 of 3, continued from previous issue)

In the field of all possibilities
everything that can happen does happen.
It has already happened.
It continues to happen.

In the field of all possibilities
Mages roam the earth,
Mermaids swim the seas.

Angels soar in the heavens,
and God lives in fire.
God lives in the body.
God lives as fire and breath in the body.

To this truth she bows low. When Natasha returns to Belfast she bows low upon the earth.

IV.

Natasha has returned to Belfast. She has come to Sanctuary, to sainted ground. She has come to the garden of the abbey seeking sanctuary. She comes with her offering of words, like Hildegard, so long ago, like Mirabai and Lalleshwari, ecstatic poets, all. Her offering... she would that she were worthy to make this offering, yet... worthy. What is worthy? Nothing exists in this world but that by its very existence it be worthy. “Nothing exists that is not Shiva.” It’s all fire, the fire of which Saint Hildegard spoke so lovingly. It’s the fire within.

I am that living and fiery essence of the divine substance that glows in the beauty of the fields, and in the shining water and in the burning sun and the moon and the stars, and in the force of the invisible wind, the breath of all living things. I breathe in the green grass and in the flowers and in the living waters... All these live and do not die because I am in them. I am the source of the thundered word by which all creatures were made. I permeate all things that they may not die. I am Life.

St. Hildegard of Bingen

It’s all fire, the fire within. Matter is consciousness. When Natasha comes to Belfast, it is her work to grove on this macroscopic ditty.
In the garden of the sanctuary there are purple flowers attended by a black-and-yellow, pollen-laden bee. And there are adders' tongues and hosta and astilbe. She enters into the consciousness of Hildegard; she returns to a medieval cloister with a walled garden full of medicinal and culinary herbs. There is symmetry. In the center of the four directions there is a sundial to tell the hour of the day. The hours of the days pass slowly. The drift by like petals on a river. In the passing of the hours a liturgy unfolds from within her, offerings of words, hymns of praise, O virga ac diadema ....

When Natasha returns to Belfast, she feels this woman, Hildegard, and others like her. She feels them rising from her body like progeny. Though it is they who have given birth to her, she also feels herself as the force which ignited and gave birth to them. She feels the holy fire within and without. She is the Genetrix, the Creatrix, the Matrix; she is the source, and its final destination,

She is wood and the fire within it. She is earth and molten rock glowing, burning from within. She is brilliant sun; aether and the fire of the void. She is water flowing. She is liquid light coursing through the veins and meridians. Her body is the macro and the microcosm. She is the manifested form of formlessness.

She is infinitely small; she is subatomic.
SHE IS LARGE; SHE CONTAINS MULTITUDES.

All the creative power of the Universe is within her.

Sometimes she goes about in pity for herself, and all the while a great wind is bearing her across the sky.

(Ojibwa saying)

She is the wind. She is the sky. She is that which is borne.

In the garden, in the sanctuary, and also in the wild places, Natasha feels them near: the guardian spirits, sprites, devas. They welcome her to this place as kindred, as comrade, as tribe. Grandmother spider, crow, bird spirits, plant spirits welcome her. Fern and moss and fungus welcome her. They tell her stories. The herbs tell her stories: purple-flowering mint, and rosemary, sage, salvia. Kale and nasturtium. Wild rosehip, Wild apple, chokecherry. All these are luscious like love.
When Natasha returns to Belfast, there is only love, and love and love.

Love is in the roots that stretch across the path. Love is in the spruce needles. Passion permeates the pinecones. Goldenrod and asters dance in the breeze of love. Water laps the shore in love. Love is in her bones and sinew. She drinks the blood and eats the flesh of love. Love has thus infused her. Love circulates in her veins. Love lights her eye and 'livers her tongue. Love pulsates in her loins and snaps and crackles up inside her brain. Love moves her breath. Love empowers her words. Love throbs within her heart. Love moves her mind and witnesses her thoughts. Love shoots out of her fingers as her hands caress her lover. Love annihilates her. Love dissolves her. Love consumes her. Love becomes her. Love moves her lips and tongue along the delicate flesh. Love blows her right out of the fuckin' water, man!

When Natasha returns to Belfast, she comes to understand the importance of allowing herself to feel vulnerable, to be vulnerable, to open herself to love, to rejoice in her powerlessness, to surrender to a greater Power, and thus she is consumed by the ALL-CONSUMING JOY of love.

Natasha Bernstein

Belfast, Maine
September 17, 1998
Odd Ball

When Blake stops to get gas
he only gets three dollars worth.
No matter how low his gauge reads
or where he is or how much the gas costs
He only gets three dollars worth!

Blake will not flush his toilet
every time he uses it
No matter if he does a number one or two
He lets the waste accumulate
then flushes once every three or four days
He says it saves water!

Blake will never hug anyone
family, friends, girlfriend, buddies
He will not hug anyone!
No matter how long it has been
since he has seen them
No matter how emotional the moment is
He just will not hug you.
But he will shake your hand.

Song of Anom

We talk as in a whisper:
Nai-ho-o.

And the cottonwood knows
what is above the earth
and what is beneath the earth.

I have waited for you
in the darkness;
I have thought there was nothing
but eternal loneliness.

Your footstep reminds me
that there is sunlight
even in darkness.

Hi-ihiya
nai-ho-o.

I awake
as if from a dream
and you are here
dreaming beside me.

George Gott

5/6/99
Elvis does not beat eggs. He gently separates them, reunites them, separates them, reunites them, until
quietly folded into one another.

Xip-Collage

5 of 12

5/18/99
She wore a smart blue dress, the stranger, walking four feet ahead. I wanted her to touch a leaf of every
tree as she walked, she had a perfect leaf-touching dress on, smart blue one, perfect---oh stranger.

5/19/99
Michelle on phone.
"I know I'm right Conrad because the same bird sings to me on Camac Street! And I find a nickel
five minutes before I need it! I tell you this because I know you'll know what I'm talkin' about!"

5/20/99
Xip Collage is a poem where these words appear. It is a poem so much a variety show. Sometimes others
(conversation) help me write Xip: proof it's everywhere: poem(s): every singleday! I thank them now...
vitamoonor...synergism...possumultra...I thank them now...where these words appear.

5/14/99
Here, wear this sweater made of Xip Collage, you are cold. Yes, it's paper. Rain shreds it from your
shoulders, storm of paper water. Shifting clouds of crumpled stanza...come, let's see how light is made.
I have been endeavoring to extend the principles of physics into the humanities. Not having the benefit of academic facilities, a laboratory, or funds, I have been obligated to broaden and authenticate the empirical base on which my views rest.

—Bern Porter

Beginning in 1939, Bern Porter began the process of integrating physics with the fine arts, a process that continues to this day. In *Physics Today* Bern Porter gives us his current thinking in blending physics to literature, communication, music, theatre, poetry, art, sculpture and architecture.

Includes an introductory statement by Bern Porter dated May 18, 1999.

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