

The Mysterious Barricades: Language and its Limits

By Janet Giltrow

Ann E. Berthoff. *The Mysterious Barricades: Language and its Limits*.
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Deliberating on C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards' (*The Meaning of Meaning* 1923) triangle with a dotted baseline as "an emblem of triadic semiotics," Ann E. Berthoff writes that language as such — the formal system, the arbitrary structure, unconscious and historically determined — **language is itself the great heuristic** (p. 49, emphasis in original).

Calling on Charles Peirce and citing Max Black (*The Labyrinth of Language*, 1969) "rejecting the idea of language as a barrier," Berthoff re-engineers barrier as bridge, a design exemplifying the kind of paradox which is insoluble but not irrational. All discourse is partial, as Peirce noted; **but it is by being partial that it carries out its tasks** (p. 50, emphasis in original).

In this book which insists on a triadic semiotics, Berthoff eloquently restates — and reinstates — abstract remarks of earlier thinkers pondering the "mysterious barricades" which language comprises or invokes or involves. Why is she getting into conversation with these luminaries in the discussion on language — these and others who are more or less distant from current comment? What motivates this project of citation and rehabilitation? Why is Berthoff telling us this now? To what ends does she restore the valence of these venerable philosophical positions, brushing them up for contemporary contexts?

Readers will find trace statements of practical aspirations. For example, in her introduction, Berthoff recommends inquiry based on Peirce's "revolutionary doctrine of the Interpretant" for its civic potential:

Perhaps the chief reason for studying triadicity is that with its guidance, those responsible for literacy at all levels might yet forestall the political dangers of a citizenry which cannot read either in the sense of not being able to construe the written word or in the wider sense of being unable to read critically. (p. 10)

But this kind of statement of aspiration — on the surface uncontroversial — is rare. Elsewhere, claims are likely to be in contest with other positions. So, where

Shleiermacker's early 19TH-century theological hermeneutics is appreciated for its prospect of extending a congregation, Berthoff advances the extensive project obversely, by condemning what she sees as the narrowness of "contemporary theory":

... instead of encouraging the development of an understanding of interpretation in teaching; instead of making texts accessible to different kinds of readers; instead of helping our fellow citizens reclaim the powers of language — instead of going forward with the enterprise of an authentic practical criticism, contemporary theory has usually contented itself with a variety of semioclastic exercises, serving no purpose beyond those narrowly defined by academic politics (p. 85)

Disciples of "contemporary theory" are assumed universally to have abandoned their responsibilities as teachers:

Only if we account for meaning can we given an account of meanings; the demise of practical criticism which has accompanied the rise of "theory," as it is currently understood, is not merely coincidental. [...] witness the complete lack of interest among critics, of whatever variety, in teaching (p. 17–18, emphasis in original).

Except for attacking some episodes of misreading, Berthoff on the whole does not particularise the output of the contemporary theory she deplores. She does notice in "the newest critical fashions" appetite for "whatever theme of oppression has gained attention for the time being" (p. 4), but she also, in her introduction, assigns to her readers the job of identifying the culprits:

I have not discussed the misunderstandings of gender studies or cultural studies or the new historicism, but in defining "gangster theories" (I. A. Richards), I expect the reader to recognize whatever might be pertinent to a critical discussion of those fields of study and inquiry, to a critique of current attitudes towards history, the self, and the role of interpretation. (p. 7)

Berthoff's presuppositions ("the misunderstandings ...") and expectation project familiar milieux of professional experience. In the rhetorical chambers of this book, the factional declarations and outcries of late-20th-century English studies reverberate.

To note these tacit familiarities is not to say that Berthoff handles her opponents delicately, or that she is generally as reserved as she is about "the misunderstandings of gender studies or cultural studies." On the contrary, the dyadists — those who are

exposed as depending on two-value theories of meaning — are targetted by missiles of invective. Deconstruction is a “corrupt mysticism,” involving “ignorant disregard for the heuristic character of limits” (6, emphasis added); for as long as “contemporary theory fails to account for meaning, “pseudodoxia academica will remain as virulent as ever” (18, emphasis added); only a “philosophy of representation” can withstand “the radical scepticism and moral terrorism of contemporary critical theory” (47, emphasis added); North American need to catch up with “European philosophers, who have long since discarded the spurious claims, the sophomoric paradoxes, and the deadly jargon of Deconstruction and its successors” (124, emphasis added). Berthoff is incensed — insulted and inflamed — by current discourse on language, and seemingly by its social and political reach, although her discussion doesn’t give an exact measure of this reach. It is exact, however, in targeting the major figures of the opposition, zeroing in on Derrida again and again, but also on Jonathan Culler, René Wellek, and Paul de Man, among others — and Saussure, who cannot rest in peace.

While it would be a disservice to this book to minimise its militancy or moderate its heat, it would also be a disservice to let insult and injury stand for the whole. The short, elegant chapters of *Mysterious Barricades* offer fine opportunities to inspect modernity’s struggles to get an idea of language. Berthoff’s central claim and refrain is that language must be regarded as a triadic system. A two-valued conception of language leads both to “naïve realism” (word having an autonomous and unproblematic relation to thing) and to the “radical scepticism” of deconstruction (everything is a code). Peirce’s Thirdness, his “revolutionary concept of the Interpretant,” overtakes error by proposing a three-valued system. Throughout the book, triadicity battles dyadic thinking, in major engagements and also in minor skirmishes (for there is something about the dyad which tempts reasoning, and even when overcome by superior forces, it regroups to fight another day, as sniper or saboteur).

In Berthoff’s hands, the triad is flourished on many occasions, an inspiring abstraction and battle cry. I am much less qualified to represent triadicity, and also liable to be tempted, unwittingly by the dyad. To acquit myself I will pick two moments when triadicity shows itself in closer quarters, away from the clamour of the battlefield.

Let’s take first the idea of limits (along the lines of the barricades of Berthoff’s title). The dyadic perspective stalls at limits, confounded by or smug about the equivalence of thought and language: to dwell on the equivalence is to repeat either “naïve realism” or everything-is-a-code. On the trail of Walter Benjamin, Berthoff finds encouragement to take the risk of differentiating thought and language — and it is a

risk indeed, for once we separate the two, language can quickly reduce to the ‘dress’ of thought, or its conduit. But we defy the hazard by moving fast to semiosis as process and “activity” (p. 54), the third value, the Interpretant, beginning its operation to produce the “functional unity” (p. 51) of thought and language. First separating thought and language, we capture their “emergent identification” (p. 54): that is, they are not equivalent at rest, or in taxonomy, but in practice, in activity. And in fact once we have crossed Benjamin’s “abyss” by this desperate leap, we can relax, having discovered the semiotic bridge.

But barrier-as-bridge and limit-as-link are hard to keep in mind, and we can lose our way if we relax too much, and do not continually maintain this route. So I will offer one more memento of Thirdness, in which Berthoff cites “what Walker Percy calls ‘the Delta factor’, in honor of his fellow-Southerner Helen Keller”:

When it dawned on Helen Keller down at the pump house that what Annie Sullivan signed in one palm was the name of what gushed over the other, she responded to something other than a signal: **recognizing a word as a name was a triadic event** (p. 128, emphasis added).

Elsewhere, Berthoff is caustic and quick to dismiss current uses of “code” which dyadically mistake signal for message, and here the dyadic error would bury Keller’s actual discovery: the moment of another consciousness engaged in representation, and her own consciousness engaged in interpretation. The Third present at the pump house is Peirce’s Interpretant — neither signal nor referent but the intersubjectivity of knowing.

Collating the reasoning of enabling thinkers, Berthoff offers many other occasions on which to acknowledge the uncanny performance of Thirdness, which is appreciated by its effects in the interanimation of consciousness. Some of these occasions are dramatised by the dyadic mistake of ignoring context.

... in the absence of context — destroyed in defending the gangster theory of all-is-text — there is an expectable confusion of lexical definition. Indeterminists discover that words in a dictionary have quite a range of possible meanings. They marvel at the indeterminacy of words out of context, which are the only kind we have now. (p. 34)

Recovering context, we also retrieve purpose and intention, and with these motives, the tangency of others, congregated in community which takes up generality and instates it in dialectic with particulars — recognised by language users in light of generality but portending as well an unforeseeable future. Recovering context, we also come across a traffic in sameness and difference, and in habits taken and broken

(p. 60). And in language, the speaker or writer, listener or reader, finding others also finds Self:

Man is conscious of his interpretant — his own thought in another mind
... is happy in it, feels himself to some degree to be there. (Peirce cited in
Berthoff, p. 63)

Encountering Thirdness, and charmed by its uncanniness, Berthoff's readers are also incited to fight off dyadic reasoning about language. They are urged to repudiate erroneous figuring about, for example, Peirce's indeterminacy, and Saussure's arbitrariness, and they are urged to repudiate the figures themselves: deconstructionists, Marxists, exponents of structuralist poetics, theorists and commentators deluded by psycholinguistics. I am hard pressed to account for the antagonism of this presentation of triadicity and hermeneutical possibility: how is it that Berthoff, and other thinkers like her, have come to be traumatised by "contemporary theory"?

In many ways, "contemporary theory" could be construed as not so much antagonistic to Peirce's infinite semiosis as entranced (or hoodwinked) by the representation itself, involved in the mists of mediation, shadows of other minds, drift of history. But Berthoff's position cuts off sympathetic readings with a call to arms and contest. And, although there is a politics to every theory of language, Berthoff's discussion tends to keep politics at the level of personal power struggle: one imagines departmental clashes and hard feelings rather than larger conceptualisations which interpret, endorse, or upset the social order. At the same time, I recognise, and can identify with, the urgent disdain in her outrage. I can get angry myself at presumptuous or amateur notions of language: for example, the idea that verbs are better than nouns, or that there's something about English syntax itself which crushes liminal sensibilities. With these unwieldy feelings of my own in mind, I wonder if there is something about language debates which triggers oppositional stances rather than appositional ones.

As well as expressing strong feelings, Berthoff's book offers a context — a heuristic — for thinking about severe attitudes and the issues which inspire them. Are dyadic theories on the march? Can Thirdness be summoned to preside over conflict? Berthoff's reasoning, and her delicate paraphrases of the intellectual dignitaries she cites and celebrates can provide means for these involved in teaching and technique to understand the claims and concerns about language they meet in their working lives.

