

## Jonathan Skinner

### Boundary Work in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's "Pollen"

Mei-mei Berssenbrugge introduces landscape into the experimental line, letting place affect contemporary circulations of meaning. Hers is a poetry that moves out on simultaneous channels, breaking from modes of crystallization that can include the very frame of the poem—toward an inclusive consciousness, a poly-subjectivity located in the parallel scansion of multiple connections. This I take to be the impulse of her generous, sometimes exhausting lines, often offering repeated scans of a single perception: “A pellet of sand rolls down, leaving a trail behind. In-depth seriality takes time, blur, / static and transient ecological interference into a memory with the frame built in. . . . / Water flow would critique how the image falls out, like navigating in a car down alluvial fans in Utah” (“Pollen,” *Four Year Old Girl* 41, 43).

Berssenbrugge's is a poetry of peripheral vision and of blur: an exploration of the diffuse or ambient environment, in its moments of semi-crystallization from flux and its pursuit of what can only be seized in motion: “the moving frame of a child's hand inside the chest cavity of an animal beside a barrel cactus / crowned with magenta flowers” (45). It is also a poetry, not of metaphor but of metamorphosis, a challenging poetry because one is constantly being asked to release focus, and to reengage—constantly getting away from and back to things: “You hold her, like pollen / in the air, gold and durable, more like a dry spring that continues holding sky” (44). It is about the shimmer of connecting rather than connection, about finding links and moving through links: tensile filaments passed from the “inside” to the “outside”—thread where strength lies not in the connecting material but in the termini, sutures and stitches.

“In-depth seriality” is the linear remembering of the poem, amidst malleable, diffuse simultaneity, a recursive advance enriching the boundaries of consciousness. The wild space the poem seems to move into (from one perspective), composed of “static and transient ecological interference,” can from another perspective be read as just this mode of breaking and reconnecting, a process that builds landscape, as an interference grid of simultaneous communications, into our frame of relation to it (Interview). These communications build up like pollen on the head of a moth or hummingbird (rather than as theatrical representation) and,

smear away and recollected, are the shining medium, the most dense yet light organic material known to exist, of what cognitive scientists Maturana and Varela call the “structural coupling” between an “autopoietic” consciousness and its environment (McMurry 73-79). If we are to speak of “ecopoetics” here, it is as a species of boundary work, rather than exploration of (communication about, imitation of) a given environment. It is as much about disconnecting (death) as it is about the enlivening rush of connecting, how both are integral to our coupling with what lies beyond us, and how the most attentive kind of writing takes up decomposition at the heart of its compositional process.<sup>1</sup>

Berssenbrugge gets the poem out of the poem. She is well known for introducing extra-poetic materials—scientific language, along with discourses from philosophy, architecture, psychology, sociology, medicine—in order to give the poem a leverage on the world. She herself has described this project as “getting away from the heroic materials of modernity” (Workshop). In addition to material from Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Lacan, Berssenbrugge’s poem “Pollen” introduces materials from a well-known sociological text by Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis*. The work seems to invite a reading in terms of “keying” and in terms of the “frame structures” so compellingly analyzed by Goffman—a reading that helps us to understand “environmental” texts as a species of boundary work.

“Pollen” brings us to “flowering cacti at the edge of a seasonal stream, barrel cactus, cholla, saguaro” (45). In this border country of excess amidst limiting factors, ephemeral yet durable, the five-stanza poem confronts a mother’s death, exploring in fifty-three long lines the physical body, the boundaries between life and death, how to compose decomposition and how decomposition, in turn, composes us (Interview). Death is a sticky space, a life situation: “The air is sticky with moisture and heat. It feels like decomposition . . .” A related concern is how to “change one’s fate.” Pollen, the diffuse yet very dense life form, concrete yet immaterial, crosses borders—making a pattern with the gene-flow between mother and daughter, the boundary work the poem itself enacts between life and death: “The human body, / touching it, its involuntary movements, figure in tension regarding its boundaries” (“Pollen” 44). Immunology

---

<sup>1</sup> It would be fair to trace some of the principal ideas in this essay to Jed Rasula’s *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* (U of Georgia, 2002), even though my approach ultimately is quite different. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Charles Bernstein, who is the first poet I heard talk about Erving Goffman and *Frame Analysis*.

teaches how “self” is built of such patterns, a diffuse matter of screening, not a single thing (Interview).

The compositional pattern is textile, “paralleling lines” until boredom calls for a new element. One notes many such parallels: between the desert spring and the body, between moths and reproduction, between glowworms and memory, between mimicry and writing—with the heat exchange of entropy the element of composition that makes decomposition happen:

. . . It feels like decomposition, strings of protein,  
 a wound healing in my daughter’s chin. Air absorbs heat from the wound. The  
 imitation of a hummingbird absorbs the bird’s beauty in shadows in the  
 honeysuckle.  
 Moths mate inside the yucca flower. Time is involved, like strands hanging  
 from a glowworm  
 your memory of a person casting strands across unfixed wild space sticky with  
 pollen. (“Pollen” 45)

Lines add “strips of experience,” parallel lines and Deleuzian “lines of flight” that issue through the repetitions of phrasal structures, through the pronoun shifts and connective dissipations of meaning in the syntax (Workshop). “A pellet of sand rolls down, leaving a trail behind”: as an entropic rhyme (pellet of sand, water flow, car’s navigation of alluvial fans) or as a negentropic break (the introduction of a new key), each line rolls out a new view of the cognitive organization of the poem, in a series of decompositional framings, connected yet disconnected with the surrounding lines, just as the poem feels connected yet disconnected with the desert landscape. As Andrew McMurry puts it, in *Environmental Renaissance: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Systems of Nature*, his study of the Emersonian environment in cybernetic terms:

[W]e are simultaneously connected to this world through our sensorium yet disconnected to it, in that information selections can only contribute to the maintenance of our cognitive organization. The world is just the world we enact through living in it, and there is no ground but the ground we walk on. Thus our feelings of rootlessness are fully justified—but so too are our feelings of connection. (164)

McMurry works with cognitive scientists Maturana and Varela’s notion of subjectivity as “the self-description of a closed unity structurally open to the environment,” to redirect ecocritical focus from observations of “environments” to observations of the observations, from

ontology to epistemology (163, 222). In Maturana and Varela's theory of autopoiesis, life is constituted by organizationally closed yet structurally open systems, defined by "their circular, self-referential organization, or *autonomy*; and their continual creation (*poesis*) of the components that structure and sustain that autonomy" (74). Life in a desert environment, for instance, is organized non-negotiably around securing and retaining water—while the structures and materials life draws on for maintaining this organization are variable, themselves factors of other structures, and of a host of environmental selections. The realization of an autopoiesis, as the embodied self-description of a closed unity, cannot be "about" or even "like" its environment, since the "environment" is that which does not communicate within the terms of the system:

Firstly, we now consider knowledge to be just another of the many adaptations we have evolved to allow us to cope (i.e. structurally couple) with environments; it is storable, transmittable, action in the world. Secondly, because this knowledge of the world is embodied, not objective, there is no particular path the subject is forced to take in the realization of his autopoiesis; any path is permitted so long as it is viable, that is, it does not destroy his cognitive and/or bodily organization. (163-164)

"Ecological" distinctions are "distinctions made by observing systems, ones that could always have been otherwise. The way the observation was made, then, and not the observation itself is what is crucial" (222).

For McMurry, the task of the ecocritic is "to observe and theorize how systems establish environments in the process of communicating with and among themselves" (223).

Berssenbrugge's poetry offers such observation, in the experiment (experience) of writing, teaching us about how we see and frame environments, including the environments of writing, and making us aware of the boundaries between different systems or ways of seeing. In this sense the poetry is "environmental" not by writing about or by mimicking aspects of the environment, but through the decompositional process of framing. Berssenbrugge's attitude toward death is, like Robert Smithson (who in his fascination with ruins was taking after Claude Levi-Strauss), "to perceive this process of disintegrating frameworks as a highly developed condition" ("Proposal for Earthworks and Landmarks to be Built on the Fringes of the Fort Worth-Dallas Regional Air Terminal Site," *The Collected Writings* 354).

In the first line of "Pollen," "The sky and movement of clouds figure in the issue of the frame of the spring," we find a trace of Erving Goffman's provocative book *Frame Analysis*

(Berssenbrugge 41). Goffman explores structures built into the question, *What is it that's going on here?* (8). His basic premise is that understanding of activities implies frameworks (schemata of interpretation): “definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them . . . these frameworks are not merely a matter of mind but correspond in some sense to the way in which an aspect of the activity itself is organized” (10-11). “Frame” refers to the principles we are able to identify, and “frame analysis” is the examination of how they organize experience, which the user is likely to be unaware of or unable to describe: “observers actively project their frames of reference into the world immediately around them, and one fails to see their so doing only because events ordinarily confirm these projections, causing the assumptions to disappear into the smooth flow of activity” (39). (To highlight how such projections invisibly organize our most ordinary perceptions, Goffman offers the example of the sudden “visibility” of someone using a mirror on sale at an auction to adjust her hat, or, conversely, of someone examining the frame of a mirror in a dressing room.) In Western society, according to Goffman, two broad classes of primary frameworks, natural (or undirected) and social (or guided), provide “background understanding” for activities. It is a distinction clearly undergoing some kind of breakdown in this era of “climate change” and the “end of nature.”

Berssenbrugge’s poem begins with the “natural” context of sky, clouds, a spring: “The sky and movement of clouds figure in the issue of the frame of the spring” (41). What does the introduction of the word “frame” do? In conjunction with the literal framing of the first stanza of Berssenbrugge’s poem—one feature of the layout design of the Kelsey Street edition of *Four Year Old Girl* is that the first stanza of each poem-sequence is framed visually by a simple box—the word “frame” snaps our attention from primary frames such as “sky,” “spring” or “nature” to the box, the container, the book. (In the process, we become aware of “nature” itself as a kind of frame.) The poem is suddenly embodied as *this* object we hold in our hands. This sort of shift Goffman calls “keying”: “the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else. . . . Keyings represent a basic way in which activity is vulnerable” (43-44).

To continue with Goffman’s terms, each line of the poem adds a further “lamination” to the frame:

Given the possibility of a frame that incorporates rekeyings, it becomes convenient to think of each transformation as adding a *layer* or *lamination* to the activity. And one can address two features of the activity. One is the innermost layering, wherein dramatic activity can be at play to engross the participant. The other is the outermost lamination, the *rim* of the frame, as it were, which tells us just what sort of status in the real world the activity has, whatever the complexity of the inner laminations. (82)

In “Pollen,” it is hard to say which is inner and which outer: conventionally, the book itself would be the rim, anchored in body and environment, the “small theatre” of poetic composition the innermost lamination. But the lack of symmetry in the mirroring frames, each line reflecting yet failing to recuperate the last, boggles any spatial illusion: “An orange cliff holds the light, concave / and convex from wind, as between alive and not alive, the boundary of a person touching you” (44). Just as Berssenbrugge’s composition departs from a theatrical staging of “inner” drama, she confounds distinctions between “inner” engrossment and “outer” reality, between natural and social frames. Reading “Pollen,” it no longer makes sense to speak of holding or placing a book “in” the environment.

In yet the next lamination (of the second line of the poem, in a parallel grammatical frame), “a freeze fifty years ago figures in the tension of vegetation regarding its boundaries, now,” sky and movement of clouds are frozen and the issue of the frame tenses up as vegetation, in response to limiting factors (boundaries of the spring). The simultaneity of this visible tension, “now”—“Everything’s in the field to designate and stabilize, plants evenly spaced by water”—also rekeys the linear temporality of “fifty years ago” (41).

The aim of frame analysis is to make sense out of activities and to analyze the special vulnerabilities to which these frames of reference are subject: “while one thing may momentarily appear to be what is really going on, in fact what is actually happening is plainly a joke, or a dream, or an accident, or a mistake, or a misunderstanding, or a deception, or a theatrical performance, and so forth” (Goffman 10). Or a poem, or an instance of boundary work.

“Framing” is borrowed from Gregory Bateson, who observed otters playing at fighting, transforming “a strip of fighting behavior into a strip of play” (Goffman 41). A “strip” is a sociological sample, “any arbitrary slice, cut from the stream of ongoing activity”; linearity allows it to be “transformed, that is, serve as an item-by-item model for something else” (10, 83). It is thus a category of the observer, and of language, particularly suited to the “in-depth seriality” of the poet’s lines. That Bateson would have hit on the transformation of “framing” in

observing animals at play doesn't seem of much interest to Goffman, though he elsewhere contemplates the vulnerability of "our belief that the world can be totally perceived in terms of either natural events or guided doings" (35). Are the otters "playing at fighting" only *for* humans, or in and for themselves? As "Pollen" confronts the death of a mother, the poem assumes, as a given, the vulnerability of boundaries drawn between natural and social frameworks.

The frame is then keyed yet again: "Touching the body, its waste and involuntary movements figure in tensions regarding her frame, relating planets to moon in a strip above the spring" (41). While "touching" invokes the most vulnerable dimensions of death, the recurrence of "frame" and "tension" (after "issue of the frame of the spring," and "tension of vegetation regarding its boundaries") brackets for a moment "her," she who is lost.

In Goffman, whose sentences these lines enframe, "tension" and joking occur when two different perspectives are applicable to a matter but only one is meant to apply—as in the easy right our society grants medical professionals to approach the human naked body with a natural instead of a social perspective:

It should be obvious that the human body and touchings of it will figure in the issue of frame maintenance, just as the body's various waste products and involuntary movements will figure in tensions regarding its boundaries. For it seems that the body is too constantly present as a resource to be managed in accordance with only one primary framework. (36-37)

According to Goffman, framing raises "the question of unseriousness and seriousness, allowing us to see what a startling thing experience is, such that a bit of serious activity can be used as a model for putting together unserious versions of the same activity, and that, on occasion, we may not know whether it is play or the real thing that is occurring" (7). (This ambiguity may be fundamentally the mark of great poetry.) In particular, "tension and joking," "fortuitousness" (a significant event that can come to be seen as incidentally produced) and what Goffman calls "muffings" (bloopers, flubs, goofs, gaffes) can make us aware of both the power and the vulnerability of primary frameworks: the "cosmological significance" of muffings and fortuitousness is a means to deal with "slippage and looseness" in our "belief that the world can be totally perceived in terms of either natural events or guided doings" (35).

With the overlapping of ecological and social frames in Berssenbrugge's keying, the tensions have become plural, while the sudden hardening of "boundaries" back into "frame" (in

“her frame”) encourages a primary reading of frame as life-span. At the same time, the multiplication of tensions weakens the framing process. To be “in” the landscape is not to be “embodied” but to become acutely aware of vulnerability in the primary frameworks enabling easy communication about the body:

Pollen condenses to mottled light on the ground. Assuming the sense of an activity links to the frame of its experience, weakness in the framing process makes our senses vulnerable. If the apparent frame *is* the frame, she expresses underlying qualities. (45)

If aesthetics are a social activity, then Berssenbrugge’s rekeyings here (from ecological tension to social tension, from “activity” to “senses”) seem to argue that the conventional frameworks of aesthetics are designed to protect our senses, from the other-than-human structures that support them. And conversely, that the breaking from frame of wild space makes our senses vulnerable—a condition, it could be argued, of embodiment.

Death collapses secondary onto primary frames, so that “the apparent frame *is* the frame.” The absent mother becomes the underlying quality of the landscape, “pollen condense[d] to mottled light on the ground,” its primary frame (Interview). Death is the limit-case of the kind of disconnection that frames impose:

The very points at which the internal activity leaves off and the external activity takes over—the rim of the frame itself—become generalized by the individual and taken into his framework of interpretations, thus becoming, recursively, an additional part of the frame. In general, then, the assumptions that cut an activity off from the external surround also mark the ways in which this activity is inevitably bound to the surrounding world. (Goffman 249)

In exploring phenotype *as* genotype (“the apparent frame *is* the frame”), pursuing the rim that frames her relationship with her mother, who has been so thoroughly bound to the environment because so finally cut off from it, Berssenbrugge allows vulnerability into the framing process, decomposition into composition, to an extent unusual in the writing of landscape. The writer’s serial relationship to foreign bodies, touching these sentences and lining them up, figures in tensions regarding their frames, juxtaposing similar with different, moving back and forth on the loom of the page. Such movement laminates guided doings and natural events together, eliciting communications across boundaries less predictable than “social” versus “natural.”

Rather, seriality’s sharpening of boundaries expands the reach of the poem, from life



toward death, thought toward emotion, words toward imagination, the way image is immaterial to language, yet related, the reflection in a dry spring: “You hold her, like pollen in the air, gold and durable, more like a dry spring that continues holding sky” (44). This is the turning that allows a child to appear in the last stanza of the poem, with her own “moving frame,” poised hopefully between inheritance and the real (45).

Each line, each communication establishes (frames) an environment. Edges—the edge of a face, of the motility of a tadpole, of a seasonal stream—admit possibility and beauty. To gather that beauty on our foreheads, as we break from and reconnect with this other-than-human world, means attending closely to the environments we frame, to bring them into the rim of our attention. “Pollen” leaves us at that rim, the boundary between the “chest cavity of an animal beside a barrel cactus crowned with magenta flowers,” and the “imaginary animal” the child turns toward. Like that child, like the hummingbird, we are both rootless yet connected to the world, and the quality of our love for it is measured by the mobility and brightness of our attention.

**Works Cited**

- Berssenbrugge, Mei-mei. *Four Year Old Girl*. Berkeley: Kelsey St. Press, 1998.
- . "Poetry Workshop." Naropa Institute Summer Writing Program. Boulder, CO.  
23 June 1998.
- . Telephone interview. 19 June 2005.
- Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1974.
- McMurry, Andrew. *Environmental Renaissance: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Systems of Nature*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 2003.
- Smithson, Robert. *The Collected Writings*. Ed. Jack Flam. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996.