

Charles Bernstein (1950–)

To date the beginning of a poet's authority one often looks to the poet's first book, which in Charles Bernstein's case is *Asylums*, published in 1975. Bernstein's effect on American poetry, however, truly began in 1978, when with Bruce Andrews he started *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, which ran until 1981. Practically at the same time, then, Bernstein's presence was announced both as a poet and as someone orchestrating new means of community (re)formation. In the last quarter century, he has lived both roles simultaneously as a refutation of the idea that poets write in isolation. His poetry and his community work have walked in step with each other, neither one possible without the other. Alongside the publishing of well over twenty books of poetry, Bernstein started or helped to start two reading series (Ear Inn in New York, and Wednesdays @ 4 Plus in Buffalo), a website (Electronic Poetry Center), an email discussion list (Poetics@), and an academic book series on Modern and Contemporary Poetics (with University of Alabama Press). His provocative essays have now been collected three times, in *Content's Dream* (1986), *A Poetics* (1992) and *My Way* (1999), and he has edited or co-edited numerous collections of essays, including *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy* (1990) and *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998). Playing on Robert Creeley's well known expression of the relationship between form and content, one could say with Bernstein's career in mind [111] that poets are never more than extensions of their community. With that in mind, one had better work to help create a vibrant community—which Bernstein has surely done.

Born in New York (on April 4), Bernstein has held to the noisy city as his permanent place of residence except for a period from the late 1960s to the early 70s. In those years Bernstein studied philosophy at Harvard University, where he wrote a thesis on Gertrude Stein and Ludwig Wittgenstein; afterwards, with Susan Bee, whom he had met in high school, he moved to Vancouver, Canada, and then Santa Barbara, California. With Bee, a painter and collage artist, he had a daughter in the late 80s and a son in the early 90s. Bernstein remained in New York even after starting a teaching career in 1990 at SUNY Buffalo, where he was the Director of the Poetics Program and David Gray Chair of Poetry and Letters until 2003, when he moved to the University of Pennsylvania. (He commuted to Buffalo, and now does the same to Philadelphia.) As Bernstein said at the celebration for Robin Blaser's 70th birthday in 1995, it was during his time in Vancouver in 1973 that writing poetry became a central part of his life. He took a course then on Emily Dickinson with Blaser, but it was Blaser's own poetry and involvement in the "New American

Poetry” community that determined Bernstein’s poetic sensibilities. His undergraduate thesis had started him thinking about experimental writing and language philosophy in the early twentieth century; Blaser and Ron Silliman, whom he visited while living in California, introduced him to the poets of the postwar period. Once back in New York, Bernstein immersed himself in the literary, visual and performance art, film and music worlds there; in the years before becoming an English professor, he supported himself by doing writing and editing work for commercial and non-commercial organizations, and with fellowships (NEA and Guggenheim).

Readers can glean an understanding of a poet’s work through knowing where and how that work has been published; throughout his career, Bernstein has worked with small magazines and small press publishers to make his poetry public. Before being collected for book publication, most of his poems appear first in print and online magazines that are edited by other poets. Such distributors, while they do have their own agendas aesthetically and politically, are more agile and open to new poetics than commercial ones. In fact, small magazines and presses often come into existence solely to ensure that interesting work not go unpublished. So instead of poets writing to suit a publisher’s established criteria for success, the opposite happens: small venues build an identity out of the work that they promote. In that way *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine began. Bernstein has commented that in 1978 both he and Andrews were insisting “on the value of nonexpository essays and also our rejection of received and beloved notions of voice, self, expression, sincerity, and representation” (*My Way* 249). Such a comment does define their stance, but it has caused some misunderstanding. Rejected outright was the idea that poetry should have any “beloved notions”; yet voice, self and so on can never be entirely snuffed out. Instead, all conventional notions must be continuously tested. The point of the magazine, Bernstein has said, “was not to define its own activity or to prescribe a singular form of poetry, but rather to insist on particular possibilities for poetry and poetics” (*My Way* 249). So many poets became contributors to the magazine or were linked with its “poetics of possibility” that the magazine’s name was quickly used as the label for a generation of writers who from that time on have been best known as “Language” poets. Bernstein arguably has been this group’s foremost representative.

Following Ezra Pound, who said that poets give the best criticism of other poets’ work, Bernstein has offered dozens of essays on twentieth-century poets, including William Carlos Williams, Laura (Riding) Jackson, Jackson Mac Low, and Hannah Weiner. His essays, like those of Pound and Marianne Moore, have saved scholarly prose from its own worst tendency to write only of a poet’s accomplishments; Bernstein would rather point out for other writers what a poet has

done that remains useful or interesting. Implied in his essays is a challenge to readers that they produce something in response, and that approach carries over into the classroom. From 1990 to 2003 at SUNY Buffalo, Bernstein, along with Susan Howe, Robert Creeley and Dennis Tedlock (and others, as faculty changes over the years), ran the “Poetics Program,” an informal program composed mostly of students in the English Department’s Master’s and Doctoral degree programs. Buffalo has an immense library collection of first editions and manuscripts covering the field of twentieth-century poetry; as well, the program’s funding brings visiting writers each week to Buffalo, and students are able to organize reading series and start small presses. Although Buffalo has all of these poets on faculty, it offers neither a BFA nor a MFA. Bernstein’s courses, while they attract people interested in what is typically known as “creative writing,” are not workshop courses; instead, he offers “Wreading” courses, which have extensive reading lists. Students in this context write essays and poems simultaneously, so that the creative and critical minds work in tandem. Graduates of this program are poet/scholars.

Two of Bernstein’s major books were recently published by an elite academic press; with its ability to distribute books more widely than small presses are able to, his influence has expanded even further. *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (1999) and *With Strings: Poems* (2001) are companion books, not only because they are both collections of work [112] from the mid 80s to the late 90s, but because the contents of *My Way* deliberately cut across genres: his essays and poems are co-extensive of each other. “What is the difference,” he asks in the preface to *My Way*, “between poetry and prose, verse and essays? Is it possible that a poem can extend the argument of an essay or that an essay can extend the prosody of a poem?” (xi). To the latter question, readers of Bernstein’s work will answer “yes,” especially those familiar with one of his most often cited pieces, “Artifice of Absorption,” a lineated essay first published in 1987. (It was reprinted in *A Poetics*.) In “Artifice” he has given the essay form the advantage of poetry’s quickness and inclusiveness, its privilege to ask questions without always having to offer answers. He asserted in his 1990 preface to *The Politics of Poetic Form* that “Poetry remains an unrivaled arena for social research into the (re)constitution of the public and the (re)construction of discourse” (viii). In other words, with poetry we can test the limits and uses of community and language. A *social* poetry addresses these and other questions: Who speaks and how? Who will read this poem and why?

“Artifice of Absorption” historicizes the first decade of Language poetry. Bernstein reviews the work of a number of his peers through an evaluation of the degree that it resists “absorbing” the reader, singling out Steve McCaffery’s as perhaps the most antiabsorptive. These Language poets,

Bernstein notes, ask readers to question “what we are normally / asked to be absorbed into” (*A Poetics* 54). Texts that absorb readers are “illusionistic,” written so that readers will recognize what’s in the poem as “real”; they will, in other words, feel that they are looking over the poet’s shoulder. In the theater, a similar relationship occurs when the performers on stage act as if a fourth wall separates them from the audience. So when poetry “breaks the fourth wall,” readers will actively confront rather than passively overhear texts. Bernstein refers to the shift around 1795 towards a Romantic poetry that promoted the existence of “irreducible human values” and naturalized artifice to the extent that it became invisible to the common reader; such poetry has continued to be popular for many readers and academic critics (Helen Vendler, for one). In contrast, Bernstein prefers a poetry that draws attention to its artifice. Both absorptive and antiabsorptive works require artifice, Bernstein argues, “but the former may hide / this while the latter may flaunt / it” (*A Poetics* 30). Theoretically, readers aware of the artifice of all poetry will regard any claims about “human values” with some skepticism. Poetry presents not “the truth” but theater.

As much as “Artifice of Absorption” calls attention to the problem of the reader’s passive absorption into a text, this essay/poem concludes by arguing for an “intensified, technologized” absorption that would take the reader “into a more ideologized / or politicized space” (53). In fact, Bernstein says that his poetry oscillates between “absorption & impermeability / [which] are the warp & woof of poetic composition” (86). Marjorie Perloff has referred to his technique of juxtaposing the two modes as an “art of adjacency.” In his own description he refers to the medical term “dysraphism,” which, he notes, “means congenital misseaming of embryonic parts” (*A Poetics* 23). In a “dysraphic” poem, the reader has a heightened sense of poetic artifice: the parts stay parts, instead of blending into a harmonious whole. Faced with such a text, the reader feels outside, at a distance. As familiarity with this poetry grows, however, that distance diminishes. At one point Bernstein offers an illuminating analogy: his thoughts on absorption remind him of Susan Howe’s analysis of a “captivity narrative” as told by a seventeenth-century New England woman (25). A captive of Native Americans for three months, Mary Rowlandson experienced both a fear of becoming absorbed into an “other” culture *and* an attraction. This is the ambiguity Bernstein wants his readers to experience: English speakers may recognize the language in his poems as disturbingly different, and resist plunging in; with time, though, they will notice themselves becoming “native” readers of the once-strange language. Then, and most importantly, when they “return” to “normal” English, they will be conscious of the artifice of “normal.” No language practice should be taken for granted or assumed to be the only one.

Bernstein addressed this connection between poetry and fear in his 1990 poem “Autonomy Is Jeopardy”: “Poetry scares me,” he says, because of its “virtual (or ventriloquized) / anonymity,” which offers no protection against “its accretive / acceleration” (*Republics* 307). Bernstein’s poetics of artifice aims to place both the writer and reader in that condition of anonymity. In his “Today’s Not Opposite Day,” a call-and-answer poem, the final stanza includes a nod both to his collection *My Way* and to Emily Dickinson: “What will you say, Nonny? / What will you say? / I’m just a nobody making my way” (*With Strings* 77). Dickinson’s 1861 poem begins: “I’m Nobody! Who are you? / Are you - Nobody - too?” (Franklin #260). Writer and reader thus make a pair of nobodies. In a sense, Rowlandson became a nobody during her captivity (or absorption), neither English nor Native; and the poem, like the “Wilderness” in which she traveled, is a space that encourages a divestment of the interfering ego. A nobody: somebody with an open identity. In Bernstein’s poem “The Lives of the Poll Takers,” the poet explains that the poems he writes are not about him “though they / *become me*”; and a few lines later he adds: “I’m a very becoming guy” (*Dark City* 15, 16). The poet is like a spiritual medium, channeling what comes from “outside.” Readers should follow [113] suit, and realize that the things we read are not about us though they *become us*.

A list of Bernstein’s major books of poetry includes *Controlling Interests* (1980), *Islets/Irritations* (1983), *The Sophist* (1987), *Rough Trades* (1991), *Dark City* (1994), and *With Strings* (2001). *Republics of Reality: 1975-1995* (2000) usefully reprints Bernstein’s early work, as well as some from the early 90s. *Republics* begins with *Parsing* (1976), the title a description of the poet’s task: “this parsing of the world / to make worlds & worlds” (55). In isolated passages the voice seems personal (“I’m not going to change my language” [26]) but it shifts between and sometimes within lines so much that the poet must be read as performing the “I” from a multitude of positions. There are as well sequences that play on the various uses of a word—“turning a bed down / or a deaf ear,” for instance—and ones that reflect on decentered movement in language: “what we have is a network,” just “a sequence of camping sights” (52, 64). In *Parsing*, then, one can see already the wide range of formal experimentation that characterizes all subsequent Bernstein books, a range that includes fractured and dysraphic poems, collage and quotation poems, “New Sentence” poems (in which a semantic gap exists between sentences), song-like poems, and typo poems. His immense capacity for comedic play, as in, for instance, “conveyor belts / incapacitated for several weeks with psychomimetic complaints,” is even more obvious when he performs his poems for an audience (*Controlling* 6). Opportunities to hear him read are not to be missed: they prove that meaning really can depend on *how* the poem is read.

In Bernstein's dysraphic poems, the line break often signals a shift: in "St. McC." for example, "TURN / face to a / *inevitable* / picturesque / baulk / DESIRE / tokened by / topology: the / se e / 'OR' / *verfrumdungseffect* / autonomous explosions / *taste* as / blocks, circling / like (star), fl...m...n...g... / aire, leap—" (*Republics* 84-85). Or the shift occurs within the line: in "Live Acts" we read, "our redaction / of sundry, promise, another person, fills all the / conversion of that into, which intersects a continual / revulsion of, against, concepts, encounter" (*Controlling* 28). Meaning is thus not held to an exclusive moment but is dispersed throughout the poem. Lines in "Pinot Blanco" have a "New Sentence" quality: "Slowly but surely I felt a rumor in my pain (succor in her refrain, a groomer in my brain). As for instance salt tastes salty, pepper hot, sugar sweet, apples tart" (*With Strings* 91). The language in a Bernstein book often modulates between relatively impermeable passages, as in "St. McC.," and transparent or absorbable ones, as in these two in "Emotions of Normal People": "Moreover, all systems components / Are easy to install & reconfigure" and "*If you would love to be living your life in a different way but don't want to spend a lifetime learning how*" (*Dark City* 86, 92). Composed entirely in the language of advertising, self-help books, thank-you letters and so on, "Emotions" exposes, when juxtaposed with his other poems, the artificial techniques at work even in our everyday language; the everyday has been made strange.

Basil Bunting's comment that "We lose very little by not knowing what the words mean, so long as we can pronounce them" struck a chord with Bernstein (qtd. in *A Poetics* 58). Bunting was thinking of how, in his experience, people reading or listening to a foreign language can still enjoy or even understand some of it. Bernstein's poem "Egg Under My Feet" tests that possibility: "Whaz iz maze, / INtendant to dEep fray ap ferg / exum[p]les twishting the roop / off'n unt goatee's buck. Fogem / frumptious besqualmity / voraxious flumpf" (*With Strings* 80). Ostensibly a mess of typos, these words can be pronounced. A reader could produce a homophonic translation (choosing English words that sound like those in the original) of this poem—as Bernstein sometimes does with poems in other languages. Again, one finds abundance in a Bernstein book; adjacent to poems that seem far from a personal expression of the poet are ones that display an enacted self in social space, the self dramatized. Many aspects of the poet's identity—his social status as a New York intellectual, his position as a husband and father, his Jewish heritage, his gender—are parsed. An ironic voice in "The Influence of Kinship Patterns upon Perception of an Ambiguous Stimulus" observes that nobody wants to hear "About the pain we men feel / Having our prerogatives questioned" (*Dark City* 133). Another voice says that a "poem bleeds / Metaphorically, just like I

do,” and a few pages later comes the question “What color blood came out?”(134, 136). A mixture of red and black?

The effect that Charles Bernstein’s books and teaching have had on writers, critics and students constitutes only a part of what has made his presence in American poetry so substantial. There is his promotion of new media in the 1980s, when he argued that poets needed to look at how writing on a computer would extend what had already been made possible in the shift from the pen to the typewriter, and much of his work has been made freely available online. As well, he has fostered exchanges among American poets and poets in Canada, Europe, and the Americas. More recently he has written librettos for concert hall musicians (*Shadowtime* [2005]); his interest in performance led to a role in a Hollywood film (*Finding Forrester* [2000]) and a series of radio and tv commercials (for Yellow Pages). In “Artifice of Absorption,” Bernstein quotes Veronica Forrest-Thomson’s idea that poets should write so that it becomes “impossible as well as wrong for critics to strand poems in the external world” (*A Poetics* 10). Made of and in the world, Bernstein’s poems have not been left stranded. His “Live Acts” poem ends: “These projects alone contain / the person, binding up in an unlimited way what / otherwise goes unexpressed” (*Controlling* 28). Attempting an “unlimited way” has been his way. [114]

Selected Primary Sources: Bernstein, Charles, *Controlling Interests* (New York: Roof, 2004); ---, ed., *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy* (New York: Roof, 1990); ---, *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992); *Dark City* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1994); ---, *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999); ---, *Republics of Reality: 1975-1995* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 2000); ---, *With Strings: Poems* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001).

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