



[Charles Bernstein Sounds Off](#)

Saturday 21 May 2011, 3:04 pm /[digital/gatherings/programming/sound/](#)

Charles Bernstein just gave the keynote-like presentation at E-Poetry. (Actually, he used PowerPoint.) I'm providing a few notes, feebly extending in my subjective way some of his oral and photographic/digital presentation for those of you in the information super-blogsphere.

He started by mentioning the UB Poetics Program and its engagement with digital humanities, saying: "As Digital Humanities departs from poetics, it loses its ability to articulate what it needs to articulate."

EPC and PennSound, he explained, are noncommercial spaces that aren't proprietary, don't have advertising, and are not hosted on corporate blogs or systems. These are dealing with digital archival issues – not as much computational poetry – but very important work to do on the Web. There was no foundation support for EPC, even though it was acknowledged as the most widely used poetry site on the Web.

PennSound, a project with the strong support of Penn thanks to the work of Al Filreis, has around 10 million downloads/year – even bigger than Billy Collins! There are about 40,000 individual files. This is bigger than anyone thinks poetry is today. But the NEH won't fund the project because we aren't mainly a preservation project; we don't put audio on gold-plated CDs and place them in a vault.

Bernstein's new book *Attack of the Difficult Poems* gives an account of language reproduction technologies and poetics, explaining how different technologies exist overlaid at once. Hence, he explained that he is interested not only in e-poetry but also in d-poetry and f-poetry. Alphabetic, oral, and electronic cultures are overlaid today.

Talking machines, since Edison's recitation of "Mary had a little lamb," produce sounds that we process as if they were speech. The recorded voice only speaks and is private – unlike in the public of a live talk. The digital creates proliferations of versions, undermining the idea of the stable text even further.

Bernstein demonstrated the aesthetics of microphone breakdown and then explored the poetic possibilities of the presenter having difficulties with computer interface – he played some audio clips, too, showing that the "archives" we are discussing are productive of new works. Bernstein also welcomed an outpouring of "cover versions" of poems. Poets now only read each others' work aloud at memorial gatherings. "Any performance of a poem is an exemplary interpretation." Bernstein went

though the specifics of four possibilities found in speech but not in text. Bernstein discussed “the artifice of accent” and how recorded voice, and digital access, have been important to this aspect of poetry.

Bernstein went on to discuss Woody Allen’s fear of books on tape, odd for someone for whom the more recent technologies of TV were so important. Charles presented his Yeats impersonation, which he suggests may be not as important as Yeats’ actual recorded reading, just as the Pope’s prayers may actually be more important even though we like to think that everyone’s are the same. Sound writing is the only kind of writing other than unsound writing.

I have a final image macro based on something Bernstein said immediately before he corrected himself. I hope this gives you some idea of why I’m a follower, a close follower, of Charles Bernstein...

