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Charles Bernstein. **All the Whiskey in Heaven: Selected Poems**. New York. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 2011

Fans of Charles Bernstein will like *All the Whiskey in Heaven*, which includes poems from 1975 to the present. As always with a selected poems that covers a poet's career, we can see the arc of development in style and content, hopefully witnessing an increasing maturity and quality in the work. For many poets, unfortunately, this waxing quality of work over a lifetime is not the case, William Wordsworth serving as a well-known example. Bernstein's work to date seems to have peaked somewhere in the middle to late 1980s, particularly with the poems from *The Sophist*, which seem densely intentioned and experimental in form. These poems have a complexity of texture and imagistic diversity that is sometimes missing or diminished in his other work; they also have a tenor of serious purpose that I wish we might see more in his gimmick-ridden later poems.

In the line of such poets as Albert Goldbarth who seek to dazzle and compound with range and diversity of content, Bernstein too has a showmanship side to his work; however, unlike Goldbarth, who most often has a powerful emotional dimension counterweighing his pyrotechnique, Bernstein seems content to provoke mainly thought—he leads with his headlights on. Although this is mainly a matter of taste, it can leave poems without recourse when the thought is not quite up to par, as in poems like “Thank You for Saying Thank You” or “Let's Just Say,” in which the conspicuously obvious is belabored and technique-as-structural-device cannot hide a failure of wit. When Bernstein allows his thought to lower to sniping social critique or political partisanship, the poems fail, not just because of the predictability of the content, but because of the loss of quest that we find in his best work. One of the longest poems in this book, a full twenty-nine pages, the poem “The Lives of the Toll Takers” is a poem hijacked by theory and presented in the “experimental” form of atomized print (that is, pages that are typed up in sophomoric ways that, for example, leave periods on lines by themselves and monosyllabic words broken into two separate lines, all to no real consequence except the annoyance of this reader). The poem also contains—as do his other lesser poems—bald statements that seem unworthy, such as “brought to you by DuPont, a broadly diversified company dedicated to exploitation through science and industry.” Regardless of one's political and economic convictions, this is just not good poetry. There *is* a selected poetry of Bernstein worth saving, but it is a much slimmer, more heavily *selected* volume than what we have here.

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