

#36/37—Fall 2008/Winter 2009—\$15



MARK JACOBS on ROBERT CREELEY  
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ZAKARIYYA MOHAMMAD, TAHER RIAD and YOUSEF  
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## Charles Bernstein and Professional Avant-Gardism

I had decided to go back  
to school after fifteen years in  
community poetry because I felt  
I did not know enough to navigate  
through the rocky waters that  
lie ahead for all of us in this field.  
How had Homer done it, what might Milton  
teach? Business training turned  
out to be just what I most needed.  
Most importantly, I learned that  
for a business to be successful, it  
needs to be different, to stand out  
from the competition. In poetry,  
this differentiation is best  
achieved through the kind of form  
we present

—Charles Bernstein, *Dark City* 24-25

Returning to "school" for "business training" as a professionally savvy move for the poet; formal experiment as a path to career success; the very alignment of school and business on the one hand, "community poetry" on the other — in my epigraph's comic ventriloquizing of the ambitious business-poet, Charles Bernstein invokes what are by now familiar critiques. Richard Kostelanetz comments, with reference to Language writing, on "the desperate desire of some cliques to acquire a *tenured* academic position before it is too late" (qtd. in Epstein 51); Joan Houlihan argues that the point of Language writing's disjunctions is "to secure an academic career position in the hierarchy of capitalist society" — "the poet cannot successfully create a coherent poem and so uses poem-as-pretext for expounding critical theories — something . . . that, happy coincidence, ensures an academic career." From the position of his own investment in what he calls the last avant-garde, the devoutly anti-theoretical New York school, David Lehman claims that "the idea of an academic movement that is avant-garde is oxymoronic." For

Lehman, "the Language School . . . could not exist outside of the university," and produces merely "offshoots, or illustrations, of academic critical discourse — with the result that poetry becomes a subsidiary branch of literary theory" (370-71).<sup>6</sup> While the level of misinformation and misattribution of motive in remarks such as these, along with the conflation of the historically separate moments of textual production and reception, is rather depressing, they do represent a widely circulated position, and they put before us, quite starkly, a real question: can there be such a thing as a professional, or professionalized, avant-gardism? If the avant-garde is a way of thinking about art in relation to an oppositional cultural politics, a way of thinking and art-making that claims to critique and resist institutionalization, isn't it fundamentally incompatible with assimilation into the academy? That's always been the assumption, at least since Marinetti's 1909 determination to "destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind." Marinetti goes on, "we establish *Futurism* because we want to free this land from its smelly gangrene of professors" (50). Questions of institutional cooption are as old as the idea of the avant-garde itself, but the academic reception of Language writing and the academic employment of Language poets has posed them again in particularly pressing terms. This is an avant-garde less committed to a thoroughly oppositional inside-outside model than the movements on which dominant theories of the avant-garde are based, one more willing to consider the implications of its own academic reception and to see that reception as "a moment in the ongoing social negotiations of their avant-gardism, not the end" (Rifkin 29), as another way in which the effects of avant-garde poetics may be socially reproduced.<sup>7</sup>

In particular, Charles Bernstein has become a kind of poster child for the ironies of the poetic avant-garde's academic success. Bernstein's career is of special interest in considering this relationship between the avant-garde and the

<sup>6</sup> Bernstein concludes *My Way* with a poem, "The Republic of Reality," that parodies these critiques, especially in the lines "This line is stripped of emotion. / This line is no more than an / illustration of a European / theory" (315).

<sup>7</sup> For a historical overview of Language writing's relationship to the academy, see Epstein, and Golding 144-70. Epstein cites a number of critiques of that relationship by Tom Clark, Richard Kostelanetz and Eliot Weinberger. He also raises my own central question: "Can an avant-garde poet also be an academic?" (46) For a long view of poets and the academy, one that emphasizes the British context but has more than passing relevance to the American, see Crawford. On the conjunction of avant-garde poetics and the idea of the "career," see Rifkin.

academy, because more than almost any of his peers associated with Language writing (the other example would be Bob Perelman), he has made his own institutional status a recurrent subject of his criticism and poetics. Especially since his full-time appointment as the David Gray Professor at SUNY Buffalo in 1990 (he actually taught his first seminar there in fall 1989) and including his 2003 move to the University of Pennsylvania, Bernstein's poetry has taken as one of its subjects the fact, process, and even likelihood of its own cooption. As Bernstein writes in a 1987 exchange with Tom Beckett, "I'm not all that interested in focusing on the reception of my work except insofar as this can become material for me to absorb into the work" (*A Poetics* 179). In the process, Bernstein has suggested the potential porousness — though also the reality — of the boundary between the academy and (the values of) outsider poetic communities, and his work from the early 1990s on offers a case study for how a belated avant-garde writing might reflect on its own reception while maintaining its non-normative status.

Loss Pequeno Glazier asks the sort of question that I'm addressing here in an interview with Bernstein:

Some might say that your position with respect to the establishment has shifted from one end of the spectrum to the other: from outside to inside, from outspoken critic to tenured professor. Do you think you have been absorbed by the institutions you have critiqued? Is it possible for a radical voice to maintain a usefully critical distance while drawing sustenance from a largely conservative institutional apparatus and while having to be, of necessity, supportive of the goals of that sponsoring institution? (*My Way* 251)

This is partly a question about a move between communities that are stereotypically represented as incompatible or incommensurate — a stereotype collapsed in many locales by the active presence of local college and university graduates as publishers, editors, arts organizers, and so forth. Bernstein constructs part of his answer around the relationship between these communities: "the university's role is not to be the center of authority but a place that responds to, and aids, the poetic activity that is generated, by and large, far from its precincts" (251). One singular feature of much American literary avant-gardism, it's worth noting, has been its impulse to institutionalize itself, from Ezra Pound's career-long desire and perverse efforts to reshape the literary academy to the first avant-garde

based in a college, Black Mountain, to the establishment of the Buffalo Poetics Program. The Poetics Program, so energetic and productive under Bernstein's leadership, marks a historically important first meeting among innovative poetics, criticism, scholarship, and pedagogy at a state-funded institution, where public money sustains the education of future professors of experimental poetry (many of whom have gone there from a "community" background in small-press publishing and editing). From this point of view, Bernstein, as an instigator and apologist for the potential of avant-garde poetics to cohabit with and reshape academic institutions, is very much in a certain American tradition.

In his essay "The Revenge of the Poet-Critic" Bernstein poses questions that some of his harsher critics consider rhetorical: "Do the administrative and adjudicative roles of a professor mark the sell-out of the poet?; does critical thinking mar creativity, as so many of the articles in the Associated Writing Programs newsletter suggest?" (*My Way* 5) He has addressed such questions with remarkable frankness, and preserves the possibility that a professional avant-gardism is not a total oxymoron in three ways: by making his own assimilation one of his central subjects; by his critique of the conventions of academic style and logic and his performance of alternatives in his critical writing; and by the range of extra-academic literary activity that he has used his professional position to foster — I'm thinking here of the presses, magazines, reading series, talk series, web sites and listservs associated with or enabled by the Buffalo program. In the remainder of this essay I'll focus on the first of these, that is, on a few of the ways in which Bernstein writes the issue of cooption into his poetry.

As early as "Standing Target," published in the 1980 *Controlling Interests*, Bernstein had sought to fracture from within the stifling language of institutionally sanctioned characterization (to use his own term). The poem collages together the language of clinical psychology (ways of measuring motor development, terms for maladaptive social behavior), business biographies from a corporate newsletter, and day camp reports that again assess their subject's (the young Bernstein's) adaptiveness. The poem ends with the shattering of what was apparently, in its original form, an unflattering school report:

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\* For a range of perspectives on experimental poetics and teaching, see Recallack and Spahr.

Fluency in gain has remedial comprehension  
 The Course of Improvement shown again, noticeably  
 Benefitting errors, numbers, a more certain  
 Knowledge to vary need, type of work (*Controlling Interests* 46-47)

The basic move here is that of reversal, as Bernstein fractures the language used to characterize him as a child. "Gain in fluency" becomes "fluency in gain," "need to vary type of work" becomes "to vary need, type of work." Bernstein's 1991 book *Rough Trades* contains "Reading the Tree 1" and "2," anthology-poems that he constructs out of quotations from Ron Silliman's influential anthology of Language writing. In *The American Tree*. It's notable that in commenting on his and his peers' reception, through the poem-as-anthology made from an anthology, he goes to already self-commenting passages like those from David Bromige's *My Poetry* (made up largely of reviews of Bromige's work) or this from Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*: "they used to be / the leaders of the avant-garde, but now / they just want to be understood" (*Rough Trades* 31). Later in the same volume, the dynamics of reception and canonicity are spliced with business terms in a way prophetic of Bernstein's later work, as he plays on the commodification of avant-garde poetics and its ambivalent relation to the American obsession with the consumption of newness: "Coca-Cola franchises / the metaphysics of / numerosity, according class and new equal / status" (85).

As I've already suggested, however, the themes of his own reception or cooption and the subversive appropriation of "official" discourses, while sporadically present in Bernstein's earlier work, only become prominent after his hiring at SUNY Buffalo in 1990. By 1994's *Dark City*, Bernstein is alluding both to his own earlier work and to his own reception. It's no accident that in "The Lives of the Toll Takers" he refers to "The Klupzy Girl," which was already being treated critically as a signature Bernstein poem and was anthologized the year of *Dark City*'s publication in the *Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Poetry*. "The Klupzy Girl" begins "Poetry is like a swoon, with this difference: / it brings

\* Bernstein provides some context for these reports in an interview, where he says: "On the school's part, they did not think much of me, as I was repeatedly told: my penmanship and spelling were abysmal; I was slow to read and in constant need of remedy in the form of remedial groups; I did not socialize right, my appearance was somewhat ajar." He continues: "what I hated . . . was that you never received grades but were given pop psychology reports about your development and social integration" (*My Way* 235-36).

you to your senses" (*Islets/Irritations* 47); in "Lives" we get "poetry's / like a spoon, with three or four / exemptions: in effect only / off peak, void / were permitted by Lord, / triple play / on all designated *ghost* phonemes" (*Dark City* 12). Tags of poststructuralist theory float through the same poem as casual markers of a philosophical and institutional context that includes Derrida ("difference or / *différance*" [9]), Jameson ("[the prison house of language]" [10]), Kristeva ("libidinal / flow" [11]) and Lacan ("an imaginary that cannot be willed away / but neither need be mindlessly / obeyed" [22]) — the theoretical short-hand here constituting a set of name-tags not significantly different from the literal name tag cited later in the poem that reads "Hello / my name is Max Gomez" (26). A certain kind of reception-anxiety is perhaps registered via the status of a fellow producer of hybrid art objects and one-liners—Barbara Kruger is enshrined in the window / of the Whitney's 1987 Biennial" (11)—and Bernstein continues to foreground the uneasy postmodern line between art and commerce with the observation that "Andy // Warhol is the // P. T. Barnum // of the / (late) / twentieth century" (18). This concern with the cooption of oppositionality becomes more pronounced later in the poem: "What if / success scares you so much that at the point of some / modest acceptance, midway through / life's burning, you blast out / onto the street, six-shooters smoking, still a rebel. / For what?" (21). Part of the joke here is that Bernstein couches resistance or rebellion in stereotypically masculinist terms, even as gender essentialism has been another of the poem's recurrent subjects via its constant invocation of then-contemporary debates: "Fear of / softness characterized as rounded edges, indecisiveness, need to / please / versus the humorless rigidity of the 'phallic' / edge, ready / to stand erect, take / sides" (21).

For Bernstein, poetic self-reflexiveness is frequently reflection on po-biz, on the business of poetry. Thus "Emotions of Normal People" incorporates three paragraphs of advertising copy for the 1989 edition of *Poet's Market* (*Dark City* 94-95). This move assimilates the marketing context for poetry into poetry (instead of being assimilated by it), and Bernstein parodically calls forth his own prospective reception through his use of business or marketing language to make

\* Susan Schultz (180-208) similarly connects Bernstein's uses of business discourses to questions of reception and professional status, and remarks in particular: "I take his 1994 book, *Dark City*, to be an extended (and very zany) meditation on the paradoxes of achieving success within the academy. For Bernstein realizes that he has entered into another consumer economy, that poetry in (and out of) the academy is marketed like any commodity . . . . How to market poetry without becoming a pawn to consumer culture in the process is one of the central questions addressed in *Dark City*" (199-200).

comic statements about poetics — language that implicitly acknowledges poetry's involvement with or inseparability from brand-naming. In "Today's not opposite day" he does so in the form of the investment disclaimer, with the language of academic theory ("performativity") replacing — or perhaps emerging as analogous to — that of the stock market ("performance"):

Readers are cautioned that certain statements in this poem are forward-looking statements that involve risk and uncertainties. Words such as 'bluster,' 'rotund,' 'interstitial,' 'inebriate,' 'guerrilla,' 'torrent,' 'prostrate,' and variations of such words and similar expressions are intended to identify such forward-looking statements. These statements are based on current expectations and projections about the aesthetic environment and assumptions made by the author and are not guarantees of future performativity. (*With Strings* 73)

With his acute ear for the rhetoric of hucksterism, Bernstein coopts critiques of Language writing's alleged careerism by adopting the voice of a literary carnival barker selling disjunction: "We're all serialists now," said the barker for / the Language Contortionist live act on the Net. 'Words / bent and mangled beyond belief, syntax twisted to / an inch of sense by our grammar-defying, double / jointed linguabats, who speak out of both — all three— / sides of their mouths & through their heads too!'" (*With Strings* 123). In "The Lives of the Toll Takers," if mainstream poetry of the time is "the show-me business" (*Dark City* 17), Bernstein couches his own parody of poetry as business in terms that again provocatively and uncomfortably make the link between avant-gardism and the capitalist obsession with new product, visual disjunction in tension with the seductive smoothness of sales talk:

... Our new

service orientation

mea

nt

not only changing the way we wrote poems but also diversifying into new poetry services. Poetic opportunities

however, do not fall into your lap, at least not

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very often. You've got to seek them out, and when you find them you've got to have the knowhow to take advantage of them.

Keeping up with the new aesthetic environment is an ongoing process: you can't stand still. (22)

To compound the irony of such passages, we might remember Ron Silliman's wry observation that the "Language poetry" label, even if imposed from the outside by a hostile critic, at least served the function of improving visibility: "Becoming identified with an inaccurate but provocative name enabled the Language Poets to rapidly deepen market penetration and increase market share" (*Paradise* 18) — a sentence written at a time when these poets' "market penetration" was actually nothing close to what it would become.

If the rhetoric of po-biz and the marketplace makes up one way in which Bernstein reflects implicitly on his professional status, the allied rhetorics of critical discourse, educational institutions and contexts of reception make up another. I want to suggest briefly three ways in which Bernstein uses these rhetorics to locate his work self-consciously in a professional educational context while interrogating the norms of that context or setting. First, he now ventriloquizes academic discourses and sub-genres far more than in his earlier poetry; for Bernstein, the language of the literary academy has increasingly become another of the many possible languages for poetry. In "Emotions of Normal People" he quotes a brief paragraph from a review of Michael Andre Bernstein's *The Tale of the Tribe* that praises its qualities as academic argument (*Dark City* 92). A later paragraph in the poem splices together sections of numerous book reviews that similarly praise examples of academic criticism. These quotations illustrate Bernstein's effort to have his poetry assimilate or incorporate its own site of reception rather than vice versa, in a kind of pre-emptive strike. In "The View from Nowhere" he calls up another institutional discourse, that of the external reader's report on a scholarly article. In Bernstein's version, however, *ad hominem* argument displaces the convention of objective analysis: "The article / paints a picture / of its author as seething with jealousy / & egomania — hopelessly out / of touch / with the material / that is his / putative / subject" (73). Even more pertinently for our purposes, he invokes in this same poem the unsympathetic side of the academic reception of alternative poetics: "Of course, what / many have regarded as a liberating / permission / to write in otherwise unsanctioned ways / will provoke professional sanction-takers to see / only red"

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(74), with the words "only red" foregrounded by a line break and perhaps gesturing towards the unannounced attribution to Language writing of a monolithic leftist politics that overrides care for "the poem itself." This is the second form of professional self-reflexiveness that I want to point out in Bernstein, writing issues of reception into his work by addressing straightforwardly, if comically, the terms of that reception. The same kind of move occurs in his critical collection *My Way* when Bernstein conducts an imaginary conversation with "the prize-winning poet," "the politically committed academic" and the "Professor" over some of the recurrent canards of Language writing's reception: real poetry stems from expressive individuality, not from groups and movements; no-one can understand Language writing (and it's therefore politically regressive); it's "just one more commodity being peddled" (5). In particular Bernstein mocks the notion that his professional avant-gardism constitutes some kind of turning away from a prior "real world" community: "Of course you're right, I tell the few friends I have left, now that I am poet-professor at the University of Buffalo, I have retreated to an ivory tower, removed from the daily contact I used to have, as a poet-office worker in Manhattan, with the broad masses of the American people . . . the ones that I used to meet at downtown poetry readings and art openings" (5-6).

Thirdly, time and again Bernstein invokes institutional contexts that link reading and interpellation into the normative. In "log rhythms," books are a retrograde monkey wrench in the educational testing system, as an unnamed student, perhaps an irritated teenager anticipating the SAT, blurts out "if you'd just let me take the reading skills / test-preparation course instead of making me waste / my time with all these books you're always / foisting on me, like so many greasy french / fries from a '70s-theme coffee shop" (*With Strings* 124). In "Emotions of Normal People," conversely, we hear the bafflement of institutional authority at students' apparent "failure" to be interpellated into norms of educational competitiveness: "Again the explanation / of their incompetence in passing a mental / test may lie in the subjects' seeming / inability to regard fellow students as rivals or to feel / any element of / opposition in either the test itself or the examiner" (*Dark City* 100). Through the disembodied voice of "why we ask you not to touch" (*With Strings* 118) and its efforts to hygienically regulate reading, Bernstein mocks the possibility of disinterested reading both stylistically, in his Big Brother-ish diction and tone, and thematically: "Human emotions and cognition / leave a projective film over the poems / making them difficult to perceive. / Careful readers maintain a measured / distance from the works in order / to allow distortion-free comprehension / and to avoid damaging the meaning"

(*With Strings* 118). The hidden threat in the official discourse that Bernstein invokes here lies in its almost libidinal, and certainly gendered, magnetism: as Bernstein writes in another poem, "Yet it is the virile voice of authority, the condescending / smugness in tone, that is thrilling" ("Conversation" 134).

Part of my point in these last few paragraphs has been that the idea of a professional avant-gardism cannot be separated from the specific profession in question—that of university teaching and the inevitable compromises and contradictions it poses for the experimental poet. As Bernstein says in a 2003 interview, "A funny thing happens to you when you become a professor of poetry as I am . . . you end up teaching Robert Frost with great pleasure" (Caplan 134). When the avant-gardist takes up an academic position, his or her commitments instantly become complicated, and s/he becomes responsible for taking seriously poets whom s/he may previously have dismissed. The act of rejection that is constitutive of avant-gardism is professionally irresponsible for the academic. Bernstein begins *My Way* by observing that the book "addresses the limits and possibilities for poetry in the society and for literary studies in the university, which I treat as intertwined topics" (xi). Increasingly, then, Bernstein's writing plays wittily off the institutions of poetry, or institutional forms of poetic behavior, in the academy. As one example, we can take his satire of that familiar paratext for poetry, the poet's preface to the poem, such a staple of the campus poetry reading with its captive audience of press-ganged undergraduates earning their extra credit. Bernstein's position is that "I tend to dislike readings where the poet defines every detail and reference of the work so that by the time you get to the poem it's been reduced to an illustration of the anecdotes and explanations that preceded it" (*My*

\* Applying this lens of "voice" and "authority" to some of Bernstein's critical prose, the often conventional expository surface of that prose can seem to contradict its radically disruptive content (cf. Schultz 203). Bernstein has long understood, however, the strategic use of the social power implicit in conventional exposition, as well as expressing his ambivalence about it and an attraction to it "that is, for me, disingenuous to deny" (*Content's Dream* 455). For a range of poets' positions on the avant-garde writer's use of conventional expository forms, see the discussion emerging out of Bernstein's 1983 talk "Characterization" (*Content's Dream* 428-62) and, more briefly, out of Silliman's "Canons and Institutions" (172-73). Especially within the overall structure of *My Way*, Bernstein's use of normative prose saves him from becoming predictably self-interrupting — that is, the normative is not privileged but becomes one of the range of rhetorics on which Bernstein strategically draws, defamiliarized by its context.

Way 9). Thus we get a poem like "Poem," the tautological title not a mark of O'Hara-esque casualness but a taste of the comic circularity to come:

Just a few things first  
let's see  
a dog, well for those of you not  
from here—a rather common domestic  
pet, four legs, tail.  
I should say  
the seasons in the poem refer  
to the seasons in the northeast  
so that fall refers to the leaves  
falling and winter is cold and usually  
gray—often  
I will use the seasons  
in a metaphorical way,  
as you will see. (*With Strings* 20)

In the face of such dumbing-down, it's no accident that Bernstein begins *With Strings* with these simultaneously earnest and comically clunky lines, almost a topic question for the volume: "What are aesthetic values and why do / there appear to be lesser & fewer of / them?" (3). This is a complex moment, because the decline of "aesthetic values" belongs to a high cultural discourse that Bernstein has himself always critiqued, even as he wants to preserve the aesthetic — or more specifically, the "artifice" of his essay-poem "Artifice of Absorption" — as a viable category of analysis, thought, or response. The question both aligns Bernstein with and separates him from perhaps his most influential precursor, Stein. He alludes to her "What Are Masterpieces and Why Are There So Few of Them," in which notions of identity, memory, and audience are destructive of the potential masterpiece (rather, they are "what makes school" [Stein 84-85]), and to his own tweaking of the formula at the beginning of his essay "Stein's Identity": "What is identity and why is there so much of it?" (*My Way* 141). The professional avant-gardist distances himself from one form of public poetic identity, that of the self-professed modernist genius, through the redundancy of "lesser and fewer,"

while embracing Stein's early rejection of the notions of identity on which the mainstream poetry and professional networks of his own moment came to rest.<sup>1</sup> Susan Wheeler has addressed the issues that I've touched on here in a number of brief but trenchant essays over the last few years, confronting the conundrum that "radical poetics are so widely read and taught now that thousands of idiosyncratic assimilations and responses vie for our reading and discernment," like products on the supermarket shelves ("Reading" 152). In the entrapped acknowledgement that "we're all informed consumers here" (148), Wheeler proceeds in "Reading, Raiding, and Anodyne Eclecticism" as if to cite a writer is to invoke a brand name. To name names allows one summarily to articulate or refer to positions in a cultural field, but for Wheeler this move also induces an embarrassment of reification: "Four sentences and a quote in and, so far, seven brand names," and later "the brand name count is at least fifteen and rising" (148, 150) — the analogy with a rising body count is depressingly a *propos* in our current historical moment. In current literary politics as Wheeler describes it, "wrong assimilation — or appropriation," the adoption of putatively avant-garde tropes without an evident understanding of the original motivation behind them, "is seen as a marketing ploy, the models now having obtained brand-name recognition" (149). This branding of the radical poet is part of what Wheeler calls vividly in another essay "the steamroller of cultural objectification" ("Poetry" 321), a matter of reception that, she suggests, frequently rebounds upon practice. In this essay, "Poetry, Mattering?" she invokes Pound's promotional activities on Eliot's behalf and then asks "At what cost was this packaging, this framing and branding, this construction of public personages . . . to him [Pound], to Eliot, and to the work?" (321). Bernstein, however, has used his work (in all genres and as a poetry activist) precisely to *address* packaging, framing, the construction of his own public

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<sup>1</sup>One of the "identity constructions" that Stein "questions," in Bernstein's reading, is that of her own Jewishness, even while he sees her as "one of the least assimilationist of American modernist writers" (*My Way* 141-43). Bernstein's essay plays on Stein's "Identity a Poem," which begins with her famous line "I am I because my little dog knows me" (71), the line that Stein goes on to complicate and deconstruct in "What Are Masterpieces."

personage.' As he puts it, "I never wanted to become a professional activist, although in some ways maybe that is what I've become" (*My Way* 240).<sup>†</sup>

In Wheeler's "Poetry, Mattering?" the academy is merely another assimilative corner of the cultural marketplace: "What began as an assault from a fringe becomes more centralized, assimilated within the institution (the academy) that supports it. The fact of [Susan Howe's] interest in Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville sells them anew within this institution" (319). The market, the academy, professionalization, and teaching become crisply conflated in her pithy observation that experimental poets "find themselves a market share now resisted by students with proximity to their endowed chairs" (322). What takes Wheeler's argument beyond a standard critique of cooption is her acknowledgement that those students — as both writers and readers — "are stymied" for a place to stand, since no one aesthetic position seems tenable: "irony," "the denial of the self," "the unquestioning personal narrative," and "rhyme and decoration" are each, on their own, "insufficient" (324). In response she calls for "the ambition to find language combinations, structures, methods of composition, that remain *unassimilable* in the broad banality of the cultural market" (324), and suggests that teaching can nurture "the possibility of genuine . . . striving toward the enlargement of site, borders" ("Reading" 154-55). At the same time unassimilability, Wheeler well knows, is as much a fantasy as avant-garde outsiderhood once was, a metaphor or horizon, a motivating ideal rather than a possibility, a heuristic rather than an ontology, so that it paradoxically operates by a form of "insiderness." She praises, for instance, "the poet who hopes he can, in some small way, alter the path of the steamroller by inserting the 'uselessness' of elegant form . . . into the lives of the . . . academic 'players' around him" (324). That's another way of putting what I mean by professional avant-gardism, the distant, quixotic possibility that Charles

<sup>†</sup> On the question of framing, we might note Bernstein's own longstanding use of and interest in the term and concept, and in Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis*. See, for instance, the essay "Frame Lock" (*My Way* 90-99), his most sustained treatment of academic professionalism.

<sup>†</sup> Compare Schultz — "Bernstein has become the most consummate of professionals" (207) — and Ron Silliman's remark on his blog that Bernstein's work and career are marked by "as judicious a management of OVC [Official Verse Culture] institutions as any poet of my generation. Bernstein Amid the Bureaucracies will someday make for a fascinating exploration of the social structures surrounding verse at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century & start of the next."

Bernstein's work and career puts before us. If Wheeler suggests that for writing to get done "we must *willingly* suppress the knowledge that we will participate in the assimilation of our own text" ("Reading" 153), Bernstein's work gets done by acknowledging, embracing, and ironizing that assimilation.

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