

The Literary Encyclopedia

Charles Bernstein (1950-)

Nerys Williams, University College Dublin

Poet, critic, editor, teacher.

Active 1975- in USA, North America

Charles Bernstein's work as poet, critic, collaborator, educator and editor can be read as a life-long campaign to introduce and affirm poetry's position in the public sphere. He is associated primarily with the emergence of a poetic tendency known as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry (also referred to as language writing) on the American East and West coasts during the late seventies. With poet Bruce Andrews he co-founded and co-edited the journal L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E in New York, which ran from 1978-1981. Early language writing can be characterised as a poetry which frequently works in terms of diminished reference, questioning language's unequivocal claim as a finite medium of representation. The disruption of syntax, narrative and the foregrounding of language's generative properties through its slippages, puns and word play serves to create a poetry of intense linguistic opacity. The writing was predicated on the belief that the divergence of poetic language from customary discourse marked out the ground for political agency. Bernstein's familiar comment that language must be seen as not accompanying but constituting the world (Bernstein 1986, 62) has become axiomatic for understanding the original tenets of language writing. It is important to note that the tendency established continuities with a distinct lineage of literary avant-garde and experimental as well as theoretical precedents. As Bernstein stresses in an early essay, language writing would appear to be Janus-like, establishing a dialogic engagement with a past and an immediate future:

I am sufficiently skeptical of the presumption of advance in avant-garde to equally distrust formulations that appear to pit the new against tradition. What is presented here exemplifies a continuing dialogue with the past(s) surely not, though, just a narrow line of hallowed English verse! and the future(s). Yet because it is a dialogue, it does not only involve repetition of old forms but also a response to them. (Bernstein 1986, 242)

A key then to Bernstein's poetry and poetics is the role of community -- whether they be established literary and political communities, or imagined and utopian communities. This idealistic strain in his poetics is made evident in a Bernstein suggestion that his poetry is harnessed to the possibilities for creating an alternative polis:

Against the Romantic idea of poems as transport, I prefer to imagine poems as spatializations and interiorizations blueprints of a world I live near to, but have yet to occupy fully. Building impossible spaces in which to roam, unhinged from the contingent

necessities of durability, poems and the books they make eclipse stasis in their insatiable desire to dwell inside the pleats and folds of language. (Bernstein 1986, 247)

In this light the poem becomes an architectural or textual utopia, and this sketch of a public space is concomitant with Bernstein's demand that poetry and poetics have a public function. Indeed, his poem *Matters of Policy* suggests that love of the /public good is the only passion that really/necessitates speaking to the public (Bernstein 1980, 6).

Born in New York City, the son of Herman Bernstein, a dress manufacturer, and Sherry Bernstein, Bernstein attended the Bronx High School and studied philosophy at Harvard University from which he graduated in 1972. From the early 70s to the late 80s he worked as a writer and editor on healthcare and medical topics, with a break to serve as Associate Director of the CETA Artists Project. He spent the early period of his poetic career outside of the academy and was largely self-supporting, except for the receipt of fellowships from the Guggenheim and NEA. Aspects of Bernstein's poetics were influenced by his study of Gertrude Stein and Ludwig Wittgenstein as well his early friendships with poets Robin Blaser and Ron Silliman during a stay on the West Coast and in Vancouver. Blaser and Silliman encouraged Bernstein's interest for post war American poetry and his appreciation of literary experiment. Bernstein lives in New York with his wife (a frequent collaborator) the painter artist Susan Bee (b. 1952). Their two children are Felix (b. 1992) and Emma (b. 1985 d. 2008). His major volumes of poetry include *Controlling Interests* (1980), *Islets/ Irritations* (1983) *The Sophist* (1987), *Rough Trades* (1991) *Dark City* (1994), *With Strings* (2001) and *Girly Man* (2006). Key volumes of poetics and essays include *Content's Dream Essays 1975-1984* (1986) *A Poetics* (1992) and *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (1999). In 1990 Bernstein established a teaching career at SUNY Buffalo becoming the Director of Poetics programme and the David Gray Chair of Poetry and Letters until 2003. He is now the Regan Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania

One historicising of language writing reads the tendency as a reaction to the predominance of the workshop lyric of the seventies and eighties. In this account the writing performs a general swipe in the face of what Bernstein has called official verse culture (Bernstein 1986, 247). In explaining official verse culture he suggests that it is not mainstream, nor is it monolithic, nor uniformly bad or good (Bernstein 1986, 248). Instead Bernstein objects to the criterion of value which is placed on its circulation: What makes official verse culture official is that it denies the ideological nature of its practice while maintaining hegemony in terms of major media exposure and academic legitimation and funding (Bernstein 1986, 2489). Bernstein's dissatisfaction with the workshop lyric stems not only from a refutation of a certain aesthetic, but is also linked with his own approach to poetics as necessarily social in its address and political in its intention. He addresses the domestication of the recent lyric in no uncertain terms, suggesting that for the subjectivized, gutted lyric, imagination and subjectivity have become house pets of the personal lifestyle industry, cousins to a creativity that seems to apply more to earrings than to hearing (Bernstein 1996, 19, 20).

It is perhaps no surprise that Bernstein's interest in Wittgenstein's philosophy, with its examination of a shared grammar in use, has had an extensive impact on his poetics and his re-adaptation of lyric forms. Central to the opening up of the lyric to the social sphere are the poet's own references to Wittgenstein's dismissal of the concept of private language and philosopher Stanley Cavell's scrutiny of the social contract. Bernstein links the artifice of poetry, or what he calls writing centered on its wordness (Bernstein 1986, 32), with an ambitious political and social claim:

Language is commonness in being, through which we see & make sense of & value. Its exploration is the exploration of the human common ground. The move from a purely descriptive, outward directive, writing toward writing centered on its wordness, its physicality, its haecceity (thisness) is, in its impulse, an investigation of human self-sameness, of the place of our connection: in the world, in the word, in ourselves. (Bernstein 1986, 32)

Bernstein's essays indicate a mistrust of poetry as a mastery of form, and acts of linguistic indeterminacy become strategies safeguarding against the dangers of an authoritarian rhetoric. He also associates the foregrounding of language's generative properties with an engagement from his reader. This is apparent when he gestures to a writing that incorporates the issue of interpretation and interaction (Bernstein 1986, 233). In one of his most provocative essays, *The Poetics of the Americas*, Bernstein argues for an ideolectical approach to American poetry, reliant less on a multiplicity of identities than a plurality of different languages. Taken in its broadest sense, Bernstein's ideolects draw a vast perimeter around an experimental poetics and the conceptualisation of a social language. As opposed to dialect in poetry, Bernstein argues that an ideolectical approach creates a virtual poetics of the Americas, allowing in effect for a range of different idioms.

Wordsworth's original incorporation of common speech in poetry as the gesture of a man speaking to men (Wordsworth 2005, 290) becomes in Bernstein's poetry a consideration of not whom one is speaking to, but speaking for. In the poem *The Kiwi Bird in the Kiwi Tree* the speaker proposes *The first fact is the social body/ one from another, nor needs no other* (Bernstein 1991, 11). Bernstein argues that, as initiates into language as a means for exploring relations, the naturalisation of speech patterns needs to be dismantled and constantly scrutinised, and this is the most valuable role for error. The world in this light is seen not as something external predetermined by language, but as comprising of textuality. Or, as Bernstein succinctly states, *the grammars we create in turn create the world* (Bernstein 1986, 168).

A Bernstein poem can read as a textual vaudeville act or as a polyphonic performance. The poet has noted a fascination for entertainers and performers born between 1889 and 1909 (Caplan 2004, 132). His subjects often include song lyricists, blues singers and comedians such as Henny Youngman, the Marx Brothers, Burns and Allen, Fanny Brice; Charlie Patten, Robert Johnson, Oscar Hammerstein II and Cole Porter. In *Whose Language* Bernstein introduces us to a staged dynamic between slippage, humour, nonsense and a challenge to grammatical order:

Who's on first? The dust descends as
the skylight caves in. The door
closes on a dream of default and
denunciation (go get those piazzas),
hankering after frozen (prose) ambiance
(ambivalence) (Bernstein 1991, 35)

Bernstein insists that his polyphonic texts open the univocal lyric to a multiplicity of ideolects. This extract is part of a skewed sonnet and the casual reader may be surprised at how Bernstein's tactics of syntactical disruption create a sonorous pattern. As the editor of a collection of essays on poetry and performance, *Close Listening Poetry and the Performed Word*, Bernstein is insistent on the musical possibilities inherent in writing. He urges us to stop listening and begin to hear, which is to say, stop decoding and begin to get a nose for the sheer noise of language (Bernstein 1998, 22).

A further feature of Bernstein's poetry is the intentional disruption of clichés and aphorisms embedded strategically in the poetic text. In a longer poem, *The Lives of the Toll Takers*, sayings become skewed intentionally, and while meaning may shift within an aphorism or a quotation, the cadence of the original remains as a trace mark within the text. This fascination with error is made clear in an early essay, in the questions the poet poses: Is it possible, for example, to allow typographical errors, mistypings, to remain integral? (Bernstein 1986,48). Take for example the disrupted proverb in a picture/ [fixture]/ is worth more than a thousand words, which disappears almost completely to a demarcation of syllables [*a tincture gives birth to a gravely verve*] (Bernstein 1994, 10). It then becomes a command for form above rhetoric, [*a mixture is worth a thousand one-line serves*] (Bernstein 1994, 11) and ludically collapses into linguistic economy (A picture is worth 44.95 but no price can be/ put on words) (Bernstein 1994, 15). A further ghosted reference behind all these examples is the pertinent adage *Actions speak louder than words*. *Lives of the Toll Takers* also reads as an a mini biopic, one cannot fail to see resonances with Bernstein's career path as poetics professor:

I had decided to go back
to school after fifteen years in
community poetry because I felt
I did not know enough to navigate
though the rocky waters that
lie ahead for all of us in this field. (Bernstein 1994, 245)

His most recent volume of poetry, *Girly Man* (2006), literally takes its title from a sound bite, i.e. Governor of California Arnold Schwarzenegger's attack of Democrats in 2004 as girly men. Bernstein embraces the phrase as an anti-war chant dedicated to his son Felix: *So be a girly man/ & sing this gurlly song/ Sissies & proud/ That we would ever lie our way to war* (Bernstein 2006, 180)

Unsurprisingly Bernstein's insistent focus on reader, interpretation and poetry itself as a form of enquiry has resulted in an expansive range of essays on twentieth century poets and theorists. His celebrated essay in verse *Artifice of Absorption* from *A Poetics* (1987) can be read as an extended dialogue with the English poet/ theorist Veronica Forrest Thomson and her critical volume *Poetic Artifice* (1978) as well as a chronicle of the first decade of language writing. What is most compelling about Bernstein's essay is how the key terms artifice and absorption are given provisional interpretations. While one would intuitively associate the transparency of more accessible writing with a certain absorption, and the opacity of more challenging poetry with a certain artifice, Bernstein problematises these categories by suggesting that a poetry of impermeability can also be absorbing. Bernstein's early essays have also helped to devote more critical attention to neglected or underrepresented poets. His essays examine the legacy of second wave modernists such as Louis Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker and Laura Riding as well as examining an alternate tradition of Modernist writing which includes the work of Stein, George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, William Carlos Williams and Basil Bunting. Moreover, Bernstein is a keen commentator of contemporary poets such as Steve McCaffrey, Robin Blaser, Jackson MacLow and Hannah Weiner.

Certainly Bernstein's will to disseminate poetry beyond the academic sphere has been both effective and impressive. An early campaigner for web based material and discussion of poetry and poetics, he helped establish the celebrated website at Buffalo (Electronic Poetry Center), an email discussion list in the early nineties (Poetics@), and at the University of Pennsylvania an archive of modern and contemporary poetic readings and interviews, *PENNsound*. Bernstein has also helped to start the important reading series in New York (Ear Inn). He has collaborated widely with visual and sculptural artists. The recent publication of *Blind Witness* (2008) brings together three libretti written by Bernstein (*Blind Witness News*, *The Subject*, *The Lenny Paschen Show*) with music by Ben Yarmolinsky. In 2004 his libretto *Shadowtime* (music by Brian Ferneyhough) based on the work and life of the German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin had its first performance in Munich.

While Bernstein is aware that the ambitious claims of poetics might frequently falter in the practice of poetry, his remarks on the public function of art, suggests that this is the invariable gamble staked by an experimental praxis:

I believe that artists and intellectuals have a commitment to try to make their work and the work they support available in public spaces, not in the watered down forms that only capitulate to the mediocracy, but in forms that challenge, confront, exhilarate, provoke, disturb, question, flail, and even fail. (Bernstein 1999, 15)

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