failing to bridge the gap between who we truly are and the face we present to the world is a ravaging, ashamed emptiness, a theme that arises repeatedly. Even at a moment of relative ease, Father Manny jars us by reporting that he ". . . felt liked and admired, but the feeling did not go into him very deeply." Sarafino's own emptiness is often described, and his room is referred to as an "empty nest." In order to close that gap between the obvious and the hidden, we're asked to question our notions of what constitutes criminality, versus what might be a challenging, creative response. An act that is criminal by definition caps the plot, but it is healing and necessary. It happens to require concealment; life is complex enough to ask us to distinguish what should be announced from what needs honorable subterfuge.

Stealing Fatima seems to embrace the truths contained within Simone Weil's essay on "Affliction," that spiritual oppression must, sooner or later, take the form of social alienation and then—crucially—physical ailment. The final pages contain the remarkable assertion (referring to priests on retreat to cure despair, loss of faith, or addiction) that "The brothers of Saint Matthew of the Mount saw such despair not as a sin but as a kind of suffering, and the order recognized such suffering as a holy state and therefore redemptive." It's wonderfully audacious to implore readers to note and embrace and forgive suffering, since we live in a climate of shrugging off or despising our own as well as the world's. The novel's considerable achievement is that we read the pages eager to find out what happens next, while what we are mining are the human foibles that are, finally, inseparable from grace, inseparable from the redemption of what we have been, what we are now, what we will always be.

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All the Whiskey in Heaven: Selected Poems

By Charles Bernstein

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010

A BOOK REVIEW BY MARY MAXWELL

THAT CHARLES BERNSTEIN'S *All the Whiskey in Heaven: Selected Poems* has been brought out by a publisher at the epicenter of "traditional verse culture" is bound to raise the eyebrows of those at both ends of the contemporary poetry spectrum: How in the world did this book get published? Could it simply be another piece of recycled flotsam carried along by the rising flood of unnecessary *New and Selected Poems*? Certainly such literary goods are increasingly being marketed as a way to make a mid-career poet's tepid or dissipating output appear more substantial than it's really been.

Such a cynical explanation, however, doesn't correspond to the appearance of *All the Whiskey in Heaven*. For whatever else might be noted about him (the self-promoting consequences of his efforts, for example), Bernstein's extensive and energetic activities on poetry's behalf could hardly be described as halfhearted. At the forefront of electronic media for well over a decade, the poet has been in a unique position to utilize and benefit from the newer technologies; a generous—if not exhaustive—selection of his own work in performance can be found at the PennSound Web site. Whether online and or on the conventional page, Bernstein (now the author of twenty-five or so published volumes of poetry) seems to be picking up, rather than losing, steam.

One function traditionally assigned the *Selected Poems* has been to keep important work available to a serious readership, especially when a poet's early books are out of print or hard to find. Since the era of BookFinder (as well as readily Web-accessible reprints and readings such as those linked at PennSound) this last impetus has lost much of its exigency. It's true that many of Bernstein's earliest volumes came out under somewhat obscure (Tuumba, Pod, Aweda, Zasterle) imprints; in 2000, on the other hand, Bernstein published a fairly complete offering of this work in Sun & Moon's *Republics of Reality 1975–1995*. (The book's cover may not have included the words "selected" or "collected," but that's the kind of gathering it was nonetheless.)

So what exactly, just ten years later, is "America's most ardent literary provocateur" (in the words of Paul Auster) doing at Farrar, Straus and Giroux with another book of "selected poems," whose title sounds like the latest offering from August Kleinzahler? In a recent interview Bernstein himself has observed that "official verse culture needs to incorporate and tokenize a critical amount of peripheral material, which it then hopes (often vainly) to anaesthetize by embedding within its set of norms." At first glance it would appear that this indeed describes what has taken place with Bernstein's most recent publication.

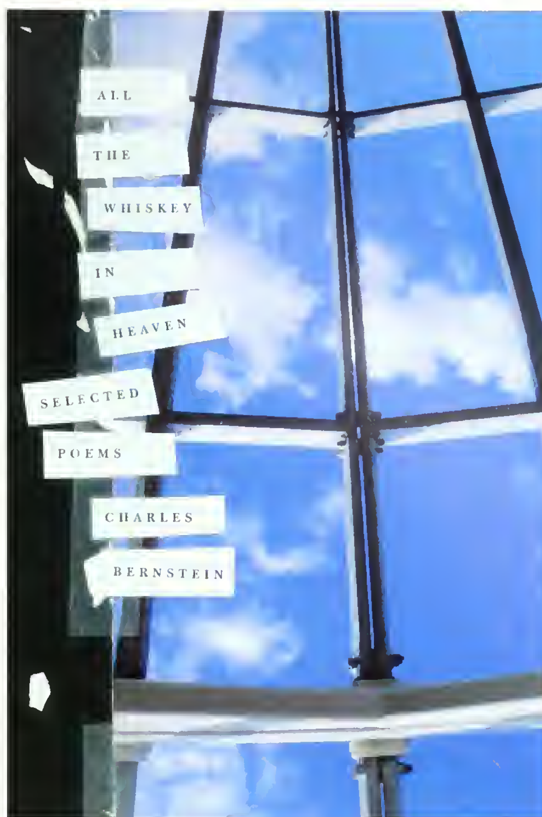
His poetry, however, has not been effectively de-thorned. Despite my reservations about the essential incongruity of the enterprise, *All the Whiskey in Heaven* comprises a stimulating, unsettling, and ultimately rewarding book. Bernstein's oeuvre has benefited from the volume's rigorous (thinking here of Sappho's few roses) pruning. This is not to suggest that a lot of deadwood has been cut out or that the rest of his output is composed of inferior blooms; on the contrary, there are many things I would have liked to have seen included: much more work from *The Absent Father in Dumbo*, for example, or most especially a lyric or two from Bernstein's libretto for the opera *Shadowtime*, published by Green Integer in 2005. But the relative spareness of the volume not only allows for new appreciation of individual poems or excerpts from longer works, it makes the convincing case for a certain quasi-narrative trajectory of his stylistically diverse output so far—which is, of course, what any authentic *Selected* must try to do.

Though the table of contents suggests that the material has been organized chronologically, there's considerable variation as to whether individual poems are dated by their composition or by their publication. As just one example, when the poems from *Residual Rubbernecking* were published by Sun & Moon in 2000, they were there identified as being written in 1995. Here they follow work from the omnibus *My Way*, published in 1999. Not that this is in itself terribly important, but such editorial inconsistency makes evident that the selections have been given a shape slightly ajar from strict chronology. The book's specific arc is partly the contribution of Marjorie Perloff, whom Bernstein thanks by name in his acknowledgements "for her suggestions on the selection and support for this project." As much as I appreciate Perloff's advocacy of (and involvement with) Bernstein's career, I wonder about the appropriateness of including a blurb from her on the volume's back cover. There's a certain closed self-reflexivity in her presence both in *and* on the book. I nonetheless wholeheartedly agree with her concise articulation quoted there that Bernstein "displays a formal range, performative urgency, and verbal dexterity unmatched by other poets of his generation."

Once it could have been argued that as a result of Bernstein's position as an important proponent of Language poetry, a comprehensive review of his oeuvre required dealing with the whole problematic of acoustical (and even quasi-dramatic) recital. The poet's own thoughts on such issues have been treated in depth in his contributions to the manifesto-journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* or in his introduction to the 1998 collection of essays *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*. But with his latest book's conventional publication, it's time to evaluate Bernstein's lexical explorations and experimentations as they play upon the silent page. For though Bernstein the performer is often very funny, it would be a great disservice to his "performative poetics" to treat it merely as an "outside" or countercultural version of the reading-friendly, stand-up lyricism produced by more mainstream practitioners. While his poems may well remain texts to be performed (Bernstein himself has used the expression "thought opera" to describe his

ambitions), these *Selected Poems* now need to be read and judged as printed score.

Though the theoretical approaches associated with Language poetry have in practice become almost completely mainstream, there can still be detected in some quarters the remnant suspicion that the "nonlinear" prosody proposed by Bernstein and his circle has always been a justification for the evasion of metrical rigor. The idea of a "nonverse indeterminacy" does sound suspiciously like a hoax. Unquestionably, poems such as "The Italian Border of the Alps" look like prose and sound like nonsense. In addition, Bernstein's sentences (in contrast, say, to those of the Surrealists) don't retain any feel of traditional verse movement. In fact, even when his works are set in lines, enjambments are usually weak or nonexistent; even when an end of line is marked by punctuation, the effect remains that of unrequited wraparound "hankering after frozen (prose) ambiance / (ambivalence)." In a manner derived from Charles Olson, Bernstein's poetics use space, rather than punctuation or syntax, as a structural element or indicator of pulse (if not, strictly speaking, regular rhythm). Passage of time—what in performance would be a pause—is suggested by lack of typography; this effect is most emphatic in the wait-for-the-laugh vacancy made by "This Poem Intentionally Left Blank."



Bernstein thus often works with mass-media language apparently culled from business publications, advertising, and *TV Guide* listings, composing what might be called "apparently found poetry." In this Dada-inspired yet postmodernist schema, the traditional idea of "author" (or even "poetry") becomes an exceedingly unstable concept. *All the Whiskey in Heaven*'s first poem, "Asylum," serves as introduction to this appropriative method, as well as to recurring themes. (Significantly, the poem was not included in *Republics of Reality*.) A seventeen-page verbal collage formed from the sociologist's studies of institutional residents, "Asylum" rearranges Erving Goffman's *Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Fragments from Goffman employing social-science rhetoric present a pseudo-objective perspective on the individual's relation to the closed society in which he lives. Context is all, and remains all: When Bernstein changes Goffman's "frame" from scholarly discourse to the register of poetry, text is transformed. The material's apparent "subject" (the social situation of mental patients) becomes identified with that of the academically affiliated and employed poet-author himself. And in this reprinted incarnation of the poem, the current Donald T. Regan Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania appears in self-duplicated shadow as both inhabitant and staff of another closed system, a parochialism that also serves as both refuge and prison.

Though I find "Asylum" quite brilliant, the early "Roseland" (not included in *All the Whiskey in Heaven*) would nevertheless have been my preference for his compendium's opening poem. Though similarly constructed, this beautiful piece is made of phrases quoted from a talk by fellow poet David Antin. The inclusion of the less academically inflected "Roseland" right up front would have nicely embodied an acknowledgement of Antin and Antin's poetics, a debt Bernstein has recognized elsewhere. Here (rather than with the more ironic appropriation of "Asylum") is where I myself would have liked to see the book begin. For even in the printed version of "Roseland," there's palpable yet cautious enthusiasm about the possibilities for "a literal culture," an innovative poetic of improvisatory "talking poems" that hearkens back to the Homeric rhapsodes. If the claustrophobic "Asylum" circumscribes the topic of poetic career, "Roseland" gestures with the expansiveness of vocation.

Anyone familiar with the movements of twentieth-century art will recognize that Bernstein's appropriation of other peoples' words is analogous to Marcel Duchamp's readymades (works based on the proposition that gallery or museum context changes found objects into "art"). So, too, the formal range of Bernstein's poetry corresponds to (as he himself is personally linked with) the New York art world since the sixties: The use of Madison Avenue jingles and sales pitches mimics Warholian Pop. "The Year as Swatches" or "Dodgem" effectively exploit a Minimalist aesthetic. "This Poem Intentionally Left Blank" can be seen as a product of Conceptualism. "This Line" embodies the semiotics of postmodernism, mocking its own rhetorical approaches even as it employs them: "This line is no more than an / illustration of a European / theory." Such divergences in methodology indicate either that Bernstein doesn't really know what he's doing, or else he's using his sense of formal dissatisfaction (which is, indeed, palpable) as a goad to try something different.

Though sprung from strong emotions or complex thought rather than within the confines of received form, some of the latest work has a considerably less contemporary feel, particularly those poems whose sound-shape is close to song. The rhyming lines of "The Ballad of the Girly Man," for example, are resonant of Bert Brecht, though their "alienation effect" is not really Brechtian. In such genuinely moving lyrics the reader is pulled in by a false sense of lyric accessibility or familiarity even while knowing full well the manipulative rhetorical tactics in use. In his theatrical works (his California poems being one exception) the heartless Brecht never managed that. Yet Bernstein, too, is capable of great lyric composition (for example, his very beautiful Gilbert Sorrentino-worthy "Castor Oil") free from all levels of jargon and ringing perfectly true.

I have to confess that I'm not convinced that all the tonal, as well as formal, instabilities in Bernstein are completely intentional, though perhaps it doesn't really matter. To me, the way his lyric speaker uses irony to distance himself from feeling (invisible air quotes regularly in effect), then injects an almost sentimental lyricism to balance it back, is related to a distinctive emotional bipolarity I associate with the streets of Manhattan. In many Bernstein poems, New York seems not merely a backdrop but an alternately prickly and affectionate recurring character. For the poet, the shared trauma of 9/11 resulted in the blog-like, nearly free-writing exercises of *Some of These Daze*, from which the journalistic "Report from Liberty Street" is taken. Some critics have expressed admiration for this poem's on-site observations and haunting refrain, "*They thought they were going to heaven*," but my own preference remains for the less easily accessible beauties contained in Bernstein's cityscapes of twenty years earlier:

> In the summer
> blackouts crippled the city & in the winter
> snowstorms: & yet the spirit of
> the place—a certain *je ne sais quoi* that
> lurks, like the miles of subway tunnels, electrical
> conduits, & sewage ducts, far below the surface—
> perseveres.

So, too, the formal experimentation and tonal range of Bernstein's *Selected Poems* have now survived the most conventional of contexts. My own hope is that his recent movements toward traditional lyric are yet another feint. Otherwise those who've preferred to see his work in more experimental bindings might begin to fear (quoting a Bernstein poem not included in *All the Whiskey in Heaven*) that "the bonds of trust" have been "sold for success." It's a little spooky to read reviews citing him as a "prominent" poet with "razor-sharp" wit who has found a "hard-won" clarity—even while such universalizing (and neutralizing) descriptions are, as a matter of fact, perfectly true. But in any event, whatever the poet has next in mind, with

this recent entry into the verse oligopoly a fearful yet inevitable paradox may kick in: As his work becomes more familiar and his influence more acknowledged, Charles Bernstein himself will grow less and less important. For what he has written about the poetry reading as a social and cultural form might even more meaningfully be applied to marginalized poetries and poets themselves: *It is a measure of their significance that they are ignored.*

MARY MAXWELL's work as a poet, critic, and translator has appeared most recently in Salmagundi, Vanitas, *and* Yale Review. *She is also the author of a monograph,* Serena Rothstein: Discourse in Paint, *published by LongNookBooks.*

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The Tyranny of Milk

By Sara London

Four Way Books, 2010

A BOOK REVIEW BY KIRSTEN ANDERSEN

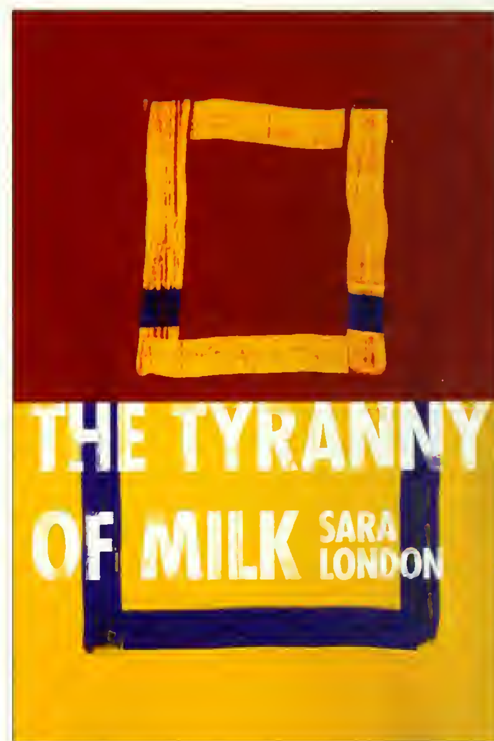
SARA LONDON'S debut poetry collection is titled *The Tyranny of Milk*, but it's her evocative meditations on water that steal the show in the book's linked narratives of particular, human experience. We encounter "the frozen surface of Lake Champlain"; the "oblivious ballad" of rivers; a neighbor's pond; and "the dark Atlantic"—all of which function as interactive backdrops for the image-driven poetry that unfolds.

Early in the book, London gifts us with the powerhouse poem "Cold War": the story of a father's strange and reckless compulsions as he drives across frozen lakes and ponds, his children in the "scooped vinyl cushion of backseat." This important poem functions like a light switch, illuminating several of the book's recurring concerns: parental influence and its aftereffects, the shifting shapes and functions of love and marriage, our bottomless longings and mysterious sets of sorrows.

The ice thaws as the collection progresses, and in "Trespassing" we delight in a sensuous tale of night swimming in a neighbor's pond. Two sisters have shed their dresses, which are "deflated like angels wrecked ashore," while one husband watches from a raft. The poem's brief, crystalline tercets pull us through the pond with grace; "Trespassing" is a testament to the economy of London's language, as she manages to plumb the nuanced depths of human relationships in eleven brief stanzas.

Of course, milk also has a principal role to play in this collection; *The Tyranny of Milk*'s opening poem, "Cow's Eyes," begins as a rich recollection of a sixth-grade science lesson: "Thirty fist-sized globes / filled with clear jell" donated by a local butcher. As the poem unfolds, these cow's eyes evolve into a symbol of the poet as witness:

> Had it seen
> things I saw—blue
> sky over a muddied
> snow-patched hill,



> silver buckets like displaced
> hats, tipped for sap

London's "valley Jerseys" reappear throughout, and in the book's title poem, there occurs a magical and mysterious conflation, as dinner hosts and guests embody unmistakable bovine qualities: "giant lash fanned orbs" and "hair netted nostrils." Parents are heard "lowing" in the kitchen, and the speaker herself sniffs the air, both bred and bound by the ham-fisted animal nature of familial care and intimacy.

The Tyranny of Milk is a reassuring book, though hardly a tale of pat morality: in London's twenty-six poems, we are presented with versions of complexity—some melancholy, some revelatory, all lyrically resigned to their particular mysteries. In "Why the Water," the book's closing, benedictory poem, we read an oceanic address that seems to blow backward, misting over the collection's mothers and fathers, prisoners and roofers, lovers and children:

> We are a strange kind.
> Small and wiry.
> We weigh nothing. You can hardly
> call our clumsy strokes motion.
> But so huge
> we are in sorrow, so
> mired in metaphor and hope,
> you would know us by it.
> We ask anything.
> You have heard us calling, our song
> a dim thing at the edge
> of your ancient drumming.
> Our thirst is unfathomable.
> Our heart, hoarding the possibilities,
> follows you everywhere.

KIRSTEN ANDERSEN's poetry most recently appears in Tin House, Dossier, *and* Crab Orchard Review. *She lives in Provincetown, Massachusetts.*

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