



With Strings

By Charles Bernstein

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With the publication of *With Strings*, Charles Bernstein adds to a long list of contributions to the world of experimental poetry, a world in which he has immersed himself as the author of more than 20 books of poetry and three books of essays, and the editor of several influential collections of critical writings. Indeed, Bernstein is as well known as a theorist and critic, and with one foot firmly in the academic world (he is the David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters at the State University of New York at Buffalo), he navigates a smooth and impressive course within both the academy and the community of innovative writers.

As one of the leading theorists of language writing and former editor, with Bruce Andrews, of the seminal 1980's journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, Bernstein makes clear his aspirations for the possibilities of poetry; his stance is, as the poet and critic Bob Perelman has characterized it, "radically democratic" as he argues against normative language and standardization. "There is no natural look or sound to a poem," Bernstein asserts in *Content's Dream*, a collection of essays. "Every element is intended, chosen. That is what makes a thing a poem." A poem's constructed nature must be emphasized, with its chosen vocabulary and circumscription in grammar and syntax; any effort to conceal this constructedness, with its masculinist groping for "natural" voice and transparency of language, becomes what Bernstein refers to as "the phallacy of the heroic stance."

For Bernstein, who infuses much of his critical writing with poetic forms and tones, and whose poetry is indefatigably political and often expository in tone, poetry should be indefinable, ungeneralizable, so that genres bleed together, prose can be read as poetry and vice versa. And indeed generalization is a main target in his polemic. Any attempt to address poetry, and not *poetries*, as a singular and normative genre, with generalized characteristics, tendencies, and effects, is one of the most salient assaults of the mainstream. Dominant culture seeks to remove the materiality from poetry, while language writing attempts to expose it. The very *thingness* of words is foregrounded, opacity is valorized, and new meanings, new possibilities for language,

and open forms are in themselves modes of political action. The opening page of *With Strings* is "in place of a preface a preface," in which Bernstein argues that "art is made not of essences but of husks. Hazard will never be abolished by a declaration of independence from causality. But such a declaration may change how hazard is inscribed in our everyday lives." Bernstein seems to be pointing to a kind of evasiveness in mainstream culture, a subject position that feels itself comforted more by essences than by husks.

Lest we fall into the common trap of thinking of all subversive art as a study in nay-saying, however, and all language writing an attempt to do simply and thoughtlessly what traditional writing does not, Bernstein makes clear and concerted efforts to distinguish among various subversions:

We can act: we are not trapped in the postmodern condition if we are willing to differentiate between works of art that suggest new ways of conceiving of our present world and those that seek rather to debunk any possibilities for meaning. To do this, one has to be able to distinguish between, on the one hand, a fragmentation that attempts to valorize the concept of a free-floating signifier unbounded to social significance . . . and, on the other, a fragmentation that reflects a conception of meaning as prevented by conventional narration and so uses disjunction as a method of tapping into other possibilities available within language. (*Content's Dream*)

In the poetry itself, Bernstein calls for action, for speaking out, for articulating and constructing, but he is careful not to be too prescriptive, and is loath to fall into the role of the wrist-slapping rhetorician. The poem "captain cappuccino and his merry con leches" opens with the line, "I'm not telling you what you can't/ do but what you can do." And he seems to be arguing further for the autonomy of the word, language for its own sake, when he says in "thinking i think i think," "The baby/ cries because the baby likes crying" and in "total valor," "The wind is singing but it is not saying anything."

Irony and humor are central to Bernstein's project, and both play a significant role in the poems that comprise *With Strings*. If we accept Adorno's assertion that one has to have tradition in one to hate it properly, then we can see that advantage of positioning oneself inside the thing one is critiquing. Bernstein often uses the logic and the language of mainstream culture to expose its ironies; but just as often he enacts an entirely new, defiant, and radical mode in order to show us just a few of the infinite number of things that are possible.

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