



Charles Bernstein, Berlin 2012 © Gezett/ullstein bild via Getty Images

# Charles Bernstein's aesthetic probe

JULES SMITH

Charles Bernstein

## **PITCH OF POETRY**

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At the New York launch of a 2003 anthology of “writings against the War”, Charles Bernstein declared that poetry “offers not a moral compass but an aesthetic probe”. In a short, rousing rhetorical performance, he also stated that art, “unregulated by a predetermined message”, is “a necessary response to crisis . . . offering alternative ways not only to think but also to imagine and indeed to resist”. This “talking essay”, overshadowed in *Pitch of Poetry* by lengthier more academically complex texts, nevertheless gives us Bernstein in essence, an activist literary politics allied to his passionate advocacy of the experimental arts. Yet it is also unrepresentative: he is a poet-critic for whom issues around “difficulty” have been a touchstone, from his founding co-editorship of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine to the arguments of his previous collection, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* (2011). His typical discourse is playfully professorial, dense with linguistic jargon and his own coinages, asides, joking references from abstract art to the movies.

Bernstein is widely regarded as both the key impresario and best known exponent of so-called Language Poetry. This sought to radicalize American poetics during the 1970s with concepts from analytical language philosophy

amalgamated with postmodernism, questioning received notions of the poetic self, voice and sincerity. It dissented from the political status quo and what Bernstein likes to call “the official verse culture”. His retrospective discussion of the magazine’s aims and personnel calls it “a frame” for a range of disparate practices that were “thinking with the poem”; or, more succinctly, “ours was a poetics of (some of) the excluded”. He subsequently moved into academia, continuing the project by other means, notably the new digital media (he enjoys an active presence on YouTube). At SUNY Buffalo, teaching poetics alongside Robert Creeley and Susan Howe, Bernstein helped set up its Electronic Poetry Center website. He has also been involved in the PennSound digital archive, preserving the recorded legacy of many experimentalist poets, including friends he memorializes in these essays, such as Leslie Scalapino, Hannah Weiner and Jackson Mac Low.

For Bernstein, as for most other Language Poets, the foundational figure is Gertrude Stein, whose *Tender Buttons* (1914) exhibits language being “valued for itself, in itself, and as itself”. Like Stein, he has aligned himself with parallel practices by contemporary visual artists, even if his seminar notes on a 2012 MOMA exhibition (*Disfiguring Abstraction*) remain largely impenetrable, or in his terms, “non absorptive”. The other key radical modernist is his fellow New Yorker Louis Zukofsky, who (unlike Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, he argues) “recognized the founding significance of difference for American poetry”. He praises Zukofsky’s “iconoclastic” approach to translation, that is, the notoriously phonetic *Catullus*. In his own version of Paul Celan’s poem “Todtnauberg”, Bernstein seeks to emulate this “homophonic” sound rather than sense approach, whose opening stanza (“Arnica, hold-in-trust, tear / Trump out dim Bruise admit dim / Stern waffled drought”) now seems strangely prophetic, if hardly mellifluous.

The humour in Bernstein is mostly intentional: “Jewish jokes riddle my writing”, he admits. His tricky wordplay is almost continual, with puns, aphorisms and jokey asides: “I am as hung up on the sin in sincere as the verse in perverse”. He deadpans to one earnest interviewer: “I pursue both a strategy of tactics and a tactics of strategy, though not necessarily at the same time”. He has perfected a species of slyly satirical critical essay, notably “John Ashbery: The meandering Yangtze”. Analysis of a poetry of “continuously flowing voices” is set alongside his own tourist experience on a musty boat going down China’s longest river, complete with muzak and the guide’s megaphone voicings. In *Rivers and Mountains* Ashbery “crossed the Rubicon in American poetry”, he concludes. “Actually he double-crossed it.”

It is with the book’s final section, “Bent Studies of the Pataquerical Imagination”, that difficulties for readers not well acquainted with his provocative manner become even more obtrusive. Echoing Alfred Jarry, Bernstein defines himself as “a pataphysician, looking for the swerve”. On one level it is a series of clever re-readings of Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, Stephen Crane and William Blake suggesting the poetics of stigmatized difference and disability. But he interpolates attacks on prominent arbiters of the poetic mainstream, notably Helen Vendler, Paul Muldoon, and Charles Simic and Sean O’Brien’s anthology *New British Poetry* (2004) for “trashing” poetry “that challenges the aesthetic status quo”. Bernstein is an admirer of an alternative tradition that includes Maggie O’Sullivan, J. H. Prynne, Tom Raworth and the sound poet Bob Cobbing.

He is equally scornful of populism, for example describing Beat poetry as the only post-war poetry to have entered mass culture “in a big way”, but this was “an extraction of the social attitudes of the poets, leaving the textual

practice as a discardable pulp on America's living room floor". Such acute phrasing indicates Bernstein's quick wit, but as a critic he's skittish, forever worrying away at his own statements, seldom allowing readers the complacency of firm conclusions. In that sense, Bernstein's "pataquerical" insights continue the questioning agenda of Language Poetry, with his comedian's patter and querulous stance.

From the book's preface onwards, Charles Bernstein plays with the word "pitch", as tar (as in Poe's tale "Doctor Tarr and Professor Feather"), "the confidence man's selling" or baseball analogy. For him, "poets catch my ear because of their pitch: I prefer live wires to retread tires". Such pitches for the importance of otherwise marginal experimentalist poets are luminously intelligent if not always illuminatingly intelligible. The "official verse culture" has a formidable antagonist.