

CONTEMPORARY POETS

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New York

The crimson face of awareness you gave me.
What is the heart-shaped object that thaws your fingers?
It is a glove and in it a fist.

Sometimes Berkson's experiments break through to a new level of metaphor that ties extraordinary words together ("In the Mean"):

Running water—
it makes you think of all you didn't do
but not regret it, no: *de ma jeunesse*.
You didn't know I was the President
of a great cloud of falling bricks, did you?
Zoom. Bent. The bare stalk of the corn tree plant
of October thirty-one, of November one, November two....

In such work, however, the strain for novelty can become an effort, and there is much dogged flippancy in Berkson:

What am I indicting that heads off gardenia?
green green stove-pipe
arm around me stalk wherein pegged a relax bus
globule of often-candelabra in the cake
of soap...

and so on. The intention, we might suppose, is to draw attention to the maker, to the process of mind that gives rise to words, or even more precisely, the compromising nature of words as indications of a consciousness words can only guess at. The intellection of lines such as these would suggest more than one process is at work although words themselves track a single linear reasoning. But then the poetic itself has only found the fault of language, not its virtues and possibilities. Taken far enough, this kind of experiment produces a stingy nonsense, and Berkson mercifully backs off and pursues more often a lyric of genuine feeling.

—Paul Christensen

BERNSTEIN, Charles. American. Born in New York City, 4 April 1950. Educated at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1968-72, A.B. in philosophy 1972 (Phi Beta Kappa); Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia (King Fellow, 1973-74). Married Susan Bee Laufer in 1977. Writer on medical and health topics; also arts administrator and health clinic coordinator. Editor, with Bruce Andrews, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, New York, 1978-81. Recipient: National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, 1980. Address: 464 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, New York 10024, U.S.A.

PUBLICATIONS

Verse

Parsing. New York, Asylum's Press, 1976.
Shade. College Park, Maryland, Sun and Moon Press, 1978.
Poetic Justice. Baltimore, Pod, 1979.
Senses of Responsibility. Berkeley, California, Tuumba Press, 1979.
Legend, with others. New York, Segue, 1980.
Controlling Interests. New York, Roof, 1980.

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Contemporary Poets (London: St. James Press; New York: St. Martin's Press 1985); entry by Paul Christiansen; updated 2001

Disfrutes. New York, Sun and Moon Poets Press, 1981.

The Occurrence of Time, photographs by Susan Bee Laufer, New York, Segue, 1981.

Stigma. Barrytown, New York, Station Hill Press, 1981.

Islets/Irritations. New York, Jordan Davies, 1983.

Resistance. Windsor, Vermont, Awede Press, 1983.

Other

Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984. College Park, Maryland, Sun and Moon Press, 1985.

Editor, with Bruce Andrews, *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1984.

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Critical Studies: "Charles Bernstein Issue" of *Difficulties* (Kent, Ohio), ii, 1, 1982; "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties" by Marjorie Perloff in *American Poetry Review* (Philadelphia), May-June 1984.

Charles Bernstein comments:

The sense of music in poetry: the music of *meaning*—emerging, fogging, contrasting, etc. Tune attunement in understanding—the meaning sounds. It's impossible to separate prosody from the structure of the poem. You can talk about strategies of meaning generation, shape, the kinds of sounds accented, the varieties of measurement (of scale, of number, of line length, of syllable order, of word length, of phrase length, of punctuation). But no one has primacy—the music is the orchestrating these into poems, the angles one plays against another, the shading.

My interest is not conceptualizing the field of the poem as a unitary plane: that any prior principle of composition violates the priority I want to give to the inherence of surface, to the total necessity in the durational space of the poem for every moment to *coincide*. Writing as a process of pushing whatever way, or making the piece cohere as far as can: stretching my mind—to where I know it makes sense but not quite why—suspecting relations that I understand, that make the sense of the ready—to hand, i.e. pushing the composition to the very limits of sense, meaning, to that razor's edge where judgment/aesthetic sense is all I can go on (knowhow).

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Lyn Hejinian published Bernstein's book *Senses of Responsibility*, indeed printed and designed it, on her Tuumba Press in 1979. It is written in a style that could only strike Hejinian as in accord with her own suspended style of discourse, a language intended never quite to touch earth or to assemble in a final pattern of unified meanings. Instead, Bernstein, like Hejinian and vintage John Ashbery, particularly his double monolog "As You Know," tends to make poetry stand still, accumulate sound, not expository sense. The juxtapositions of sound phrases owe their invention to Gertrude Stein, who stood poetry on its ear in 1914 with publication of her teasing book *Tender Buttons*.

But there is a doleful, somnolent quality to Bernstein's long lyrics. They seem rooted in American symbolist meditations, the sort T.S. Eliot wrote in the 1910's, including "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Preludes," and "Portrait of a Lady." The poetry tends to explore the discord of a speaker's mind, the ravaged emotions and confused thinking brought on by some unnamed crisis or impending disaster.

Bernstein is less insistent on disasters in his own poems, but clearly seems intent on making speech raise up airy indeterminate structures without explicit connection to experience. He tracks a twilit state of mind in many of his poems, preferring settings that suggest asylums, prison cells, waiting rooms, confinements where the immobile, frustrated speaker is bereft of all possessions and is let loose within his own agitated interiors.

There is, at midcentury, a crossroads of intentions among various writers of America and England—writing that John Barth once called “the literature of exhaustion.” In such work, one finds spent characters unable to act, only to utter rushes of thought that express their deadened willpower to change situations or to take hold of circumstances. Robert Creeley’s poetry has long plumbed the subtleties of inert characters, whose world has become their own minds. He has expressed his pleasure in the similar excursions of Bernstein, whose characters seem all the more pinned to chairs as they wait out some fate unmentioned in their monologs. Their speech all but escapes the representational function of language, as crabbed syntax unfolds layers of linguistically refracted awareness:

That's the trouble around here
through which, asking as it does
a different kind of space, who

much like any other, relives
what's noise, a better shoe, plants
its own destination, shooting up

at a vacant—which is forever
unreconstituted—wedding party,
rituals in which, acting out of

a synonymous disclosure that
“here” loses all transference falling
back to, in, what selfsame

dwelling is otherwise unaccounted for.

Many of his speakers are at peace in their enclosures, able to discern qualities within that are too concealed or delicate to be dissected by active, working citizens. Immobility has ironically freed such characters to dwell on themselves, relieved of routine responsibility and care. In that way, Bernstein is refreshing, an inevitable recoil to the work-centered culture of society, where life is rushed and formulated to the point of unthinking monotony.

Poetic Justice, published by Pod Books in 1977, bears finger-prints on its cover to suggest the booking of a prisoner. It is another of Bernstein’s prose sequences of a waiting man, whose resources of language allow him to delicately dissect his every sensation and turn of thought.

Listen. I can feel it. Specifically and intentionally.
It does hurt. I like it. Ringing like this. The hum.
Words peeling. The one thing. Not so much
limited as conditioned. Here. In this. Spurting. It
tastes good. Clogs. Thick with shape. I carry it
with me where ever I go. I like it like this. Smears.

In *Parsing*, self-published in 1976, the final 15 pages are a list of familiar objects each beginning with “my.” The list is preceded by a quote from Swami Sachnananda, “Count the number of things you call mine. This is the distance between you and enlightenment.” Bernstein’s poetry clearly suggests the disinclination to possess of his speakers is pointing toward a purging or

purification of spirit, where the disclosures, now wrapped in verbiage, distorted, inflated language, may one day come clean and limpid. His flourishes of language in lyric may be a way of satirizing the confused materialistic culture of contemporary America.

Like Hejinian and Ashbery, Bernstein frequently borrows dated language and discarded forms of eloquence to fill out his poetry; it is craftily achieved and often moving for its unusual powers of music, its haunting qualities of memory and distant association:

There is an emptiness that fills
Our lives as we meet
On the boulevards and oases
Of a convenient attachment. Boats
In undertone drift into
Incomplete misapprehension, get
All fired up inside.

Bernstein edited a bimonthly journal of poetics and poetry, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, which brought together poets and prose writers attracted to semantic and linguistic experiment. The journal has initiated a movement of sorts among many interested in turning a reader’s concentration onto the medium of words instead of the meanings to be abstracted from them. Writers of the journal together seem to agree that the language of art has been too well appropriated by others for political and commercial ends, and only by distorting and experimenting with its syntax and grammar can it be renewed for artistic purposes.

—Paul Christensen

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PUBLICATIONS

Verse

Time Without Number. New York, Macmillan, 1957.
Encounters. Cleveland, World, 1960.
The World for Wedding Ring: Poems. New York, Macmillan, 1962.
No One Walks Waters. New York, Macmillan, 1966.
False Gods, Real Men: New Poems. New York, Macmillan, 1966.
Love, Love at the End: Parables, Prayers, and Meditations. New York, Macmillan, 1968.