

Making strange

An instructive introduction to Bernstein's energetic advocacy

John Hawke

PITCH OF POETRY

by Charles Bernstein

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When Viktor Shklovsky, in his famous 1917 essay 'Art as Technique', asserts that the fundamental task of the poetic function is one of 'making strange' the reader's customary perceptions, he is arguing for more than just the avoidance of linguistic cliché. Through the medium of poetic form, the accepted conventions of our habituated view of the world can be defamiliarised: the political implications of this approach directly influenced Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, and in turn underwrite Roland Barthes's structuralist unmasking of societal 'mythologies'.

The Russian Formalist critics – and their counterparts in practice, the avant-garde Futurist poets – are frequently cited as precursors by the American poet and

critic Charles Bernstein, along with Wittgenstein's similar explorations of the manner in which our perception of the world is shaped by language. (Bernstein's undergraduate dissertation, later published as *Three Compositions on Philosophy and Literature* [1972], linked Wittgenstein's 'linguistic turn' to the textual experiments of Gertrude Stein.) Yet the political claims made for their often wilfully 'difficult' poems by Bernstein and his associates in the burgeoning international field of 'Language' practitioners have often been contested: as a somewhat perplexed Chinese interviewer puts the question to Bernstein here, 'L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E is generally regarded as a renegade brand, but in what way is it rebellious?' Or, as the poet Jackson Mac Low once

asked: 'What could be more of a fetish or more alienated than slices of language stripped of reference?'

These issues are consistently addressed across the essays and interviews collected in *Pitch of Poetry*, a summational critical work that also serves as an instructive introduction to Bernstein's energetic advocacy of experimental poetics over several decades. Unlike Stein, who, as Bernstein puts it, 'refused to explain the inventiveness of unconventional art in conventional prose', Bernstein's critical approach – honed through years of pedagogy – is a model of compositional clarity. An informative survey essay, 'The Expanded Field of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E', describes the 'constellation of activity' that Bernstein and Bruce Andrews initiated through their establishment of editorial and organisational poetry networks from the late 1970s. A group of poets, roughly corresponding in age to Australia's 'Generation of '68' – including Bernstein, Susan Howe, Leslie Scalapino, Michael Palmer, and Lyn Hejinian – were joined by younger figures such as Andrews, Ron Silliman, and Steve McCaffery; the movement incorporated important overlooked experimentalists from the postwar period like Clark Coolidge, Hannah Weiner, and Jackson Mac Low, and established connections with such innovative British poets as Maggie O'Sullivan and J.H. Prynne. These associations have since become more fully internationalised – in part because of their dissemination through such vital online resources as Buffalo's Electronic Poetry Center and PennSound (both initiated by Bernstein), and through the significant role played by John Tranter's *Jacket* magazine; their often controversial effect on Australian poetry has been in particular evidence over the past decade.

From the outset, the movement was intended as a critical as well as poetic enterprise, and this included the reconsideration of neglected precursor figures, such as the Russian Futurists. *Pitch of Poetry* acknowledges many of these in a section of valedictory tributes (some of which appear to be obituaries) to Bernstein's chief luminaries. The primary figure in first-wave modernism is

Stein, for her cubistic emphasis on the materiality of language ('for itself, in itself, and as itself'): poetry is necessarily, in Shklovsky's terms, 'a difficult, roughened, impeded language', and Bernstein several times approvingly quotes Robert Creeley as stating that 'content is always an extension of form'. Bernstein also champions a second-wave of American modernists who emerged in the 1930s, especially the 'Objectivist' poet, Louis Zukofsky, whose extreme emphasis on 'sound sense' led him to homophonic translations which challenge referential comprehension. The postwar poets of Donald M. Allen's *New American Poetry 1945–1960* (1960) are re-evaluated, mainly for the degree to which they break from Poundian compositional principles based on 'montage' (which Pound called the 'ideogramic method'). Bernstein instead favours 'a more open-ended collage', which is first identified in Charles Olson's 'The Kingfishers', and in the 'non-linear' compositions of New York School poets such as John Ashbery and Barbara Guest.

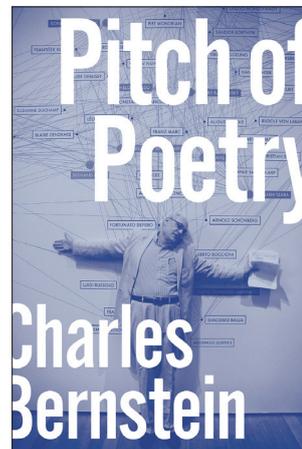
Bernstein is equally adamant in defining the 'official verse culture' to which he opposes these figures, especially the 'reification of lyric poetry' evident in 'the personally expressive poem'. His remarks on Ashbery's evocation of 'the temporal sensation of meandering thought' are particularly interesting in this regard: Ashbery, he argues, creates 'a "third way" between the hypotaxis of conventional lyric and the parataxis of Pound and Olson', one which 'averts both exposition and disjunction'. Barbara Guest is similarly viewed in terms of a 'lyric negation', 'at all times close to, yet out of sync with, the rites of lyric voicing'. Bernstein expands on this idea to present what is perhaps his ideal for poetic representation: 'No ideas only surfaces, no surfaces only words, no words only textures, no textures only contingent connections ...'

This rather cryptically Mallarméan phrasing seems to place Bernstein at some remove from the realm of political action. Yet *Pitch of Poetry* opens with material devoted to the Occupy Movement, in which Bernstein was an eager participant, and for which he at times acted as a somewhat unlikely

spokesperson. Answering a 2011 interviewer's question regarding Rogelio López Cuenca's slogan 'Poetry makes nothing happen', Bernstein argues that: 'There is a direct relation between OWS and a poetics that sees the representation of reality as always at stake when we use poetry'. But where and how exactly can this relation be located? Bernstein's essay on the foundation

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of 'Language' poetics describes how many of these poets emerged from the political movements of the 1960s (Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies are cited in the Occupy interview), with 'a strong desire to connect oppositional political and cultural views with linguistically inventive writing', based on the belief that 'language is never neutral but rather always betrays an ideological interest and unstated messages'. Shklovsky's claim that poetry can 'lay bare the device' is therefore pertinent to this goal. As Bernstein sums up the implications of the Russian Formalist's argument: 'poems can make the metaphoricality of our perception in and through language more palpable'. ■



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