

A Consumer Guide to Charles Bernstein
by Garrett Caples

Just think of someone who's somehow found the "way" they are and then makes a determined effort to be that way—a frightening business.
—Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream*

Once again, I've chosen to do the punctuation, and much else, my way...
—Charles Bernstein, *My Way*

The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the beginning.
—Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Without question, Charles Bernstein has emerged as the most formidable practitioner of language poetry, the one whose work provides the most substantial basis for evaluating the claims about such writing made by partisans and foes alike. Whereas most poets identified with this aesthetic employ theories of one sort or another to bolster an anemic verse practice, Bernstein gives the opposite impression, as though deliberately attenuating his self-diagnosed "mistaken . . . concern for the poem to sound right"^[1] in order to write the poetry he imagines needs to be written. To his credit, this sense of necessity accommodates a fairly wide range of modes within his own work; he has few qualms about dropping a slab of concrete poetry amidst more apparently lyric material, and while he tends to worship heterogeneity for its own sake, his devotion to this fickle muse has yielded fruit. For Bernstein's best work is not of any one kind and yet he is no mere dauber. If poetry is, as Bernstein suggests, "the ultimate small business,"^[2] then he has definitely developed his own line of products. And business is booming; in addition to a new collection of poetry, *With Strings* (2001), and a recent companion volume of criticism, *My Way* (1999), the past few years have seen the republication of *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (2001), along with the reprinting of a hefty dose of previous verse as *Republics of Reality: 1975-1995* (2000). The time for a consumer report is therefore at hand.

Republics of Reality: 1975-1995 collects Bernstein's first four books, a trio from the early '80s, and one from 1990, along with a final section of more recent vintage. (Omitted are several of the poet's better known volumes, like *The Sophist* [1987] or *Rough Trades* [1991].) If it seems strange for an avowed avant-gardist like Bernstein to chuck a word like "reality" around, the plurality of "republics" is meant to reassure us of his democratic fairness. The existence of multiple, potentially incompatible worlds within the shared physical one is a concept available to both everyday parlance ("the Muslim world," "you live in your own world") and more philosophical discourse ("*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world,*" as Wittgenstein writes in the *Tractatus*).^[3] If we turn to the opening book of *Republics*, *Parsing* (1976), we find Bernstein exploring this concept in ways that suggest the continuity of its range. The following extracts are from "Sentences," the long poem that opens *Parsing*:

people come in, you talk to them, you wonder if they really are seeing the same things, if they are willing

...

I joined different clubs.

I wondered if it would get me somewhere where I would stand out.

I was not behaving myself.

I would allow people to come in my room.

I could be there.

I would find it a barrier.

I found it hard all my life.

I didn't understand.

I don't begrudge other people.

I did it freely.

I really mean it.

I hate it so much.^[4]

Much of "Sentences" alternates in this manner between a conversational, first-person use of "you"—the *you* that means *I*—and these serial "I" statements that mostly float free of one another though sometimes hint at continuity. Is it the "join[ing] of different clubs" that "would get me somewhere"? Do these desires represent "not behaving myself" or does the latter refer to "allow[ing] people to come into my room"? (Are these, moreover, the same people who came in that "you talked to" during the previous quote?) Certainly the "it" "I would find" "a barrier" wouldn't be the same "it" "I did" "freely," which, in turn, is probably not the "it" "I hate." ("I did it freely," after all.) If such sentiments sound surprisingly adolescent from an avowed opponent of writing "that uses the self as its organizing principle" (*Content* 234), the inconsistency of *it*'s possible referents is designed to discourage reading along autobiographical lines. So we might surmise, at any rate, from Bernstein's insistence that

These words, or those in poems, are not used to describe events in the world that have already occurred, in life or in fantasy, or intended to be about something else; it being primarily a question of attention, of not wanting to attend to bringing forward a memory or an idea or an event, all external to the poem itself (to the act of writing), but to attend to the internal event that is taking place in it. (*Content* 50)

One might object at this point that the inconsistency of *it* is not much of an "internal event," or that it simply thematizes the lack of external event, and this is true to an extent.^[5] But let us grant Bernstein the fire of youth, for he is at this point primarily concerned with purging his poems of personal affect. As the title insists, this is not a dark night of the soul but merely "Sentences," each of which is given more or less equal weight. The

unrelieved character of their syntax tends to enforce isolation among them; they don't "add up," as it were, to any larger formal unit, thwarting any development of narrative through a sort of perpetual rebeginning. And yet, a melancholy pervades the poem; there are no "I love cheeseburgers" here. A general sense of alienation dominates the poem in mood even as it resists particular scenarios.

The more philosophical sense of the world as linguistically constituted comes to the fore in *Parsing's* equally long title poem:

the snow,
 flakes,
this parsing of the world
 to make worlds & worlds
like atmosphere
 a substance, of gravity
 that pulls apart
 or back on
i slept then, i bathed on wednesdays also
 the feta cheese
 the mozzarella marzipan
 the seedless eye brow pencils
was waiting for the bust &
was on a telephone,
 gyroscope, sleeping binge

(*Republics* 55)

Here the punctuation and lineation of "the snow/ flakes" prevent the words from easily resolving into "snowflakes," though we can't help hearing this customary compound as well. Uncertainty remains; are "snow" and "flakes" separate nouns, or is the "snow" itself "flaking" (and what would that mean if it were)? It's impossible to decide, because there's not enough conventional syntax in the immediate surroundings. Instead we move on: "this parsing of the world/ to make worlds & worlds" explicitly identifies language ("parsing") with the "world" or "worlds," the attendant pun on "words" perhaps inevitable. The "gravity/ that pulls apart" is strange, as we ordinarily speak of "gravity" drawing things together. Gravity can, of course, "pull apart"; the apple that clocked Newton, we could argue, was "pulled apart" from its arboreal home. But this seems to me remote, and if the "snow," "atmosphere," and our general progression down the page lead us to *gravitational pull*, the earlier technical sound of "parsing" combined with the weight of "substance" may indicate "gravity" in the sense of the *seriousness* of Bernstein's analytic ambition. For these matters of world and word are important to him—the sort of thing that provokes him to write essays from time to time—despite the more playful business to follow. The line "or back on," for example, seems to send "pulls" into a different register entirely, away from "gravity" towards socks and sweaters, let's say, or knobs and levers. Even something as inert as a list provides him opportunity for linguistic scrutiny, for we could also argue that the obviously absurd "mozzarella marzipan" exposes the apparently industrious "feta cheese" as redundant. For what other *fetas* are there?

The importance of cheese in a poet's diet is not to be underestimated—it's the food degree zero of most poetry readings—but whereas we can imagine a more mainstream writer pursuing that last question with some vigor, for Bernstein, it leads back to language, to his exploration of "writing centered on its wordness" (*Content* 32). Among the several tasks Bernstein charges poetry with is "the exemplification of the structures of discourse—how the kind of discourse effects what can be said within it" (*Content* 218). Fair enough; in this he follows Roland Barthes' claim that, for modern writing, "Literature is openly reduced to the problematics of language."^[6] In an "Introduction" to the *Paris Review's* "Language Sampler," Bernstein expands on what this might entail:

Identifying "conventional practices" is a major preoccupation for many of these writers since such practices exist primarily as blind spots in our thinking field . . . Gesturalized divergence, for instance, is as much a conventional practice as uninflected conformity; both can provide inexhaustible material for poetic scrutiny. Such scrutiny will not necessarily dispense with conventional practices when they are identified. Rather the forms being critiqued will often be mimicked, which is to say, cited. (*Content* 241)

The notion of "literature as critique" is a familiar academic one much championed by professors who feel guilty reading novels all day. In its more dignified guise, *littérature engagée*, it stems from Jean-Paul Sartre's *What is Literature?* (1948), to which Barthes' statement above is an implicit rebuttal. That Bernstein has internalized rather than transcended this literary dispute is evident by the strategy he uses to resolve it: open self-contradiction. He has little trouble asserting in the same book both that poetry "need[s] no value outside its immediate pleasures" and that "it allows for reformulations of the basic issues of political policy and the means we use to represent them" (*My Way* 277; 240). No doubt this is based on sound business principles (attempting to please everybody) but the equation "critique" = "mimic" = "cite" might cause a little trouble down in Accounting. To pick up "Parsing" where we left off, we might very well wonder what the poor phrase "waiting for the bus" did to warrant the censure of "waiting for the bust"? The second is surely a better line of poetry inasmuch as a less conventional phrase allows for more imaginative possibilities. But whether such a move constitutes "critique" in any meaningful way is not immediately apparent. The lack of reasonable public transportation in this country is as political an issue as you could propose, relating as it does to both racial demographics and environmental degradation. Is "waiting for the bust" an apocalyptic vision of a polluted and segregated America? It could just as easily be some suburbanite bitching that the Benz is in the shop. And this is, to some extent, as Bernstein would have it; in *Content's Dream*, for example, he imagines a poem in which "any given remark can be taken as true, ironic, false, didactic, satiric, fantastical, inscrutable, sad, funny, my view, someone else's view, and so on" (396). A laudable ambition, perhaps, in an avant-gardist who seeks to emphasize the materiality of language, but it makes for a curiously non-committal form of *engagement*.

Although Bernstein mentions Barthes and Sartre from time to time, they are not his true loves. Pride of place is instead reserved for Gertrude Stein and Wittgenstein, both of whom were the subjects of Bernstein's undergraduate philosophy thesis at Harvard (*My Way* 242). As such interests might

imply, he is somewhat more at home as a grammarian than as indecisive unacknowledged legislator. But if I find the start date of *Republics of Reality*, 1975, worth remarking as the year of John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, it is not to set up an invidious comparison between poets of different generations and sensibilities, but rather to note their distinct responses to similar stimuli. For, apart from a radical reappraisal of Trumbull Stickney, the centerpiece of the as-yet unwritten but sorely needed study, *The Influence of Harvard Poets on Harvard Poets*, would surely be the impact of Stein on Ashbery and Bernstein. That chapter begins in 1957, with Ashbery's review of Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*, published by rival Yale. Here Ashbery describes Stein's poem in ways that prefigure his own later work:

There is certainly plenty of monotony in the 150-page title poem . . . but it is the fertile kind, which generates excitement as water monotonously flowing over a dam generates electrical power. These austere "stanzas" are made up almost entirely of colorless connecting words such as "where," "which," "these," "of," "not," "have," "about," and so on, though now and then Miss Stein throws in an orange, a lilac, or an Albert to remind us that it really is the world, our world, that she has been talking about. . . .

Like people, Miss Stein's lines are comforting or annoying or brilliant or tedious. Like people, they sometimes make no sense and sometimes make perfect sense; or they stop short in the middle of a sentence and wander away, leaving us alone for awhile in the physical world, that collection of thoughts, flowers, weather, and proper names.^[7]

Compare this to a passage from one of Ashbery's long poems in *Self-Portrait*, "Grand Galop":

I cannot decide in which direction to walk
But this doesn't matter to me, and I might as well
Decide to climb a mountain (it looks almost flat)
As decide to go home
Or to a bar or restaurant or to the home
Of some friend as charming and ineffectual as I am
Because these pauses are supposed to be life
And they sink steel needles deep into the pores, as
 though to say
There is no use trying to escape
And it is all here anyway. And their deep, slippery
 sides defy
Any notion of continuity. It is this
That takes us back into what really is, it seems,
 history--
The lackluster, disorganized kind without dates
That speaks out of the hollow trunk of a tree
To warn away the merely polite, or those whose
 destiny
Leaves them with no time to quibble about the means,
Which are not ends, and yet . . . What precisely is
 it
About the time of day it is, the weather, that
 causes people to note it painstakingly in
 their diaries
For them to read who shall come after?^[8]

To be sure, this passage isn't as austere as Stein's *Stanzas*, but if the words aren't completely "colorless," they are certainly faded with use. That is to say, Ashbery invokes various words--"escape," "history," "destiny," "life"--whose poetic force has been compromised by the general carelessness with which they've been bandied about. No sooner does the word "means" arrive than we slip unhesitatingly into "ends." Even the more concrete nouns--"bar," "mountain," "home"--are so plain as to be anti-pictorial. But the seeming casualness with which Ashbery handles words is belied by the sudden intensities he creates with them. After some faux romantic indecision, over presumably inconsequential choices, it is less the image than the very words "steel needles deep" that arrest us, with their assonance and the cluster of stresses they form with "sink." The phrase sneaks up, like Stein's Alberts and oranges, though its effect, we might say, is the opposite, reminding us that this is a poem after all and not the eccentric musings of a stranger who's buttonholed us at a party.

But if Ashbery hooks us here, he's content to set us adrift again. One wonders how many cinematic supervillains have uttered "there is no use trying to escape"--enough to send these already heard words floating past our ears without much resistance. But where the supervillain generally follows with a boast about the ingenuity of the means of imprisonment ("These walls are made of solid focauldia!"), Ashbery instead tells us "it is all here anyway." This is equally "colorless," however, unless we stop to inquire just what "it" is. The only plausibly available antecedent, "life," occurred three lines ago, but the ensuing distance gives "it is all" a much more encompassing feel, as if remedies for this vast ennui were ready to hand, if only we could recognize them. Such a reading might be assured if the line began with a qualifying "But" instead of the merely contiguous "And." "And it is all here anyway" could equally suggest "don't bother looking; you won't find anything." Bernstein has criticized the Ashbery of *Self-Portrait* and beyond as being too "fluid" and "elegant" (*Content* 389-90), but one of the more remarkable features of a poem like "Grand Galop" is how its apparent discursive unity disintegrates under the lightest interrogation. "And their deep, slippery sides defy/ Any notion of continuity" is one of those great passages in poetry that almost seems to enact what it says, for the "continuity" of these lines is precisely what is in question. Whose "sides" does "their" refer to? "Pores," "needles," and "pauses" are the possible suspects, but none seem satisfactory. Pores might be "deep," but our usual perspective on them makes us unlikely to speak of their "sides." Needles and pauses may be *long* but not "deep" and neither have "sides" in any conventional sense. I don't want to suggest that these considerations trip us up as we read; on the contrary, it's easy to pass from

“There” to “here” to “their” on the basis of sound alone, though neither “there” is of the “here and there” variety. Ashbery makes his absurdity blatant at times, as in the abrupt non sequitur, which seeks a general answer to what would necessarily be a particular question. (There is, of course, no one “time of day it is” or “weather” during which all diaries are written.) More often, he is content with subtler maneuvers--the certainty of “really is,” for instance, immediately undercut by “it seems”--and our attempt to follow the logic indicated by the grammar produces the dance “Grand Galop” proposes.

Parsing is, of course, a very different book from *Self-Portrait*, and while Ashbery is drawn to Stein’s *Meditations*, Bernstein is much more a *How to Write* or “Composition As Explanation” man, as befits his concern for “structures of discourse.” That this project is not exclusively critical may be inferred from those lines following “waiting for the bust”: “was on a telephone/ gyroscope/ sleeping binge.” The various objects of “on,” we might say, elicit quite distinct senses from that preposition, as being *on the phone* and *on a binge* have as little in common with one another as being *on the spot* and *on the floor*. My familiarity with gyroscopes goes only as far as the word itself, but I assume being *on* one is Bernstein’s own humorous invention (I picture him in one of those round *American Gladiator*-style cages). Variations on “on” may seem like severe pleasure, though it is very true to Stein’s sense of where the literary action is; in her own lecture on “Poetry and Grammar,” she declares prepositions her favorite part of speech. [9] But where Stein tends towards an expansiveness that influenced Ashbery, Bernstein’s early impulse, even in long poems, is to compress and fragment:

was peeling an apricot
was peeling an american
was peeling a jug, sitting,
 setting, the apricot
was peeling a fig
was peeling,
 very sorrowful, she said,
 in itself (*Republics* 41)

As Bernstein himself notes, influence is a “byzantinely complicated matter” (*Content* 390), and I make no definitive claim for my analogies except as such. But at the risk of much oversimplification, I want to say that the early Bernstein filters his Steinian impulses through both Williams’ feel for line-breaks and Creeley’s sense of a word’s objecthood. The drop from the final “was peeling” to “very sorrowful” deftly halts *and* continues the syntax at hand, the sequence causing an unprinted “feeling” to hover close by. I confess, too, to being utterly drawn in by the first line, whose placement of “apricot” alongside “peeling” had me thinking “peeling” the first dozen times I read it. Not that “peeling” any of these things makes literal sense, though we might imagine Whitmanian uses for such a locution, especially in litany form. Clearly both words are evoked, or at least I hesitate to relinquish the bizarre reveries “peeling an american” inspires in me. It sounds like a Steinian thought.

As Bernstein takes pains to point out, both he and Stein pursued their studies in the same building at Harvard (*My Way* 242), to be duly noted on the *IOHPOHP*’s fold-out campus map. That they didn’t attend the same grammar school is evident from their recorded opinions on the matter. This is Stein in “Poetry and Grammar,” followed by Bernstein in *A Poetics* (1992):

When you are at school and learn grammar grammar is very exciting. I really do not know that anything has ever been more exciting than diagramming sentences. . . . I like the feeling the everlasting feeling of sentences as they diagram themselves. (*Lectures* 126)

I felt my initiation into such a public voice was the product of a profound humiliation and degradation that I had to undergo: a private-school hazing into Grammar, which once mastered I cannot unlearn but which, like many men, I am perennially suspicious of even as it continues to inform the expression of my (most well-founded) beliefs and convictions: the artifice of my authenticity. [10]

I raise this point not solely out of pedantry--it’s perfectly permissible to learn from a writer without endorsing every opinion--but also to account for a difference in their aesthetics despite Stein’s significant influence on Bernstein. There’s something sensuous, almost erotic, in Stein’s enjoyment of grammar, the way she doubles back to “feeling” for sheer pleasure’s sake, making us feel the sentence too, as though it *did* what it *said*. We might like to hang this diagram on the wall. In another lecture, “Portraits and Repetition,” she describes her writing process with her usual mixture of humble simplicity and supreme self-confidence:

I say I never repeat while I am writing because while I am writing I am most completely, and that is if you like being a genius, I am most entirely and completely listening and talking, the two in one and the one in two and that is having completely its own time and it has in it no element of remembering. (*Lectures* 108)

“Listening and talking” is a nice way to put it and this needn’t imply anything so sordid as “oracular,” “inspired,” “surrealist,” or any of the other anxieties we might group under Bernstein’s general fear of “the Romantic idea of poems as transport” (*My Way* 57). Stein is listening to language. There doesn’t seem to be anything incompatible with her conception of language in terms of hearing and speaking, and her treatment of it as material for formal manipulation. At this time of day I doubt anyone takes her writing as an unmediated outpouring of a unified soul or self. (Occasionally, Stein academics trot out the “Mabel Dodge” defense--asserting that Stein’s writing is a type of “stream-of-consciousness” [11]--but it has largely fallen out of fashion.) Unlike Bernstein, Stein conceives of herself as working *with* grammar; sentences “diagram themselves.” She doesn’t consider grammar a limitation so much as a given of language, the medium in which she works, and in her hands it’s a pliable substance. [12] For all her cultivation of monotony, Stein makes a music of subtle but considerable tonal variation, as when she twists her syntax here to include “and that is if you like being a genius,” with its disconcerting shift to the second-person and its almost inscrutable implications. [13] Certainly it’s a sly assertion of her own genius--the *you* that means *I*--but the form of it at once suggests a piece of insider advice (“this is how to be a genius”) and a muted threat (“you’d better follow this advice if you’d like to be a genius”). And yet there *is* something comforting in Stein’s advice, for it links genius with a certain receptivity, while acknowledging the need for self-assertion. She even frosts it for us with a fairy tale, “the two in one and the one in two,” as if she were explaining reproduction to a kindergarten class. This is a great deal to offer in one sentence, and Stein offers

a great many such sentences.

For Bernstein, as we have seen, “Grammar” is more like being hazed by the rugby team: “humiliation and degradation.” It would be hard to imagine how he derives such an attitude from either Stein or Wittgenstein, were it not clear that he takes grammar to be something like the principles of expository writing. For Bernstein prefaces his humiliation above with the following observation:

The legitimating markers of persuasion and conviction in our society are intimately tied in to what can be usefully stigmatized as a male heterosexual form of discourse, one that I think that “men” writers, given their specific vantage of being identified with this discourse, can also rupture, cut up, break apart in order to expose and defuse and reform. (*A Poetics* 223)

Remarks such as this one, variants of which appear throughout *Content’s Dream* and *My Way*, primarily reveal that Bernstein doesn’t know what grammar is. Or, to put the matter more fairly, he doesn’t know what Wittgenstein means by “grammar.” But Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, is pretty straightforward on the subject:

Grammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfil its purpose, in order to have such-and-such an effect on human beings. It only describes and in no way explains the use of signs.^[14]

“Grammar” for Wittgenstein designates a *description* of how words are used, not an explanation of why different linguistic constructions exert particular psychological or social influences. Some of this description is technical, as when *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* reports that the functions of prepositions in English are carried out in Hindi by *postpositions*, concluding the phrases they govern.^[15] But in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein also writes of “the grammar of a word (or phrase)” in a way that suggests an account of a word’s possible employments. This is more than just a matter of classifications of word-type (*nouns*, etc.) or grammatical positions (*direct object*, etc.). It also includes what we might call a word’s *play*, by which I mean something like a range of conceptual usage according to custom, about which it is extremely hard to generalize. For example, we might say either we *swallow* or we *eat* food, but we wouldn’t ordinarily say we *eat* medicine. This information is part of “the grammar of *eat*.” Over time this could change--as we used to *build* and now simply *grow* businesses--and exceptions may exist even now, as we once *ate* opium and opium was once *medicine*. Is there any compelling reason why we should one day speak of *eating medicine* generally? I suppose we shall know if that moment comes. But until such time, it’s none of philosophy’s business, according to Wittgenstein, for, like grammar, “Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it” (*PI* 124).

A problem with Bernstein’s Wittgensteinian aspirations is that he continually asserts in one context or another that grammar does indeed “tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfil its purpose.”^[16] Sometimes he puts it the other way around, “that societal conditions are repressive and that these repressions are *reflected* in grammar” (*Content* 418), but either way it leads to the same conclusion, we must “rupture, cut up, break apart.” To the charge that the resultant poetry is “non-syntactical,” Bernstein retorts that he is “working with . . . nonnormative syntax,” “as if syntax were other than the order of strings of words” (*Content* 395). But it is. Or, at least, *The Oxford Companion* defines “syntax” in a sense that I--and, I would contend, Stein and Wittgenstein--understand it:

A term in general use and in linguistics for the study of the ways in which words combine into such units as phrase, clause, and sentence. The sequences that result from the combinations are referred to in linguistics as *syntactic structures*. The ways in which components of words are combined into words are studied in *morphology*, and syntax and morphology together are generally regarded as the two major constituents of *grammar*, although in one of its uses, *grammar* is strictly synonymous with *syntax* and excludes morphology. (1016)

The “grammar” of Stein’s “Poetry and Grammar” seems to be “synonymous with syntax” and is, as far as I recall, consistent with her use of the term elsewhere. Wittgenstein seems similarly unconcerned with morphology, and while I have suggested that his sense of the word “grammar” has particular nuances, he also uses the term in its purely syntactic sense. But whether we take it to mean *unusual* or *multiple choice*, Bernstein’s “nonnormative” is at odds with the very idea of syntax. Syntaxes follow rules, or rather, the rules of syntax are generalizations derived from characteristic constructions that preceded their articulation as such but may regulate further construction. And as Wittgenstein notes, convention and repetition are part of the grammar of “obeying a rule”: “It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule” (*PI* 199).

If I may now return to my thesis after such a long digression, I’d like to suggest that Bernstein’s deliberate attenuation of his powers largely stems from his sense that syntactic rules are prohibitions restricting expression. This is from “Dodgem” in *Shade* (1978):

a point to really
the ends TOSSES (commodes, lemons
slides even, while
etc.--all and, an, up
WINDOWS ((swOOp)
WHACK (*Republics* 134), have future,
oration (i’ll

In one of his several accounts of his own writing, Bernstein asks us to “Consider a work composed of a number of autonomously distinct pieces that

nonetheless functions as a whole by articulating the relations among the parts—that is, has an overall configuration whose music is composed of differences” (*Content* 361). But if we perceive no relations, what then? The problem with many of Bernstein’s departures from what he considers “normative” syntax is that they’re not sustained or systematic enough performances to establish any alternative grammar. They tend to pile up, like bric-à-brac, and feel as tepidly mannered as “commodes” does here. If only he wasn’t obliged to write this way! For the less worried Bernstein is about appearing *obviously* avant-garde, the more likely he is to achieve the effects he seeks. Indeed, though 1979’s *Poetic Justice* is in many ways his breakthrough volume—its extensive experiments in prose allowing him to stretch out as never before—he often feels compelled to add layers of unnecessary tedium through tYPoGRaPhY. But a poem like “Consideration,” from *Resistance* (1983), shows that at his best Bernstein achieves an abstract lyricism wholly unreliant on burlesque:

Feelings that grant promises
 alone am cured of. A salient
 detonation, tangled and flickering, to
 up till vexed, mottled plum
 that stands at guard, gorged
 by the pensive percussion I
 develop all too slowly out of,
 implicitly to maroon a
 mobile flare—the slant
 of any rest, afloat with
 wonder, heaves. (*Republics* 255)

Here Bernstein assembles conventional syntactic structures on the level of phrase or clause into overall unfamiliar sentence structures. Yet the individual units are convincing enough that by the time we arrive at “to/ up till vexed” we may be willing to grant “up” this quite new role as an intransitive verb. Just as the poem threatens to devolve into a list, Bernstein makes a lateral move to “gorged,” which seems to spring out of “guard” and resonate with the “plum” overhead in some throaty way. The “pensive percussion I develop all too slowly out of” reminds me of Alexander Pope’s alexandrine on the clunkiness of alexandrines, the way the pile of stresses in “all too slowly” slows us down, as though it spoke of the sound it makes. The deceptively simple repetition of “of” followed by a pause imparts a rhythm to the passage, establishing to some degree the alternative grammar Bernstein elsewhere seeks. These “salient detonations” seem to signify a morose jouissance, the lines lending themselves equally to readings textual (*man writing*) and sexual (*man pumping*), without committing to either. Though it may make for a substanceless political tactic, such non-commitment is not, for poetry, the end of the world. In terms of Bernstein’s poetics, it’s just the beginning.

If I have tarried overlong in the *Republics*, it is in part due to an aversion to Bernstein’s more recent poems. Indeed *Republics*’ last two sections are already as unwanted bonus tracks on a CD of ill-advised length. That said, it is still difficult to convey how dismaying a volume *With Strings* is. The technical facility with which Bernstein could suggest unprinted words has lapsed into a much overused tic of parenthetically inserting whatever word he wants evoked: “irritating (irrigating)”; “lather (later)”; “doubting (doubling)”; “arterial (artisanal).”^[17] In contrast to Bernstein’s libertarian claims about language poetry, this practice fairly hectors the reader into accepting a pre-fab relation. The short poems are vapid; the quadruple spacing of “The Human Abstract” (“the shortest distance// between two points// is love” [35]) does little more than accentuate a Hallmark banality quite visible on its own and quite shocking in so avant-garde a poet. Meanwhile, the long poems have taken on an unbecoming bulk, as these chunks of “Today’s Not Opposite Day” attest:

The revolution

will begin not with a call against sin
 but with a hankering for bootleg gin.
 Then promise me a roll or a muffin,
 a hole in the ocean, & I will wrap
 it with twine & keep it with mine. (72)

These statements are based on current expectations and projections about the aesthetic environment and assumptions made by the author and are not guarantees of future performativity. Therefore, actual events or performances may differ materially from those expressed and projected in the poem due to factors such as the effect of social changes in word meanings, material changes in social conditions, changing conditions in the overall cultural environment, continuing aesthetic turmoil, risks associated with product demand and market acceptance, the impact of competing poems and poetry distribution systems, delays in the development of new poems, imagination capacity utilization (ICU), and genre mix and media absorption rates. The author undertakes no obligation to update any projective statements in this poem. (73)

Regardless of one’s feelings for language poetry, Bernstein’s early works exhibit an experimental restlessness conspicuously absent here. The frequency with which he’s taken to rhyming of late, along with these quotations from the Beatles (“hole in the ocean”) and Dylan (“keep it with mine”), shows a zesty postmodern interest in the relation of poetry to popular song, as do the musical conceits of *My Way* and *With Strings*. Thus it seems fair to ask: hasn’t hip hop raised the bar on what counts as a well-busted rhyme slightly higher than this? I mention this in part because Bernstein’s desire to rhyme seems genuine, but his so-bad-I’m-funny routine makes me wonder who the joke’s on. In his own language, country, and day, a tremendously inventive “subaltern” verse culture is reinvigorating the art of rhyme while he’s playing patty-cake and ending his own list of African American “indigenous cultural forms” prematurely and predictably with “blues” (*My Way* 132).^[18] There’s a provincialism at work here that seems of a piece with naming a book after a Sinatra song. Moreover, the good-timey, family restaurant glare of “bootleg gin,” the antique finish on “The revolution,” suggest frames of reference irrelevant to the cultural critique Bernstein advocates.

The second passage argues that the poet has lost his once-judicious hand at citation. A disclaimer for the poem within the poem—outrageous,

perhaps, but we get the joke well before he surrenders it. Such frantic clowning shows his poems suffering the strain of jacket copy, for the frequent assurances of Bernstein's hilarity force him to don motley a little too often. *My Way's* "Whose on first" (xi), for example, *cites* comedy but isn't funny; it's a corny appeal to the lowest comic denominator. And unfortunately, the room in his postmodern riff arsenal for such stalwarts as Abbott & Costello, *Forrest Gump*, and Don Rickles is by no means an indication of its depth. This resort to generalized signifiers of comedy is perhaps the price of Bernstein's increasingly noisy application to the "public intellectual" club. In "Unrepresentative Verse," we find him eulogizing not so much Allen Ginsberg himself as the late poet's "astounding success at attracting media attention" (*My Way* 270). He heads his list of enemies ("official verse culture") with *The New York Times* (*Content* 247)^[19] yet scans its pages endlessly for poetry news that excludes "the many participants in $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ " (*My Way* 250). I would say his increasing success at public figurehood has eviscerated his criticism—it certainly makes *My Way* more unpleasant to read—if *Content's Dream* weren't already filled with such howlers as "The trouble with Humpty Dumpty's stipulative definitions, if they can be dignified by such a word, is that they are entirely capricious and absurd" (54) or "To see a live human sacrifice in an arena would bring into play active responses to the scene and to the audience largely obliterated in seeing a movie of such an event" (90). While I would suggest the trouble with Humpty's definitions has more to do with the fact that he's an egg wearing pants, the grasp of the obvious Bernstein exhibits in this second quote convinces me he may indeed be fit to occupy some public office. Clearly he is capable of the necessary sentimental posturing:

The U.S. is less a melting pot than a simultaneity of inconsolable coexistences—from the all-too-audible spokespeople of the state to the ghostly voices of the almost lost languages of the sovereign nations of Arapho, Mohawk, Shoshone, Pawnee, Pueblo, Navaho, Crow, Cree, Kickapoo, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Zuni . . . ; though in truth there are no sovereigns, only sojourners. (*My Way* 114)

There's something despicable about Bernstein's invocation of "truth" here, including but not limited to the bumper-sticker cadence of the parting salvo. It would fit right on a minivan, one parked at the IKEA in Emeryville, CA built on the last Ohlone shellmound. This effacement of the last physical evidence of their tribal life is ample testimony as to who the sovereigns are. I include this detail, because, as Bernstein writes in *A Poetics*, "details [are] more important than names," are "always already peripheralized as names become packages through which a commodity is born" (7). But what has Bernstein done here but list a bunch of names he looked up, in order to co-opt them for so much grandstanding? What does he know about any of the dozen "ghostly voices" his multiculturalism so glibly embraces? Perhaps he'll show us in his next book of essays, though the empty pieties Bernstein has shown increasing willingness to embrace suggest otherwise.

[1] Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984*, 2d ed (Evanston, IL: Northwestern, 2001), p. 458. Hereafter cited as *Content*.

[2] Charles Bernstein, *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago: Chicago, 1999), p.234. Hereafter cited as *My Way*.

[3] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1974), § 5.6. All references to Wittgenstein's work are by paragraph number unless otherwise indicated.

[4] Charles Bernstein, *Republics of Reality: 1975-1995* (LA: Sun & Moon, 2000), pp. 24 and 28 respectively. Hereafter cited as *Republics*.

[5] This is what I meant when I rather rashly characterized a great deal of language poetry as "anemic" at the beginning of this essay, for there seems to be a frequent assumption that thematizing the lack of external event will single-handedly induce some sort of internal event. This appears to be not the case.

[6] Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, Trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 82.

[7] John Ashbery, "The Impossible," in *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, ed. Michael J. Hoffman (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), pp. 104-105.

[8] John Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (NY: Viking, 1975), p. 17.

[9] Gertrude Stein, *Look At Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures, 1909-1945* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1967), p. 127. Hereafter cited as *Lectures*.

[10] Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1992) p. 223. Hereafter cited as *A Poetics*.

[11] Dodge took this line, without the "stream-of-consciousness" label, in "Speculations, or Post-Impressionism in Prose" in the March 1913 issue of *Arts and Decorations*. It can be found in *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein* (see note 6).

[12] This is not to suggest, by the way, that Stein never fragments her syntax, but it is to say that her often initially bewildering texts are not the random agglomerations of words that people frequently take them to be. Nor does she require excessive length for all her syntactical play. If we recall the sentence—"When you are at school and learn grammar grammar is very exciting"—we might note the odd visual appearance, sans comma, of "grammar" followed immediately by "grammar." This is something she loves to do, for though it involves a suppression of our usual employment of pronouns, the syntax has a technical correctness even as its initial unexpectedness may distance us. More often she simply begins with pronouns as placeholders for the nouns (of which, she reports in "Poetry and Grammar," she is not terribly fond [*Lectures* 126]), as vehicles for her to maintain syntactic integrity even as she contorts it almost beyond recognition.

[13] We saw this sort of thing in the last line of the "Grand Galop" passage quoted above—"For them to read who shall come after"—which is either a dead-on imitation of Wyatt or an actual sample, it matters not. The transition between the tone of this line and the more conversational preceding one is definitive but strangely effortless, despite a good 450-year idiomatic interval.

[14] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3d ed, Eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 496. Hereafter cited as *PI*.

[15] Tom McArthur, ed., *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (Oxford: Oxford, 1992), pp. 798-99.

[16] Phrases like "the legitimating markers of persuasion and conviction" lead me to believe that Bernstein conflates grammatical analysis with semiotics, the study of signs, among which is counted language. The type of grammar someone uses may be said to *signify* a great many things, or indeed different things to different people, depending on the situation. But this is not the same as using words to do things, no matter how analogous or intertwined these two matters may at times seem.

[17] Charles Bernstein, *With Strings* (Chicago: Chicago, 2001), pp. 12, 14, 37, 83 respectively.

[18] My admiration for hip hop may seem immoderate, but the dexterity with which certain rappers manipulate words in order to make rhymes--often from half-rhymes or even non-rhymes--and the conceptual reach required to accommodate them remind me of nothing more than reading Metaphysical poetry. Witness "barbecue or mildew," E-40's wry condensation of the oppressed's perpetual options into two very noun-leaning verbs. The remoteness of the grammars it holds together--from *get cooking* to *molder in the grave* to *move it or lose it*--has a visceral impact "sin" and "gin" simply don't. When was the last time the slow-roasted goodness of "barbecue" signified *hustle*, and therefore *speed*? Perhaps never until its opposition to the more leisurely traffic of "mildew." (This imperative can be found on "Pop Ya Collar," track 8 of E-40's *Loyalty and Betrayal* [Vallejo, CA: Sick Wid It/Jive, 2000].)

[19] *Parnassus* only came in eighth (*Content* 247).

GARRETT CAPLES published a book of poems, *The Garrett Caples Reader*, in 1999 with Black Square Editions (NY). A limited edition chapbook, *er, um*, appeared from Meritage Press (SF) in 2002. He lives in Oakland.

home *biography* *andrew* *star* *collaboration* *eye peasant*