

TWO OR THREE THINGS I KNOW ABOUT CHARLES BERNSTEIN

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ABSTRACT

Through a reading of Charles Bernstein's poetry and a closer analysis of his libretto, *Shadowtime*, this essay argues that Bernstein fully inhabits two possibilities for contemporary American Jewish poetry—one that eschews mourning and one that embraces it; one that rejects a romantic tradition of interiority and one that has made its peace with it. It shows that he also posits a third possibility, which is perhaps an extension of the first, a poetry that goes beyond melancholy, to what Gillian Rose called an *inaugurated* mourning for the European Jewish past.

My parents were assimilationists who nonetheless had a strong Jewish and later Zionist identification . . . As for many of their generations, this made for interesting contradictions. But as I say, for my parents, the religious end of Judaism was less pronounced than a decisive, but at the same time mutable, ethnic identification.

—Charles Bernstein

Like his parents, Charles Bernstein is a mutable Jew. Born in a very Jewish spot at a very specific time—the Upper West Side of New York in 1950—Bernstein is a product of the contradictions of postwar Judaism. His family was thoroughly acculturated but consciously Jewish. They were intermittently kosher, sometimes attending a reform synagogue and sometimes an Orthodox one.¹ Bernstein started out as a student at that last bastion of almost complete assimilation, the Ethical Culture School, and ended up at a public school that has always been heavily populated by Jewish kids—Bronx Science.

This article is about a set of tensions in, a bunch of fault lines through Bernstein's own brand(s) of Jewish poetry and about the possibilities for American Jewish poetry that Bernstein presents. On the one hand, he writes a fiercely unapologetic and socially progressive poetry that often satirizes and more often eschews the common tropes of interiority, including mourning. On the other, he seems to be increasingly interested in the Shoah and its

That “hidden language of the Jews” comes from the title of Sander Gilman’s famous *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*, an account of the ways Jews internalized the antisemitic trope of linguistic pollution. Bernstein gladly accepts the accusation. Yes, he’s guilty of muddying the waters of English. Yes, he’s adopted the “the old *pilpul* song and dance” and engaged in verbal sabotage. Unlike the self-hating Jews who dream(ed) of achieving a language purified, Bernstein ‘fesses up. He will not be silent and he will be cunning.

Bernstein learned this cunning from the Objectivists and from Stein, but not only from them:

I take this as an aesthetic practice that repudiates the moral discourse of a right to speak as a racial or national patrimony, and also a right way to speak. This is a lesson I learned not from Pound and Eliot, exactly, but from Stein, from Reznikoff and Zukofsky, and also from Groucho Marx and Lenny Bruce. (“From an Ongoing Interview,” 189)

There is no right way to speak—there are only different ways of speaking. Groucho Marx and Lenny Bruce provide wonderful examples of how one might speak in various tongues.

On a number of occasions, Bernstein has described himself as a Groucho Marxist. This Marxian influence is an echo of the deflationary zeal which, according to Michael Wex, is the backbone of Yiddish humor (Wex). The secret language of the Marx Brothers takes down pretension with a surgical if somewhat devious precision. Margaret Dumont is reported to have asked Groucho what he meant when he exhorted the troops in *Duck Soup* to fight for her honor, “which is probably more than *she* ever did.” She didn’t get it. But the audience did and that was all that was needed.

So what do you get when you cross an Objectivist with Milton Berle? The postmodernist as stand-up comedian:

George Burns likes to insist that he always takes the straight lines; the cigar in his mouth is a way of leaving space between the lines for a laugh. He weaves lines together by means of a picaresque narrative; not so Henny Youngman, whose lines are strictly paratactic. (“Of Time and The Line,” 42)

Bernstein makes clear his debt to Burns in one-minute lecture he delivered at the University of Pennsylvania:

My lecture is called “What Makes a Poem a Poem?” I’m going to set my timer. It’s not rhyming words at the end of a line. It’s not form. It’s not structure. It’s not loneliness. It’s not location. It’s not the sky. It’s not love. It’s not the color. It’s not the feeling. It’s not the meter. It’s not the place. It’s not the intention. It’s not the desire. It’s not the weather. It’s not the hope. It’s not the subject matter. It’s not the death. It’s not the birth. It’s not the trees. It’s not the words. It’s not the things between the words. It’s not the meter. It’s not the meter—

[timer beeps]

It’s the timing.

In performance, Bernstein takes an extra beat between the beeping of the timer and the last line, getting the timing right by getting the time wrong. (“What Makes a Poem a Poem”)

Bernstein shows his Henny Youngman side at the end of “Time And The Line:”

Or, as
they say in math, it takes two lines to make
an angle but only one line to make
a Margarita. (43)

In the end, Bernstein is more Groucho and Youngman than Burns: paratactic and not picaresque. The signature of his poems is their speed.

If the evidence of the recent selection of his own poems is anything to go by, Bernstein presents himself as a comedian and a satirist as well as the director and stage manager of a theater of voices. One of the most obvious butts of his satire and sources of his comedy is the clichéd language of subjectivity:

I am especially interested in the treatment of depression. With my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ at the center of my life, I have found real Joy and Purpose in dedicating myself to the Truth of his Teaching as Written in the Bible. What gives the job its excitement is working with Stan Richards, a nationally recognized creative wizard. Nowadays, being a husband, father, homeowner and Jew keeps me both busy and satisfied. I find myself immersed in a foreign but also satisfyingly tangible world of container shipping (“Foreign Body Sensation,” 138)

Of the essence here is the mash-up of different snippets of perfectly normal—or normal-sounding—self-definition. These kinds of thing you find in testimonials or reunion books, and nowadays on the web.

Bernstein's point cannot be completely subsumed under the posthumanist commonplace that our subjectivity is the product of language. From the get-go, Bernstein has pledged allegiance to Cavell and not to Derrida. Here he is in 1977, criticizing the "poetries of gesture:"

In these modes, to use Stanley Cavell's phrase . . . alienation is not defeated but landscaped. What is needed, now, is not the further dramatization of far-outness, but the presence of far-inness . . . It's not that we don't need to hear these things again & again . . . but that there is so much more we can do than simply underline the fact—and describe the conditions—of our alienation, of the loss of the world's presence to us. As if it were enough to simply mourn & not organize. ("Three or Four Things," 28-29)

Mourning is not enough. In fact, it may be too much, if only because losing the world should not be the final word. (Note here that by conflating Cavell and Marx, alienation registers both "losing the world" and reification.) To remain in mourning is to make a mistake, an error that Derrida falls into: "Our losses are not based on the conceptual impossibility of presence . . . but rather on the grounds that each person must take responsibility for—the failure . . . to respond or act when the occasion demands" ("The Objects of Meaning," 182). That we are selves by dint of our language and what we do, not some other "five to midnight" private self ("Three or Four Things," 19) does not absolve us from responsibility. It is the place from which we begin. While scepticism might have its point, it misunderstands that point. Yes, we live in a world of convention but that does not mean that convention—our shared grammar—is somehow a veil that could ever be pierced. It cannot nor should it be. The social world is where we live: "Only / the imaginary is real—not trumps / beclouding the minds acrobatic vers- / ions. The first fact is the social body, / one from another, nor needs no other." ("The Kiwi Bird in the Kiwi Tree")

If the (social) imaginary is all we've got and if it is the source of our attunements and responsibilities, then the whole drama of post-Romantic lyricism—its interiority, its alienations and identifications—is at best a starting point or at worst, diversion. And mourning—the loss of the world—which constitutes the original impetus of that drama—should be nothing more than a moment. Don't just mourn. Just get down to the business of poetry. ("The promise of the return of the world can [& has always been] fulfilled by poetry" ["Three or Four Things," 29].)

Bernstein's earliest pronouncements tell us something of the project of so much of his poetry, a project that seems to be borne out by the selections in *All The Whiskey In Heaven*. To put it as concisely as possible: the Objectivists and Stein showed Bernstein that there could be a modernist poetry that manifested its Jewish consciousness in a number of ways, not the least of which was that it did not have to comply with the notion of the pure language of an autochthonous (Christian) nation. Furthermore (and here the example of Stein is salient), Bernstein claims that a poetics of interiority based on mourning marks a retreat from the responsibility of the social, from the Imaginary, which is the only real.

So: a different kind of Jewish poetry—a “pushy,” unapologetic, self-assertive and manically comic writing. In his poems (and in his numerous essays, interviews and talks) Bernstein has been willing to play the *tummler*—a comedian who makes a racket—and a *kochleffel*—someone who stirs things up. He has been nothing if not worldly.

But as the Jewish aspect of his work has become more explicit, he has edged closer to the Frankfurt School. As a result, Bernstein's writings have become increasingly inclined towards mourning: not for a world we live in, but for the one we have lost to history, for the culture of European Jewry that was destroyed by the Nazis. If we can say that skepticism has crept into Bernstein's poetry, it is a scepticism not about our knowledge of the world but about our ability to know the past and to do it justice.

The need to confront an enigmatic, because ultimately unrepresentable past motivates the essay “The Second War and Post-Modern Memory.” The specter of Adorno haunts it. Bernstein refers to him directly in the last paragraph and—more tellingly—(mis)quotes him without attribution in the middle.³

Bernstein's argument is pure Adorno: postwar poetry registers in its formal disjunctions and experiments the “psychic realities” of the traumas attendant on the war. In part because the essay grew out of a talk delivered at a conference on the poetry after the Holocaust, Bernstein is particularly sensitive to the traces of the Shoah in postmodern poets. The emotional kick of the essay comes at the end with a discussion of a small excerpt from Reznikoff's *Holocaust*. It is a horrifying little story of a boy whose innocence blinds him to the fact that his family has been murdered and that he too is about to be killed. Bernstein insists that we cannot help identifying with the boy and he writes with an uncustomary pathos that unlike the young victim, we know what is going on. Or, more precisely, we remember what actually did go on.

It is worth quoting Bernstein at some length here:

This detail from Reznikoff brings forward, in an ineffably shattering way, the atmosphere of willed forgetting of the 1950s, or now. We blithely go about our business—busy, gay, distracted; until that blistering moment of consciousness that shatters all hopes when we recognize that we are orphaned, have lost our parents—in the sense of our foundations, our bearing in the world; until, that is, a detail jolts the memory, when we feel, as in the fragments in our pocket, what we have held back out of denial.

Denial marks the refusal to mourn: to understand what we have lost and its absolute irreparability. Reznikoff and . . . Rothenberg initiate this process, but no more than other poets, ranges of poetry, that register this denial. (“The Second War,” 216-17)

Bernstein’s argument is based on the assumption that even now (in 1991) we continue refuse to acknowledge what we lost in the War, what was destroyed not only of human life but of “our foundations.” He calls this refusal by a psychoanalytic name, denial, and uses it to designate a refusal to mourn. Whether or not his claim is accurate—in the 1950s, the Shoah might have been a taboo subject, but surely was not by 1991 and the shaken foundations of the West’s self-conceptions was an integral trope of the debates over postmodernism in the 1980s—the pathos of its presentation is important. Our inability to mourn takes the shape of a sleep and a forgetting. Poetry forces us to recall and mourn.

Memory and mourning. More recently, Bernstein has written of the task of the postmodern Jewish poet:

Imagine European poetry and philosophy by the descendants of Benjamin and Heine. But, to a large extent, this is not to be, or anyway, insofar as it has to be, it too must be the task of secular Jewish culture on this side of the Atlantic and of our radical poetry and ambiguitating poetics. I think it is difficult to acknowledge this unwanted and perhaps even insufferable task, certainly it is has been difficult for me. But perhaps this is what we have been chosen for. (“Radical Jewish Culture,” 16)

It is somewhat startling to read Bernstein use the language of election here. Secular Jewish writers are the chosen poets of the chosen people and it is their responsibility to recreate what the Nazis destroyed. This is quite a burden. Bernstein indicates that he himself was in denial—he had a hard

time accepting the imperative nature of this task. He had forgotten the command never to forget.

Never forgetting in this instance involves real work. It is tempting to call it the work of mourning although it is not clear whether the stringent psychological passage through irrevocable loss ever ends, whether his mourning is ever worked through. This problem is presented *Shadowtime*, Bernstein's libretto about that avatar of mourning and melancholy, Walter Benjamin. The opera largely consists of a series of sophisticated, sometimes witty, sometimes opaque, sometimes melancholic interrogations between Benjamin and questioners from his past, the European past and his present. In essence, then, through quotation, word play and translation, Bernstein presents us with a question of his own: "Our 'Benjamin' is born in the space of contemporary American thought. This historical person leaves the face of the earth, but not our imagination. How do we 'hear' him? How do we hear the flapping of the wings of history?" ("Radical Jewish Culture," 16). Benjamin is dead and we are not resurrection men and women. We can only imagine him, review him from our place in history.

Even so—or especially so—*Shadowtime* is a form of divination. Bernstein presents Benjamin as a speaker for, or rather, through the dead. In parallel scenes, Benjamin finds himself in dialog first with his friend, the great Jewish historian Gershom Scholem and then with Hölderlin. At issue in the first encounter is Benjamin's method, his zigs and zags between Marxism and Jewish mysticism. Benjamin explains that he is looking for ways of thinking "outside the self-enclosing circles / that bury us alive and make us / Deaf even to the dead" (54). To listen to the dead involves mourning and Benjamin asks how the utopian promise of language—reconciliation—can fulfil itself as mourning. The point, Scholem tells him, is not the expression of mourning, but the process within it, within the language of mourning. This allows Benjamin to conclude: "Then mourning is a kind of listening / Where the dead sing to us / And even the living tell their stories" (55). If mourning is merely the expression of loss, then mourning only tells us of the mourner. If it is a process of mortification, of breaking the false spell of immanence—Benjamin discusses the importance of melancholic's mortification of the world in a key section of *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*—mourning tells us of both the quick and the dead.

This motif gets repeated in Benjamin's confrontation with Holderlin:

Holderlin:

Are not the living—

Many of them—
Known to you?

Benjamin:
What is alive
Can be perceived
Only by means
Of what is not.
The dead speak
but only the living hear them. (*Shadowtime* 58)

Again, Benjamin claims that the mortification—literally, the making dead—of what is, and thus making it what it is not, is the only way to make visible what is. (It is important here that Benjamin says “what is alive” and not “who is alive.”) This strenuous dialectic is then given another turn—just as the living can only be understood via the dead, the dead are only audible to the living.

Mourning’s critical value lies in its affect, its reduction of the world to dust. It shatters the seemingly eternal edifices of second nature—the relations that govern the world we live in—by turning them into ruins and finding their meaning there, in the rubble. The method that is bound to this mortification of the world Benjamin calls “natural history”—and its hope lies in the fact that it shows that neither nature nor history is conclusive, that neither is bound by necessity.

The chief mourner of *Shadowtime* is the chief mourner of Benjamin’s last great piece of writing, “On the Concept of History”—the Angel of History, who driven back from Paradise with its back to the future, can only conceive of history as permanent catastrophe. In *Shadowtime*, the Angel is given the last word in two simultaneous laments. In these speeches we hear a deep-seated pathos:

no sooner than
I held you
from where I came
for the last time
never to face
the facts I saw
what I had
forgotten
now whispers (*Shadowtime* 114)

The Angel is the lover and Benjamin is the lost beloved, but the language is doubly resonant because it echoes Bernstein's descriptions of his own task—of facing the facts, of remembering what he had forgotten, of remembering that he was not to forget.

In "On the Concept of History," the Angel of History cannot redeem the past: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them." (Benjamin 392). Bernstein's Angel is in a much more complicated position:

I back away
 Helpless, my eyes fixed.
 This is my task:
 to imagine no wholes
 from all that has been smashed. (*Shadowtime* 118)

Bernstein's Angel creeps like a guilty thing surprised. It backs off. It is not blown away like Benjamin's. Furthermore, its inability to make the world whole is now cast as an imperative. It is not to imagine whole what has been cast asunder.

The Angel, then, has assumed the *task* (the term Bernstein comes back to) that Bernstein has assigned himself and other secular Jewish writers—to recover the past but not to paper over its fissures. And the problem that the Angel faces is the problem that anyone faces who tries to re-collect the past:

What still can't be seen
 is still
 apprehended
 even as I lose more
 than I retain
 as I go
 backwards
 in time toward
 time's end. (*Shadowtime* 120)

The returns on memory vanish before the Angel's eyes and its losses threaten to become complete. The consolation that there is still a trace—that the past can still be apprehended if not seen—is fragile and it leads to another form of consolation, which is just as fragile. If what is alive can only be perceived by what is not, then the negative, not the picture gives the most accurate rendering:

The negative pictures
 the picture better
 than the picture
 just as I
 picture you
 without
 ever having seen you
 or touched you

But even that dialectical sleight of hand does not really solve the problem that started the whole thing off—forgetting:

now you fall
 from my arms
 into my capacious
 insomniac forgetting. (122)

The Angel's lament that she or he has never even touched the beloved (but the loved one slips from the Angel's arms!) can only be turned to advantage for a moment, because by then Benjamin has fallen into oblivion again.

I have purposefully read this section as straight as I can—disambiguating, to turn Bernstein's phrase—because I want to emphasize how the language of missed connections turns into a poetry of object subjects and lost objects and how easy it is to see the way the poet's fears might mirror the Angel's.

The Angel can be taken as a figure for the poet or for our time or for the poet in our time. It becomes a figure for memory itself and thus casts the memorializing poet in the role of a melancholiac. The trouble is that the Angel, a figure fascinated and fixated by melancholy is itself too fascinating and therefore too fixating: it has overwhelmed most of the readers of Benjamin's text. More significantly, because it presents a subjective mood as historical insight, it has proven to be remarkably captivating.

As a critical stance, melancholy reduces the present to ash, and, as Adorno pointed out, it is always susceptible to subjective projection. It might not tell you anything about the world but everything about the melancholiac (Pensky, 240-49). A psychological correlate: as "the shadow of the object falls across the ego," melancholy is always in danger of losing the object completely. "Mourning and Melancholia," separates the two affective positions. Mourning as melancholia does not.

In her Hegelian critique of Benjamin, the late Gillian Rose argues that

Benjamin's vision was marked and marred by his inability to countenance history in terms that are neither melancholic nor apocalyptic: "Benjamin is the *taxonomist of sadness* . . . But his figures of melancholy—baroque, Baudelaire, Kafka, 'left-wing,' the angel of history—are not counterposed to recognition, love, forgiveness or faith: and therefore their mourning is not completed; it remains *aberrated* not *inaugurated*" ("Walter Benjamin," 181). Recognition is the Hegelian card she plays here; faith and forgiveness, the Jewish ones. By playing them together, she claims that Benjamin was unwilling to see that mourning takes time and requires the binding, restrictive and enabling power of the *polis*, that is, the social in which we have to live in order to be properly human. The aberrated leads to a state of unresolved and unresolvable grief. The inaugurated returns to "the law of the everyday and of relationships, old and new, with those who live" (*Mourning Becomes the Law* 70). By her lights, "to celebrate Benjamin is to lament his *aberrated* mourning," that is, to mourn his mourning. ("Walter Benjamin" 209). To acknowledge his mourning as aberrated would be the first step towards transforming it into something inaugurated, that is, generative.

It is therefore easy to describe *Shadowtime* as a bit of aberrated mourning, one that falls into the trap that Bernstein originally ascribed to Derrida. I could leave it at that if the story ended there, but it doesn't. According to Bernstein, the task of the postwar secular Jewish poet is after all to "imagine European poetry and philosophy by the descendants of Benjamin and Heine." An inaugurated mourning of the slaughtered generation of German-Jewish intellectuals would therefore entail a recasting of their heritage as our own. Bernstein does this in *Shadowtime* with a version of Heine's all-too-famous "Die Lorelei":

Each night is soul-bedeveled
As each frayed ship rigs sail
In journey's end sight falters
Where journey never ends

Bernstein's rendition is generated by the sounds of the German:

Ich weiß nicht was soll es bedeuten,
Daß ich so traurig bin;
Ein Märchen aus alten Zeiten,
Das kommt mir nicht aus dem Sinn.

Bernstein chucks the narrative of the German poem, but not its mood. He maintains some of Heine's motifs (specifically, the sea journey) but is not

particularly interested in the particularly German myth of the siren. He bases his poem on the sounds of the German: “soll es bedeuten” becomes “soul-bedevelled”; “Zeiten” becomes “sight,” and “Sinn,” “ends.”

The argument (if we can call it that) of the final stanza derives from the first stanza of Bernstein’s poem and therefore only bears a tangential relation to Heine. “Die Lorelei” stands as a goad, not an end and Bernstein’s purpose is to create an American poem, not to English a German one:

This globe spins on, verse lingers
A sail without a sigh
A song without a singer
Laurel’s veil, Laurel’s eyes

There is more than a touch of Heine’s sentimentality here and a huge dollop of what looks like Victorian kitsch in a tone that is serious and historically aware without being noticeably ironic.

Heine presents Bernstein with a double opportunity. By recapturing something of a German-Jewish tradition, Bernstein is able to revisit, if not reappropriate, the something of the Victorians and of the literary ballad, freed from pathos of an identifiable subject (“A song without a singer”). To a certain extent the clichéd “I” of the ballad—when it appears—liberates the poet and the reader from the pressures of biography, but still admits something of the Victorians’ turn of emotion, as is clear in “All the Whiskey In Heaven,” which is dedicated to the poet’s wife, Susan Bee: “No, never, I’ll never stop loving you / Not till my heart beats its last / And even then in my words and my songs / I will love you all over again” (“All the Whiskey in Heaven,” 295).

It’s fair to speculate that at some level Heine has given Bernstein permission to embrace precisely the affect, the rhythms and the diction that the High Modernists found so suspect. He therefore presents us with a third aspect of his poetics (or is it just an extension of his first?), a model postmodernism that looks peculiarly Jewish. It extends back to Zukofsky’s “Poem Beginning ‘The,’” whose Jewishness does not merely rest on its quotations from Yiddish, but also—and perhaps more importantly—on its sheer ferocity towards Eliot. This poetry’s tutelary spirit might well be Heine and its cardinal points are sentiment, aggression and comedy (which is itself little more than aggression’s socially sanctioned form.)

So yes, Bernstein has shown himself to be mutable. He fully inhabits two possibilities for contemporary American Jewish poetry—one that eschews mourning and one that embraces it; one that rejects a romantic tra-

dition of interiority and one that has made its peace with it. And he points to a third one, which is perhaps an extension of the first, a poetry that goes beyond melancholy. He can inhabit all these possibilities so fully by virtue of his particular moment in American Jewish history. He was born into that great period of American Jewry's first real self-assurance and so could imagine a poetry that in its sensibilities, though not its subject matter, was equally Jewish and American, without having to apologize to either. At the same time, though, he is a child of the first postwar generation of American Jews, one that came to the melancholic conclusion that it had unremitting responsibilities towards the slaughtered Jews of Europe. As a countermeasure, he has proposed that the task of secular American Jews is to take on the inheritance of a lost central European culture. So here's my pitch: Bernstein's work has become exemplary because it is clearly overdetermined: aberrated and inaugurated, aberrant and inaugural. Just as the old joke says, sort of: one Jewish poet, two (or three) opinions.

NOTES

1. "Those who might 'correctly' say you can't be a little bit kosher ignore the actual practice of Jewish ethnicity" ("An Interview" 231)
2. Because I make a point of Bernstein's self-presentation in his volume of selected poems, I quote his poetry from *All The Whiskey In Heaven*.
3. Bernstein: "Poets are seismographs of the psychic realities that are not seen or heard in less sensitive media; poems chart or graph realities that otherwise go unregistered" ("Second War," 213-14). Adorno: "Taste is the most accurate seismograph of historical experience." (*Minima Moralia*, 141). As "taste" in this instance refers to the artist's relation to his or her artistic materials and as "historical experience" means something like the unconscious relation to historical realities, Bernstein's argument is, in the end, not that far from Adorno's.

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