

Charles Bernstein: Against the Idea of Poetry

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Abstract: This article is a foreword to a collection of poems and essays by Charles Bernstein in Finnish translation. The author, smartly and humorously, introduces his personal connection to Bernstein, via whom he was brought to a larger new poetry community. To the author, Bernstein's poetry is wildly individual, anti-communal, and against the very idea of poetry. The fruitful way to approach most of Charles Bernstein's poems is to see them as interventions in the field of poetry, as they always react against a particular idealization. Directly related to his two great fellow-Americans, Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg, Bernstein's poetry has a note of certain generalized, but always intellectually controlled sorrow. Having a constant feature of Bernsteinian prosody, his later poems are prevalent with a sense of transcendental utopianism.

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This article is a translation of "Foreword" to *Runouden puolustus*, a collection of poems and essays by Charles Bernstein in Finnish translation (poEsia 2006). This book has a long prehistory, which at least in part is also a personal one. I first met Charles Bernstein in the Fall 1992, and the oldest translation in the volume (of "Targets of Opportunity",) is from that time—it was printed with my interview with the poet in Helsingin Sanomat in January 1993.

I can say, without exaggeration, that a connection to Charles Bernstein—and via him to a larger new poetry community, first in North America, then increasingly on a global scale (both geographically, and in terms of orientation [of the poets concerned]) has served as an absolutely crucial reference point to my own later work. I cannot say what directions my work might have been taken without it; what is certain is that the Finnish poetry culture, during the Nineties and indeed later on, could not have offered it any

reference points at all.

Enough of personal history. Except that what I just said will also say a lot about the poet Bernstein; it would be impossible to enumerate all the actors at the present world scene of poetry, who share this same line of reference (though each one from his/her own direction) to the same poet. Here, we are of course talking about his role as a poetry activist—a teacher, a critic, an essayist, an organizer and a “man behind the scenes”. These roles alone will easily make him the single most influential person in terms of the development of the serious poetry of our time. Enough about “communality”.

Except that, here, these “communal” roles (ones that traditionally may be thought of as being “extra-literal”) will at the same time say something essential about the poetry in question, on one hand, and about a communality possible in this world of ours, on the other. If anything, the poetry of Charles Bernstein is wildly individual—not in the sense of a safe and stable “personal voice”, but—on the contrary—in its devotion to questioning of this kind of voice, and that from as many (mostly unexpected) directions as possible. In addition to that, it is—in a more conscious way than any other poet’s that I know of—not only happily indifferent to communication, but in most times also against communication in a flat sense (and thus also against communality in a flat sense); militantly anti-communal, so to say (“against the idea of political efficacy of poetry”, as he put it in an interview in 1995). This is why I don’t think that influence, in the case of Charles Bernstein, can be understood as being “extra-literary”; it derives from... no; it is... the same... with his poetry.

Except that, it would be difficult to locate a poem by Charles Bernstein that would not also be against poetry—the idea of poetry—itself. And not only against Poetry (understood as an idealized model or essence), but also against various individual poetries—a fruitful way to approach most of Charles Bernstein’s poems is to see them as many interventions into to various constellations, or power-relations, in the field of poetry, always reacting to something, always against a particular idealization—among them, of course, the idea of interventionism as such: “[T]he work drops away and in its place there are stations, staging sites, or blank points of radical metamorphosis (...) [T]urning ever further away from the ideal in the pursuit of an ultimate concretion”, as he writes himself in the preface to his collection of poems, *With Strings* (2001).

Except that this, of course, is exactly his idea of poetry. I have tried my best to make the selection to reflect this continuous state of intellectual awareness that I see as being central in Charles Bernstein’s poetry. The poems span his entire active career; there are poems and essays (in a way, my prototype has been Bernstein’s 1999 volume of “speeches and poems”, *My Way*, The Chicago University Press); poem-essays and essay-poems; short lyrical pieces that often interrogate the fundamentals of epics, longer epic sequences where Bernstein often is at his most lyrical (to me, the long sequence, “Emotions of Normal People”, is one of the most moving poems in the late 20th Century); sound poems, “conceptual” poems, non-

poems, anti-poems, a translation by Bernstein from Finnish to English (which at the same time is a translation from English into Finnish)... and, speaking about communality, also poems written by others than Bernstein.

I suggested that Bernstein's poetry is against the idea of a "personal voice," and constantly in work to dismantle the ideology of a "lyrical I"—as it is, except that: what I've said about individuality, about maintaining the critical awareness, openness, etc., amounts to the poet letting his (in Charles' case charming / engaging) personality to impregnate / saturate the work, through and through, and without restrictions. Here, Bernstein's poetry indeed is directly related to these two great fellow-Americans, Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg—though it also effectively trans-illuminates a certain hidden conformism of the latter. Personality and "personal voice" understood as independence vis-à-vis the given communal structures—including the more and more lobotomised structures of traditional publishing—and thus always as a possible starting point for a new, utopian communality (but note that "The Only Utopia Is In a Now").

Communality also as a sensitivity toward one's own background: the question of "being American", in the sense of a transcendental utopianism first outlined by Ralph Waldo Emerson,^① can be seen as one of the later Bernstein's most prevalent themes (in my reading, the "Bricklayer's Arms" writes about that theme; and the slashing remark in "War Stories"—"War is an excuse for lots of bad antiwar poetry"—seems as if taken directly from a lecture / sermon of Emerson). Finally, voice and sound, as such: even though (or rather: because), an attraction to unexpected or difficult-to-pronounce sound combinations is a constant feature of Bernstein's prosody, I wouldn't hesitate to speak, at the level of the work, of a certain peculiarly Bernsteinian sound. It is not exactly the bright flute sound of a Pound, not the broken willow whistle of the Finnish folk-songs, either—perhaps something of these two combined, and then pierced by a besotted adolescent gaiety to such an extent that a certain generalized, but always intellectually controlled, sorrow will most often linger as the final note.^②

Except that saying, "at the level of the work," is begging the question whether, and on what conditions, one can talk about "a work" ("the work") with Bernstein. Even in the original, his poetry is characterized by a certain resistance against the idea of a work—a centrifugal movement that will gain momentum now that this poetry is entering its foreign language phase, so to say—something that I see as imminent: during this Fall alone, "representative" volumes will come out in Swedish and in Portugal, in addition to the present Finnish one. "The translation of poetry is never more than an extension of the practice of poetry," Bernstein himself writes. Out of necessity, translating his work will also mean its continuous rewriting—and I mean this in the same radical sense that the poet, in the final essay in the present selection, sees the transition of the old oral poetry to what have happened. I urge[you] to follow up this process that evidently will produce numerous new "stations, staging sites, or blank points of radical metamorphosis."

Except that first you may have to read this book.

【Notes】

① Ks. Emerson, *Luonto*. Suom. Antti Immonen. 23^o45 niin & näin-lehden filosofinen julkaisusarja, 2002. [A reference to a recent Finnish translation of *Nature*.]

② With this, I am reacting against a certain American reception, where the humour, or satire, in Charles Bernstein's poetry gets foregrounded. Except that his "humour is so dark that one cannot see it", it is also so visible and all-prevalent, that it ceases to work as a separate "device", becoming an immediate and indispensable basis for (much grander) seriousness.