

Private Enigmas and Critical Functions, with Particular Reference to the Writing of Charles Bernstein

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He imagines a vast science, into the utterance
of which the knower would finally include him-
self—this would be a science of the effects of
language.

Roland Barthes par lui-même (1975)

GM: Doesn't it *bother* you sometimes, this kind of writing? As if you had to be someone special to read it—as if it were meant for a coterie of initiates or a literary intelligentsia. When Bernstein's new book of poetry is published it will contain the following piece:

Verdi and Postmodernism

She walks in beauty like the swans
that on a summer day do swarm
& crawls as deftly as a spoon
& spills & sprawls & booms.

These moments make a monument
then fall upon a broken calm
they fly into more quenchless rages
than Louis Quatorze or Napoleon.

If I could make one wish I might
overturn a state, destroy a kite
but with no wishes still I gripe
complaint's a Godly-given right.¹

What is one to say of such nonsense? I observe that each stanza is dominated by (introduced by) a distinct "literary" allusion: Byron is echoed in the first line, D. G. Rossetti in line five, and some nursery doggerel in line nine.² But the absence of an integrating element among these three simple allusions is an index of the text's chaos (as is the poem's title, for that matter). The work is a travesty of "meaning" because it flaunts its own deliberate wreckage of

meaning. It is an arbitrary construction, but what it constructs is a series of heteroclitic elements yoked by violence together.

JJR: Bernstein would regard your phrase "arbitrary construction" as no more than a simple description of his writing's point of departure. He is fond of Humpty Dumpty's retort to Alice about words, their users, and their meanings.³

AM: And why do you expect a "comprehensible" meaning from a poem anyway? Russian futurist poetry, which has clearly influenced Bernstein, operates "beyonsense"—as a self-conscious critical reflection on, and reproduction of, "nonsense" traditions of verse: the riddle poem, the enigma, sound poems, and all the rhetorical/ornamental forms which call the reader's attention away from the "content" and toward the physique of the text, or what Bernstein has called the "extralexical / strata of the poem."⁴ "The semantic strata of a poem should not be understood as only those elements to which a relatively fixed connotative or denotative meaning can be ascribed, for this would restrict meaning to the exclusively recuperable elements of language—a restriction that if literally applied would make meaning impossible. After all, meaning occurs only in a context of conscious & nonconscious, recuperable & unrecoverable, dynamics" (AA 8). "Verdi and Postmodernism" is not *zaum* poetry, of course, but it is evidently disjunctive and "meaningless" within a similar horizon of thought about how poetry ought to function. Its outrageous music comes partly from its having invoked that most traditional of forms (the quatrain) and then scattered its songs and their customary expectations.

GM: So you agree, it *is* meaningless.

AM: No—but I agree that it is a work which disrupts certain traditional forms of meaning. Part of its meaning lies in its having exposed (via the travesty you yourself have remarked) the fact that we expect poems to "mean" in certain ways. We expect from them a "balance and reconciliation of opposite and discordant qualities," and when a text (such as this text) works with evident deliberation to unreconcile its materials, our reading codes are upset. I suppose I don't have to detail the various devices which this work employs to unbalance normal reading procedures. They are clear enough.

GM: Clear enough, yes, but to what point?

AM: Well, partly to demonstrate the presence and character of the reading codes. Reading this text *as outrageous*—at what Kant would call its "moment" of travesty—we realize some of the forms of poetry which we have internalized and shaped to our desires. To register this text as "meaningless" is to see that we expect poems to "tell" us something. Or rather, it is to see what the expectation

of “meaning” customarily *means* for the reader of poetry: that a poem possesses some definable content, that it walks in a beauty or a truth which it is seeking (however indirectly) to communicate. The reader’s part in such a theater of meaning is to recuperate the content—that is to say, to produce an interpretation. The more generally acceptable the interpretation, the more true (or beautiful) it is taken to be.

That set of meaning-expectations is being invoked by this text—is part of the *meaning* of the text. The reader’s part in the poem—the reader’s presence in and to the text—is thereby shown to be included in the work, subsumed in its quest for “meaning.” The poem’s disfunctions are partly devices for exposing these aspects of the work’s “meaning,” and partly maps (or invitations) to other kinds of meanings.

Bernstein recently described this imaginative textual dynamic in the following way: “Out of fear of being opaque to one another, we play the charade of comprehensibility. . . . To be comprehensible to all—the telos of the language of what is called science—is to censor (a collective repression) all that is antagonistic, anarchic, odd, antipathetic, anachronistic, other. . . . So poetry can be the *censer* of these spirits from the unknown, untried, unconsidered—really just *unacknowledged*—that now, as if they always had, bloom in vividness.”⁵ The blessing “censer,” in Bernstein’s work, only and always emerges through the summoning of the demonic “censors.” His texts “censor” the “censors,” and they do so precisely by refusing to offer themselves as tabernacles of the Truth. As Bernstein goes on to say: “For after all it is only after a work is completed—a journey that begins at the point a *text* becomes a *work*—that others may enter into it, trace its figures, ride its trails along tracks that are called lines. . . . It is only an *other* that, in the final instance, constitutes the work, makes it more than a text (test), resurrects it from the purgatory of its production, which is to say its production of self-sameness” (127).

GM: All of that stinks of the lamp. It describes the kind of writing professors have wet dreams about, and classrooms were made for? The simple fact is that “Verdi and Postmodernism” is a classic instance—I’ve been to school too!—of a meta-poem. Who would read it except as a school exercise or assignment? No one, any more than they would read *Finnegans Wake*.

JJR [to GM]: You wield “Verdi and Postmodernism” like a weapon, as if you *wanted* to defend yourself against Bernstein’s writing. You wouldn’t approach Zukofsky through his Catullus “translations,” good as (in my view) they are. The gate is too strait, and the same

is true of “Verdi and Postmodernism.” And for the life of me I can’t imagine why *you* [addressing AM] are agreeing to discuss Bernstein’s work in such a restricted horizon.

AM: Well, I like the poem’s minor key—or I like its implicit suggestion that we not lose touch with the centrality and importance of matters that are too easily taken as trivial and inconsequent.

JJR: But to start reading Bernstein from such a text can be so misleading—as if he were a writer who could be safely passed by. Why not begin from evidently “major” works? Even a hostile reader (are you a hostile reader [GM]?) will register the strength of poems like “Dysraphism” or “Ambliopia”; for in these texts the dislocations—the “mis-seamings” and mis-seeings⁶—evidently function as opportunities to reimagine the world:

Such is the space that, called
into being, or given,
transforms everything from what we
know it to be, mishandled by
the world, to what it never was, blessed.⁷

Bernstein goes on to define this “space” of blessedness for nine more lines and then appears to launch his text from it (or toward it):

So begins the long march to the
next world. Custom is abandoned
outright as a criterion of moral
conduct. Everything must be justified
before the courts of the New Criteria, which
spring out of the old with the resourcefulness
and tenacity of the truly ingrained. The theory
of primary colors is rejected as elitist
empiricism and the wavelengths of the spectrum
take their proper and equal place in
the constitution of perception. Garrulousness
is taken for honesty.

(116)

The text is another of Bernstein’s travesties, this time an extended (and serious) joke on programmatic imaginations of revolutionary events. The joke is all the more telling, of course, because Bernstein’s own work is grounded in the vocabularies and languages of the democratic and utopian left.

AM: There is such a thing as being too serious. Besides, you talk about "misleading" even as you completely sidestep GM's false representation of Bernstein as an "academic" writer. Now that is a point to be addressed and challenged. For the truth is that Bernstein's work was produced over the past fifteen years completely outside the academic arena. His poetry was not published by academic presses, and insofar as it was known to the academy at all, it was avoided. He and others who are now pigeonholed with the label "Language Writing" had to create new journals, new (small) publishing houses, even new distribution outlets.

GM: But now the internal exile is over, and their avant-garde positions are being taken up, happily it would seem, among the pedagogues. Superacademic journals—*Critical Inquiry*, *boundary 2*—publish essays about them; Bernstein and others like him speak at the MLA; they even take academic teaching positions. Surprising? Not at all. It is the blight they were born for.

AM: What are you saying: that in the end Dave Smith and Robert Pinsky are no more or less academic than Bernstein and Hejinian, that the differences between their work are superficial? Or is this some kind of weird polemic for Edgar Guest? *Lyrical Ballads* makes a virtue of rustic places and common men, but the book was written for the London intelligentsia, was written specifically to alter the way England's cultural center thought about poetry. All serious poetry is directed at specialized readerships—"fit audience, though few."

JJR: I take it, then, that you would see Bernstein's poetry the way we now see the *Lyrical Ballads*: as part of a critique of certain traditional ideas about poetry, writing, and reading. Like "The Idiot Boy" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Verdi and Post-modernism" is an "academic" poem because it aims its revisionism toward those understandings of poetry, writing, and reading which dominate our received (academic) thinking.

AM: Precisely.

JJR: Well then, I think it would be useful if we clarified the specific shape of Bernstein's revisionist program. And we can do this in fairly traditional ways because Bernstein, like Ron Silliman, has written a great deal of critical and theoretical prose (and poetry!) on the subjects of poetry, writing, and reading. Not since Pound and Eliot have we seen poets like Bernstein (or Silliman, Barrett Watten, and several others) who set out to investigate and polemicize these topics with the same kind of range and critical intensity.⁸

Let me start with some remarks Bernstein made in a 1982 interview. There he says that his poetic interests are not "so much in disconnected bits . . . [as in] how these bits form an overall weave."⁹

He calls this a "critical, analytic" goal by which "the poem itself becomes a machine that spells and dispells illusion upon illusion, so that illusion's engendering can be witnessed" (CD 392). Thus, "Mine is an interest . . . towards focussing attention on the constitutive nature of conventions" in reading and writing, toward "the relentless theme of how language socializes us, but so often without a trace of this socialization that would illuminate, like the phosphorescence of an all-permeating world-soul made manifest as world-body" (CD 391-92). Three foundational ideas are being set forth here. The first—that is, the constructivist premise about writing and poetry—we have already touched on. In the second, Bernstein declares himself an inheritor of the Saussurean (or perhaps one ought to say, the Wildean) legacy which declares "reality" to be a function of the language(s) by which we speak of it. An immediate corollary of this idea (that "language socializes us") is the correspondent imagination that "reality," within the horizon of Human Being, is irreducibly "social"—that from the human point of view there is no such thing as a nonhuman world. The scientific imagination of an "objective" or "nonhuman" world is itself, in this view, a human imagining, a human world. When Bernstein critiques Terry Eagleton's statement that "literature does not exist in the sense that insects do," his argument proceeds from the latter perspective: "Of course, all Eagleton intends to say is that there is no objective, value-free sense of literature. . . . But this is also true of *insects*, *fiction*, and *ideology*" (CD 375). Bernstein's italics here are eloquent: they declare his (Blakean) belief that for human beings the world is human, and that (therefore) the Being of such a world is the language(s) by which it is embodied.

The third key idea in the passage concerns the function of poetry, which Bernstein regards as the paradigm form of a language (a "socialization") which "illuminates." Bernstein recurs to this topic frequently:

Alphabets . . . remain perhaps the most formidable technologies human culture has produced. Readers can usefully be regarded as operating highly sophisticated technologies. The technology of writing has many more dimensions than are "read" by most users: the technology is not fully "accessed." Poetry has an important, if often vacated, role in supplementing minimal reading values and in this sense can be understood as among the most useful tools for making alphabet technology available. (CD 355)

Literature is the best word we now have for a writing that critiques itself not only at the level of represented ideas but prosodically, acoustically,

syntactically, visibly: which is to say gives these dimensions equal methodological weight as it gives to more traditional notions of semantic content. (CD 370–71)

Bernstein repeatedly asks his readers to “imagine a literature that proposes its own interpretations,” a literature that makes its own “production of ideas audible—in measuring and placing, sounding and breaking; and visible—in page scoring and design” (CD 368–69). The thought is toward a kind of naked poetry in which the discursive limits of the writing—its own ideological horizons—are made an explicit desire of the work. In such writing the reader comes to see that poetry is (what Bernstein, punning, calls) “Thought’s measure” (see CD 61–86), the measure of the ideology of language. “Style and form are as ideological as content and interpretation” (CD 368) because all aspects of language operate socializing mechanisms. Poetry’s special function, in Bernstein’s view, is to foreground these matters; therefore “The question persists: What is the interpretive stance to be toward a work which unmasks its own discontinuities, flaunts its core ideas as candy coating, and insists throughout not on its deferred meaning but its enacted meaning? Not that such a work transcends its historical/ideological situation; fully contemporary with its readers/critics, and anticipating their interpretive methods, such work subverts the privileged status that may be lorded over works ‘regressive’ of their interpretive horizon” (CD 380). That first “question” is, to me, exactly the question raised by a work like “Verdi and Postmodernism.” The poem is not “a travesty” of itself or of poetry in general. To the extent that it appears an outrageous work—as travesty—to that extent it has merely lifted into view the “regressiveness” of certain “interpretive horizons” which poetry and the readers of poetry (too) often agree to accept.

GM: What is “regressive” about expecting a poem to make sense? Bernstein himself seems to hold out that requirement for writing—at least some of the time. *Artifice of Absorption* is organized in lines of verse, but it generally reads like prose. And what of the superb opening of “The Klupzy Girl,” with its excellent pun on “senses”: “Poetry is like a swoon, with this difference: / it brings you to your senses.” But of course the descent into the maelstrom comes quickly. The poem continues:

Yet his
parables are not singular. The smoke from
the boat causes the men to joke. Not

gymnastic: pyrotechnic. The continuousness
of a smile—wry, perfume scented. No this
would go fruity with all these changes
around. Sense of variety: panic.¹⁰

There are, I suppose, many who would subscribe to this kind of writing for its bold flaunting of convention. . . .

JJR: Perhaps, but they would not include Bernstein himself: “Certainly . . . agit-prop has its own commendable values. But it’s not as much as poetry can do. . . . Richard Kostelanetz has generally put forward this kind of reactive ‘experimentalist’ line, actually calling Stein in his introduction to the otherwise wonderful new Yale Gertrude Stein ‘nonsyntactical’—an appalling remark to make of someone who wrote ‘I am a grammarian,’ meaning that she wasn’t being *antigrammatical* she was discovering what the grammars of our language *are* by making them” (CD 395–96). Bernstein’s desire is therefore toward a poetry “which is not essentially reactive but generative” (CD 395). This is a poetry that works “by diminishing diversions from a constructed representation” (CD 36), that operates a “Structure that can’t be separated from the decisions made within it” (CD 38).

Why not *try*, at any rate, to read Bernstein on his own terms—why not try to read “The Klupzy Girl” on such terms? Here, for example, is Bernstein speaking explicitly about his writing practice:

Let me give an example of what “generative” might mean. I think of some of my poems as a series of remarks, either in the aphoristic sense or in the sense of observations, constructed items, etc., occurring at the level of phrases or sentences. These can be interpreted in multiple ways: they are each, perhaps to say, polyentendres (that is, 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 . . .). Polyvalences and polyrhythms occurring overall throughout the poem create a music of the text . . . creating *chords* of the simultaneous vectors of the several interpretations of each polyentendre, and with the combination of these chords with other chords, durationally, in the sequence of the writing, and simultaneously, in the overall structure. (CD 396–97)

Using this passage as a kind of elementary instruction manual, we can see what “The Klupzy Girl” is asking from its readers. The “grammar” of the passage is a set of discontinuous sentences and phrases. It is dominated by its special “sense of variety” which swings between a swooning *voluptas* and nervous “panic.” Everything in the

passage depends upon the management of the differential moments: the line endings, obviously, and the stops between phrases and sentences. We are asked to come to a kind of “hyperattentiveness” in a text which evolves polyvalent parables—and parables whose “meanings” are not primarily cognitive in any case.

the power of
making aware, which necessarily involves a
disruption of a single plane of attention or
belief, results in a hyperattentiveness
that has its own economy of engagement.

(AA 61)

In this context of thought, “The Klupzy Girl” constructs (“generates”) its differential moments in order to multiply its possible engagements. We see the effect with special clarity in the way Bernstein rings his “changes” in the “sentence” that begins “No this”—a text only to be *read* if its parts are “changed around” (KG 47).

In general one could say of this poem that it works to *sensitize* meaning, to free meaning from the narrow cognitive frameworks of “singular” (in the “sense” of one-to-one) parables and release them to new “singularities” (in the “sense” of concrete particulars). From a purely rhetorical vantage we may take “Yet his / parables are not singular” as an approving or disapproving remark, and we may imagine it to be spoken by anyone. Is the poem’s opening statement an aphorism being quoted by Bernstein, so that the second statement might be Bernstein’s own response to that (“his”) aphorism? We do not know, the text will not tell us. What it *will* do, however, is order itself in such a way as to multiply these kinds of generative “polyentendres.”

One paradox of all the apparent discontinuity is that the text acquires an incredible degree of seamlessness. To borrow one of Bernstein’s own images, it has “The continuousness / of a smile—wry, perfume scented” (KG 47). That is an image of a complex particular whose many “parts” we register *as* many but which we are reluctant to separate or disentangle. Likewise in Bernstein’s texts, we do not find it easy to isolate or define passages for quotation (or commentary) because they are always undergoing a continuous transformational process.

That quality of the writing calls attention, once again, to Bernstein’s belief that poetry is not doing “as much as poetry can do” if it merely serves as a vehicle for some (parabolic/referenced) “meaning.” Its chief function is to illustrate its own resources for creating meaning and the possibilities of meaning. Thus the poem’s poetry

is not easily isolable in fixed units. Though Bernstein's writing is riddled with gaps and disjunctions, they function as his little deaths of verse, eroticizing and re-energizing the language: "The music in my heart I bore / Long after it was heard no more."

AM: Your way of reading the poetry serves up another of its paradoxes, and one that might better be called a contradiction. In *Artifice of Absorption* Bernstein represents it as the differential play of a poem's "absorptive" and "antiabsorptive" elements: music and cognition, "dream" and "content."

In my poems, I
frequently use opaque & nonabsorbable
elements, digressions &
interruptions, as part of a technological
arsenal to create a more powerful
("souped up")
absorption. . . .

This is a
precarious road because insofar
as the poem seems
overtly self-conscious, as opposed to internally
incantatory or psychically
actual, it may produce
self-consciousness in the reader in such a way as to
destroy his or her absorption by theatricalizing
or conceptualizing the text. . . .
This is, then, the subject of much of my
work.

(AA 38)

Even in this expository moment Bernstein flaunts the candied character of his own ideas ("his or her absorption"). That witty use of contemporary jargon illustrates—indeed, it carries out—the "self-consciousness in the reader" which the text is discussing. This kind of textual event "enacts" Bernstein's special form of a literature of knowledge. Ultimately he represents it as a contradiction of the word made flesh:

The *intersection*
of absorption & impermeability is precisely
flesh. . . .

This
is the philosophical interior
of my inquiry. . . .

The *thickness*
 of words ensures that whatever
 of their physicality is erased, or engulfed, in
 the process of semantic projection,
 a residue
 tenaciously in-
 heres that will not be sublimated
 away. Writing is not a thin film
 of expendable substitutions that, when reading, falls
 away
 like scales
 to reveal a meaning. The tenacity of
 writing's thickness, like the body's
 flesh, is
 ineradicable, yet mortal.

(AA 63–64)

The contradiction here partly proceeds from an “inversion” of Christian incarnational ideas which Bernstein carries out in the verse. That which “will not be sublimated / away” appears as the physical turns of the text, which become “on the contrary the sole” appearance of the desublimated soul. “Meaning” does not consist in a “fall” away from “The tenacity of / writing’s thickness” to achieve a mere revelation of things not seen. It is rather a Shelleyan revelation, that is, an injunction to imagine what we know. The “scales” are not to fall away but to appear in a more generous, positive condition: “scales” of the many possible “meanings” (and grammars and rhetorics of meaning) which that word has known and which it can be remade—as here—to know again.

This effort to produce *through poetry* a cognitive transformation of a central Christian conception connects to his long-standing critique of the science-based model of knowledge. In Part 5 of “Three or Four Things I Know About Him,” headed “Comic Interlude” (word play, as usual, intended), Bernstein writes: “It is, then, *our thesis* that political writing becomes disoriented when it views itself as description and not discourse: as not being *in* the world but *about* the world. The hermeneutic indicts the scientistic that it has once again subverted the dialogic nature of human understanding” (CD 20). Like the Lady of Shallott, poetry as “discourse” comes *into* the whole world, abandoning its exclusive residential areas (what the interpreters have called beauty, truth, and disinterestedness). This move entails, however, a descent into life (not death), into the comic interludes which poetry defines exactly by performing its own parts in them. So far as Bernstein is concerned,

“writing” is a “dialogic” event of “production / exchange that must be entered into, not observed” (CD 376).

Artifice of Absorption ends with a scene of writing that plays out its theatrical approach to knowledge and poetry:

Absorption & its many con-
verses, re-
verses, is at heart a measure
of the relationship between
a reader &
a work: any attempt to isolate
this dynamic in terms exclusively of
reading
or composition
will fail on this account.
As writers—
& everyone inscribes
in the sense
I mean here—
we can
try to intensify
our relationships by considering
how they work: are we putting
each other to sleep
or waking each other up;
& what do we wake to?

(AA 64–65)

That third phase of Bernstein’s last dialectical question splinters the text’s latent Hegelian drive toward a synthetic conceptualization. The “verse” of this text thus appears not simply as “con” and “re,” but as “in” and “per” and “ob” and “trans” and whatever else we might choose to imagine. For through this text we understand that “everyone inscribes / in the sense / I mean here,” a poetical passage which—like the rest of this text—may be read in a variety of different ways.

JJR: Indeed, the “understanding” of this passage, the “knowledge” to which it is committed, is the act(s) of transformation which the reader/composer carries out through it. The opening section of Bernstein’s essay “Thought’s Measure” is headed “Writing (as) (and) Thinking.”

AM: Yes, Bernstein’s is a philosophical poetry not because it is a “poetry of ideas” but because it is a “poetry of thought and thinking.” One might abstract from the work an “idea” about knowledge as

a process of knowing (as opposed to a set of knowns, whether factual or ideological). But the writing would mean to make it clear that such a view is itself simply a way of knowing the writing.

JJR: And the poetry “unmasks” itself precisely by its Brechtian theatricalities, precisely by flaunting its artifices of absorption. Everyone is caught in these networks of illusion because everyone is moved by them to produce their meanings.

AM: “A literature that proposes its own interpretations, enfolding these in sequence with interpretations of these interpretations” (*CD* 369).

JJR: And thereby an imitation of the human world, since that world is defined as a world of signs, a signifying world, a world precisely made up of meanings.

GM: And a world with an impressive unanimity of academic thinking—“precisely” like your own! Not that I am unimpressed, or even uninstructed. But I don’t believe either of you have really thought through what must be involved in this kind of writing. Bernstein’s own “question persists” more emphatically than ever, about the appropriate “interpretive stance” toward a writing which “unmasks its own discontinuities” and “flaunts its core ideas as candy coating.”

This is a poetry without a center, like Los Angeles, abandoned to its own flux. By refusing objective norms of order, by making “Thought’s Measure” the musical arrangements which are discovered and laid down in the writing of writing, the poetry has lost the common reader. *The Sophist* is an impressive book of poetry, perhaps, but its title is suspicious and not a little disturbing.

AM: Perhaps Bernstein is working a poetics of suspicion and means to disturb the public order of language.

GM: Surely he is—and that is part of my point. Take the opening poem, or the opening lines of the opening poem:

The Simply

Nothing can contain the empty stare that ricochets
haphazardly against any purpose. My hands¹¹

I recur to your earlier “instruction manual,” AM, in order to read this text. But in taking that direction I find myself in a “sophistic” situation where anything can mean virtually anything. The first sentence, for instance, may be taken to mean that “the empty stare” is uncontainable by anything—or, that “Nothing” is able to contain it (with or without the implication that containment is possible by other means). “The [sentence/poem] Simply” means/does not mean

what it says—by which I do *not* mean to imply that that reading of the title is what *it* means. Rather, it is what it may be *taken* to mean.

This way of reading may take “the empty stare” as a figure of itself, where “Nothing” may be taken as the text (in an imagination of “Nothing” that follows upon the imagination of Wallace Stevens). Or perhaps the figure of the text is “any purpose,” so that “ricochets / haphazardly” is the writing’s figure of free interpretive possibility. On the other hand, “the empty stare” might just as easily be taken as a figure of the writing, with all the other terms shifting their significances accordingly.

Furthermore, nothing (or “Nothing”??) here *insists* that we read these terms within the horizon of literature (hermeneutics): the terms may be taken as figures in another social framework altogether. Bernstein’s encyclopedic incorporation of various kinds of textual materials continually drives the reading toward different interpretive frames of reference—as we may “clearly” see if we “simply” read on past those first two lines:

My hands
are cold but I see nonetheless with an infrared
charm. Beyond these calms is a coast, handy but
worse for abuse. Frankly, hiding an adumbration of collectible
cathexis, catheterized weekly, burred and bumptious;
actually, continually new groups being brought forward for
drowning. We get back, I forget to call, we’re
very tired eating. They think they’ll get salvation but
this is fraudulent.

Possible connections—in many cases, obvious and *simple* connections—rise up, as “The Simply” continues out from these first lines, between each of the initial sentences (and parts of sentences) and other sentences and passages set down in the poem. Some of these are “substantive,” some are “formal,” and some operate to blur the distinction we customarily imagine between those two terms. Besides, for all their heterogeneity these opening ten lines offer numerous internal collocations—for instance, the elementary adverbial series emphasized through the title (simply, haphazardly, handy, frankly, actually, continually).

That series of words is a sign of Bernstein’s deliberateness, of his “constructivist” procedure. But I ask again: what does it *mean*?

AM: Your own exegesis contains the answer to your question. The adverb series means what you take it to mean. The writer’s

constructivism has to be met by the reader's correspondent breeze. Again and again Bernstein insists that meaning does not preexist language, it is made in language; and "language" is Bernstein's central figure for the social body of the world. The opening poem of *Rough Trades* sets these ideas down as virtual (in both senses of that word) *propositions*:

The Kiwi Bird in the Kiwi Tree

I want no paradise only to be
drenched in the downpour of words, fecund
with tropicity. Fundament be-
yond relation, less "real" than made, as arms
surround a baby's gurgling: encir-
cling mesh pronounces its promise (not bars
that pinion, notes that ply). The tailor tells
of other tolls, the seam that binds, the trim,
the waste. & having spelled these names, move on
to toys or talcoms, skates & scores. Only
the imaginary is real—not trumps
beclouding the mind's acrobatic vers-
ions. The first fact is the social body,
one from another, nor needs no other.

Like *Artifice of Absorption*, this text follows an observable expository line. Does it help to know that the work is a "generational" text not simply in an aesthetic but in a social sense: that Bernstein's father was a manufacturer of "ladies' dresses" and that his wife recently gave birth to their first child? Perhaps, for "The first fact is the social body," and poems are, as JJR says, imitations of life.

Nevertheless, the poem's "argument" is inseparable from its textual generations. The title, especially in face of passages like "Only / the imaginary is real," may easily recall Marianne Moore's famous observation about poetry, imaginary gardens, and real toads (for whereas there are—in New Zealand—"real" Kiwi trees and Kiwi birds, their appearance "in" this poem, as much as the textual bird "in" the tree, is purely imaginary, as the very oddness of the title—in relation to the following text—argues).¹² The poem's "social body" grows from its various real/imaginary correspondences.

JJR: Sometimes you do make me laugh, AM—I mean when you use phrases like "textual generations" and respond to ideas about the "social body" of poems. You ought to resist your tendency to think so abstractly about these matters. You ought to take the poems you like *into the streets*. Here, for instance, is some important information about this poem's real "social body" and "textual gen-

erations." "The Kiwi Bird and the Kiwi Tree" was first printed in *Jimmy and Lucy's House of "K"*.¹³ A bit later it appeared with three other poems by Bernstein in an issue of *Rethinking MARXISM*.¹⁴ Now there you have some "social body"! I suppose I don't have to add that the poem is inclined to "mean" in very different ways when it is encountered in one or another of its three (current) textual contexts.

AM: You don't have to be so smug. What you say *is* important—I can see that, I even think about it sometimes on my own. But a poem's "social body" isn't defined by its bibliographical codes alone. The "social body" of poetry is dispersed across all aspects of the work, and not least at its grammatological and semantic levels. It is a crude materialism which imagines the physique of writing to be exhausted in the bibliography and sociology of texts.

Indeed, this poem's "real/imaginary correspondences"—so crucial to the work, in my view—do not display themselves very easily at the text's bibliographical levels. But they do at the semantic and grammatological levels. They appear, most dramatically perhaps, in the text's extreme playfulness (a "style" that means to rhyme with the "substantive" presence of the child and its world of toys and games): for example, through the word plays in "tropicality" and "trumps" (the latter making witty allusions to Christian days of judgment, on one hand, and to those very worldly Donald Trumps on the other, the contemporary incarnations of Mammon who are the princes of this world, the masters of its cities), or through the exceedingly suggestive connection of ion clouds and "acrobatic vers[e]."

The text enables these and a host of other "connections." Its insistent and (reasonably) organized thematic lines may encourage a fairly traditional reading—following upon, for example, "The first fact is the social body" and (or) "Only / the imaginary is real." But even so the work illustrates what Alan Davies has named the "Private Enigma in the Opened Text."¹⁵ The poem's personal ("private") allusions cut this enigmatic figure in a very traditional way, but the enigmatic appears throughout the work in even more *literal* forms. Our traditional thematizing will have no difficulty making sense of "be-" and "cling" and perhaps "vers-" and "ions" as well. But while the text opens itself into these "meaningful" fragments, it leaves behind certain troublesome residues (perhaps "the waste" spoken of in the poem). What, for instance, are we to make of "yond" and "encir-"? These are the text's most manifest "private enigmas," but precisely because they resist an easy interpretive absorption, they emerge as the touchstones of what is most rich and meaningful in

the poem. Because “yond” and “encir-” make (no) sense, they go begging for meaning.

So I conclude by repeating myself: Bernstein’s poetry, even at its most statemental, operates a “production/exchange.” Language is a signifying system, and Bernstein’s poetry embodies its signifying processes exactly by its demands upon the reader. For to Bernstein “signification” is a system of feedback loops, a generative intercourse; and—paradoxically—it functions most richly through its resistances, particularities, and “impermeable” features. His ideology of language is that everything signifies, but it is an ideology which, in its own enactment, reveals its inherent contradictions: minimally, that the ground of significance is the tension between the private, the enigmatic, the (non)sensical, on the one hand, and the public, the plain, and the (in)sensible on the other. “Privacy [is] a central aspect of writing,” he writes. “Poetry is a private act in a public space” (*CD* 77).

GM: If your reading of Bernstein’s work is accurate, why does it not come under his own critique of “ideological mimesis” as he develops that concept in his essay “Living Tissue/Dead Ideas” (*CD* 363–82)? I realize, of course, that he is careful to distinguish a “literature” that works with “ideas [as] representations of concepts” (364) from a “literature” that works with “ideas . . . as sound . . . *Thought* as mediating among these, superideational” (*CD* 368). And I also see that his own writing, especially the poems, tries to avoid the first and embrace the second. But if, as he says, all of poetry’s “core ideas” are “candy coating,” if no work “transcends its historical/ideological situation,” then its living tissue will always be full of dead ideas. That metaphor embodies an objective and more than literal truth.

AM: One of Bernstein’s most recent poems, “The Lives of the Toll Takers,” is a good illustration of the symbiosis of living tissue and dead ideas—for example, through its simultaneous critique and reimagination of poetry in the slick idioms of contemporary linguistic junk.

Our new
 service orientation
 mea
 nt
 not only changing the way we wrote poems but also
 diversifying
 into new poetry services. Poetic
 opportunities

however, do not fall into your lap, at least not very often. . . .

Keeping up with the new aesthetic environment is an ongoing process: you can't stand still. Besides. . . . (studies show higher levels of resistance to double-bind political programming among those who read 7.7 poems or more each week

).

Poets deserve compensation for such services.

For readers unwilling to pay the price we need to refuse to provide such service as alliteration

internal rhymes,
exogamic structure, and
unusual vocabulary.

Sharp edges which become shady groves,
mosaic walkways, emphatic asymptotes (asthmatic
microtolls).¹⁶

The text is a parodic recovery of certain key Shelleyan ideas. Not least significant is the understanding that poetry always speaks in a contemporary idiom—that its dialect(s), like everything else about it, are time and place specific.

Poetry must live and/or die in those idioms and particulars. This means that it must participate in their contradictions. The whimsical brilliance of “The Lives of the Toll Takers” calls to mind Shelley’s “The Witch of Atlas,” but the (t)issues are the same as those raised up, more famously, in the “Ode to the West Wind.”

GM: But your argument, and Bernstein’s poem, only resituates the problem I am seeing. Suppose I accept your Shelleyan analogue. It makes me want to ask: what part do “dead thoughts” play in the poetry of a “new birth,” why deliberately drive (those presumably dead) thoughts through (a presumably living) language into the world? Shelley imagines a poetry that comprises both “ashes and sparks”—like Bernstein’s living tissues and dead ideas. But in your representation of Bernstein’s work—and often in Bernstein’s own self-representations—the best poetry is all spark (“superideational”) whereas the worst is ashes (“ideational mimesis”). This view struggles against the (contradictory) thought that poetry does not escape ideology (read here: Shelley’s contemporary idiom). My difficulty is that Bernstein never resolves the contradiction. Nor do you.

AM: Why do you want it resolved? Who says it ought to *be*

resolved? The poems *are* ashes and sparks—it is just that, in their living tissues, one cannot decide once and for all what is ash and what is spark. These distinctions are forged (are defined and imagined) when the poems are “read,” in the writer’s own initial reading of the text as well as in the many subsequent rereadings that rewrite the original work. “The Lives of the Toll Takers” reimagines some of the most corpsed language and thought of our day, including the language of promoters, of advertisers, and of poets (left and liberal alike).

GM: Is this just deconstructive and theoretical play you are involved with, or are you actually prepared to take your program to its limit?

Here is a highly concrete literary anecdote. I have in my library an interesting book, *The Poetical Works of Miss Landon*, published in Boston in 1841, in one volume. On the front flyleaf is a signature in ink, “C. R. Stenson,” which is written again (in the same ink) on the title page. The collection contains what was then thought (erroneously) to be the “Complete” poetry of Laetitia Elizabeth Landon, one of the most celebrated English poets of the 1820s and 1830s and a cultural touchstone, especially for women and women poets, throughout the nineteenth century (the L. E. L. on whom so many wrote elegies).

The volume contains three of Miss (or perhaps Mrs.) Stenson’s marginal notes. The first appears in a poem called “The Zenana.” Next to the text’s “Ah! never is that cherish’d face / Banish’d from its accustom’d place—” Stenson writes (in pencil): “My heart.” In this case Stenson makes a personal appropriation of a situation in a narrative poem. In “The Zenana” a young woman named Nadira is speaking to her lover, Murad. The way Landon frames the scene of Nadira’s address in the poem is important: in “the few moments that I steal / At thy beloved feet to kneel.”

Stenson’s second marginal gloss is written beside the following lines in the lyric “Pulo Penang”:

O, only those who part can know
How dear the love that absence brings;
O’er wind and wave my fancies go,
As if my very heart had wings:

Pencilled in the margin here is the word “Yes.”

Finally, near the end of the book is a poem titled “Can You Forget Me.” These are its last five lines:

The happy hours that I have pass'd while kneeling
 Half slave, half child, to gaze upon thy face.
 —But what to thee this passionate appealing—
 Let my heart break—it is a common case.
 You have forgotten me.

The marginal note here, placed next to the first line I have quoted, is a date: "1846 & 1847." It is in the same ink as the two signatures at the beginning of the book.

What we have here is a brief but very common type of literary interpretation. It is a form of reading, however, which professional interpreters (like yourselves) do not encourage and usually condescend to. But I submit that your "dialogical" way of reading Bernstein, and Bernstein's own poetics, entails this kind of private textual appropriation (consumption?). C. R. Stenson, like Charles Bernstein, "generates" a network of textual meanings. Indeed, by writing a mere six words she has managed to compose a form of interpretation which answers precisely to Bernstein's poetics. If poetry is "living tissue" and not "dead ideas," if the function of writing is to "enact" a process of thought (rather than deliver a set of ideas), then Stenson has found a hermeneutic to rhyme with Bernstein's imagination of the writing/reading dynamic.

Do I have to point out that this is a hermeneutic of privacy and alienation—private acts in public space? In its interpretive "moment" it executes a kind of anarchism of meaning—what Byron once called "Every poet his *own* Aristotle."¹⁷

JJR: Defenders of "traditional values" repeatedly issue dire warnings that if such critical "free play" is licensed and approved, civilization will unravel. But there is no need to invoke the spectre of wholesale cultural collapse to argue against the kind of consumerist poetics your anecdote illustrates. Just *think through* the material facts of the case. The image of that young and unknown American woman, C. R. Stenson, making brief glosses in the margins of the verse of L. E. L., the queen of the *Annals* and the very emblem of nineteenth-century sentimental poetry: what could be more pathetically inconsequent!

GM: It might be useful to "*think through* the material facts of the case" a bit further—to a further limit than you seem willing to imagine. There is far more to "the material facts" of this case than you suggest.

I recall that Ron Silliman once criticized Bernstein's arguments (in the essay "Thought's Measure") for privacy and idleness in poetry. "Poetry is not produced in the personal sphere by those

who publish—this is a major distinction between those who consume what they produce & those who exchange, as we do, their productions.”¹⁸ Like Bernstein in his response to Silliman, I would agree that poetry should be seen as a system of textual exchange rather than a system of production and consumption.

In the case of L. E. L. and C. R. Stenson, the “material facts of the case” define such a system of exchange operating within the structure of a larger (dominant) system of production and consumption. L. E. L. seems a (blind) producer isolated from C. R. Stenson, the equally blind consumer. It all appears as a scene of alienation—of an illusory intercourse—within the imaginative framework of the dominant system. And of course in one sense it *is* precisely that. But Stenson’s fragile gestures toward communion explicate *precisely* the scene of Landon’s poetical work, which maps a terrain of erotic desires running to waste in a wilderness of luxury.

Landon’s and Stenson’s struggles in this wasteland of art may be “pathetic,” but they are not *only* pathetic. Or at any rate they need not be so. Everything depends upon how *we* respond to (how we imagine) the material facts of the case. What else might it signify to declare this textual scene “pathetically inconsequent”? When you used that phrase it seemed to me that you had not imagined what you knew, had not realized the potential significance of your own commentary. So I would turn and inquire: Inconsequent for whom? C. R. Stenson? How could we know? Then perhaps for us? But the remark “pathetically inconsequent” may carry any number of meanings, as Bernstein argues. For my own part, I prefer to read beyond the limit you imposed—to read it as a sympathetic injunction to enter into and share this transatlantic mid-Victorian exchange on the subject of frustrated desires, rather than as a dismissal of that exchange as empty and fruitless. I prefer to read it, in fact, as a (blinded and self-) critical comment upon “pathetically inconsequent” imaginations of imagination and poetry.

“Think through” the scene, all of it. C. R. Stenson reads L. E. L. in another country, after the latter’s death. We have here a scene of female exchange being carried out over great distances at a significant point in time. If Stenson’s book does not enter an immediate material communion with the dead L. E. L., it illustrates the desire and need for such a communion in the most concrete way. Everything about the exchange is eloquent, all the material facts of the case (or what Bernstein calls the “flesh” of poetry, its “extralexical” features): the form and place that Stenson chooses to write her commentary (in her copy of Landon, in the margins, in pencil and ink); the text of Landon that Stenson is reading (Landon

died mysteriously in southern Africa in 1838, and she published in England); the period and context in which Stenson writes her comments. One would want to thicken this set of details further, not least with more particular knowledge of C. R. Stenson and her world: who she was, when and where she lived, when exactly she wrote her comments—perhaps especially the note “1846 & 1847.”

JJR: You don’t seriously mean to compare Landon’s light verse with Bernstein’s work—or to suggest that C. R. Stenson, a completely unknown person, become a model of literary criticism—on the basis of three brief marginal comments!

GM: I suppose it all depends on what you mean by “seriously.” Early in this conversation you accused me of putting barriers in the way of reading Bernstein. Perhaps I do, or have; but now I think I may be reading him far more “seriously” than you do. You—both of you—just read him intelligently, reasonably, successfully (and even, to a certain extent, usefully). You find L. E. L.’s poetry and Stenson’s book uninteresting, “pathetically inconsequent”: unimaginative, sentimental, private. But those (unimaginative) imaginations are what you have *made* of their work. If you were to take your own readings of Bernstein *seriously*, you might come to realize that the case of L. E. L. and C. R. Stenson contains an indictment of those readings.

AM: On that argument, *anything* can be poetical.

GM: As I recall, Bernstein’s poems deliberately seek to include as much diverse material as possible, from garbage to computers, from Verdi to Postmodernism.

David Melnick’s

Men in Aida may one day seem no more strange
than Verdi’s *Aida*—both composed in a foreign
language, but once we know the score,
it’s pure song

(AA 62–63)

L. E. L.’s music seems foreign to most of us now, though it once was sung by a great many people, including C. R. Stenson. Perhaps she knew the score.

AM: Perhaps she did. But perhaps the score is hardly worth recalling, it is so trivial and thin.

GM: Does it make music, does it make sense, does it open the doors of perception? Perhaps the strongest argument against such work is yourselves, whose doors remain shut to its approach.

AM: I've never read L. E. L.

JJR: Nor I. And only you own Stenson's book.

GM: And you've never seen anything like either of them, I suppose?

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NOTES

1 This is the last poem in the first section ("The Riddle of the Fat Faced Man") in Charles Bernstein's new book *Rough Trades*, to be published soon by Sun and Moon Press. It was first published in *Conjunctions* in 1987. Bernstein's most recently published book is *The Sophist* (Los Angeles, 1987).

2 The texts parodied are Byron's "She Walks in Beauty," Rossetti's "The Sonnet" (the opening text of *The House of Life*), and the nursery rhyme beginning "Star light, star bright."

3 See Bernstein's collection of essays *Content's Dream. Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles, 1986), pp. 55, 351; hereafter cited in text as *CD*.

4 The quote is from Bernstein's *Artifice of Absorption*, his extended (and deeply Horatian) *ars poetica* published as a single issue of *Paper Air*, 4 (1987), 8; hereafter cited in text as *AA*. The futurist influence is most evident in, for example, works like *Disfrutes* (Needham, Mass., 1981) and *Veil* (Madison, Wis., 1987). For a good introduction to futurism see Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment* (Chicago, 1986).

5 Charles Bernstein and Tom Beckett, "Censers of the Unknown: Margins, Dissent, and the Poetic Horizon," *Temblor*, 9 (1989), 126; hereafter cited in text.

6 In a prose note to "Dysraphism" Bernstein observes that the word is "used by specialists in congenital disease to mean a dysfunctional fusion of embryonic parts—a birth defect . . . so dysraphism is mis-seaming—a prosodic device!" (*The Sophist*, p. 44) But this "prosodic device" is simultaneously a thematic element—"Content's Dream," as it were. The title of "Ambliopia" is another medical term, in this case a disease of the retina which results in a dimming or blurring of vision. For Bernstein, the dysfunction is a trope that offers the possibility of engaging with the world on an entirely new footing. Bernstein in fact hears in "Ambliopia" a word play to "ambliopia—multilevel seeing, which is to say, vision repossessed" (see Bernstein and Beckett, "Censers of the Unknown," p. 127).

7 Charles Bernstein, "Ambliopia," in *The Sophist*, 115; hereafter cited in text.

8 See Ron Silliman's essays collected in *The New Sentence* (New York, 1985) and his Wittgensteinian poetical meditation on writing, "The Chinese Notebook," in *The Age of Huts* (New York, 1986). See also Barrett Watten, *Total Syntax* (Carbondale, 1985), and Alan Davies, *Signage* (New York, 1987), Susan Howe's great study *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley, 1985), and Nick Piombino, *Boundary of Blur* (Los Angeles, shortly to be published).

9 Charles Bernstein, "An Interview with Tom Beckett," *The Difficulties*, 2, No. 2 (1982); the present text is taken from the one reprinted in *Content's Dream*, p. 391.

10 Charles Bernstein, "The Klupzy Girl," in his *Islets/Irritations* (New York, 1983), p. 47; hereafter cited in text as *KG*.

11 Charles Bernstein, "The Simply," in *The Sophist*, p. 7.

12 It is perhaps worth remarking that the kiwi fruit actually grows on "vines" rather than trees. Bernstein takes his poetic licence here, presumably, because the word "tree" is important to his book in a general way—as one observes, for example, in the pair of important poems printed later: "Reading the Tree: 1" and "Reading

the Tree: 2." The latter are textual reimaginings of Ron Silliman's recent anthology of "Language Writing," *In the American Tree* (Orono, Maine, 1986).

13 That is to say, in a journal widely known as a regular outlet for "Language Writing."

14 The other poems are "The View from Nowhere," "Catabolism," and "Force of Feeling." The poems are introduced by an eight-page discussion (by the editors) "On Language Poetry": see *Rethinking MARXISM*, 1 (1988), 69–84.

15 See Alan Davies, "Private Enigma in the Opened Text," in *Signage*, pp. 70–74.

16 Charles Bernstein, "The Lives of the Toll Takers," from a typescript, pp. 11–12 (the ellipses are not Bernstein's: they indicate the absence of some text). The poem will be published soon by Awede Press.

17 George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Don Juan* (London, 1837), I.cciv.8.

18 Bernstein quotes from Silliman's longer critique—a private correspondence—in a note at the end of "Thought's Measure" (CD 85–86n).