

LITERARY NOTES

Poetry Page

Bernstein makes a case for poetry of dissent

By R.D. POHL
News Contributing Writer



Photo by SUSAN BEE

Charles Bernstein seeks new voices.

“WE HAVE to get over, as in getting over a disease, the idea that we can all speak to one another in the universal voice of poetry,” writes poet and critic Charles Bernstein in his most recent collection of essays, *“A Poetics”* (Harvard University Press, 1992). “When we get over this idea ... I think it will begin to be possible, as it always has been, to listen to another, one at a time and in the various clusters that present themselves, or that we find the need to make.”

The significance of the indefinite article “a” in the volume’s title is implicit in Bernstein’s opening essay, “State of the Art,” which begins: “There is of course no state of American poetry, but (various) states, moods, agitations, dissensions, renunciations, depressions, acquiescences, elations, angers, ecstasies. ... I register my own passion ... for poetry that insists on running its own course, finding its own measures, charting worlds otherwise hidden or denied or, perhaps best of all, never before existing.”

For Bernstein, co-founder of the influential journal *L=A=N-G-U-A-G-E* and a leading theorist and spokesman for the “movement” loosely associated with it, “Poetry is the aversion of conformity in the pursuit of new forms. ... I care most about poetry that disrupts business as usual, including literary business: I care most for poetry as dissent, poetry that makes possible sounds to be heard that are not otherwise articulated.” If poetry is reduced to an elitist craft that there is a right or wrong way to do, Bernstein avowedly prefers pursuing “the wrong way.” “What interests me most is a poetry and poetics that do not edit-out so much as edit in: that include multiple conflicting perspectives and types of languages and styles,” in the same work.

Bernstein holds the David Gray Chair in Poetry and Letters at the University at Buffalo. Since 1990, he has coordinated the stellar “Wednesdays at 4 Plus” series of readings and lectures, which have brought many of the most innovative voices in contemporary literature (including a considerable number whose work is discussed in *“A Poetics”*) to UB’s North Campus. Those who have followed the series with interest will find this collection not only a major work by a subtle and witty intelligence, but also an indispensable adjunct to understanding the new set of possibilities that so-called “language poetry” envisions for American politics and culture.

Diversity as status quo

In “State of the Art,” Bernstein presents a radical pluralist’s critique of the currently fashionable “idealized multiculturalism” that has swept through much of contemporary letters. Without necessarily questioning the sincerity of this movement toward including “diversity” in the curricula of many high schools and colleges, Bernstein does question whether this effort is not more “ameliorative rather than politically or aesthetically exploratory.”

In locating a continuum between the ideas of “diversity” and the older New Critical and liberal-domestic notions of a “common readership” (a principal tenet of what he has dubbed the “official” verse culture in American letters), Bernstein argues that in our media-dominated culture “the very idea of public space has been befouled,” making the “recognition” of cultural difference either a belated gesture of assimilation or, worse yet, tokenization. Without incorpo-

rating formal innovation into its process, this kind of multiculturalism ends up simply an ethnicized reaffirmation of the status quo.

In “The Artifice of Absorption,” an extended essay in verse that is arguably the masterpiece of this collection, Bernstein explores the complicated function of “artifice” (i.e., “a measure of a poem’s intractability to be read as the sum of its devices and subject-matters”) in a literary work, especially the degree to which it affects the “total meaning complex” of a work and impinges on the crucial dialectic between “impermeability and absorption” that determines both the reader’s and the writer’s relationship to a literary text.

If the “inner limit” of a literary text is utter transparency or the ability to absorb (or “engulf,” “spellbind” or “mesmerize”) and be absorbed without reference to the self-consciousness of the writer or reader, then the “outer limit” is totally “opaque” or “unreadable” text, composed entirely of devices, tactics, rhetorical tropes, lexical fragments and transgressions at the expense of “meaning” or narrative continuity.

Misguided concern

In this dialectic, Bernstein finds himself attracted to the “ambivalence” (“as in wanting multiple things”) of using “anti-absorptive” techniques (artifice) for absorptive ends. Absorption and its many converse, he concludes (contrary to post-structuralist theories of reading), “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 relationship by considering/ how they work: are we putting/ each other to sleep/ or waking each other up/ & what do we wake to?”

Elsewhere in this volume, Bernstein offers a compelling argument that all of the contemporary hand-wringing over the “postmodern situation” in our culture is profoundly misguided. The essay “In the Middle of Modernism in the Middle of Capitalism on the Outskirts of New York,” Bernstein addresses the celebrated essay “Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” by critic Fredric Jameson by demonstrating that, contrary to most received wisdom, the tenets of radical modernism (particularly in literature) have never fully been absorbed into our cultural orthodoxy.

In “Optimism and Critical Excess,” Bernstein argues that “Poetics is the continuation of poetry by other means.” Making the case for a kind of “applied poetics” that extend into other realms, he offers a critique of “acceptable communication behavior,” with its emphasis on “specialized, anti-democratic ‘careful’ critical discourse” (or CCD) that props up the ideology of the self-interested professional classes.