

## RECALCULATING

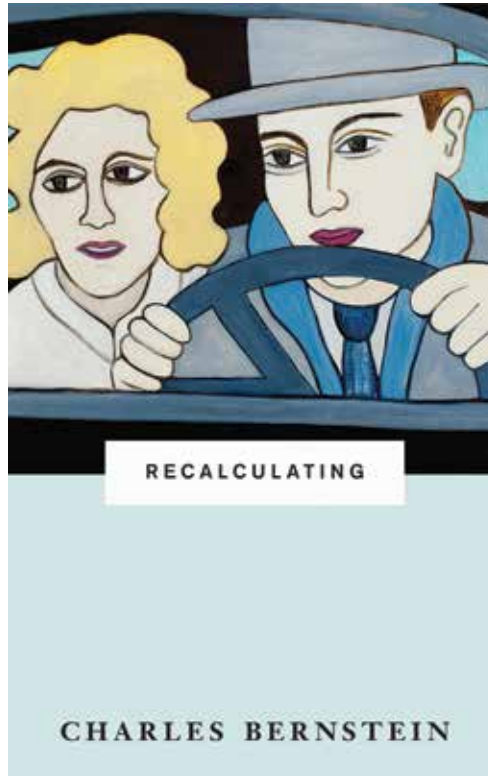
By Charles Bernstein

University of Chicago Press, 2013

### A BOOK REVIEW BY JED RASULA

CHARLES BERNSTEIN HAS carved out a singular role in the public life of American poetry for thirty-some years. As an educator, he's effectively inspired and guided several generations of younger poets, whose debt to him has never taken on the characteristic obsequiousness that often prevails in such a relation. As a critic, he's been an astute gadfly of accepted opinion and sententious drivel, constantly inventive in his advocacy of actual poetic diversity—notably and often flamboyantly flying in the face of the accepted, brand-name “diversity” that holds court in universities. And, finally, his adventurous trajectory as a poet has revealed him as someone willing to try anything. “I’m an observant Jew,” he puns. “I look closely at the things around me, as if they were foreign” (125). Bernstein is a fastidious observer of language above all. His most familiar tactics involve word substitutions, puns, diverting the transactional business of language to ends that can rapidly shift from ludic to ethical, sobering and boisterous in very short order. “*If you are not part of the problem, you will be*” (179).

Approaching a new book by a poet of Bernstein's eminence at this stage of his career and output, I wonder: What's new? and How does it build on the strengths of previous work? The first question is easy to answer, as *Recalculating* is



subtly but absorbingly drenched in the tragedy of personal loss, and this casts even the most impromptu and seemingly irreverent pieces in an unsettling ambience. The second question is easily answered as well, for Bernstein's penchant for trying anything and throwing in the pantry with the kitchen sink risks making this collection seem

more of the same—until, that is, the insistence of veiled lamentation makes itself heard. It's as if his previous books have all been played in C major, so the shift to the key of E is haunting despite the apparent continuity of prior methods. If there's a single component that announces the shift, it's the plentitude of translations (at least sixteen, by half a dozen poets), most of them carefully chosen for theme, it seems, yet each translated with a different procedure.

Beginning with the wonderful “Autopsychographia” by Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa from 1931, and ending with a wistful croon, “Before You Go,” *Recalculating* traverses 185 pages of nonstop inventiveness. The Pessoa poem serves notice of the black grief that lies ahead, though its cleverness strikes exactly the evasive note that Bernstein's own jauntiness often adopts:

Poets are fakers  
Whose faking is so real  
They even fake the pain  
They truly feel (3)

Another poet, Gérard de Nerval, gives voice to the grief near the end of the collection in “Misfortune”:

My morning star's dead and my disconsolate lute  
Smashes in the blackened sun of torn alibi.  
In the tomb of every night, memories of  
Venetian reveries raw rub the inconsolable  
Pitch of the dark, where over and again  
I love you. (180)

“Misfortune” drastically contracts Nerval’s sonnet “El Desdichado” into a direct personal lament. Phrases like “torn alibi” follow the sound rather than the sense of the original French (*la tour abolie*—ruined tower), as the poet gradually brings Venice into view (a city not in Nerval), where his daughter died in 2008. Using other poets’ works as crutches for the expression of anguish might seem evasive but for the fact that it’s one of the longest-running practices in the history of poetry. Bernstein is also capable of the most disarming unrehearsed direct address: “I was the luckiest father in the world / until I turned unluckiest” (158). That this

heartbreaking, heartbroken poem is preceded by the tender lament of Victor Hugo’s “Tomorrow, dawn . . .” reinforces a sense of poetry as the site of ultimate sharing. A welcoming place, as *Recalculating* itself proves to be.

The personal loss so poignantly registered in some of the poems gathered here doesn’t extend to the book as a whole, in part because it’s so large, but also because the contents go back a decade, overlapping with *Girly Man* (2008), a poetry title, and *Attack of the Difficult Poems* (2011), a collection of essays. Like those and other works throughout his career, *Recalculating* is full of perceptual periscopes, furtively eyeing current events and taking the soundings. “Tea Party: I love America so much I want to lock her in my / basement to have her all to myself” (132). Some of Bernstein’s work could be described as nonsense poetry for brainiacs. This poet has the fastest draw out of the verbal holster in the O.K. Corral. Like John Wayne in *Stagecoach*, Bernstein can bound from the driver’s seat onto a galloping horse, then manage the lateral move onto the next horse. All this might happen from one line to another of a single poem, reaffirming his conviction that “whereas poetry never gets anywhere, it just makes you more present to where you are, or at least where you were when you were brushing up against it” (89). But the *it* in question never smacks of the familiar smug classroom icon: contra Keats, “A thing of beauty is annoyed forever” (4). For Bernstein, “off key . . . remains my motto” (89). “I always wanted,”


he elaborates, “to make poetry almost / painfully / clumsy, clumpy” (14).

*Recalculating* abounds with an almost reckless profusion of styles and attitudes, a traveling carnival of poetic antics. But there are deft tactics even where the jalopy seems to careen, reminders that while this big book may be homemade, and decked out with custom tailpipes and Day-Glo flames, it’s got the hottest rods under the hood. The translations interspersed throughout—an approach that works better than segregating them—attest to careful design. The Baudelaire translations are especially fetching, ingenious and pungent as they should be. Even Apollinaire’s old chestnut, “Le pont Mirabeau,” is freshened up here. Another thematic arc related to the translations consists of poems in the idiom of, or answering back to, other poets (“Loneliness in Linden” after Stevens, “Pompeii” after Auden, “Stupid Men, Smart Choices” sampling, presumably, Garrison Keillor’s “Guy Noir” radio episodes, “Armed Stasis” after Pound, “The Introvert” after Wordsworth, and “Chimera” after Yeats); these reinforce the aura of tradition that hangs over the collection as a whole, as well as bringing to the surface a spirit of comradeship. Such pieces *sample* the poetic mother lode as if it were amenable to sound bites in a desktop music program, “free-base tagging” (9).

The clusters of poetics (“The Truth in Pudding,” “How Empty Is My Bread Pudding,” “Manifest Aversions, Conceptual Conundrums, & Implausibly Deniable Links,” and “Recalculating”—placed as they are at roughly equal distances throughout) are vital structural components, and they’re also full of the quizzical, laconic, wry Bernstein wit that can turn on a dime into profundity. While many of the poems don masks of various sorts (has any poet since Pound been as conversant and at ease with *personae*?), in these ruminations the mask not only comes off but is often brazenly crunched and shredded, as if to drive home the moral that “So much of what we can’t imagine we are forced to experience. And even then we can’t imagine it” (175). Bernstein’s *ars poetica* is courageously resistant to the blandishments of what he calls “personification” in its easy embrace of the unimaginable (172). This insistence makes all the more poignant and arresting, then, the abject misery of personal misfortune obliquely sheltered, honored, and given voice in *Recalculating*, a resounding collection by one of the true originals of the art. ✘

JED RASULA is the Helen S. Lanier Distinguished Professor at the University of Georgia, author of numerous books including *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940–1990* (1996), *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* (2002), *Modernism and Poetic Inspiration: The Shadow Mouth* (2009), and most recently the anthology *Burning City: Poems of Metropolitan Modernity* (2012).

**NORTHERN LIGHTS HAMMOCKS**  
ESTABLISHED 1981 PROVINCETOWN



EXPERIENCE THE FINE ART OF LYING IN A HAMMOCK  
361 Commercial Street  
WWW.NORTHERNLIGHTSHAMMOCKS.COM



Tennessee Williams'  
**KINGDOM  
of EARTH**  
an award-winning production from  
Cape Town, South Africa

SEPT 12-22  
provincetowntheater.org

SEPT 26-29  
twptown.org

ARTSCAPE THE PROVINCETOWN THEATER

Provincetown  
**TENNESSEE WILLIAMS**  
Theater Festival