The syntactician's song

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Charles Bernstein

ALL THE WHISKEY IN HEAVEN
Selected poems
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William Allegrezza, editor

THE SALT COMPANION TO CHARLES BERNSTEIN
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For nearly forty years Charles Bernstein has been one of American poetry's most spirited iconoclasts, a tireless and resourceful foe of "Official Verse Culture" and all who deploy, without the requisite lashings of irony, the much-derided "lyric I". Co-founder in 1978 with Bruce Andrews of the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, Bernstein has been at the forefront of a vast and varied phalanx of American poetic experimentalists, and a key exponent of the values and practices of what has come to be known as Language writing. Members of this group were initially published by small presses such as Roof Books or Burning Deck or Sun & Moon, but are now often found on the lists of commercial publishers such as Farrar, Straus and Giroux – who issued Bernstein's *Selected Poems* in the United States in 2010 – or university presses such as Chicago and California. Indeed, one can now see that Language writing offers an almost textbook example of a successful avant-garde movement, first defining itself in scornful opposition to the dominant pedagogical and publishing institutions, and then invading, or, as it might seem to some, being co-opted by them. (Bernstein has taught at Columbia, Brown, Buffalo and Princeton, and is currently Donald T. Regan Professor at the University of Pennsylvania.)

All the Whiskey in Heaven opens with a few pages from *Asylums* (1975), a long poem entirely collaged from a book by Erving Goffman, also called *Asylums*, on the social situation of mental patients (1961). Bernstein's poem was originally produced on a manual typewriter, and circulated in a stapled edition of a few dozen (a facsimile, it goes without saying, is now available online). While this grungy, samizdat format signalled Bernstein's affiliations with the mimeograph culture of the Lower East Side poetry scene of the late 1960s and early 70s, its subject matter, evoking Michel Foucault and the need to understand social systems of classification and control, pointed to a striking difference between Language writing and the hedonistic, dandyish aspects of the New York School, or the utopian ideals of the Beats: Language poets knew their literary theory, and Bernstein, who studied philosophy at Harvard under Stanley Cavell, saw poetry as a means of transforming attitudes to language and society, rather than in camp competition with Hollywood movies, in the manner of Frank O'Hara – who once observed, with a sly flick of the wrist, that "in a capitalist country, fun is everything".

That's not to say that there is no fun to be had from this *Selected Poems*, which offers a smorgasbord of disruptive techniques, verbal distortion and extravagant pastiche, as well as much literary knockabout, my favourite quip being Bernstein's version of a famous phrase from T. S. Eliot's essay on Philip Massinger: "Immature poets borrow. Mature poets invest". Culled from nineteen chapbooks and volumes, it also makes one aware of the many traditions Bernstein inherited, and set about schmearing into his ongoing critique of the treacherous linguistic, economic and psychic circuitry of late capitalism. Dadaist fragmentation, the Modernist manifesto, Olsonian open field poetics, Ashberian abstraction, the Whitmanian catalogue, the Ginsbergian direct address, Brechtian "anti-absorptive" alienation techniques, Oulipian constraints, phonetic Pound-speak, and experiments with doggerel that would have made even William McGonagall's flesh creep: all are deployed in Bernstein's ferocious assault on the status quo.

It is not surprising, given the centrality of certain developments in theory to his poetic practices, that one can map Bernstein's work so neatly onto the concerns of theory-orientated criticism; Bernstein is, after all, the author of *Shadowtime* (2005), a "thought opera" based on the life and work of Walter Benjamin. Accordingly, the essays gathered in *The Salt Companion to Charles Bernstein* tend towards a celebration of the guerrilla tactics with which he attempts to undermine linguistic conventions rather than antithetical readings, or evaluative assessments of particular poems or books.

The essay I found most interesting was by Paul Stephens, who explores Bernstein's use of the sophist-figure, a use that builds on Michel de Certeau's definition of sophism as "the dialectics of tactics". Ancient Greek sophists taught rhetoric, but also became bywords for deceitfulness and artificiality; Bernstein's express mission is not only to highlight the deceitfulness and artificiality of all the discourses we inhabit, especially those that claim to be grounded in sincerity or common sense or truth, but also to unpick poetry's claims to some superior linguistic realm: "think of me as a snake-oil salesman", he once remarked, "a confidence-man". His volume *The Sophist* (1987) includes a poem entitled "Amblyopia", the technical term for lazy eye, and Bernstein's work might be said to be motivated by the desire to bring to our attention the distorted vision that results from all attempts to feel at home in language. In *A Poetics*, published a year before *The Sophist*, he defined the ideal "syntactitian" as a linguistic nomad living in a state of vigilant and radical provisionality, as, in Stephens's phrase, "an itinerant teacher of tactics rather than of unconditional truths".

The syntactitian's tactics must of course change in response to developments on the ground – or in the air. "And then", as Barack Obama wrote in his preface to *Dreams from My Father*, "on September 11, 2001, the world fractured." Bernstein, having spent his poetic career up to that point orchestrating various kinds of linguistic fracture, adopted a set of completely antithetical tactics, offering in "Report from Liberty Street", begun a week after the attacks, a reportage-style description of the destruction of the Twin Towers and the mourning and anger that followed, punctuated by the italicized refrain, "They thought they were going to heaven". Reading this piece, it's hard to locate the sophist-figure inviting a sceptical take on the journalistic language of crisis-response:

> One of the most affecting sites is at the Times Square subway station. Around the cold tile columns in the central atrium of the station, people have put up dozens of homemade signs, each with the picture of someone. They say missing – not in the sense of "looking for", but rather feeling the loss. The grief surrounding these columns is overwhelming and we look on as if hit by a wave of turbulence.

A number of references to Shelley's "Ozymandias" suggest an analogy between the hubris of the American empire and that of the long-vanished king of kings. "Report from Liberty Street", in other words, is emotive and descriptive and allusive in a pretty traditional manner, registering trauma in a style that is indifferent to the fracturing verbal strategies of the "syntactician", or the notions of "meta-irony" so prized by Bernstein's commentators.

The dramatization of states of uncertainty in "Report from Liberty Street" is uncharacteristic of Bernstein's normally provocative and confident, even didactic, modes of address. 9/11 and the War on Terror that followed undoubtedly expanded the range of genres that he felt might serve his purpose, and in pieces such as "War Stories", a set of somewhat Emersonian aphorisms ("War is the world's betrayal of the earth's plenitude . . . . War is revenge on the wrong person"), or the very Brechtian "The Ballad of the Girly Man", both published in 2006, we find him jousting with the powers that be in language comprehensible to anyone:

> Thugs from hell have taken freedom's store
> The rich get richer, the poor die quicker
> & the only god that sanctions that
> Is no god at all but rhetorical crap

The poem's title is an allusion to Arnold Schwarzenegger, at the 2004 Republican National Convention, denigrating his opponents as "girly men"; re-angling the term somewhat in the manner of gay theorists appropriating the word "queer", Bernstein applies "girly men" to all those who oppose the war in Iraq:

> So be a girly man
> & sing this gurly song
> Sissies & proud
> That we would never lie our way to war

In such a poem the all-conquering self-consciousness of the syntactitian finds its own peculiar ground zero.

Recalculating is Bernstein's first full collection since *Girly Man* (2006), and reveals him responding to a more personal tragedy, the suicide of his daughter at the age of twenty-three. "I was the luckiest of fathers in the world / until I turned unluckiest", begins one of the pieces written in the aftermath of the death of Emma, who is commemorated in the book's epigraph. *Recalculating* includes inventive versions of poems by Baudelaire, Mandelstam, Apollinaire, Celan and Catullus, but the finest of Bernstein's translations is a ravishingly simple rendition of Victor Hugo's elegy for his daughter Léopoldine, who drowned in a boating accident on the Seine in 1843. Here is Bernstein's translation of the middle quatrain of "Demain, dès l'aube . . . ":

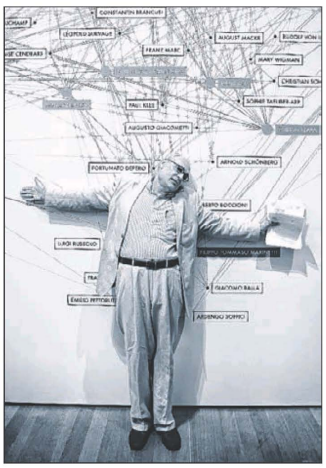
> I will be walking with my eyes fixed on my thoughts,
> Without looking around, without hearing a sound,
> Alone and unknown, with back bent, with my hands crossed,
> Sad, and the day for me will be like the night.

Almost as affecting is a looser version of the first half of Gérard de Nerval's "El Desdichado", that makes light but deft use of the Oulipian technique of homophonic translation, "Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie" becoming "Smashes in the blackened sun of torn alibi".

"Recalculating" is the term some satnav systems use when you take a wrong turn, and the journey has to be replotted. The title poem of the volume is a set of aphorisms and vignettes that range from "The Jew is a textual construction" to "We aced the shit out of that asshole" to "It was a fork in the road, but he had always favored spoons . . . ". For all his earnestness of purpose, there has often been a Groucho as well as a Karl Marx element to Bernstein's poetics, a belief that humour is as likely to open the doors of perception as polemic. Like the Ginsberg of, say, "America", Bernstein enjoys launching burlesque riffs on serious topics, as in a poem such as "Strike!":

> Strike because the Supreme Court is jerry-rigged, its justice without honor.
> Strike because Murdoch and Berlusconi make Big Brother seem like chopped liver.
> Strike because it's not fun to tango alone.
> Strike because you've been on hold for longer than you can remember and want to hang up without losing your place in the queue.
> Strike because it's nearly as effective as Prozac.

The poem delivers 112 reasons for striking, but fortunately there seems little likelihood that its author will be withdrawing his own poetic labour any time soon: "Strike", it concludes, "because you want to sing this song".



Charles Bernstein at the *Inventing Abstraction* exhibition, MOMA, New York, April 3, 2013