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VERSE

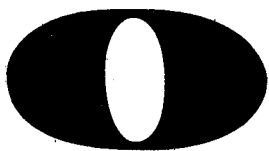
VS.

VERSE

**The Language Poets
are taking over
THE ACADEMY.**

**But will
SUCCESS
destroy their integrity?**

By Andrew Epstein



ON A SATURDAY EVENING IN 1997, in a hard-to-find performance space in New York's East Village, scores of poets, critics, and academics gathered to debate the fate of Language poetry—a politically charged, theoretically informed alternative to mainstream verse that emerged in the 1970s. The catalyst was a new book by Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History*, which offered an insider's account and a lit-crit interpretation of the movement Perelman and his friends had launched twenty years earlier.

In the 1970s, Perelman didn't hesitate to attack the nature scenery and first-person epiphanies of mainstream poetry as "neo-academic." But now he is an academic himself: In 1990 he became a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and *The Marginalization of Poetry* was published not by a small independent house but by Princeton University Press. The East Village crowd was hostile toward academe's assimilation of what had once been an outsider aesthetic. Ron Silliman, a leading Language poet and an old friend of Perelman's, charged that Perelman's book was "literally a step in the long march toward tenure." Silliman asked, "What might this book have become had it been written for poets instead of as a strategy for professional advancement?" In the crowd, young people wore buttons that read FREE BOB PERELMAN. "It was very unruly," recalls Steve Evans, one of four panelists who spoke that night. "There were two hundred people trying to come to terms with where the academic world ends and an alternative one begins."

Switch channels to the Super Bowl pregame show, January 1999. One of the expensive commercials features a poet-critic enthusiastically dissecting the Yellow Pages. It's Charles Bernstein, perhaps the most famous theorist, promoter, and practitioner of Language poetry. Back when he supported himself with a day job as an editor of medical journals, Bernstein preached that writing must be "taken out of the service of the capitalist project." Now he has an endowed chair at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and he appears on television selling that compendium of commodities, the Yellow Pages. Has he lost all indie credibility?

"It's quite funny how the bad boys of poetry so quickly became the new academic verse," says Eliot Weinberger, the editor of *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders* (1993). The assimilation of the avant-garde is of course nothing new. It is practically the defining story of twentieth-century art: Dada is enshrined at MoMA, *Ulysses* becomes as classic as *Hamlet*, and Jackson Pollock's splatters grace T-shirts and mugs. But in the case of Language poetry, the interval between outrage and institutionalization has been unusually short. And the intensity of the Language poets' early campaign against the evils of capitalism and the imperial power of the state has left them particularly vulnerable to charges of compromise and selling out. "Let us undermine the bourgeoisie," Silliman declared in 1979; today he is a market analyst

in the computer industry.

The relative success of Language poetry—particularly in the academy—raises uncomfortable questions. Should radical intellectuals maintain a radical stance forever? Is a poet's opposition to the mainstream more genuine if she remains unrecognized? Are Language poets embracing the consumerist culture they once challenged? Can an avant-garde poet also be an academic?

LANGUAGE POETRY

first came to life in the early to mid-1970s, when a number of young writers in San Francisco, and to a lesser extent New York, began congregating in lofts and bars to discuss radical poetry and its possible connections with radical politics. Every oppositional movement needs an enemy, and in this case, the villain was the amorphous blob that Bernstein calls "official verse culture"—the academic creative writing establishment and its presses, prizes, and professors. Determined to resist that world, the poets set up an alternative network of journals and small presses. In homemade magazines like *This* and *Hills*, a poem might start "Sanity be applicable something men / But entails bridge energy often left me know to do with / Fabric may predict what experience" (Bruce Andrews), rather than, say, "Traveling through the dark I found a deer / dead on the edge of the Wilson River road" (William Stafford). This early period of creative ferment, youthful manifestos, and community building peaked when Bernstein and Bruce Andrews began publishing a magazine called *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. The mysterious equal signs have been much discussed. They are generally thought to have been a way of interrupting any easy understanding of the word or concept of language—of drawing attention to the materiality of words. They may also represent the political goal of equality that the poets shared. In any case, the journal, which printed theory and criticism by poets rather than poems, provided a name for the nascent movement. Although the magazine lasted only from 1978 to 1981, the name stuck, despite protests from some involved.

The Language poets—a group whose core includes Bernstein, Andrews, Silliman, Perelman, Lyn Hejinian, Barrett Watten, and Rae Armantrout, as well as fellow travelers Michael Palmer and Susan Howe—were for the most part born during and just after World War II. They were radicalized by the Vietnam War and severely disillusioned by Watergate. They shared a passionate devotion to the more avant-garde side of American poetry—to the experimental poetics of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, the early, more daring William Carlos Williams, and the neglected objectivist Louis Zukofsky. They saw themselves as extending and challenging the fiercely antiacademic, open-form New American Poetry of the 1950s and 1960s written by figures like Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Allen Ginsberg.

In the 1970s, waves of European poststructuralist theory were crashing onto American shores, and many of the Language writers wanted to see what impact Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Kristeva, Althusser, and Wittgenstein could have on American poetry. At a time when most poets

in academic settings were retreating from theory to a neo-Romantic model of lyrical self-expression, Language poets were talking about the signifier and signified, the politics of the referent, and the ideological state apparatus. They refused to respect the boundary between creative and critical writing—between the writing of poetry and the writing of poetics. Ironically, this interest in theory meant that, for all their antipathy to the poetry of the academic establishment, Language poets were primed for a scholarly audience from the start. Even when virtually no Language poets had university affiliations, they were tagged as academic. The poet Tom Clark's scathing 1987 indictment in *Partisan Review* was typical: The Language poets "are as long on critical theory as they are (relatively, and I think also absolutely) short on poems.... Their criticism is mostly written in a pretentious intellectual *argot* that sounds a little like an assistant professor who took a wrong turn on the way to the Derrida Cookout and ended up at the poetry reading."

But Language poetry is much more than poststructuralism chopped into lines of verse. At the heart of the Language aesthetic is an antagonism to the narrow conventions of the university creative writing workshop lyric—the "McPoem," to borrow a term coined by the (non-Language) poet Donald Hall. The workshop lyric, Language poets argue, is as bland, predictable, and easy to consume as a Happy Meal. Typically, it is an accessible, first-person account of an event, often involving family, which culminates in a tidy epiphany. Such poems are prized for the authenticity of the poet's voice and the naturalness of the language. Take Philip Levine's 1979 poem "Starlight":

My father stands in the warm evening
on the porch of my first house.
I am four years old and growing tired.
I see his head among the stars,
the glow of his cigarette, redder
than the summer moon riding
low over the old neighborhood. We
are alone, and he asks me if I am happy.
"Are you happy?" I cannot answer....

Language poets argue that the plain style and straightforward, linear story of a poem like Levine's do not call into question language's ability to convey an experience. In mainstream verse, they feel, language is treated as a transparent window on the world. Language poets, by contrast, tend to write collages—discontinuous statements that are intended to expose the workings of language. They prize texts that are disjunctive, nonlinear, and open ended, demanding a reader who will be an active participant rather than a passive consumer. Rather than present a coherent "I," they explore the fragmentation of the self. Detractors like Tom Clark have described Language poetry as "non-referential solipsist muzak," but fans find this kind of experimental writing more verbally exciting, unpredictable, and mysterious than mainstream lyric. For example, here is Charles Bernstein's "The Kiwi Bird in the Kiwi Tree":

The Language poets attacked official **VERSE** **CULTURE** for fostering poems as bland and easy to consume as a **HAPPY MEAL.**



RON
SILLIMAN

LYN
HEJINIAN

BOB
PERELMAN

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 talcums, 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.

As Bernstein's poem suggests, Language poets believe that the world as we know it does not exist outside or before language: "Only / the imaginary is real." Accordingly, their poems focus on the vexed relationship between words and the world, which they consider "less 'real' than made."

Although those who disparage Language poetry often dismiss it as uniform in style, the work is actually quite diverse. For example, Bernstein's rigorously scrambled poetry is quite different from the poetry of Lyn Hejinian, whose non-sequitur sentences are studded with lyrical observations of quotidian experience. In *My Life* (1987), her highly regarded series of prose poems, Hejinian evokes childhood memories, though in a self-conscious and disjunctive style: "Summers were spent in a fog that rains. I had claimed the radio nights for my own. There were more storytellers than there were stories, so that everyone in the family had a version of history and it was impossible to get close to the original, or to know 'what really happened.' The pair of ancient, stunted apricot trees yielded ancient, stunted apricots. What was the meaning hung from that depend. The sweet aftertaste of artichokes...."

There is so little public beauty." By critiquing the conventions of autobiography, Hejinian manages to create an innovative autobiographical mosaic.

Most Language poets hope that their aesthetic rebellion doubles as a political one. Their self-aware, fragmented writing, many Language poets believe, resists and subverts the prefabricated, covertly ideological language produced by mainstream culture. But even among Language poets, this political claim has been hotly debated. It rests on a series of assumptions: First, no linguistic construction of reality is natural or neutral. Second, dominant public discourses cannot be trusted, especially in a post-Vietnam, post-Watergate era, when language has been debased by an imperialist state and a consumerist culture. Third, the choices that writers make—in grammar, syntax, narrative structure, and subject matter—reflect ideology.

If these three premises hold, then disrupting standard forms of language can be a politically liberating act. As Bernstein put it in the late 1970s, "language control = thought control = reality control." Andrews explained in 1989, "Faced with rules or patterns of constraint—the negative face of ideology—writing can respond with a drastic openness." In Andrews's rebarbative, hyperpolitical poetry, this openness means smashing normal syntax and coherence: "Equality demands no less; history begins with old man crying, logic you know, airplay your fingertips is not freedom—The disintegrating slop situation on outlaw; read it in the voodoo prospectus, keep trying death squads paid for by our *Christianity* radiation taxes so that human rights clone improves because there are so few rebels left to kill, like iron filings...."

FROM THE FIRST,

Language poetry was greeted with bafflement and hostility. In Ron Silliman's estimation, "no other current poetic tendency in America has been subject to the constant flow of dismissals and exposés, many of them composed in the threatened rhetoric of fury." But it didn't take too long for the mainstream to pick up on this new brand of poetry. In 1982 the *Paris Review* gave Bernstein space in its pages to offer a sampling of Language poetry. In 1984 Marjorie Perloff, a premier critic of twentieth-century poetry, published a widely read piece explicating Language poetry in *American Poetry Review*. She quickly became the movement's most forceful academic advocate. Soon, prominent critics like Charles Altieri, Jerome McGann, Frederic Jameson, and Andrew Ross were debating the political value and aesthetic merits of the movement.

Throughout the 1980s, the poets still prided themselves on their marginal status. Central figures in Language poetry were making ends meet as typesetters, limo drivers, and writers of medical abstracts, and the Language poetry community remained well outside the orbit of the major publishers, the cultural media, and the academy. It was sustained instead by small, alternative presses such as Sun and Moon Press and The Figures.

When the University of Virginia professor Jerome McGann sang the praises of Language poetry in *Critical*

Inquiry in 1987, he drew clear boundaries between inside and out: "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing is distinctively experimental, while poets like Robert Pinsky, Louise Glück, and John Hollander are traditionalists; and whereas the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers are almost all situated—economically and institutionally—outside the academy, their counterparts, critics and poets alike, occupy important scholastic positions." In the introduction to a 1989 collection of essays, Bernstein noted how "encouraging" he found it that most of the poets who wrote for the volume, himself included, "are not affiliated with any university and their investigations of poetics and politics continue to be conducted without much institutional support."

At the beginning of the 1990s, all this began to change. Suddenly, yesterday's outcasts and revolutionaries were not only on final exams but also mingling in the faculty lounge. In 1990, despite his lack of an advanced degree, Bernstein was named the David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He co-founded and now directs the university's Poetics Program, and his recent books of criticism have been published by Harvard and Chicago (though he has continued to publish his poetry with small presses such as Sun and Moon, Granary Books, and Meow Press). Susan Howe joined Bernstein at Buffalo in 1991. Meanwhile, Bob Perelman returned to school in 1985 to earn a Ph.D. at Berkeley, and he landed a job as a specialist in modernist literature in 1990 at the University of Pennsylvania, where he now has tenure. In 1998, Hejinian was invited to teach for a semester at the place many consider the bastion of the workshop lyric, the Iowa Writers' Workshop, which in recent years has opened up to alternative styles of poetry. "The students didn't seem to be invested in the old poetry wars between a mainstream and an experimental mode," Hejinian says. "The fact that I was invited to teach there means something is changing," she points out, wryly adding, "although of course this could just be seen as co-optation." Perhaps the most tangible sign of literary canonization came with the 1994 publication of *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, edited by Paul Hoover, which devoted generous space to Language writing and placed its practitioners firmly on the official map of contemporary literature.

The Language poets have certainly come a long way, but don't expect Charles Bernstein to knock Robert Pinsky out of the poet laureate chair anytime soon. "It's far from any kind of successful coup d'état by any stretch of the imagination," says Perelman. "It's ludicrous, really, when you count how many Language writers are in the academy." In fact, probably fewer than a dozen Language poets have found permanent employment in universities, and most of them were hired to teach literature rather than poetry writing, leaving creative writing programs still largely staffed by poets less amenable to the avant-garde. "If you look at the close to 300 creative writing programs in the country," says Silliman, "the number opened up to or interested in Language writing or employing Language poets would be 12 or less. It's not like these people have taken over the academy! What about the other 288 schools?"

Even the leading Language poets are "still virtually unrecognized" by official verse culture, says Perloff, currently an English professor at Stanford University. And in her opinion, with the exception of UPenn and Brown, "the Ivy League schools are still incredibly inhospitable to experimental work." Indeed, although he has featured yesterday's outsiders, such as Olson, Creeley, and Ashbery, in *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (1990), Yale's poet-critic J.D. McClatchy has little patience for recent experimental poetry. "Language poetry, like other forms of experiment, appeals more to the young, the more innocent, those who haven't read as much and who are attracted to glittering, moving objects," McClatchy says. "Those who don't realize that they can find in John Donne or Elizabeth Bishop depth and complexity about the human experience.... For more mature readers, it's boring."

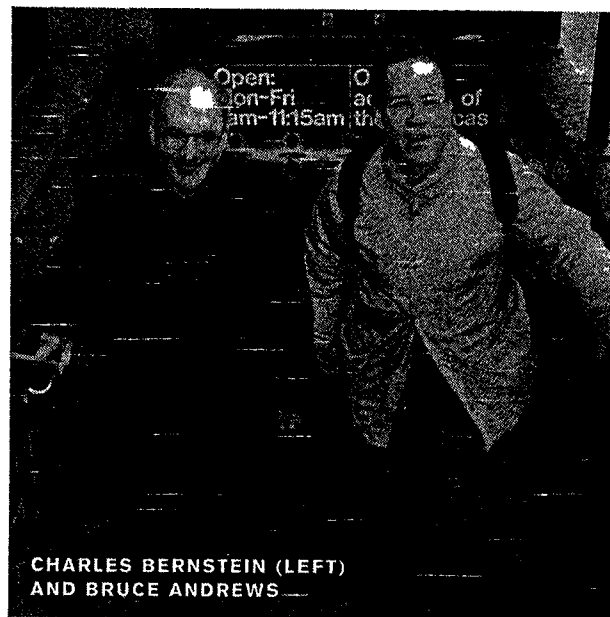
DESPITE SUCH

indifference and resistance, the mainstream *has* taken a greater interest in Language poetry lately. "For all its subversive claims," Xavier University professor Norman Finkelstein recently commented, "Language poetry is gradually (and happily) being absorbed by the university." Has institutional acceptance defanged another avant-garde? "Ironically, they've been folded like egg whites into the cultural mix," says McClatchy. Says Weinberger, "They are pursuing exactly the same kind of middle-class careerism as those in the creative writing programs they oppose. How is Charles Bernstein's endowed chair any different from Galway Kinnell's?"

"The easiest thing to do is shout careerist" when someone is successful, retorts Perloff. "I think it's nonsense to say that Charles Bernstein or any other Language writer has sold out to capitalism." But, as even Perloff concedes, the poets are hardly Young Turks anymore. "You can't be oppositional forever, decade after decade," she says.

As Alan Golding of the University of Louisville points out in his 1995 study, *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (Wisconsin), literary outlaws are either canonized or forgotten. "Criticism of Language writing's assimilation into the academy," writes Golding, "rests on an impossible, ahistorical wish for an ideologically pure, uncontaminated avant-garde that successfully resists co-option by the institution that it attacks." Is there another alternative for oppositional artists? Golding maintains that because Language poets are "highly self-conscious about their institutional relations," they now have the opportunity to change the academy from within—to mount an "institutional critique of contemporary writing and reading habits." Like a spy in the enemy camp, a poet like Bernstein or Perelman can function as "a complicating presence within these institutions."

Golding's proposal strikes some as overly optimistic. "I respectfully disagree with Alan on the notion of Language poetry's 'provisionally complicit resistance' within the academy," says Steve Evans, an assistant professor at the University of Maine and an advocate of the poetry of the new generation nipping at Language poetry's



CHARLES BERNSTEIN (LEFT)
AND BRUCE ANDREWS

The equal signs in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E drew attention to the materiality of words.

heels. Like some of his contemporaries, Evans feels somewhat let down by the taming of the movement's original, rather heroic project. "The enterprise of creating an alternative space in American culture bottomed out," Evans says. "The Language poets intended to transform the institution, but the institution transformed them."

In *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (1998), the poet and critic David Lehman rejects the notion that Language poetry deserves to be called avant-garde. In his opinion, "the Language School looks modern but smells of the museums. It could not exist outside of the university." Lehman's broader argument is that the New York School of poets, a group that included Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Kenneth Koch, were the "last authentic avant-garde movement...in American poetry." Lehman, who is series editor of the annual *Best American Poetry*, speculates that the idea of the avant-garde may no longer be viable, perhaps because "there is no real resistance to the new."

Lehman may be painting the contrast between the New York School and the Language poets too starkly. For many years, the Language poets did sustain an alternate literary universe without academic employment or support. And the New York School poets were hardly untainted by the academy: Lehman's bohemian heroes held Ivy League advanced degrees, W.H. Auden awarded the Yale Younger Poets prize to Ashbery's first book, and Koch has been a Columbia professor for forty years.

Lehman insists that he is not mounting "a critical attack on the Language poets as poets—they've worked *hard* at

it—and some are really interesting poets.” But he believes that the kinship between Language poetry and the academy by definition deprives the movement of avant-garde status: “The idea of an academic movement that is avant-garde is oxymoronic. They are polar opposites. When Manet was an avant-garde exemplar, he was in contradistinction to Bouguereau and the academy. When Jackson Pollock appeared scowling and looking like a housepainter under the caption ‘Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?’ in *Life* magazine, it was a slap in the face of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But when a school of poetry is entirely academic—its readers, practitioners, supporters are all academic—how is it avant-garde?”

BUT WHAT'S SO BAD

about the academy? Is it really so dangerous for poetry? Even longtime allies of Language poetry disagree on this question, and tension has increased between those who have joined the academic ranks, such as Bob Perelman, and those who haven't, such as Ron Silliman.

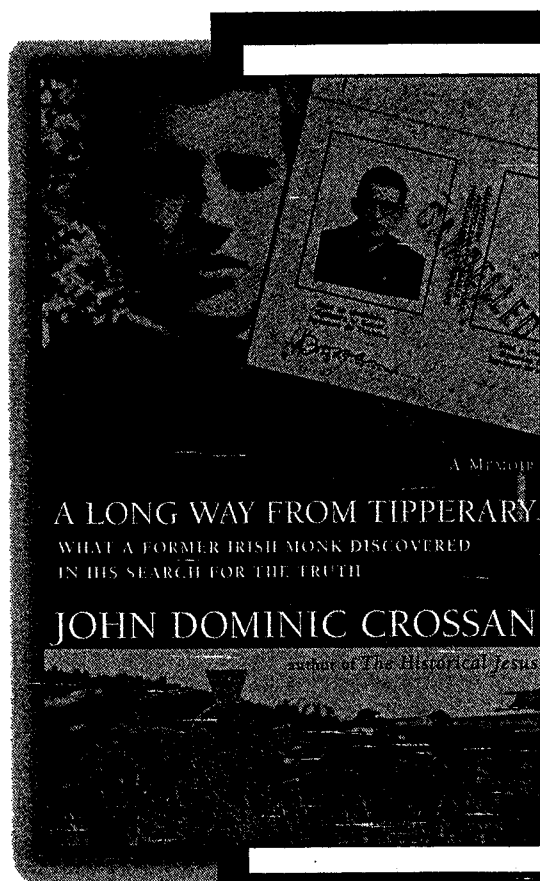
After many years of community organizing and editing the *Socialist Review*, Silliman started working in the computer industry in 1989. Although he has taught on occasion, he says he has turned down offers of tenure-track positions, not only because he distrusts the institution, which he sees as “feudal and hierarchical,” but also because of “the significant pay cut.” Unlike some of his cohorts, who have been backed of late by such university presses as

Wesleyan, California, and Chicago, Silliman has continued to publish exclusively with small presses like Roof Books and Meow Press. Silliman speaks highly of his day job and its effect on his poetry. “It gives me access and insight into aspects of the universe I couldn't otherwise see,” he says. “Relationships outside the academy, in a nonprofit organization or even in an \$80 billion computer company, are much less feudal and are often based on cooperating with one another. It's not purity one is looking for, but it is useful to look for a workplace that doesn't actively eviscerate, emasculate, and oppress the individual.”

Bernstein, on the other hand, doubts that the academy is more oppressive than other professions. Maybe in the corporate world there is “an internal dynamic that's freer than at the State University of New York,” he says, but “the creativity that's encouraged there is all about maximizing the profits of the corporation!”

At the 1997 debate in the East Village about Perelman's *The Marginalization of Poetry*, Silliman expressed his pessimism about the prospects of poets in the academy. He sharply questioned his friend's decision to write the history of Language poetry as an academic monograph. Because his book conformed to “normative academic discourse,” Silliman argued, Perelman was guilty of explaining away the indeterminacies and taming the difficulties of Language poetry.

In his defense, Perelman contested Silliman's “demonization” of the academy. To dismiss academia wholesale perpetuated the anti-intellectualism that Language poetry



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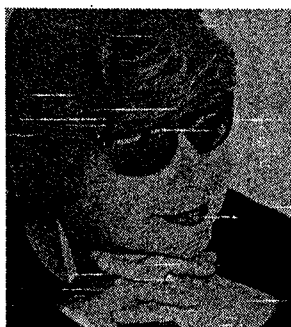
always opposed. "Can real poetry only exist in autonomous margins?" Perelman asked. "If your answer is an unqualified yes, then my book will be a complicitous, not to say a fallen, act. But, come on, if you're going to demonize universities—where are these other, valid workplaces?"

"At the center of the argument between Perelman and Silliman," says Golding, "are two different visions of the university. The first view sees it as a possible vehicle for social change, where liberatory thinking can get done. The counterargument, Silliman's, is a vision of the university as a medium of social control."

No one views the academy as a utopian institution, but some poets and critics defend the value of introducing students to unconventional writing. Hejinian sees a continuity between experimental writing and teaching. "Isn't the avant-garde always pedagogical," she wrote in *My Life*. For her, "there's an affinity between what Language poetry tries to do and what good teaching tries to do: effect social change and progress. Really good teaching tries to foster intellectual creativity and encourage people to take intellectual risks, and good poetry does exactly the same thing."

AS LANGUAGE POETRY'S most public face and as the Language poet most deeply engaged in the university, SUNY Buffalo's Charles Bernstein takes the most flak. A recent attack by Richard Kostelanetz in *American Book Review*, for example, alleged that Bernstein's literary politicking involved "a fundamentally fascist strategy,"

**"YOU CAN'T
be oppositional
FOREVER,"
says Perloff.**



MARJORIE PERLOFF



DAVID LEHMAN

citing as evidence Bernstein's failure to mention certain experimental writers in a recent essay. Kostelanetz also sneered at "the desperate desire of some cliques to acquire a *tenured* academic position before it is too late." Given Bernstein's endowed chair, his university press-published books, his frequent public lectures, and his Super Bowl television commercial, Weinberger

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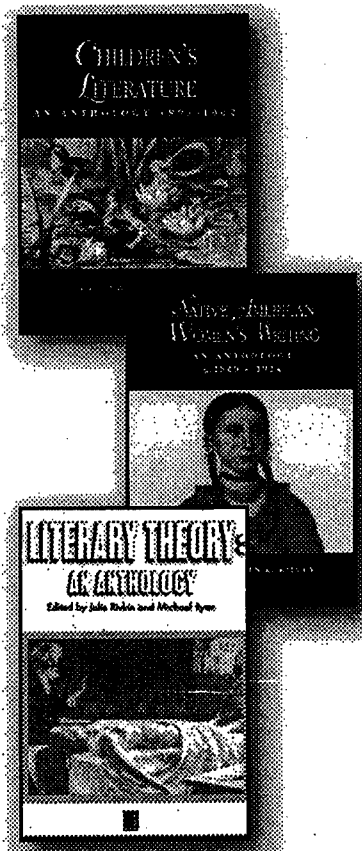
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quips that "Bernstein is an establishment figure in ways John Crowe Ransom never dreamed of."

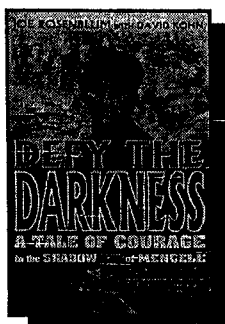
But Bernstein, the author of more than twenty books of poetry, still thinks of himself as a gadfly. "Verse is born free but everywhere in chains," he wrote in his latest book. "It has been my project to rattle the chains." At fifty, Bernstein is slightly balding and bespectacled, with a mischievous glint in his eyes, a razor-sharp wit, and a formidable and exuberant way with words. He is quick to admit that he is as influenced by Groucho Marx as by Karl Marx, and his brand of irreverent, disruptive comedy draws on Lenny Bruce and Woody Allen as much as Allen Ginsberg or Frank O'Hara. In all his restless, ambitious work, Bernstein seeks to perpetuate what he calls (borrowing from the philosopher Stanley Cavell) the "aversion of conformity" at the heart of the American intellectual tradition of Emerson and Thoreau. A tireless provocateur, Bernstein is probably better known for his critical writing than for his poetry. His innovative, genre-bending essays (some of which appear in verse form) offer an inspired blend of contrarian polemic, acute analysis, and antic humor.

Bernstein does not pretend to be free from the taint of capitalism or its institutions, which he sees as ubiquitous. "People act as if assimilation into the university is the most dangerous kind, but there are so many kinds of assimilation. Assimilation is everywhere," he argues. Do poets run the risk of having their autonomy compromised? "All cultural life, all language, is about compro-

mise—that's what it is. The idea that there is a pure space is naive and possibly demagogic," he says. "The only unasimilated poet is the dead poet who never wrote anything." He objects to the notion that being a poet in the university is "ipso facto an example of hypocrisy." In Bernstein's opinion, "the interesting question is not whether a poet has a job but what he or she *does* with it."

So what has Bernstein been doing with his? At Buffalo, he directs the influential and unconventional Poetics Program, which since 1991 has granted Ph.D.'s to a whole crop of poet-critics who are interested in the avant-garde and are now teaching around the country, such as UC-Santa Cruz's Peter Gizzi and University of Maine's Benjamin Friedlander. In 1994, he founded the Electronic Poetry Center (<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/>), a vast Web compendium of texts and links related to innovative poetry, which describes itself as "one of the first sites ever to provide a collaboration between the university and the innovative writing community." The same year he inaugurated the Poetics List, an e-mail listserv focused on experimental poetry, which today has around eight hundred participants.

Bernstein has regularly confronted poetry's powers that be, satirizing their clichés, pomposity, or narrow vision. A hilarious piece in his book *My Way* (1999) drew attention to the tired conventionality of *New Yorker* poetry by showing that virtually every poem in a four-month period contained images related to water. Last year, in his essay "Against National Poetry Month As Such," he argued that the new annual insti-



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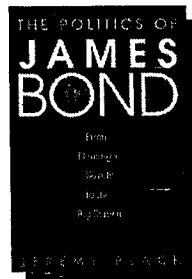


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tution amounts to a dumbed-down celebration of bland, feel-good poetry for commercial purposes. "The kind of poetry I want," Bernstein wrote, "is not a happy art with uplifting messages and easy-to-understand emotions. I want a poetry that's bad for you."

Recently elected to the executive committee of the Modern Language Association's poetry division, Bernstein has also written critically about the academy, protesting rigid disciplinary boundaries and contesting the way that thought, in an academic environment, tends to be "contained and stabilized" at the expense of "the irregular" and the "nonstandardizable, the erratic, the inchoate." Bernstein has perfected one method of disrupting the scholarly status quo: His lively, comedic performances have become a fixture at academic conferences, where they have been enthusiastically received. At a 1997 conference at Rutgers University called "Poetry and the Public Sphere," Bernstein shuffled a stack of note cards and read from them at random. His zigzagging talk mixed forceful critical statements about poetry and politics with a long Whitman-like poem that explored his own slippery, conflicting identities:

I am a leftist poet in my armchair
and an existential poet on the street;
an insider poet among my friends,
an outsider poet in midtown...
I am a capitalist poet in Leningrad
and a socialist poet in St. Petersburg;
a bourgeois poet at Zabar's, a union poet

in Albany; an elitist poet on TV,
a political poet on the radio.
I am a fraudulent poet, an incomprehensible poet,
a degenerate
poet, an incompetent poet, an indecorous poet, a crude poet...
I am a language
poet wherever people try to limit the modes of
expression or nonexpression. I am an experimental poet
to those who value craft over interrogation...
an elegiac poet, a raucous poet, a frivolous poet, a detached
poet, a roller-coaster poet...
& I am none of these things,
nothing but the blank wall of my aversions
writ large in disappearing ink—

At their best, Bernstein's performances seem both to mock and reinvent the genre of the academic conference paper. "I participate in *many* aspects of institutional and group identity," Bernstein says, "and I try to open up, redefine, and reconceptualize those definitions" through writing.

As a well-paid professor on the lecture circuit, has Charles Bernstein succumbed to capitalism? "That's a naive and romantic view," he says. "I think the refusal to engage the culture is actually an absorption into it, a silencing. The idea that you can't teach, or publish in certain places, or appear on TV, is contrary to my conception of how poets and intellectuals can engage public space." Indeed, what is most intriguing about recent writing by Bernstein and his fellow Language poets is how self-conscious they are about their conflicted

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identities. They wrestle with mixed feelings about the avant-garde and about the viability of its old narratives of shock, rupture, and marginality. "I seem to / have lost my avant-garde card / in the laundry," Perelman wrote in a recent poem. "They say that's / typical."

INEVITABLY, THE next thing is already slouching toward our cultural consciousness, waiting to be born. A new generation of post-Language poets is coming of age—poets who have absorbed Language poetry but question how it has been absorbed. These younger writers, who form a much more diffuse and less cohesive community than their predecessors, have started their own magazines, like *Chain*, *The Germ*, *Fence*, *Apex of the M*, *Lungfull!* and *Combo*, filled with poets like Peter Gizzi, Jennifer Moxley, Chris Stroffolino, Juliana Spahr, Lisa Jarnot, Harryette Mullen, Anselm Berrigan, Lee Ann Brown, and Mark Wallace (to name a handful among many, many others).

These poets have taken much from Language poetry—the devotion to experiment, the fascination with language as a medium, the curiosity about literary and cultural theory, the use of disjunction and fragmentation, and the skepticism about essential, stable selfhood. But they question some of its strict political and aesthetic proscriptions, and they are put off by its commodification as an organized movement. They are impatient with its austerity, its penchant for the abstract and theoretical, and its by

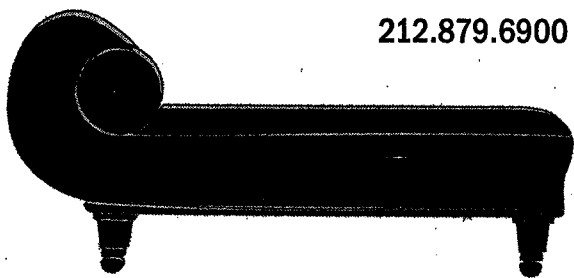
now familiar techniques of disruption. Some of these younger poets have resisted the avant-garde label, and some have allowed greater narrative coherence and lyricism to creep into their work. But they are no freer from the problems posed by institutionalization, as many embark on academic careers and begin to wrestle with the compromises that come with greater recognition.

"Publication—is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man," Emily Dickinson wrote in 1863. Caught between a desire to remain autonomous and a yearning to be heard, the best poets will always be ambivalent about institutions. But withdrawal is not likely to be a satisfying or practical solution. "I don't think you lose critical function by publishing books or by teaching," Bernstein says, "but rather by *what* you say, and *what* you teach." For him, "neither language nor universities are prison houses, but you can make them so; and you can also be jailed." As John Ashbery put it when he was a young avant-garde writer barely noticed by mainstream institutions, "the academy of the future is / Opening its doors." What happens on the other side of those doors remains an unresolved question, but one that most poets cannot ignore for long.

Andrew Epstein recently completed a dissertation at Columbia University on individualism and friendship in twentieth-century American poetry. His essays and poems have appeared in *Raritan*, *Verse*, *Notre Dame Review*, and *American Book Review*, and he is currently teaching at Barnard College.

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