

JFLC

I n t e r v i e w

**The Shimmering of the Transitory: An Interview with Charles Bernstein.¹
With an Introduction by Lauri Ramey**

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Co-editor's Introductory Remarks

This exhaustive and illuminating interview with Charles Bernstein, published for the first time in English, was originally conducted in 2001, in conjunction with the theme, interpreted both concretely and abstractly, of “Language of the West, Language of the East.” Such a focus makes this interview particularly appropriate to appear in the *Journal of Foreign Languages and Cultures*, whose purpose is to engender precisely such dialogue. The international provenance and thematic locus of this interview is indicative of Bernstein’s esteem and positioning globally, as many of his longtime political concerns, aesthetic judgments, social and communal values, and philosophical foundations reveal abiding comparatist roots and resonance. A quintessentially American poet in many ways—and very much a product of late modern and postmodern Western culture—Bernstein has long earned tremendous international respect and attention for his poetry, poetics, and principles. He has reciprocated that interest by displaying an authentic inquisitiveness and receptivity to poetics of “difference” from his own national traditions, and a sensitive appreciation for unrecognized and unexamined correspondences and echoes across perceived boundaries.

His areas of attention dating back to his earliest publications and presentations include permutations of orality, performativity, and the manifold textual presences and evanescences of language; the essential correlation between poetry and politics; the dynamic interplay between theory and practice in the obstacles, possibilities, and desirability of translation; the precarious balance between scrutinizing and unmasking the false and maudlin and creating something new with authenticity and sincerity; and compassion towards diverse and disparate experiences and expressions, including or even especially those which emanate from diasporic encounters and transplanted cultures. While Bernstein is a prominent and greatly admired figure in global poetry circles, whose ideas and writing have been tellingly in sync with many non-Western ideas, he also has served as a powerful American cultural figure in the roles of editor, critic, social commentator, teacher, mentor, archivist, and poet. This interview’s timeliness in the current moment makes it an especially important document for longtime followers of Bernstein’s writing and an ideal introduction for new readers to this major poet’s thinking and aesthetic ethos. In this interview, we encounter a trajectory of some of his most important philosophical attitudes and topics of concern during a career that has spanned more than four decades.

From the start of his identification as a writer, Bernstein has always been interested in the

symbolic and material substance of language as an index of individuality, mode of micro- and macro communication, and constitutor and reflector of social values. As one of the key figures to be associated with the 1970s-1980s Language poetry, including serving as co-editor of the legendary and primogenitive journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, Bernstein's project in some ways appears mischaracterized or misunderstood in hindsight if it is viewed solely through that limited historical-aesthetic window, although it is factually and historically valid. One of the main criticisms of Language poetry was that it tore down cultural commonplaces but did not replace them with alternative and constructive poetic paths. It was dismissed for being "non-aesthetic," non-musical, atonal, non-mnemonic, characterless, formless, arch, ironic to a fault, devoid of selfhood, and missing a defined speaker's point of view. Initially, through this affiliation, he was tagged with an early image of "outsider" status, with the fearful whiff of perceptions of anti-capitalist Marxist-leaning ideologies. Bernstein's voice was characterized, rightly so, as leading a cultural assault on the type of poetry typified by non-self-aware conceptions of language, flabby verbal sentimentalizing, and rigidified employment of imagery, metaphors, narratorial perspectives, and rhetorical postures in much of the "verse culture" or "workshop" lyric poetry at mid-century. Yet contrary to such characterizations, even his earliest writing grappled with the problems of how to convey the emotional and the personal—and how to explore and unleash the visual, oral, aural, and semantic power of the slippery medium of language—in the form of lyric poetry. Bernstein has long been centrally concerned with the historical, sociopolitical, and aesthetic relation between modernism and postmodernism, and the necessity of thinking outside parameters of such ideological, stratified, and hierarchical categorizations as "popular culture" and "high art."

Bernstein's writing has drawn scholarly attention since the 1970s, with steadily increasing reviews and academic studies in the last two decades. From the end of the twentieth century to the present, with shifting perceptions in the post-postmodern moment, Bernstein has grown into a career as a true cultural statesperson. In part, this evolved identification occurred through his ascension to distinguished academic posts since 1990, starting when he assumed the august David Gray Chair in Poetry and Letters, and Directorship of the prestigious Poetics Program at State University of New York, Buffalo, a position that he held until 2003. This post had previously been held by Robert Creeley, a key influence for many of the poets associated with the Language poetry movement. In spite of his respect from Bernstein and other Language-affiliated poets, Creeley was apart—he belonged to an older generation and certainly made no pretense of being a Language poet, but rather was associated with other and earlier phenomena and trends such as the Black Mountain School, and more tangentially, some of the formal manifestations of Beat writing. Assuming the Gray Chair and that mantle of legacy and inheritance may have helped solidify perceptions of Bernstein's writing and poetics in a larger field rather than within the seemingly constrained confines of the non-referential, oppositional, and disruptive practices of Language poetry. As a further indication of Bernstein's cultural centrality, rather than solely small niche literary presses, his books have the imprimatur of some of the world's most esteemed creative and academic publishers, among them University of Chicago Press, Harvard University Press, and Farrar, Straus and Giroux. His books are reviewed in such august and mainstream venues as *Times Literary Supplement* and *Publishers Weekly*.

In 2005, Bernstein was appointed as the equally esteemed Donald T. Regan Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, a post from which he retired at the end of Fall semester 2018. From *enfant terrible* to *eminence grise* is an oversimplification though it has elements of being germane to the circumstances. And it is a telling reflection on some of the

subtle and surprising evolutions of today's accepted "versions" of Western lyric poetry. Many figures associated with Language poetry have remained more coterie and on the periphery of the best of the literary mainstream, while Bernstein seems more essential and relevant with each passing year and new poetry collection, including his lauded newest volume, *Pitch of Poetry* (University of Chicago Press, 2016). The literary intent of the oppositional, difficult, resistant, or anti-absorptive writing in the 1970s and 1980s was to present a confrontation, challenge, and redirection from poetic representations of language as a transparent medium or vessel, evoking Michael Reddy's contemporaneous 1979 conduit metaphor, imagining that packets of communication may be conveyed directly and unimpeded with no consciousness of language—with all its slippery fractures—as its medium. Poetry audiences and evaluative criteria have changed, and Bernstein has changed too in some ways. Yet those shifts have signaled processes of maturation more than departures. We see the seeds of Bernstein's later poetry and poetics in his earliest writing in the questions he ponders in this interview. Among several recurring concerns is the topic of language itself. Many critics have attributed this interest to the influence of Wittgenstein on Bernstein (and, in fact, on many poets associated with Language poetry) while it is Bernstein's attraction to Wittgenstein in the first place that helps us to delineate the poet's own concerns. There is the mesmerizing attraction towards language as both artistic medium and analytical trope, and the attendant questions raised by this dual perspective. What and where is language as a place (interstitial or constituted), instrument, or facilitation device (and of what, for whom, how?). What level of clarity can be achieved by language and in our ability to understand language? How is it possible—if it is—to articulate the complex relationship between language and culture, and language and ontology? We look for clues in those figures mentioned by Bernstein in this interview as touchstones and sounding boards for and against his formation of ideas: the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin, Blake, Byron, Heine, and Roland Barthes.

This interview's address of such issues as Romanticism and sonic lyricism touch on features that have always characterized Bernstein's poetry and thought. Bernstein's comments must deepen our understanding of the scope and variety of Language-oriented poetry while also differentiating himself as a unique poetic voice that defies stereotypes. In one of this interview's most revelatory responses, Bernstein articulates his sense of the Romantic and his increased comfort in identifying with that impulse if it is defined with precision and sophistication: "if the Romantics are understood in their political dimension . . . then I'm a Romantic poet." This interview passage concludes by acknowledging that his suspicion of the rhetoric of sincerity led him in the past to place such expressions within various frames, but lately, he has discovered that "the ethics of the poem have to do with allowing a multivocal sincerity . . ." Bernstein's poetry has always burlesqued platitudes to both ironize and chucklingly embrace the seductive attraction of those very platitudes, to scrupulously interrogate the emotional and sentimental while ultimately acknowledging their inevitable presence in human relationships and in love—and love does abound in his writing even while it questions the nature of the personal. For Bernstein, the poem is a deliberately, or unavoidably, performed and performative plural entity based on its complications of performances, receptions, and formats that intentionally evade one "true" manifestation. Just as Bernstein states in this interview, "I don't think critique ever ends," and so the possibilities for any given poem never end. He problematizes the transitional and the arbitrary, and in fact, it is Bernstein himself who chose which phrase to highlight as the title of this interview: the shimmering of the transitory. Just because something is transitory, it is not without meaning or impact; it still possesses a reflective sheen that shows us something that feels real through its vaporous appearance.

INTERVIEWER: Since the theme of tomorrow's reading is "Language of the West, Language of the East," I would like to begin by asking whether you think of language as a place or more as a kind of intersection, a nonplace?

BERNSTEIN: That's a very good question. I think intersection is a good way to put it. A constant displacement and replacement, or location device. Sometimes I think of language as more like a sonographic mapping system in which one is bouncing language off different material and social phenomena, finding one's way through, and in, them. In that sense, language is medial. At the same time, language is intimate and perceptually grounded. It doesn't feel arbitrary or even contingent, but rather like an extension of the senses. From this angle, language is a prosthetic device, like one's glasses, so wedded to what we're perceiving, thinking, and feeling that it's hard to be aware of how transitional it is, how much it shifts from day to day, time to time, moment to moment. It's as if our glasses were made of vapour and changed shape and color in tune to the time.

INTERVIEWER: So, you don't see autonomy as a useful metaphor for what language is?

BERNSTEIN: The question is—autonomous to whom and for whom? Maybe language is autonomous at a cosmic level, if you think of it as part of human beings on the earth, existing internal to that life world. But for us, in media res, it's like an echo system that shifts in response to changing conditions, of weather, of geology, of history, of passion. But the shifts affect language as a total system. I do like the idea of autonomy as a metaphor. I was immensely influenced by the idea of the autonomy of the work of art, in the sense so crucial to modernist art. And it remains a useful way to imagine what you're doing as an artist or poet. Philosophically it has some value in terms of reflecting what art objects are, but it can also be over-emphasized, depending on how you understand what autonomy means. I like the idea of treating a poem as something autonomous as opposed to something representational, if you want to take those as polar opposites. I'm not taking some scene, thought, plot, or situation that exists outside of the writing of the poem and then bringing it into the poem, so that when you read it, it recreates that for you. I'm taking the poem as a space that creates its own object that exists like other objects in the world, next to them.

Now whether that's culturally autonomous in the sense of being a product of the culture, of all the biographical and historical and sociocultural factors in the culture—it's not autonomous in that extreme new critical sense of something that's split off. It's not pure. But I like it as a compositional idea. That I'm looking at it, working on it, it's something separate from me, not expressing what I'm thinking but expressing itself.

INTERVIEWER: So, it's more a pragmatic than an epistemological concept?

BERNSTEIN: Right. You're obviously striking on two terms that I'm comfortable with—the idea of the transitional in your first question and then the pragmatic. I wonder if it's a middle age phenomenon, in some positive sense. But I have a pragmatic sense about philosophical issues, more than I used to. Felix, who is just nine, had a long conversation with me yesterday in Oslo about questions like "is the world real or is it just a dream?" "what's the difference between dreaming and thinking?" "how do you know that there's not an evil genius in Descartes' sense who is controlling what you're thinking?" As somebody who goes into a kind of fantasy world at nine, constructs his fantasy world, what's the relation of that or the dream world to what he's actually experiencing? All of these are classic philosophical questions, and it was interesting to talk to him about it. But in the end, the interest in pursuing a kind of absolutist, extreme or logical progression in respect to this

is less appealing to me than to just take a more pragmatic approach to all those questions, and say, well, what difference does that make? Those kinds of ultimate questions are a kind of distraction—a favorite word of yours—from simply accepting “things as they are,” as Wallace Stevens says. Not that distraction is bad, distraction can be lateral. It’s like Felix said, he had this idea that there was something before what we’re seeing before us, and I said well, this is the answer, what’s before us is before us, i.e., in front of us. So this is a kind of phenomenological, pragmatic idea.

INTERVIEWER: Where does Stevens talk about “things as they are”?

BERNSTEIN: In “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” It’s also almost the name of another of his poems, “The Plain Sense of Things” (“It’s as if / We had come to the end of imagination the plain sense of it, without reflections”). But the problem with things as they are, like with autonomy, as attracted as I am to that, and of course Robert Creeley is the great poet of “things as they are,” is that things are never as they are. You get distracted, you look at them from a different point of view, and then another perspective opens up. You have multiple and often discontinuous “presents,” so what’s present is not just what you’re seeing right now but shifts to something else a moment later when you turn the light on in a different direction and it all doesn’t add up into one thing. It’s multiple different things at all times. So, the multiplicity is something that to me is part of the nature of things as they are—the transitoriness and the multiplicity. To try to make things whole and continuous is the abstraction or the hallucination, not the real.

INTERVIEWER: This differs from say, the Frankfurt School, who would have a more critical or pessimistic view, along the lines of “things are never what they seem”?

BERNSTEIN: That’s again interesting. Autonomy in the sense that attracts me is an idea that Adorno writes about. I find the Frankfurt School immensely useful, formative. There’s a kind of austerity to the Adornian aesthetics which I don’t share but that I’m yet very influenced by. With Habermas there’s too much of a problem in the later work that there’s some rational circumstance that you return to. Whereas I’m completely with him on critique, I don’t think critique ever ends. It’s sort of a question of false consciousness, which is very concrete. It’s not an abstract issue so that you have to read all these philosophers, it’s like what Felix was asking about the evil genius. What happens if an evil genius—not in the sense of a devil or something theological but in the sense of economic system, or when somebody wants you to feel like you’re getting paid a decent wage, and that everybody else is getting paid the same, but then it turns out that’s not true, people in the next town or country get twice as much and they have better plumbing than you have. You’re being deceived in a very concrete way. I think that’s true, I think our whole system in the U. S. A. is a constant production of deception. But I think the deception is not separable from the reality, there’s no way to make the false consciousness drop out to get true consciousness. I don’t believe there is any true consciousness. I believe there is a multiplicity of views, which is almost like the dialectical method itself. You might say it’s a method of distraction, where you look at it in different ways. It’s the fixation, the constant looking at everything the same way from the same angle, which can be avoided. But you can’t go outside of false consciousness because consciousness is never total or final.

It’s debatable whether what I’m saying is different from what’s being said in the Frankfurt School. Certainly, Walter Benjamin had complex and interestingly paradoxical views. He believed in the Messianic moment, or let’s say he spoke to it, I don’t know whether he believed in it. That’s a crucial idea, I couldn’t operate without the idea of this moment when the scales drop away from the

eyes and things become absolute. But that's a void—a blank—to me. Human history never arrives at a Messianic moment, that's the end of history, the end of consciousness. It's not interesting in itself, it's a conceptual end point (an *sich*). That kind of apocalyptic thinking is also not interesting an *sich*, and certainly not interesting poetically. Poetry exists almost in the savouring of illusion, or the shimmering of the transitory. This is not the same as the reinstating of it, or the patriotic promotion of it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you see poetry as strengthening or exaggerating it?

BERNSTEIN: I think poetry strengthens one's ability to perceive the transitory, to see it as permutations and possibilities that you are absolutely indebted to, beholden to, and responsible for. One of the problems with a certain kind of semiotics of the 1970s and 80s.

INTERVIEWER: Such as that of Roland Barthes?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, perhaps as that of Roland Barthes, to some degree, although again he's a writer I like very much, or much of his work. But especially the way in which some of these ideas filtered into North America. There was this idea that there was no responsibility toward things: if things were arbitrary—which they're not—or transitional—which I'd say they are—or possibilities that are constantly being instantiated, then what responsibility do you have toward them? But I say, total responsibility, the same responsibility as if they weren't transitory. In fact, even a greater responsibility, because you're partly responsible for their crystallizations. If something is a realization of a possibility and didn't have to be that way then it doesn't mean that it isn't a realization and that the effects of it, in the world, are not borne by the individuals in terms of their suffering, or their pleasure, their alienation, or their engagement. When you participate in the creation of all that you perceive, it makes your political responsibility all the greater. Things are not predetermined, they are not necessarily the way they are from an abstract political, theological, or social point of view. We make them that way, and we make our consciousness that way, and this is where the politics of poetic form comes in.

I also think that this is where the ethical, as I'd say now, would come in. I'm interested in differentiating ethics from morality, if you understand morality as a system of determining what's right and wrong. Ethics is more like aesthetics. Poetry could be understood as the aesthetical-ethical dimension of politics. It doesn't achieve political ends because it's not involved with political efficacy. But it allows us to imagine what the ethical space is, the space of our responsibilities in a world of transition, of change, of identities which are constantly being made, identities that are not fixed.

It's like ethnic identity. To say, as I am often prone to, that the poetics of identity, I am this particular description of myself, which I am, a Jewish male, 51 years old, from New York City—this is true, I wouldn't deny it—but what the essence of that is I don't know, I don't think that there is an essence. It's something to be explored, it's not something that can be eliminated, it's not something that's arbitrary, it's not something that vanishes. It's always there as a frame, but there are other frames that come in, it's not a determined thing. And one bears a responsibility for how one wants to imagine such things as group identity, personal identity, social identity.

INTERVIEWER: It seems as if there is a fine line between the arbitrary and the transitory?

BERNSTEIN: There is, and I'm interested in skating on that line without falling into the arbitrary. If anything, I'm more on the other side from the arbitrary, even though it seems like I'm as close to it. I think the arbitrary completely mistakes both the ethical dimension and the aesthetic dimension. It isn't

arbitrary what one experiences and perceives.

INTERVIEWER: What is closer to your concerns, language or poetry?

BERNSTEIN: It's hard to have to choose between those things, I'm tempted to interview you now and ask you what the difference is. Language is the medium, and poetry is the exploration of the medium. I'm very interested in thinking about the medium of poetry being verbal language. Often language is used metaphorically, as in the language of photography, music or dance. But we'll speak of language as the verbal language, such as the English language. For me, that's the material out of which I want to create poems.

Language, in this sense, is a very specific material, very unlike stone, as in sculpture, if a sculptor worked with stone and stone was his medium or material. Stone exists as a physical object in the world, it's not fundamentally social material. Sculptures are social objects, of course, because they're created by human beings. But language is itself a social medium. Paint, in and of itself, is not a social medium.

My wife is a painter, I often see the material she works with, the canvas, the wood frame, the pigments, brushes. None of those are intrinsically social materials, they're physical materials. Though, of course, the way we use them always has a social dimension. But people who work with language, whether journalistic, informational, non-fiction, fiction, poetry, are dealing with a social material. Any given word has a social history, it's spoken by people. It has an existence of course apart from any particular use of it, it's neither simply its alphabetic inscription nor its spoken utterance. It has a diachronic or historical dimension, as well as a contemporary dimension. It's constantly shifting. Every word, even the letter, or parts of words, evoke different things.

So, for me, poetry is taking language, as writing or verbal art, to the limits of what you can do, not circumscribed by other kinds of functional concerns. People often respond to that idea with the conception that well, then your language is not communicating, or, are you against communication? This always seems funny to me because poetry is a very small part of human activity, of verbal language. I would consider it monstrous to think that everybody should speak in poetry, that everybody does speak in poetry, or that everything should be written as poetry, or even that everything should be read as poetry. It wouldn't interest me *at all*, it's a little bit like a Messianic idea, it would void everything out to speak in that way.

INTERVIEWER: It's a very Romantic notion.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, the idea that somehow everything is going to be poeticized. I think of poetry as a particular kind of activity within a culture, working with language in a particular way. And what's interesting about poetry is that it is discontinuous, to *some* degree, with other uses of language.

INTERVIEWER: How does politics play into this, how can language be a radical issue?

BERNSTEIN: Following up from my thought of poetry being the research and development wing of writing, I would say that poetic thinking is a prerequisite for political thinking. It doesn't replace politics as we understand it—the election of people to office that legislate—but it can help to illuminate and reflect upon the terms that we use to conceptualize and represent political issues. All the great political issues involve the investment in certain kinds of nouns, syntax, relationships between concepts. To reflect on those concepts, those nouns, those meaning-formations may actually create a more flexible, usable, even a more pragmatic politics, that is less fixed and invested in the status quo

of its code words. But, of course, politics goes in the opposite direction in the U. S., where we have the most reductive kind of language used to debate the most colossal and significant issues. Ten to twelve words are often meant to suffice to describe enormously complex situations. It becomes advertising, slogans. Maybe a very easy, perfectly comprehensible way, of understanding this point is to say that poetry and slogans are at the opposite end of language discourse. There is poetry that is slogans. By slogan poetry I don't mean poetry that sounds like jingles I mean the slogans that brand something as authentic, "Genuine, one hundred percent, sincere sentiment product." The kind of poetry that I'm speaking of is fundamentally in opposition to thinking of reality through slogans, through reductive characterization.

INTERVIEWER: And in opposition to advertising as well?

BERNSTEIN: Let's say that poetry is advertising that is not selling anything. I'm quite interested in using advertising techniques, or even in anticipating advertising techniques, in my writing. But it's only selling self-reflection, or not even selling it but making it available as a kind of reflective process on the culture itself. So, again, it's a kind of navigation tool in the culture. It isn't that poetry has to justify itself through its pragmatic value as providing a kind of greater mobility of thinking for politics. Poetry requires no justification, it has its own value in, of, and as itself. But that itself is political. The idea that certain things have value by virtue of themselves, not through what they're going to get you, not through some end result. And that's where the pleasure of poetry is, which is crucial to the way poetry operates. Pleasure in my case through the comic, which I think is pleasurable. Reflection, thinking, turning things upside down, debunking as well as remaking, are all immensely engaging and enjoyable activities.

INTERVIEWER: But when you speak of "poetry" here you mean certain kinds of prose as well?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, that's true. The poetic function could take place in any kind of verbal art. It is that aspect of the verbal work that is not for anything else, is not conveying information. You could take an index of a book or a railroad timetable. It's very important that a railroad table is accurate if you're going to catch a train. But as a poem, you could just use the forms, derange every item, have different things in every spot in the table, so that it uses the form of a railroad table but conveys no information. It's useless as information, and its uselessness is what gives it its aesthetic function. It's simply pleasurable, it exists as a reflection on something that exists in the social world. It's not just made up, it's an extension of something that's used in the world.

INTERVIEWER: Is this a step back or forward from an avant-garde position?

BERNSTEIN: Two steps forward, two steps backward. Yes. It's not an avant-gardist position—I don't see an advance, I'm not trying to create a new language or purify the language in that modernist, avant-garde sense. It's much more an idea that one uses the materials at hand.

INTERVIEWER: But more in a kind of symbolist way?

BERNSTEIN: Well, yes, all your comments are quite accurate. There's something wonderful about the Mallarméan idea—I suppose if you're not French—of creating this shimmering (*frisson*). This shimmering between the different shards of language. That you can put this syllable on the left-hand side, and in the center you put another word in, and then another on the side. You create this echoing, which I think is what happens, it's almost mystical. However, I believe this is not supernatural but rather

pragmatic. And I don't believe that poetry is a purer language, or that language is otherwise debased. To think that there is a debased language of advertising and commerce, and then one purifies it. It's the opposite, I would say. I would want to debase the language of debasement. To take this language of commerce, and take it out its functionality, so it becomes even less informational—to mime it, parody it. Not to get something that's more pure, but rather less pure. Because in our commercial society, people take marketing and advertising as a kind of purity, it's not viewed as being debased. TV isn't seen as debased. It's poetry that's debased, because it doesn't do anything, doesn't sell or convey anything, it's not motivating people to buy things, is obscure. And that's what's interesting about it, making it more impure, transitory, social, less individual—at least in the aesthetic sense.

INTERVIEWER: Some of your poetry has been translated into Finnish for tomorrow's event, yet your view of translation as reflected in the name of your 1995 seminar at SUNY-Buffalo, "Resisting Translation," suggests maybe a skeptical view of translation?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, although I've always regretted that I called it "Resisting Translation." As I said at the time, it should have been "Irresistible Translation," or "The Impossibility of Not Translating." I resist a certain conception of normative translation, like many others. Not only when considering poems but certainly very much when considering poems. You can't take a poem that exists in one culture and create something that's the same, or that's the equivalent, in another culture. There's something about a poem that's specifically nontranslatable. In a way what's poetic about a poem, or about a specific piece of language, is that which really can't be translated.

But another way of saying that is that it's only translatable, that even when you read it in your own language you're translating it, bouncing off of it or transforming it. If translation is understood as prejudicative, as creating some kind of equivalent, then I think that's impossible for poetry. However, it may be that translation is the closest thing to writing and to reading that we have. Writing a poem is itself a kind of translation of experience or of other poems. When one writes one poem one's translating another poem oneself, and the translating between languages becomes a kind of conversation, becomes reciprocal, a transformation, a recreation into the other language. Translation is then, in a sense, the only possibility for poetry.

So, one goes from resisting normative translation to an idea that translation is irresistible, or that you can only translate, that there is nothing you ever do but translate, that interpretation is a kind of translating, and it always and only translates one among multiple aspects. Because nothing can ever translate the totality of something else. That's the nature of the transitoriness and specificity of language and experience.

One translates friends, and recreates them, and then, as a form of exchange, it's one of the most appealing aspects. I think especially now, in the early part of the twenty first century, where we want to have possibilities of exchange among different constellations of cultures, of meanings, as a way of finding tactics to resist the intense standardization that some aspects of globalization bring.

On the television news about Genoa that I was watching in New York before I left, CNN was commenting on the great irony of anti-globalization protesters using the internet to organize. This is a form of false consciousness, in its primary, Adornian sense. CNN—the fundamental multinational propaganda and news organization—characterizing the demonstrators in Genoa as "anti-globalization" but hypocritical about it, whereas in fact, of course, they're not anti-globalization, they're a global movement. They're for an alternative globalization, they're not for globalization as a form of control by multinational corporations and the homogenization that it brings. There are other ways of imagining

globalization or the international. I think translation is very important in terms of them.

We don't translate into Esperanto or into the Euro-language, or Euro-American, which is what we're quickly developing—and which is English, actually—but rather have an idea of reciprocity and difference, and particularity. Everything isn't created as homogenous. There is this homogenized, global culture, much of it manufactured in the U. S. My son, when he turns on the television in the hotel room, he sees all of the same shows. Just this morning we saw Larry King interviewing Julie Andrews. I suppose Julie Andrews, and Mary Poppins, is almost a kind of Disney culture but that's not local culture to me. As an American, my relation to Disney is "I grew up with it" but it's not my local culture—perhaps no more than, after a while, it will be the local culture of anybody else. The entertainment industry—which I think does wonderful stuff that I'm not against—that aspect of mass or world media, that's one aspect of our culture, it's not going to go away, and it's not necessarily bad. However, what would be bad is to think that that's the only cultural value. We have to continue to develop multiple other cultures, and those other cultures necessarily involve translation and the exchange that translation brings, which emphasize a difference, which emphasize the specificity of given languages.

It's not like I'm saying the same thing in my New York accent that you are going to say in your Helsinki-based Swedish. If it's the same thing, then there's no point to the poem. If I'm sad because my mother died—she's not, happily, dead—I could write a poem that conveyed that. But this is not what's interesting about a poem, it's the specificity, culturally, that's not translatable in the American poem that I write, which you then respond to, in order to create something specific and different, which perhaps brings in the strangeness of the English syntax into the Swedish, that makes something different that doesn't exist in Swedish, as Swedish.

INTERVIEWER: This particularity is also aesthetic?

BERNSTEIN: The particularity is primarily aesthetic, even formal, in terms of the language itself, to specify, not only to preserve the difference in the language but to generate more differences. And this is the odd perversity. It's the opposite of homogenizing, so that we can find a way like with a translation program, you know: select all, drop into the translation machine, get your translation out on the other side.

INTERVIEWER: Translation machines are quite funny though.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, using them can create an interesting kind of difference itself. It's not that one wants to develop, like when you're talking to somebody that you think is a moron, or deaf, and you say: Y-E-S, I W-O-U-L-D L-I-K-E S-O-M-E B-U-T-T-E-R. You want to create not greater sameness but greater difference. Translation, rather than trying to reach out to be the same, should reach out to be more different, and multiply and exaggerate the difference of accent, style, regional differences, to allow the translation to create greater disparities rather than to eliminate the disparities. The idea of eliminating this disparity strikes me too much as a world of totalization of singularities, in which everything is the same and we just use different words to describe it.

INTERVIEWER: Speaking of transitions, another transition: how has your poetry changed during the last five years? Has music become more important for your poetry? At least that is the sense I get when I read some of your work after *Dark City*.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, I've gotten involved in this libretto on the life and work of Walter Benjamin. It's

interesting to write with the idea that the text will be performed with and through music. It's hard for me to characterize exactly what's been going on in the last five years. I have a book coming out from the University of Chicago Press, in the late fall, called *With Strings*.

I think I'm also interested in creating poems that are sui generis, i.e., each poem is almost what I call a novelty poem. Rather than the idea of a lyric poem with a similar form in which one is expressing an emotion for a single voice, in the same way, each poem happens under a different premise, form, shape, or motif. I like this idea of the heterogeneity of forms. I've always been interested in that, I've always had that. The idea of each poem sort of being its own style continues to appeal to me.

But then I think you're also right that there's kind of an emergence of a more intensely musical, prosodic, rhythmic dimension with less cultural filtering and shifting. I've been very interested in cultural sampling, often comic, in the 1980s especially, which would quote from advertising and all kinds of other things and juxtapose it and change individual words so it would be both demented and wacky, and highly juxtaposed. I'm less interested in the sampling right now, and the quotational, I guess because I've done the stuff that I can do. So if you drop that away and have almost the transitions themselves, I think you get something that seems more musical, in its movement moment to moment.

INTERVIEWER: Somebody suggested on the POETICS-list that your poetry has become "Romantic."

BERNSTEIN: That was because of the Benjamin libretto. In many ways, I've always been a very Romantic poet, if the Romantics are understood in their political dimension. If Blake, Byron, or Heine are understood as Romantic poets, then I'm a Romantic poet. Romanticism understood as rhetorical. But to say that you understand Romanticism rhetorically, which means that you don't accept sincerity for its own sake but investigate the rhetoric of sincerity, isn't to say that you're not interested in sincerity or ethics. Maybe I'm more at ease with that now. I've been so suspicious of the rhetoric of sincerity as a form of manipulation and deception that I would always include it within frames, whereas now I'm not so concerned about that. I think the ethics of the poem have to do with allowing a multivocal sincerity, sincerity which isn't contained by a single voice. Maybe the musicality you're talking about is that coming through, that the self-consciousness doesn't have to be foregrounded, for me, in order to avoid the traps of the manipulation and deceitfulness of sincerity. The ethical dimension could be understood as a kind of resonating, musical dimension without seeming to be pure. I don't feel it comes off as pure, I don't feel I'm articulating a Romantic sincerity or purity. At the same time, it's perhaps less encumbered by its self-consciousness.

INTERVIEWER: How have your academic preoccupations changed over the years? In "A Blow Is Like An Instrument," an essay of yours that I liked very much you wrote: "I suspect part of the problem [of the humanities] may lie in the way that a certain idea of philosophy as critique, rather than art as practice, has been the model for the best defence of the university." Would you like to elaborate on this?

BERNSTEIN: On the one hand, it's been very useful to have a lot of the strong debunking and critiques that we've seen within philosophical, academic culture of the last twenty years — questioning the master narratives, the great ideas. I've learned a lot from it and participated in it. On the one hand, this decreation or critique is valuable as an analytic tool. But when the analytic tool is all that's offered, one loses the phenomenological recreation which art makes possible. The absence of the aesthetic and of the value of aesthetic creation as an extension of critique, rather than as a mystification, troubles me. So often aesthetic activity is viewed as cultural symptom, which can be analysed, as opposed to even more rich investigation of cultural constitution through non-rational

means. Too often, analysis becomes reductive in a way that poetic thinking would help to offer an alternative to. The overly mechanistic, reductive, rationalistic aspects of critique can themselves be critiqued by the anti-reductive, aesthetic and ethical dimensions of the sort of art that I'm articulating.

As a teacher—which I've only been for the last eleven, twelve years—I'm interested in advocating aesthetic values in an undergraduate context, to younger undergraduates from Western New York. These are people who have had little or no contact with art or poetry—the value of that has absolutely disappeared from the education they have been offered. These students have been at school for twelve-fourteen grades, and yet art as an activity has no status at all, thinking aesthetically doesn't exist. Simply professing—I'm a professor of poetry so I profess poetry—becomes a culturally valuable activity. Talking about the fact that sound has meaning apart from its function, trying to get young students to listen to sound, and to enjoy the pleasures of sound within language for their own sake, and not for what they signify.

INTERVIEWER: You don't think they get some sense of that from music?

BERNSTEIN: Absolutely. But pop music is so inscribed within a highly commercial generation-bound thing that it's very hard to make that transition to verbal language or to the visual arts. But you're right, music is the greatest area of aesthetic free play, and that's a great aspect to it. Yet it's highly delimited by its commercial delivery. Making that translation, from the commercialization of sound to its non-commercial possibilities, is part of what I'm getting at. Thinking in terms of the question of translation we were talking about: You can translate ideas, or critique, but what is not translatable about an idea would be the poetic dimension that exists within it. Ideas are not completely translatable. A theory that exists in France isn't fully translatable to the U.S., every culture is not the same. Ideas are not entirely transcultural; they are as specific as poems.

I'd like to aestheticize or symptomize the theory, and theorize the poetry, which is almost the opposite of what's going on. To understand poetry as a philosophical enterprise would almost require a different kind of poetry, because it's true of course that most poetry is symptomatic of its culture, and not a critique or an investigation. But this is true of most academic theory and criticism as well.

In my graduate teaching, I try to explore not so much any given. The tendency I see in universities is this idea of mastering a given set of narratives, often viewed now as being theory, with relation to a particular period or set of relatively fixed cultural objects—even with all the critique of the canon—and then a rather systematic theory based on one, two, three, or five master theorists, or theories. Whereas for me, what's interesting is a collage of multiple different levels of artistic and philosophical works, seeing how they're woven together, and how they go from one to the other. The clash and connection between multiple different perspectives also seems ideal within a university culture, rather than trying to impose some overall program in the kind of study that's going on.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that you've become more disillusioned with theory? When I had a look at your recent syllabi on your home page on the internet, I noticed that they tend to include less and less theory, and that the theory included seemed more phenomenologically inclined or so, than before.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, I get interested in different kinds of things all the time. I've never taught the same seminar twice, although I might go back to certain seminars that I've done earlier, and which may have had a greater amount of philosophical material, at different times.

Often, it seems to me I can go through a whole semester without ever discussing any poems on the syllabus, though, nonetheless thinking about and around the poems.

I'm interested in poetics, too, and the history of poetics—poetics understood as its own genre, as distinct from theory. The writing of poets, and to some degree artists, about their work—rather than philosophers or theorists. It also depends on what the people know who come into the environment, they may be fairly well informed philosophically and not perhaps as informed poetically. It's interesting to look at this fairly heterogeneous set of works.

What I'm doing this fall is what I'm calling Second Wave Modernists, which is poets born in the U. S., mostly, between 1889 and 1909—but also blues musicians and comedians—and to think about the connection between George Burns and Hennie Youngman, Oscar Hammerstein II and Cole Porter, who wrote the Tin Pan Alley songs, with people like Robert Johnson, or other blues artists, with the poets of the Harlem Renaissance, who had an interesting set of similar concerns—Sterling Brown, Melvin Tolson, or Langston Hughes.

I think it's a very interesting moment, almost defining what people think of as postmodernism, even though it's of course within the so-called modernist period.

INTERVIEWER: How is that?

BERNSTEIN: Because some of the real, smashing breakthrough work had been done, and this work is much more aestheticized, it's much less assertive in terms of the basis of what it's doing. Also, in Europe there would be Tzara and the Dadaists as well as Surrealism, Aimé Césaire. It's very interesting to think of it as a fabric, these twenty years going on, to some degree overshadowed by the great modernist innovations. Maybe a little less interested in innovation. A lot of the radical modernist innovations in the turn toward language had already occurred and that allowed for a certain level of intricacy, introspection, and sophistication in thin work which I find very appealing. Much more private work, less in your face in the public sphere. And the connection between folk music and popular music, such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and some of the poets is fascinating. Also trying to find an alternative to mass culture, or to an official culture. So, you have official culture on the one hand, the official poetry or artwork that represents the culture in its highest sense, and you have the beginning and development of mass culture, then you have this other stuff going on. It really wasn't a mass entertainment industry, at that time. The Tin Pan Alley people are very interesting, kind of creating a transition from opera and operetta to what becomes popular music—but still it's popular music, it's not the same as what's going on in this restaurant right now, this pop-manufactured music. Oscar Hammerstein II, Ira Gershwin, or Yip Harburg, these lyricists are compelling for their cultural negotiations, mostly immigrants—a lot of them Jewish immigrants—creating mainstream, non-ethnically marked, cultural icons like Irving Berlin's "White Christmas"—the classic Christmas song written by a Jew. Then also the comedians who were creating a certain kind of parodic comedy, vaudeville, cultural works that don't fit in to the model of mass culture that developed after the Second World War. Although many of them were part of that, and helped to create that to some degree, still it's a different moment. So, I'm interested in the difference between mass culture, official culture, popular culture or folk culture, and unpopular culture—which is what I would call the Objectivists (Zukofsky, Reznikoff, Oppen), or the kind of poetry culture that I'm fundamentally interested in.

Where does the blues fit into that? Delta blues is also unpopular culture in that it's folk rather than culture, and it's the viscerality, going back to the materials, the minimalism but also the conceptual formalism, the extreme aestheticism.

INTERVIEWER: It's somewhat more popular?

BERNSTEIN: It's popular but it's not mass, not manufactured. Delta blues is not pop, nor is it rock or hip-hop. Like jazz and soul, it's close to an indigenous culture, extending, echoing, translating and transforming African-American slave and work songs. It's the most aesthetically sophisticated American art in that it provides the model for an iconoclastic, homemade, collective, and rhythmic art, rooted in its materials (both social and physical)—whether music or poetry, song or painting. Sophisticated in the way that it transforms foundational materials. At the same time, the blues comes from black culture and has been subjected to appropriation, commercialization, and exploitation. The genius of James Weldon Johnson, Hughes, Sterling Brown and Tolson is how they—here it comes again—translate this material—this social materiality—for poetry. And I see this as connected to the contemporary work by the Objectivists and the Tin Pan Alley lyricists, which was going on separately, decidedly so, but still part of the same cultural space understood in the widest possible sense.

INTERVIEWER: The term “modernism” appeals to you more than the term “postmodernism”?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, therefore “Second Wave Modernism”—I think a lot of the “turns” that are claimed for postmodernism are already there in modernism. Someone like Gertrude Stein fits the bill as a postmodernist, though she is surely one of the key modernist innovators. What you have is multiple, contradictory directions within modernism, fuelled by modernization at the turn of the twentieth century and the first world war soon after. This produced a set of cultural conditions that allowed for not simply a monolithic “master narrative” conception of modernism but also for a critique of those master narratives. “Postmodernism” creates a kind of historical amnesia, where we create this idea that the modernists were all involved with totalization and progress; they all weren't. The antinomies of modernism and postmodernism are already part of modernism and they persist into the present. I prefer the temporal marker post-war. The Second World War creates a profound schism within the twentieth century, within human history, and that war is a necessary frame for all post-war art, at least up through my generation. I prefer the term, the second war, evoking as it does the systematic extermination process in Europe—the whole conception of ethnic cleansing in the West—and the atomic bomb in the East. These twin or duel events—the systemic extermination of the Jews and the A-Bombing of the Japanese—are marked by a dystopian technologizing forever tied to race. So, I'm not unmindful of the historical period following 1945, which I consider to be a seismic break from the period before.

Notes

1. This interview was conducted in Helsinki in August 2001. Its Finnish translation may be found at the following website: <http://users.abo.fi/fhertzbe/bernstein.html>