

Bernstein's Disruptive Praxis

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When a poem enters into the world it enters into a political, in the sense of ideological and historical, space. (My Way 4).

Charles Bernstein's work seeks to wed the political to poetry, or at least acknowledge its presence, yet his work is experimental, less accessible, and rarely mentions political figures, so is it, can it be, politically useful, especially in a revolutionary moment? And as he thinks it is, how so? These are common questions in regards to Bernstein's work and to the work of post-avant poets' work. Bernstein's answer for how it can be politically useful lies in the community of poetry, the poetry's multiplicity/diversity, the eccentricity of innovative poetry, and the process of writing poetry. I will talk about these three ideas primarily and relate them briefly to the Occupy movement in the States.

In essence, Bernstein believes that poetry has been largely left aside in our commodity driven culture. Of the arts, it is on the low end of the commodity ladder. That, of course, with other things like inaccessibility leads many to lament the so-called decline of poetry. For Bernstein, this issue pushes poets to create an alternate economy of poetry, one that is outside the pressures of creating works that will be designed and advertised specifically to sell, works that do not have to conform to some preset advertising lingo or development. Moreover, since it is not highly valued in the capitalist system, it compels those who read and write it to focus on the difference between it and the preset sound-bite driven words of capitalism. In other words, it can call attention to the uses/abuses of language by capitalist forces (industry, advertising, government) to craft language full of certain favorable political tendencies. Such an alternate economy focuses on using language in creative ways but lives practically in the people and groups who form it, such as small presses, poets, schools, reading venues, etc..., things that are

often short-lived, mobile (up for change and renewal) and dependent on the period. And in many ways, his central political ideas here are descended from those of Antonio Gramsci as he argues for disparate intellectuals, not a universalizing hegemony. (In sum, Gramsci argues that the elite create a cultural hegemony that is hard to break through for political change because it feels natural, so if an individual request is granted, it calms the system, when what is really needed is an entire system change.) In a practical sense, Bernstein has been active in fostering a poetry community. He has run a radio show, has run small press projects, has been instrumental in starting important poetry websites, and in more recent years he has been a teacher and has pushed his students to become involved in creating poetry communities—his success in pushing these ideas can be seen in the numerous small presses and reading series started by his students soon after leaving his tutelage. The poetry community itself, though small, can be vibrant and can act as a site of resistance in a culture.

In *My Way*, Bernstein says, “I have wanted to bring poetry into the ‘petty, commercial,’ indeed material and social world of everyday life rather than make it a space in which I could remain free of these things, or, better to say, chained to an illusion of such freedom” (234). In other words, he wants a poetry that is engaged with its period. He stresses this elsewhere in *My Way* by saying

Poetry explores crucial questions about core values that constitute a polis; it allows for reformulations of the basic issues of political policy and the means we use to represent them. It may even mock what men, and women, hold most dear, so that in our laughter we may come to terms with what we cling to.

Poetry thickens discussion, refuses reductive formulations. It sings of values not measurable as commercial sums. (240)

Poetry, by its very nature, is political for Bernstein. It explores values at the heart of a community and allows us to reframe issues of important. This is where we begin to look at ideas of diversity/multiplicity. Poetry’s specific connection to a place and a person mean that it does

not allow for reductive tactics. And sometimes Bernstein is critiqued for this aspect since it is probably troubling to traditional poets--as it is myriad, there is no universalizing it because it actually should change with the period and the people. Bernstein argues for a plurality, a diversity, in poetics that ultimately is like a many-headed monster, with no center from which to judge and control the system. (In some ways, I think this is why many turned to Bernstein with Occupy Wall Street because he is arguing for a decentralized poetry that responds to politics just as the Occupy movement is decentralized and thus more difficult to contain.) Ultimately, he argues against poetry as a heterogeneous field. The joy of it is its diversity, but traditional work, or as he calls it "Official Verse Culture," tries to cut back on this diversity by touting the universal principles of poetry. For Bernstein, A diversity of styles is an act pushing for freedom of form/language control. He says in *A Poetics*, "I value eccentricity in poetry for its ability to rekindle in writing and thinking, for the possibility of sounding an alternative to the drab conformist fashion-minded thinking that blights our mental landscape" (118). His valuing of the eccentric is a way of valuing alternative modes of thinking. He states this many other times, such as "*Poetry is aversion of conformity in the pursuit of new forms, or can be*" (*A Poetics* 1). The new forms he is talking about are new forms of thinking. Poetry at heart should be for Bernstein a form of resisting conformist thinking or universalizing thinking. When it is working well, it should be a search for alternative modes of thinking.

This push for the eccentric, the disparate in poetry, stems from what I'll call in the context of this conference Bernstein's poetic anarchism, a non-conformity that denies an easy readability (he might just argue for a form of Marxism). In other words, he suggests that poets insists "that politics demands complex thinking and poetry is an arena for such thinking: a place to explore the constitution of meaning, of self, of groups, of nations,--of value" (*My Way* 5).

We can see an example of this idea in his poem in “Solidarity is the Name We Give to What We Cannot Hold.”

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 serial poet, a paratactic poet, a
 disjunctive poet

 I am a vernacular poet, a talk poet, a dialect
 poet, a heteroglossic poet, a slang poet, a
 demotic poet, a punning poet, a comic poet.

He lists himself as multiple different poets. His list shows the wide variety of poetry being written; it shows how different types of poetry enters into his own work (the “heteroglossic”), and it shows his desire not be held down by the singular. It suggests that no single poet exists behind the work but that we have multiple poets made up of a variety of language, of labels. A similar idea is at play in his poem “In Particular,” except it doesn’t focus on the type of poet he is. He gives us a list of people.

A Christian lady with toupee
 A Chinese mother walking across a bridge
 An Afghanistani eating pastrami
 A provincial walking on the peninsula
 A Eurasian boy on a cell phone
 An Arab with umbrella

(Lots of repeated sounds going on here, i.e. poetic techniques). The poem goes on for several pages in a similar manner. It does focus on specific types, specific people but without mentioning their names. And it doesn’t show us a way of interpreting their actions. Some of them are said to be dreaming, writing, or rowing, but that’s it. Poetry in our times should include these diverse people, and at least in the U.S. has started to in ways, and it would be hard to find poetry from an earlier period that would have such a list, but we are not told what to do with the

list. We are given the multiple and told to hold it, but the multiple is also partial, not something that applies to all. He stresses, “Poems are partial and particular not universalizable expressions of humanity” (*My Way* 4), so if we have that desire to state things like this poem expresses something we all feel, we would have difficulty doing it. (I could come up with something like we are all starting to feel a diversity in a global world, but that’s really not it is it?) In essence, it is hard for us to take control of the poem, and it makes us question whether it is a poem and what the nature of poetry is. With a poem like this one, we must ask what is the purpose of it? What does it want to do to/inspire in us? This does not look sound like a traditional poem; it is what Bernstein calls eccentric because it plays at the edges of the poetic. It gives us something out of the ordinary (and yes, some poems are rather ordinary). This pushes us as readers and writers of poetry outside our usual boundaries of poetry. We might dismiss it, but we would be considering an alternative to the normal before doing so.

Beyond the inclusion of the eccentric, Bernstein focuses on the process of writing poetry itself as a political act. He explains this idea by stating that the process of writing poetry itself is a practice in non-traditional thinking. Art itself is a process in non-traditional thinking, so the product is less significant for Bernstein than the process of creating, and ultimately, the nature of its political content rises and falls with the political context, but the act of creating poetry creates a push for the individual. This aspect of the process is one reason that Bernstein does not focus as much on political figures specifically or on witness as much political poetry does. The process of writing poetry helps fight against the increasing push to dehumanize the individual, to group people so that they can be dismissed. He states:

Poetry can, even if it often doesn’t, throw a wedge into this engineered process of social derealization: find a middle ground of care in particulars, in the truth of details and their constellations--provide a site for the construction of social and imaginative facts and configurations avoided or overlooked elsewhere. (*A Poetics* 3).

For Bernstein, the process itself helps to point to what is individual in us; it helps us retain our individuality while arguing against a system of poetry and politics that wants to claim that the individual is the universal. In essence, the process of creating poetry pushes us to think in non-formulaic ways, and reading it can push us to look at the language being used by the mainstream media, by the advertising complex. It can help us look past language as given to us. He has talked about this in relation to post-WWII poetry: “Poetry after the war has its psychic imperatives: to dismantle the grammar of control and the syntax of command” (*A Poetics* 202). For him, this still applies now. In looking at ways to dismantle control, he focuses on crafting new forms that move away from the language of “massed media” (OWS 1). He says that we need to insist on “creating our own frames rather than translating our intuitions, aspirations, and demands into tabloid commodities” (OWS 1). The process of writing poetry is a process in creating new forms/frames. In speaking of his politics in poetry, he says:

If I speak of a ‘politics of poetry,’ it is to address the politics of poetic form not the efficacy of poetic content. Poetry can interrogate how language constitutes, rather than simply reflects, social meaning and values. You can’t fully critique the dominant culture if you are confined to the form through which it reproduces itself. (*My Way* 4)

It’s not the content specifically that makes poetry political for Bernstein; it’s the extent to which it critiques the forms (to use Gramsci’s language), critiques the cultural hegemony.¹ His desire for the eccentric falls into this process because it lies outside what is expected of poets.

Ultimately, it is through experimentation poetically that new forms are created. His own work is known for its poetic playfulness. For example, he often uses what he calls “anti-absorptive” language with forms of non-linear thought like parataxis or homophonic replacement or

¹ So, it might be argued that his poetry is not political enough because it is not directly addressing some political content, but looked at through the lens of Gramsci, if the cultural hegemony is in place, one might feel so comfortable with the way things are that one only asks for small changes instead of systemic change. In the standard form, the comfort allows for certain small level critics that feel large. Once the standard form is thrown out, the entire field looks different.

techniques like intentional misspellings, sound play, and word play. Take, for example, this excerpt from “A Defense of Poetry”:

Nin-sense. sense is too binary
andoppositioin, too much oall or nithing
account with ninesense seeming by its
very meaning to equl no sense at all. We
have preshpas a blurrig of sense, whih
means not relying on convnetinoally
methods of *conveying* sense but whih may
aloo for dar greater sense-smakinh than
specisi9usforms of doinat disoucrese that
makes no sense at all by irute of their
hyperconventionality (Bush’s speeches,
classically).

He is intentionally playing around with the spelling of the language here, with conventional language practice, and he is making an argument for nonsense, i.e. non-linear forms. The criticism is that experimental poetry is not clear and sometimes appears to be non-sense, but of course the argument is bigger than the binaries of clarity and nonsense. What might be called non-sense is an alternative to the sense of mainstream language and might allow for making sense in a broader not boundaried language format. And while he is playing with the word spelling here, it does not take that much to figure out which words he is referring to, but it does push us back to look at the words individually more than we otherwise might. He is both asking us to think about linear logic as a mode of thinking and how just because it is conventional (and thus comfortable) it is not necessarily the best route for us. Language is open to manipulation, deception. As he says in his book *Content’s Dream*, “there are no thoughts except through language, we are everywhere seeing through it, limited to it but not by it” (49). As engaged readers and perhaps writers of poetry, we must be aware of the medium we are using.

In conclusion, I promised at the beginning to turn to look at his poetry in relation to the Occupy movement, one of the most significant protest movements in recent U.S. history.

Bernstein was pulled into the movement originally through friends, and he joined the protest march. He was recognized by poets in the crowd and filmed and later was interviewed about it. He published work in the Occupy poetry anthology and has been reading several poems related to the movement at readings in different parts of the U.S. The actual political sentiments of the movement are close to his own personal politics and the movement shares some relation to his views on decentralization in poetry. Of poetry, he says, “Decentralization allows for multiple, conflicting authorities, not the absence of authority” (*Attack of the Difficult Poetry* 182). Such a statement could also be applied to the Occupy movement. In fact, one of the common critiques heard in the U.S. media is that there are no spokespeople or common platforms. According to Bernstein, that is one of the “beauties of the movement” (OWS 2). It cannot be easily defeated by cutting off a central body of people. In fact, the movement has morphed in many directions in many cities depending on what is most central to the crowd. A brief look at the various Occupy poetry anthologies show quite quickly that much of the poetry is content driven protest work. Still, it’s method of bringing in people from different backgrounds to address issues that have become non-issues politically, and it is divergent. Bernstein has been arguing for something similar (though not necessarily protest driven in content) by arguing for and attempting to create a poetic community that thrives on the eccentric, that thrives on forms that diverge from the standard forms. He has said for much of his career, “I want a poetry that interrogates how language constitutes, rather than simply reflects, history; and not only history, but social meaning and values.” (*My Way* 67). Bernstein argues ultimately for the inclusion of diverse communities and diverse concerns in poetry through formal innovation, eccentricities, and the process of simple creating without worrying about creating great works or failing.

Works Cited

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