

# Onoma

<https://06515.blogspot.com/2017/11/father-bernstein.html>

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## Father Bernstein

of Maxwell Owen Clark

There is something about Charles Bernstein's poetry that defies explanation, exposition, elucidation, summation, generalization, communication, representation, method, system, totalization. There may even be more than one something about him that is like this. The point is that I absolutely do not know. I believe Charles's poetry is better off left alone then, to speak for itself---of course. Even if I lauded him with a gush of superlative veneration about his poems, which, by the way, he deserves---that would be wrong! To demonstrate this thesis of mine, an experiment: try and find a quotation in Bernstein that could be used as an epigraph for an essay or book. I myself can't seem to do it. Even though I desire to. Indeed, have repeatedly tried to. But at this, I must immediately remark that this inability to excerpt a quotable aphorism from his text is no sign of its weakness. It is indeed an element of the great innovative contributions Bernstein has made to literature and beyond. The tissues of his poemata are set in so pataqueerically as to more or less successfully interrupt his easy quotation. He doesn't want to be lazily skimmed by just anyone, you hear?! Bernstein, with enormous rigor---I mean with some kind of especially bent drive, has closed-off all the lazy short-cuts, etc., that would integrate him anywhere near the pith of the massive consumerist spectacle. He refuses to be assimilated into the herd. Any poet deserving of the name is indeed a shepherd and not otherwise.

I remember the first time I read Charles. Content's Dream was sitting there in the stacks of a library, spine out, displaying itself. I would notice it in the midst of my tracking down Amiri Baraka every once in a while. The alphabetical order of their last names brought them very close together in this library. I remember I had seen it there a couple of times before, each time with increasing wonder. Content's Dream, eh? Eventually I was lured to open it. I had never read such things before! The limited texts of Baraka then available to me got pretty "out" at times, but this was positively bent. It was if the pages were glowing. In the reference points then available to me, I might have characterized it as "Baraka plus Derrida". In any case, because I didn't have a card to this community college library I was regularly haunting, I requested it be transferred to the local public library. And it was. And I checked it out. It almost became like an extra appendage for a week or two.

Then I found his Electronic Poetry Center website! That was it. I was home. Here was some "secret store" of knowledge as I had read of in P.B. Shelley. I will access that website until either it or me dies. The archival work of Bernstein though! This is one reason why I use the word poesy so much! Poets don't just write poems. The very "doing" (poesy) of their lives are their art. Bernstein has archive fever in the best way. He is full or partial sovereign, if you will, over many immensely massive websites. He

attends to the graves of the elders. He is a respectful man.

I forget how I got his UPenn mailing address, but eventually I sent him a hardcopy print-out of my juvenile work MASSIF: a protocol for my eulogy. I believe he responded by email, and that was that. It is an absurdly one-sided email correspondence we have kept since then. I bombard him with whatever welter of expressions I happen to have, and once a month or so he writes a sentence or two back. I feel safe expressing myself to him though. He seems to read me quite a bit.

I read his books, then I read them again, then I read them again. They are reference points for me. They function as a sort of anchor for me in my aesthetic meanderings. His voice spoke to me, has even directly addressed me by name of late, through his texts, like an elective father or voluntarily obeyed master. I love his voice. It has this sonority I associate with Yiddish patois, as sharing its sort of nebulously distinctive trait. It's hard to explain in the properly respectful terms it deserves because of the micrologically subtle linguistic patterns of abuse heaped against it by the bigoted members of various different ethnic groups. If I must, however, I will say it: it is a sort of "whine". But a more subtle or musical whine, more playful and curved, not entirely unlike the style of feminine vocals in Hindu musics. The only way to appreciate it is to find as many Yiddish derived people as you possibly can and have friendly conversations with them, preferrably including humorous anecdotes and such. Posthence you may even also begin to realize that Bernstein has a really quite geo-linguistically distinct version of the Yiddish accent. I am not properly apprised at the moment of exactly where its from, otherwise than NYC, but if you've ever heard Charles's son Felix speak you will recognize it is of a very peculiar ethnic inheritance they carry in themselves.

I've met Charles in person only three times in my life. The first time was at a memorial for the Russian poet Arkaadi Dragomoshchenko. I got there way early, as per usual, having travelled from New Haven to NYC to meet the revered legend and living giant Charles Bernstein. Guess who else did too? Charles! Suddenly we had someone snap a classic photo of us together on my cellphone. And was it that among my opening lines to him were: "you're my Bloomian father"? I forget his response, something to the effect of "please don't kill me then". It was so rushed. The next time I visited him was at his own beautiful residence somewhere in Brooklyn. I remember cringing with joy when he came to open the door, even looking up and away for a moment, in disbelief that I was to now meet again with my veritable hero among the living. I've never had such a good conversation as the one I had with Charles that day. He was like a best friend, who you can just confide yourself to. The third meeting was unfortunate, and painful to recall. I will repress it for now, except to say it did nothing to affect the strength of our friendship and collaboration---was merely too brief and too hemmed in by the institution at which it took place.

I feel my poetry repeats Charles's too closely sometimes. Charles is always thirty or so cycles, as he may or may not have put it once, ahead of me. If anyone is silly enough to be looking for a generic statement of methodical interest about how Charles's poetry affected mine, however, here: somewhere in the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E journal Charles writes about the "systematic derangement" of our inherited grammars. That always stood out for me as a rallying cry. Grammar is important to study, but only in order to juke it out, transcend it, make it otherwise. I feel I owe any new derangement of our grammars I may have achieved as of yet in my life a significant nod to Bernstein's influence.

Max Clark at 9:05 PM