



Charles Bernstein's Dark City: Polis, Policy, and the Policing of Poetry

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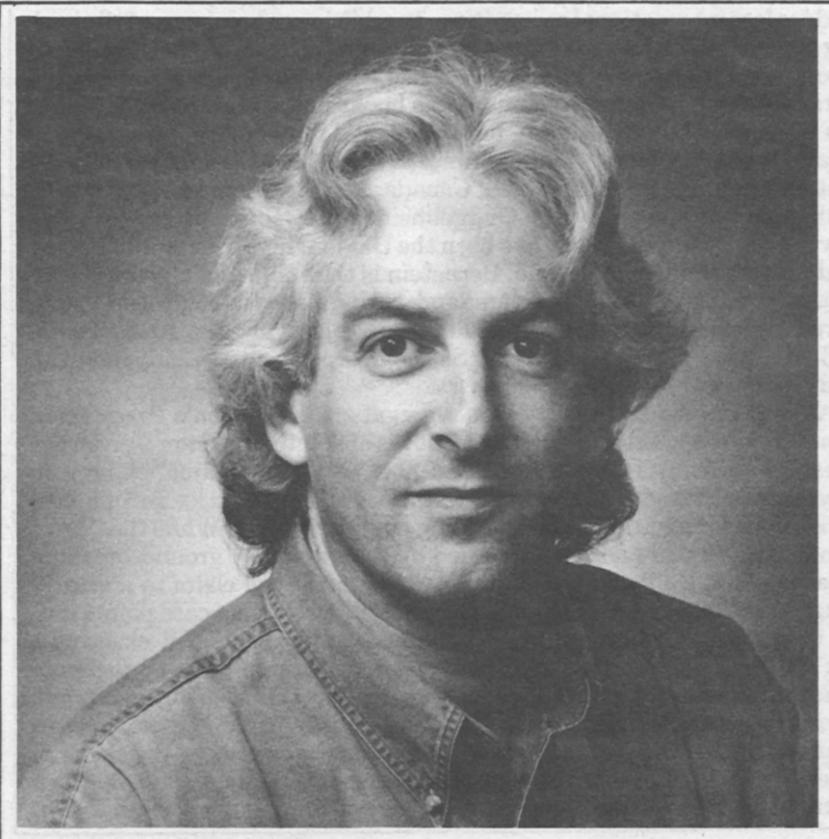


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HANK LAZER

Charles Bernstein's *Dark City*: Polis, Policy, and the Policing of Poetry



Hank Lazer: photo by Rickey Yanaura

*Of course, what
many have regarded as a liberating
permission
to write in otherwise unsanctioned ways
will provoke professional sanction-takers to see
only red.*

(*Dark City*, 74)¹

Charles Bernstein's writing, particularly his poetry, tends to generate two kinds of response. First, the mere mention of his name occasions a metonymic substitution: "Bernstein" becomes the means for an evaluation (or attack on, summary, or advocacy) of Language poetry, and his poetry recedes into a more general discussion of the sociology of American poetry-culture. Second, his poetry gets discussed principally in terms of its stylistic features and poetic assumptions, somewhat in accord with Bernstein's own critical pronouncements:

There is no escape in writing (or "elsewhere") from structures/forms, they are everpresent—"de" forming and "re" forming. To see them—to hear them—as inseparable from "content." . . . All writing is a demonstration of method; it can assume a method or investigate it. In this sense, style and mode are always at issue[.] . . . [A] "constructive" mode would suggest that the mode itself is explored as content, its possibilities of meaning are investigated and presented, and that this process is itself recognized as a method.

(*Content's Dream*, 72, 226, 227)²

Indeed, in this essay I intend to continue some aspects of those two projects of critical consideration. But, after an initial lengthy detour, I would also like to try a different approach to Bernstein's poetry, an approach which, quite improbably, owes its genesis to a strategy undertaken by Helen Vendler in relation to John Ashbery's poetry.

Fifteen years ago, when the name "John Ashbery" occasioned similar critical anxiety as the name "Charles Bernstein" today, Vendler, with great directness, brushed aside the tendency to write (merely) about Ashbery in terms of style:

It seems time to write about John Ashbery's subject matter. His *As We Know* will, of course, elicit more remarks on his style—a style so influential that its imitators are legion. It is Ashbery's style that has obsessed reviewers, as they alternately wrestle with its elusive impermeability and praise its power of linguistic synthesis. There have been able descriptions of its fluid syntax, its insinuating momentum, its generality of reference, its incorporation of vocabulary from all the arts and all the sciences. But it is popularly believed, with some reason, that the style itself is impenetrable, that it is impossible to say

what an Ashbery poem is "about."

(*The New Yorker*, March 16, 1981, 108)³

Vendler proceeds, in an essay of considerable lucidity and influence, to discuss precisely what Ashbery's poems are about. Similarly, I wonder if it is possible or even desirable to discuss Bernstein's poetry in terms of content? Would such an approach inevitably deform and domesticate (as it thematized and de-mystified) Bernstein's poetry? Certainly, over the past few years, that is one thing that has happened to Ashbery's poetry: once the cutting edge and the flashpoint for debates about poetry's direction and function, Ashbery's poetry is now seen as an elegant, somewhat wistful, poetically nostalgic but easily thematized poetry on the passage of time, on the phenomenology of dailiness, and on the indirectness and instability of self-portraiture. There is, then, a cost to such an approach: thematized or content-based criticism, in the manner of the New Criticism, inevitably pretends to a unification of material. In the case of Bernstein's poetry, a thematic or content-based approach may falsify his poetry which is quite insistently based on difference and on a collagist practice of dysraphism, which Bernstein, in a footnote to a poem given that same term as its title, defines as

a word used by specialists in congenital disease to mean a dysfunctional fusion of embryonic parts—a birth defect. Actually the word is not in Dorland's, the standard U.S. medical dictionary; but I found it "in use" by a Toronto physician, so it may be a commoner British medical usage or just something he came up with. *Raph* literally means "seam," so dysraphism is mis-seaming—a prosodic device! But it has the punch of being the same root as rhapsody (*raph*)—or in Skeat's—"one who strings (lit. stitches) songs together, a reciter of epic poetry," cf. "ode" etc.

(*The Sophist*, 44)⁴

Nevertheless, acknowledging the liabilities of a thematic approach, it does seem worthwhile to ask, especially after twenty books, what are Bernstein's recurring concerns. After an initial consideration of the reception of Bernstein's writing and its place in recent representations of American literature, I will attempt to begin a thematic reading of Bernstein's most recent poetry.

An inquiry into the recurring concerns in Bernstein's poetry may also begin to answer a recurring criticism that has been directed at his poetry. Interestingly enough, this particular line of criticism has been leveled at Bernstein from opposing critical quarters. In a letter written to me seven or eight years ago, Helen Vendler acknowledged that while some of Bernstein's ideas (or poetics) were of interest, she asked (both about Bernstein's writing and about Language poetry more generally) what was memorable about the poetry, what lines or passages were memorable or beautiful. To answer Vendler in her own terms would require a detailed (re)consideration of the memorable and the beautiful (see Gertrude Stein's "Composition as Explanation," 1926).⁵ Certainly the form of much Language poetry—from Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* to Ron Silliman's *Tjanting* to Bernstein's "Standing Target"—is memorable and, arguably, beautiful. From a position which, unlike Vendler's, is generally sympathetic to innovation and experimentation, Richard Kostelanetz in his *Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* discusses Bernstein in terms of complaint remarkably similar to Vendler's:

BERNSTEIN, Charles (1950). The most conspicuous of the language-centered poets who gained a precarious prominence in the 1980's[.] . . . Trained at Harvard in philosophy and thus rhetorically skilled, Bernstein's writing is derived from early Clark Coolidge and middle Gertrude Stein. Though his experiments in poetry are various, there is not enough consistent character, even in the kinds of experimental intelligence, for many (if any) poems published under his name to be immediately recognizable as his, which is to say that they lack signature. The second, perhaps related problem is that few, if any are individually memorable. Ask even his admirers which poems they like best, and you will find them unable to identify anything. Thus, Bernstein's career raises the radical question of whether a purportedly major experimental poet can be someone whose poems, apart from his or her theories, lack signature and are not remembered.

(21)⁶

First, those of us who have been reading Bernstein's poetry over a number of years can identify particular poems as favorites: "Standing Target," "The Only Utopia Is in a Now," "Amblyopia," and "Emotions of Normal People" among them. But the complaint of a lack of signature (which, I believe, my essay will show to be a dubious claim) is particularly odd. Such a complaint comes close to a mainstream poetic assumption: that poetic accomplishment must be marked by the

achievement of a singular, recognizable, individual "voice," following the commodified artworld's insistence that an artist develop a conceptual signature and/or a repeated, recognizable style. But Bernstein's work resists such simplistic commodification; he produces instead a varied poetry based more on principles of difference. But, as with the (paradoxically) highly personal and individual manner of self-erasure in John Cage's work, Bernstein's poetry of difference—in spite of or *through* his resistance to a poetry of (mere) self-expression—*does*, over a long period of time, develop individualistic modes and manners. What Bernstein's poetry involves is a resistance to (but *not* absolute evasion of) self-expression and the poetics of signature, voice, and a homogeneous style. Indeed, Bernstein's work does not ignore but is in constant dialogue with such forces.

Putting aside for a moment the conflicting evaluations of Bernstein's poetry—in part because as Dana Gioia and others have noted, we live in an era in which a genuinely critical debate and a seriously engaged critical writing about poetry are virtually non-existent, replaced instead by predictable puffs and (less frequent) dismissals—I find it shocking and wrong that Bernstein's poetry is unrepresented in virtually every "major" anthology of American literature and nearly every "major" anthology of contemporary American poetry. *Dark City* is Charles Bernstein's twentieth book of poetry. In conjunction with *Dark City*, Sun & Moon has also reissued Bernstein's ground-breaking first collection of essays, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984*. As co-editor with Bruce Andrews of the important journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and as one of the leading figures of Language poetry, Bernstein entered debates over the role and direction of contemporary American poetry as a serious, provocative critic of the poetic mainstream, decrying the limitations of what he labeled official verse culture:

What characterizes the officially sanctioned verse of our time, no less than [William Carlos] Williams's, is a restricted vocabulary, neutral and univocal tone in the guise of voice or persona, grammar-book syntax, received conceits, static and unitary form. . . .

Let me be specific as to what I mean by "official verse culture"—I am referring to the poetry publishing and reviewing practices of *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *The American Poetry Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry* (Chicago), *Antaeus*, *Parnassus*, Atheneum Press, all the major trade publishers, the poetry series of almost all of the major university presses (the University of California Press being a significant exception at present). Add to this the ideologically motivated selection of the vast majority of poets teaching in university writing and literature programs and of poets taught in such programs as well as the interlocking accreditation of these selections through prizes and awards judged by these same individuals. Finally, there are

the self-appointed keepers of the gate who actively put forward biased, narrowly focused and frequently shrill and contentious accounts of American poetry, while claiming, like all disinformation propaganda, to be giving historical or nonpartisan views. In this category, the American Academy of Poetry and such books as *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing* stand out.

(*Content's Dream*, 245, 247-8—from a talk delivered in 1983)

That narrow-mindedness and xenophobia continue today in mainstream publishing—including the most recently up-dated American literature anthologies of Norton (4th edition, 1993), Heath (2nd edition, 1994), HarperCollins (2nd edition, 1993), Prentice Hall (1991), and McGraw-Hill (8th edition, 1994). The exclusion of Bernstein's writing by the editors of these anthologies has no credible basis. These anthologies all include many poets of similar age with far fewer books of poems, fewer awards, and far less international recognition. In addition to being one of the leading figures in the Language poetry movement, Bernstein has published twenty books of poetry and two books of essays (one with Harvard University Press); he has edited numerous books and special journal issues; his work is widely translated, published, and read in Argentina, China, Spain, Australia, New Zealand, France, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, England, Canada, Mexico, Finland, Yugoslavia, and Japan; he has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and an NEA Fellowship; and, since 1990, he has been the David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters at SUNY-Buffalo. Bernstein is the subject of a great deal of critical writing by critics as diverse and distinguished as Marjorie Perloff, Jerome McGann, Rachael Blau Duplessis, Alan Golding, Keith Tuma, Bob Perelman, Pierre Joris, Henry Sayre, George Hartley, Linda Reinfeld, and Geoffery O'Brien, among others.

At best, Bernstein's poetry gets segregated into Norton's *Postmodern American Poetry* anthology (1994). But his absolute exclusion—given the presence of many less well-qualified poets—in the "major" American literature anthologies points to an aesthetic conservatism (or xenophobia) which calls for additional consideration (and correction). While the "new" American literature anthologies—led by the ostensibly ground-breaking Heath (edited by Paul Lauter, first edition 1990)—lay claim to a greater range of inclusiveness, that inclusiveness, as Bernstein's case points out, is, in spite of a valid and important multiculturalism, still exactly as Bernstein claimed in 1983 of official verse culture: narrow, stylistically rigid, and aesthetically xenophobic. It is precisely this stylistic and formal narrowness that is most alarming about *all* of the "new" American literature anthologies. If we were to use an ecological analogy, the range of (poetic) species exhibited in these anthologies is frighteningly narrow. I can think of no credible basis for the exclusion of Bernstein (or a number of

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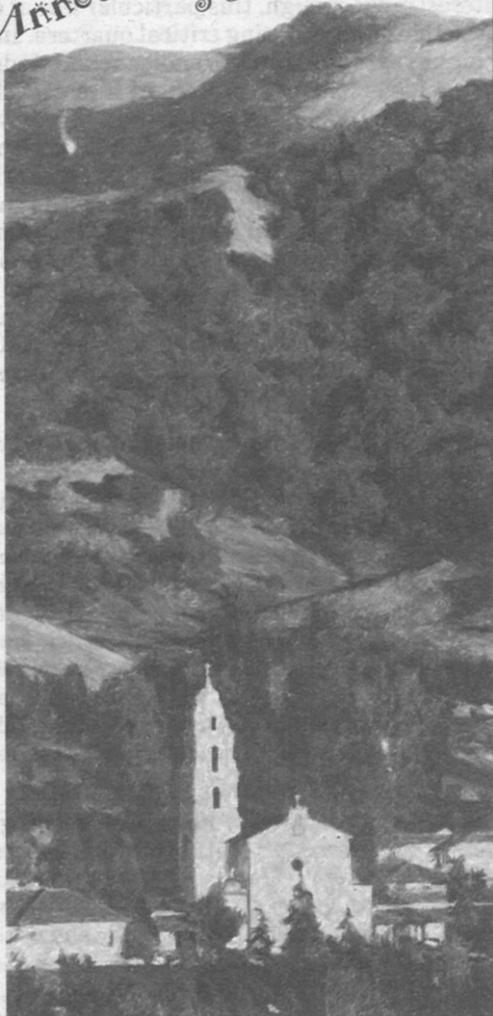
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The "new" American literature anthologies make Gertrude Stein's lament of 1926 equally pertinent today:

it is very much too bad, it is so very much more exciting and satisfactory for everybody if one can have contemporaries, if all one's contemporaries could be one's contemporaries. . . . If every one were not so indolent they would realise that beauty is beauty even when it is irritating and stimulating not only when it is accepted and classic.

("Composition as Explanation," 515)

As with Stein's own writing (which, similarly, baffles most makers of American literature anthologies), Bernstein's writing presents us with, to paraphrase William Carlos Williams, difficulties that stay difficult. These difficulties, if presented to readers of American literature, would prove quite worthy of consideration, for they are precisely the difficulties that call into question our most ingrained habits of reading. The situation for Language poetry (and Language poets) within the academic practice of creative writing is roughly the same as the situation in the anthologies: Language poets are kept outside the walls of the institutionalized practice of creative writing. Interestingly enough, the principal pressure for the situation to be otherwise comes from students in these programs who are often more democratic and adventurous readers than their teachers (who, for the most part, were raised on the institutionalized divide between poetry and criticism, creativity and theory).

While Bernstein's poetry does not provide an easy or steady target for quotation nor for the simple summary-by-quotation that would assure us that these are Bernstein's essential views and themes, there are recurring concerns (even if emeshed in the play of ever-shifting tone and form and even if freed from the false innocence of direct self-expression). The first poem in his 1994 collection *Dark City*, "The Lives of the Toll Takers," establishes a consideration of the state of poetry today as one such recurring concern for Bernstein. If we ignore the complexities of voice and advocacy, we find some seemingly simple and straightforward axioms or conditions for poetry: "There is no plain sense of the word,/ nothing is straightforward,/ description a lie behind a lie:/ but truths can still be told" and "No 'mere' readers only/ writers who read, actors who inter-/ act"(24, 20).

Bernstein's poetry, like nearly all of the significant poetry of this century, takes its place against poetry as a simple form of self-expression. As John Cage has it, an art of "self-alteration not self-expression" and "a way of writing which comes from ideas, is not about them, but which produces them" (*Composition in Retrospect*, 15; and *X: Writings 1979-1982*, x).⁷ While Bernstein rejects today's mainstream activity—"Poetry: the show—/ me business" (*Dark City*, 17)—the notion of a self or an individuated writer of poetry remains a complex issue that will not, even with the magic wand of the phrases "the death of the author" or "the fragmentation of the self," disappear. For Bernstein, one distinctive and idiosyncratic form of self is an insistence on his presence in poems as a kind of besidedness, a besidedness (as in the root of the word ec-stasy) that is manifest in alternative or multiple phrasings:

(I
pride myself on my pleonastic ar/mour.) {ardour}
(Besides.)
Love may come and love may
go
but uncertainty is here forever.
{profit?}

(*Dark City*, 14)

The entire poem ends with the word "Besides," and as in Bernstein's earlier poem "Standing Target," there are disruptive syntactic forms that undermine any traditionally unified voice or version of stock expressiveness.

But even a process of self-erasure (as in Cage's chance-generated compositions) or self-dissemination bears with it personal traces. Bernstein asks and claims, "Then where is my place?/ Fatal Error F27: Disk directory full./ The things I/ write are/ not about me/ though they/ become me" (*Dark City*, 15). The humor, vocabulary, and rapidity of shifts are all idiosyncratically Bernstein's. In other words, it is important to recognize that all collaging is not the same nor is it of equal interest, durability, or intelligence. All experimentation, even if premised upon the displacement of self-expression, is not the same. While it most certainly would be wrong to think of (current) poetic expression apart from its community, its cultural, historical, and economic contexts, there remain ways in which Bernstein's writing differs decidedly even from the writing of other Language poets. That is part of why Kostelanetz's remarks are so wrong in two fundamental ways: a personal signature is not a goal for Bernstein's writing (in fact, the blunting of such through a poetry of sustained difference is one of Bernstein's chief accomplishments); and besides, Bernstein's writing is, as I hope to demonstrate, distinctive.

In *Dark City*, humor—slapstick, punning, low humor, the humor of an associative stand-up comic (a la Lenny Bruce or Jackie Mason), a self-critical Jewishness—grows more and more important to Bernstein's writing. His poetry of play deforms the common and the clichéd, whether the source be nursery rhymes (and, obliquely, Bernstein's role as father and as reader to his two children figures into his writing again and again)—"There was an old lady who lived in a/ zoo,/ she had so many admirers/ she didn't know what to rue" (*Dark City*, 11) and "There was an old lady/

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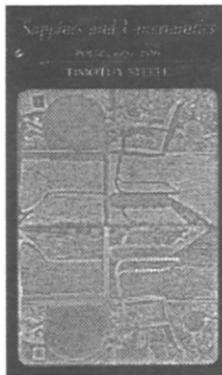
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who lives in a stew . . ." (*Dark City*, 14-15)—or the humorous re-phrasing of banal music lyrics (in this case, variations on Bob Dylan's "Knocking on Heaven's Door"): "Take this harrow off/ my chest, I don't feel it any-more/ it's getting stark, too stark/ to see, feel I'm barking at Hell's spores" (*Dark City*, 24). Before we assume that serious, difficult poets lack a sense of humor, we might recall that T.S. Eliot was a devoted fan of Groucho Marx. In fact, one might conjecture that the example of the stand-up comic contributes significantly to the multi-voiced productions of modernist and post-modernist poetries.

One joy in reading Bernstein's poetry comes from his uncanny ability simultaneously to spoof a given discourse—in "The Lives of the Toll Takers" the rhetoric of investment calculation and market penetration—and to investigate an issue in poetry of considerable seriousness:

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(studies show higher levels of resistance to double-bind political programming among those who read 7.7 poems or more each week

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Poets deserve compensation for such services.*

For readers unwilling to pay the price we need to refuse to provide such service as alliteration, internal rhymes, exogamic structure, and unusual vocabulary.

(*Dark City*, 22-23)

A recurring topic for Bernstein has been Poetry as/and/is Business. Within the inherent humor of presenting poetry as a kind of small business investment opportunity, Bernstein's counsel does raise serious questions: isn't poetry a small business with plenty of indirect economic benefits (prizes, reading fees, academic positions, grants, residencies, publication) which usually go unacknowledged? What are the significant trends in poetry today? (is the wise investment in performance-oriented poetry? in computer or CD-based texts? in multicultural identities?) What are the benefits of reading poetry? What is an efficient way to distribute poetry? (free through e-mail? or through the hierarchies of prestige and "major" [hard-copy] publishing houses?) What services does a poet provide and how is s/he to be compensated? In such matters, Bernstein has throughout his career been importantly influenced by the thinking of Thoreau, who insisted that "trade curses every thing it handles; and though you trade in messages from heaven, the whole curse of trade attaches to the business" (*Walden*, 70).⁸ Bernstein and others, especially experimental poets who resist the trends and habits of the mainstream, face a serious issue: how to commodify poetry (for publication inevitably constitutes commodification) without destroying poetry's oppositional potential and the poet's position as a player in the enterprise of cultural criticism.

The avant-garde is, as Bernstein realizes, not exempt from the deforming pressures of a market economy. While David Antin contends that poetry is essentially "an advertisement for nothing," most poetry in fact is an advertisement for a community of writers, for itself (as a worthy object of attention), and for the writer (as "competent" and "professional" and worthy of "compensation"). While Shelley's idealism contains some element of truth—we all are working on one big poem (collectively, over time)—anyone who has tried to get published also knows that poetry too is an intensely competitive business. Knowing Stein's description of the movement of innovative poetry from outlaw to classic, a wise poet-investor might wish to venture into the new but might also do so in a savvy manner: "What if/ success scares you so much that at the point of some/ modest acceptance, midway through/ life's burning, you blast out/ onto the street, six-shooters smoking, still a rebel./ For what?/ Of course new ventures always require risk, but by carefully/ analyzing the situa-

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tion, we became smart risk/ takers" (*Dark City*, 21). And such may in fact be both Bernstein's own position—as the "rebel" who now holds an endowed professorship and who is published in *The American Poetry Review*—and that of Language poetry generally. Language poetry itself is now a frequent topic for university-based critics writing about contemporary poetry, as the central school in recent anthologies such as Paul Hoover's *Postmodern American Poetry* (Norton, 1994) and Douglas Messerli's *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960-1990* (Sun & Moon, 1994), and as the object of some anxiety among younger innovative poets (see for example Susan Smith Nash's "Beyond the Language Movement: A Manifesto of Aesthetics in a Time of Communication, Plague, and a New World Order" in *Taproot #4* with its implicit question "what next after Language poetry?") who seek both to extend the work of Language poetry and to differentiate themselves from it. Also, over the past five to seven years, many of the leading Language poets have, for various reasons, written less and less in the way of manifestos or adversarial critical essays. The era of market penetration and of positioning by way of antagonism is over for Language poetry. The risks being taken by most Language poets today may be "smart risks" or risks that occur within an established domain (of market consolidation or risk repetition). Just as the term "risk" (used as a form of praise) within the domain of a mainstream poetry of personal experience and singular voice now sounds absurd, the same may be true for most forms of innovation in Language poetry. In *Dark City* Bernstein addresses, albeit humorously, this sense of having reached some sort of plateau: "Voyage of life/ Getting you down? Felt better when things/ Were really rocky & now there's smooth/ Sailing but it's lost its meaning?" (133-134). Perhaps it is fair to say that Bernstein's writing—particularly the essays—is less adversarial than it was ten years ago (and a re-reading of *Content's Dream* confirms such a sense). Bernstein's work is more widely read; Language poetry is a movement and a variety of poetry that has achieved a certain level of visibility. But there has also been a cost for such citizenship, a cost for participation in a broader (institutionalized) literary discussion for both Bernstein and Language poetry—a politeness and conciliatoriness that go along with a quest for greater acceptance. In re-reading Bernstein's earlier essays, though, I must also conclude, however, that most of the complaints he lodges in *Content's Dream* (against the narrowness and exclusions of the mainstream) are still, for the most part, valid.

But the more serious question to ask—rather than what comes after Language poetry—is whether or not Language poetry, or more specifically the work of Charles Bernstein, represents (merely) an extension of earlier developments in modernism or whether there is something fundamentally or seminally distinct about Language poetry's contribution. My own

sense is that such a question must be answered with attention to the specific cultural and historical circumstances in which Language poetry and the writing of Charles Bernstein appeared. In answering in the affirmative—that Language poetry and Charles Bernstein do make important contributions to American poetry—that contribution may, oddly enough, not be principally based in formal innovation per se, but in altered professional conceptions of the poet and in re-directed and re-imagined relationships between reader and writer and in re-thinking earlier modernisms. (In the latter regard, the New Formalism, by contrast, is fundamentally a nostalgic and regressive phenomenon, for it makes no claims for undiscovered or unknown forms in its predecessors, nor for a significantly altered perspective in the re-reading of prior poets. Its primary claim seems to be that poets should return to those already accomplished forms and learn to do them again.)

To return though to the specific poems in *Dark City*, we find that Bernstein is quite skilled at taking a common phrase or proverb and deforming it. In "Locks Without Doors" the phrase about "the quality of mercy" becomes "The quality of Hershey's is not/ too great although I always preferred/ Skippy's smooth to crunch"(55) and "Then again the quality of Jersey is not/ much to wriggle your teeth about"(56). Or, in the same poem, more substantive transformations occur such as "not for you/ the hullabaloo" (54), "Books can be deceiving" (57), and "I can't but make it con-/ fluesce" (52), the latter (with its assertion of the inevitable running together of all writings) stands as an important corrective to Pound's lament late in the *Cantos* that he could not make it cohere. The high modernist quest for unity—Pound's quest for closure and unification in the *Cantos*, Eliot's attempt in *The Waste Land* to shore fragments against his ruin—gives way to a postmodern understanding more attuned to Cage's relativist assertion: "that two notations on the same/ piece of paper/ automatically bring/ about relationship" (*Composition in Retrospect*, 22). Or, if Bernstein's writing were to be called a new kind of realism, that realism would be premised not upon closure and (thematic) unification but upon resistance to these particular over-used poetic devices.

One particular register in Bernstein's compositional arsenal is, in addition to a wide-ranging vocabulary (which contrasts with the more narrow claim of an anti-poetic diction by William Carlos Williams's 1960's descendants, whose claim really amounted to the reintroduction into poetry of slang and of some elements of vernacular "common" speech), the recurrence of a peculiarly clotted sound-effect, a kind of line and sound that is deliberately but interestingly difficult to say, a kind of anti-mellifluousness: "Slump not lest slip, slumber, swagger into/ indelicacy, delirious indolence" (*Dark City*, 50) and "Sustenance evaporates in subsequent/ slumber. Amulets emit armatures" (*Dark City*, 42). When

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Kostelanetz laments the lack of a signature to Bernstein's poems, I would counter with this peculiar sound-quality in Bernstein's work. Admittedly, such a feature of sound is not established with the consistency or reductiveness to constitute Bernstein's (ugh) "personal voice," but it is a recurring idiosyncratic marker in his work. As is his odd inhabitation of a late nineteenth-century iambic Swinburnian mellifluousness:

For long have I entombed my love
 Less fleck than flayed upon
 Who quaint and wary worry swarms
 In tides lament nor laminations ore
 As stare compares a belly's tumble
 Have I awaited by the slope
 Of lumined ledgers lumbering links
 Foregone though never bent

(*Dark City*, 51)

When, as he often does, Bernstein makes apparent the mode or form of construction for a given passage of his writing—as in the following example where a process of word association from one word at the end of one sentence to the same word used with a different meaning at the beginning of the next sentence—we must ask if that display of conscious construction (cf. Thoreau: "Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter?" *Walden*, 46) is the only content of the passage:

*Not that I mean to startle just
 unsettle. The settlers pitched their tents
 into foreign ground. All ground is
 foreign ground when you get to know
 it as well as I do. Well I wouldn't agree.
 No agreement like egregious
 refusal to hypostatize a suspension.
 Suspension bridges like so many
 drummers at bat, swatting flies in
 the hot Carolina sun. No, son, it
 wasn't like that—we only learned we
 had to be proud not what's worth taking
 pride in.*

(*Dark City*, 51)

First, it is tempting to answer "no," and to back up such an answer by isolating assertions that do indeed have a substantial resonance for Bernstein's poetry and poetics: "Not that I mean to startle just/unsettle." Such a process of isolation amounts to a repetition or reapplication of New Critical methods of reading-as-thematizing. (The

third sentence may also be subjected to a similar act of thematization-by-isolation.) But what such a method fails to take into account is the deliberately ambiguous status of the authoritative proverbial pronouncement in Bernstein's writing. In this section, each self-assured pronouncement is immediately undone or at least made dubious by the next sentence which stands as a literal counter to its partner sentence, exposing the rhetoric which allows the allusion of unchallenged authoritativeness (folk wisdom) to come into being in the first place. To "No, son, . . ." we must answer, "right, we don't know what to take pride in, including this authoritative tone which allows us to make such a negative declaration." Bernstein thus mixes irony, pastiche, play, and serious declaration in a conscious act of theatricalized dysrhythmism. And, as Bernstein's previously cited discussion of dysrhythmism points out, there is a rhapsodic element to such writing. Bernstein's poems also demonstrate some of the range available to a collagist writing practice which, as David Antin has argued, may be the single most important critical principle of twentieth-century innovative poetic practice.

Though Bernstein's work, and that of Language poets generally, tends to be presented in opposition to many of the projects and styles of mainstream poetry, there is an important overlap. Among mainstream poets (and poets of the plain style), Louis Simpson and Philip Levine (in different ways) typify attention to "the ordinary" or to "the common life." Bernstein too is interested in "the ordinary": "As if the/ ordinary/ were just there answering/ our call but we/ won't sound it/ out, or find the work/ too demanding (de-/ meaning), too extra/ ordinary" (*Dark City*, 62-63). Whereas Simpson and Levine thematize that ordinariness, by relegating it to the position of the poem's subject matter (presented in a thoroughly unselfconscious language which pretends to a non-distorting transparency), Bernstein, like Ashbery, is concerned with the ways in which different modes of language fashion our conceptions of the ordinary, indeed the ways in which different modes of language are the ordinary in which we live:

*Every syllable stings. & that's the
 hardest thing to stomach on a low-noise
 diet, if you can sink your teeth into
 the
 thought that all that sound gotta be
 digested. Anemic
 poetry—or roughage?—for the health-
 continent society? But
 why prize distraction over direction, song over
 solemnity? The times detail a change of
 pockets & everybody's loopy, mind made*

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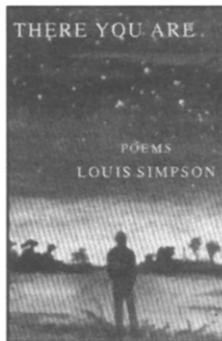
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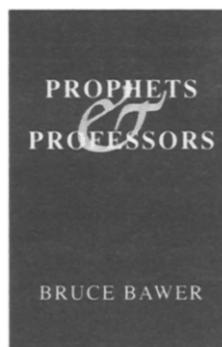
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up with hospital corners, while the leaves
of our lives unsettle their occupation.

(Dark City, 64)

Like the music of Charles Ives—a collage of avant garde dissonances alongside immensely popular elements of band music—Bernstein's collage poetry increasingly involves the language of movies, the style of stand-up comedy, and the language of business. At times, along with the camp citation of cartoon characters, there is even a quaint, Ashberian sentimentality to Bernstein's most recent poetry:

Popeye
no longer sails, but Betty
Boop will always
sing sweetlier
sweetliest
than the crow who fly
against the blank
remorse of castles made
by dusk, dissolved in
day's baked light.

(Dark City, 81)

One of the most important poems in *Dark City* is "Emotions of Normal People," an extended collage-poem which invites comparison with Bernstein's earlier classic "Standing Target" (in *Controlling Interests*, 1980). Though, overall, *Dark City*, as all of Bernstein's larger books, is built on a principle of difference—i.e., each poem different from those which surround it and a book of poems which offers conscious resistance to signature and the cults of personal voice, personality, individualized-instantly-recognizable-style, and poetry-as-personal-expression—long composite poems such as "Emotions of Normal People" recur throughout Bernstein's twenty book output, and, in my opinion, constitute his most important, distinctive, and most fully realized contribution to American poetry. The poem begins in the language of computer sales:

With high expectations, you plug
Into your board & power up. The
Odds are shifted heavily in your
Favor as your logic simulator comes
On-screen. If there's a problem
You see exactly where it's located
& can probe either inside or
Outside with a schematic editor.
English-like commands make
Communication easy.

(Dark City, 85)

As in the earlier poem "Standing Target," Bernstein's concern is with the world of words and concepts in which we command and are commanded. While the sales-rhetoric—consistent with an American ideology of individualized choice—insists that the product will be "Compatible with target-embedded/ Resident assemblers & wet-wet/ Compilers. & the fact that you can/ Configure it yourself means you/ Get exactly what you want" (86), Bernstein calls our attention to the recurrent elements of control, standardization, and normalization in the technologies which shape our thinking. The ways in which we are sold on computers—with their "controllers," "a family of workstations," an "external trigger," "low-loss mating," "debugging," and "remote-error sensing terminals (RESTS)"—re-sell us on embedded American ideologies as "several vendors [attempt] to control the marketplace by promoting standards that especially benefit their computing architecture" (89). In "Emotions of Normal People," where computer/business transactions are juxtaposed with thank-you notes, psychological analyses, descriptions of marital difficulties, market surveys for personal products, and book advertisements, Bernstein is concerned with the ways in which we are targeted in the processes of social and technological normalization—a process of narrowing possibilities which has obvious ramifications for poetic expression. In the consumer-oriented world which Bernstein lays out—a world of complete commodification, from computers to self-esteem—where exchange and sales are endless, the one certainty is that all of the time "Operators are on duty."

True, there is a truism or cliché at the heart of such a poem: that we today are bombarded and manipulated by many messages (i.e., that the Marxist term 'over-determination' names an alarming omnipresence). But Bernstein explores that truism and focuses attention on the particular language-terms and rhetorics that may foreclose thinking and standardize our options if such forces are not resisted. Thus, poems such as "Standing Target" and "Emotions of Normal People" embody both a pedagogy and an implied primer of/on resistance.

The final, extended section of the poem begins "Are you a normal person?" Of course, some deviance from the norm is perfectly normal—"Probably for the most part you are [normal]./ Your sex complexes, your fears and furies and petty jealousies,/ your hatreds and deceptiveness, only serve/ to secure your normalcy" (96). Nearly all of us remain fit targets for the consumerist bombardment detailed earlier in the poem, and thus Bernstein's aside in the flat discourse of a scientific news release—"Dr. Cuit P./ Tichter of the Johns Hopkins University/ found that Norway rats/ died quickly if their whiskers were clipped/ and they were put into a/ tank of water" (96)—rhymes with the other modes of manipulation

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and targeting detailed throughout the poem. As targets, we are warned in the appropriated language of pop psychology that "There are no adequate emotional outlets/ for many stresses and people who depend completely/ on their emotions frequently find themselves/ in jail" and "The intestine is/ as sensitive to bombardments/ from the brain as the skin of some people to sun rays" (97). In Bernstein's characteristic mode of self-cancelling irony, the end of the poem warns, "In any case, sarcasm/ is evidence of a sadistic trend in one's/ personality" (101). So, if sarcasm is not appropriate—and Bernstein's collage-poems of social and consumerist manipulation rarely descend into a simplistic sarcasm or superior scorn—what strategies are available to us? I think that Bernstein's entire poetic output answers that question by embodying modes of writing and thinking which resist simple commodification and which undermine most forms of normalized, standardized "communication." Thus, the political dimension of Bernstein's "opaque" writing, in its subversion and defamiliarization of the "transparent" communication used in the world of commodification and consumption, bears an important relationship to what Michel Foucault, in his preface to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*,⁹ calls the "art of living counter to all forms of fascism." Foucault advises, "Prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic" (xiii). Such advice pinpoints the ideological implications of Bernstein's poetic practice.

One form of resistance or subversion that Bernstein has worked on for years is a humorous writing based on a series of rapid shifts and replacements. As an example of this kind of intellectual poetic slapstick, I cite the opening lines of "Debris of Shock / Shock of Debris":

*The debt that pataphysics owes to sophism
cannot be overstated. A missionary with a horse
gets saddle sores as easily as a politburo
functionary. But this makes a mishmash of overriding ethical
impasses. If the liar
is a Cretan I wouldn't trust him
anyway—extenuating contexts wouldn't amount
to a hill of worms so far as I
would have been deeply concerned about
the fate of their, yes, spools. Never
burglarize a house with a standing army,
nor take the garbage to an unauthorized
junket. Yet when I told the learned
ecologist about my concern for landscape
she stared unsympathetically into the
carbon. Mr. Spoons shook his head, garbled his*

*hypostases. To level with you we'd have
to be on the same
level. Then, with all honesty, we can
only proceed to deplane.*

(*Dark City*, 105–106)

Later in the same poem, Bernstein writes, "Fool's/ gold/ is the only kind of gold I/ ever cared about." But only an uncritical reading would take Bernstein at his word, as if his aphorisms had some sort of transcendent "truth" value, as if they were somehow the "essential" part of a poem. Humor (often of the pun, the replacement [of one word for another similar word], and of association) and a perpetual shifting of perspective become Bernstein's vehicles to an absolute contingency—the nomadic flow which Foucault idealizes in his preface to *Anti-Oedipus*. Bernstein achieves a dizzying kind of poetic variability. By contrast, for a poet such as Emily Dickinson such compressed variability focuses on and creates a perpetually elusive meaning (or theme). For Bernstein that variability displays the slipperiness of a constantly shifting tone.

A poem such as "Heart in My Eye" goes a long way toward illustrating some of the peculiarities of Bernstein's "unpoetic poetic" (*Dark City*, 113) ear. He has always toyed with an encrusted, alliterative sound, as in these lines from "How I Painted Certain of My Pictures": "The lorry has left the/ levy lest the sandwiches lay/ lost, looted" (*Dark City*, 62). We can zero in on some of Bernstein's particular unpoetic poetic sounds in the following passage from "Heart in My Eye":

*—or hate
the boom-shebang effect
fostered at time

interlock, station flayed by
inoperable hampers, obsequious
swoops, as pulp bumps
plop, thingamawhoseit baffle

joint, glassed in gradually
gestures of gerrymand
origin, jitters jocose oblong—*

(*Dark City*, 114)

Bernstein is increasingly drawn to the odd demotic word such as "boom-shebang" (or, as elsewhere in the same poem, "higglety pigglety" and "slumpy"). He has established a well-developed ear for a peculiar dissonance in word-sounds, a kind of deliberately clotted, awkward, technical language that has its own percussive music. I dare say that no one else is writing lines such as "voids convivial handtray intubation" (*Dark*

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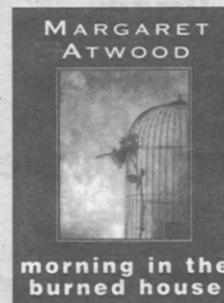
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City, 114), and that no one else is as attuned to such a peculiar music. The very deliberateness of such a music—indeed it must be a conscious craft—bait the reader in several ways. The regularity of stanzaic appearance (in this poem, alternation of three and four line stanzas, with alternating three-word and four-word line lengths) combined with this odd music may bring into play outmoded habits of reading—particularly the seeking out of theme and unified meaning. In such poems, the sound itself and the form itself become the poem's content; deliberately, they do not yield to some meaning beyond their appearance. The words and sounds refuse the more habitual or mainstream poetic task of carrying meaning. Instead of sacrificing their "thingness" to the allegedly greater task of expression (of a message), Bernstein's words do their work at the level of sound and appearance. These words exercise their full rights in an act of oddly pleasant autonomy, what Bernstein hints at (earlier in the poem) as "coddling codices in/ endoskeletal humor mongering" (*Dark City*, 113).

Nevertheless, in Bernstein's poetry I feel an element of encodedness. His poetry does not arise out of an absolute rejection of meaningfulness nor even an absolute rejection of thematicization—the milieu of the literary in which Bernstein's writing comes into being is too fully situated in these particular tasks. As a reader, I feel baited to crack a code or in some way to tame or domesticate the poetry by means of some seemingly more coherent form of restatement. One such method would be the New Critical hangover of compulsive (theme)-making, which takes any writing, no matter how fragmented and dispersed, and creates the fiction of unification (often by means of an over-arching idea). Such cherry-picking—selecting choice quotation-morsels—achieves a readerly sense of mastery (by an assured tone of restatement) but utterly falsifies the reading experience of such a text. Another alternative would be the personalizing (or, more accurately, biographicalizing) of the text. This second approach has proven to be a "successful" approach to both Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Pound's *Cantos*. In the latter case, the painful personal story of Pound's experience in Pisa and subsequent time in St. Elizabeth's is used as a substitute narrative which makes "accessible" the more complicated poem by graphing the poem's language in terms of the poet's personal experience. Of course, such an approach misses the poetry's adventurous formal consciousness (and replaces it with the more familiar contour of personal narrative). And such an approach also verges on becoming a *People* magazine version of criticism. Bernstein's work—with its occasional references to his father's clothing business, to his children and family, to Bernstein's many years of work writing medical digests, and so forth—offers some similar temptations. But the rigor of his poetry of difference—his conscious resistance to a poetry of personal expression—adequately short-circuits such reading approaches. Like the more radical phases of Gertrude Stein's writing, Bernstein's poetry successfully resists reductive recuperative reading strategies. He writes "difficulties that stay difficult." Thus, along with Stein, he shares an important place in American innovative poetry with his contemporaries such as Susan Howe and Bruce Andrews.

One of the most intriguing poems in the collection is the concluding title poem, "Dark City," which begins with a movie-epigraph, Elizabeth Scott to Charlton Heston in *Dark City*, "We're a great pair—I've got no voice and you've got no ear." While throughout *Dark City* (and earlier collections as well), Bernstein engages in a kind of genre writing, inhabiting the language of various cinematic genres, in this concluding poem the epigraph points more decidedly toward issues of poetics, Bernstein's poetry decidedly being a writing that eschews the mainstream essential of a recognizable individual "voice." Oddly, this poem leads into two

sections—"Apple-Picking Time" and "Early Frost"—which are obliquely in dialogue with a conventionally voice-based poet, the (metaphysical) Robert Frost of the folksy vernacular. The opening lines, though, do not bear any obvious relationship to Frost (nor to Frost's "After Apple-Picking"):

*A transom stands bound to a flagpole. Hard
by we go hardly which way is which
lingering somewhere unsettled where evidence
comes harder by sockets, stems
etched in flexed omission like osmotic
molarities flickering edge and orange at flow
rates unrepresentative of ticking or torpor
any child or person requires for, well
against, that remorse remonstrations
brings. It's cold outside, maybe
but the heart sinks daily in
slump of sampled parts and I
feel like carelessness, disowning what's
acquired in indifferent
animation, no body swaps to—
not as if elevated or cut down
to size up, like layers of lost
boys, like aspiration in a tub
at sea, lists all the scores and
scares at measures twice the fall.*

(139)

Instead, they point more toward both a kinship with John Ashbery's sumptuous sentences and Bernstein's idiosyncratic difference from such eloquence. What I have referred to as a clotted sound or a difficult percussive music is reflected in phrases such as "etched in flexed omission like osmotic molarities" and "that remorse remonstrations brings" (139). His long sentences are like Ashbery's but with lumps and clots in them—sumptuous, sinuous sentences partial to a strangely pleasant awkwardness, sentences which stage a deliberate conflict between mellifluousness and a clunky scientific quality. The epigraph leads us to wonder whether such writing does indeed constitute both a voice and an ear, albeit a deliberately "off" version of both.

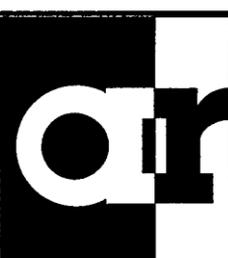
In a manner similar to his self-cancelling irony, Bernstein in "Dark City" plays (both quaintly and movingly) with aspects of the iambic English tradition:

*I loved my love with gold
She loved me with her smile
But I took no possession
Then/ Had no taste called mine
I knew I wept alone that night
As sure as sheep in folds
The I has ways the arm betrays
For now my lance is warped*

(140)

If it is the "I" that is perpetually being re-constituted, critiqued, burlesqued, and dismantled in his poetry, we may do well also to keep in mind Bernstein's injunction earlier in the book, "Our jailers/ are our constipating sense of self" (127).

Bernstein's poetry remains self-consciously a poetry of venture and adventuring: "I think it's about time we let the cat out/ its bag, swung the dog over the/ shoulder, so to say, let the hens/ say 'hey' to the wood-



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peckers, doled/ out some omniaversions to the/ too-tapped upon, the tethers without/ toggles, the field-happy expeditioners/ on the march to Tuscaloosa, Beloit,/ Manual Falls, Florid Oasis" (142). That adventure remains one of de-formation and transposition— a destruction of the automatic and habitual and the clichéd: "The Czech/ is in the jail (the wreck is in the wail, the deck is in the/ sail, the Burma shave's shining over the/ starry blue skies, Waukeegan, New Jersey,/ 1941)" (142). But it is transposing that is serious too:

*A poem should not mean but impale
not be but bemoan,*

boomerang
buck(le)
bubble.

(Dark City, 141)

Bernstein's altered aphorisms (like Professor Peabody's Fractured Fairytales?) offer up the unsettling "truth" of transposition and deformation. They mark and remark upon the perpetual (and inevitable) metaphoricity of poetic expressiveness:

*Love is like love, a baby
like a baby, meaning like
memory, light like light.
A journey's a detour
and a pocket a charm
in which deceits are borne.
A cloud is a cloud and
a story like a story,
song is a song, fury
like fury.*

(Dark City, 145)

In the midst of his play, Bernstein has the poem swerve toward a more seemingly direct consideration:

*This is the difference between truth
and reality: the one advertises itself
in the court of brute circumstance
the other is framed by its own
insistences. Truth's religious, reality
cultural, or rather
truth is the ground of reality's
appearance but reality intervenes
against all odds.*

(145-146)

But the book itself ends with a critique and a reminder: "The words/ come out of/ her heart/ & into the/ language/ & the language/ is in the heart/ of that girl/ who is in the heart/ of you." (146) As he claims in "Thought's Measure," one of the most important essays in *Content's Dream*, for Bernstein (via Wittgenstein) there is no allowance for thoughts apart from language:

An analogous idea to that of language not accompanying but constituting the world is that language does not accompany "thinking." "When I think in language, there aren't 'meanings' going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions: the language is itself the vehicle of thought."

(Content's Dream, 62)

So, too, for Bernstein does the expression of emotion, and the creation of meaning in and through emotional experience, take place in and of lan-

guage. Perhaps that is why the poem begins with references to Frost, whose poetry, crafted and self-conscious as it is, pretends to truths apart from the nature of language itself and pretends to a voice of wisdom that somehow transcends the contingencies of rhetoric and theatricality. It is this same poetic naiveté in Frost that David Antin, at greater length and more vituperatively, complains about in his talk piece "the death of the hired man." Bernstein, though, does not himself eschew voice nor rhetoric nor theatricality. Instead, he insists on the constructedness of poetic writing, speaking/writing through it with necessary contingency, humor, and a peculiarly accomplished grace:

Boxers
*can't live by punching alone, but
stay clear of such as possible—a
Divine Swerve will still land you
in Hell's cauldron. Thus
make your peace with yourself at
your own risk for peace with the Devil
costs everybody more than you could
hope to destroy. Holy is as holy does.
Essence precludes existence.*

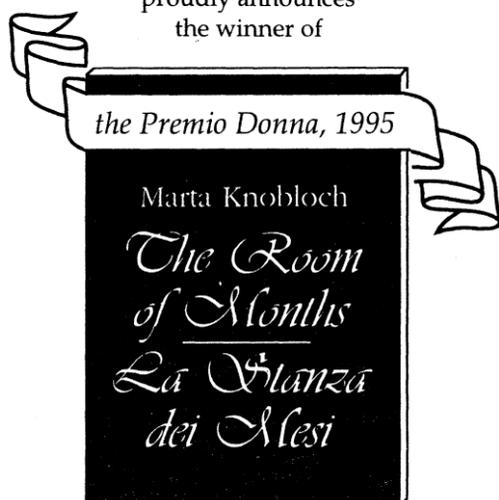
(Dark City, 143)

Bernstein's poetry, with its odd humor and its calculated resistance to repetition and personal narrative, provides us with a rich exploration of new modes of meaning-making in poetry. His poetry, particularly the new work represented in *Dark City*, makes a substantial contribution to the ever-developing and perpetually unstable genre of American poetry. Bernstein's poems challenge our most ingrained reading habits, particularly the thematizing of poetry which has dominated American critical reading methods for poetry since the advent of the New Criticism nearly seventy-five years ago. The particular irritation, difficulty, pedagogy, and beauty of Bernstein's poetry ought rightfully to occupy a significant place in current representations of American poetry. ■

Notes:

1. Charles Bernstein, *Dark City* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994).
2. Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986, reissued 1994). For a more detailed consideration of *Content's Dream* see Hank Lazer, *Opposing Poetries: The Cultural Politics of Avant-Garde American Poetry* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), Chapter One: "Criticism and the Crisis in American Poetry."
3. Helen Vendler, "Understanding Ashbery" *The New Yorker*, March 16, 1981; reprinted in Helen Vendler, *The Music of What Happens* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 224-241.
4. Charles Bernstein, *The Sophist* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1987).
5. Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation" (1926) in *Selected Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972) pp. 511-523.
6. Richard Kostelanetz, *Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* (Pennington, New Jersey: A Capella Books, 1993).
7. John Cage, *Composition in Retrospect* (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1993).
John Cage, *X: Writings '79-'82* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983).
8. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
9. Michel Foucault, preface to *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. xi-xiv.

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