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BERNSTEIN, CHARLES (1950-)

To a much greater degree than most of his contemporaries, the writings of Charles Bernstein adopt and adapt a wide range of forms, of which prose is but one possibility. Because his books are thematic and formal in their construction, carefully avoiding the emphasis on self, a sort of personism, implicit in any chronological (autobiographical) composition, the bulk of his prose is concentrated in just three of his twelve books: *Poetic Justice* (1979), *Controlling Interests* (1980), and *The Occurrence of Tune* (1981), a book-length work written in 1977 and published as a collaboration with painter-photographer Susan B. Laufer. Yet, although only a fraction of his output has been in paragraph/sentence format, many of his best known pieces are in prose, such as *Occurrence*, "Palukaville," "The Taste of What Counts," and "The Italian Border of the Alps."

Although there is a formal element in Bernstein's writing, it has little of the symmetry or balance which the term *formalism* is often thought to imply. In contrast (and far exceeding the uses of asymmetry employed by Charles Olson), Bernstein is the poet of awkwardness, hesitation, the step back, decenteredness, doubt. Yet, whereas in this epoch of poststructuralism and deconstruction some authors, such as the Canadian Steve McCaffery, take the diaspora of significations in their work as an end in itself, Bernstein alternates imbalance with elegance and continually returns the reader to the origin of such "dysraphisms" (a term for mis-scaming Bernstein, a free-lance medical writer, expropriated from the theory of congenital disease), the social context of language itself.

The emotional impact of such works on a reader can be unsettling, both for the normative presumptions of literature which they disrupt and the world thus characterized. If, for example, literary coherence requires both

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continuity and closure, a text that reveals such effects to be no more (or other) than the consequence of a series of rhetorical and syntactic devices insinuates a bleak universe—what little that seems whole, rooted, connected, or intelligible in our personal lives may equally be a delusion. Such is the thrust of the final passage of "The Italian Border of the Alps" in *Controlling Interests*:

That's just the way it. In our studios, the shape of, everybody grouped, along the shore, clammy, pleasure and an, at approaches attended to, towards. I like hard work and I don't care how long my hours are. I have an inquisitive and analytical mind, make a good appearance and get along well with others. Gives way to. A reality continually demanded of, give up, renovated. Or else the hygenics of personal encounter are bowled over by autodidactic posturings in the name of space. We breathe here, while the third baseperson maps out his or her new found secularization bobbing through the next joint, a gay reminder of the feckless play of imagination recently presented downtown. The aerial bombardment lasted several weeks, with intermittent disruption, but life went on much as usual, the shop steward noting several irregularities.

Coherence here is feigned, countered, parodied. That which is most continuous is "aerial bombardment," and the moment of completion falls on the word "irregularities." Readers of contemporary verse will, of course, recognize the presence of Charles Olson in the terms *space* and *breathe*, the passage being an explicit rejection of the neo-romantic individualism of the New American poetry.

Even couched in a pervasive irony, Bernstein's cynicism is not that of "The Waste Land," that nihilism so characteristic of a narcissistic modernism. In fact, Bernstein goes so far as to reject romantic love (intersubjectivity, that love of self reflected from the eyes of an Other) as anything more than a further delusion. But it is not a failing of people. Language and social relationships, particularly those that take place on the job or in bed, are mutually constitutive. Read from the perspective of "Alps" or *The Occurrence of Tune*, modernism (be it that of Eliot or the postmodernism of Olson) can be seen as a writing that dealt only with the linguistic half of this complex equation, while the social realism of writers such as the 1930s novelist Michael Gold just reversed the problem.

Like Gold and Louis Zukofsky, the Objectivist poet who combined the development of new forms with progressive politics, Charles Bernstein is a product of the Jewish experience in Manhattan. Born in 1950 and raised on the Upper West Side by a family that had found some success in the garment industry, he attended the Bronx High School of Science before studying philosophy at Harvard. There, he worked with Stanley Cavell (whose famous essay "Must We Mean What We Say?" can be read as a call for a contextual theory of language) and wrote a lengthy paper on Ludwig Wittgenstein, the most "poetic" of modern philosophers, and on

Gertrude Stein, a poet, prose poet, and novelist who had studied with William James. After Harvard, he moved to Santa Barbara, California, where he worked for a community-based health program, before returning to the Upper West Side.

In 1978, with only two self-published collections, *Asylums* and *Parsing*, but a rapidly growing collection of magazine credits, Bernstein joined with Fordham political scientist and poet Bruce Andrews to edit and publish *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, a journal explicitly focused on the poetics of current writing. The magazine quickly became the hub of new critical thought on the East Coast, an in-print counterpoint to the San Francisco Talk Series begun by Bob Perelman the year before. Although the publication lasted for only four volumes, the writers whose work most often appeared there became known, if not stereotyped, as the language poets.

Shade, the first really extensive collection of Bernstein's work, was published by Sun & Moon Press in 1978, but it wasn't until the rapid-fire sequence of *Poetic Justice*, *Controlling Interests*, and *The Occurrence of Tune* that his own writing reached a national audience. Since then he has published one large collection, *Islets/Irritations* (1983), and several smaller ones. With Andrews, he edited *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, an anthology of pieces from the magazine. He also edited *Content's Dream*, a selection of his critical writing, due out from Sun & Moon Press in 1985. The Fall 1982 issue of *The Difficulties* was devoted to Bernstein's work—only four years after the publication of *Shade*—and included several critical pieces on his work and an interview, as well as a fairly complete bibliography.

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RON SILLIMAN

BLOOM, HAROLD (1930–)

Born in New York City in 1930, Harold Bloom belongs to an intellectual generation of literary critics whose primary practical concern has been with

revising the low modernist estimate of romantic poetry by offering a tough-minded and anti-idealist version of its poetics. After earning his B.A. from Cornell University in 1951, Bloom moved on to Yale, first as student (gaining his doctorate in 1955) and then as teacher (he is currently professor of English and of Humanities). His primary companions in the effort to reinterpret and perhaps revalorize romanticism have been his Yale colleagues: Paul de Man,* Geoffrey Hartman,* and J. Hillis Miller.* Along with Bloom, in many minds, these are the four horsemen of the past decade's literary critical apocalypse. That the relations among these four have frequently taken on an oppositional cast disturbs none of them—and perhaps least of all Bloom, whose work has been a continuing promotion of literary and critical agonism.

Bloom's early work must have looked very much of a piece with other contemporary or slightly earlier efforts to reestablish the value and interest of romantic poetry and poetics—work by, for example, Northrop Frye or M. H. Abrams or Earl Wasserman. *The Visionary Company* (1960) is dedicated to Abrams and seems to share Frye's interest in myth and his insistence on the centrality of Blake. It is with his study of Yeats (1970) that Bloom first really opens his distinctive problematic, and it is one that places him in inevitable conflict with such figures as Abrams and Wasserman. *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (1976) offers the following Arnoldian gloss on Bloom's activity: "The function of criticism at the present time, as I conceive it, is to find a middle way between the paths of demystification of meaning, and of recollection or restoration of meaning, or between limitation and representation" (p. 68). Elsewhere he casts his contrast in terms of de-idealization and re-imagination. In each instance Bloom sets himself off from the modernist debunkers of romanticism on the one hand, and, on the other, from those who would simply reassert the romantic self-image and valorization in the face of that critique—T. S. Eliot or T. E. Hulme on the one side, M. H. Abrams or Wasserman on the other. (Hulme and Abrams meet in describing romanticism as "spilt religion"—they disagree about the value of that thing: Bloom rejects the description.)

It is not accidental that Bloom borrows Arnold's title to lay out his own ambition. Eliot attempted to dismiss Arnold as a propagandist rather than a critic—and from a Bloomean angle that attempt to separate *polemos* and creation is continuous with Eliot's ("weak") idealization of influence into the "simultaneous order" of "Tradition and the Individual Talent." If, as Eliot would have it, the existing order of art is complete before each new work arrives and must be altered to accommodate it, this must mean that each new work actively struggles against its precursors in order to forge for itself a place at their expense. This is the fact about poetry that romanticism makes crucially visible for Bloom (so that his theory and criticism are both bound to and continually surpass the particular ground of romantic