

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC**

**142**

Volume 142

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers



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## Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

### Scope of the Series

*CLC* provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

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- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.



- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
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Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967), 211-51; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 223-26.

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# Charles Bernstein

## 1950-

American poet, essayist, critic, and editor.

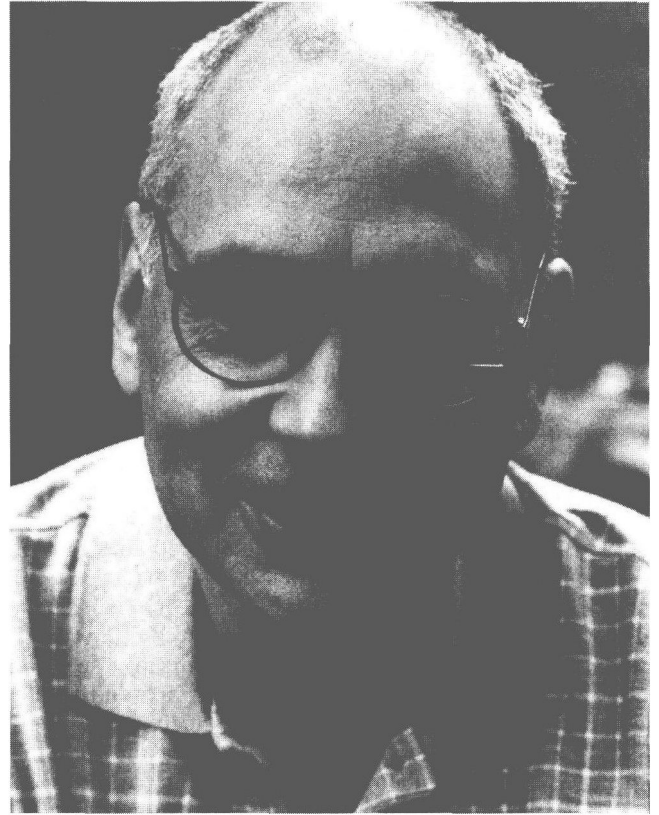
The following entry presents an overview of Bernstein's career through 1999.

### INTRODUCTION

As one of the originators of "language poetry," Charles Bernstein is recognized as a leading postmodern poet and avant-garde theorist. Language poetry developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s among various experimental writers in New York, San Francisco, and Toronto. In the tradition of objectivism and Ezra Pound's experimental poetics, Bernstein and others advocated new kinds of poetry that called attention to language itself, rather than the persona and unique voice of the poet. Bernstein's iconoclastic verse challenged, and continues to challenge, conventional ideas about poetry. His influence on contemporary poetry, however, extends well beyond his own writings. As co-founder of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, from which "language poetry" derives its name, Bernstein also created a forum that showcased emerging writers and advanced the field of poetry by promoting concerns that went against current tastes.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Bernstein was born on April 4, 1950, in New York City. His father worked in the garment industry and Bernstein grew up near Central Park. At the Bronx High School of Science, he edited the school newspaper. He met the artist Susan Bee, his future wife, in 1968. That same year Bernstein entered Harvard, where he was active in the movement against the Vietnam war. Bernstein edited the freshman literary magazine and published *Writing*, a photocopy magazine. Concentrating in philosophy, he wrote his senior thesis on Gertrude Stein's *Making of Americans*, which he analyzed by applying Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*; both of these writers would influence Bernstein's later poetry. In 1973 Bernstein used a William Lyon MacKenzie King fellowship to study at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada. There he was influenced by a seminar on Emily Dickinson given by Robin Blaser. Subsequently, Bernstein moved to Santa Barbara, California, where he worked part-time at a community free clinic. For approximately twenty years, Bernstein earned his living in medicine, mainly as a medical and healthcare editor and writer; his work in the medical field would partially come to inform his poetry. In 1975 Bernstein and Bee moved back to New York and married



two years later; they share two children. Bernstein's involvement in poetry increased upon his return to the city. In 1978 Bernstein and Ted Greenwald co-founded the Ear Inn series, which came to be an important venue for developing writers. Bernstein and Bee also established Asylum's Press, which released his first two books, *Asylums* (1975) and *Parsing* (1976). In 1978 Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, whom Bernstein met shortly after his return to New York, founded *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine. The journal, which ran until 1981, and despite its production as photocopied stapled booklets without covers, it proved to be a highly influential poetry publication. In 1986 Bernstein received the University of Auckland fellowship; his appointment as a visiting lecturer in English at that school advanced his international reputation. Having taught at several other universities, Bernstein currently serves as David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he is also director of the Poetics Program and co-founder and executive editor of the Electronic Poetry Center, an online website devoted to poets and their writings.

## MAJOR WORKS

Bernstein has been prolific both in releasing his own works and in promoting new experimental poetry. Copies of Bernstein's first book, *Asylums*, were released as stapled photocopies (as was his second book). The poem "Asylum" consists of lines that are constantly shifting upon the page and its description of an institution consists of words whose sounds seem to clash with each other. Bernstein's second book, *Parsing*, is divided into two parts, "Sentences" and "Parsing," with the sentences of the first section's poems breaking up into the phrases of the second. *Poetic Justice* (1979) includes one of Bernstein's most often cited poems, "Lift Off." This poem consists of fragments of words and seemingly randomly positioned punctuation marks as well as spaces. The sense-defying poem turns out to be the transcription of the correction tape from a self-correcting typewriter. The poem also serves as a unique time capsule for a particular mode of producing typescript. *Controlling Interests* (1980) was the first of Bernstein's books to present poems in a variety of formats. The collection's poems range from single-stanza works to poems made up of mixtures of prose and verse. *Islets/Irritations* (1983) displays a diverse range of poetic forms and includes "Klupzy Girl," one of Bernstein's best-known poems. Using regular spacing at irregular intervals to form a "modified field format," the poem's ironically woven words juxtapose diverse voices, including that of German intellectual Walter Benjamin. *The Sophist* (1987) includes "Dysraphism," which has come to be considered one of Bernstein's major works. The poem's title reflects Bernstein's medical experience ("raph" means "seam"); the "mis-seaming" of "dysraphism" is apparent in the sound-based juxtaposition of its words, which move effortlessly through the poem to create an illustration of Bernstein's approach to poetry. While combining traits from Bernstein's earlier poems, including a dense grouping of sounds and a compressed amalgam of voices, the poem still manages to create a readable text. *Rough Trades* (1991), a noticeably large collection, looks at poetry as not only a vocation but as a difficult business as well, alluded to by the volume's punning title.

Arguably Bernstein's most important contribution to poetry was *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, which brought together the work of a varied group of writers who shared a concern about the state of contemporary poetry and whose works opposed prevailing critical sensibilities. The journal, which published writers of both prose and poetry, confronted the appropriation of the language of art by politics and commercialism and sought to renew it by experimenting with words and syntax. *Content's Dream* (1986), Bernstein's first essay collection, further demonstrates the poet's aesthetic concerns. In this volume Bernstein considers the relationship between poetry and prose and questions distinctions between the two. He also rails against what he terms "official verse culture," or the current critical establishment and its institutionalized encouragement of homogenized mainstream poetry. Bernstein's second essay collection, *A Poetics* (1992), examines poetics, philosophy, and the social aspects of the text.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Though Bernstein—and language poetry—was long relegated to the periphery of academic circles, he is now recognized as an innovative and influential late-twentieth-century American poet. Bernstein's first book signaled the importance of his project; "Asylum" has been praised for drawing attention to the poetic potential of the word list. In *Controlling Interests*, the purposeful unevenness of Bernstein's poetic forms has been interpreted as serving, by focusing the reader on the actual words making up the poems, to work against the tendency of poetry to be autobiographical. While many critics have objected (and still do) to the nonsensical quality of Bernstein's verse, which makes rational explication of his work difficult, if impossible, others insist that his deliberate manipulation of syntax, word associations, and cultural jargon represents a highly effective subversion of traditional verse and social understanding. Despite the importance of his own work, Bernstein's greatest influence upon contemporary poetry is perhaps best attached to his work with *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine. Though many critics no doubt still lean toward more traditional forms, Bernstein has been successful in winning critical acceptance for the kind of poetry advocated by him and his peers, including Lyn Hejinian, Steve McCaffery, and Ron Silliman. In addition to encouraging experimental work in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, Bernstein has also won the respect of critics and academics with his essays in *Content's Dream* and *A Poetics*. Bernstein's critical works have been praised not only for bringing humor into criticism, but also for his facility in exploring the relationship of poetry to various aspects of culture. Now, firmly ensconced in the world of academia himself, Bernstein continues to be recognized as a significant writer and promoter of innovative poetry.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Asylums* (poetry) 1975
- Parsing* (poetry) 1976
- Shade* (poetry) 1978
- Disfrutes* (poetry) 1979
- Poetic Justice* (poetry) 1979
- Senses of Responsibility* (poetry) 1979
- Controlling Interests* (poetry) 1980
- Legend* [with others] (poetry) 1980
- The Occurrence of Tune* (poetry) 1981
- Stigma* (poetry) 1981
- Islets/Irritations* (poetry) 1983
- Resistance* (poetry) 1983
- The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* [editor; with Bruce Andrews] (criticism) 1984
- Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (essays) 1986
- Artifice of Absorption* (essays) 1987
- The Sophist* (poetry) 1987

*Veil* (poetry) 1987  
*Four Poems* (poetry) 1988  
*The Nude Formalism* [with Susan Bee] (poetry) 1989  
*The Politics of Poetic Form* [editor] (criticism) 1989  
*The Absent Father in Dumbo* (poetry) 1990  
*Fool's Gold* [with Susan Bee] (poetry) 1991  
*Rough Trades* (poetry) 1991  
*A Poetics* (essays) 1992  
*Dark City* (poetry) 1994  
*The Subject* (poetry) 1995  
*Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* [editor] (essays) 1998  
*Log Rhythms* [with Susan Bee] (poetry) 1999  
*My Way: Speeches and Poems* (interviews, criticism, and poetry) 1999  
*Republics of Reality: 1975-1995* (poetry) 2000

## CRITICISM

Joan Retallack (essay date Fall-Winter 1984)

SOURCE: "The Meta-Physick of Play: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry U.S.A.," in *Parnassus*, Vol. 12, No. 1, Fall-Winter, 1984, pp. 213-44.

[In the following excerpt, Retallack provides an overview of the theoretical and technical project of the Language poets, including Bernstein and his verse in *Resistance*.]

Physick n. *Medicine, especially a purgative. Whole-some or curative regimen or habit.*

Nashe (1589) *I wold perswade them to phisicke their faculties of seeing and hearing* (OED)

*Playing is inherently exciting and precarious.*

(D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*)

### I.

It's called "Language Poetry," which is odd enough. Isn't all poetry made of language? And then there are all those equal signs in the official logo, the name of the magazine that was for four years the chief forum of the movement. Is the implication that all letters are equal? Surely not. If all letters were equal we'd have no words. It's their unique and very unequal roles that make language possible. Perhaps the Language poets have a different sort of egalitarianism in mind—from each according to ability; to each according to need. No elitists among letters (or words), no imperious Ps or Qs. No privileged access to meaning. After all, Language poetry with its Marxist origins is out to skim or scrape the bourgeois fat off the language.

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E is the emblem, of course, of a different sort of elitism—from those of purer vision; to those of . . . purer vision. This is nothing new in the annals of

avant garde movements. Pushing the logic of possibility to extremes, like Theoretical Physicists or pioneers in the study of Artificial Intelligence, the Language poets have aimed their work at a relatively small audience which agrees upon the importance of certain questions, though not necessarily upon the nature of the answers. The emphasis is on a proliferation of experiments; the excitement lies in not really knowing where the inquiry will lead. The central question, which they share with their audience (largely other poets), is, How do changes in the forms of our language affect our experience in the world? Though their abundant theoretical writing on this question sometimes has the stale breath of closure, if not out-and-out dogmatism, it functions effectively to open up a wide field of play and experimentation in their poetry.

In fact, experimentation is a form of play and visa versa. As such, it is as Winnicott says "exciting and precarious [belonging] to the interplay . . . of that which is subjective (near-hallucination) and that which is objectively perceived (actual, or shared reality)." This is as true in the sciences as it is in the arts. In all cases, Winnicott stresses, "a paradox is involved which needs to be accepted, tolerated, and not resolved." The paradox inherent in language is that it is at one and the same time deeply personal and conventional. It must serve equally the needs of both individual and group. There cannot be an exclusively private language; neither can there be an entirely public one. Language both conceals and reveals; is emotionally charged and uniformly dispassionate; is mysterious and plain; it both shapes and is shaped by our experience. The tension arising out of these lively oppositions can produce creativity or despair; or in work like Beckett's, a strange equilibrium which floats precariously on the surface membrane of non- or mis-communication.

Whether the poets under review achieve in their work some sort of equilibrium (Darragh, Weiner, Andrews, Messerli), or a studied disequilibrium (Sherry, Dewdney), or something that has more to do with mime than juxtapositional acrobatics (Bernstein, Inman), they all resist resolution and closure in their poetry; they are all, in Winnicott's sense, at play. This is not a Wordsworthian notion of enlightened regression to childhood perceptions. Play, of the sort Winnicott means, is a practice we must continually renew in ways appropriate to our maturing vision, in order to keep the imagination vigorous. Without it we are depressed creatures of habit and circumstance; it is the meta-physickal practice of the healthy spirit. If they are good, artists, philosophers, Zen masters, and psychoanalysts (like Winnicott, who sees psychotherapy as a form of play)—teachers of all kinds—keep us in training.

Play, from early childhood on, is a rigorous discipline—requiring acute focus and concentration (not all children do it well) along with unfettered ingenuity. It requires a wholeness of being and response that embraces our rationality and emotions, our logic and intuition. As adults we need to concoct complicated justifications for play—themselves forms of play—because we don't entirely trust

it as really worthwhile and serious, much less essential to our vitality. The very serious Language poets, whose goal can be seen as a kind of sociolinguistic therapy (they would probably prefer "politics") acquire their sanction to play from a rich diversity of ancestors and theoretical sources: ancient charm songs; Old English and Chaucerian modes; the sound poetry of the Russian Futurists; their very American interest in compositional strategies, vagaries, and disjunctions of everyday speech; the formal preoccupations of Gertrude Stein and John Cage and the Concrete poets; the "Indeterminist" effects of Pound, Beckett, and John Ashbery; Jackson Mac Low, Zukofsky, David Antin. . . . The list could go on; the Language poets are extremely well read. But the poetry itself gains its distinction from the peculiarly American pragmatic inventiveness which (reminiscent of developments in the visual arts in America since the '50s) pays intense attention to the particulars of the medium—phonemes, syntax, graphics, etc.—to the anatomy of language itself.

However, one gets the sense that the really official permission slip for play, the identification of what is and what is not "Language poetry," the cultivation of a community of writers, the formation of a highly intelligent and interested audience are heavily dependent on philosophical progenitors, most notably Marx, Wittgenstein, and Derrida. The leading theoreticians of the Language group—Ron Silliman, Steve McCaffery, Bruce Andrews, and Charles Bernstein have entered the debate over the relation between language, thought, and reality and see their work, both theoretical and poetical, as a contribution to it.

Without recalling the peculiar status of Language these days, the new nominalism in Western intellectual circles, along with the widespread disrepute of so-called "naive realism," the radical disruptions of the Language poets may seem unaccountably frivolous, if not destructive of all that is reliable and sound. . . .

## V.

Bruce Andrews' *Praxis* (quoted in the first section of this article), Charles Bernstein's *Resistance*, and Douglas Messerli's *Some Distance* are examples of more traditional poetry (certainly graphically), the non-symbolist, "Indeterminist" one that Marjorie Perloff has charted from Rimbaud's *Illuminations* to the work of John Cage in her book *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*. The lean elegance we have come to expect of poetry lodged between ample margins remains; we read familiar words in the usual fashion—left-right, zigzag down the page—and we respond primarily to the meanings of words rather than to their textures or the puzzle of their unorthodox alignments. Here, however, the familiar ends. All of this work is syntactically odd because these poets are playing with semantic units and relations. When we realize that the units (words, phrases, lines) quite often don't coalesce in a logical manner, we are thrown back on more intuitive responses which depend on the sensual properties of the language. So this poetry, like Inman's and Sherry's, though not to the same degree, brings us close to the nap of the language. . . .

In *Resistance* Charles Bernstein has adopted a consciously literary mode by combining Indeterminist strategies with what his editor calls "a perverse formalism." There is the return of the line, beginning with capital letters, and even the stanza; there are regular metrics and internal rhymes. The only problem is that the sense is distinctly skewed, as in these lines from "Playing with a Full Deck":

What chainlink beckons, held in  
Hand, for pleading bleeds the  
Finer auger's talon. Redress  
Without defame, insists what  
Losses snare, here to where  
Determine favors show. Gleam of  
Your unbridling, diffused arc's  
Indifferent spar—the slater  
Letters oak-lined portion, flagrant  
Sorrow end up, calling. What  
Wills this show, for make believe  
Or stammer, pockets blast at  
Infamy's store: These cratered  
Sorrows launch out, serenade  
To pare the suction sooner  
Stung; Whose will not bend nor  
Ape like furrows, arched  
Complacency's wirey mold.

The strong iambs, with some internal pentameter—"What / Wills this show, for make believe / Or stammer"; the adjectival drama—"Finer auger's talon," "indifferent spar," "flagrant Sorrow"; and the archaic tone give this a pseudo-Shakespearian surface (or Hart Crane via Stein and the Dadaists?). How many in the audience would notice if it were slipped into *Hamlet*, or *Macbeth*, or *Othello*? This is a kind of sound poetry akin to Inman's "Old English" and perhaps even to Zukofsky's "Catullus LI":

*Ille mi par esse deo ridetur*  
He'll hie me, par is he? the God divide her,  
he'll hie, see fastest, superior deity . . .

*Resistance* is full of the sounds of earlier poetry. But are not these the forms that carried the spirit of the capitalist project in the name of high culture? Probably Bernstein would see it that way. So this resistance has to do with a refusal to fulfill the orders and expectations dictated by the form. And there are other kinds of resistance—the flagrantly opaque medium: the non-linear line; and the images like *faux marbre*. The closer the inspection, the more "auger's talon," "diffused arc's Indifferent spar," and "cratered Sorrows" appear to be rhetorical flourishes. The pleasure, not unprecedentedly, is in the perversion, which, in this case, is in the (de)formalism. . . .

There is something unsettling too about the convoluted, hyperacademic prose of a good deal of the theoretical writing in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. Studded with cacophonous jargon like "structuralized fetishism," "positionality," and "commoditization," it perpetuates bad habits traceable to Marx's nineteenth-century philosophical milieu while arguing for a contemporary reevaluation of style. Social preoccupations seem largely polemical and con-

spicuously devoid of interest in the audience (beyond other Language poets) which is presumably to be empowered by the "new syntax." There is much work to do on "praxis." Despite this, the daring ingenuity of language poetry<sup>1</sup> provides a powerful and much needed antidote to the ubiquity of the bland and innocuous in so-called "main-stream" literature, and may indeed help to "phisicke," as Nashe put it, our "faculties of seeing and hearing." As the sum total of persons sensitive to language rises, so does the general welfare, or so some of us believe. For this we need continually to reinvent the fine art of language play.

#### Notes

1. This essay necessarily considers just a fraction of the writers who can be considered Language poets. For a better idea of their numbers and range see selections of their work included in *Paris Review* 86 (Winter 1982), *Ironwood* 20 (Fall, 1982), and *Sulfur* 8 (1983).

#### Marjorie Perloff (essay date 1985)

SOURCE: "The Word as Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties," in *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 215-38.

[In the following excerpt, Perloff defends the literary project of the Language poets, including Bernstein, and offers analysis of Bernstein's poems "The Sheds of Our Webs" and "Dysraphism."]

#### "OILFISH" TO "OLD CHAP" FOR "C"

Performing military service for the king and bearing a child have a common medieval root. The progression to this point is first academic, then technical. Textbooks give way to textiles which lead to T-formations and T-groups. We pause to add "th" and proceed through Mediterranean anemia, deep seas, Greek muses, pesticides, young shoots and the instinctual desire for death. It is there that we find "thane" to be followed by all manner of "thanks," including the "thank-you-ma'am"—a ridge built across a road so rain will roll off.

—Tina Darragh, *on the corner to off the corner*<sup>1</sup>

#### CARBON

But this is a false tart, the trap door insecurely latched, a tear in the velvet curtain. Yet the tear was but a drop of glycerine sliding down her cheek. Nonetheless skin is not porcelain, however it spots.

—Ron Silliman, *ABC*<sup>2</sup>

Floating on completely vested time, a lacrimy  
To which abandon skirts another answer  
Or part of but not returned.  
Confined to snare, the sumpter portion  
Rolls misty ply on foxglove, thought  
Of once was plentitude of timorous  
Lair, in fact will build around  
It. Shores that glide me, a

Tender for unkeeping, when fit with  
Sticks embellish empty throw. Days, after  
All, which heave at having had.

—Charles Bernstein, "The Sheds of Our Webs,"  
*Resistance*<sup>3</sup>

But is it *poetry*? Tina Darragh's paragraph is a mock page from a dictionary; instead of "oilfish" to "old chap" (which is, of course, not under "C"), we are given a set of riddling permutations of words beginning with "t": "technical," "textbooks," "textiles," "T-formations," "T-groups." One or two phonemes (/k/, /kst/) can make all the difference. Add an "h" to "t" and you introduce a Greek element: "Mediterranean anemia" (evidently "thalamic hemorrhage"), "deep seas" ("thalassa," which gives us the word "Thalassian"), "Greek muses" (e.g., "Thalia"), pesticides ("Thalline"), "young shoots" ("thalluses"), and "the instinctual desire for death" ("thanatos"). Then "thane" and "thanks" and a "thank-you-ma'am" which, so the OED tells us, got its curious meaning ("a ridge built across a road so rain will roll off") from the fact that such a ridge or hollow in the road would cause "persons passing over it in a vehicle to nod the head involuntarily, as if in acknowledgement of a favour." (The first example cited by the OED is from Longfellow's *Kavanaugh* (1849): "We went like the wind over the hollows in the snow; / the driver called them 'thank you ma'ams,' because they made everybody bow.") And where does the "C" of the title come in? In the riddle of the first sentence, which pits "conscriptio" ("Performing military service for the king") against "confinement" ("bearing a child").

How curious, the text suggests, the vagaries of *words* that can, with the shift of a single phoneme or two, mean such different things as "thane" and "thanks"; with the addition of a suffix or two, turn "thanks" into "thanatos," or again, with the addition of a word or two, turn "thanks" into an idiom meaning ridge or hollow in the road. The signifier, it seems, is never merely transparent—a replica of the signified. The prefix "con," for that matter, generates life as easily as death.

Again, when, in the first line of "Carbon," Ron Silliman removes a single phoneme from a word ("false start" becomes "false tart"), he creates intriguing plot possibilities: to make a false start by falling through a trap door is one thing; to position a "false tart" in this setting, especially given the tear in the velvet curtain, quite another. But then "tear" (rip) becomes a teardrop, and one made out of glycerine at that. It is difficult, the text implies, to distinguish artifice from reality. Skin spots, porcelain spots; "Nonetheless skin is not porcelain."

Charles Bernstein takes this sort of word play a step further, almost to the point of unintelligibility. In "The Sheds of Our Webs," neologisms abound: "a lacrimy," "sumpter" ("marshy" or "low-lying" on the model of "sump"?), "plentitude." More important; grammatical posi-

tion is frequently ambiguous: is “sheds” a noun or gerund (“sheddings”)? “Abandon skirts” a verb followed by its direct object or a subject—verb clause? “Tender” a verb or adjective or noun? There is no way to be sure, especially since many of the words in ambiguous syntactic position are homonyms. Thus “vested” means (1) “conferred as a legal right” as well as (2) “wearing a vest”; and, what is more disconcerting, “tender,” if a noun, can mean (1) “a formal offer to supply goods or carry out work or buy at a stated price”; (2) “a person who tends to look after something”; or (3) “a vessel or vehicle traveling to and from a larger one to convey stores or passengers etc.,” more specifically, (4) “a car attached to a steam locomotive carrying fuel and water.”

But is it not the function of syntax precisely to tell us which of these possible meanings is the appropriate one in the context? “Art,” as Hugh Kenner puts it with reference to Williams’ “The Red Wheelbarrow,” “lifts the saying out of the zone of things said.”<sup>4</sup> And the “saying,” in the case of “**The Sheds of Our Webs**,” becomes a way of foregrounding the human need to escape confinement (the “plentitude of timorous lair”), the need to rid ourselves of our defenses, to shed our webs, which are also “sheds” in that, “Confined to snare,” we hide within them. “Floating on completely vested time” is, after all, a way of skirting the issue with “a lacrima” rather than real conviction: “abandon skirts another answer” (or, abandon[ing] our skirts is an answer that brings in no returns). The poet opts for “Shores that glide me, a / Tender for unkeeping”: he is, so to speak, the vessel that carries the cargo, even if others perceive it as an “empty throw.” The thing is to make an imprint, to leave “Days, after / All, which heave at having had.”

The prominent alliteration and assonance in these last lines, indeed, the highly formalized sound structure of the whole poem, with its stately diction and heavy stressing—

Rólls místy plý on fóxglôve, || thought  
Of ónce was pléntítúde or tímorous  
Láir. . . .

recalls Hart Crane rather than, say, Williams. “Shores that glide me, a / Tender for unkeeping” is nothing if not Cranean even as Crane points back to the Yellow Nineties and to Swinburne. Indeed, in a curious way it is *fin de siècle* that the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry of our own *fin de siècle* recalls in its renewed emphasis, after decades of seemingly “natural” free verse, on prominent sound patterning and arcane, or at least “unnatural,” diction.

But of course the immediate impression likely to be produced by a Bernstein or Silliman poem is that Swinburne or Crane have somehow been put through the Cuisinart: what finds its way into the bowl looks, at first sight, like so many chopped and hence unrecognizable vegetables. Faced with the syntactic and semantic difficulties I have been describing, the reader may decide that “language-centered writing” is little more than a clever

hoax. What is the value, I have heard it asked, of these little word games when we all know that the business of poetry is to convey the concrete particulars of experience, the response of the sensitive individual to the vagaries of human suffering and struggle?

In their more theoretical writings (essays, reviews, prose poems, manifestos, interviews, and various hybrids of these) the Language poets have addressed themselves to precisely such questions. “Poetry and philosophy,” says Bernstein in a recent essay, “share the project of investigating the possibilities (nature) and structures of phenomena,”<sup>5</sup> an assumption shared by such otherwise diverse Language poets as Ron Silliman and Lydia Davis, Clark Coolidge and Douglas Messerli, Lyn Hejinian and Tom Raworth. I propose, therefore, to take up some of the central theoretical assumptions that govern language-centered writing, assumptions that take us back into the poetry itself. But then, as the poets repeatedly tell us, the distinction between theory and poetry is an arbitrary one anyway, even as generic and prosodic differentiation violates the integrity of the text as “language-work.” For Olson and Creeley, “Form is never more than the extension of content.” For the Language poet, this aphorism becomes “Theory is never more than the extension of practice.”<sup>6</sup> . . .

But whatever the generic category, the important distinction to be made is not between “story” and “prose poem” or “story” and “essay” but, as Charles Bernstein points out, between “different contexts of reading and different readerships” (D, p. 35). To read such “writerly” texts as Hejinian’s *My Life* or Davis’ *Story*, is to become aware of what the Language poets call “the rights of the signifier.”<sup>7</sup> Again, to “lay bare the device,” a term the Language poets have borrowed from the Russian Futurists, does not necessarily mean to write in verse rather than prose, or to write lyric rather than “essay” or “manifesto.” It means only that “the Word as Such”—what the poets Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh called, in the title of their manifesto of 1913, *Slovo kak takovoe*<sup>8</sup>—becomes the primary poetic determinant.

### III

To emphasize the Word as Such is, inevitably, to pay special attention to sound patterning, to phonemic play, punning, rhythmic recurrence, rhyme. It is a paradox of language-centered writing that, despite its frequent recourse to prose rather than verse, and its refusal to separate “philosophy” from “poetry,” sound structures are heavily foregrounded. This is not, of course, coincidence: a violation of “normal” language habits is in itself a commentary on these habits—in this case, the recourse to the frequently bland free verse that currently passes for “poetry.” As Charles Bernstein puts it in the introduction to the *Paris Review* “Language Sampler”:

. . . there is a claim being made to a syntax . . . of absolute attention to the ordering of sound’s syllables.  
. . . Not that this is “lyric” poetry, insofar as that term



may assume a musical, or metric, *accompaniment* to the words: the music rather is built into the sequence of the words' tones, totally saturating the text's sound.

(p. 76)

Take, for example, Charles Bernstein's recent poem "**Dysraphism**," which appeared in *Sulfur*, 8 (1983). Here is the poet's note on his title:

"Dysraphism" is actually a word in use by specialists in congenital diseases, to mean dysfunctional fusion of embryonic parts—a birth defect. . . . "Raph" of course means "seam," so for me dysraphism is mis-seaming—a prosodic device! But it has the punch of being the same root of rhapsody (*rhap*)—or in Skeats—"one who strings (lit. stitches) songs together, a reciter of epic poetry," cf. "ode" etc. In any case, to be simple, Dorland's [the standard U.S. medical dictionary] does define "dysrhafia" (if not dysraphism) as "incomplete closure of the primary neural tube; status dysraphicus"; this is just below "dysprosody" (sic): "disturbance of stress, pitch, and rhythm of speech."

Bernstein's sensitivity to etymologies and latent meanings is reflected in the poem itself, which is an elaborate "dysfunctional fusion of embryonic parts," a "disturbance of stress, pitch, and rhythm of speech" in the interest of a new kind of urban "rhapsody." The "mis-seaming" of the poem brings together the life of the entire city—let us say New York—with its overheard conversations, advertising slogans, Wall Street jargon, medical terminology, TV clichés, how-to manuals, remembered proverbs, wise sayings, and nonsense rhymes. Like Joyce's "Aeolus" chapter in *Ulysses*, it playfully exploits such rhetorical figures as pun, anaphora, epiphora, metathesis, epigram, anagram, and neologism to create a seamless web of reconstituted words:

The pillar's tale: a windowbox onto society.  
But heed not the pear that blows in your  
brain. God's poison is the concept of  
conceptlessness—anaerobic breath.  
No less is culled no more vacated—temptation's  
flight is always to  
beacon's hill—the soul's  
mineshaft.  
*Endless strummer*. There is never annul-  
ment, only abridgment. The Northern Lights is  
the universe's paneled basement. Joy  
when jogged. Delight in  
foreflight.

(p. 41)

This is not nonsense talk, the collaging of whatever bits and pieces happen to enter the poet's consciousness. Rather, "**Dysraphism**" violates standard language so as to foreground the discourses actually operative on contemporary writing: the "literary" ("pillar's tale" for Chaucer's "Miller's Tale"), the "sociological" ("a window[box] onto society"), the recourse to proverbial wisdom ("But heed not the pear. . ."), the obsession with film titles (*Endless*

*S[tr]ummer*), book titles and publishers' blurbs ("Joy when jogged" for "the joy of jogging" or "Delight in / foreflight" rather than "foreplay"). Instructions to the waiter or waitress new on the job ("Fill / the water glasses—ask each person / if they would like / more coffee, etc.") alternate with parodies of medical textbooks ("vaccination of cobalt emissaries pregnant with bivalent expasperation, protruding with inert material") and the lingo of the business conference ("It's a realistic package, it's a / negotiable package, it's / not a final package").

"**Dysraphism**" thus presents the reader with a world in which the articulation of an individual language is all but prevented by the official discourses that bombard the consciousness from all sides. "Blinded by avenue and filled with / adjacency," "Arch or arched at," how do we avoid speech as mere repetition? Perhaps, the poem implies, by decomposition and recharge—in this case, particularly the recharge of sound. For the psychological self-projection ("Twenty-five years ago I walked. . .") "It was that night I knew. . .") of most contemporary free verse, Bernstein substitutes the overdetermination of sound. Sometimes we hear a quasi-Elizabethan iambic pentameter ("that hits the spring to sing with sanguine bulk"), sometimes the tunes of Tin Pan Alley ("No where to go but pianissimo"), everywhere the chiming of rhyme: "Morose or comatose," "Best of the spoils: gargoyles," "Reality is always greener / when you haven't seen her." "Prose / pose" "Poem, chrome," "A fleet of ferries, forever merry." Words, that is to say, are not dependable when it comes to signification, but the play of their sounds is endlessly pleasurable. "Thread / threads the threads, like / thrush. thrombolytic cassette." Or, as we read on the poem's last page:

That is, in prose you start with the world  
and find the words to match; in poetry you start  
with the words and find the world in them.

(p. 44)

In a world "Riddled / with riot" (a play on Yeats' "Riddled with light" in "The Cold Heaven"), "there is always something dripping through," if we can find it. Otherwise, "We seem to be retreading the same tire / over and over, with no additional traction."

#### IV

The unmasking of contemporary discourse in poems like "**Dysraphism**" is, of course, far from innocent. Both in San Francisco and New York, the Language movement arose as an essentially Marxist critique of contemporary American capitalist society on behalf of young poets who came of age in the wake of the Vietnam War and Watergate. . . .

For one thing, what the Language poets call late monopoly capitalism is never compared to the economic system of existing Marxist countries—the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and their satellites. "The rise of capitalism," writes

Silliman, "sets the preconditions for the rise of the novel, the invention of the optical illusion of realism, the final breakdown of gestural poetic forms" (LB, p. 126). Where does the rise of communism fit into this picture? Is Silliman implying that in contemporary China, "the optical illusion of realism" has given way to a valorization of "gestural poetic forms"? Or is the very opposite not the case in countries that can only tolerate socialist realism? Indeed, the transparency of the signifier, its loss of power to *be* in its own right, seems to me the very hallmark of discourse in the literary journals of, say, East Germany.

Still, poets like Silliman and Bernstein are on to something important when they lament the "invisibility" of language in our "literary" culture. "The words," says Silliman sadly, "are never our own. Rather, they are our own usages of a determinate coding passed down to us like all other products of civilization" (LB, p. 167). The dominance of a sophisticated technology, whether under capitalism or socialism, means that language is always in danger of becoming commodity. Those of us who have taught courses on poetry are familiar with the student with a very high IQ, say a computer science major, who cannot make anything of a poem like Blake's "London" because he or she cannot conceive of a linguistic or social context in which one might refer to a soldier's "hapless sigh" as "Run[nin]g like blood down palace walls." In the discourse of medical text books or legal briefs, such statements simply make no sense. . . .

Writing is inevitably repetition, but each repetition reveals something else. As Charles Bernstein puts it in a poem called "Sprocket Damage":

What happens opens up into what  
happens the next time.<sup>10</sup>

Or, as Ron Silliman playfully paraphrases Freud so as to avoid the familiar id and ego, "When words are, meaning soon follows. Where words join, writing is" (LB, p. 16).

#### Notes

1. *on the corner to off the corner* (College Park, Md.: Sun & Moon Press, 1981), p. 7.
2. *ABC* (Berkeley: Tuumba, 1983), unpaginated.
3. *Resistance* (Windsor, Vt.: Awede, 1983), unpaginated.
4. *A Homemade World. The American Modernist Writers* (New York: Knopf, 1975), p. 60.
5. "Writing and Method," *Poetics Journal*, 3 (May 1983), 7.
6. See Charles Bernstein, "Interview with Tom Beckett," *The Difficulties: Charles Bernstein Issue*, ed. Tom Beckett, Vol. 2, no. 1 (Fall 1982), 35.
7. See Nanon Valaoritis, Introduction to "Poésie Language USA," *Change*, 41 (Paris: Seghers, March 1981), 159. The section devoted to "Language Poetry" in this issue is on pp. 151–88.

8. See Vladimir Markov (ed.), *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 129–31.

9. *Sulfur*, 8 (1983), 39.

10. *Islets/Irritations* (New York: Jordan Davies, 1983), p. 5.

#### DeVillo Sloan (review date Summer 1987)

SOURCE: A review of *Content's Dream*, in *Southern Humanities Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3, Summer, 1987, pp. 283–84.

*[In the following review of Content's Dream, Sloan commends Bernstein's defense of Language poetry and his observations concerning film, though finds his critiques of non-Language poets disappointing and his assorted minor pieces and transcriptions self-indulgent.]*

In recent years the work of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers, a movement in late-postmodern American literature, has received increasing critical attention. Charles Bernstein is the east coast spokesman and one of the original founders of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine, and the publication of his *Content's Dream* marks the addition of another important document to the growing L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E canon. The book is panoramic in its cultural concerns and expands considerably on the theoretical statements made in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* anthology co-edited by Bernstein and Bruce Andrews in 1984.

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing demands that the reader approach the text with a firm, literary-theoretical background. Despite Bernstein's protests to the contrary, it is a theory-centered writing, a synthesis of the labyrinthine avant-garde movements of the 20th century. In the essays "Semblance" and "Three or Four Things I Know about Him," Bernstein most succinctly states the method and philosophy that informs his writing. Briefly, western culture has evolved a syntax that enforces a repressive model of reality. The rhetoric of "Semblance" becomes visionary in its assertions that disruptions of syntactic conventions could actually change the world. Bernstein's claims were disputed several years ago in the *Village Voice* when a critic suggested that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing promotes neither social change nor good art but instead produces strings of "meaningless relationships." In "An Interview with Tom Beckett," Bernstein carefully addresses issues that occur frequently to most readers of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing: its derivations from surrealism, its use of "found" language, and its implicit politics.

*Content's Dream* clarifies theoretical issues, but when Bernstein discusses writers outside his immediate circle, the results are disappointing. Reviews of works by Clark Coolidge, Hannah Weiner, and Ron Silliman are illuminat-

ing. “Undone Business,” however, about Charles Olson, does little more than restate accepted notions about Olson’s poetry that can be found easily in print elsewhere. Bernstein’s essay on Williams is little more than a sympathetic restatement of common notions of Williams’ relationship to the academy. “Hearing ‘Here’: Robert Creeley’s Poetics of Duration” is a flaccid attempt to explore postmodern poetics but becomes, unfortunately, an apology for the sexism inherent in Creeley’s early work and a defense of his weaker writing. Particularly distressing is the overly ambitious “Words and Pictures.” While provocative in its exploration of visual literacy, the essay presents a garbled reading of Louis Zukofsky. Zukofsky is an important poet in the formation of a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E canon, and Bernstein’s inability to come to terms coherently with Zukofsky’s theoretical writing creates serious doubts about an objectivist/L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E connection.

Ironically, Bernstein is at his best in *Content’s Dream* when he is *not* writing strictly about literary concerns. There is a preoccupation in the book with visual perception. Bernstein’s insistence that the objects of culture be read as language makes an interesting theoretical basis for the exploration of non-literary media. His essay on film, “Frames of Reference,” is insightful and refreshing. Perhaps, because his own artistic ego is not at stake, Bernstein can bring a sharper objectivity to the art of film. He is able to explore his own responses to the medium as well as the ideological ramifications of popular culture. “Meaning the Meaning: Arakawa’s Critique of Space,” co-authored with Susan Bee, is a well-informed discussion of conceptual art which also manages to capture the tone of the New York art world at a particular historical moment.

Filled as it is with provocative essays, *Content’s Dream* has moments of extreme self-indulgence. The book jacket places Bernstein firmly in the company of Williams, Pound, and Stein. Apparently author and publisher are convinced by their own advertisements since among the essays are included many minor prose pieces—a short introduction to a poetry reading by Robin Blaser, for instance—and transcriptions from tape recordings whose purposes are problematic at best. The reader is occasionally treated to transcriptions where Bernstein simply free-associates anything that comes to mind. For instance:

. . . that kind of self consciousness so i should get into that im as good as they are im as good as they are im as good as they are im im i am i i am i i am as good as they are i am as good as they are okay so you are as good as they are but in what sense . . .

This material seems rather ego-centered for a poet who claims that he wishes to abolish accepted notions of the self in contemporary poetry. The reader must struggle with the writer through difficult passages to find the rewards of *Content’s Dream*. Clearly, though, in its pages the central issues of the current literary scene are brought into focus.

Mac Wellman (review date Winter 1989)

SOURCE: A review of *Content’s Dream*, in *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Winter, 1989, p. 96.

[In the following review, Wellman offers a positive assessment of *Content’s Dream*.]

It is one of the scandals of our literary culture that the so-called “language” writers have been so scrupulously ignored by virtually all establishment editors, pundits, critics, and upholders of public taste. Charles Bernstein must be accounted a major literary theorist of his generation, but don’t expect to find his articles in *The New York Times* or his poetry in *The New Yorker*.

These essays [in *Content’s Dream*] range over a wide number of topics: the idea of representation, the fallacy of value-free, “objective” prose, canons of good taste, and such contemporary artists and writers as Arakawa, Louis Zukofsky, and Clark Coolidge. Throughout the collection, Bernstein offers a multivalent analysis of the various kinds of political discourse of our time.

Bernstein’s ideas are critical for any worker in the theatre because they assume language as act, as gesture, within the realm of performance. Bernstein sees performance as an everyday cultural phenomenon, as the field of a pervasive theatricalization that serves the interests of a deeply layered and politically repressive system. In a very real sense the “language” movement constitutes a spirited attack on all orders of official public decorum which, despite its facade of enlightened liberalism and toleration, is in these terms only a cabal of multinational interests, greed, sexism, racism and, in sum, Baudrillard’s war of the nation-state against its own population.

The reckless anarchy and good humor of essays like “Three or Four Things I Know about Him,” the precision of “Living Tissue/Dead Ideas,” and the sheer wacky openendedness of “The Conspiracy of ‘Us’” present the possibility of a kind of criticism we see too rarely in the theatre, a benighted and provincial art still dominated by what Edward Said has termed a “discourse of structure and refinement.” We need more of Bernstein’s kind of intellectual wildness in the theatre.

Jerome McGann (essay date 1991)

SOURCE: “Charles Bernstein’s ‘The Simply,’” in *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, edited by Antony Easthope and John O. Thompson, University of Toronto Press, 1991, pp. 34-9.

[In the following essay, McGann offers a close reading of “The Simply,” by which he examines the linguistic relationships, structure, and underlying technique of Bernstein’s verse.]

being less interested in representing than enacting.

(Charles Bernstein, “State of the Art/1990”)