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## **BETWEEN POETRY AND THEORY: CHARLES BERNSTEIN' POETICS**

*to Katica Kulavkova  
for her 70<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary*

At the center of my discussion of the American language poet Charles Bernstein will be the dynamic relation between the 'theory' (or, as he prefers to say, the poetics) and the 'poetry' in his work. I put these terms in quotation marks, because of, as I intend to show, Bernstein's and other language poets' work on destabilizing their borders. Although Bernstein explicitly explains that he doesn't consider himself to be a theoretician, his interest in theory is evident, which is why Marjorie Perloff called him and other poets like Steven McCaffery, poet-theorists (Perloff, 2004: xxviii).

Writing poetics was important within the countercultural poetry formations of poets, including Donald Allen's famous 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry* (among the most influential were the New York School, the San Francisco Renaissance and the Black Mountain poets). The last part of Allen's anthology included poetics, and in 1973 Donald Allen and Warren Tallman coedited a volume, *The Poetics of The New American poetry*, collecting the poetics written by these poets. This interest dates from the previous period of poetry's modernity which was marked by its break with the traditional approaches of thinking of and making poetry. At this point, modern poets start "radically questioning what a poem is" (Cook, 2004: 1), which at the same time implies the question of what the poem can be. The consequence of this is the gradual pluralization of the field of poetry, so that we now use this noun in the plural (poetries).

Reconsidering the status of the poem and the poet implies a highly reflexive approach to poetry. Looking at the attitudes toward poetry of modern poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Jon Cook concluded that “[t]he link between theory and practice is self-evident: inherited ideas about what poetry is will have a direct impact on the poetry that gets written” (Cook, 2004: 3). Therefore, I will briefly discuss the concept of the *difficult poem* because modern, postmodern and contemporary experimental poems became so difficult to communicate. This notion is now frequently in use, and it is not by chance that Bernstein’s book from 2011 was titled *Attack of the Difficult Poems*.

It is clear that the difficulty in the reception of poetry has always been present, but with modernism’s challenge of traditional forms, it became significant for modern times. As British art historian Charles Harrison remarked regarding modern art, “Modern art (and I would include modern poetry here) was taken to have a crucial role in depicting the culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although it was not popular and was not understood by the majority of people” (cited in Đurić, 2009: 23). Bernstein detected that the “epidemics of difficult poetry” broke out in 1912 (Bernstein, 2011: 3). The characteristic marks of modernist difficulty include “concision, intertextuality and polyvocal montage, disjunctive syntax and illogical sequences, typographical play, and the technique of defamiliarization” (Greene, et al, 2012: 365). In other words, *difficult poems* intentionally disrupt the act of communication in poetry, demonstrating that transparency of language is a rhetorical effect. Readers are forced to reconsider their reading habits, and, as Bernstein would suggest, to find alternative reading strategies. Bernstein explains that difficult poems make us frustrated and angry. Therefore he, “[i]n the smoothing (and parodic) voice of self-help guru” (Fink, and Halden-Sullivan, 2014:1) gives advice on how to treat this kind of poetry. “*Difficult poems are normal*” (Bernstein, 2011: 4), he states, and the fact is that today there is so many poems labeled *difficult*. “*Difficult poems are like this because of their innate make-up*” (Bernstein, 2011: 5). They are intentionally made to be difficult, “*hard to read,*” and “*not popular*” (Bernstein, 2011: 5). But by being difficult, the poems express that they want our full attention. In order to comprehend difficult poems, we have to deal with the canonical codes, which are internalized and naturalized and to understand why they need to be severely questioned. In this sense, poetics are a useful tool for poets and readers alike.

Considering what the public function of poetry was for the American avant-garde poets involved in the 1950s, poetics became an important part of poetry production. Reflecting on this phenomenon, Susan Vanderborg used the term *paratext* to denote “the highly creative essays, notes, prefaces, and source documents that these authors provide with their experimental poetry,” adding that the “[p]aratexts offer a forum in which the author can present ideological agendas more directly to an audience, define a sense of community in terms of other experiments as well as projected readers, or simply

contextualize new poetry within literary and historical traditions familiar to a broad range of readers” (Vanderborg, 2001: 5). The problem with the experimental poetry community in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was how to construct a wider public space of poets and readers. This led them to “create text-paratext dialogues: poetics texts whose fractured syntax, metonymic associations, and ellipses were contextualized by extended discussions of poetic politics, references to local or national history, or reading instructions presented in more accessible formats” (Vanderborg, 2001: 18). With the language poets’ writing, poetics gained an even more exclusive status. It became as important as the poetic practice. In the practice of the language poets, the distinction between writing about poetry and writing poetry itself diminished. But the crucial difference between the language writers’ paratexts and The New American Poets is that the latter had naïve (pre-structuralist) conceptions of language as a tool for reflecting the reality which exists outside it, including emotions, and the language poets insisted that language constructs reality in language for us (Heuving, 2019: 64). In considering Charles Bernstein’s poetry and poetics (and/or theory) I will deal with the dynamic relation between poetry and poetics/theory in his work.

Bernstein will, in conversation with Eric Denut (conducted in 2004), explain that in the 1970s the direct expressive utterance called *lyric* written in free verse „was the sine qua non of poetry“ (Bernstein, 2016: 204). For him, the function of ’theory’ is not to give a prescription about how to write poetry, „but rather, poetry and poetics both emerge out of a conflict with a given state of affairs. Poetry and poetics, theory and practice, are interrelated. Poetry is an extension of the practice of poetry, and poetry in an extension of *thinking with* the poem and also the reflection of poetics“ (Bernstein, 2016: 204).

In their transformation of the field of poetry, the language poets (beside Bernstein, I will mention Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, Bob Perelman, Barrett Watten, James Sherry, Douglas Messerli, Rae Armantrout, among others) had a crucial role because they questioned the *lyric paradigm*. In this paradigm the *lyric I* is established as the main organizing principle (Bernstein, 1986: 408). It is articulated as a speaking voice in the poem, which became “the medium delegated to poetry as a primal signature of selfhood” (Rasula, 1996: 38). In mainstream American poetry the *lyric I* became the marker which secured authenticity and truthfulness of utterance (Đurić, 2020: 300). Marjorie Perloff will extract several characteristics of the mainstream lyric paradigm in the 1970s and 1980s, including the use of free verse, which is organized by placing the image as the most powerful tool to indicate the inner states of the speaker’s mind (Perloff, 1998: 151). Free verse in this narrative poetry was based on speech rhythm, so that the readers have an impression that the poet speaks to him/her directly, without mediation.

The questioning of voice, what language poets did, could be contextualized regarding the “larger post-structuralist critique of authorship and the hu-

manist subject” (Perloff, 2004: 130). Bernstein insisted that language writing and poststructuralism are parallel developments, but because poetry is marginal as an art, for obvious reasons, this fact remained hidden and unknown.

Depicting the situation at US universities in the 1970s, Bob Perelman stressed that, on the one hand, the dominant model at creative writing departments was the *lyric paradigm*, which he described as the “scenic monologue of the writing workshops,”<sup>1</sup> with the belief that language is a natural transcription of reality. On the other hand, French poststructuralism was introduced at English departments and advocated “that language is transindividual” (Perelman, 1996: 130). The language poets used the post-structuralist theories in their discussions of radical experimental poetry. Related to this, the position of language poetry in the 1970s to the 1990s should be understood by its relations to 1) the mainstream American poetry of the time; 2) post-structuralist theories; 3) marginalized Modernist and experimental poetry in the US, as well as within the transnational context.

Mainstream American poetry at the time was predominantly based on the confessional model (the *lyric paradigm*), an ideal that was seen to be realized in the work of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and John Berryman. Masterly crafted, these poems “were short narratives, focused on small or large moments of crisis or optimism” (Perelman, 1996: 12). The language poets’ interest in theory was also locally motivated: the mainstream poets were utterly anti-intellectually oriented. Language poets insisted on the *textuality* and *materiality* of the linguistic sign, searching for and re-evaluating excluded or marginalized experimental poetry, making the new canon which functioned as a working textual and ideological environment for writing new experimental poetry. By always using new theoretical conceptual frames, they were dealing with Russian Cubo-Futurism, American Objectivists, putting Gertrude Stein in the center of their canon, dealing with the Fluxus artist and poet Jackson Mac Low, or performance poets David Antin and Jerome Rothenberg, and many others. As new theoretical trends appeared, the language poets provided new interpretations of experimental poetry, constantly reshaping the field.

In relation to the *linguistic turn*, at the beginning of their public activities, they focused on poetry as the production of *material texts*. In poetics and in poetry, they foregrounded the material signifier and worked with the sentence. They also work with the writing units at a higher level, such as paragraph(s) or books or a series of books, as well as with the word as a primary unit, and with the units below the word (syllables, phonemes, etc.) (Đurić, 2018: 44-45). With the *cultural turn* (1980s and 1990), they will politicize their writing production, interpreting poetry in relation to Post-Marxism, the New Historicism, Cultural Studies and Cultural Materialism. In this context

<sup>1</sup> From the 1970s writing poetry was taught at many American Universities (Đurić, 2002: 144-145).

Charles Bernstein will use the notion of the *politics of poetic form* to explain how “innovative poetic styles can have social meaning” (Bernstein 1990 vii, Đurić, 2018: 46). The phrase ‘the politics of poetry’ refers to “the politics of poetic form not the efficacy of poetic content” and Bernstein will further explain that “[w]hen a poem enters into the world it enters into the political, in the sense of ideological and historical space.” Poetry is understood as “a place to explore the constitution of meaning, of self, of group, of nation – of value” (Bernstein, 1999: 4). With the *performative turn*, Bernstein will introduce the notion of *close listening*, insisting that the style of reading poetry should be taken into consideration when the meaning of the poetry production is discussed (Bernstein 1998, Đurić, 2002: 152-153, Đurić, 2018: 47-48). Bernstein’s *Close Listening* and Adelaide Morris’s *Sound States: Innovative Poetry and the Performed Word* (1997) are considered to be the first theoretical volumes dealing with poetry performance (Gräbner and Casas, 2011: 9).

In conversation with Jay Sanders (conducted in 2009), Bernstein said that the objection that he and other language poets received was that their work “is much more interesting as theory” (Bernstein, 2016: 231), and to Yubraj Aryal he explained:

“I prefer the terms *philosophy*, *aesthetic*, and *poetics* to *theory*. In this sense I am not so much a theorist as a practitioner who reflects on his practice. Much of my poetics is pragmatic; none of it is systematic. [...] poetics and poetry are mutually informing; but those who wish to deny the conceptual basis of their writing in favor of unmediated expression risk falling into a dogmatic rigidity about writing. I am especially interested in extreme forms of poetry, odd and eccentric forms, constructed procedures and procedural constructions. I never assume that the words I use represent a given word; I make the work anew with each word”

(Bernstein, 2016: 225).

In conversation with Yurbaj Aryal (conducted in 2008), Bernstein claimed that in criticizing mainstream poetry and categories like *voice* and *expression*, *clarity* and *exposition*, language poets, including himself, “advocate the invention of new forms and the use of found (or appropriated) language” (Bernstein, 2016: 223). In this endeavor, their intention was to link poetry and poetics. This tight connection was a part of the *poststructuralist turn*, or *turn to theory* in humanities, and will direct their attention to the discursive formations, imposing the urgent need for new definitions of the new poetry practice. The result of this new situation was a production of a range of attitudes toward the poetics and its function in the process of writing and understanding poetry. As Jeane Heuving and Tyrone Williams stated, “[f]or some, poetics were just as important, if not even more important, than poetry – and for some practitioners, not to be distinguished” (Heuving and Wil-

liams, 2019: x). As theory used literary devices by which it was literalized, for example in the work of Jacques Derrida, language poets used theory to make the field of poetry production utterly porous and ‘contaminated’ by discourses which were, according to the mainstream canon, foreign discourses.

In his books of essays and poetry, Bernstein works with these two genres in different ways, blurring the distinction between them. In anti-essentialist terms, he defined the difference between poetry and philosophy as a result of “a tradition of thinking and writing, a social matrix of publications, professional associations, audiences; more, indeed, the fact of history and social convention than intrinsic necessities of the ‘medium’ or ‘idea’ of either one” (Bernstein, 1986: 217). In accordance with this, he and other language poets experimented with the genres, destabilizing them. As an example, he pointed to Lyn Hejinian’s book *My Life*, written, in Ron Silliman’s phrase with *new sentences* (Đurić, 2002: 83-102) which meant she worked with paragraphs and sentences as the main writing units. Hejinian destabilized the difference between prose and poetry (Đurić, 281-311) which is the effect of the new sentence as a literary device. Bernstein points to the sentences, phrases and words which “are permuted or, more importantly, permutable; the sort of disjunctive collage or serial ordering that characterize much of recent poetry” (Bernstein, 1992: 152). On the other hand, “[e]ssays can also be combinatorial, making a sharp break from essays that are developmentally narrative” (Bernstein, 1992: 152).

In other words, the language poets’ intention has been to work with and destabilize the established stylistic differences between theory and poetics, criticism and poetry, pointing to the artifice of their generic codes. Most importantly, Bernstein sees poetics as a powerful tool in the process of changing the current poetry production (Bernstein, 1992: 157). Among several of the definitions or, rather, descriptions of poetics Bernstein gave are these: “Poetics is not supplement [to poetry] but rather complementary“, “*Poetics is the continuation of poetry by other means*“, and “Poetics makes explicit what is otherwise unexplicit and, perhaps more important, makes unexplicit what is otherwise explicit“ (Bernstein, 1992: 160). In 1981 he wrote that „[t]heory is never more than an extension of practice“ (Bernstein, 2016: 204).

From 1978 to 1980 Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews edited the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* designed by feminist artist Susan Bee, dedicated to poetics. Matthew Hofer and Michael Goldston stressed that the magazine had activist and political aspirations, and is rooted „in Sapir-Whorf, early Wittgenstein, and Neo-Marxist notions of language as ideological production“ (Hofer and Goldston, 202: ix). Most of the essays were written with references to marginalized or forgotten avant-garde authors and well known theoretical works (Vanderborg, 2001: 86). This kind of questioning the genres, and working with and in-between them continued.

In 1986, *Contents’ Dream*, Bernstein’s book of essays appeared and, according to Vanderborg, in it he included a variety of approaches that de-

stabilized the academic essay as a genre. It embraced the range from “formal sentences and paragraphs to the run-on format of talk poetry texts” and “cultivated the tabloid tone of exposé” (Vanderborg, 2001: 90). The first essay titled „Three or Four Things I Know about Him“ begins:

1. „...the task of history, once the world beyond the truth had disappeared, is to establish the truth of this world. ...“ – Marx
  2.           its like a living death           going to work  
every day       sort of like being in the tomb       to sit  
in your office           you close the door       theres the  
typewriter           theres three or four maybe three hours of  
work to be done           between that nine oclock and five [...]
- (Bernstein, 1986: 13)

In his verse-essay *Artifice of Absorption*, published for the first time in the magazine *Paper Air* in 1987, Bernstein responded to British poet Veronica Forrest-Thompson's book *Poetic Artifice* (1978). Forrest-Thompson objected to the critical approach to *difficult poems* like those published in John Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath* or the ones made within the concrete poetry movement. As Brian Kim Stefans explains, she pointed out that “[t]he beauty of theory [...] is that it allows one to cross the lines separating various ‘poetics’ - these codes of literary identity that are more often a system of dislikes - and to cross into the central element that all poetry shares, the physis of its Artifice” (Stefans, 2001). She expressed the structuralist credo applied to poetry that “[t]he ‘meaning’ of a poem may have more to do with the ‘intention’ to write a poem with reference to particular variants in convention than with the utterance itself” (Stefans, 2001). Bernstein response articulated how both of them similarly posited “*artifice against realism*” (Greene, et al, 2012: 90). *Artifice* directs attention to the materiality of the medium which, thanks to the linguistic turn, became the most important concept for experimental poets and critics from the 1970s until today. Heuwig stressed that this strong emphasis on the materiality of language, as well as the importance of poetics was identified with Language Writing (Leuwig, 2019: 63).

In this regard, Craig Dworkin would explain:

“... the materiality of the medium makes available alternative strategies for pursuing signs along routes of signification, and it thus allows language to function anaphorically and cataphorically – gesturing forward and backward within the economy of the text. This shifting dynamic between opacity and transparency, between the material and the meaning it subtends, explains in part why so many difficult and visually unconventional works seem self-referential or meta-textual”

(Dworkin, 2003: 73).

The “innovative visual collage of poetics and essay” (Vanderborg, 2001: 93) titled *The Artifice of Absorption*, that I already mentioned, was later in-

cluded in a Bernstein' book *A Poetics* (1992). *Artifice of Absorption* was written in verse, but it also includes prose paragraphs. It could be said that the whole page is used as a field, and thus the reference to Olson's influential visual aesthetics of the page could be established. The use of different sizes and types of font as well as the patterning of parts of the text can be connected to the devices of concrete poetry (these two were in relation at the time). Bernstein shifts "between different genres [which] allows him to experiment with the several versions of the relation between author and audience, negotiating among the writerly 'I,' the readerly 'you' and 'we' together" (Vanderborg, 2001: 93). Although its tone could be understood as a „conventional persuasive essay“ (Vanderborg, 2001: 94), the formal visual layout, i.e., the visual aesthetics of the page complicate its status. I would say that what he argues as important for poetry, could also be applied to this kind of verse writing:

„[...] I would say  
that such elements as line breaks, acoustic  
patterns, syntax, etc. are meaningful rather than,  
as she [Veronica Forrest-Thompson] has it, that they *contribute* to the meaning  
of the poem.“

(Bernstein, 1992: 12)

In any kind of writing, including poems and essays, everything we understand as formal (meaning not essential), like the visual, acoustic, syntactic elements, should be understood as meaningful: it actively participates in the production of meaning.

In 1999 Bernstein published his book *My Way: Speeches and Poems*, mixing short and long essay-speeches, poems and interviews (interviews are always an integral part of his books of essays). According to Vanderborg, Bernstein here „extends the collage of the *Artifice [of Absorption]* to the unit of the book, offering a selection of poems, essays, interviews, and speeches that is even more diverse than the stylistic range of his previous essay volumes“ (Vanderborg, 2001: 98).

I will end my essay with the poem in which Bernstein himself deals with difficult poetry:

*Thank You for Saying Thank You*

This is a totally  
accessible poem.  
There is nothing  
in this poem  
that is in any  
way difficult  
to understand.  
All the words  
are simple &  
to the point.



There are no new  
 concepts, no  
 theories, no  
 ideas to confuse  
 you. This poem  
 has no intellectual  
 pretensions. It is  
 purley emotional.  
 It fully expresses  
 the feelings of the  
 author: *my feelings* [...]

(Bernstein, 2006: 7)

In this poem we are confronted with the conflicting status of a poem which in an ironical way explicates the otherwise internalized ideology of mainstream poetry: a poem should not be difficult. In many of his poems Bernstein uses poetic strategy as „an analogue of his critical strategy in the essays“ (Miller, 2014: 66).

### Coda

Recently we have witnessed, I would say, the dramatic refiguration of poetry not just in the US, but globally. In this process, which in American poetry started approximately around the end of 1990s, I see language poetry as a most important factor. The *Anti-lyric paradigm*, introduced by language poets, foregrounded poetry as an important term in opposition to lyric. The function of the term was to reevaluate the experimental poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the context of American poetry in which radical modernists were marginalised and/or erased or, in other words, deevaluated. The context in which poststructuralist theories foregrounded the materiality of linguistic sign, with important consequences for experimental poetry as language art, coincided with the language poets', including Bernstein's, construction of the field anew. The triumph of the *anti-lyric paradigm* in 1990s caused reactions, an acceptance of experimental poetics, including language poetry', but also a backlash.

In these multiple and conflicting processes of reshaping and pluralizing poetry practice, the term *lyric* was introduced again with a pragmatic function. The mainstream poetry was transformed into the newly established production of hybrid poems (St. Johns and Swensen, 2009). This occurred in relation to the powerful language poets' production of theory, poetics and poetry. Soon a new field of research was established: *new lyric studies*, with the aim of renovating literary aesthetics (Ramazani, 2020: 241), and recuperating the category of the *lyric* as it is defined in the *anti-lyric paradigm*. The terms poetry and lyric are both strategic and situational: they function to reconfigure the poetry production.

In the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and beyond, along with Kenneth Goldsmith's and Craig Dworkin's *conceptual writing*, the experimental practices excluded from the mainstream have been foregrounded. After 2000, the reintroduction of *lyric* as a term is a symptom of the change within mainstream poetry, in which all the procedures of experimental writing of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are absorbed and mixed with the more traditional approaches of poetry production. 'Lyric' now includes definitions which were assigned to 'poetry' within the anti-lyric paradigm. As Jahan Ramazani wrote, interpreting Jonathan Culler's recovering of the term, "he [Culler] resists the historical discrediting of lyric, the idea that it's a mystical abstraction, showing that writers and their readers reactivate for their own time the lyric structure of the past" (Ramazani, 2020: 242). The advocates of *new lyric paradigm* play on the double status of the lyric: it is understood to have ontological status (there is a transhistorical essence of lyric), but at the same time historically it changes.

When I say that the terms 'poetry' and 'lyric' are strategic, situational and functional, I mean they are defined so that they are operative in contemporary cultural and poetical battles against or for hegemony. And the actual battles around poetry are interesting because we are witnessing a time of a *global turn to poetry* in a *global age*. When we think of the state of affairs of poetry in the US (and elsewhere), we should think of the following factors: several decades of hegemony of poststructuralist theory, the globalization of neoliberalism, and the new global (or transnational) approaches to poetry which could be viewed as generating the field of „world poetry“ analogously to „new world literature,“ (see Ramazani, 2020), the field in which mostly world prose has been researched. The field of poetry is now in the process of constant pluralization transnationally and, thanks to the global or transnational turn in literary studies, the imperative is to map different geo-poetries. The interesting paradox as an effect of the processes of globalization is that the field of poetry globally is pluralized and heterogenized, but at the same time in the process of homogenization.

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CHARLES BERNSTEIN' POETICS

The focus of my attention is the poetics of language poet Charles Bernstein. I discuss his work within American experimental poetry, especially the poetry formations of New American Poetry and its production of poetics. The relation between language poetry and post-structuralism is discussed, along with the transformation of the field of American poetry with its consequences today. I explain the notions of the difficult poem, the anti-lyric paradigm, and the new lyric.

*Keywords:* Charles Bernstein, language poetry, poetry experiment, poetics, theory, anti-lyric paradigm, lyric.