


Context is all: the language games of Charles Bernstein

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ABSTRACT

Charles Bernstein, the founder of the Language Poetry movement, is one of our leading poet-theorists, but his poetry is often considered to be incomprehensible – too difficult. In this essay, I argue that when one reads Bernstein in the light of Wittgenstein, whose philosophy Bernstein knew well, he emerges as quite accessible – and wholly delightful – as a poet. Wittgenstein taught us that “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” and hence context is all. When one reads Bernstein commonsensically, understanding that “ordinary language is alright,” as Wittgenstein said, we can understand Bernstein’s satire and parody and his “language games” quite well. My example is the long poem “Lives of the Toll Takers” together with some later short love songs and ballads.

Keywords: Wittgenstein. Language game. Context. Parody. Collage. Structure. Irony.

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Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* begins with a careful refutation of St. Augustine's theory of language acquisition:

When grown-ups named some object and at the same time turned towards it, I perceived this, and I grasped that the thing was signified by the sound they uttered, since they meant to point *it* out [...] In this way, little by little, I learnt to understand what things the words, which I heard uttered in their respective places in various sentences, signified. And once I got my tongue around these signs, I used them to express my wishes.¹ (AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, I, 8 *apud* WITTGENSTEIN, PI 2009, §1).

¹See Augustine, *Confessions*, I, 8, as cited by Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Revised fourth bilingual Edition, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, et. Al; ed. P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). Subsequently cited as PI and the numbers given are those of the propositions, not page numbers.

"These words," as Wittgenstein explains it, "give a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the words in language name objects-sentences are combinations of such names. [...] Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands" (PI 2009, §1).

But of course, as Wittgenstein notes, and as linguists today would agree, we don't, in fact, learn language this way. Some words – nouns, adjectives – do point to things – *apple, table, tree, Mama* – but most words – verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions – do not, for example, *for, in, but, then, was, want*. And in any case, as the *Investigations* (WITTGENSTEIN, 2009) shows so convincingly, children learn to speak, not in words, but in phrases and sentences. A two-year old will say "I hope we can go to the beach tomorrow" but that child could not define the word "hope." She has heard adults use the word in the context of wanting something to happen and so begins to use it. And indeed, as the *Investigations* shows, even the most common words like *pain, read, or blue* have variable meanings. Take "blue":

"Is this blue the same as the blue over there? [...]"
You are mixing paints and you say, "It's hard to get the blue of this sky."
"It's turning fine, you can already see blue sky again." [...]
Do you see the blue book over there? Bring it here." (PI 2009, §34)

And Wittgenstein (2009) hasn't even come to the metaphorical meanings yet, as in "Am I blue?" or "He is green with envy."

From his years of study of how language actually works, Wittgenstein (PI 2009, §43) concluded, in what is probably the most famous of his propositions, that "The meaning of a word is its use in the language."² The German word *Gebrauch* refers to actual *practice*, and for Wittgenstein, the understanding of language is always a practice, an activity – never a theory. This philosopher did not believe in *metalanguage*, insisting again and again that "Ordinary language is alright."

²"Die Bedeutung eines Wortes ist sein Gebrauch in der Sprache." (PI 2009, §43).

In practice, that ordinary language is organized into what Wittgenstein calls *language-games*, games that include the range of human activities from "Giving orders, and acting on them" to "Reporting an event" to "Requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying" (PI 2009, §24). We might, for instance, be playing the "breakfast game": you bring in a tray with eggs, toast, butter, salt, sugar, and coffee" and I ask, "May I have the sugar please," and if we are both native speakers this game is played quite smoothly and easily. But note that context is everything. "Pass the sugar!" is readily understood in the breakfast game but what about the phrase "Milk me sugar," a command found in a Gertrude Stein poem like *Tender Buttons*? Or again, what is the game being played if I say, "Sit here, sugar"?

Language, Wittgenstein points out, "is not *contiguous* to anything else". We don't have "ideas" and then put them into words; indeed, there are no thoughts outside of language. It is language that defines us as humans. So, for example, "A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe that his master will come the day after tomorrow?" (PI, II, §i). Or again, "Why can't a dog simulate pain? Is he too honest?" (PI 2009, §250). To pose such questions is to recognize their absurdity.

Philosophy, given this view of language, is defined as "the attempt to be rid of a particular kind of puzzlement."³ The puzzles are those of *language*: "Instinctively we use language rightly: but to the intellect this use is a puzzle" (LC 1, 1930). Verbal analysis begins by looking closely at the *grammar* of a given phrase or sentence. Not grammar as prescriptive, but quite simply as the description of what *is*, of how a given sentence is put together. "There are no gaps in grammar;

³Wittgenstein's *Lectures Cambridge, 1930-32*, ed. Desmond Lee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1.

grammar is always complete" (LC 16, 1930). And so "in philosophy all that is not gas is grammar" (LC 112, 1931).

How does Wittgenstein's view of language apply to poetry? For the experimental poets – the Concretists, Conceptualists, Language Poets – of the last half century, Wittgensteinian thinking has provided wonderful ammunition for reassessing the role language plays in poetry. The context of a given word or image must be specified as fully as possible so that we can understand what a given word means in just THIS context. If the context changes, the word within it will also change meaning. And so experimental poets have worked with context itself, trying to understand what happens when we take a word out of its usual context or when the context remains indeterminate. If poetry is, as Ezra Pound taught us, "language charged with meaning," then the context within which a particular statement is made becomes especially important. If context is elusive, communication is occluded, either by insufficient information or by a surplus thereof, as is the case of the internet, with its endless flow of excess information.

One important poet who has asked himself repeatedly what happens when the context of a given phrase or sentence is missing is Charles Bernstein. Having studied with that great Wittgensteinian Stanley Cavell at Harvard, Bernstein, generally considered the *chef d'école* of the Language Movement, came to poetry with a new sense of possibility. He understood that the lyric did not need to limit itself to endless personal confessions and small epiphanies but could take on the larger issues of contemporary culture, whether Big Business or political cliché or mediaspeak. Well-versed in pop culture as well as poetic tradition, Bernstein has produced a difficult but enormously suggestive and exciting poetry, often very funny.

I propose here to look at one long poem, "The Lives of the Toll Takers", from the volume *Dark City* (1995), and then two short, very different elegiac poems from his later years.⁴ The form of Bernstein's long poems is often assumed to be a latter-day version of Charles Olson's famous "Projective Verse," the process poetics or "composition by field," governed by the famous principle, first spelled out by Robert Creeley (1951) that "form is never more than an extension of content,"⁵ and that in the "energy-construct" resulting, "one perception must

⁴ Charles Bernstein, "Lives of the Toll Takers," *Dark City* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994), 9-28. Rpt. in *All the Whiskey in Heaven, Selected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010), 150-179. I cite the text from *All the Whiskey in Heaven* here, due to greater accessibility. For an earlier discussion of the opening lines of "Lives," see my 21st *Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2002), 172-179. "Today is the Last Day of Your Life 'til Now," appeared in *Recalculating* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 158, and "All the Whiskey in Heaven" is the name, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010), 297.

⁵ CREELEY, Robert, as cited in Caps by Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," *Selected Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1971), 15-30, see esp. p. 16.

immediately and directly lead to a further perception.” For Olson and his fellow “New American” poets, projectivism or “open form” meant that each poem establishes its own form in an exploratory, unpredictable act of writing, prompted and shaped by the “pressures” of the poet’s own voice—more specifically, the poet’s breath.⁶

Open form, claiming its ancestry from Pound and William Carlos Williams, was the dominant mode of the 1960s and 70s poetic *avant-garde*, from Black Mountain to the Beats, to the San Francisco and New York Poets. But it is important to note that Bernstein’s interpretation of Pound is very different from, say, Allen Ginsberg’s. The ideogrammic method, as Haroldo de Campos has explained it,⁷ emphasizes, not the shaping breath or the move from one perception immediately leading to another, but the *homology*, based on sonic, visual, or semantic echoes, of individual items – what Hugh Kenner referred to as Pound’s “subject rhymes.”⁸ Then, too, the mode of Bernstein’s poems, in contradistinction to, say, George Oppen’s or Denise Levertov’s, is that of satire. “Lives of the Toll Takers” is a Popean *Dunciad* of sorts, its burlesque comedy replete with cerebral punning, elaborate word play, and parodic rhyme, in the vein of Byron’s *Don Juan*: “But – Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual, Inform us truly, have they not hen-peck’d you all?”

For Byron’s *ottava rima* or Pope’s heroic couplets, Bernstein’s poem, which runs to 435 lines (although line count is deceptive because some lines have only a single word or syllable, while others are part of a prose paragraph, and there is much blank space between given passages), substitutes the mobility of typographic play: the poet’s unit becomes, not the stanza but the verbal fragment in tension with the overall page design. At the same time, at the phrasal level, Bernstein’s sound structures often recall the high pitch of Hart Crane,⁹ as in “Slow / Applause flows into liquid cynosures,” or “The dice of drowned men’s bones he saw bequeath / An embassy.”¹⁰ Neither narrative nor the meditation of a grounded speaker in a particular landscape, nor the Olsonian “energy-discharge,” the structure of “Lives of the Toll Takers” is best characterized as montage: its connections are metonymic and paratactic rather than syntactic, its structure less temporal than spatial although the sequence does drive to a tentative conclusion with its final word “besides,” which leaves everything wide open for the

⁶ Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” *Human Universe and Other Essays*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 51-61. “Projective Verse” has been widely reprinted; it appears in virtually every anthology of American poetics of the period, beginning with Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* (New York: Grove Press, 1960). See Alan Golding’s entry for the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics*, 4th edition, ed. Roland Greene and Stephen Cushman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1109-1110.

⁷ Haroldo de Campos, “Poetic Function and Ideogram: The Sinological Argument,” in *A Haroldo de Campos Reader: Selected Writings* ed. and trans. Sergio Bessa and Odile Cisneros (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 287-311.

⁸ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 92-93.

⁹ Hart Crane, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters* (New York: Library of America, 2006), “The Wine Menagerie,” p. 16, “At Melville’s Tomb,” p. 24. The poems were originally published in *White Buildings*, 1924.

¹⁰ See on this point, Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 185-187.

reader, allowing as it does for the widest range of possibilities to come. And *besides*. . . .

“Victimless” Rhymes

Consider, for starters, the resonance of the poem’s title. Not *The Lives of the Saints* or *The Lives of the Poets* or *The Lives of the Rich and Famous*, but *The Lives of the Toll Takers*. We are all familiar with those anonymous men and women in glass booths or open-air stations, collecting toll money on our freeways and bridges and handing us change. The job of toll taker, mechanical and endlessly repetitive as it is, is not even an essential one, since today toll takers have largely been replaced by machines. Even in 1995, when Bernstein was composing the poem, toll takers were becoming obsolete.

Then again, toll takers do have lives: surely, they have unique experiences like anyone else, pleasures and sorrows all their own.¹¹ And figuratively they are everywhere among us: people performing routine jobs just to make a living, or, in the opposite sense, toll-takers are those whose jobs exact a *toll* on themselves and others. “Working that job,” we might say of Bernstein’s character “That Klupzky Girl,” “certainly took a toll on her.” Moreover, the rhythm of toll-taking is the rhythm of recurrence—and hence, by definition, boringly repetitive. Even then, however, there are unforeseen changes of rhythm, as when in *The Godfather*, Sonny Corleone stops at the toll booth on the Causeway to Queens, only to find that the attendant has been replaced by his murderer. Such “speed bumps” become a challenge for the poet.

Here are the poem’s first twenty lines:

There appears to be a receiver off the hook. Not that
you care.

Beside the gloves resided a hat and two
pinky rings, for which no
finger was ever found. Largesse

¹¹ In the *San Francisco Chronicle* (May 31, 1999), there is an article by Carolyn Zinko on this very question:

There’s the slap, the snatch, and the ball of change.

These are the moments that make up a day in the life of a Bay Area toll taker. Five hundred times an hour, eight hours, a day, as the cars approach endlessly, like lemmings to the sea.

Toll collectors must make change with as few bills as possible, and balance the cash drawer at the end of each shift.

They must count cars and axles that come through their lane. They must give directions. They must be happy. And above all, no matter how cranky the motorists are, they must never snap back.

And Zinko tells the story of one particular toll taker, Peter Klein, 60, who has held the job for 26 years and says he has come to enjoy observing and classifying the various toll payers who pass through his booth.

(see Perloff, *Twenty-First Century Modernism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2002), 173-74.

with no release became, after
not too long, atrophied, incendiary,
stupefying. Difference or
différance: it's
the distinction between hauling junk and
removing rubbish, while
I, needless not to say, take
out the garbage
(pragmatism)

Phone again, phone again jiggety jig.

I figured
they do good eggs here.

Funny \$: making a killing on
junk bonds and living to peddle the tale
(victimless rime)

(All the Whiskey, 150-51)

At first reading (or hearing), "Lives" may seem casual and improvisatory—a kind of stand-up comedy routine. But this seemingly casual talk is actually highly structured. It begins with a bit of everyday conversation: before the advent of cell phones, it was common to pick up the phone to make a call, only to find that one of the extensions in one's home or office was "off the hook." It makes perfect sense to remark on this to a relative or friend, and when the latter does not respond, to complain, "Not that you care." You don't need to make a call!

The exchange, in any case, provides the key leitmotif for the entire poem. In the world of the “toll takers,” communication is blocked: nothing comes through the channel but noise.

Now the conversation between “I” and “you” abruptly breaks off and, in Wittgensteinian terms, the poem shifts to a different language game. Not casual banter between two people living together, but a kind of pseudo-Victorian narrative: “Beside the gloves resided a hat and two / pinky rings, for which no / finger was ever found.” Pinky rings: In Victorian England, members of the royal family initiated the custom of wearing a wedding ring on one’s fifth (pinky) finger, but in modern America, one usually associates pinky rings with images of gangsters: the Godfather Vito Corleone wears one. In “Lives of the Toll Takers,” however, the rings have no fingers to encircle: another sign of extreme dislocation. The disconnect—again in very formal and slightly archaic English—is an emblem of “Largesse / with no release,” a largesse “atrophied, incendiary, / stupefying.” Perhaps the reference is to the exchange of these rings, to wedding vows that don’t work out or promises that have been broken and lead to unspecified trouble. In any case, something, in this old-fashioned tale, is very amiss but we don’t know what.

No solution is forthcoming from our contemporary Great Thinkers. Derrida’s insistence (lines 8-9) that there is a clear-cut distinction between *difference*, as we ordinarily use the word, and the *différance* of language, where no word has a fixed meaning but, on the contrary, *defers* meaning endlessly, is parodied in Bernstein’s distinction between hauling junk and / removing rubbish, while / I, needless not to say, take/ out the garbage.” Let’s, even if it’s offensive (“needless not to say”) not succumb to the high falutin’ distinctions of French theory: American “pragmatism” (as in William James) is surely preferable.

And so on to the everyday lives of our toll takers. Again the register changes: “To market to market to buy a fat pig, / Home again home again, jiggity jig.” The nursery rhyme is adapted so as to put emphasis on the phone again--a “phone” that quite logically replaces “home” in our market economy where the “right” call makes the trade, never mind going to “market” in person and buying anything as tangible as a “fat pig.” “I figured / they do good eggs here”: a fellow trader, no

doubt, is explaining why he or she chose a particular local restaurant for breakfast.

“I figured they do good eggs here” is a nice example of Wittgenstein’s adage that the meaning of a word is its use in a language. Bernstein’s sentence is perfectly ordinary: we’ve all had the experience of walking along a city street and selecting one restaurant among many possibilities with an explanation of how good the eggs or whatever else might be here. But what is such a line doing in the poem? If we bear in mind the poem’s business context, we might note that even here the speaker says, not I “thought,” but I “figured.” Even a choice as mundane as this one has been “figured.” The “funny money” (\$) now cited is literally counterfeit, but in our culture all money is in a sense counterfeit-- an empty signifier with nothing to back it up. “Making a killing on / junk bonds and living” not just to tell the tale, as the idiom has it, but to *peddle* it, this being a tale of junk bonds exchanged in what is a “victimless rime” (rhymes with “crime”). The crime (“rime”) is ironically victimless in that the victims of Wall Street “killings” are anonymous and too numerous to specify. Our nursery rhymes, it seems, are not so innocent.

To recapitulate: the first twenty lines of “The Lives of the Toll Takers” use a variant of Pound’s ideogrammic method to juxtapose fragments of conversation, Victorian narrative, pseudo-philosophic phrase-making, parodic nursery rhyme and familiar clichés and adages, repeatedly altered just enough to be recognized even as they are carefully skewed, so as to create a portrait of a domestic world so in thrall to business interests that the language of peddling and making killings no longer seems exceptional: it is simply the discourse of everyday life. The language game being played is the game of buying and selling and we all know how this game works.

Who is speaking? Sentences like the first – “There appears to be a receiver off the hook” – may be attributed to a friend or relative, as in a drama or film, but the words may also be the poet’s own, as in “I, needless not to say, take / out the garbage,” and “I figured. . . .” “Lives of the Toll Takers” is by no means “personal” in any direct way, but that is not to say there isn’t a very particular voice speaking here – a voice I can recognize and separate from the voices of other “language poets,” New York poets, and so on. Bernstein’s “I” functions as

an angle of vision, a subject position, responding to a related set of propositions. And the vision, however depersonalized, is that of a bard: his lines are marked by elaborate alliteration, assonance, consonance, and internal rhyme, as in “Beside the gloves resided a hat and two / pinky rings, for which no finger was ever found. Largesse / with no release.” Enchanted, so to speak, by the associations his own words call up, the poet bombards us with clichés, slogans, aphorisms, proverbs, puns, familiar catchy tunes, pop songs, and nursery rhymes – individual motifs repeating themselves, always in bowdlerized form, as in “Phone again, phone again jiggety jig,” “laughing all the way to the Swiss bank,” and “the prison house of language,” the latter a reference to Fredric Jameson’s famous critical study, denouncing the formalist focus on the word as such, rather than on the word as symptomatic of larger cultural and political issues. It’s as if Bernstein’s antennae, unable to hear a familiar phrase without picking it up and turning it inside out, are almost feverishly attuned to the vagaries and contradictions of living in the marketplace of late twentieth-century America. Everything is always already mediated and waiting to be decomposed or reframed. But it is also the case that the references point to New York City – the New York of the tabloids and *Variety*, of TV comedy and nightclub humor, of subways and street crossings. And these references are in turn interwoven with more literary material: Bernstein’s radius of discourse is that of the secular Jewish New Yorker turned, improbably to himself, artist and intellectual.

The opening page of Bernstein’s poem, in any case, sets the stage for what is to come in the lives of the toll-takers and specifies what toll their environment takes on them and thus on the reader. In this connection, it is useful to note what sorts of references are *not* to be found in a Bernstein poem like this one. Unlike, say, John Ashbery’s or Robert Creeley’s, Bernstein’s is a curiously *asexual* world: energy and power, far from having overtones of love and desire, are channeled into business, finance, and media activity: the poet is surrounded by people buying and selling; his competition is never with rival lovers; it’s with other poets and with those (perhaps relatives) who want him to be successful in the accepted sense of the word. Voluble and entertaining, playing the prankster with his friends, this poet is nevertheless curiously isolated, standing

on the sidelines, where he can take in the foibles and follies of his contemporaries. Thus, Bernstein's is a *Dunciad* of overheard conversation and cartoonish gesture. His is a very *social* world as viewed through the lens of an anti-social observer.

Now consider how the threads of the opening page are developed in the course of this thirty-page poem. The recitation of absurd rhymes and jingles, always just a word or two *off*, recurs throughout, for example, this version of "There was an old lady / Who lived in a shoe":

There was an old lady who lived in a
Zoo [for "shoe],
she had so many admirers [for "children"]

she didn't know what to rue [for "do"] --

or the continuous word play on the aphorism, "A picture is worth a thousand words," here becoming - cynically - "A picture [fixture] is worth more than a thousand words," and later, "(A picture is worth \$44.95 but no price can be put into words)", and so on. All the variants on the original adage circle around the concept of "worth." In the original maxim, by now a cliché, a visual representation is much more graphic than a verbal account of the same thing: think of the photographs of Hiroshima or the Vietnam War that literally changed the course of history. But Bernstein literalizes the notion: in fact, a successful picture (painting) *is* worth more than "a thousand words," even as the price (\$44.95) can never be a measure of a given art work's real worth. And the further irony is that Bernstein himself is using words, not pictures, to map his universe.

Or again, consider the variations on the song, made popular by Frank Sinatra, "Button up your overcoat / When the wind is free / Take good care of yourself / You belong to me!":

Button
your lip, cl
asp your tie, you

re on the B team

“Button up your overcoat” is a cheery love song, “*Button / your lip*” a kind of threat, urging the addressee to shut up, to remember how to put his tie *clip* on correctly, the conclusion suggesting that the advice just given hasn’t been taken since “you/ re” on no better than “the B Team.” And indeed the toll-taker’s fate is set: in a scratchy echo of “A rose by another name. . .” we read “A job / by any other name / would smell as / sour.”

No wonder: for the “lives of the toll takers” function, as the last page of the poem tells us, not in *an operating system*” but in “*an /op /erating environm /ent.*” The phrase splutters out: “in computer software,” according to Wikipedia, an *operating environment*, also known as an “integrated applications environment,” is one in which users run application software. “It consists of a user interface provided by an applications manager and usually an application programming interface (API) to the applications manager.” Such an environment is of course rigidly controlled, but the “control” is not the artist’s, as Bernstein proposes in his essay “Stray Straws and Straw Men” but that of an impersonal system that governs exactly what you can and cannot do, as rigidly as the movement through the toll both controls the driver’s options. But the wrenching of the phrase, with the apostrophe getting its own line –

It’s
not an operating system it

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s an

op

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ent.–

implies that this operating environment simply doesn’t function. Not with a receiver off the hook...

The blocked communication channel is, as I've already noted, one of the key motifs throughout the poem. And, to trace another ongoing thread, communication failure is everywhere related to *money*. This is, after all, a poem about paying tolls, and its scene is one of buying and selling, hot tips and broken promises, junk bonds and stock options. Bernstein's is not so much the genteel world of Wall St. as it is the rough-and-tumble world of the back-rooms and uptown offices, of deal-making and business breakfasts, "laughing all the way," not just to the bank, as the idiom has it, but appropriately to the "Swiss" bank where international customers deposit and launder their assets, perhaps "in gold bars." "Exemptions," "off-peak" trading, "A depository of suppositories" (an absurdity mixing business talk with items from the drugstore), "current fees" that "barely cover expenses," and a host of other business references pile up and culminate in such plaintive and absurd questions as – in a twist of Bob Dylan's "if dogs run free, then why not we?" – "Catalogs are free, why not we?"

Self-help manuals and bits of good advice on everything from buying gold to composing successful poetry permeate the poem. Words and phrases that would mean one thing in one context, here mean another. The theme throughout is the debasement of poetry into the poetry *business*. One of the funniest of the self-help bits, this time on the poetry front, is the following True Confession:

I had decided to go back
to school after fifteen years in
community poetry because I felt
I did not know enough to navigate
through the rocky waters that
lie ahead for all of us in this field.
How had Homer done it, what might Milton
teach? Business training turned
out to be just what I most needed.
Most importantly, I learned that
for a business to be successful, it
needs to be different, to stand out
from the competition. In poetry,
this differentiation is best
achieved through the kind of form
we present. (*All the Whiskey*, 173-74)

The first two lines are straightforward, as in a True Confession. But then comes the odd phrase “community poetry,” on the model of “community service.” And when we get to the cliché “Navigate/ through the rocky waters that lie ahead,” we know something is wrong. Yet, grotesque as these lines, written in the early 1990s sound, today they have become almost normative: one finds such suggestions everywhere in announcements and promotions from the Dean’s Office, speaking of “creativity” and “entrepreneurship” in the “humanities.” The key word is *form*, reduced, in our own *operating environment*, to *format* – to mere technique chosen from a Microsoft Word menu or manual. And when form is reduced to format, *language* is inevitably unhinged:

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Language, abused, copied, misconstrued, recycled, takes a heavy toll. Words and morphemes fly apart, the line breaks and cuts acting to distort words and phrases almost beyond recognition. Dialogue repeatedly presents us with such misconstrual: the “triple play / on all designated *ghost* morphemes” leads to the qualification “(you mean morphemes)” and the immediate huffy response, “[don’t tell me what I mean!/]”. Throughout the poem, not X but Y, is a frequent grammatical construction: “Simplicity is not / the / same as simplistic”; “Not angles / just / tangles”; “No “mere” readers only / writers who read, actors who inter-/act”; “not

this or this either, seeing five sides to every issue.” Since the channel is full of noise, the words start to fly apart, morphemes are opened up and contain unexpected paragrams, and when, on the penultimate page, “significant” questions start to come up, culminating in “Daddy, what did you / do to stop the war?” the computer crashes:

[p-
=jovwhu2g97hgbcf67q6fbqujx67sf21g97b.c.9327b97b987b87j7
7td7ktq98gdukbhg g9tq9798 icxqy2f108ytsxags62jc .

Here text is finally reduced to junk. But then again, the numbers on the screen are mostly sequences containing 6, 7, 8, and 9. Perhaps this *is*, after all, a language that can be decoded? It’s a natural impulse, in any case, to *try* to decode it. On the other hand, in toll taker land, as we read on the poem’s penultimate page, “It’s not / what you / know but / who knows / about it / & who’s likely to squeal.” (178). Here too is a pragmatic solution, if a very cynical one. And “besides. . .” The poem’s last word resonates with possibility. Perhaps, it implies, there *is* a way out. Or at least a further explanation. And *besides*: let the reader complete the sequence and pay the toll.

Once we catch on to Bernstein’s technique, once we see what language game he is playing with the reader, “Lives of the Toll Takers” is not at all incomprehensible. It is a searing critique of current business methods, as they dominate – and do not quite dominate – our lives. The final chaos of the text is the social/cultural chaos being described – a world where the stock market and trading rule the day but the computer finally has a melt-down, requiring poet and reader to, so to speak, start all over again.

Shoring the Fragments against one’s Ruins

In relating the seemingly “unrelatable,” Bernstein’s is an art of excess, baroque in its piling up of manifold exemplars of the follies and mendacities of our Waste Land, an unreal – or, more properly, hyperreal city that splinters into fragments before our eyes as “the profit and the loss” of Eliot’s “Death by Water”¹² is carried to its absurdly logical conclusion. Indeed, as we make our way through single-word lines and prose

¹² ELIOT, T. S. Death by Water. In: ELIOT, T. S. The Waste Land. [S.l.]: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016 [1922].

paragraphs, through Tin Pan Alley songs and computer coding instructions, we watch the breakdown of the “operating environment’ (op/erating environm/ent)” until there is nothing left except a series of numbers spewing out from all the computers and calculators in sight. The poem’s rhythm of recurrence always takes the most subtle differentials into account: one letter or phoneme can make all the difference, as in the overheard remark, “Funny, you don’t look / gluish.”

Bernstein’s art of excess is not easy to maintain. If there is a downside to this poem’s exuberant and elaborate verbal play, it is, I think, that certain allusions will date, for example the references on the second page to “a 1965 ‘short stabs’ poem / by “Ted “bowl over” Berrigan” and the aside, “Barbara Kruger is enshrined in the window / of the Whitney’s 1987 Biennial” on the following page. It’s not that Berrigan and Kruger aren’t significant art figures of the late twentieth century, but it isn’t clear—at least not to me—why they are singled out for inclusion in the riff on the commercialization of poetry and painting: the specificity of reference seems at odds with the hyperreality of the scene. Again, some of Bernstein’s effects are too easy: for instance, “Andy / Warhol is the / P. T. Barnum / of the / (late) / twentieth century,” followed by the too-clever pun, “there’s a /succor [for sucker] dead every twenty seconds.”

But then think of how many lines of *The Waste Land* manuscript Pound crossed out. It is almost inevitable, as Edgar Allan Poe insisted, that a long poem will have lapses. On the whole, “The Lives of the Toll Takers” maintains its difficult juggling act. And once the reader gets the hang of the poem’s spatial form—the cutting and positioning of words and phrases on the page, forcing us to see what the Russian Futurists called “the letter as such,” as in

just another
word for loose
st
ools)--

where the hiss of *st* and chiasmus of the off-color reference “loose/ stools” say it all—the poem’s careful construction becomes obvious.

To understand this and related Bernstein poems, in any case, we need to bypass current clichés about schools and movements. Language Poetry, is regularly read against its seeming precursors: the New York School, Objectivism, Black Mountain. But if we take Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* seriously, we begin to see that, however much Bernstein may protest that he has been influenced by Louis Zukofsky and Robert Creeley, by Gertrude Stein and George Oppen, his real affinities are for those two great Modernists whose politics and ideological stances he so often found objectionable—the Eliot of *The Waste Land* and Ezra Pound.

In a controversial essay called “Pounding Fascism,” originally presented as a MLA talk in 1985, Bernstein insisted that one must recognize – and decry – Pound's fascism even as his best work inadvertently undermines his own theories:

Pound's great achievement was to create a work using ideological swatches from many social and historical sectors of his own society and an immense variety of other cultures. This complex, polyvocal textuality was the result of his search – his unrequited desire for – deeper truths than could be revealed by more monadically organized poems, operating with a single voice and a single perspective. But Pound's ideas about what mediated these different materials are often at odds with how these types of textual practices actually work in *The Cantos*.¹³

This is an important point. Here is a representative passage from C. 80 in the Pisan sequence:

It is said also that Homer was a medic
 who followed the greek armies to Troas
 so in Holland Park they rolled out to beat up Mr. Leber
 (restaurantier) to Monsieur Dulac's disgust
 and a navy rolls up to me in Church St. (Kensington End)
 with:

Yurra Jurrman!

To which I replied: I am *not*.

“Well yurr szum kind ov a furriner.”

Ne povans desraciner (POUND, 1993, C.80)¹⁴

The “mishearing’ of English and German in the London of World War I brings together a dizzying set of references, looking ahead in its multivocalism to the “misseaming” of Bernstein's own “Dysraphism” or “Amblyopia.” But the Pound

¹³ Charles Bernstein, “Pounding Fascism (Appropriating Ideologies – Mystification, Aestheticization, and Authority in Pound's Poetic Practice)” *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 121-127: see p. 123.

¹⁴ *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1993), 523.

of the *Pisan Cantos* could move easily from his burlesque rendition of German accents and off-color war stories to the high seriousness of “*dove sta memoria*”: the elegiac note that opens *The Pisan Cantos* with the famous line “The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant’s bent shoulders” (POUND, 1993, C.74) and concludes the sequence with the words:

If the hoar frost grip thy tent
Thou wilt give thanks when night is spent (POUND, 1993,
C.84, *Cantos* 560)

In a similar vein, Bernstein’s baroque excess is often qualified by a dark lyric note. In recent years, for example, he has turned to the love song and ballad for imaginative transformation. The impetus seems to have been the tragic death of his adored daughter Emma (age 23) in 2008; the question, from a critical perspective, was how a poet, so given to irony, parody, burlesque, and satire, a poet who had always avoided autobiographical, much less confessional, poetry, would address such a rupture. Here is “Today is the Last Day of Your Life ‘Til Now”:

I was the luckiest father in the world
Until I turned unluckiest
They shoot horses, don’t they?
In the mountains the air is so
Thin you can scarcely say your
name. I dreamt I was a drum.
In the dream, I dreamt I was a
School boy afraid of school. I dreamt
I was drowning. Far away, the
crush of snow refracted the still muted
light. As if punishment was not
punishment enough.

This comes from *Recalculating* (2013), where Bernstein includes many translations and adaptations that have obliquely given this would-be anti-expressivist poet permission to treat of his own lost love, from “Auto-psychographia (after Fernando Pessoa) to “Be Drunken” (Baudelaire) and “Le Pont Mirabeau” (Apollinaire). In these translations, the poets in question provide the mask that the reticent Bernstein evidently feels he needs, but what about the “straightforward” “Today is the Last Day of Your Life ‘Til Now”, with its play on “Today

is the first day of the rest of your life?" Aren't those opening lines, "I was the luckiest father in the world / until I turned the unluckiest," almost painfully raw in their reference to the loss of the person this poet most adored?

As in his satire, Bernstein avoids all personal reference. We know nothing about Emma – not even her name and certainly not the circumstances of her suicide or memories of her life. Nor do we know anything about this father's own life – no excuses, no explanations. The aim is to project *how it feels*, avoiding all mitigating circumstances or occasions for self-pity. And so the *context* is devoid of the usual trapping of elegy, substituting for a specific environment the jumpcuts of film. "They shoot horses, don't they?" the poet irrelevantly asks. Even horses are routinely taken out of their agony, he notes, so why not he? The line's allusion to the 1969 film about a group of losers and derelicts is apropos: the poet has reached bottom. And, appropriately for the digital age, every line alludes parodically to commonplaces and clichés we hear every day. Thus the obvious statement "In the mountains the air is so thin you can barely breathe" becomes "you can barely say your name," which is neither here nor there, except that this poet has all but lost his name. "I dreamt I was a drum" is less a narrative of dream content than a visceral description: to feel like a drum is to feel one's head and heart pounding unbearably, even as to dream that one is "a school boy afraid of school" is the ultimate nightmare since all of us have to go to school. The poet's dreams are unbearable, but they are also wish fulfillments: no doubt, he would like to drown but already, in another nature cliché, the "still muted / light" is coming up, "refracted" by a "crush of snow." It seems that there is no choice but to go on, "As if," again in a parodic version of a well known phrase ("as if x or y were not punishment enough"), punishment itself is now "punishment enough."

I don't know a contemporary elegy more moving than this one unless it is the title poem of *All The Whiskey in Heaven*, which I have heard Bernstein read many times. Again, on first hearing, I found the language of excess almost too painful: the "No, never, I'll never stop loving you" seemed too much the stuff of Frank Sinatra pop songs and the transparency of the whole ballad seemed, well, not quite seemly:

Not for all the whiskey in heaven
Not for all the flies in Vermont
Not for all the tears in the basement
Not for a million trips to Mars

Not if you paid me in diamonds
Not if you paid me in pearls
Not if you gave me your pinky ring
Not if you gave me your curls

Not for all the fire in hell
Not for all the blue in the sky
Not for an empire of my own
Not even for peace of mind

No, never, I'll never stop loving you
Not till my heart beats its last
And even then in my words and my songs
I will love you all over again.

In this pseudo-ballad, almost every line takes some cliché out of context, beginning with “Not for all the joys of heaven. . . .” The lines largely fail to measure up to the *abcb* ballad rhyme, except in the clichéd “pearls”/ “curls” rhyme of stanza 2, and the rhythm falters awkwardly as in line 4 where the flowing anapestic rhythm of the first three lines is curtailed.

Such short-circuiting befits the irreverent title: heaven hardly seems the place where one will get all the whiskey one wants; too much whiskey, after all, is hurtful and its intake is usually associated with the road to hell rather than heaven. The nectar of the gods would be nice, or perhaps champagne: heaven might be the place to keep these flowing, but whiskey? No. And the catalogue that follows now turns bizarre: I will never stop loving you, not for all the flies in Vermont! Aren't these the opposite of what we want of immortality? “Tears in the basement”? Hardly. And even astronauts are not eager to make “a million trips to Mars.”

The second stanza begins by coming back to the more acceptable pop theme: “Not if you paid me in diamonds / Not if you paid me in pearls.” But “pinky ring”? Who even wants one? And the gift of curls would mean they were not on the lost girl's head. As the ballad continues it becomes more and more disjointed: the fire in hell is equated with the blue in the sky. All the talk of heaven and hell and empires is pure posturing:

this elegist won't give up his pain "even for peace of mind." And so, in the final stanza, the hackneyed "I'll love you till my heart beats its last" is rejected, the poet exclaiming that he cannot conceive even of a *death* that will end his pain. Indeed, the one thing that is eternal is neither heaven nor hell: it is *pain*.

Interestingly enough, the excess of the satiric poems becomes, for Charles Bernstein, the very stuff of the love elegy. Hyperbole, contradiction, the juxtaposition of unlike items, the "bad taste" of unpleasant suppositions, the explosion of conventional form: these create a poetic complex as rich as it is strange and distinctive. The longer poems, often sequences of short units like those in "All the Whiskey," are ambitious in their reach and range even as Pound's *Cantos* have the serial form of accumulation, splicing together smaller lyrics for greater resonance. It is, to return to Wittgenstein, the particular context for an image that counts. Words like *pain* don't have their usual meaning: here we can almost *feel* the pain in the awkward stanzas that don't really add up. The words themselves—*whiskey*, *flies*, *tears*—may be perfectly ordinary: it's their association and context that count. Thus the last line "I will love you all over again," which *in* itself sounds too sentimental—these words are, after all, found in any old pop song—sound, in the context of "whiskey in heaven" and "flies in Vermont," entirely individual and moving. Placement, grammar, coordination: these are what makes this poetry so distinctive.

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RESUMO

Contexto é tudo: os jogos de linguagem de Charles Bernstein

Charles Bernstein, o fundador do movimento Language Poetry, é altamente respeitado por suas afirmações teóricas, mas sua poesia é frequentemente considerada incompreensível – muito difícil. Neste ensaio, argumento que, quando se lê Bernstein à luz de Wittgenstein, cuja filosofia Bernstein conhecia bem, ele se torna bastante acessível – e totalmente encantador – como poeta. Wittgenstein nos ensinou que “o significado de uma palavra é seu uso na linguagem” e, portanto, o contexto é tudo. Quando se lê Bernstein com o senso comum, entendendo que “a linguagem comum está bem”, como Wittgenstein disse, podemos entender a sátira e paródia de Bernstein e seus “jogos de linguagem” muito bem. Meu exemplo é o longo poema “Lives of the Toll Takers” acompanhado, em seguida, de algumas canções de amor curtas e baladas.

Palavras-chave: Wittgenstein. Jogo de linguagem. Contexto. Paródia. Collage. Estrutura. Ironia.

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