

GUEST REVIEW: HIRSCHHORN ON BERNSTEIN

Norbert Hirschhorn reviews

All the Whiskey in Heaven. Selected Poems

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Attack of the Difficult Poems

By Charles Bernstein

Charles Bernstein is one of the leading poets of what is commonly known as the ‘language’ school of poetry, and now serves as Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and Distinguished Visiting Professor of Poetry, Poetics, and Theory at Princeton University – all signs of establishment acceptance of what was once considered a fringe movement.

Attack of the Difficult Poems is a collection of Bernstein’s essays and presentations that discuss the theory and methods of experimental poetry. Bernstein defines the term ‘difficult poem’ as one with difficult vocabulary and syntax, hard to appreciate on first readings, but affecting the reader’s imagination; all of which makes some readers feel stupid. More formally, we should say that the difficult poems disrupt syntax; play with the geography of the poem on the page; deal in contemporary language and idiom; often erudite; may incorporate non-linguistic elements; privilege sound over sense, or idiom over sound, or the aleatory over idiom; but above all, are experimental. One can learn to read and appreciate this poetry. The digital age now opens a whole new way to produce and understand poetry: vocal attributes of a reading can be parsed from audio recordings, a technology Bernstein is helping to develop. (1)

Bernstein’s own metier is about breaking boundaries, playful transgression, sarcasm, and experiment. The cover of *Attack...*, for example, is garish yellow and orange, the lettering resembling Mad Magazine’s Pow! Bam! Zap! The first thing to know about the selected poems is that few of the titles relate in any way to what follows; that is a charming aspect of the serious game. Sometimes, however, the title is in code: *Dodgem* consists of broken lines, busted words, odd punctuations, much spasmodic white space, which reminds me of the electrical dodge-em cars we kids drove around in amusement parks. Or, consider the prose poem *Azoot D’Puund* written in a send-up of those NYC subway ads for shorthand courses, ‘*If u cn rd ths, u cn gt a jb*’. The first line goes: ‘*iz wurry ray a ZoOt de puund in reduce yap crrRisLe ehk nugkinj.*’ (What, me worry about the British pound?) He experiments with nonsense typography, neologism, and a joke about insurance form pages titled, *This Poem Intentionally Left Blank*.

Some of Bernstein’s poems superficially resemble those of John Ashbery (who praises Bernstein), but they originate from a totally different milieu. If John Ashbery is a frenchified canape/martini-Christian, delicate, whisper-in-your-ear poet, Bernstein is a New York City herring/schnapps-Jew, raucous, in-your-face poet. He dares you to pay attention, like that too-smart kid you knew in school always raising his hand. But there is great substance to the work. I don’t know Bernstein’s personal history, but I grew up in the same neighborhood and attended the same New York City high school. During my medical school years I worked as an attendant at the

New York State Psychiatric Institute. Thus I know that Bernstein's poem, *Asylum* – his fifteen-page philippic inveighing at the indignities, deprivation, psychological and even physical torture visited on patients – is exactly on the mark. The poem is 'languagey', that is, written in broken lines, jump-cut images and dissociated thoughts, the poem itself enacting the chaotic drama. *Asylum* becomes increasingly compelling as it progresses because one senses so much was at stake for the poet; so much then at stake for the reader.

I particularly like Bernstein's list poems that play on the infinite combination of words. *In Particular* lists several dozen kinds of people each doing or being something unrelated or indifferent to his or her own status. 'An adolescent Muslim writing terza rima... A Buddhist financier falling to ground... an australopithecine toddler grimacing in the basement... A maladroit Swede coughing bullets... A D.C. dervish dribbling dodecahedrons...' The music and imagination run riot in each line bringing delight and surprise (Harold Bloom's criteria for poetry), which should make any ordinary poet say, 'do I dare to eat a peach?'

Thank You for Saying Thank You sets up an 'accessible' straw-poem the better to burn it and begins, 'This is a totally/ accessible poem./ There is nothing/ in this poem/ that is in anyway/ way difficult/ to understand./ All the words/ are simple &/ to the point.' And it ends, 'This poem/ belongs to no/ school. has no/ dogma. It follows/ no fashion. It/ just says what it says. It's/ real.' The joke, of course, is in the stuttering lineation, a difficult poem in disguise. It wants to teach us how to understand what 'understand' means.

There is hazard in being amusing or astonishing – providing simple entertainment for the reader without engagement in emotion, wisdom, or epiphany. Hazard in experiment, too: restraint, attention to and drawing from tradition are not lightly dismissed. Those who deliberately seek novelty may become trapped in their very aspiration, their world hermetic, uninviting; violating what Juhani Pallasma, Finnish architect and theorist calls 'the power of limits'. (2)

Is Bernstein just an entertainer? Not by a long shot. His *Report from Liberty Street* gives the pained eye-witness account of 9/11 – 'I took a walk on Liberty Street today. Only it was not the same place as I had known before'. The refrain of the poem, '*They thought they were going to heaven*' carries a double edge. At the end the poet reflects on what troubles poets in every generation: 'The question isn't is art up to this but what else is art for?' and concludes with Ozymandian bleakness, "'The lone and level sands stretch far away'" that surrounds the 'colossal wreck' that has become America in the 21st century. Another fine polemic is *War Stories*, ninety-five declarative sentences, each beginning with 'War is'. Not simply a feel-good anti-war poem ('War is an excuse for lots of bad anti-war poetry'), the poet is clear-eyed, unsentimental: from 'War is never having to say you're sorry', to 'War is the legitimate right of the powerless to resist the violence of the powerful'. Bernstein understands the human condition, from ancient days onward: 'War is us'.

The title poem of the poetry collection, *All the Whiskey in Heaven*, is a traditional love song beginning, 'Not for all the whiskey in heaven', and ending, 'No, never, I'll never stop loving you/ Not until my heart beats its last/ And even then in my words and my songs/ I will love you all over again'. He isn't joking.

Difficult poems are difficult to get ones ear or eye around, especially for readers accustomed to the popular poetry of, say, Billy Collins, Maya Angelou, or Mary Oliver, among others. Difficult poems may appeal to only a minority of readers, themselves poets or critics of poetry. Yet they have long been around, beginning with Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Apollinaire, on through the Surrealists, Pound, Stein, Objectivists, Oulipo, the language-poets, and even Geoffrey Hill. Thus to call the kind of poetry Bernstein espouses ‘non-poetry’ – as a recent British reviewer did – is oafish. In the end all that is written *as* poetry *is* poetry; taste and the test of time will determine what endures.

Bernstein’s last essay in *Attack...* is a mock confession, *Recantorium* – Galilean in scope, Yom Kippur atonement in form – for daring to oppose the ‘Official Verse Culture’ that rewards and promotes ‘accessible poetry’, the kind coming out of most creative writing programs. But between the lines Bernstein can be heard to murmur – no, to bellow – ‘EPPUR SI MUOVE!’

1) A fine survey by Ernest Hilbert demonstrates what else is possible in the new forms of verse: *Without a Net*: <http://www.cprw.com/without-a-net-optic-graphic-and-acoustic-formations-in-free-verse-by-ernest-hilbert>.

(2) *The Thinking Hand. Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture*. London: John Wylie & Sons, 2009. p. 113.

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