

Charles Bernstein

The Pitch of Poetry: Moral Perfectionism, Occupy Wall Street, and the Poetics of Holocaust Representation

ABSTRACT

"When I explore the poetics of representation of the Systematic Extermination Process, I said in Warsaw, I don't do so as an American looking at Poland and Germany but as someone whose intellectual and cultural foundations are European. I feel it as much my story as anyone else now alive and that a part of European culture destroyed here lives on with me, in and as an American, and is expressed through a commitment to the syncretic and miscegenated poetics of Americas.

The aversion of an ordinary or authentic or correct language is foundational for the poetics of Americas and makes a sharp contrast with those European (and American) nationalists that place a single language as fundamental to national or literary identity or who work to police national identities in ways that go beyond being born in a place, which, unlike in parts of Europe, is sufficient for U.S. citizenship. Several years ago, at the urging of my daughter, my father-in-law, who was born and grew up in Berlin, tried to reclaim his German citizenship under repatriation laws. His request was denied because he had never actively claimed this citizenship during the Nazi period, when he was a teenager. He was told that he was Polish, the country of origin of his parents. But he would be unable to claim Polish citizenship because, for that, knowledge of Polish is required; Yiddish was not then, nor is it now, considered a proper language of this nation, which was just the problem in the first place, now compounded. (As long as monoculture laws stand in Poland, the stain of the destruction of the Jews will be ineradicable.)

The power of American poetry comes from the mixing of many languages and the resistance to the dominance of any one language, including English – or anyway and one kind of English. As I argue in "The Poetics of the Americas" in *My Way: Speeches and Poems*, it is the overturning of standard English by second languages and vernacular/dialect speakers that defines American poetry, which is not to say that there is no resistance to this idea in America."

BIO

Charles Bernstein taught poetry and poetics, with an emphasis on modernist and contemporary art, aesthetics, and performance. His web CV links to poems, essays, and books. He retired from Penn on June 30, 2019. Bernstein has published five collections of essays — *Pitch of Poetry* (Chicago, 2016),



Attack of the Difficult Poems: Essays and Inventions (Chicago, 2011), *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago, 1999), *A Poetics* (Harvard, 1992), and *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984*. His books of poetry include *Near/Miss* (Oct. 2018), *Recalculating* (Chicago, 2013), *All the Whiskey in Heaven: Selected Poems* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), *Girly Man* (Chicago, 2006), *With Strings* (Chicago, 2001), and *Republics of Reality: 1975 - 1995* (Sun & Moon, 2000). His libretto *Shadowtime*, for composer Brian Ferneyhough, was published in 2005 by

Green Integer; it was performed as part of the 2005 Lincoln Center Festival. Bernstein is the editor of several collections, including: *American Poetry after 1975* (Duke University Press / special issue of *boundary*, 2009), *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (Oxford, 1999), *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy* (Roof, 1990), and the poetics magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, whose first issue was published in 1978. He is editor of the Electronic Poetry Center and co-director (with Al Filreis) of PennSound.