

In Borrowed Words and Through Recycled Attentions: On Charles
Bernstein's Lyric and Elegiac Poetry
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The Janus Pannonius Grand Prize for Poetry

In 2015, Charles Bernstein was awarded the Janus Pannonius Grand Prize for Poetry, an international contemporary poetry prize established by the Hungarian PEN Club in 2012. The award ceremony was held in the courtyard of the Episcopal Palace of Pécs, where Janus Pannonius (1434-1472), one of the most highly revered poets of the European Renaissance, praised among others by Erasmus of Rotterdam himself, was bishop. "Sometimes called the Nobel Prize for Poetry" (Martin), as *The New York Times* claims, and awarded by an international jury, the Grand Prize has gone to a roster of widely acclaimed poets: the Iranian lyricist Simin Behbahani (2013), the Syrian-born Lebanese bard Adonis (2014), the Parisian maestro Yves Bonnefoy (2014), the American enfant terrible Charles Bernstein (2015), and the Italian celebrity Giuseppe Conte (2015). The Grand Prize includes publication, readings in Europe, and 50,000 euros.

Past winners of the Janus Pannonius Grand Prize for Poetry were:
2013: Simin Behbahani
2014: Yves Bonnefoy and Adonis (Adunis Ali Ahmad Said Asbar)
2015: Charles Bernstein and Giuseppe Conte

1. Self-reflexivity and intertextuality to counter elegiac immediacy: the example of "All the Whiskey in Heaven"

"All the Whiskey in Heaven," the last poem in Bernstein's collection with the same title, marks a radical break with the anti-lyricism of his earlier writings, including most of the poems selected here from earlier volumes. In this poem of personal loss, the former language poet most against sentiment expressed in poetry speaks in the voice of the elegist, as the subjective speaker of utter emotional immediacy: in immediate relation to his emotions, he confirms love that death cannot touch. Lyrical and elegiac in its tone and intent,

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the poem is grounded in a proper communicative situation: the speaking subject is indeed the poet and the addressee is indeed the lost loved one.

But some significant aspects of lyrical and elegiac poetry seem to suffer here: the immediacy (transparency) and subjectivity of the emotional experience. If the speaker uses other people's words, how can we be sure that his emotions are his own? Indeed, some words are "borrowed," being lent by a variety of existing and often recognizable texts, discourses, and tones that are not all equally suited to this particular emotional experience. The genres and texts the poet reuses are often incompatible; in a similar way, the associations brought about by scraps of language taken from diverse registers, clichés, and phrases are also often incompatible. This self-reflexivity and intertextuality subvert the genre, creating a tension alien to the lyric and elegiac mode.

The words not being solely the poet's own, and the tone pulling in several directions, the speaker's "mastery" over language also seems to suffer, as if the poet has given up being "in charge" of meaning (Humpty Dumpty's ultimate dream) and has permitted language—taking detours to diverse genres, modes, registers, and styles—to take over. Consequently, he is willing to give up sole ownership of his sentiments as well.

So these are the caveats, so to speak, that allow a former language poet to adopt a lyrical-elegiac voice: he returns to lyricism but only by subverting it—by not being in sole charge of language and by not being the sole subject of his emotions. Here is the poem in its entirety.

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
(*All the Whiskey* 297)

The overall trajectory of the poem derives from its expansive structure, pointing to genres that follow one another: an Irish drinking song ("whiskey in heaven"), a proverb ("flies/cows in Vermont"), a fairy tale ("tears in the basement"), popular clichés ("diamonds, pearls, blue in the sky"), and children's rhymes ("pinky finger, curls"), coming to a dénouement in the last two lines reminiscent of Schubert's "An die Musik." Moreover, the juxtapositions of the first lines between the desired (whiskey) and the undesired (flies, tears), the exalted and the vulgar, pull apart the syntactic parallelisms governing the first three stanzas ("Not for," "Not if," "Not for"), lending, as Marjorie Perloff claims, the tone of an "embarrassing bathos" to the poem ("Poetry on the Brink").

This first stanza captures the conceptual superlative of multiplicity.

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

Indeed, "manyness" serves as the link between such immediate semantic associations as whiskey/heaven, flies/Vermont, tears/basement, and trips/Mars: heaven is where whiskey abounds; Vermont is the place of too many flies (because of the many cows probably); whatever the basement is full of is a multitude (like the silvery lake of tears within Bluebeard's Castle); trips to Mars take millions (of miles, most probably). But manyness is not always desirable: the image of whiskey in heaven cannot be ranked together with the bothersome flies of Vermont or the tears in the basements of our lives.

The second stanza gives a list of other kinds of superlatives, those of value. The proverbial diamonds and pearls are named first, to be followed by

two unexpected items, both incalculably more precious for the speaker: the ring on the loved one's pinky finger and her curly locks. Value increases by how close the valued object was to the loved one.

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

In terms of its overall syntax, the third stanza points back to the first in reusing the "Not for" structure, while giving two kinds conceptual superlatives. The first is "mostness" in terms of what is the most essential quality of a phenomenon: the fire of hell and the blueness of the sky: "Not for all the fire in hell / Not for all the blue in the sky." The second is "mostness" in terms of what is desired, especially by the grieving mind: "Not for an empire of my own / Not even for peace of mind."

Up to this point, the whole poem seems to be making one grand statement after another. One can, indeed, sense the effort of always trying to find stronger superlatives, expressing a sense of increasing "mostness" that might compare conceptually to the infinity and everlastingness of love. Ultimately, the strongest conceptual superlatives are reached: being "most" in terms of numbers; being most valuable; being "very": "most" terms of quality; and being most desired.

The first three stanzas follow this trajectory but do it in a covert way: four different conceptual structures emerge under the syntactically parallel structures, each moving away from the commonplace, fairy tale-like, or proverbial (whiskey in heaven, tears in the basement, diamonds and pearls, fire in hell, blue in the sky) to the particular and personal, each superseding the previous one, and each making a stronger and grander statement than the previous one.

Now comes the final stanza, with its transition from drinking song (as well as proverb, fairy tale, cliché, and nursery rhyme) to elegy in terms of the lyrical mode, from sorrow to consolation in terms of the elegiac mode, to come to a rhythmic dénouement in the final three-stress line (and only three-stress line in the whole poem) in terms of the ballad meter. Here, the poet takes over,

topping all these superlatives by pointing to a particular condition of infinity available to art only. Self-reflexive and intertextual, Bernstein reiterates what has already been expressed by a whole line of poets from Donne to Shakespeare, and Dickinson, as well as composers like Schubert: that his love will live forever in his poems. Except, Bernstein supersedes these poetic "*déjà dit*" texts (as Perloff calls literary ready-mades appropriated in modernist and postmodernist texts ["Pleasures"])—and, in one case, a "*déjà chanté*" song—claiming that it is not simply that his love is eternal, carried forever by the poem, but that he—poet, lover, and griever—will love again and again in his poems. That is, love is not a continuous condition carried by the poem, but an iterative act performed by the poet, even after his own death, via the poem. It is coming about again and again, repeatedly, and eternally: "And even then in my words and my songs / I will love you all over again."

The syntactic parallelisms marked by the "Not for's" and "Not if's" in the first three stanzas do not bring about comparable semantic convergences. In fact, even the same structure works differently in the first stanza than in the third: "Not for [all]" provokes a "there isn't so much . . . in . . ." paraphrase in the first stanza, but a "Not even if I was punished/rewarded with . . ." paraphrase in the second. The conceptual superlatives of multiplicity as an objective measure for "manyness" in the first stanza stand against the various manifestations of "mostness" in terms of both essence and desirability in the third. Sandwiched between these two stanzas is the second, listing superlatives of objective and subjective value. Stanza by stanza, Bernstein lets syntax and semantics clash; using parallel syntactic structures generating different meanings, the poet is making grander and grander statements, until he rounds off the already grand statements with an even grander one, regarding the endless (beyond the grave) repeatability of loving via poetry.

2. Dickinson's modes of attention appropriated

While "All the Whiskey in Heaven" marks a turning point in Bernstein's writing in being the first in a series of powerful elegies, his lyrical voice actually appeared before the elegies, in poems scattered across the earlier volumes. It is the voice of the lyricist who is attentive to internal processes and registers their moments with precision and objectivity, as if from a distance. This poetics of attention focuses on the state of mind itself, and not the person living through

them. This poetic attitude bears the marks of Emily Dickinson, the poet to initiate the poetics of attention in America. This Dickinsonian legacy, both thematic and technical, figures prominently among Bernstein's sources, his different registers that will pull the lyrical poems in different directions.

Much like the Amherst predecessor, Bernstein also distances joy and pain from his suffering self, focusing instead on the modes of cognition deriving from such intense experiences. "[H]ope is a thing / feathered with loss," he writes in "Poems for Rehab" (*Recalculating* 139), evoking Dickinson's well-known words on hope as "the thing with feathers" (314). And much like the nineteenth-century anatomist of pain, he too is fascinated by how experiences lead to particular states of mind and, vice versa, what internal events these states of mind bring about.

Dickinson's sentences and sentence fragments will repeatedly appear as texts cited, reused, appropriated, or evoked, while her rhythms, ballad rhythms primarily, will beat from within or beneath Bernstein's lines. Exploring directions which the language of appropriation has recently taken in American poetry, Perloff discusses the short lyric that incorporates cited or recycled material, or "Other People's Words": "we have witnessed a return to the short lyric, but now a lyric that depends for its effect on the recycling of earlier poetic material" ("Poetry on the Brink"). Indeed, the appropriation of earlier texts constitutes a distinctive form of transgression in Bernstein's poetry too, as he oscillates between his own attentions and lines and those of others. And nowhere is this appropriating gesture more evident than in his lyrical pieces and elegies, in which readers may identify textual residues, resonances, and ekphrases, blurring the boundaries between the poet's own text (the one being written right there) and the texts appropriated from others (those that have already been written). Dickinson figures prominently among the texts appropriated in Bernstein's lyrical pieces.

"The Measure" is one of the earlier lyric pieces that evokes Dickinson, where the self is walking through the levels of a "great pain," mapping up its borders, and scrutinizing what comes after, or its "afterness," as David Porter aptly termed this focus (10). Like an obedient guard, this self is determined to stay on the watch—"at attention," "on guard"—all through, lest the unconscious dilemmas pull him down into its foggy avenues where the senses are dulled.

The privacy of a great pain enthrones
itself on my borders and commands me
to stay at attention. Be on guard
lest the hopeless magic of unconscious
dilemmas grab hold of you in the
foggiest avenue of regret.
(*All the Whiskey* 90)

It seems that the Dickinsonian “great pain” stimulates, in a Dickinsonian manner again, the sufferer’s senses; the poet is willing to suffer rather than lose his attention, and resists the threat posed by the unconscious trying to grab the self into its foggy avenues.

A very particular, and also Dickinsonian, state of mind is given accurate description in “Castor Oil”: the speaker’s sense of (already) losing the loved one. Step by step, the initial soul searching grows into the searching of the loved one, while the poet, not finding his soul in the song of the bird, tuneless and wandering, becomes slowly aware of his cognitive and artistic limitations. The greater powers of the world—the waters of the sea and the levels of the universe—take over, pulling him under the waves and losing him in the Leibnizian folds and pleats of matter. The images of earlier human encounters recede, appearing as “remote displays” only, borrowed but never really owned, drift away in the fading light as even the “bottom bottoms,” and the loss is total.

Tuneless, I wander, sundered
In lent blends of remote display
Until the bottom bottoms
In song-drenched light, cradled fold
(*All the Whiskey* 277)

The Leibnizian imagery defines the sufferer not as the lyrical voice with discursive agency, but as a helpless “patient,” at the mercy of forces that are beyond his control. Yet the poem is devoid of self-pity, or any reference to his being a victim. It uses the first person, but only to give form to the account of the events and processes—as if from the perspective of a by-stander. What the

experiencing self feels is of little importance, only these complicated and tragic processes matter. While verbs are scarce, and active verbs are even scarcer in this linguistically muted text, terseness weighs down the sentences, the four beats of the four-stress ballad meter slow down the tempo, and structural ambiguities control the pace. These formal devices create a sense of self-restraint, even self-abnegation, for the aim is to understand what is happening, and not how the person might suffer.

The Dickinsonian legacy is especially visible in the elegies written over the past several years. Much like for Dickinson, the greatest American lyricist of death, Bernstein's poetry of grief also conforms to the poetics of attention, where the poet's inquisitive attention targets internal processes accompanying loss and grief. And both poets conclude that it is impossible to come to terms with the death of the loved one.

We find several such poems of loss and grief in Bernstein's last full-length collection, *Recalculating*, each tracing the changes in the state of mind of the grieving person. The poet is struggling with his memories, while watching, as if from a distance, the battle between remembering and forgetting. "Cajole me into oblivion if not / obliviousness," he orders, "Send me away, I've never been there" ("If You Say Something, See Something" 156). Recalculating does not seem to be an option: the past cannot and should not be obliterated by a new GPS instruction. He suffers from every new impetus coming from the physical world in "Today Is the Last Day of Your Life 'Til Now" (158), and every new day seems only to add to his solitude and spiritual blindness, his time to be served ("Time Served" 159). The mourner speaks in broken sentences, in Bernstein's imploded sentences, since the complete grammatical sentence cannot give form to the harsh shreds of emotions. This is why, for example, "Charon's Boat" (155) abounds in non sequiturs, linguistic self-reflections, and unfinished sentences; this is why he follows the call of sound as opposed to semantics in "Synchronicity All Over Again" (160).

The finality of death is the theme of "Today Is the Last Day of Your Life 'Til Now" (158), whose title turns around the cliché, "today is the first day of the rest of your life," proceeding to quote the title of Sydney Pollack's film, and to evoke lines from T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and Robert Duncan. As if we were hearing a contrapuntal canon, Bernstein ties into the parts sung by predecessors and contemporaries. This multivocal performance seems to serve

a double function: on the one hand, by subduing the lyrical-elegiac voice, it prevents the suffering “lyrical ego” from feeling an exclusive personal grief while, on the other hand, by adding his own experience to the many similar experiences, he enriches the literature of grief, amplifying the harmonized voices of the choir.

The prose poem, “Recalculating” brings together two discourses while engaging in grief work: the discourse of Bernstein’s aphorism poetry and bits from Dickinson’s poems of loss and grief. Introspection, or the inspection of consciousness, is carried out with sober rationalism. It is the rational conclusion drawn by the mind of cool reason that will come to understand the preservation of the past complete with memories.

[. . .]

I think of Emma climbing the icy rocks of our imagined world and taking a fatal misstep, one that in the past she could have easily managed, then tumbling, tumbling; in my mind she is yet still in free fall, but I know all too well she hit the ground hard.

The hardest thing is not to look back, the endless *if onlys*, the uninvited *what could have beens*. I live not with foreknowledge but consequences; wishing I had foreknowledge, suffering the consequences of not.

. . . how poems become sites for mourning—not in fixed ritual repetitions (prescribed liturgy) but as mobile and specific areas for reflection and projection, holding areas, havens. Not words received for comfort but works actively discovered in the course of searching.

[. . .]

So much of what we can’t imagine we are forced to experience. And
even then
we can’t imagine it. (*Recalculating* 172-74, 175)

It seems that the content of knowledge is different from that of the imagination, and the mourner’s job is to bring them into harmony, to come to

the imaginative realization of what is known. All the while, locked into the dark Dickinsonian chambers of pain, he battles the infinite internal darkness.

Each day I know less than the day before. People say that you learn something from such experiences; but I don't want that knowledge and for me there are no fruits to these experiences, only ashes. I can't and don't want to "heal"; perhaps, though, go on in the full force of my disabilities, coexisting with a brokenness that cannot be accommodated, *in the dark*.

(*Recalculating* 174)

As in Dickinson, so in Bernstein too, we have the person trying to "grope a little" (428) as he is feeling his way in the larger darkness inside. As in Dickinson, so in Bernstein too, we have this proper learning to see, either because the "Darkness alters" or "something in the sight" does.

I've grown so accustomed to the dark that I can hardly imagine
anything more
than shadows..

[. . .]

It's always darkest at night. A darkness day can't touch.

(*Recalculating* 177, 178)

Dickinson's lines are clearly cited here: the reader will remember "We grow accustomed to the Dark— / When Light is put away—" (428), and "The first section of Darkness is the densest, Dear—After that Light trembles in" (Letter 874) with the suggestion that in order to accept death one must first accept darkness, and in order to know death one must know darkness as well.

But knowing can only stem from not knowing, or the acceptance of not knowing. Much like his nineteenth century predecessor, Bernstein also insists that the only way to dispel metaphysical darkness is by coveting a familiarity with darkness: the griever must learn to feel comfortable in darkness, and ultimately accept the impossibility of clear sight. The proper will step on the path that takes not knowing for granted, a not knowing that can only be captured in a particular language: the language of linguistic darkness, dense with imploded sentences and broken English in general. But unlike Dickinson,

Bernstein does not believe that only the “first section of Darkness” is dense, or that after that “Light trembles in.” For him, darkness will never be touched by day. The grieving person’s only hope is to attain some form of comfort in the darkness of the unknown. Although he did not ask for the knowledge gained from such spiritual darkneses, he adapts to the dark, finding his way in the unknown, the great unknown of the physical and metaphysical alike.

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Notes

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