

Charles Bernstein and Penelope Galey-Sacks
[2012 Interview]

POETRY'S CLUB-FOOT: PROCESS, FAKTURA,
INTENSIFICATION

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Paragraph 1 follows:

Summary of the editorial project as printed in the preface to *The
L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (1984):

Throughout, we have emphasized a spectrum of writing
that places its attention primarily on language and ways of
making meaning, that takes for granted neither
vocabulary, grammar, process, shape, syntax, program, or
subject matter. All of these remains at issue. Focussing on
this range of poetic exploration, and on related aesthetic
and political concerns, we have tried to open things up
beyond correspondence and conversation : to break down
some unnecessary self-encapsulation of writers (person
from person, & scene from scene), and to develop more
fully the latticework of those involved in aesthetically
related activity. (ix)

02:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: I would like to take the editorial project on language poetry as defined at the beginning of your article for the *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* and see where you have gone with it. You are specifically referring to the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine (1978-81) and *The Language Book* (1984). What seems important to me is what you were interested in yesterday in relation to what you are doing today. So my first question concerns *process*. In your definition of the project you say language takes for granted neither vocabulary, grammar, process, shape, syntax, program or subject matter. But for me, in fact, *process* encompasses all that.

03:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: That's true. In this list, *process* is a cover term than includes concept and method.

04:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: To what extent then is *process*, for you, an inclusive concept? That's my first question. Would you like to reflect on it from both a creative and a critical stance?

05:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: *Process* understood as a philosophical concept has a crucial connection to *method*, as I first wrote about that term in an early essay in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* called «Writing and Method». The entire New American poetics, from which my work emerges – the poetics of the generation before me that includes Robert Creeley, John Ashbery, and David Antin – is focused on process and especially John Dewey's thinking about

process in *Art as Experience*, or – for Charles Olson and Robin Blaser – Alfred North Whitehead’s *Process and Reality*. Jackson Mac Low fits here too, even if his work seems to more directly engage procedure and the conceptual.

06:

The New American poetics was very much grounded doing, rather than ends-directed, or goal-directed, or craft-oriented, composition. The poems were to be facts of their own coming into being in the moment of writing, not deduced from prior or received forms or ideas or conceits figured prior to the making. So, famously, *process* not *product*. This binary opposition was sometimes presented as the *raw* versus the *cooked* in the immediate postwar period. It is a convenient way to distinguish the New American Poets from Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell. Still, *process*, as it was worked out through the specific poems of that earlier generation, seemed to rule out some of procedural and lexical choices that a number of us were interested in the 1970s. So that while you could say that we were also working through process, the term was too vague or perhaps too closely related to the specific styles of our predecessors. In addition, some of the more procedural or artificial or structural interventions made within a poem seemed at odds with “process,” in the sense of an improvisatory, seat-of-your-pants approach to composition. So the idea of using prior, external texts, found material, appropriation, constraints, artifice, wild shifts of tone, syncretic syntax, derangement of the representation, and so on, looked very different from process as so compellingly practiced

by the New American poetry.

07:

But really what we were doing, with our emphasis on method, was not turning away from process, but opening onto an expanded field of process. It's still process not product. You still don't know exactly where you are going to come out before you are finished. It's a turning away from a preconceived beginning, middle and end, a rejection of closure, in Lyn Hejinian's signal phrase. As I engage process, it is intimately tied up with *poesis* and with *faktura*; but I am just as interested in the function of making as in doing anything, so there is built in an enhanced self-reflection on the devices of poetry. Process as it becomes aware of itself is method.

08:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: Yes, as with Pound and Eliot, the function of making and doing is an overriding preoccupation. So do you see process as both inclusive and open-ended as a concept?

09:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: Absolutely. Inclusive in the Emersonian sense of "more perfect": not moving toward a final all-encompassing end but accruing and shedding particulars, one by one, hourly changing. With the well-made poem, you start with a preconceived idea of subject matter and a proscribed form and prescribed diction and then you work with that to create the poem, revising until it's the most perfect object that you can create. The kind of poem I am talking about – not the most perfect poem but the more perfect poem – necessitates new kinds of reading. You could say the function of the poem is not to create beautiful object

(though it may be a beautiful object) but to foment new forms of reading. In that sense, you could think of radical modernism from Stein and Williams onward to the present as being involved with concept, process, and *poesis* as opposed to making a finished, crafted product. Necessarily you do have a completed poem, as when Stein says “a completed portrait” (of Picasso) but not a complete portrait. The poem is not the end but a springboard point, an energy field that intensifies the reader’s fantasies, reflections, projections, and introjections.

10:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: So for you, where language is radically new conceptually, is that you are challenging Aristotle’s basic poetic principle that there is a beginning, a middle, and an ending by saying there is perhaps a beginning, perhaps a middle, but that there is certainly no ending.

11:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: Yes, but you stop. And then begin again. Well that’s also Stein. A hundred years after Stein’s beginning and we’re still definitely offering an alternative to Aristotle, that’s for sure, and to Plato to boot. But as, Olson would say, a turning away from Plato but not from Heraclitus, not to the Presocratics, if you want to think archaically, and perhaps not to cultures where poetry is less oriented to a rationalistic and linear order. There is a set of specific historical developments which I am necessarily eliding. Blake, for example, is crucial to this way of thinking about poetry. David Antin makes the distinction between story or plot and

narrative. In the 1970s, I would not have thought of narrative in this way, I was wary of the term, but now I am convinced by Antin's argument that process-oriented work does allow for narrative while not being driven by plot. Narrative, for Antin, is the transformation that occurs when moving through a series. In that sense, I construct my books as plotless narratives. That's why I am stressing that a process orientation doesn't preclude the making of objects. Poems are objects, albeit semi-autonomous ones, that we encounter in the world. The object quality of the poem is more important than the "poetic" quality.

12:

But that, again, marks a shift in the mid-and late-1970s and the 1980s: there was a greater interest in making poems that had object density, that were lapidary, that you could hit your head against, kind of like machines in William Carlos Williams's sense, machines made of words, but with the emphasis on artifactuality — well not only their artificiality but weirdness or then again systematic or programmatic or conceptual quality. Contraptions small and large made of actual word stuff. (Emphasis on *trap* as in the Venus Fly Trap.) No plot – a beginning, middle and end that gives a thematic logic to why thing happens – but plenty of dynamic narrative surges, as the elements of the text undergo a transformation – Ladies and Gentleman! – Believe It or Not! – right before your eyes. I'm saying this because there was a lot of interest in the mid- and late-70s and 80s in parataxis; that is to say, discrete units of language juxtaposed to one another without logical connectors.

Nevertheless, they do start to connect. They just don't connect in a linear or plot-driven way. And as the particulars concatenate, sometimes along musical lines, sometimes as motifs, transformation occurs and the text becomes a work, the poem comes into being. And that is narrative.

13:

One of the most striking examples of this, in a work of this kind and from this period, is Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*. It's so palpable, because it's an autobiography, even if it's a non-linear one. Lyn wrote the first version of the work when she was 37: There are 37 sections of 37 sentences each, often with the same sentences permuting. But that organization in no way prevents the affective quality of autobiography or the narrative transformations you experience when you see the same sentence put in a different context. The process is not without a container. It's not without a structure and a form that pushes back against the process to allow this kind of transformation to occur. And that makes a kind of open-ended exploration into an aesthetic object.

14:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: You said something interesting at the conference yesterday. That the intimations of verse occur on the teleological horizon of the possible. Yet you're also presenting language poetry as breaking with convention and I imagine you mean breaking with American convention specifically? How does this idea of continuity tie in with the idea of rupture, the idea of breaking? You said yourself that there was a continuity in your work

as well as an evolution — an expansion of yourself. You are yourself an *expanding* poet and you are expanding through language... how do these intimations of verse occur on the teleological horizon of the possible? To cite Eliot, how do you connect your beginnings with your endings?

15:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: There are different overlapping strands that twist and loop back, as in a Moebius strip or Kline bottle. The issue of convention is an important one and it relates to the idea of process. The best formulation for me is the one coming from Emerson: aversion of conformity in the pursuit of new forms. The concept of aversion – which is a *swerving-away-from* – is more appealing and also more accurate than the idea of breakage and transgression. Still, in poetry, the difference between those terms is more about emotion and desire than accurate philosophical description or decision. And so, there are reasons why some poets talk about transgression and breakage, or *coupure*, blows (*Les quatre cents coups*). And in France you have that, of course, partly with the French Revolution itself versus the British revolution...when you're cutting off heads, that's a vivid image for this spectrum. But what's interesting about aversion or swerving – to think of it in Lucretian terms – is that you actually feel the process of moving away and moving toward rather than a splitting or disconnection or decoupling. That's what I'm interested in as a poet. I'm interested in the rhythmic relationships that occur, moving in, around, and about convention. Because my work is entirely dependent upon

convention.

16:

I don't write traditionally crafted poems, that is true; and I do a lot of odd things that can be described as non-conforming. But nonetheless what I do brings to mind conventions, it is a constant convening and reconvening of language. I thought it was funny when a web detractor recently accused me of using clichés; as if clichés were not language in it's most sublime, or anyway sublimated, form: fossil language. So you don't really – you can't and I don't want to! – obliterate conventions. But you can call them into question, voice them, or flip them around. So this is where I must bring in Walter Benjamin's chordal poetics, with its acknowledgement of fragments and discontinuity, absolute breaks in the fabric of history. Yet Benjamin speaks about constellation, the (non-sensuous) connection among discrepant particulars (something like Antin's idea of narrative). My work is connecting that which appears discrepant, to call those discrepancies into account and in the process create a new modalities of configuration. That is, the desire is not just for the constellations but more the possibilities for configuration. Reconvening brings to the table emergent or unrecognized or stigmatized conventions. So while there is a swerving from convention, there is, at the same time, a reorienting to the possibility of conventions as provisional, as democratic social space. This is the essence of poetic rhythm.

17:

Imagine the convention of a fantasy political party where you

determine those conventions you're going to observe and those you're not, or you reorder or conceptualize what your conventions will be. *Reality – it don't work that way*, you rightly say. Reality slams us again and again, as much with the clash of signs as with the impossibility of anything else but what history tells us, with its cruel face, is the case. What's necessary about poetry, the kind of poetry I want anyway, is that unlike much of the rest of life, it is a provisional or holding area in which we consider alternative formations, alternative modes of convention and constellation, and live with these imaginal realities for the duration of the poem. Poems can create acutely intensifying connections in and through an immersive verbal experience. It's not dissipation, not emptying out, nor voiding, nor creating something that exists primarily at the level of abstract form... I want the visceral experience that comes from the construction of the poem as a psychic experience of dwelling in such language intensities — with the ever imminent (that is, intermittent) possibilities for transformation.

18:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: You speak of the poem within the language experience as an object, an artifact, which it is, unquestionably. But you also speak of its affective intensity, of emotion and of desire. How do you work with these concepts which, contrary to appearance, do not clash, because they work together? You work with the poem as an object, you work with the word as word and you work with the word, I mean with the expanding word. And at the same time you are working with

effective/ affective intensity, because that is something that grows as well. Are you conscious of this, or does it come through the work in spite of yourself? To me, as someone who also writes poetry, poetry speaks itself, speaks through you, speaks you, despite the fact that you are continually keeping it at a distance in order to construct it as perfect an object as possible. Do you agree with this idea?

19:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: I worry about claims about poetry that seem to put it in the realm of the irrational, or supernatural, or the religious. The problem is that when poetry is underwritten by religious or supernatural claims, the psychic and intuitive intensities are often (not always) compromised. The minute you start to talk about religion there is a risk that the work loses its magical qualities and feels stale and staid, an extension of a set of beliefs separate from the poem (including the belief in God). When poets talk about spirituality it often (not always) makes the work seem like pointing to transcendence without doing anything about it. (The zen poetics of Norman Fischer and Hank Lazer are exemplary in the way they address, and avert, this issue.) I maintain a deep affection – perhaps it’s nostalgia – for the realm of reason, a realm that goes beyond rationality but that is not irrational. Reason incorporates intuition, including what Jack Spicer calls dictation, or what you described as the poem writing itself. I also have that experience when I am writing poems. You set something up, certain conditions let’s say, and then, well, *it starts to happen*. It’s not

entirely controlled by a rational intelligence, otherwise you wouldn't write poems. You could write another kind of work. Although I also channel this energy when I write essays, and sometimes when I talk.

20:

Surely it involves the unconscious, but the unconscious is part of the mind and part of reason. In my practice, certain kinds of unexpected and unpredictable associations occur when I think peripherally (aslant)... I have learned to potentiate those associations. There's also a kind of sound and rhythmic or musical patterning that occurs, concomitant with less-than-conscious mental states. Just as when puns occur to me, or... rhymes... assonances... I'm not looking for them. They come to me because I'm in that zone of consciousness. I spend a lot of time entering into and also expanding the zone specific to poetic thought and verbal fancy... I spend a lot of time with streams of words going through my head. In the right circumstance, I can tap into those streams in different ways. Poems are ways creating containers or structures or forms that channel those verbal/ semiotic/ symbolic/ psychic streams. The poem is the medium in the double sense that it's a material ground but also in the psychic sense of something that receives signals. Channel is another resonant word — you can think of a channel like a river or a stream; but a channel is also a site for external reception. As you create the form or structure of a poem, it creates a channel for a flow of perception, a verbal stream concatenating unconscious associations manifesting themselves

through words, as well as channeling, from outside, other sorts of material. Now what's channeled from outside is not coming from Mars, as Spicer said – though I rather like that metaphor – but from the social and historical world we share – but also from memory, psyche... The social and historical world enters into the poem and that entering in – from the outside – is not something I consciously figure out, the connections are the result of a hunch or intuition or something even more subliminal: it just occurs to me. My mind's a blank then something occurs to me in the moment.

21:

It's like the way allusion works. A song or an associated literary line invades my mind, bonds with a perception: I don't seek it out it just appears. I usually change that initial allusion, distort or reverse, but I couldn't explain why or how the allusion came to mind in the first place. I catch it, I transform it, *then I move on*. Being receptive is the fundamental talent — the ability not to go with what you figure is right but rather where your associations lead, where language leads, letting the rhythm of the poem channel itself into a flow that takes you over rapids, irregular or jumpy movements, curves, bumpy patches. And then sometimes you flip out of the rapids and you're just drifting... But you just keep on going with it to see what happens. It's something like shooting a film. You are out there and you just shoot a lot and then a lot takes place post-production, during the editing. And sometimes you can really edit *in* the camera, like they say. At this point in my life, I have so much experience doing this work, which to me in is similar whether

writing essays or poems, though I think the two are very different genres. So sometimes I know where I am going and I stop — I have enough of one thing and begin something else. But I am aware that I am not committed, as far as process goes, to what I come up with when I'm writing. Because I can continue when I edit. Whatever works best.

22:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: We talked about hybridity in connection with your work, and the other question in connection with it, is the following: for you, does form follow function or does function follow form?

23:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: In the *Attack of the Difficult Poems*, I write about the theories of Henry Petroski, a historian of industrial design who has rewritten the famous Bauhaus formula as *form follows failure*, which I love. Petroski is referring to the fact that inventors of “useful” things often make their innovations in response to the perceived failures of objects around them. When I was at college, in my most anti-Bauhausian phase, when writing a paper for William Seitz, an art historian who did the *Assemblage* show for the Museum of Modern Art, I made a sort of collage-assemblage paper with the motto *form follows fun* – seems silly to me now, appropriately sophomoric for a sophomore – but I do remember what I was thinking at the time – premonitions of the neo-Baroque! – that the Bauhaus stuff was too reductive and rigorous...

24:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: You mean restrictively minimalist...

25:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: Yes, so I just eliminated the five last letters of function to have (some) fun. But in fact this also brings to mind another aphorism which was influential with American poetry, which is Robert Creeley’s «form is never more than an extension of content», and the extension of that is that content is never more than an extension of form. But I would say, still, the most fundamental of that *f-u-n* core issue around the Bauhaus doxa is the concept of function. One of the great things about poetry is that it doesn’t have to have a function, doesn’t need a function. I’m

always looking for the useless — to make poetry less functional, or simply more purely aesthetic. Of course, that's a horizon...

26:

Penelope Galey-Sacks:: Yes, indeed... the word *aesthetic* is such a complex notion, because it includes who you are as a person: your stance and position in the world as a creator, philosopher or critic...

27:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: So you could say poetry has no purpose, but that is not its purpose... a kind of a conundrum... poetry has no function and that is not its function...

28:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: You spoke of the centrifugal forces in poetry and you said this is the primary mode...

29:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: Yes because the centrifugal pulls different disparate elements together rather than projecting them outward.

30:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: Do you see performance poetry then as the perfect answer to the centrifugal mode? To the extent that the written page, or the projection of the alphabet on the page, or stabilized forms of alphabetical language, all work towards a relative fixing of reading, of interpretation? Do you think the performance liberates the fixed form, and that each performance renews, rewrites, re-presents, re-enacts? For you, is performance in fact the ultimate expression of the expanding field of language?

31:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: One of the fault-lines of poetry performance is between the centripetal and the centrifugal. It's my sense that a highly projective centripetal performance is potentially less interesting than a performance that is contained. The centrifugal performance is like a piece of metal getting red-hot but collapsing into itself rather than exploding outwards. I am more interested in that implosion or introversion than in explosion and extroversion. Performance is typically – whether in spoken-word poetry or method acting – oriented towards projection, an outward movement. So it is against this that I propose a combination of introjection and centrifugal energy. Tracie Morris's "Slave Sho to Video aka Black but Beautiful" works that way, as do many of the performances of Maggie O'Sullivan or, in a different key, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge. Though an extroverted performance by Christian Bök is exhilarating, partly because he plays on wild mania of the performative energy. But to switch to another level: "Performance," like "translation" is an appealing, and sometimes liberating, metaphor for most the qualities of poetics I profess. It's well known that nowadays that you can say everything is a performance, from having coffee by yourself at home to performing the role of King Lear on a theatrical stage. So it is a very expansive idea...

32:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: Yes, but I am applying it specifically to performance poetry or the type of language poetry that is meant to be performed...

33:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: Bien sûr. Performance can be a model for a way of understanding everyday life, as when performing an identity. It's not just reciting a poem that is a performance; reading is a performance as well; the double sense of "a reading" speaks to this. Poems can provide performance models that can then be stranded into the world. The poem "itself" is not the end but the beginning ...

34:

Penelope Galey-Sacks:: I have a few more questions, but here's perhaps the one that's uppermost in my mind. With respect to Hannah Wiener's juxtaposed fonts, in *Clairvoyant Journal*, and here I quote you: «consciousness mapped on page through a melded clashing of voices»: How can you meld clashing voices? Isn't this an oxymoron? Also, I'm just thinking of Apollinaire's idea of juxtaposing voices rather than clashing...

35:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: That's the issue I raised with Benjamin – disparate elements not as disconnected bits but having chordal relationships, interconnecting through constellation. So my use of *melding* or *melting* is another way of understanding this centrifugal poetics. A constellation, after all, is made of distinct elements that form a pattern, which for Benjamin can be "non-sensuous," which is a both evocative and allusive. My poetics of melding is a form of syncretism, the basic modality of the poetics of the Americas, thinking of the way *syncretic* is used in Latin America to refer to religious practices that are partly native, partly Catholic, partly

invented...

36:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: ...but the voices individually clash, and yet they all come together...

37:

Charles Bernstein: The language of the Americas is syncretic. Instead of speaking of hybrid language, or pidgin, or dialect, we can call the often-violent clashes of language in the Americas syncretic or miscegenated. *The Clairvoyant Journal* has three distinct voices, which we could perhaps understand psychoanalytically as the id, the superego, and the ego. These distinct voices are bouncing off of one another, creating a syncretic space of consciousness.

38:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: I find Silliman's *Ketjak* a fantastic written illustration of the expanding poem because it's expanding literally, I mean exponentially. It's also integrating mistakes into itself, because it does start out by following an equation...

39:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: *Ketjak* is a perfect example of what I am talking about here.

40:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: Perhaps we have time for one final question here... before I squeeze the lemon dry, as they say. To what extent do you think extreme-constraints poets are influenced by OuLiPo and Perec?

41:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: There's no question that they are. There's been a real revival of interest in OuLiPo in the United States. Perec is primarily a novelist, so while he remains perhaps the best-known OuLiPian writer, the greatest interest in OuLiPian work right now is among poets. The most notable example is Bök's *Eunoia*, which is entirely a lipogram – every section is written with a single vowel, and there are several other constraints: *Eunoia* uses conventional syntax and grammar, has various predetermined narrative elements. *A tour de force*.

42:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: Do you personally see this type of writing as really creative? I mean I myself don't see you at all as an OuLiPo-influenced poet...

43:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: I'm not, though I am interested in OuLiPian work and in 'pataphysics more generally. Though a work like Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de style* interests me very much. And indeed among my exercises in style are constraint-based works: it is a part of the spectrum of what I do. But I am more about bending or breaking or melting rules than in strictly following them.

44:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: Yes, I wouldn't really put you with the extreme constraints poets...

45:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: In fact when talking to Jackson Mac Low, whom I love – a wonderful poet – doing work that in some ways parallels OuLiPo – well, he quotes me as saying «I don't like to follow rules... not even my own rules.» I teach an undergraduate class at the University of Pennsylvania, called “Experimental Writing” that is constraint-based, although constraints are not always as controlling as they appear and I include many non-OuLiPian experiments as well. I try to conduct a writing class more like a plastic-arts class. Constraints and experiments give writing students the opportunity to work outside normalizing narrative constraints; they learn to create numerous pata-structures and pata-narratives. But even then I say to the students that if I were you I wouldn't follow all the rules, even if the teacher told me to. Because for me a signal moment, especially when you are coming into your own as an artist, is to know when to turn away from a plan; that is even more important than learning to make or follow a plan. The way I work is usually to modify things on a moment-by-moment basis and to create swerves within any form that I'm working on.

46:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: What you're referring to in a way is what Robbe-Grillet does with his *slippages* of language.

47:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: Yes, but slippages of language in the French sense is for me a little more high-toned and modulated than what I have in mind. I'm really interested in a more vaudevillian sense of the word, like slipping on a banana... that is, the intrusion of the world, disrupting your movements, such as what began our conversation here... you losing your heel on the sidewalk... that's the kind of slip that I'm interested in: pratfalls and real falls and...

48:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: ...intrusion of the really and truly accidental, rather than the error...?

49:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: Yes, rather than what a conceptual idea of error is. Because error is also losing your way, which happens to me quite a lot anyway because I have a poor sense of direction...

50:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: What you are saying then is that with Robbe-Grillet, the slippage of language is a concerted conceptual endeavor and what you're going for is more – say – the purely accidental ?

51:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: Well, more the disruptive, let's say... though sometimes I do create schemes to generate errors, so there is nothing pure about it, including purely accidental... but as I say, I end up with something more vaudevillian, showing off the more vulgar or visceral or intrusive aspects of slipping. Mispronunciation, slips of the tongue, puns: that is my poetics of

the everyday. It's the way I perceive everyday language: such things are constantly intruding into my perception, like it or not. Susan says, "open two cans of tuna" and I see an image of a toucan, then I have to duck because the toucan's coming right at me. In my writing, I tend to go more toward more uncomfortable puns, puns that don't seem that elegant.

52:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: Because they *de-range*?

53:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: Yes, because they derange. But also because it's a way to bring into play everyday experience, which is constantly filled with disruptions and obstacles that you don't overcome, that trip you up. I'm compulsively drawn to tripping; slippage is also bewitching, as one particular dissolves into another, as with word transformations and metamorphosis and substitution, the slips and slides within language. But you might not feel the bumps. I'm obsessed by the club-foot, *piéd bot* type of bump. It's the rhythm of my poetry.

54:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: What occurs to me here with the notion of slippage the way you define it is that it renders the creative act extremely vital. The metamorphoses appear more spontaneous, more vital more dynamic. Does this to you make the poem more present in terms of its dynamic existence? Does it intensify existence itself? Is it for you a way of making the poem more alive, making yourself more alive, making the thing more alive?

55:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: I don't know about what it makes me.
That's a hard question.

56:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: Okay, let's cut you out and just talk
about the poem...

57:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: You're opening a whole other can of
worms, a veritable Pandora's box! I am certainly interested in
intensifying the experience of language, and therefore potentially
perceptual experience, in a poem through rhythmic oscillation, odd
shifts, awkward transformations in the work. Whether that actually
affects – or how that affects – life outside the poem, I wouldn't want
to say.

58:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: But it affects the poem?

59:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: Yes, the proprioceptive intensification
certainly affects the poem, and it certainly affects me when I'm
working on it. It potentially allows for a changed/ charged
perception when you're reading the poem or hearing the poem
performed that – if you hear it in the way that I would hope that a
reader-listener would – and as I think some people do from their
accounts to me – then yes, you will have this extended n-
dimensional experience during that aesthetic moment. That could
be described as aesthetic pleasure, but it is both more visceral and
conceptual than sometimes suggesting by that phrase: more

psychedelic (or psychodynamic). That occurs during the duration of the poem. What effect does that have outside the poem? It might simply be a reminder that you can have those kinds of experiences and that's probably sufficient. Or it may just simply be that those moments are experienced that way, and nothing else, and that also would be sufficient.

60:

Beyond that, conceptually and philosophically, poems are models for other kinds of social organization, other phenomenologies of perception, other perceptions of consciousness. To go back to this one more time: poetry can offer ways to understand the relationship between apparently discrepant particulars... configuration or constellation or overlay of discrepant materials. As I have suggested, this is a possible model for democratic social space in the Americas, where we have incommensurable languages, consciousnesses, people living side by side and creating something beyond the sum of the parts. We call that the New World, hourly changing. How can we imagine that? Or how can we avoid imaging it and, instead, live it? And how does this relate to tolerance and assimilation? Poetry has the possibility of offering perceptual models for a range of philosophical and social problems. Not solutions, rather reflections on... which can deepen our conversations. This is not policy. The kind of poetry I have in mind doesn't tell you what to do but it does help you to think about the issues, to reconceptualize the problems, as again going back to the site of the convention, which helps us to reconvene/rethink the

terms or our mutual co-existence...

61:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: I love your notion of *club-foot* and I'd like you to go into the concept. We can think of club-foot as an impediment, as a state, or we can think of it in terms of motion, in terms of movement. Like a club-foot moving along in a hobbling fashion. Could you perhaps define what club-foot really means for you?

62:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: *Pied bot* is the title I came up with for Martin Richet's translation of two of my early books, *Shade* (1978) and *The Occurrence of Tune* (1977), along with the introduction to *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984*. It's a line from the preface to *Content's Dream*: "Rumination is the soul's club foot, by which it beats the rap." One thing about club-foot, of course is that it refers to a physical condition...

63:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: ...and therefore to a disability...but you're turning it into something else as well...

64:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: Right, but I want to acknowledge it's not just a metaphor, that disability causes hardship and those viewed as disabled are often stigmatized or overlooked. Moreover, there are particular histories, states of being, and capacities, positive and negative, associated with the range of conditions that falls under this rubric. Still, like *performance* and like *translation*, *disability* has

wider resonance. The poetics of disability is foundational for me: poetry that comes out of what cultures mark as deformed or impaired and by extension poems also so marked. Like queerness or race or ethnicity, disability connects to an expanded field of consciousness and the possibility of articulating aversive perceptual intensities. Poetry, as I practice it, begins in disability, which smacks up against language as something palpable, thick, resistant. The materials of language don't easily give way to my will but push back, trick me, trip me. *Club-foot* suggest a kind of prosodic *foot*: off-beat or syncopated, which has rhythm but not meter. "Beats the rap": beats could be metrical beats, but *beats the rap* is also slang for getting out of a crime. When you *beat the rap* you're off the hook. *Rap* is what you are charged with by the police or by extensions anything you are accused of: Did you take the car keys? It turns out that you didn't, so you beat the rap. But *rap* also is *wrap*, so then beating it means getting beyond the container...

65:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: So in fact you use *rap* as an umbrella concept...

66:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: Right... *Rap* also means... sound the container ("as of someone gently rapping" in Poe). We are beating the form, making the form itself sound out. Also *rap* is a performance poetry genre, one with a heavily accented beat. But getting back just to *piet bot*: club-foot is awkward, jerking or spastic motion, poetic textures I keep returning to...

67:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: ...because it's disquieting...?

68:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: Also off-balancing. I am not romanticizing debilitating limitations, but trying to stay real. I'd rather not be so spatially disoriented, going west when I want to go south. But everyone has limits. There are our individual points of origin. Language is a limit... the self is a limit. And rather than try to overcome the limits through transcendence, or a universalizing humanism, I prefer bouncing off them. That way I stay closer to the ground.

69:

PENELOPE GALEY-SACKS: But this is perhaps what all art is about: seeing the limit and bouncing against it, beating it, complying with it...?

70:

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: But it is not quite the same for people. If I could go to the airport tomorrow morning without any time constraint, I certainly would do that. It's not like I really want to go through the process of getting to the airport from the city center. But in a poem, indulging in an impediment can be sublime. I don't celebrate derangement *per se*, Rimbaud notwithstanding, since I know plenty of people who suffer greatly from derangement of the senses and would just like it to stop. I feel that way a lot of the time myself. But I do think it's important to recognize, acknowledge, and explore derangements (and so rearrangements) as part of a human

common ground. I mean not to celebrate the *poète maudit* but to find my bearings as a *poète chetif*.

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Continued...



Photo: Charles Bernstein, New York City, November 1997,
photo by John Tranter

Charles Bernstein (born April 4, 1950) is an American poet, essayist, editor, and literary scholar. Bernstein holds the Donald T. Regan Chair in the Department of English at the University of Pennsylvania. He is one of the most prominent members of the Language poets (or L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets). In 2006 he was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Educated at Harvard College, he has been visiting Professor of Poetry, Poetics, and Creative Writing at Columbia University, the University at Buffalo, Brown University, and Princeton University. A volume of Bernstein's selected poetry from the past thirty years, *All the Whiskey in Heaven*, was published in 2010 by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. Bernstein's continued commitment to small presses remains strong – In the same year that FSG released his major collection, Chax Press released *Umbra*, a collection of Bernstein's latest translations of poems from multiple languages. *The Salt Companion to Charles Bernstein* was published in 2012 Salt Publishing. Bernstein served as Distinguished Visiting Professor of Poetry, Poetics, and Theory at Princeton University in the Fall Term of 2011. In May of the same year, The University of Chicago Press released Bernstein's collection of essays, *Attack of the Difficult Poems: Essays and Inventions*.



Photo: Penelope Galey-Sacks, with permission.

Penelope Galey-Sacks was born in Trinidad, and educated in Ghana, Australia and France, where she has lived for the past forty years. She is Professor of English and comparative literature, specialising in the poetics of modernism and experimental poetry. She has published extensively on pre-modernist and modernist poets and especially on the visual works of Apollinaire, E. E. Cummings and the theory and practice of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement. She is also a poet, writing and publishing her poetry in French although some of it has recently been translated into Italian and Spanish. She is the author of the paper 'Songlines and Entropy in Ron Silliman's *Ketjak*' in the collection *Études anglaises - N°2/2012 - Flirting With Form: 'Experimental poetry and contemporary audacity'*, available from <http://www.klincksieck.com/livre/?GCOI=22520100942810&fa=details>

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