

Notes Toward Approaching Charles Bernstein's *The Kinds of Poetry I Want*

Andrew Levy

Digressions incontestably are the sunshine; they are the life, the soul of reading.

Laurence Stern

Shortly after the publication of my first chapbook, *between poems* (1985), I visited Charles Bernstein's and Susan Bee's apartment on Manhattan's upper west side. During our visit, Charles gave me the best piece of advice that I've received from another poet. We were just beginning to know one another, and I had shared a few poems that I felt somewhat confident about. Charles read the poems, then paused. Paraphrasing our conversation from memory, he replied, "I can see that you're thoughtful and careful in your choice of words. Perhaps too careful? You might try casting around further, stretching out more." In that moment, I understood that poets could give themselves permission to do whatever it was their poetry wanted.

Language, how to acquire it, and what do we become if we are deprived of it? Writing on that, its geo-cultural-political space, is an issue that's personal to me. When Neuralink is built into us will we be harvesting strawberries, apples, and childhood memories vis-à-vis seamless connections wherever we are? Purchasing the wealthy and well-connected upload to whatever ridiculousness someone interjects into the future? The militarization of space? Become one with the seductive figures suffering, abject, grandiose, vengeful, self-sacrificing, murderous, and noble who have gripped the Western imagination for thirty centuries? Instantaneously produce smart conversation, full of worldliness and sly wit? Have faith in an impossibility that we experience, existentially, as an absolute limit? Sleep the small poetic sleep? Auto-renew the service of a past that does not exist projected onto an elusive future?

Poetry can be the making of an analogy for something non-linguistic and incomprehensible: giving and bringing its form within reach. That is why good poems are incomprehensible. Akin to Bernstein's notion of 'difficulty', the difficult poem's 'artifice of absorption', creating the incomprehensible, has nothing to do with turning out any old bunkum, because bunkum, or clichés out of habit or convenience, is always comprehensible. 'Not comprehensible' partly means 'non-transitory': i.e., essential. And it partly means an analogy for something that, by definition, transcends our understanding, but which our understanding allows us to postulate.

What Charles Bernstein not so much wants but thinks:

Everything made since Duchamp has been a readymade, even when written by hand on paper.

Never subordinate art to an ideology.

The whole literary world is one vast scene of pettiness, lies, deceit, depravity, wretchedness, stupidity, nonsense, impudence. It is not worth wasting one word on it.

Language Poetry was an attempt to develop a new alphabet for the poetry of the future. And although it doesn't look as if it is being used in that way, Bernstein's hopes still go in that direction. But then perhaps that is a completely wrong way of looking at it.

Traditional, supposedly old works of literature are not old but contemporary. So long as we 'have' them, in the broadest sense of the word, they will never be outworn: neither are we setting something of equal stature alongside them, nor shall we match or surpass their quality. Their permanent presence compels us to produce something different, which is neither better nor worse, but which has to be different because we wrote the "The Red Wheelbarrow" yesterday.

The poem hides in this lost place. In the silences of planting it, keeping the line. That is the fabulous parity (and parody) of art, often a result of emergence or serendipity. Beauty lies in an honest bone box.

Volatile social values remain in flux. Imitators miss the point by confusing otherwise reasonable people and their behavior with content.

How what is to be made readable gets made has nothing to do with poetry or with poetic abilities.

Hubris, combined with the expectation that you'll always get good press, leads to laziness.

Donald Trump is a trial run for putting the entire country under martial law.

It's important to admire something that one can't do—something that one is in no position to do.

Americans get graded on their Americanness; Charles is agin' it.

Giving impressions of your imitators can be fun.

In humanity's endless drift into silence and invisibility, poetry is what it means to make it.

Being Jewish, poetry isn't the same everywhere.

All of the above things at the same time.

Southern Democrats “will strip Trump’s immunity” for only \$25.

They’re joking, right?

Poets and poetry interfere with (unless recruited by Amalgamated Writing Poetry, ready to sell you a hat or t-shirt) consumer culture.

Not everybody wants to rule the world.

An analogy:

Described on its back cover as “a dialogic novel, long poem, and grand opera,” *The Kinds of Poetry I Want* (with the caveat that I have yet to complete reading all of its 412 pages) seems to me to be akin to a 3-D print of a Golgi apparatus (a near “infinite context window”) in the genre of scholarly memoir cast with neo-noirish humor and requisite shadows. Bernstein is a memoirist who will not make every reader happy. His tome is a ‘novel’ about poetry and an ‘opera’ about academia, about the luxury of writing poems and about the exquisite uselessness of and uses for the poem.

It’s kind of like our voting machines and democracy. It’s the worst of all possible worlds except for all the others.

When asked to explain the title of *Naked Lunch*, William S. Burroughs said, “A frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork.”

The Kinds of Poetry I Want eludes this reader’s grasp in the welter of words tumbling after words, all of it in formation, something more no other than narrative, intimate while maintaining its distance, socializing while wearing the poem rather than letting it lead. In his book, Bernstein’s emphasis is on the ‘critical’ aspects of the ‘creative’ act. This reader loses himself in the pleasure and dilemma at the edge of Bernstein’s ambition, of an ambivalence possessed by a different ambition coded by a love for literary expression.

Footnotes to the above items:

“President Trump is restoring beauty and pride to our nation’s federal buildings which have been destroyed by terrible and unpopular modern architecture,” said White House spokesperson Taylor Rogers in a statement. “The Founders envisioned our federal architecture to reflect American exceptionalism and inspire civic virtue. President Trump is restoring American greatness to everything — even our buildings.”

Trump orders classical and traditional architecture for federal buildings

The president’s order expands his campaign against modernism, overhauling design principles that have guided government construction since the 1960s.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/2025/08/28/trump-executive-order-classical-architecture/>

Poetry is both concrete and illusory, ephemeral. It is the concrete production of artifice.

Humanitarian compassion is not the issue; the issues are vanity and the projection of power.

Poetry is action producing artifice, and this is the paradoxical source of its magic. Artifice is an essential part of it, but the artifice is real.

There is no context larger than that of the sale.

If poetry today is defined by autobiography and identity, Bernstein represents a time when poets were obsessed with a desire to get back to formal origins.

In a moment when subjectivity appears to muddy nearly every contemporary poem and cultural situation, Bernstein’s writing seems bracingly clear.

Is it Bernstein’s idea that his poetry remains “bracingly clear” while also incorporating “subjectivity”?

On the Locus of Poetry

The locus of a poem's presence is not the publication or book, the finished product, standing apart from the hours of toil put into it by the writer. It is, rather, those hours of toil, and the reader's recognition of them, that is the real poem, the true place where the poetic chooses to dwell. The poet, rather than crushing into insignificance the human perspective, rather than subsuming human effort into an aesthetic structure which ultimately surpasses and negates the relevance of the very effort put into the making of that structure, instead emphasizes, and privileges, the human concerns which were involved in the construction of the poem.

President of the United Hearts

I have found that writing outside of academia is somehow more nourishing than struggling to make everything publishable. Employed by Borough of Manhattan Community College-CUNY, I am not paid for publishing or teaching creative writing or poetry courses. Outside of my employment, I have received modest sums of money for reading and speaking on my work, but the audience I have in mind is a constellation of poets, scholars and writers in touch on email. Afterall, I have a lot of scholars and writers reading what I write, relatively speaking. I've nothing against writing for a more academic readership but I save my serious writing energies for more imaginative work. And of course, correspondence of all sorts including in-person and by phone is a way of developing my thinking.

Charles and I met in 1985 on the recommendation of and with contact information provided to me by Ron Silliman. Four years earlier, I'd moved to New York City from Boulder, Colorado. In Boulder, where I lived for 3 years, I'd had a somewhat skeptical relationship with the music and poetry programs at Naropa University, including an apprenticeship with Alan Ginsberg which consisted of secretarial work, e.g., typing his hand-written journal writing, and occasionally providing percussion for readings in which Ginsberg sang Blake's songs while playing an Indian harmonium. At the time, I was employed at Brillig Works, a wonderfully eclectic independent bookstore on "The Hill" near the University of Colorado campus. One day, Ed Dorn, whose poetry and prose I had been introduced to by scholar Barry Alpert at Indiana University, Bloomington came into the bookstore during my shift at the front counter. I deeply admired Dorn's work. He requested a scholarly study on Samuel Johnson which I duly ordered for him. For anyone unfamiliar with Dorn's interest in Johnson, you might begin by reading Stephen Fredman's short Jacket 32 (2007) article, "Introduction to Ed Dorn" (<http://jacketmagazine.com/32/fredman-dorn.shtml>). In his essay, Fredman writes that "Like one of his heroes, Samuel Johnson, the great eighteenth-century exposé

of cant and author of the first major English dictionary, Dorn remained conscious that a ‘reference’ book, like any other product of human intelligence, rests on the authority of decisions for which individuals must take personal responsibility.”

Fredman’s thought linking Johnson and Dorn aligns with my thought on *The Kinds of Poetry I Want*.

Bernstein’s ‘reference’ book is thoughtful and at times amusingly ruthless in its interrogation of the cant rampant with academia, the poetry world, and society generally. It is a highly detailed ‘memoir’ of Charles Bernstein’s experience in and around academia over, vis-à-vis Google’s AI, “four decades of his writing, with most of the essays being from the last ten to fifteen years leading up to its publication in late 2024.” The same 40-year time-span during which Charles and I have been acquainted.

Remember Rockefeller at Attica

*Not to be here –
but there, in the cloud, and to be there
as a being here of which, in other wise,
there is no conception.*

Nathaniel Tarn, “Recollections of Being”

From 1999 to 2001, I worked under the direction of “The News Dissector” Danny Schechter, "blogger-in-chief" at the now-defunct MediaChannel.org, one of a handful of early non-profit experiments in online alternative news media and reporting. Entirely dependent upon monetary contributions by readers, the largesse of individual patrons and competitive grants from various large and small educational and news media foundations, MediaChannel.org was for all effects and purposes disbanded late 2001 when it became overwhelmed by the tenuousness nature of its finances; payroll could no longer be sustained. Schechter did, however, continue to produce his 3,000 word daily blog on media and society through 2010. It was during my engagement in the complementary roles of Affiliate Manager (responsible for building MediaChannel.org’s network from 100 to over 1,000 geographically disparate and indigenous non-mainstream media organizations in 45 countries) and Content Producer (involving the creation and editing of an online bookstore, writing occasional articles and reviews, the organization of public forums, etcetera, and in coordination with Editorial working to best feature the journalism and media resources produced by

MediaChannel.org affiliates) that I acquired an understanding and deep appreciation for independent professional storytelling.

Note: Known for his sharp criticism of corporate media, Schechter was just as scathing in his opinions of PBS... In a 2002 column for *Current*, Schechter wrote, "PBS is a land of niches and bailiwicks, a Japanese-style employment system topped with execs who seem to have cushy jobs for life if they play it safe. They are thus very risk-averse and barely accountable to the public in whose name they are paid."

Bernstein's 'narrativist' approach throughout *The Kinds of Poetry I Want*, despite first generation Language Poets' well-documented criticism if not total distrust of conventional plot-driven story-telling, presents compelling multi-faceted stories of polemical intent by developing character motivations, putting them into conflicting situations, and making their decisions drive the narrative's progression, with a central theme (the value of experimental writing in search of a radical poetics against formally conservative lyric identity driven verse) emerging from these actions rather than from a pre-planned plot in a conventional manner. His scholarly-literary memoir is chock full of intersecting ideas, personalities, plots and scenes involving an international cast of characters and locations, including poetry and academic conferences, readings, talks, and personal one-on-one encounters in the U.S., and abroad. He's talented at providing finely hewn cameos of a diverse array of distinguished arguments, personalities and institutions including the Academy of American Poets to Sacha Baron Cohen, Arkadii Dragomoshchenko to Thomas Fink, Tonya Foster to Franz Kafka, Mina Loy to Walter Pater, Charles Reznikoff to *Tablet* magazine to Hannah Weiner, alongside multitudes of others old and new—including a number of international academics about whose existence I was completely unaware—that are analytical, compassionate, sometimes disdainful, and entirely entertaining. Taken together, Bernstein's collection of texts across forty years of literary endeavor creates a richly interwoven story, the goal of which is not to meticulously simulate reality but to emulate (satirically when required) the structures of fiction and story. The pleasure taken in storytelling, a gift of any academic with an audience, is the true star of *The Kinds of Poetry I Want*.

"UP Against Storytelling"

The minute you or anybody else knows what you are you are not it, you are what you or anybody else knows you are and as everything in living is made up of finding out what you are it is extraordinarily difficult really not to know what you are and yet to be that thing.

Gertrude Stein

“UP Against Storytelling” is the second piece in *Act Three, Doubletalk* of Bernstein’s genre mash-up of an opera. (I hope to complete reading it soon.) Though this section appears late in the book, I find it to be a central chamber in the heart, so to speak, of Bernstein’s collection. It’s an introductory meta-narrative framing pages 327-348, itself a collage of one-two page reflections, personal and rhetorically abstract in their effect, on David Antin who was a close friend of Bernstein, and on Antin’s work as talk-poet and theorist. In addition, we meet Amit Chaudhuri, a novelist, poet, essayist, literary critic, editor, singer, and music composer from India who is currently a professor of creative writing at Ashoka University.

The poem, “UP Against Storytelling” *For David Antin* is composed of short lines centered on the page, several of which are one word in length, that run for two-and-a-half pages. It opens with: “I told my / wife, / I / don’t want / any more / stories, / tell me what / you need.” It continues: “I told / my husband, I / don’t / want any / more stories, / tell me what you / think.” The poem continues to transition from one subject to the next multiplying into a play of subjects: mother, father, rabbi, friend, professor and president each uttering subtle alterations on the theme of what someone wants, which is no more stories. In other words, the speaker wants someone to get to the point: What is it you’re saying, what do you want? Okay, let’s assume that everyone experiences at some time or another impatience with someone who won’t get to the point, someone who just can’t tell you what they want. Then again, not getting to the point, playing with the ways that point, if there is one, arrives can be part of the pleasure one takes in creating a narrative, especially when delivered by skilled writers of fiction. To delight in preamble, to take a circuitous route, to explore the minutia on the ground of what one’s intelligence would posit, to perambulate toward.

Bernstein’s meta-poem on the commonplace endlessness of storytelling, between family members to the university classroom to the president (of a university? of the Nation?) is placed at the start of the second piece in *Act Three, Doubletalk* to ‘home’ his sincere appreciation of Antin’s “radical coherency” that values “process over craft and revision” (330-331). To think in dialog with the speaker-writer *as the work is being composed* so that momentarily, perhaps, we may stem our fear from childhood through old age of the dark and of our mortality. To sidestep an irritable closeting of explanation and by averting closure allow for a possible *transformation* in one’s own life. Hence, David Antin’s “Sociology of Art” which “extending through time (makes space for) some kind of diversionary brilliance” (333).

Emerson, in “Self-Reliance,” states, “We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other.” Narratives may increase and stem one’s fear. Adorno, in *Minima Moralia*, observed that, “Only death is an image of undistorted life.” For Adorno, one lives one’s death vis-a-vis the “administered world” of late capitalism, where individuals are controlled by systematic, impersonal structures. One wonders what he would have made of algorithms that provide an instantaneous simulacrum of personally customizable liberty. Socrates sophistry, different from professional educators focused on teaching the art of persuasion and winning arguments, sometimes for political or personal gain, was meant to bring into the light the possibilities and the obstacles of an undistorted life experienced prior to one’s death. Bernstein’s friend David Antin does too.

The below 4 sentences are culled from Anne Applebaum’s “This is What the End of the Liberal World Order Looks Like,” *The Atlantic*, September 2025:

“In 2024, the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, at the UN, counted 123 million people around the world who were refugees, displaced, or seeking asylum.

Russia and China and their network of allies—from Cuba to Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe—mock or undermine the language of human rights altogether. So does the MAGA wing of the American Republican Party.

The humanitarian agencies of the UN, never models of functionality, have become so bureaucratized that officials refuse to take risks, even to prevent deaths.”

Simone Weil once expressed the idea that sympathy is the rarest and purest form of generosity. Charles Bernstein is an exceptionally generous professional sophist. I find value in the knowledge that people are so thoroughly “in-the-world” that our thoughts, moods, and feelings are unimaginable except through practical, embodied engagement with this world. Ignoring this, of course, makes it easier than it should be to attribute the mind to disembodied information and its processing.



Kyle Grillot/Bloomberg/Getty Images

The site of the Stargate AI data center currently under construction in Abilene, Texas, a collaboration between OpenAI, SoftBank, and Oracle, September 24, 2025

Professionalism is an embodiment of privilege, well-earned. And, as in all endeavors it has structural limits that typically connect to and reiterate hard-wired biases. Bernstein's writing is widely admired both in and outside of academia for the breath of its attention and discernment, however, there are surprising absences in *The Kinds of Poetry I Want*. What at first struck this reader as a nearly infinite context of poetic-philosophical-political intelligence spanning 40 years of a seemingly global history of writing practices, critical theory, and philosophy has proven somewhat illusory.

Poets Outside (to the extent possible) Academia

Given how rarely literary scholars and critics these days read outside their circle of professional associates, just imagine the difficulty of reaching out to a wider nonacademic audience or extending one's attention and resources to writers on the fringes when not entirely outside circles of officially countenanced and

normative investment. Thinking about all this, questioning commitment bias and the pressure to keep things consistent is integral to Bernstein's endeavor as poet and critic across the entirety of the experimentalist address his book represents. That said, much of the most significant poetry published over the past 40 years (and much further back than that) receives scant to no attention by the literary academic establishment, of whatever kind or location. The neglect is especially dire for writers of experimentally innovative poetry.

From among the experimental poets of the last 40 years who do not have an MFA or a PhD in poetry or creative writing, have never held positions tenured or otherwise in a college or university, or applied, for instance, to the multitude of poetry contests, I want to mention a handful of poets whose work I would love to see receive more attention (I'm hoping *The Kinds of Poetry I Want*, Vol. II is in the works). Their writing is inspiring, and difficult: Jean Day (Oakland), William Fuller (Winnetka, Illinois), Roberto Harrison (Milwaukee), Robert Kocik (Brooklyn), Julie Patton (Cleveland), and Chris Daniels (Berkeley). Daniels is one of the most talented translators of contemporary experimental and Modernist Lusophone poetry out there. If you want to read something different, check out his translations.

The ivy-walled idylls of academia bolster a political-economy difficult to resist. Sadly, in congruence with the critical neglect of many good writers and their work has been the abandonment of local community-based poetics and poets, an improvised and under-funded creative commons. Two scholarly and well-regarded books which I will not summarize here, but that one might consult on the political and economic operations of universities today, are *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (2011) by Benjamin Ginsberg, and *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (2016) by Christopher Newfield. And, Bill Reading's classic, *The University in Ruins* (1996).

Note: By introducing a writers who are in their own way poetry outsider artists, perhaps due to differences in class, aesthetics, and other backgrounds, I have not mirrored nor would I agree in any manner with, for instance, Richard Kostelanetz's malefic "massive intelligence failure" levelled against Bernstein in the *American Book Review* 21:4 (2000)—an episode of antisemitic paranoia Bernstein comments upon in "You Can't Make This Up: Twice-Told Tales," *The Kinds of Poetry I Want*, pages 313-314; if you're interested.

Tragically, the progress being made on Project 2025 is well on track in its effort to subvert American democracy. Today, the idea or possible reality of university life as providing a tranquil, contemplative place where one is free to pursue knowledge and ideas is under threat by pressures beyond the typical garden-house variety of internal politics and harsh realities faced by people who work within academic institutions.

In the meanwhile, the times are getting *meaner* by the minute. I'll mention some topics I'd like to read Bernstein's thoughts on but haven't located in *The Kinds of Poetry I Want*:

Artificial Intelligence. On September 16, 2025, I prompted Google's AI Overview with the question, "Is there such a thing as artificial intelligence." After 25+ minutes it could not "generate" a response. I may have given a machine intelligence an aneurysm. How might one use Conceptual Writing, a metonymic precursor to Sam Altman's ChatGPT, to avoid incurring its intellectual, pedagogical and social pitfalls, missteps, and short-sightedness?

Ecopoetry, a genre formally recognized around 2001, after the term "Anthropocene" was coined to describe the geological age defined by human impact on Earth.

Issues of socio-economic class in connection to experimental poetry, including access to quality education, employment, healthcare, social exclusion, access to influential social networks, stable housing, and class conflict, among other concerns. I think about these things in part due to my employment at BMCC-CUNY, where I teach journalism, environmental literature and film, and introductory literature courses to a student body from households having a median family income of approximately \$28,400.

Overproduction, oversupply, or a market surplus

I profess an extreme distaste for all totalizing bureaucracies, institutions, and attendant media which quarantine the Imagination. For the aspirational celebrity-aesthetic gambit of artists exemplified by, for example, Andy Warhol who personally profited from marketing spectacles of capitalist culture by appropriating Duchamp's legacy; the hypnotic refrain of a third generation. The investment expended in such endeavor is a damaging and wasteful overproduction, aesthetically and socially, of short-lived careers and trends. In the idea that sheer quantity of production guarantees the probability that one's career will continue if simultaneously (cynically) exercising an adept skill at market manipulation and timing.

It would be another 30-35 years, in 2003, before Conceptual Writing's faux-populist "uncreative writing" decoupled the conceptual from the technical, thereby rendering Warhol's work or, for example that of Joseph Kosuth (a founder and leading figure of the Conceptual Art movement of the 1960's) a sophisticated semblance of the Baroque era in the Netherlands during the 17th century. There is a political economy at work that ties all this together. The pattern goes back to the eventual process of poetry being converted into a way to get a teaching job (because that's where the money and status actually are).

To borrow from Benjamin on Baudelaire, Charles Bernstein knows what the true situation of a man of letters is: he goes to the marketplace to supposedly to take a look at it, but in reality, to find a buyer. As argued with a variety of means and ways across *The Kinds of Poetry I Want*, once that's the game then poetry is beholden to the rules of academia, which itself evolves into a kind of woke phase and logically aligns with Iowa school style identity poetry (because it delivers the identity) and away from the historical avant-garde. Totalizing identity as a poetics does not deliver the echopoetic dialogue that Charles Bernstein wants. Artists, writers and researchers (especially poets) have the capacity, and the duty, to combat the most malign forces of the market's presentation of work and lifestyles that are both chic and facile, and what that implies for culture and democracy. There are more than 150 types of poetry from cultures all over the world. As Charles might say, let's think about it.

Entr'acte

Every Inhabitant Arrested to Charles Bernstein

*Men of consequence lubricate the virtual
hate into a shared vibration. Poetry passes them by.
They carry the rot of antisemitism
in a dirty little world. The experience of perception
happy with smoke. With an acoustic terror
that dilutes every last bit of matter and energy into a cold
equilibrium, a thin gruel of nothingness.
The poem has come to an end.
Some talk of revelation, besieged with invitations
to sit on panels, give talks, and judge.
Then what, asked to comment on political issues
that they know nothing about. May they live
a thousand years. The poem has
come to an end.*

Sunshine on my shoulders makes me happy:

The Kinds of Poetry I Want, despite the ambitious scope of the author's survey of literary interests, the impressive number of people, writers, and subjects addressed and the number of years its materials reflect, is not the thickest book in the world, by a long shot. The thickest published book in the world is *Shree Haricharitamrut Sagar* by Gyanjivandasji Swami, which is 496 mm (19.5 in) thick and was recognized by Guinness World Records in 2020. It is a biography of the Hindu religious figure Swami Narayan.

- Pages: 10,080
- Chapters: 249
- Weight: Over 20 kilograms