On Poetry, Language, and Teaching:  
A Conversation with Charles Bernstein

CB: Thanks for inviting me to Pittsburgh. I was pleased to be asked here by all three of the sections that make up your department, as I understand it—composition, literature and literary theory, and creative writing. I like to imagine what I do as a synthesis of these factions, though I suppose it's all shamelessly scrambled together in my practice, and no doubt I'm excessively edgy about what goes for standards in anything like a proper or disciplinary approach to any one of them. I feel at odds with each one just that I locate myself at the intersection, which can be an unsettling, but also possibly useful, place to be.

As you could see, what I presented to you, "The Dialects of Ideology:

Charles Bernstein came to the English Department at the University of Pittsburgh on January 25-26, 1996, to read his poems, to lecture, and to teach a seminar. At the end of two intense days, Bernstein held a conversation with David Bartholomae, Lynn Emanuel, Colin MacCabe, and Paul Bové. Great thanks have to be given to David Bartholomae, who made possible the transcription of this document and gave enormously of his time to edit and correct the transcription. Thanks to all involved, and especially to Charles Bernstein for his unflagging energy and stimulative generosity.

S/he Do Standard English in Voices (Knot)," was less a lecture than a performance. I assembled a series of remarks (paragraphs, stanzas) on index cards, shuffled the cards, and read what resulted. In preparing the cards, I included three main elements: some remarks on the relation of dialect poetry to what I call ideoelectical poetry, or poetry written with invented syntax; a discussion of nonexpository essays; and a serial poem called "Locks without Doors" from Dark City. In trying to find ways to pursue my discomfort with the standardization of language, I thought this form would let the links I am pointing toward speak of, or anyway for, themselves. I wanted, for one thing, to address the problem I see with the way a certain brand of Official Verse Multiculturalism plays a politics of identity that has quickly become the group version of the poetics of self-expression that has long been associated with the "workshop" lyric. That is, I find the unreflected expression and valorization of "group" identity as problematic, politically and aesthetically, as the unrefracted expression of "self" identity. I say that realizing it may seem to contradict the concern many of us have not only for the rights of sovereign people to determine their national identities but also for the necessity of various "underrepresented" groups to assert their value. Now I worry as much about too many imaginary bloodlines being drawn, too much group and national identity being projected. Poetry is very intimately tied up with these questions, whether it is used to assert the integrity of the personal voice or in inventing—that's what it often amounts to—a national tongue; or whether it avers or eschews or chokes—let's say reimagines—such formations. That's why Hugh MacDiarmid ends up being so important for me—you know, he was thrown out of the Scots nationalist party and also the Communist Party—[laughing]: he was intolerable to both! He was a localist and an internationalist in ways incompatible with either position understood monologically. That's why his work, his reinvention of Scots dialect, makes a crucial intervention; it unsettles identity formations without obliterating the particulars.

CM: I wonder if I could push you a little. In certain of the things you argue, it seems to be that you were calling for an absolute plurality of voices . . .

CB: Well, I have to say a relative plurality, because I never would say an absolute . . .

CM: . . . Okay, a relative plurality, but where does the relative come from? Let me push you on this point.

CB: I don't know . . . it's basically coming from a Western European . . . Yugoslavia, the breakup of the Soviet Union. . .
CM: Yeah, this is exactly my point. Standard English is an imposition, okay? It's an imposition on a whole range of speech in communities. Yet, if you take the position that this will not be imposed, that it's okay for the Harvard-educated, but for those who really don't have any kind of access to that kind of privilege . . . to say "get on, you know, enjoy your own dialects"—to say this is simply clamping them in an absolute linguistics ghetto.

CB: I share your concern and don't have an easy answer. I'm interested in Basil Bernstein's research on class codes, where he speaks of the "restricted codes" of those who only have access to their dialect and the "unrestricted" codes of those with multiple dialects from which to choose. Bernstein was charged with having a derogatory view of those using restricted codes, but this mistakes his point. The thing is, you can't go back to a restricted code from an unrestricted code; it's not that being in an unrestricted code is a better position but that it's irreversible. I think standard English, and the process of education, creates an irreversible change; it disrupts a rooted, unselfconscious relationship to dialect, accent, and to slang, and I don't . . . I think in a university context one's always essentially teaching ideologics and standardizations and rhetorics; once people are at a college level, one isn't simply saying, "Oh go ahead and do what you're doing." I want to be critical about the ways we write and speak, which means not saying, "Just keep doing what you're doing." That's why I say, the poets who insisted on dialects and vernaculars were not necessarily arguing that they were, or are, univocally rooted in some particular culture and that their language is an authentic expression of that culture. I see these practices as constructive, as linguistically innovative, as ingenious creations of literary form, comparable to what we think of as the innovations of the radical or "experimental" modernist poets. They're just different kinds of concerns coming from a different . . . necessity. In any case, the representation of speech is always a dynamic issue—it's rhetorical and formal. In dialect, the immediacy of the scene of speech is constantly confronted by the strangeness of the orthography—I'm thinking of a quote from Karl Kraus that I use as an epigraph to a poem: "The closer we look at a word the greater the distance from which it stares back." The work looks so strange and that looking strange, I don't think, is something that ever disappears. But, you see, a lot of people have looked at dialect poetry and thought that when people are really reading this its linguistic resistance, its lexical oddness, disappears and that they're hearing the voices of people from their community. Actually, what you have is a very material writing that brings out aspects of the sound and alphabetic visuality at odds with this kind of transparency. Then, when
Linton Kwesi Johnson spells England *Inglan*, that's as much a provocation as it is a pronunciation! I think this issue brings us back to the very basis of the representation of speech in vernacular, the whole history of that in respect to Greek, Latin, Italian, and so on. It's always a dialectical question. And when we're talking about poetry, we're talking, for me, about a realm that assumes the artifice, acknowledges the construction.

I want to question the idea of correctness by investigating the historical and ideological formation of the standard. Not so that people don't learn it but so that they learn it in a way that is less manipulative, less deceitful, and that allows them to use it to their advantage rather than to be controlled by it. Though I think the language always controls us to some degree, so this is relative autonomy again. I think if you understand what that language is, where it comes from, what its history is, you can be more comfortable with it, you can be more performative and theatrical with it, and you can better use it for your own ends. It's not always calling you on your mistakes, you're not always consulting a book—you can let it happen. So I don't think there's any question about university students learning standard English; the question is whether we repress the difference between standard and correct.

*DB*: Most of the discourse of education, when it wants to make the argument that you're making, makes it in the very terms that you have been set against, that is, basically in terms of natural voice, the lyric impulse of the lyric moment . . .

*CB*: That's right.

*DB*: . . . So then instead of working inside of standard English, students are told to find their own voice. This sometimes means the syntax of Black English vernacular, it sometimes means someone's notion of what it means to be an authentic person or a real person rather than a person constrained by systems, but usually those who would join the argument on your side would use a language that, in fact, most of your work has been set against.

*CB*: That's exactly right. In a lot of ways, the personal essay is the exception the university has allowed to give vent to frustration with standardization of style and tone, perhaps, more than grammar or lexicon. Nancy Miller's book, *Getting Personal*, is a good example, because she is advocating a greater role for the personal voice in scholarly writing. If you say that the problem with the essay is that it's too impersonal, that can be accepted as a gendered accusation, as well as perhaps a warning about an implicit sci-
entism in our discourse that we in the humanities don't have to be involved in. That is, to some degree, people can buy that and there are anthologies now of the personal essay edited by Philip Lopate, by Joyce Carol Oates, and so on, all of which make the case for the essay in ways that resonate with the precepts of official verse culture—subjectivity, lyric, authenticity, the unified voice. But I feel that . . . in a pragmatic way, anything that breaks down hegemonic authoritative discourse structure is positive even if it is also a wrong argument. If there is one alternative, that's better than if there's none, because then you can at least make a contrast. But there's no reason you can't point out the problems with both positions. Certainly, there's a lot of well-meaning stuff going on about writing and getting in touch with the voice and so on that has pragmatic value. There are other approaches that can achieve some of the same aims. For example, it's very interesting for people to do tape recordings, to tape people in their community, and their friends, and try to transcribe speech as accurately as possible. I think what you find out is the difficulty and the number of choices there are in creating representations of speech. I mean, teach the choices! Focus on the values suggested by different conventions. People don't need to be taught to have their own voice, they've got it, you know, the idea of going to school to learn that . . . it's so often the school that knocks it out of them and makes the people feel stupid for speaking the way they do and that's why we feel like what we're trying to do is restore a sort of pride. It's like putting a Band-Aid on a bruise that's not going to heal. I can understand . . . a little kid sometimes likes a Band-Aid even though it's not bleeding, but he wants a Band-Aid. If you want it, by all means take it, you want another one? It's not going to hurt the bruise, but it's irrelevant in some ways, and it may add to the problem by being a diversion.

But what can you teach?—what literature, what art can teach, not just teachers . . . these are more technical, in the sense of techné, craft and rhetorical questions. The idea of rhetoric as being inimical to poetry, odd notion though it is, is very common, and that spills over into the conception of the "personally expressive" essay. Craft then becomes a patching up of small technical matters that are incidental. But the idea that you're building something, you're making constructions—that's what you get to when you start talking about writing that is composed not of feelings or even ideas but of letters, words, constellations of words, visual formats. I'm not sure what the intrinsic meaning of any form or any word sound or any accentual pattern is. Part of the meaning is extrinsic—historical and social association; part of it may have to do with various iconic or methodologic factors. The
meaning of forms, or other aesthetic choices, doesn’t have to be pinned down that way. It’s a start just to say it signifies quite a bit when you use one or the other; and to know that when you choose one form versus another, that opens up a whole realm of signification, which you can’t split off. There’s no way to get rid of the meaning of forms or sound patterns—even if you would like to. It’s always there. Although it’s most typically there in a form of denial, that is to say, it’s there in the form that neutralizes, that says the form itself doesn’t mean anything, it’s just correct or incorrect.

*DB:* You argue that the opposition to standard English is not simply a retreat to something that’s local or natural but that it’s a learned opposition. And what I’d like you to talk about is your sense of the range of that lesson across the curriculum. The power of your work is imagining the materiality of language. You argue that work with language is work on the problems of language as a writer feels those problems inside sentences—or inside the essay—given its history as a form, with the tradition and ideology it carries. You provide a very interesting way to imagine what an English department is or might be. You allow one to say that the English department is the place where, perhaps at the moment of practice, or through the moments of practice, students who wanted to do that oppositional work could do it, that is, to work with language, not simply to be working instrumentally or have language work for them or through them. What’s the range of that . . . I mean, I could imagine a freshman composition program where, when the student says, “Writing this essay with a thesis is really stupid and boring,” the institution wants to say, “Yes, that’s right, that’s exactly it. It can be stupid and boring. What you want to do is to write differently.” Do you imagine that this can or should be taught? How does this desire work itself out in an English department?

*CB:* You spend a lot more time than I do working with students who are in a composition class. I don’t do that, so I am reluctant to prescribe . . .

*DB:* There’s no Buffalo project to teach students to write like Charles Bernstein or Susan Howe?

*CB:* I’m concerned about the ways that people are alienated from language when ideas of correctness are imposed upon them. Different teachers will have different things that they are enthusiastic about and want to deal with. But it’s the composition-teaching model of punishment and correction that is troubling. For some people, that works very well. They develop high levels of competence—there are often people who tend to go on in English because
they did so well! But for others, the whole question of reproducing the set models creates enormous obstacles, and it's those people with whom I'm primarily concerned, with whom I identify. To the others, who develop a great facility, I would only say there's a real problem if you don't see the ideological implications of the particular forms you use, if your facility allows you to repress the meaning of those particular forms. My imagination of teaching composition is working in and on a series of different language projects, employing different shapes, styles, and forms, and exploring how these make for different meanings, where meaning is understood as something socially and aesthetically—as much as logically or lexically—determined. That is, if you consider the limitations of, and possibilities for, each form and each standard, you create a more open and democratic conception of language practices that does not preclude the importance of standardized forms but rather sees those for what they are—the dominant choice, which you may need as a survival skill, but which has a direct relation to truth or coherence. You might also discover that in many ways, those dominant forms, I would say, force you into a kind of inarticulateness . . . force you into . . . I can't imagine any writer who isn't aware of it. . . . It's an inarticulateness that perhaps those most facile in their use of the standard suffer from the most.

It's not that I don't manage my non sequiturs and manipulate the thoughts to fit the form; of course I do, that's my point. I also want to talk about it. But I don't think that anybody writing a standard essay . . . when they think of something that doesn't fit in and they cross it out . . . it's a kind of lying. . . . I mean, there's nothing wrong with this if it is acknowledged as a rhetorical trick, but to claim that this is coherence. . . . Montaigne provides an enormously useful model for the alternative—not for the personal essay but for digression. You know, Shklovsky writes in his Theory of Prose, digression is the most typical part of prose! And if you don't account for digression at every level of teaching—from elementary school on—if you don't account for the enormous force of digression, then you end up, on the one hand, teaching some people to have an enormous facility to cut out what doesn't fit and to fit in, which is a very corporate, commodified, homogenized, bland way of imagining writing. And on the other hand, you're letting people who can't develop that facility, or have just an enormous psychological resistance to it, feel disenfranchised from their own language. Which is not to forget that most expository writing that people learn to do competently is terrible, boring, and that's partly because they can't contain the contradictions and digressions. They haven't learned how to deal with that in a dynamic way, so they cut them out just like they've
been taught to do. But cutting them out is like giving an essay a lobotomy. A good essay written in the most standard form retains that tension—you see it there, it breaks down, it hits you. Great stylists within the traditional mode—not every one, but a lot of them—operate just in this way: as you read, you feel the tension between the form—what the form is containing—and what is being said.

DB: One of the things this suggests is that if we taught the parenthesis with the same vigor as we taught the topic sentence, we'd have a different tradition of writing in this country.

CB: Right. And one looks back especially to eighteenth-century prose, which seems so wonderful with its semicolons and compounded complexity. I mean, in some ways I am complaining about the rise of the plain style over the past century, which means the problem is how we've dealt with mass literacy. Now we are stuck with this shrunken prose fundamentalism, those simple sentences. That's a very limited medium.

CM: To switch the topic... What I've read of *A Poetics*, I was very moved and impressed by, but my most critical thought was that this was just Shelley all over again. After mass literacy, who gets to be a legislator?

LE: I'd like to follow up on what Colin is saying. In my introduction to your reading, I described your view of the role of poetry and the poet as utopian. How can the claims you make for poetry, given the current intellectual climate, both within and outside the academy, and the pressures of mass culture, be seen as something other than whimsical?

CB: Well, there's nothing wrong with whimsical claims [laughter].

LE: No, however, I do become more nervous about your connecting those claims with something that seems very much like a national literature, your emphasis on "the American."

CB: Well, the American part is... makes me nervous, too. It's a reversal of what I thought previously, when I felt that the frame of America had become useless as a way of imagining the break from the dominance of English literature, just as it has been crucial for Williams, in *In the American Grain*, and others of his generation, in establishing the significance of American literature within U.S. universities and for the culture at large. Once you have U.S. global dominance, culturally as well as politically, then establishing the legitimacy of American poetry takes on a completely different ring. Then, in
fact, my allegiance may be with people who are writing in English, whether they be in New Zealand or England, and not particularly with the American. In “Poetics of the Americas,” I say that I feel closer to writers in England and Argentina and Beograd with whom I share a project than I do to American poets with whom I don’t. But I began to realize belatedly, with a classic belatedness about America, that America also can be understood as an imaginary space that’s filled with conflict, that’s not unified, not reconciled, not totalized. That’s why I say “Americas,” not just the “United States,” to keep that sense of new worlds. And within this frame of the Americas, I want to be able to talk about British writers such as MacDiarmid, or contemporary U.K. poets such as Maggie O’Sullivan or Allen Fisher or Tom Raworth or Tom Leonard. So it’s a complex, a contradictory, idea of an “Americas” that is never achievable and that can’t be summed up. It’s something you make, wherever you are.

Don’t get me wrong; I am a product of American education and of American culture. It’s just that at a time when the Bill Moyers of the world want to promote poetry as affirmative of self, group, family, origins, I got a different rap. That’s why I wrote that autobiographical interview: I wanted to explore the particular contexts, the social location, that might give rise to a poetics of disaffiliation, such as mine, which is often taken as very abstract or “theoretical.” In any case, I’m an enormous believer in public space and in public education, which I take to be education about the public as much as of it; though I realize that most public education is involved with taming the workforce, creating disciplinary values. And when you’re talking about language, obviously, most language education is disciplinary in the good and bad sense. It’s teaching people limited, manageable, testable skills for the level of work that’s required and not more.

CM: Well, actually, in Britain, for the last thirty years, the dominant ideology of language teaching in schools has not been that at all. The dominant ideology has been one of expressiveness, noncorrection, nonjudgment. And maybe when we look back we can say, “Ah, this has produced an incredible raft of creativity.” But the main thing, from my point of view, is that it has actually shoved the lower classes back further into their various kinds of socioeconomic prisons.

CB: Yes, and I think this is very much the problem we have here with the emphasis on personal expression and “creativity” as the alternative to rigorous exposition. It won’t do to substitute “self-expression” for authoritarian control and correctness, though something like expressivity and rhetoric
might work. "Expression" has become a social safety valve that turns us from the difficulty of form to the affirmation of content, which is to say from the difficulty of thought to the manipulations of sanctioned emotions. In my relatively recent teaching experience, I haven't found, as I've always been told, that you can't teach the "difficult" stuff. Spend a little time and people can understand all kinds of things. It's true that students don't have a lot of information coming in, but I think there's enormous condescension about what students can understand. Of course, educators say they just don't wanna turn the high school and junior high kids off to reading (as if reading is a switch), so better to assign Judy Blume and stay away from, oh my God, poetry. When you look at some of the new "progressive" syllabi, you can see that literature is reduced to "theme" and, as Ann Lauterbach recently put it, creative writing to looking in the mirror. I think that's a disaster. If watered-down personal or scenic narrative is all literature has to offer, how can it hope to compete with an episode of My So-Called Life or a song by Salt 'N' Pepa? That's not providing cultural diversity, that's running away from the diversity of forms, structures, syntaxes, vocabularies, and sounds that make poetry a play of, and in, linguistic difference. It's as if we only taught arithmetic and plain geometry but stayed away from algebra, solid geometry, trigonometry, and calculus—all the fun stuff!—for fear of turning kids off to math. What's left to be turned on to? For fear of turning kids off, we're leaving them out.

The problem isn't only, or even primarily, with educators, of course. I had the odd opportunity to judge a poetry contest at my daughter's remarkably good public elementary school (where poetry is rarely taught). There turned out to be five other parents who had also volunteered to judge the contest, and they had very strong preferences, among the hundreds of poems submitted, for some of the most dreadful ones, on the order of "I love my mommy because she's good / I love my mommy because she's fine / My mommy is the greatest thing / Since . . ." permaflush!, no, um, "sunshine." There were also some quite interesting, troubled, disturbing poems, with asymmetrical forms reflecting asymmetrical lives. I said to the other parents, you know, "You oughta give a prize to this poem, it's obviously better. This poem shows complex thinking, it stays with you, it's original": I used all those tried and sometimes true criteria. But they were all upset about this attitude that I had, even if they could see the logic; they wanted to say the best poem was the one with the nicest sentiment. Well, no shock after all.

CM: You say, very obviously, but surely problems of assessment are one of the great problems in relation to utopias. The reason the essay form is so
dominant throughout the educational system is the fact that it is relatively
easy to assess. Once you open up writing to the kinds of expressivity that
you seek, assessment becomes extremely difficult.

*CB*: I think it creates different problems for evaluation, but that also allows
for an ongoing and welcome consideration of criteria for evaluation.

*DB*: The problem there is not . . . actually, I don’t think it is the case that the
teacher values the Mommy poem. The problem is that no one emphasizes
value at all. The parents may want the award, but it doesn’t make any dif-
fERENCE what the kids write; it’s enough that they’ve done the thing called
making a poem. Nobody reads those poems, nobody reads them out loud,
and I think, to our great cultural shame, no one has a conversation about
literary value. There’s no way of engaging children with the question, Which
poem do you prefer, or which is better?

*CB*: Sure there is, that’s always a good place to start. In my college classes,
I always start by saying, “Don’t analyze or paraphrase the poems, but first
read and reread them, memorize and recite them, and then tell me what
you like and don’t like.” And then revisit those judgments in a few weeks and
in a few months. Students judge and categorize the music they listen to in
quite complex ways, along aesthetic, comparative, and sociological lines,
even if they wouldn’t put it that way. If the poems we were judging in that
contest were song lyrics, there is no way the fourth or fifth graders would
go for the “affirmative” ones.

*DB*: They’re our products. I mean they—those teachers—are our students,
and I don’t think we’ve taught them how to exercise those judgments; they
have developed neither a vocabulary nor the grounds to explain and justify
their creativity.

*CM*: There’s one last question you comment on, and I was very struck, as
I’m often struck at poetry readings, by the force and energy of your read-
ing. And you just mentioned now that recitation is something that children
should learn in schools. But if you were to say that out loud, you’d be taken
as a complete lunatic.

*LE*: Dana Gioia argues that we should memorize poetry, and, of course,
along with that goes the idea that good poetry is memorable, consumable
poetry. In the *New York Times Book Review*, Denis Donoghue says of Rich’s
new book, “I find her new poems hard to memorize; they slip in and out of
my mind as many of her earlier poems don’t, the poems that generations of
readers continue to recite for pleasure and companionship." This extraor-
dinary reading of Rich's work as being "pleasurable" and "companionable"
fits snugly with the idea of it being memorizable.

**CM:** But the art of speaking out loud to the public is one that does need to
be taught in the schools.

**CB:** There are several competing issues here, which is why some of my
more anachronistic teaching practices may seem surprising. My assign-
ment is not to memorize the already memorable but to memorize what may
seem at first impossible to memorize, to get inside the rhythms of works
that at first might resist just such a full-bodied sounding. How long must we
suffer under a regime of criticism that continues to dole out such banali-
ties about "memorable passages," as if boilerplate Romantic ideology could
possibly be a guide to poetry in an age where poetry's mnemonic function
is no longer its reason for being? Like that Xerox ad almost says, anything
the ear can hear it can and will acoustically record; so much of the claptrap
about "memorable passages" is just a pitch for a particular taste: you say
memorable, I say banal; you say slip, I say slap (let's call the calling-off off).
So my sense of memorization and recitation is not related to the pleasure
of the companionable but to learning to articulate the otherwise unarticu-
lated, to speak up in the forms that seem necessary, not the ones that are
mandated. I ask students to memorize and to imitate poems. But while I
advocate reading poetry out loud, I am not, of course, suggesting a return
to correct enunciation and all that baggage that went with recitation classes
in the forties and fifties. I'd emphasize the many possibilities of sounding
the same poem. I play tapes of the poet reading the poem and, if I can,
different readings of the same poem by the poet, since I want to frame the
poem as a performative event that you respond to rather than a puzzle you
try to figure out. In this sense, the reading out loud is an interpretation. I
am always amazed at how few teachers insist on performing the poems
they teach: it's a little like silently reading a song sheet or looking at a 3-D
movie without the glasses. And it's not just poetry that needs to be read out
loud. The acoustic space of prose is also something that's neglected. Some
instruction in performing prose should be a requirement for the Ph.D.!

**PB:** I will postpone raising my question for a minute to say that I think you're
all being too generous in your comments on the American educational sys-
tem. I know of at least one teacher who very specifically told a very bright
girl that her writing should not carry the mark of any other reading or writing,
that she had to learn the personal essay as a form to express "her subject."
CB: This must be a subscriber of the Associated Writing Program newsletter!

PB: Teachers have not thought about their role in the construction of this subject, but there are purposes or effects to it.

CB: Well, if I've said anything generous about the American educational system, I want to reverse it! David started me off on this tack of generosity, and I wanted to make a perhaps doomed distinction between individual well-meaning teachers and the ideological state apparatus. Maybe I'm also reacting to the often antagonistic responses that I, along with many of my friends and contemporaries, have gotten to our poetry and poetics. It's like waving a red flag. It's hard to believe that people's anger about poetry could be as great in the 1980s and 1990s as it was in the early modernist period, that people would feel personally affronted. You'd think this idea of denouncing innovative art would have lost its interest for people.

LE: Let me argue with that point of view for a minute. The American Poetry Review, a publication which you, in A Poetics, name as one of the journals of "official verse culture" recently ran a long review of Dark City. This summer, I met a student who had studied with a famous poet in a famous MFA program and who said to me, "Oh yes, my teacher, X, says that the language poets have won." Okay, so this comment gives some sense of the contentiousness of the current scene, and it is anecdotal, but isn't there a way in which that's true?

CB: There's a way in which that's not true and there's a way in which I'm sure that's relatively true—how's that for saying nothing! I know that there are creative writing teachers who actively discourage students from working in areas they associate with the sort of work to which I am committed and who express the hope that this work can be stamped out, like nasty brushfires. Controversy remains, as it should; if you are provocative, you have to expect people to be provoked. In any case, I am thinking of things that have happened over a twenty-year period; of course, I am encouraged when poetry that I care about is better known, is appreciated. That certainly seems true for the Objectivists and for Stein, and, yes, for a few of my comrades-in-poetry. No one has to like anyone else's work; it's not a "personal" issue in that sense. My polemic has to do with discrepancies of attention to different approaches to poetry, something that goes beyond an individual poet's or teacher's or even anthologist's personal taste. It's a systematic problem, a system of preferences. And, in my experience, the
tenacity of those who reject the poetry for which I speak should not be underestimated, even if it is sometimes awkward—even if it is structurally awkward!—to say so. The fact that Larry Eigner's death did not receive the same response as James Merrill's is not a fluke, and it sure isn't because Merrill is a "better" poet. It's even worse in England: a poet such as Jeremy Prynne, whom I find a troubling figure, but whom I think certainly is one of the great postwar poets, is unknown, rarely reviewed; whereas a poet such as . . . who's the new Oxford Poet? James Fenton . . .

CM: . . . I'm in the odd position of admiring both Jeremy Prynne and James Fenton.

CB: But you don't admire the discrepancy of attention!

CM: No, no, not at all. Let's take language poetry. It requires attention, it requires a willingness to believe that there is something of value that will come out of the process of reading. There is, as it were, no bribe of any kind to the reader at all. Whereas Fenton writes in very classical forms in which there is, for many people, a great deal of pleasure in reading that comes from its being accessible to the reader. It's no accident that my mother would give me James Fenton for Christmas and not Prynne. The problem I want to question is exactly that opposition.

CB: I simply don't believe that the official verse of the U.K. or U.S.A. is more accessible to readers than its honorable, and surely it's less accessible than its dishonorable, oppositions. Certainly, those who claim to represent poetry readers in the TLS or New York Times find the mainstream work more accessible; but if the audience for poetry is defined in that way, poetry as active art is lost to it. I am not interested in converting the audience that likes Fenton and Craig Raine over to reading Raworth and O'Sullivan. Let them read Larkin! The audience for the sort of poetry I have in mind is not the same audience and it doesn't need to be (there will always be overlaps). The audience that loves Raworth is just as likely to find Raine "inaccessible" as the other way around. But saying that, it is important to acknowledge how much sway genteel and society verse has—poetry remains a bastion for those who dislike modernist art. This reaches comic proportions when you have Richard Howard translating stuff from the French, Barthes in particular, that, if it were written by an American, he would be the first to trash. Accessibility is one of the most coded markers for ideology we have. It's the idea that somehow a realist painting by Norman Rockwell is accessible, and in the way that a Jackson Pollock is not. Except when a Pollock sells
for a cool million and is on the cover of *Time* (something that can't happen in poetry). Or put it this way: commodities are accessible, not art.

There are plenty of people who enjoy nonrepresentational, nontraditional, and nonrealist art, whether it be in poetry or music or painting or theater. It's not an either/or situation. There's no scarcity of potential readers or writers. And that's one of the reasons that things have changed. There is an "actually existing," quite well-organized, if loosely affiliated, alternative poetry world, with its own publishing system, its own distribution, its own audience, and it exists, as it has for a large part of this century, largely outside of the commercial publishing venues and also outside of universities to a large extent, myself notwithstanding.

*LE*: But that is changing.

*CB*: It is changing to some degree for a few people who have been around longer. It's not changing for young people, and it hasn't changed for most of my contemporaries.

*LE*: This is a "tension" that's been around a long time: this essentially binary view of poetry—disjunctive versus new formalist. Furthermore, it could be argued—not to be coy about this, I have argued—that there are a lot of parallels between new formalist and disjunctive poetics. Both poetics make of the poem an artifact that is available only to a highly trained reader; both renew a connection between poetry and literary history, even though that "history" is different in each case. Disjunctive poetry is also a formalist poetry, and so on. For me, this is an argument that feels stalled. The question is, What comes next?

*CB*: It's true that there's been a long history of antagonism in American poetry, though it's always been among many forces. I think the strongest force right now in American poetry has to do with multiculturalism, the marking (and nonmarking) of ethnic and class and sexual and gender identity in writing, which is quite different than the "academic" versus "New American" poetry of the fifties. There are many kinds of heaven and in some of them antagonism doesn't go away. While those interested in the inner ideological conflicts in American poetry are necessarily limited—there is very little money at stake, and there are never clear winners or losers, so it's not a very American pastime—I find it worth interrogating what values predominate and why. As for the similarities between new formalism and the sort of project we sponsored in \( L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E \ldots \) they are similar in the sense of antipathetic! But then my own movement, The Nude Formalism,
might have made all that clearer had it not failed so decisively on the playing field of my own misleading imagination.

PB: I'd like you to say something about your use of the word *constellation* and the way you play continually on imagination, imaginary nation—which, I understand in the context of America; but what is it, and where is it when it takes place outside of the Americas?

CB: Where there are real nations?

PB: Where there are real imaginary nations being developed by poets?

CB: By poets. Absolutely by poets. The role of poets in forming national identity is a traditional one, though it is less obvious in our culture than in many others we could point to. That's why I think these questions of antagonism are important. The terms of poets' disputes are often quite different than the terms of the broader political debate, the sorts of things that frame the contest between the Clintons and Doles. Indeed, poets of many different aesthetic persuasions probably would show greater consensus than the general public on issues defined at that level. The antagonisms have to do with how to represent, or poetically enact, individual identity, personal expression, imaginative freedom, self-expression, group identity, community identity, national identity, or a larger international identity. So when I quote Robin Blaser's phrase "Image Nations," I am registering my response to ethnic cleansing, to resurgent nationalism, and I am putting it in the context of that great line Stanley Cavell takes from Emerson: "this new yet unapproachable America." In other words, to insist that, in the best sense, "America" is a metaphor, it is imaginary; that if we capture it, pin down its identity, we have destroyed it. But there is this disturbing paradox that the genocide of the indigenous people of North America allowed for this powerful rhetorical figure of America, whose land mass—from a nonindigenous perspective—is not divided up among people defined by, or defining themselves by, their racial or ethnic identities. So to return to my earlier comment, values such as secession, separateness, distinction, or autonomy, which I take to be foundational poetic values as much as political values, can ground themselves in an idea of an America whose unity is not based on singleness nor on the discrete divisions of identity or race or language. There are plenty of people who have other ideas of, and for, America. Pound's accusation against the Jews can sound like aesthetic malfeasance: a rootlessness and fragmentation that is fundamentally unsettling. I try to turn that logic around when I say that what I'm standing
for is unsettling. We need to be unsettling so that we can be resettled. The differences of which we speak, which we want to articulate in our work, are not authentic. Let's not go down that path. Our identities are neither incontrovertible nor expendable, they're . . . expandable.

PB: This is a larger question, but what's the polis "like" in your imagination?

CB: The polis isn't like anything [laughter]. The polis is more a conversation than a likeness, but not like a Richard Rorty conversation, as if we are all sitting around the table exchanging views in an even-tempered, "pragmatic" manner. "America is a level playing field, except for the ones that own it." For the rest, intemperance is undeniable. That's something my friend Bruce Andrews often reminds me about—the value of anger in poetry. He is a very angry poet, I think; his work is not just scatological but disturbing and sometimes crude—things that are inimical to humanist, to refined, literary value. Though I gotta say, since I'm dumping on refinement here, that refined poetry is not limited to the gentry. There can be, you know, guys like me who want to talk pretty like that—I love that. I mean, my idea of Poetry is reciting a Shakespeare sonnet with a Leo Gorcey accent, an effect I think I may sometimes achieve in my work!

Somebody asked me the other day, Why does a person write poetry? One of the reasons that poetry is appealing to me . . . I did a lot of theater when I was younger and work now, when I can, as a librettist, and then I work at a university. But unlike these areas, in poetry—like they used to say on The Outer Limits—"we control the horizontal, we control the vertical." You don't have to answer to anyone for your decisions (though you may not get your work published). You can say, "The reason it's that way is that I want it that way." So I think a lot of poets like poetry because it's small scale—that allows for a measure of freedom not possible in more commercial fields. Though, you know, when I say poetry, much poetry has little to do with what I'm talking about. There are lots of filmmakers, composers, painters, literary scholars, sometimes even philosophers, who perhaps do things similar to what I'm saying poets do. I use poetry, in David Antin's sense, to mean verbal art. I'm thinking of poetry as the research and development division for language. And I don't mean this just abstractly. Poetry as a social space provides some support for this sort of work; it provides not just a shingle but a frame. As a social space, poetry is surprisingly self-regulated, considering the importance of the small and independent presses, the involvement of poets in the means of reproduction and reception. Most poets, prizewinning or totally eccentric, rely on the small presses to publish their work.
Poetry provides a model for the exchange of ideas; it provides a model not so much for community as for something just as important—call it virtual uncommunities. It's not a voice but voices, voicings.

PB: But there are all these "progressive" folks calling for the public voice. Let's take it back to the question of schooling, of making sure that kids are all speaking in their so-called own voice. The goal is to make sure you can't hear . . .

CB: . . . That's right.

PB: . . . any of the varied shadows . . .

CB: . . . But it's hear . . .

PB: . . . Right, you're just not supposed to hear; the idea is to eliminate all echoes of writing.

CB: The citational nature of writing is hidden by this univocality, though to say it's hidden suggests that you could look for it. That's a start. Take a sentence from every single book in your house and try to make a composition that seems like it was written by one person. That would be a very conscious form of hiding. More typically, it's not hiding but make-believe. Or robotics: the programmed voice is the one that sounds most smooth, consistent, real. But given this critique of "voice"-centered, or "self"-centered poetry, I suppose I remain a vocal advocate of the author, after all. A lot of what I do is so particular, so individual, in its choices. In this context, to say it again, the self remains a crucial site of resistance against homogenization. So am I for or against voice, self, author? Any answer depends upon the context. I don't contradict myself, I speak in frames.

DB: Before we run out of time, I'd love to have you talk again for a minute about the teaching of writing. You've spoken, actually written, about teaching people to read difficult material—you say this in relation to Gertrude Stein. And you've been talking now about hidden echoes . . .

CB: Well, I think Stein is relatively easy. She is a lot easier to teach, at least initially, than most of her generation, a lot easier than Pound, for example, or Yeats. Once you play a tape of Stein reading, and you start to discuss what her project might be, then the difficulties, certain kinds of difficulties that teachers are wary of, just begin to fall away. A lot of people get it instantly and are very enthusiastic about it, and others just as immediately reject it, so you have that built in as well. The difficulty is beyond Stein.
But, in general, I would say that the issue in teaching formally challenging poetry is to reorient students so that they don't bring their traditional expectations about what they will get from reading, and especially reading a poem, to these works. Once they begin to reframe their reading, they begin to notice those features of a work that they would ordinarily not attend to. There's always a period of readjustment. My idea is to inundate in the sight, sound, and intellect of the poems, to overwhelm, to get the students to take in the poems more than figure them out. So I stay away from tests, from memorizing names and dates—those things strike me as fundamentally counterproductive. I always say I am a professor of poetry, I profess poetry: think of me as a snake-oil salesman, a confidence man: I don't want to test your accumulated knowledge; I want to convince you of the value of poetry as a method, as a way of writing, as a form of vision.

**DB:** Can you teach people to write difficultly?

**CB:** That's a more difficult question! I don't have enough experience teaching people writing to say what you can do. I tend to get a very self-selected group of students in my classes. Can I teach the people who come into my class? Yes, I think so.

**DB:** Can you talk a little bit about it?

**CB:** There's so much damage done between the time people are eight or ten till the time they're eighteen that the kind of work that needs to be done to reverse that, the unlearning that's necessary . . . I don't want to generalize from my own teaching experience, because by having students who go fairly far out of their way to take my classes, I don't confront the most difficult part of the problem.

**DB:** Right.

**CB:** I also tend to teach reading classes rather than creative writing classes, since I feel some of the "expressive" assumptions about creative writing workshops can get in the way of doing difficult reading and difficult writing. I call my classes creative reading workshops, meaning you write creatively in response to the reading. As I say, I always give an overload of reading, seventy or more poets each semester, much more than can ever be discussed in class; and, especially when I teach the modernist period, I pick from every possible style, while still emphasizing the formal innovations of the radical modernists. Like a writing class, I require weekly compositions, but these are in the form of journal entries or imitations or performances;
and I especially encourage doing cut-ups and other procedures on the week's reading, as well as identification of as many different features—again formal and structural as much as thematic and historical—of the poems as possible. When I teach writing as such, I also use a list of dozens of different writing forms and structures—in effect, an experiments' list [see pp. 67–72]. I think of exercises in the most literal way, like aerobics. You build up your linguistic resources. My feeling is that a lot of students come in with very limited perceptions of what they can do. And it's like all of a sudden they move from a monochromatic screen to a screen with fifty different colors and a tools and an options menu. Now, choice can be befuddling—it's difficult to deal with a whole lot of choice—but practice does make a difference, and just about everyone finds affinities with forms or styles they didn't know about before. The whole point is to increase people's choices.

DB: I was interested in your emphasis on imitation and the idea of having students work inside of linguistic practices, experimental linguistic practices, that they won't invent on their own. You say, "People have done this kind of work, you can learn from them." Who would you have them work with? Who would you suggest for that?

CB: I'm not interested in students developing a proficiency in their imitations. I see imitations as primarily a form of reading. First of all, you see how difficult it is to do, and you can register features of the poem that you can't label or even explain. One simple exercise related to this is to choose different adjectives or prepositions; and there are a number of other substitution/translation experiments that are quite useful. It's always interesting when the class likes the imitation or transformation better than the original.

I would say that typing a poem is better than trying to write a one-page paper about what it means. Or reading it out loud in three different voices, or have your roommate read it to you, or cut it up into individual lines and permute the lines to see if you can make a better line structure than the original poet had. Poetry is an interactive environment, a hands-on system. Yes, some historical framing is essential, interpretation and analysis are sometimes valuable, but you have got to know what you are framing or interpreting! There's plenty of time, later, for the sort of care that critics and scholars and poets can bring to close reading and broad contextualizing of a poem, and I value that activity enormously. Most students, it seems to me, when they approach poetry, have been asked to talk about the poems without knowing the first thing about them, I want to say, as poems: "Don't try to explain me. You don't even know me yet, spend some time with me,
let's sit and have some wine, let's get to know each other. Then we can talk about the meaning of my life."

**LE:** I just taught a graduate seminar, the purpose of which is to support graduate students who are teaching composition for the first time. The teaching assistants asked their composition classes, which were reading *La Frontera*, to do an imitation of Gloria Anzaldúa. There was a real resistance from the composition students to doing this, and out of that resistance grew a conversation about the politics of imitation. What you say about imitation is empowering, but doesn't it also—this way of reading a text—defuse resistance? Imitation is not a neutral act. Readers and writers do not, it seems to me, "get to know" Gloria Anzaldúa in the same way they might get to know an essay by Roger Angell, and it also seems to me that this resistance to "knowing" is not a bad thing.

**CB:** Discussing any form of resistance to writing, or to any writing assignment, is often the most useful and interesting conversation you can have in a class. You're right to raise the politics of imitation, to push me from the more formal ways I've been talking about it. Imitation is commonly associated with ridicule, and there is an interesting literary history of forgeries made to mock a style. Very often a student (or literary prankster) will make a "fake" poem to show how base a particular style is; yet these poems often turn out to be more interesting than what he or she might initially have thought of as "better." Contempt is an important energy source in writing. In contrast, there are works that some might feel they would demean by imitating, say, the autobiography of Mother Teresa, or of Malcolm X for that matter. Then there are the Byrons of literature, who outrage us by violating just this sense of propriety. The point of imitation, as I use it, though, is not empathy; it is a rhetorical exercise that pushes against assumptions of unmediated expression or subjectivity or sincerity. Imitation also can show how difficult it is to write in a style either that you like or don't like. Encouraging students to try out what they are resistant to is, after all, much of what we do as teachers. And as Melville details in *The Confidence Man*, you get closer to your mark by giving him or her choice: so, sure, you don't wanna do that, try this, or this. But you gotta try something! I don't ask students to imitate one particular poem, for example; any given assignment is not that important as long as you find a way for the student to stay active.

**LE:** And yet you have dealt in your life and career with resistance. Your own writing is a writing of resistance, and you've spoken here today about the attitude of academic intolerance toward "divergence of linguistic practice."
CB: What I teach reflects my own particular, even peculiar, interests and tastes: that’s one of the things I like to emphasize: that my own views about poetry are not shared by many, even most, poetry readers, or English professors, that they are not correct—nor is any other view about poetry correct! Every class I teach involves long discussions of the meaning of meaning, about nonsense, about obscurity. Disagreement is required, it’s fundamental. I’m not interested in transcending this disagreement. So I realize that what I do is not necessarily translatable into general principles for teaching, which I think is a very local, personal thing. I don’t think the discussion about how people teach is nearly as important as who is teaching. If my classes work at all, it’s because I bring a lot of poets into the class, and I am enthusiastic (even if wrongheaded) about what I’m talking about. At least students come away seeing that you can be engaged in poetry in a way that is not altogether different than their own engagements with pop music, say, or sports. That’s what’s so hard about teaching: at some point or another during the class you have to hurl yourself through this glass wall of indifference, but then it’s great to get on the other side.