



 **Tomasz Cieślak-Sokołowski**
Jagiellonian University in Kraków

International Language Poetry: Radical Poetics in Charles Bernstein and Andrzej Sosnowski

ABSTRACT

The article discusses two linguistic poetry projects—that of the American poet Charles Bernstein and that of the Polish poet Andrzej Sosnowski. The main focus is on those poems by both poets which draw inspiration from the early modernist tradition of avant-garde and experimental literature. At the same time, the keystone of both works reveals itself to be—in reference to Ezra Pound’s poetic project—the belief that a poem is not so much a record of the poet’s experiences and emotions, but rather a distinct field capable of effectively assimilating and absorbing various elements (such as vocabularies, language styles, discourses). In this light, when closely examined, Bernstein’s and Sosnowski’s poems emerge as a late-modern attempt to contain the oversimplified, ideologized images of contemporary reality within an effectively polyphonic poetic text. This is because the author attempts to demonstrate that a difficult poem, employing avant-garde techniques, does not have to be merely a sterile formalist exercise. Instead, innovative poetic practices continue to have an important role, particularly if we shift our focus from political and journalistic declarations to the politicization of form. Poetry that still seeks stylistic and formal innovations can suggest alternative approaches to readers regarding the oversimplified methods of shaping social formations.

Keywords: radical modernism, avant-garde, Charles Bernstein, Andrzej Sosnowski, difficult poetry.

One of the most vividly recurring themes in the description of contemporary poetry is the so-called controversy surrounding difficult poetry (see Fink and Halden-Sullivan). This issue is fueled by numerous declarations and manifestos written between the “first utopian, optimistic phase” of the “Modernist era” (during which the greatest literary inventions of our time were born; here, I am primarily referring to collage, simultaneity, free verse and verse-prose combinations, genre-mixing, indeterminacy of image and syntax), and the present day.

This contemporary context continues to differentiate mainstream poetry, known for its clarity and accessibility, from avant-garde poetry that engages in experimental techniques, ironic undermining of symbolic structures, and other formal gestures that draw the reader into a playful co-creation of meanings. However, whereas mainstream poetry has its fixed conceptualization (mainly based on the rhetoric of emotion, and the romantic provenance of the poetic expression theory), discussions of the reasonable conceptualizations of difficult poetry still remain current (see Fink and Halden-Sullivan).

This essay aims to provide a brief critical reflection on categories such as innovation, and radical/difficult poetics. However, this reflection seeks to avoid the pressure of absolute innovation and originality, as Derek Attridge previously pointed out in his famous book titled *The Singularity of Literature* (see chap. 3). Therefore, it is crucial to make some distinctions between categories.

The traditional exploration on the topic of literary innovation in literary studies—adopting the perspective of questioning the legitimacy of referenced terms (such as literary experiment, innovation, radical and difficult poetics)—produces both local terminological proposals narrowed down to the examination of isolated phenomena and very general definitions. For example, in the introduction to his classic study *Poezja eksperymentalna* [*Experimental Poetry*], Jacques Donguy outlines fundamental and general characteristics, defining experimental poetry as “all language exploration being in opposition to the poetry that undertakes and develops forms inherited from the past” (7, translation mine). However, such a broad definition is not adequate for discussing the history of recurring debates on the role of innovation as the basic narrative principle of literary studies. The terminological confusion I have discussed so far proves to be a complex problem that has been debated numerous times. Over the course of this enquiry, I will touch on several aspects and motifs within those debates.

Firstly, revising traditional notions of invention, innovation emerges as a philosophical investigation, a definitional excursion. Derek Attridge attempts to make a clear distinction between originality (closely related to

novelty and the act of creation—bringing into being of something new to the creator) and invention. He defines the experience of originality as “a powerful and pleasurable element in our . . . enjoyment of a poem” (41), as one of the aspects of innovation. He points out that “invention possesses originality of the fullest kind . . . ; it is a new deployment of materials that can be both imitated and developed, . . . challenged” (42). So, innovative work marks both a significant departure from the norms of the cultural matrix and a capacity to incorporate cultural materials. The singularity of a cultural object turns out to be a particular configuration of general properties that is able to “go beyond the possibilities pre-programmed by a culture’s norms” (63). Attridge claims that we recognize the unique configuration of language and the individual deployment of rich cultural materials as inventive work.

Secondly, the debate on innovation ultimately becomes a dispute about postmodernism. In her book *Radical Artifice*, Marjorie Perloff engages in an interesting debate (Perloff herself was often associated with postmodern critique) with Fredric Jameson’s postmodern position, primarily with his texts collected in the book *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson argued for the modern necessity of pastiche as the only possible strategy of writing: “[I]n a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum” (Jameson 17–18). In this narrative framework, characterized by a sense of decline typical of apocalyptic discourse practiced by postmodern critics, the appeal to the legacy of the avant-garde is doomed to fail as it represents an ideologically contaminated attempt to revert to the category of innovation. However, Perloff stubbornly refuses to reject that category.

Therefore, thirdly, a recall of the category of invention and innovation is both risky and necessary. In her essay “After Language Poetry,” Perloff notices the danger of continuous momentum towards innovation; permanent experiment can easily fall—she writes—in the “stylistic fixation” trap (17). However, she maintains the category of innovation primarily through its association not so much with “novelty,” but with “each time specificity and difference” introduced by a poem (16–17). This allows the critic to track—as she writes—the “brilliant references” (34). Therefore, emphatically, aesthetic categories do not have a descriptive nature. Such terms as experiment, innovation, radical/difficult poetics, avant-garde, radical modernism, poetics of indeterminacy—all play the role of a communication framework for the detailed, scrupulous analysis of innovative literary texts.

Detailed historical, literary, and philosophical deliberations should ideally be accompanied by more practical insights. Charles Bernstein

argued that a “difficult poem” is a nuisance both to the reader and to the author himself, while at the same time being capable of evoking truly “enriching aesthetic experiences” (Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* 3). The poet, who describes himself as “the author of, and a frequent reader of, difficult poems” (3), even compiled a humorous checklist for readers to determine if they were dealing with a difficult poem.¹ However, behind these jocular remarks is the fundamental realization that the problem of a poem that is not merely a tool for facilitating communication and building an understanding with the reader (and, as Bernstein notes, this has probably only been achieved by the most popular American poet Billy Collins) is, in fact, the problem of all modernist poetry. The poet even hints at a specific date, the year 1912, when the outbreak of the epidemic of difficult poetry took place. This turning point is probably primarily linked to the beginnings of the imagism movement (which were reconstructed, for example, by Marjorie Perloff in her text “After Free Verse: The New Nonlinear Poetries”²). In this sense, when reading poems written in the 20th century (and the early 21st century), one has no choice but to accept this peculiar aesthetic experience (as mentioned above). Bernstein leaves no doubt in this regard, writing that “[d]ifficult poems are normal” (Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* 4). The language poetry projects examined in this essay are part of this modernist, 20th-century tradition.

DEFINITIONS OF LANGUAGE POETRY . . . *IN USE*

In 1981, Charles Bernstein wrote: “[W]e are initiated by language into a (the) world, and we see and understand the world through the terms and meanings that come into play in this acculturation, coming into culture where the culture is the form of a community, of a collectivity. . . . words have meaning . . . *in use*” (Andrews and Bernstein 60). This provides a good starting point for rethinking language-oriented or language-centered poetry. The term “language poetry” has two principal meanings in my essay, related to the context of American poetry in the 1980s and also Polish contemporary poetry, accordingly related to Charles Bernstein’s and

¹ See: “Are you reading a difficult poem? How can you tell? Here is a spelling checklist of five key questions that can help you to answer this question: 1. Do you find the poem hard to appreciate? 2. Do you find the poem’s vocabulary and syntax hard to understand? 3. Are you often struggling with the poem? 4. Does the poem make you feel inadequate or stupid as a reader? 5. Is your imagination being affected by the poem?” (Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* 3–4).

² See Perloff “After Free Verse” 141–46.

Andrzej Sosnowski's poetry.³ It is also worth emphasizing the prepositional attitude of my title for two reasons. Firstly, I am referring to a genealogical prospect that prompts me to consider certain concepts with the aim of demonstrating a continuity of late avant-garde poetics, a continuity which leads from late avant-garde poetics to the poetic experiment in contemporary poetry. This comparison, to put it most concisely, is essential for understanding the poetry emerging in the 1990s and in the 21st century—both the poetry of programmatic nonreferentiality, and *poems that defy reader expectations*.⁴ Secondly, we need some basic facts. In the 1980s Charles Bernstein published five volumes of poetry, and also co-edited *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (1984) with Bruce Andrews. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, Andrzej Sosnowski was studying at the University of Western Ontario and was aiming to complete his doctoral thesis dedicated to the poetry of Ezra Pound. He never finished it but became a poet highly influenced by, among others, American poetry of the 1980s and certain strands of Anglo-American poets (from Pound to John Ashbery and John Cage). Marjorie Perloff describes this strand as the “anti-Symbolist” mode of indeterminacy, of literalness and free play.⁵ Sosnowski is also the translator of the poetry of Pound, Ashbery and Cage into Polish.

The first text of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* titled “Repossessing the Word” informs us as follows:

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E started as a bimonthly magazine . . .
we have emphasized a spectrum of writing that places its attention

³ In this sense, the aim of my work is to make late modernism poetics less centric, and to produce the diversification of modernism's places (Mao and Walkowitz 739). For this reason, I would like to compare two language poets—Charles Bernstein and Andrzej Sosnowski (whose work appeared for the first time in the book form in English in 2011—book entitled *Lodgings*, translated by Benjamin Paloff), poets of special sensitivity to the language pool.

⁴ Marjorie Perloff describes this kind of “the new poetic” as “a period style that exhibits specific features” (see *Unoriginal Genius* 7–9).

⁵ See: “[W]hat we loosely call ‘Modernism’ in Anglo-American poetry is really made up of two separate though often interwoven strands: the Symbolist mode that Lowell inherited from Eliot and Baudelaire and, beyond them, from the great Romantic poets, and the ‘anti-Symbolist’ mode of indeterminacy or ‘undecidability,’ of literalness and free play, whose first real exemplar was the Rimbaud of the *Illuminations*. . . . We cannot really come to terms with the major poetic experiments occurring in our own time without some understanding of what we might call ‘the French connection’—the line that goes from Rimbaud to Stein, Pound, and Williams by way of Cubist, Dada, and early Surrealist art, a line that also includes the great French/English verbal compositions of Beckett. It is this ‘other tradition’ (I take the phrase from the title of a poem by John Ashbery) in twentieth-century poetry” (Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* vii).

primarily on language and ways of making meaning, that takes for granted neither vocabulary, grammar, process, shape, syntax, program, or subject matter. . . . Focusing on this range of poetic exploration, and on related aesthetic and political concerns, we have tried to open things up beyond correspondence and conversation. (Andrews and Bernstein ix)

The term “language poetry” relates to the death of the poetry (“as we know”; see Messerli 1)—so there is a pressing need for expansion. These introductory declarations prompt a reconsideration of the status of poetry in social, political and aesthetic aspects. And finally, language isn’t a transparent medium of the poem, but the matter of the poet’s close attention (from subject to shape patterns). All these problems, in my opinion, are common to basic declarations of both American and Polish language poets.

However, it is worth discussing the question of the pleonastic nature of these statements, pleonasm being the use of more words or word-parts than necessary for effective expression. What does the name Language poetry really imply? Isn’t all poetry made of language? Or is “poetry . . . a place to explore the constitution of meaning, of self, of groups, of nations,—of value” (Bernstein, *My Way*—chap. “The Revenge of Poet-Critic, or The Parts Are Greater Than the Sum of the Whole”)?

It means a resistance to the illusion of language as a transparent medium; it means a resistance to “the poetry primarily of personal communication, flowing freely from the inside with the words of a natural rhythm of life, lived daily” (Bernstein, “Stray Straws” 39). It means, as Marjorie Perloff clearly points out, a resistance to the generic “sensitive” lyric, to the mode of the expression of a particular subject (see *21st-Century Modernism* 158–60), to the still vital, Symbolist mode. “The question, What is Language poetry? has already inspired a number of definitions, some of them useful in a limited sense, some of them borderline silly” (15), Linda Reinfeld noticed. However, the pleonastic definition of so-called “language poetry” can’t be the normative one. It should rather be *a matter of comparative degree*. And that is why I have chosen an active, process-oriented claim: “Making the structure of meaning in language more tangible and in that way allowing for the maximum resonance for medium” (Bernstein, “Semblance” 115). This statement has more practical value than other historical epithets (such as “language-centered writing” or “language-oriented poetry”).

Bernstein and Sosnowski are poets who are especially sensitive to the language pool. “Special” here signifies a heightened sensitivity to language compared to poets of the generic “sensitive” lyric, and the expression of

a particular subject. In this sense, Andrzej Sosnowski in his early essay titled “Apel poległych’ (o poezji naiwnej i sentymentalnej w Polsce)” [“The Roll Call of the Fallen’ (On Naive and Sentimental Poetry in Poland)”] points to the urgent necessity of renewing interest in the language pool. According to Friedrich Schiller’s influential distinction between the sentimental poet and the naive poet, Sosnowski describes Polish contemporary poetry on the threshold of the 21st century. If Schiller’s naive poetry is based on the assumption that a union between form and content (gratifying sense and totality) is unproblematic, we can point towards two centres of such a “classical” model. Late volumes of the so-called Old Masters (poets born in the early part of the 20th century, e.g., Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Wisława Szymborska—two of whom were honoured with the Nobel Prize in Literature) were at the very centre of readers’ interest and critical debates as well. Their poems appealed to metaphysical perspectives and constituted an independent voice in their poetic proclamations. In this perspective, the most influential poets of the later generation (poets born in the 1960s, e.g., Marcin Świetlicki, Jacek Podsiadło) could have also been called “naive” due to their basic confidence in the immediacy of a particular existence within the poem. A common goal was the expression of authentic existence, delivering clear information to readers. Schiller’s alternative was the sentimental poetry, which rejected the “naive” assumption that the sign can completely disappear in what is signified. In this perspective, the Polish poetry scene after 1989 was altered by poets such as Andrzej Sosnowski, for whom—as sounds familiar—“the sign not only fails to archive union with what it signifies, but also openly set adrift amid a swarm of other signifiers” (Rasula 90).

Apart from the characterization of the literary process in the last decades of Polish poetry, an interesting aspect of Sosnowski’s essay is the vocabulary used to formulate the programme of the new linguistic poetry. The poet mainly associates it with the avant-garde impulse. When describing the atmosphere of the late 1980s and early 1990s in Poland, he complains about the “ethical determination” inherited from the last decade of confinement behind the Iron Curtain, which led to the marginalization of the avant-garde movement in Polish literature. On the other hand, Polish contemporary poetry has a chance of returning to the “excesses of the avant-garde” (Sosnowski, “Apel poległych” 23, translation mine). It is worth emphasizing that apart from Bernstein, the above-mentioned programme of linguistic poetry, which is supposed to represent a return to the tradition of radical modernist poetics, is also acknowledged by Sosnowski, but only to a certain degree. The poet claims that the poem should be as risky as possible.

ABSORPTION (CHARLES BERNSTEIN)

Does Bernstein's poetry "really have a place in the great modernist tradition?"—Marjorie Perloff poses this question at the beginning of her analysis of the works by the author of *Recalculating* in her book *21st-Century Modernism* (173). Clearly, Charles Bernstein's poems do not provide a single, dogmatic response to such a question. However, an early essay-poem, "Artifice of Absorption" (written in 1987 and published in a separate book in 1988, later reprinted in *A Poetics* in 1992), may provide important clues in this respect. The work opens with passages dedicated to deliberations on the difference in sensitivity to the structure of meaning; poets adhering to the lyrical norm prevalent in the 20th century, as Bernstein argues, were willing to sacrifice formal complexity for the sake of explicitness, clarity of thought and message in the poem (in other words, they were sacrificing the form for the sake of content). Bernstein, meanwhile, proposes the stance of an intense sensitivity to the formal organization of the poem. One of the passages from "Artifice of Absorption" reads: "to create a more powerful / ("souped up") / absorption than possible with traditional / . . . techniques" (Bernstein, *A Poetics* 59).

The poet elaborates that while a poem representing the dominant norm of lyricism will aim to achieve a consistent result through the coherence of the poetic narrative (usually focused on a single topic, motif, expression of the feelings and thoughts of the subject), in a poem characterized by "a more powerful . . . absorption," a field absorbing different elements is produced at various levels of the organization of the message (lexical, syntactic, intertextual references, etc.). At the same time, the various elements assimilated and absorbed by the poem do not have to produce any coherent message. The goal is rather to produce an effect of contradictoriness, multiplicity, and polyrhythmicity.

The question is as follows: what techniques can provide "a more powerful . . . absorption"? I would like to consider this question by reading the central poem of *Controlling Interests* (1980), "Standing Target." At the beginning, I quote two first lines: "Deserted all sudden a all / Or gloves of notion" (Bernstein, *All the Whiskey in Heaven* 55).

What we know from another italicized line ("*All of a sudden all deserted*") is that the "of" is missing, and the order of the sentence is wrong. However, we can perceive the absence of this element. These two lines rely on sound, particularly on vowels. The first line is based on words with a dominant "e" and "a," and the second line—on the vowel "o." Furthermore, the missing "of" will appear in the penultimate section of the poem, in which the "of" is restored to view:

is born out of the incorporation of various elements into the poetic text. Aspects that play a crucial role in this respect—but are usually marginalized in the 20th-century norm of lyricism—are sonic and visual elements.⁶ Works such as the “Standing Target” poem, therefore, owe much to “the great modernist tradition.” They feature a large-scale, collage-like juxtaposition of elements that, in line with the assumptions of “Artifice of Absorption,” work towards producing a poem as a field of more powerful absorptions.⁷

IMMERSION (ANDRZEJ SOSNOWSKI)

Sosnowski represents the third wave of Polish “language poetry,” which is one of the most influential tendencies in Polish postwar literature. The first wave (for example, Miron Białoszewski⁸) and the second one, the so-called New Wave (for example, Stanisław Barańczak, a poet and professor of Slavic Languages at Harvard University, who emigrated from Poland in 1981⁹), have sought to recover early avant-garde impulses and techniques. Sosnowski, to make a distinction, renews in his poetry not only the early modernism poetics markers, but also the mode of indeterminate poetics (from Rimbaud to Stein, Pound, and Williams, by way of Cubist, Dada, and early Surrealist art, and to Ashbery, Cage). Therefore, his poetry, akin to that of American “language poets,” engages with the atmosphere of disjunctive poetics previously explored by the poets associated with the New York school, particularly John Ashbery, whose early volume *The Tennis Court Oath* was one of the main inspirations for the entire Language movement, as well as the poetic constraints invented by OuLiPo.

To highlight the similarity, one can compare Bernstein’s definition of the poem with Sosnowski’s. Bernstein states: “[E]ach poem speaks not only many voices but also many groups and poetry can investigate the

⁶ Asked about his interest in “arrangement of the lines, a preoccupation sharing with poets such as Pound,” Bernstein said: “I’m attracted to the idea of lines being a primarily visual feature of the poem—it’s the modest way of designing (or arranging) how the page looks” (*My Way*—chap. “An Interview with Manuel Brito”).

⁷ It is possible to identify in Charles Bernstein’s oeuvre a group of these radical, uncompromising works, which avoid the constraints of the semantic keystone, thanks to their assimilation of avant-garde techniques (one could add to the poems mentioned earlier “Hinge Picture” from the book *My Way*, 1999). It is also worth adding that, as Marjorie Perloff notes, the result of this “extreme polyphony” in Bernstein’s poems is not merely an impression of being lost in a nonsensical chaos of data and information, but a kind of attentiveness training, which helps one perceive “the landscape of similarities” in the multitude of data (*Unoriginal Genius* 93).

⁸ Miron Białoszewski’s poetry was brilliantly described by Krzysztof Ziarek in his book titled *Historicity of Experience: Modernity, the Avant-Garde, and the Event*.

⁹ See Witkowski; Barańczak.

construction of these provisional entities in and through and by language” (*My Way*—chap. “The Revenge of Poet-Critic, or The Parts Are Greater Than the Sum of the Whole”); Sosnowski: “It is not *my* monologue. It’s not even the monologue of my own language, but a more complicated, polyphonic adventure, sometimes a dialogue, sometimes a polylogue” (*Lodgings* 156). What is discernible in both statements is the poets’ reluctance to rely on the strong position of the subject. The function of the poem is not so much to nurture such expression of a single voice as it is to retain the capability to engage with different materials, to function in multiple forms or media. At the heart of this programme lies a fundamental belief that all our constructions of worldviews consist of intricate, complex polyphony.

Let us now consider two examples of this “more complicated, polyphonic adventure.” A poem titled “The Oceans” begins as follows:

Quite delayed, I set sail on the great oceans
 with the first auspicious wind. The beach is now sketched in the distance
 by a line of breakers, in the cabin I’m brewing a mocha. . .
 I set the yacht to drift. . . How I love these states
 of inertia, as the boat dances like a leaf on gentle waves:
 so great is this love that I’m overcome with torpor,
 and first I scan the radio for some decent rock,
 later I broadcast my thoughts casually into the unknown,
 and on deck, napping away this entire tranquil day,
 I reach into the boundlessness of things for what’s yet unwritten,
 thus to multiply our shared belongings.
 But with the first word all thought is plunged into shadow
 (Sosnowski, *Lodgings* 57)

The second stanza repeats twelve end-words; we have twelve stanzas plus one irregular stanza with six lines. The scheme is a well-known procedure, called *sestina*. Sosnowski implements this constraint as a force that compels him to engage in a difficult, intellectual play, rejecting the illusion of transparent literary language convention. The poet notices that this permutation produces the effect of multivocality: “Something like a ‘statement’ or ‘message’ simply cannot work, because some other voice always appears that suddenly challenges and dismantles the tone and composition of the ostensibly unambiguous utterance” (*Lodgings* 157).

The second example is even more complex but illustrates similar effects. I excerpt it from the long poem “Post-Rainbow” [“Po tęczy”]:

And sitting by the river yesterday we saw a whirlpool.
 It was a steady, apparently stationary whirlpool

that appeared to be falling in love with us.
 It would draw something in and suck it down,
 wink like an eye of alarm, icon of the storm.
 Tremble of pipes in a faraway system,
 for all of a sudden a distinct *pop!* and I had the impression
 we're descending straight to your desktop and

ha ha

little lyric. We drink time's brandy. As long as there's
 a whirlpool, we drink. Wir trinken und trinken
 brände der Zeit, Brandy der Zeit
 (*Lodgings* 128)

We listen to a kind of conversation, but we recognize it through visualization (some phrases are written in italics). Typically, a word written in italics in a poem denotes a word or phrase borrowed directly from another language. However, Sosnowski's poem complicates this convention. The borrowed phrase ("Wir trinken und trinken"—from Celan's *Todesfuge*) is written in regular fonts. What's more, the sensitive metaphor "we drink time's brandy" is juxtaposed with a masterpiece by Celan. "Time's brandy," "brände der Zeit," "Brandy der Zeit"—which phrase is able to constitute the voice of poem? Any and every of them at a time.¹⁰

Sosnowski claims: "I write in an utterly fallen, scrambled language, and it's possible that somewhere in this language of mine, in the language of these poems, there remains some fallen spark of revelation" (*Lodgings* 158). Sosnowski and Bernstein are two poets who have never moved too far from a language that is not so much heard as overheard and then organized into formal patterns (see Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism* 179). However, whereas Bernstein seems to subject the "extreme polyphony" in his works to scrutiny, Sosnowski accepts the inevitable unpredictability of the poem. To search for the fundamental motivation behind this radicalism of the author of "Post-Rainbow," it is worth noting the opening lines of the quoted fragment of the poem ("And sitting by the river yesterday we saw a whirlpool. / It was a steady, apparently stationary whirlpool / that appeared to be falling in love with us"). "Whirlpool" turns out to be not only the personal pronoun "wir" in German (and in Celan's poem), but also an "apparently stationary whirlpool," observable on the river. This image, although puzzling, is justified by the created soundscape of the passage ("whirlpool"—"wir"). However, it can also be interpreted as a commentary on the function of poetic language itself. The poem also

¹⁰ See: "You can hear at least two [or three] voices in two [or three] different registers" (Sosnowski, *Lodgings* 156).

reveals itself as a whirlpool that draws in signals from the environment, capturing the very implosive moment of various discursive materials falling into poetic language.¹¹

HOW TO READ A RADICALLY DIFFICULT POEM?

In the article mentioned above, Charles Bernstein argued that the reader who seeks “the accessible poem” is usually simply idealizing the very notion of “accessibility” in such a work. The essential poetic traditions of the “long” 20th century, at least since the revolution of imagism, have tended to make readers more familiar with the experience of reading difficulties. How, then, should one deal with difficult poems?

Linda Reinfeld pointed out the overall tendency of reading “language poetry”: “Such poetics constructions are necessarily indeterminate . . . , matters of contingency rather than necessity or pure chance” (20). To read the indeterminate text is to demystify. Is this mode of reading still fruitful in the age of cultural studies which risks leveling all art to the status of symptom rather than to the status of original (unoriginal) work of a poet?¹²

The key issue here concerns the methodological assertion put forth by the entire poetics. For example, let us note how it problematizes the status of close reading. There is no simple return to New Criticism, which described a given poem’s unifying metaphor as the “key design” of the poem. I am referring to the challenge of rethinking our “return,” adjusting our approach. We don’t need a close reading of a key design of the poem, but we need to read closely the structure of dislocation in poems with a special sensitivity

¹¹ It is worth recalling here that in Ezra Pound’s poetic programme, at a crucial moment of transition between the techniques of imagism and the “ideogramic method,” around 1914 and 1915 (when, together with Wyndham Lewis, he began publishing the magazine *Blast*), the concept of VORTEX was extremely important. Pound used it to redefine the imagist precision of representation; the static nature of such imagery was to be replaced by “a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can and must perforce call a VORTEX, from which and through which, and into which ideas are constantly rushing” (qtd. in Kenner 290).

¹² See Terry Eagleton’s book titled *How to Read a Poem*. The critic justified the need to write this book by his own experience of a lecturer in literature who, in recent years, has noticed a waning interest of students in literary criticism. The crisis of the discipline, which he relates here to the practice of close reading, is usually put down—albeit, as Eagleton points out, wrongly—to 20th-century theories of literature (from Russian formalism to deconstruction). However, it was precisely these theories that promoted the practice of “scrupulously close reading” (2). What is meant here is not so much a simple return to the practice of *close reading* by the New Criticism (“Close reading is not the issue”), but a particular sensitivity to the literary form of the poem, which deserves to be read “fairly closely” (2).

to the language pool (see Perloff, *Differentials*).¹³ A poem is constituted by the meaning-generating strategies of its own rhetoric.

One of the advocates of such “close reading,” a meticulous formal analysis allowing critical discernment, is Marjorie Perloff. In her book titled *Differentials*, she argues:

Perhaps there is finally no alternative to what was called in the Bad Old Days, *close reading*. Today’s students may have no idea what close reading entails, but surely their teachers vaguely remember close reading . . . as some sort of New Critical or Formalist exercise whereby readers performed dry, boring, and nitpicking analyses on given “autonomous” texts, disregarding the culture, politics, and ideology of those texts in the interest of metaphor, paradox, irony. . . . But would a *far reading*, then, be better than a close one? Well, not exactly, but perhaps *reading* is itself passé, what with the possibility that a given poem or novel could serve as an exemplar of this or that theory, in which case one might only have to focus on a particular passage. . . . Formalist reading, we are regularly told, goes hand in hand with the premise that the poem is an autonomous artifact. But the privileging of the poetic function has never meant that knowledge—of the poet’s life, milieu, culture, and especially his or her other poems—is not relevant. (xiii)

Several of her arguments are worth noting here. First of all, the critic’s postulate of revisionism comes at a time when American campuses have already been ploughed through by dominant cultural studies, which, while freeing the practice of reading 20th-century literature from tedious new-critical exercises in formal analysis, have also enabled arbitrary cultural recontextualizations of the texts analyzed. Secondly, this revisionary return to the New Critical directive of *close reading* comes with an awareness of the limitations of that earlier, strongly institutionalized method which typically involved identifying a “central paradox” or “central metaphor” in a poem, understood as a clearly defined centre of a poetic work. Perloff fundamentally disputes this argument, pointing out that contemporary innovative works are rather characterized by the absence of such a “clear centre” and a lack of balance between tensions and opposing elements. With regard to this type of innovative poetry, Perloff recommends meticulous reading, taking into account the reluctance of contemporary poets to employ such unifying formal solutions for their poems. In other words, when a poem incorporates a poetics of heightened complexity, and alliterative games consistently, the critic should be just as scrupulous

¹³ It is so close to Art Berman’s definition: “[D]econstruction is a skeptical New Criticism” (278).

in describing these complex games. At the same time, they should opt for radical differentiation rather than concluding the interpretation with answers to the questions posed by the text.

In the case of language poems, what is at stake is neither mere formalism nor the advancement of certain social and political projects in the name of one ideology or another. Andrzej Sosnowski and Charles Bernstein share their attachment to avant-garde experimentation in their works (the radical modernist tradition) and their emphasis on the importance of the reader's/writer's respect for the formal organization of the poem. It should also be noted, as Bernstein observes in his sketch "Comedy and the Poetics of Political Form," that the key task for the poem to fulfil is to highlight the literary conventions and protocols that govern everyday communication. The poem does not side with any radically subversive political undertakings but rather focuses on restoring the democracy of non-neutralized individual voices. The political effect of poetry cannot be viewed in terms of a measurable number of supporters, as the purpose of the poem is not so much to seek supporters but active partners in resisting the clichés that legitimize simplistic, ideologized images of contemporary reality. As Bernstein and Sosnowski observe, only poetry that continues to search for stylistic and formal innovations can present individuals (readers) with alternative ways of producing social formations.¹⁴

This publication is a result of the research project OPUS (*Innovative Poetics at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Century*, No. 2015/17/B/HS2/01501) funded by the National Science Centre (NCN), Poland.

WORKS CITED

- Andrews, Bruce, and Charles Bernstein. "Repossessing the Word." *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, Southern Illinois UP, 1984, pp. ix–xi.
- Attridge, Derek. *The Singularity of Literature*. Routledge, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203420447>
- Barańczak, Stanisław. *Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*. Evanston, 1991.
- Berman, Art. *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction. The Reception of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism*. U of Illinois P, 1988.

¹⁴ "Language poetry" in its special sensitivity to the language medium, is able to renew critical and hermeneutic attention to textual soundscapes and textual visibility (see Bernstein, *My Way*—chap. "The Response as Such. Words in Visibility").

- Bernstein, Charles. *A Poetics*. Harvard UP, 1992.
- Bernstein, Charles. *All the Whiskey in Heaven. Selected Poems*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.
- Bernstein, Charles. *Attack of the Difficult Poems. Essays and Inventions*. U of Chicago P, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226044750.001.0001>
- Bernstein, Charles. "Comedy and the Poetics of Political Form." *The Politics of Poetic Form. Poetry and Public Policy*, edited by Charles Bernstein, Roof, 1990. E-book.
- Bernstein, Charles. *My Way: Speeches and Poems*. U of Chicago P, 1999. E-book. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226044866.001.0001>
- Bernstein, Charles. "Semblance." *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, Southern Illinois UP, 1984, pp. 115–18.
- Bernstein, Charles. "Stray Straws and Straw Men." *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, Southern Illinois UP, 1984, pp. 39–45.
- Donguy, Jacques. *Poezja eksperymentalna. Epoka cyfrowa (1953–2007)*. Translated by Magdalena Madej, słowo/obraz terytoria, 2014.
- Eagleton, Terry. *How to Read a Poem*. Blackwell, 2007.
- Fink, Thomas, and Judith Halden-Sullivan. "Reading the Difficulties." *Reading the Difficulties. Dialogues with Contemporary American Innovative Poetry*, edited by Thomas Fink and Judith Halden-Sullivan, U of Alabama P, 2014, pp. 1–14.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke UP, 1991. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822378419>
- Kenner, Hugh. *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*. U of Nebraska P, 1985.
- Mao, Doug, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. "The New Modernist Studies." *PMLA*, vol. 123, no. 3, 2008, pp. 737–48. <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.3.737>
- Messerli, Douglas. Introduction. "*Language*" *Poetries: An Anthology*, edited by Douglas Messerli, New Directions, 1987, pp. 1–11.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics*. Blackwell, 2002.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "After Free Verse: The New Nonlinear Poetics." *Poetry On & Off the Page. Essays for Emergent Occasions*, Evanston, 1998, pp. 141–67.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "After Language Poetry: Innovation and Its Theoretical Discontents." *Contemporary Poetics*, edited by Louis Armand, Northwestern UP, 2007, pp. 15–38.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*. Tuscaloosa, 2004.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *Radical Artifice. Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. U of Chicago P, 1994.

- Perloff, Marjorie. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. Princeton UP, 1981.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. U of Chicago P, 2010.
- Rasula, Jed. *Syncopations. The Stress of Innovation in Contemporary American Poetry*. U of Alabama P, 2004.
- Reinfeld, Linda. *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue*. Louisiana State UP, 1992.
- Sosnowski, Andrzej. “‘Apel poległych’ (o poezji naiwnej i sentymentalnej w Polsce)” [“‘The Roll Call of the Fallen’ (On Naive and Sentimental Poetry in Poland)”]. “Najryzykowniej,” *Biuro Literackie*, 2007, pp. 17–29.
- Sosnowski, Andrzej. *Lodgings. Selected Poems 1987–2010*. Translated by Benjamin Paloff, Open Letter, 2011.
- Witkowski, Tadeusz. “The Poets of New Wave in Exile.” *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1989, pp. 204–16.
- Ziarek, Krzysztof. *Historicity of Experience: Modernity, the Avant-Garde, and the Event*. Evanston, 2001.

Tomasz Cieślak-Sokołowski is Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Polish Studies, Jagiellonian University in Kraków. He is the author of monographic books “*Mój wszechświat uczyniony*.” *O poezji Janusza Szubera* [“*My Acted Universe*.” *Janusz Szuber’s Poetry*] (2004), *Moment lingwistyczny* [“*The Linguistic Moment*”] (2011), “(jednak z odniesieniem do awangardy).” *Radykalne poetyki w poezji polskiej na przełomie XX i XXI wieku* [“(with reference to avant-garde, even).” *Radical Poetics in Polish Poetry at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Century*] (2024), and more than 80 articles published in Polish cultural and academic magazines (e.g., *Teksty Drugie*, *Wielogłos*, *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne*) and books of collected writings concentrated on Polish, European and American modernist and late modernist poetry. He is the co-translator into Polish of Marjorie Perloff’s *21st-Century Modernism* (2012), co-editor of *Dyskursy krytyczne u progu XXI wieku* [“*Critical Discourses on the Threshold of the 21st Century*”] (2007), and a member of the editorial staff of the literary magazine *Nowa Dekada* (<http://nowadekada-online.pl/>, <http://nowadekada.pl/>). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3234-2107>
tomasz.cieslak-sokolowski@uj.edu.pl