

## Articulating a Radical and a Secular Jewish Poetics

Walter Benjamin, Charles Bernstein,  
and the Weak Messiah as Girly Man

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The primal world, Kafka's secret present, is the historical-philosophical index that lifts [shame as Kafka's strongest] reaction out of the domain of the private. For the work of the Torah—if we abide by Kafka's account—has been thwarted. And everything that Moses accomplished long ago would have to be reaccomplished in our world's age.

—Walter Benjamin

The secular Jewish culture that was wiped out in the Second War . . . stranded the correlative developments in America. . . Imagine European poetry and philosophy by the descendants of Benjamin and Heine. But, to a large extent, this is not to be, or anyway, insofar as it to be, it too must be the task of secular Jewish culture on this side of the Atlantic and of our radical poetry and ambiguiting poetics. I think it is difficult to acknowledge this unwanted and perhaps even insufferable task, certainly it has been difficult for me. But perhaps this is what we have been chosen for.

—Charles Bernstein

The above two epigraphs sound more like critical nonstarters than starting points. Charles Bernstein's statement asks for the seemingly impossible. How can one go back through time, total devastation, and languages one might not know and continue someone else's pre-World War II project? Bernstein maintains "to think Benjamin committed suicide is too easy an out for us"; he was more accurately "suicided" (*Radical Poetics* 16). Benjamin reportedly "claimed" that one of his manuscripts was "more important than his own life" (Britt 143). His guide over the Pyrenees when Benjamin fled from France to Spain stated that "what counted was that his manuscript and he were out of the reach of the Gestapo" (*Arcades Project* 952), and it is remotely possible that Benjamin was murdered to suppress that manuscript.<sup>1</sup> Still, if all of this is so, how can one rewrite that manuscript as it was or in some other way account for such a loss?<sup>2</sup>

And what, other than vague generalities, could one add to Walter Benjamin's even more daunting notion that "everything that Moses accomplished long ago would have to be reaccomplished in our world's age"? Would such a notion necessarily imply Benjamin's concept that "the work of the Torah" might have been "thwarted"? Putting these two Benjamin and Bernstein statements together seems even less of a useful place to begin critical exploration. What could it mean to assert that it is a contemporary task to reaccomplish the Torah? And what place would this claim have within this critical anthology of essays examining groundbreaking strategies for reading difficult poetry?

What critical tools might help answer these questions? Alfred Hitchcock said he knew "quite a bit about stuffed animals because it takes one to know one."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, this "chapter" uses its own self-characterized and necessarily fluid (if fixed) status as a work of "poetry-criticism" to identify some of the difficulties offered by the "poetries" of Bernstein and Benjamin by using strategies similar to theirs to model modes for readers to adapt when they both read and write difficult poetry. Everyone's a poet-critic.

However, this text is also an antagonistic model. By observing poetic and critical gaps within Bernstein's and Benjamin's texts, this work contrasts with those essays and poems. This critical mode can be called "cleaving," "since," as Bernstein observes in the *Artifice of Absorption*, "*cleave* means both to divide/ & to hold together" (16). Bernstein uses this notion to describe how a poem can incorporate and be advanced by what in form and in content opposes dominant characteristics of a given poem that are paradoxically aided by that which is seemingly wholly against it.

Although we are here examining Bernstein's critical statement concerning how "secular Jewish culture that was wiped out in the Second War" and not a seeming poem, it should be noted how his inconsistent inclusion of Heinrich Heine within the legacy lost because of the Second World War both serves and furthers Bernstein's argument. Bernstein makes the "difficult" acknowledgment of "the task of secular Jewish culture on this side of the Atlantic and of our radical poetry and ambiguating poetics" to do the work of "European poetry and philosophy by the descendants of Benjamin and Heine" who "to a large extent" were "not to be" (*Radical Poetics* 16). It is curious that Bernstein includes Heine in this formulation. It might have been sufficient to evoke Walter Benjamin alone as a lost "European poetry and philosophy" ancestor because Benjamin himself was biologically "descended" from Heine. Heine and Benjamin were, in the words of Benjamin biographer Momme Brodersen, "related at some (not very great) distance" through Benjamin's maternal grandmother, Brunella Benjamin (née Mayer, 1827-1919)

(14). Benjamin retold his grandmother's stories of Heine rocking her as a little girl upon "his knees" (Brodersen 15). That Benjamin was Heine's descendant is of particular note here since Heine (1797-1856) obviously was not lost in the Second World War, and Benjamin obviously demonstrates that his descendants continued to live in Germany. It would make more sense to say that Heine's *literary* family "line" through Benjamin is discontinued with Benjamin's death in 1940, though it should be noted that Benjamin's son, Stefan (1918-72), together with his former wife Dora Sophie Pollak (née Kellner, 1890-1964), managed to relocate in Great Britain where Benjamin's two granddaughters, Mona Jean and Kim Yvon, were born in the '70s (more than thirty years after Benjamin's death) and raised. In addition, Walter Benjamin had at least one relative, nephew Michael Benjamin, who lived in Germany after the Second World War.

Most importantly, however, is Bernstein's point that Benjamin's work was seriously curtailed by the specter of European genocide, which ultimately led to Benjamin's untimely death and an interruption of the natural avenues through which his literary influence would have proceeded, delaying for many decades the publication, translation, and assimilation of much of Benjamin's work. This explains why comparable European writers who follow Benjamin with similar ideas and forms of writing get credited for them and were for a long time much better known and more influential than Benjamin.

Indeed, Benjamin still does not receive proper credit for innovations in "mythological cultural studies," accomplished a decade or two before Roland Barthes,<sup>4</sup> "synchronic historical studies" done well before Michel Foucault,<sup>5</sup> pre-Derridean deconstructive principles,<sup>6</sup> pre-Marshall McLuhan media studies that include Benjamin's seminal "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,"<sup>7</sup> and pre-liberation theology.<sup>8</sup> The sense that most of Benjamin's writings seem "prophetic" in methodological and historical ways (see later in this chapter for discussions of his insightful certainty about European genocide, future media, and archaeological revelations about ancient Israel and how they relate to sustaining Jewish identity) may be the product of confirmatory bias since one would not tend to note the applicability of Benjamin's pioneering methods and the accuracy of his uncanny prognostications. And yet, in an unscientific test, I opened a random volume of Benjamin's *Selected Writing* to a random page and came upon Benjamin's "Painting and Graphic Art." In this essay, Benjamin, probably playing off Prague Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel's (1512-1609) distinction between the dialectical axis between "vertical" divine powers and "horizontal" Renaissance humanistic and secular scientific powers, differentiates "vertical" painterly space from "horizontal" informational space;<sup>9</sup> this stance very closely prefig-

ures by about three decades Leo Steinberg's *Other Criteria* groundbreaking insights into the semiotic nature of painterly space's new orientation toward a desktop-like pictorial space rather than the wall- or window-like space within the artwork of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and later pop artists. And just when I think this paragraph is done, I hear a television football game commentator in the background talking about the difference in reality between a football play as it appears live and how it looks in slow motion "in this high definition super slo-mo world we live in." The commentator believes that the result of the referees' review will be determined by whether the officials watch the play in slow-motion or undoctored speed, echoing Benjamin's mind-bogglingly sensible point in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that filmic techniques add to and change our sense of reality itself and not merely how we feel that we perceive it. After all, as Benjamin culled from Kafka and contemporary physics alike, the realities of phenomena, contingent on one's perspective, are often inherently fluid. Indeed, as the sensibility of the football announcer's comments show, the extent to which so many of Benjamin's ideas now seem commonplace defy how odd they seemed when he wrote them, and how little of what he said seemed sound or correct, even to his closest friends such as Scholem, Brecht, and Adorno. This speaks to how intuitive and poetic Benjamin was as a writer.

A Hegelian notion of which Benjamin was fond, that quantity affects quality, is pertinent here. The high number of his accurate predictions and methodological innovations call for a reevaluation of the kind of writing Benjamin did. Was he the greatest "philosopher" of his time, as Brecht considered him, or a writer whom even if he were a philosopher wrote outside the discipline of philosophy, as Adorno described Benjamin?

Perhaps Benjamin's "prophet mantle" can be better explained by both Benjamin himself and Bernstein as a trait directly attributable to language and the nature of Benjamin's writing. "Doctrine of the Similar," Benjamin's still unappreciated and relatively recently English-translated 1933 essay, literally accredits prophecy to language: "It is to script and language that clairvoyance has, over the course of history, yielded its old powers" (*Selected Writings* 2 Pt. 2: 698). Benjamin maintains that "in their most transient and delicate substance . . . language now represents the medium in which things encounter and come into relation with one another." Augury is therefore an inherent part of language that replaces "the augur or priest." However this "magical aspect of language" is not "direct" and cannot "develop in isolation" (*Selected Writings* 2 Pt. 2: 697-698).

Fascinatingly, Benjamin theorizes that paradoxically unintended "intention" is contained within most language since "everything mimetic in lan-

guage is an intention which can appear at all only in connection with something alien as its basis: precisely the semiotic or communicative element of language” (698). In other words, language inherently forecasts the objective world and reality because through its “nonsensuous similarity,” language mimics reality; therefore language is the real’s predictive laboratory. However, it can only have this effect in relation to “something alien,” some strange and new “semiotic or communicative” act that passes through the crucible of a kind of non-, perhaps anti-relation and thereby generates a more profound, truer poetry, whether or not it functions as prophecy. These theoretical underpinnings explain Benjamin’s avowed practice of using quotations and references in strange and unexpected contexts that startle one’s knowledge bases and forge “a newer kind of reading” with new knowledge “flashing up in an instant.” Language offers a direct form of knowing the past, future, and present (aspects particularly addressed by Benjamin’s great “On Concepts of History”), bypassing the ancient indirect and triangulating “mediating links” of “stars, entrails, and coincidences” (*Selected Writings* 2 Pt. 2: 697-698).

My point here is not that Benjamin was a prophet but rather that he advances a new kind of poetry intermingling with prophecy and aspects of the Hebrew bible in general. As regards the reading of difficult contemporary poets it must be acknowledged that Bernstein shares both Benjamin’s approach to writing and stance as a writer and a poet.

It is extremely telling that one of Benjamin’s lesser known essays, “Doctrine of the Similar,” which concerns language’s role as a modern prophetic form and, in turn, Bernstein puns that he translates “with a similar name” (*Shadowtime* 20)—“Doctrine of Similarity”—is the most prominent Benjamin title in Bernstein’s homage to Benjamin. Bernstein calls one of the seven scenes “Doctrine of Similarity.” According to Bernstein, Benjamin’s “Doctrine of the Similar” concerns how “language echo[es] or mimic[s] the primordial structures of the cosmos” (20). Bernstein calls three of the thirteen short “canons” that compose “Doctrine of Similarity” “Amphibolies,” suggesting the crystalline nature of language and the glimmer of recognition through which we glimpse reality through language. However this glimpse requires an alien mode of non-relation: “The leaves turn dark before the trees are shot with light” (Bernstein *Shadowtime* 64). The non-relation is felt as a sorrow that echoes Benjamin’s mysterious death at a border he cannot cross: “Find no words/ Cannot cross/ Cannot cross” (66), and “It is never just a matter of recognition as refiguration but redemption through resistance” (67). *Shadowtime*’s “Doctrine of Similarity” seems to have reached a terrible point of no return until the scene dips into Benjamin’s similarly titled essay and notes the necessity of language and reading: “This is not a theory of reading/ this

is about staying alive" (69). With great tragic resonance, however, Bernstein's "Doctrine of Similarity" rests on a notion of a non-relation and blankness within language itself and ends: "The blank soul of our toil [soil]" (*Shadow-time* 75). And yet this tragic sense is counteracted by the note of binary unity (see the discussion of biblical parallelism below), since "soil" suggests growth.

Bernstein's criticism often describes a process of meaning-making similar to Benjamin's "Doctrine of the Similar." Language, says Bernstein, is of the material world. "There is no escape in writing (or 'elsewhere') structures/forms, they are ever present—'de' forming and 're' forming," maintains Bernstein, "[t]o see them—to hear them—as inseparable from 'content'" (*Content's Dream* 72). Here Bernstein more forcefully voices arguments implicit in Benjamin's "Doctrine of the Similar" and obliterates our assumption of a divide between form and content. Bernstein asserts Creeley's dictum "Form is never more than the extension of content" and also makes the case that when we acknowledge the material content of language "the world gets revealed" (73). Hence, although Bernstein cites Benjamin's "Doctrine of the Similar" at length, he utilizes Benjamin's concept of a common material constituting signifier and signified, in addition to an implied accompanying diminishment of fixed distinctions separating writing genres, not so much to explain prophecy as to propose "a more reciprocal relationship between political, cultural, and literary theory and contemporary literature" (*Content's Dream* 382). Bernstein also incorporates Benjamin's call for the new and alien semiotic act: "There is no given (set of) structure(s) for all cases; they must always be generated [(re)discovered] anew" (73). And yet a poem "lives" in the same gross and material world we inhabit. In a sense, a poem is part and parcel with a poet's responsibility for a chosen process utilizing non-relation. Bernstein says, "There is no automatic writing. . . . Every phrase I write, every juxtaposition I make is a manifestation of using full-blown language. . . . You're responsible for what turns up. . . . Formal decisions are made and these decisions shape the work" (*Content's Dream* 46-47).

Bernstein postulates that because of the linguistic materiality poetry can offer, we need it as an alternative to "the stale formulas of ideational mimesis" (379). However one describes Benjamin it seems apparent that he thinks and writes poetically, that poetry is an essential part of the genre in which he worked, and that Benjamin's intuitive brand of poetic thinking furthered his philosophical thinking, making possible critical and philosophical advances.

Therefore, given that Benjamin is in a "prophetic line" with the best of post-World War II cultural, political, literary, and artistic criticism and theology, can it be said that Benjamin is in the *poetic* "line of Heine" since, if Benjamin represents Heine's literary lineage, it is not Heine's poetry but rather

Heine's politics that interests Benjamin? On August 11, 1936, about four years before Benjamin's death, Benjamin writes to Werner Kraft about Kraft's *Heine* that "I find only the political material to be at all assailable—not, as I must admit to myself, the poetic material. . . . It would probably be asking the impossible of it to expect it to awaken in me at this time the mood of Heine's poetic voice" (*Correspondence* 531). On January 30, 1936, Benjamin writes that he cannot compare Heine with Brecht due to his "limited knowledge of Heine" (520). In 1936, Benjamin says he is reading Heine, but only reading his "prose insofar as it deals with conditions in [nineteenth-century] France" (521), the subject of Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*. Interestingly, given that a poet, Baudelaire, is a central figure in *The Arcades Project*, Heine's poetry itself does not more immediately interest Benjamin. Indeed, Benjamin asks Kraft to suggest representative Heine poems, though there is no indication that Benjamin receives or follows up on any such suggestions responding to his seemingly polite interest.

Since *Shadowtime* represents figures who indirectly concern Benjamin in a broad cultural context, such as Einstein and Hitler, it makes sense for the opera libretto to also feature Heine and some of his poetry. However, that does mean that Heine's poetry was close to Benjamin. Momme Brodersen's biography of Benjamin speculates that Benjamin's aversion to his ancestor Heine's poetry might have been related to Heine's Christian conversion (15), but this is only speculation.

We do know that in an essay published in 1931, Benjamin, without objection, paraphrases Karl Kraus "denouncing Heine as an ornamentalist, as one who blurred the boundary between journalism and literature, as the creator of the feuilleton in poetry and prose" and a "betrayers of the aphorism to the impression" (*Selected Writings* 2 Pt. 2: 435). Benjamin uses Kraus's observation to attribute "the empty phrase" (for which Kraus blames Heine) and a general dilution or inflation of language to the technology that allows newspapers to put out three editions a day, a reality which demands "inauthentic" news that is not there. This is another instance of Benjamin's prowess as a virtual if not actual seer, or perhaps we might say a new kind of poet, since he foresees similar contemporary critiques of the twenty-four-hour news cycle (*Selected Writings* 2 Pt. 2: 436).

For whatever reason, despite being related to Heine and hearing stories about him from his family, Benjamin was relatively unacquainted with and did not appear very impressed by Heine's poetry, and it therefore does not seem convincing to say that Benjamin, if he had lived out World War II, would have embodied and saved the legacy of Heine's nineteenth-century poetry. Heine may have been censored in Nazi Germany, as were many authors of



Jewish birth. Nonetheless, despite Heine's greatness, the Second World War much more clearly endangered Benjamin's legacy. In short, Bernstein's statement about rectifying the near eradication of Jewish culture by World War II genocide seems more applicable to Benjamin than Heine.<sup>10</sup> And yet how can Benjamin be said to represent a lost *poetic* tradition? What poetry did we lose with Benjamin? Did Benjamin even write poetry?

My point here is that we should consider Bernstein as Benjamin's direct *poetic* descendant in addition to being a critical and philosophic descendant, perhaps giving ascendance to new forms of poetry, criticism, genres, and reading. Does Bernstein assist Benjamin in a new kind of biblical project as relating the two epigraphs at the head of this essay suggests?

These questions seem so overwhelming that it is perhaps better to ask how Benjamin can be read as a poet. Can Walter Benjamin's criticism be read as a new mode of poetry or of poetry criticism? Bernstein seems to include the loss of Heinrich Heine together with Benjamin's loss at least in part because it is difficult to call Benjamin an influential poet. However, we may ask, is Benjamin Bernstein's main poetic influence?

Any argument concerning a poetic characterization of Benjamin's prose is perhaps further confused by Benjamin having written a limited number of very fine "poems" as understood in a more conventional sense. Perhaps through the influence of Brecht's poetry, Benjamin's verse tends slightly toward the Whitmanesque since it is organized by a structure of dynamic biblical parallelism. Indeed, Benjamin's poems are instructive in how they use biblical parallelism and what it will eventually indicate about both Benjamin's and Bernstein's writing.

I use the term "biblical parallelism" in the way Roman Jakobson modified its prevailing sense "of the correspondence," says Adele Berlin, "of one verse, or line, with another." Such a characterization of parallelism had been and perhaps still is usually limited to "semantic and/or grammatical equivalences and to operate only between two or more consecutive lines." Jakobson, however, admits "smaller segments as being parallel—e.g., words, phrases, even sounds—though the lines to which they belong are not parallel" (Berlin *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* 3). In effect, Jakobson uses the mechanism of parallelism, which includes all manner of "figure and field" correspondence, to discover how biblical poetry works. Jakobson's method, says Berlin, "enables us to unify phenomena whose relationships have not been perceived" (*Dynamics* 3).

For instance, the body of Benjamin's "Sad Poem" (Brodersen 201) is primarily happy, but overwhelming sadness is conveyed by the poem's title and last line, resembling the biblical poetic device of the *inclusio* in which a po-



em's very beginning and ending are similar and, though in juxtaposition with the rest of the poem, in some manner defining. Five of the ten lines of "Sad Poem" begin with the word *you*, culminating with the contentedness suggested by the line: "You have money." The first three lines of this one-stanza poem's second half play off that monetary "gift from the Dear Lord": "Life is wonderful!/ Your heart beats louder and louder and louder." However, an oppositional biblical parallelism contrasts "louder and louder and louder" with "quieter and quieter and quieter" in the poem's concluding couplet: "The sea grows quieter and quieter and quieter/ To the very depths." A prophetic inkling of universal catastrophe, such as a lull before Noah's storm or the "disturbance in the force" felt during a planet's annihilation in *Star Wars*, is implicit in the sea's "very depths." This impression is reinforced below the poem by the information, "San Antonio 11 April 1933,"<sup>11</sup> which evokes the first few months of growing consolidation of Nazi power that Benjamin cannot help feeling from afar.

Similarly, this wonderfully suggestive and haunting poem skillfully wields many forms of biblical parallelism and yet points toward something else. One senses a magnificent form of articulation emanating from the other end of this poem's silence. If we mix a mental metaphor, we can hear Benjamin's criticism in his depiction of Karl Kraus's writing: "a silence turned inside out" bringing "a precise apparatus of control . . . into play." One relates the poem's "very depths" to Benjamin's notion that "silence is a dam before which the reflecting basin of knowledge is constantly deepened" and Benjamin's description of polemics as "the trinity of silence, knowledge, and alertness" (*Selected Writings* 2 Pt. 2: 436). Benjamin's "Sad Poem" is alertly shaped by a dynamic form of what Robert Alter calls intensification within biblical parallelism, but the pull of such a dynamic points to Benjamin's radically intense prose. It should be noted that biblical parallelism often blurs obvious distinctions between poetry and prose.

Alter links biblical parallelism to the unfolding of biblical content so that "the structure of biblical poems is determined not by any subsurface impulse of narration but rather by a steady progression of image or theme, a sort of mounting semantic pressure, which is to say, a structure of intensification" (73). Certainly, more than any thematic strategy, this mode of intense structure describes Benjamin's criticism.

Since biblical poetry is all we have remaining of the origins of "Jewish poetry," one wonders what connection there could possibly be between Jewish poetry and intensity. Seriously, the Bible only begins to be assembled and codified as a response to the Assyrian and Babylonian threats that culminate in the first exile. This biblical codification starts with a suspicious seren-

dipity concerning a discovery of Moses's writings in the temple. These "found" writings identify the future temple as the only place to sacrifice animals to Yahweh and thus the only avenue to him, giving a rationale for the temple as the only link to divinity and providing an important motivation for fighting for it. (For reasons soon to be given, ancient Israelites were characteristically ambivalent toward a centralized government that the temple bespoke.) However, when the temple is destroyed the Bible itself becomes an indispensable road to divinity. "Text substitutes for land," says Mark S. Smith (194).

The Bible in many ways concerns an unprecedented kind of ethnic survival and, therefore, is nothing if not intense. Similarly, Charles Bernstein employs an ultimate form of intense biblical parallelism by claiming an authority based in sin and ineptitude: "I am as low and befuddled as any man, as fouled and out of touch and self-deluded, that is what gives me a place from which to speak" (*My Way* 98-99). Note that, in the tradition of biblical parallelism, Bernstein paradoxically opposes his moral and authoritative states by placing them in apposition.

This kind of troping between affirmation and negation through the dynamic paralleling of opposing terms is found throughout Bernstein's poetry. For instance, the opening of Bernstein's great poem "Sunsickness" critiques this kind of trope itself: "Blame it on resembling as if it would/ change so easily" (*Dark City* 31). Change negates resemblance, but, since some form of resembling is not actually in the cards, then where is the so-called blame? "Sunsickness" can be read as a slapstick chase after an agent of blame through significations of signification, "rough[ing] up glares" through "avenues" "trace[d]" "by fingertip" (31) until change is accepted blamelessly within, "Worlds/ hourly changing/ sparring with cause to an/ unknowable end./ Asking/ no less, demanding no/ more" (38). Intensity opens to a relaxed form of perceptual exile.

Indeed, a greater examination of Jewish intensity will bring us to the heart of much that Benjamin intuited and held dear about his work involving Jewish tradition and history. In retrospect, there is strong evidence that Benjamin the prognosticator struck again by insisting that Marxism and Judaism were inseparably, one might say, joined at the hip like Jacob and an angel of god. That Judaism and class struggle are inextricably aligned was deemed ludicrous by nearly everyone else, including Benjamin's Marxist friends such as Adorno and Brecht and Jewish friends like Scholem.

However, patterns of archaeological finds since the '80s provide strong evidence for Benjamin's view. "On the basis of shared traits such as pottery and other burial types, language, and other cultural features, scholars have come to the conclusion that the 'Israel' of the highlands in the premonarchic period largely developed out of the local culture," says Mark S. Smith (*Memoirs*

21-22). It has been firmly established that the first ancient Israelites, together with the significant addition of “a motley crew” (Dever 182) of many kinds of outsiders sympathetic with the emerging Israelites, were the same people as the ancient Canaanites that the Israelites claimed to have conquered.<sup>12</sup> Although other suppositions about the ancient Israelites that follow from this archaeological consensus are more speculative, with some evidence open to interpretation, it seems reasonable to strongly suspect that the first ancient Israelites were marginalized, lower-class, and exploited Canaanites, in addition to surrounding peoples joining a slowly evolving revolt against corrupt Canaanite kinglets propped up by the steadily declining Egyptians.<sup>13</sup>

I hypothesize that different cultural qualities might ensue from this first successful agrarian, relatively egalitarian, and more ideologically than tribally based rebellion. These cultural qualities might explain the intense, returning to the topic of intensity, and (for an ancient people) uncharacteristic resolve of the ancient Israelites even hundreds of years later to maintain their culture and at least one of their gods when faced with utter annihilation. Ancient peoples overwhelmingly tend not to value vanquished gods and ethnic identifications so the resolve of at least some ancient Israelites to maintain their culture and a “loser god” is unusual. If the Israelites could not maintain a classless society and a distrust of government as a tool of the powerful, as government was then for the most part understood, there is nonetheless much evidence that these powerful notions initially inform ancient Israel, and, when a centralized government and army become necessary, ancient Israelites are ambivalent toward them.

However, a half century before these archeological finds, Benjamin claims that there is a Jewish tradition that those ready to “hear” can simply hear if they do not “strain” to hear it (*Selected Writings* 3: 326). More than Marx and most others, Benjamin sees Marxism in Judaism. It is remarkable how certain Benjamin is about this aspect of Jewish tradition. None of his friends understand him. Those preoccupied with Marxism do not understand his Judaism and vice versa. And yet Benjamin sees no distinction between the two.

In 1938, before German-initiated genocides are fully implemented, Benjamin wonders how Kafka’s writings could have anticipated a world “preparing to do away with considerable segments of the planet’s population” (*Selected Writings* 3: 326). (Benjamin himself does not seem to ask for any advance prophetic credit, but he did deserve some. Not everyone was so sure what would happen.) Benjamin reasons that, “The sole basis for [Kafka’s] experience was the tradition to which he wholeheartedly subscribed. He was not far-sighted, and had no ‘visionary gift.’ Kafka listened attentively to tradition—and he who strains to listen does not see” (*Selected Writings* 3: 326).

Jewish tradition is thus perhaps a complementary form of the “nonsensuous similarity” described in “Doctrine of the Similar” wherein prophecy also percolates.

Therefore Benjamin did not require archaeological evidence to know the Jewish tradition found in Exodus, ancient Israel’s founding tale of liberation, and running through not only the Bible but also the rhetoric of Hillel and the New Testament’s Jesus. Indeed, before these times, around the first Jewish exile, biblical scholars such as Mark S. Smith and archeologists such as William Dever note evidence that the Israelites codifying the Bible might have had collective memories of conditions surrounding their founding revolt.

This might not surprise either Bernstein or Benjamin. *Shadowtime* speaks an intuitive need to remember Benjamin’s mysterious and unknowable death just as Benjamin’s dedication “to the memory of the anonymous” (as “On Concepts of History” puts it [*Selected Writings* 4: 406]) is in line with ancient Israelite and Jewish compulsions to remember the dead since this remembrance seems to keep them in touch with something so special and strangely unique that it ironically can too easily be forgotten. It is no accident remembering is a crucial part of Yom Kippur and Passover, the two most significant Jewish holidays. The wonder must be stressed here that a thinker as secular as Benjamin could so value the past for theological reasons. It is also remarkable that Bernstein can move beyond the great many ideological mines limiting all-time greats such as Adorno, Scholem, and Brecht and be so quick to recognize the staggering power of the resources Benjamin’s secular Jewish poetics makes available.

Intuitive Jews such as Benjamin and Bernstein, therefore, paradoxically try with great intensity to remember something they cannot remember. If we had no grasp of the import of Jewish memory fueled by the need to remember lost traces of class struggle Benjamin would seem to take this endeavor over the top. Benjamin says, “Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as a redeemer; he comes as the victor over the Antichrist. The only historian fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious” (*Selected Writings* 4: 391). Benjamin argues that the memory of the dead takes precedence over future generations not because he lives in the past but because he owes the past for his bearings. We owe our descendants the memory of our ancestors, completely upsetting the smug assumptions about progress of the powerful: “The concept of man’s historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie

any criticism of the concept of progress itself” (394-395). For Benjamin this is why we write. “The origin is the goal,” Benjamin quotes Karl Kraus (395). For Benjamin, “criticism and prophecy” are “categories that come together in the redemption of the past” (Benjamin *Selected Writings* 4: 407).

Whether conscious of it or not, no one better expresses and thus comes closer to remembering the probable founding conditions of ancient Israel, and by extension the world we know, than Charles Bernstein: “A bunch of blokes push their way forward. When the real aim is achieved & society is accomplished. As when we find our way in it without thinking in terms of the old. The event itself appears like a bolt from the blue” (*Content’s Dream* 33).

The Jewish tradition of class struggle informs Bernstein’s and Benjamin’s writings, and they both view Marxism through glasses tinged by poetry and theology. Benjamin likens this Marxism to a tangibly messianic force: “The historical materialist who investigates the structure of history performs, in his way, a sort of spectrum of analysis. Just as a physicist determines the presence of ultraviolet light in the solar spectrum, so the historical materialist determines the presence of a messianic force in history” (402). A historian must “brush history against the grain” (Benjamin *Selected Writings* 4: 392) to register its fleeting poetic sparks and encounter oneself by redeeming the dead.

Bernstein is also a secular yet mystical Marxist. “Marx saw as inevitable that a proletariat conscious of its alienation would be able to develop human relations—solidarity—which would be stronger than any other human power,” says Bernstein (28). “The promise of the return of the world can (& has always been) fulfilled by poetry. Even before the process of class struggle is complete. Poetry, centered on the condition of its wordness—words of a language not out there but in here, language the place of our commonness—is a momentary restoration of ourselves to ourselves” (Bernstein *Content’s Dream* 27-28). Bernstein’s “ourselves to ourselves” can be likened to Benjamin’s notion finding the meaning of one’s time in the past’s resurrection within it.

Benjamin’s notion of the hybrid nature of time is echoed by the hybrid quality of Benjamin’s “poetry-criticism.” Robert Christgau notes a similar “hybridity” in the writings and songs of Bob Dylan. In this sense, Benjamin’s writing might be said to resemble how Perry Meisel describe Christgau’s characterization of “rock and roll’s enormous plasticity as a medium. Rock and roll includes everything—the history of world music, the history of world speech, the history of world movement and dress. It even includes Dylan” (Meisel 103).

Although Benjamin’s prose is certainly creative, often, in works such as “One-Way Street,” “Central Park,” “A Berlin Chronicle,” and *The Arcades Project*, employing a Surrealist-inspired form of verbal montage, it does not nec-

essarily follow that Benjamin's criticism can be accurately termed poetry or poetry criticism. Cannot, however, the same question be raised concerning much of Bernstein's poetry? Despite the interruptions of what Bernstein terms poetic artifice such as line breaks, many would say that Bernstein's "Artifice of Absorption" reads like a prose essay only nominally written in verse.

And yet "Artifice of Absorption," like Benjamin's and Bernstein's prose, is poetic because of this prose quality. In "Artifice of Absorption," Bernstein says "absorption," which describes an endlessly ongoing process, exists in an essentially shifting "relationship between/ a reader &/ a work." Therefore the ongoing quality of prosaic absorption presupposes a poetic artifice in, as Benjamin puts it, a "textile" quality "woven" into "good prose" that the reader cannot help but combine with associations brought to the text by each reader (*Selected Writings* 1: 455-456).

Both Bernstein's poetry and prose often work as poetry because they have qualities of good prose as Benjamin characterizes it. "Work on good prose," wrote Benjamin, "has three steps: a musical stage when it is composed, an architectonic one when it is built, and a textile one when it is woven" (455-456). Significantly, Benjamin sees prose as a combination of the musical, architectural, and textile arts. "Criticism," said Benjamin, "must speak the language of artists" (*Selected Writings* 1: 460).

It is important to note that Benjamin cautions us about his observation concerning the "three" artistic "steps" to "good prose" with the heading "Caution: Steps." For Benjamin, literature implies possible danger. In 1926, Benjamin reasons that since "the construction of life is at present in the power . . . of fact . . . true literary activity cannot aspire to take place within a literary framework" since Benjamin calls the contemporary mode of facts "the habitual expression of its sterility" (444). Benjamin determines that the world of facts must be challenged, and, in terms of both practical and literary impact, "significant literary effectiveness can come only into being in strict alternation between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms that fit its influence in active communities better than does the pretentious, universal gesture of the book" (*Selected Writings* 1: 444).

In other words, despite the love of books that Benjamin describes in "Unpacking my Library" and elsewhere, writing exists within a wider world and the forms in which it is presented are of constant and changing interest. Benjamin calls "leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards . . . prompt language" that are "actively equal to the moment" (*Selected Writings* 1: 444). Of course, for much of Bernstein's career, this describes how he primarily published. Even after he finds publication with major university presses such as the University of Chicago Press, Bernstein is extremely active within the "prompt

language forms” of electronic publishing and collaborations with artists in exhibitions and books. It is not surprising, therefore, that Bernstein should say that “[p]oetics is an ethical engagement with the shifting conditions of everyday life” (*Attack* 78). In *The Politics of Poetic Form*, Bernstein speculates that if we need “to found” a “republic” of “letters” or “discourses,” “the task requires poetic acts, but not just by poets” (viii).

Poetry insists on unexpected venues. “You might say,” Bernstein says, “that several forms of oppression rob a people of its right to poetry—and the crisis for poetry, for the aesthetic, is to create a space for poetry again and again” (*Attack* 35). In a culture in which, as Bernstein says, “American Official Verse Culture operates on the premise that innovation and originality are not criteria of aesthetic value, and while not an absolute barrier to quality, are something to be held against a work” (*Attack* 33), neither a formal or technological center can hold. From a formal perspective, Bernstein’s poetry heats up between his poetry and his criticism, and technologically it is not surprising that Bernstein is associated online with PennSound. “There is no poem apart from its material dimension, in typography or in a performance,” says Bernstein (*Talking the Boundless Book* 41). Poetry cannot suppress its own manifestation in the world. Benjamin similarly explained the goal of using writing to change the world of objective facts to Martin Buber: “My concept of objective and, at the same time, highly political style and writing is this: to awaken interest in what was denied to the world; only where this sphere of speechlessness reveals itself in unutterably pure power can the magic spark leap between the word and the motivating deed, where the unity of these two equally real entities resides” (*Correspondence* 80).

Benjamin argues that a sense of the world beyond “facts” is a necessary part of writing. Reality, never set, includes the possible, pending, erased, and “speechless.” Benjamin writes to Buber that “everything factual already exists in theory” (*Correspondence* 313). Similarly, Bernstein says, “Facts in poetry are primarily/ factitious” (*Artifice* 6). Reality is a process within the greater reality of the poetic, and poems include the real and reality. Essays, associated with reality and sometimes with “creative nonfiction,” are in a sense a form of poetry because they necessarily unfold within contexts of subjectively driven and non-value-neutral “inner” interest. After all, essays are a form of discourse, and the word “discourse” is derived from the Latin for “a running to and fro.” Keeping this in mind, it seems natural to think of poetry as a kind of river running between the banks of a poetry that looks like poetry and another poetry that is criticism.

Many of Bernstein’s difficult poems can be read within the context of how both Benjamin and Bernstein characterize criticism. Indeed, the brilliant last



line of “Artifice of Absorption” implies that this is a prime goal of poetry writing. The “fruition” of the poem’s speaker’s “relationship with readers” is “that the site of reading become a fact of value” (*Artifice* 65). That the poem offers “a fact” suggests that it merges with an objective world rooted in critical analysis. However, that it is “a fact of value” relates this objectivity with what Bernstein has called “language which comes to be in the world as the condition of a specific place, a specific negotiation by a writer that does not appropriate words but invests them. . . . [L]anguage is a living necessity making time and space” (*Content’s Dream* 353). And yet it should be noted that this has nothing to do with a politically conservative kind of neoconservative anti-fact-based reality because language encompasses and is not divorced from “reality,” whereas such a neoconservative reality by its not fully reasoned premises for actions tends to serve the ulterior motives of those who are anxious to exclude critical analysis that does not support them. Indeed, Benjamin cites Karl Kraus’s brilliant jibe against Stefan George’s similar conservatism: “he who found the goal before the way/ did not come from the origin” (*Selected Writings* 2 Pt.2: 451).

Benjamin and Bernstein have an opposing methodology. “The site of reading becom[ing] a fact of value” (Bernstein *Artifice* 65) absorbs the function of criticism in poetry. Poetry becomes a tool of criticism. Since even unlearning is a form of learning, we cannot help but learn from poetry. Benjamin and Bernstein teach us to read poetry as the play of important critical faculties.

For instance, the title of Charles Bernstein’s great poem, “The Kiwi Bird in the Kiwi Tree” (*All the Whiskey in Heaven* 144), can be read to indicate an essay about a subject that lends itself to an inner life of thought and feeling, that is, the kiwi bird, which finds a corroborating outer reality in an ironically similar internal “site” of, from a New Yorker’s perspective, a seemingly imaginary subject, the kiwi tree. “The Kiwi Bird in the Kiwi Tree” plays on this poetically enabling dynamic tension between the inner and the outer, the mind and the world.

The poem starts with a kind of imaginative denial: “I want no paradise.” However, this is soon followed by an appositional suggestion of what paradise might be: “only to be/ drenched in the downpour of words, fecund/ with tropicality.” “Tropicality” clearly suggests both the paradise of the tropics and fecundity of tropes pouring out of words that are like water. This abundant “tropicality” disarms its opposite number—fundamentalism, which opaquely and unimaginatively follows and clings to interpretations of words that are resistant to being seen as mere interpretations.

Bernstein stresses the ironically fun aspect within fundamentalism while still pointing beyond its severe limits: “Fundament be-/ yond relation.” The

primary “relation” that fundamentalism is beyond and not enabled through is the dynamic relationship between critical analysis and poetic synthesis. Bernstein here applies the previously quoted Benjamin remark that “everything factual already exists in theory” by saying that fundamentalist truth is “less ‘real’ than made.” Fundamentalism is equated to “arms” that “surround” and apparently suppress “a baby’s gurgling.” Whereas the alternative of fundamentalism, a secular though perhaps theological tension between poetry and criticism, provides “pinion,” fundamentalism can only “pronounce its promise” through the limitations of “encir-/cling mesh.” Bernstein demonstrates how his “secular poetics” exists within a discursive continuum with Benjamin’s “material dialects” and worldly theology.

However, as in the case of Benjamin’s “good prose,” “the tailor” enters Bernstein’s poem to provide “the seam that binds” and “move on” to more appropriate accompaniments for gurgling such as “toys or talcums, skates & scores.” These words are immediately followed by the poetic conclusion that “Only/ the imaginary is real.” It is never quite clear whether the poem serves the essay or the essay the poem. The poem’s conclusion calls attention to the preceding confusion: “The first fact is the social body,/ one from another, nor needs no other.” Although “the social body” might imply the external world, the poem makes a case for its primary existence as linguistic, imaginative, and perhaps subjectively based.

Bernstein’s interest in secular Judaism, much like Benjamin’s similar interest, indicates the secular and poetic theological alternative both Benjamin and Bernstein provide for fundamentalism. Benjamin’s work, like Bernstein’s, is best read as several radically new and important manifestations of poetry and poetry criticism. Such a reading invigorates our living poetic traditions and presents possibilities for new and vital poetry. Considering Benjamin as a poet enhances our appreciation of Bernstein’s and many other poets’ and poet-critics’ work.

There had been both great poetic essayists before Benjamin and great poets who were critics before Bernstein. Even in our previous analysis of “The Kiwi-Bird in the Kiwi-Tree,” it was difficult not to think of it as related to Wallace Stevens’s plays of reality and the poetic and philosophical imaginations within tropical settings. Indeed, Stevens, like Bernstein, does similar work in his poetry and criticism and they play one off the other. We need more studies tracing the continuities and innovations amongst many poet-critics, such as Stevens, Poe, Ashbery, DuPlessis, Whitman, and Damon, to name only a few. There is nonetheless a special need to link Bernstein with Benjamin because of the tremendous poetic work done in their respective prose, the critical work done by Bernstein’s poetry, and the synergy at work

in the writings of Benjamin and Bernstein. Simply put, there is enough space in this chapter to only treat Bernstein and Benjamin.

Benjamin consciously tried molding his critical discourse into creative poetry. In his autobiographical writing, he interfaced minimal autobiographical vignettes and descriptions with equally minimal analysis, observations, and critical suggestions. As Benjamin put it in “The Coming Philosophy,” the goal is to “correspond . . . experience” with “knowledge.” Such knowledge becomes a kind of “theological” “teaching”—“theology to the extent that it contains historically philosophical elements” (*Selected Writings* 1: 108). Benjamin’s theological perspective, like Bernstein’s, is dynamically secular. However, knowledge may be of this world, but it is not close-minded and unnecessarily limited. To the contrary, “Experience,” says Benjamin, “is the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge” (*Selected Writings* 1: 108). In “One-Way Street,” Benjamin asserts that “[n]ow things press too urgently on human society,” and it is no longer “possible to adopt a standpoint.” Thus overly dry, limited criticism tending to repress virtually all poetic function becomes less convincing and satisfactory. Therefore, according to Benjamin, only “[f]ools lament the decay of criticism” (*Selected Writings* 1: 476) that does not move beyond strictly contained critical thought and tap poetic thought. New kinds of powerful poetry-criticism, or, at the very least, creative criticism rooted in “the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge” (*Selected Writings* 1: 108) became increasingly necessary and possible. Benjamin’s “poetry-criticism” took several forms.

Benjamin has four kinds of poetry criticism: the profane illuminations of critical analysis, the autobiographical writing, *The Arcades Project*, and Benjamin’s immortal triple synthesis formed by bottom lining *The Arcades Project* in “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” then the bottom lining of his thoughts about the twentieth century in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” and his bottom lining of the future in “On Concepts of History.”

Benjamin hoped to become known for his new form of creative nonfiction through works such as “One-Way Street” and “Berlin Childhood around 1900” that weave and juxtapose many thoughts and experiences. “Berlin Childhood around 1900” contains multitudes of richly complex yet startlingly insightful moments. For instance, the final 1938 version of “Berlin Childhood around 1900” (*Selected Writings* 3: 344-386) concludes with a short tale that intermeshes both a theological and sexual coming of age. Entitled “Sexual Awakening,” this tale begins and ends evoking an unnamed Berlin street at night wherein “wanderings that know no end” ultimately “awaken”

“instincts.” The narrator, who can be called Benjamin since the work pretends to be autobiographical, feels “an aversion” to “a distant relative” (*Selected Writings* 3: 386), and this oddly corresponds with our prior discussion about Benjamin and Heine. This aversion corresponds with “a suspicion of religious ceremony” because the parents of Benjamin, “whose time had come” for “the awakening of the sex drive,” hand him “into the custody of a distant relative” who is to take the young Benjamin to “a ceremony of public worship” since “it was the Jewish New Year.”

Benjamin’s apprehension about “the virtual stranger to whom [he] had been entrusted” parallels his antipathy about going to “the Reform congregation, with which [his] mother felt some sympathy on account of family tradition” (386). However, this family tradition apparently is contradicted by the unexplained absence of Benjamin’s mother herself. We never know why Benjamin is not meeting his parents at the congregation. We do not believe he is because he needs to get his synagogue “admission ticket” from his strange and distant relative. Benjamin implies that he is something like a New Year’s gift from his mother to this relative: “For this holiday, I had been given into the custody of a distant relative.” The distant nature of the relative equates to the emotionally distant nature with which Benjamin entertains the prospect of going to the Reformed German Jewish service that presumably has been assimilated to the point of being virtually featureless and passionless. For Benjamin, the ceremony “promised only embarrassment.” Why? When linked with Benjamin’s seeming fear of having a suspicious and morally unproven relative replace the reliability of his parents, there is a hint of an unknown quality of Benjamin’s personal orientation toward Judaism. Benjamin likens shame and embarrassment with a kind of theological malpractice since God is perceived to have been improperly approached, that is, approached at times in the tradition of a congregation Benjamin apparently feels is out of touch with Judaism. To feel intimate with the outside world, Benjamin therefore must dodge his distant relative, who is emblematic of something between a distant god and an inconsequential one, and the relative’s reformed congregation since they bespeak guarded, non-intimate Judaism.

“Sexual Awakening,” as is much of Benjamin’s writing, is dynamically structured through pairs and opposites and a kind of poetic though semantic parallelism structurally animating the Hebrew bible. For instance, to contest this unwanted dual “critical distance” separating him from both his sense of familial closeness and his theological bearings, Benjamin matches the endless quality he feels about the Berlin streets at the start of this eerily poetic vignette with the more dire quality of being endlessly lost in the happenstance

that “for whatever reason—whether because I had forgotten his address, or because I could not get my bearings in the neighborhood—the hour was getting later and later, and my wandering more hopeless” (386).

However, in keeping with the double structuring of this piece, two emotional waves overcome Benjamin. He is first “overcome by a burning wave of anxiety” since he will “never make it to the synagogue” (386). “But also, at the very same moment, and even before this other feeling had ebbed” he felt “a second wave, this one of other indifference.” Hence, Benjamin feels a first wave of shame and hopeless anxiety that is immediately counteracted by a feeling of resignation expressing itself as “So be it—I don’t care.” Almost magically there is a new synthesis as “these two waves combine” into “a dawning sensation of pleasure.” This sexual awakening introduces Benjamin to “awakened instincts” as he takes in the potential pleasures available upon the streets in which he is lost. This new instinctual sense appears to be vital to so much Benjamin values, including sexuality, Judaism, and writing.

Like most of Benjamin’s works “Sexual Awakening” operates within a play of poetic “negotiations,” as Bernstein terms it (*Content’s Dream* 353), and we misread Benjamin’s writings if we deny their poetic dimension, or, that is, their reflexively linguistic play, as demonstrated by the poetic parallelism on display in “Sexual Awakening.” Although I here consider Benjamin’s work in translation, linguistic reflexivity as a poetic function extends to content, audience, speaker, and other language elements consistent with Roman Jakobson’s and Adele Berlin’s analyses of poetry that corresponds to the tradition of the Hebrew bible. Additionally, micro-elements of language themselves can be considered in translation. Indeed, Benjamin, in his groundbreaking “On the Task of Translation,” maintains that a prime virtue of translated work lies in its imaginative and crafty contributions to the language that is the object of the original work’s translation.

A crucial facet and power of Benjamin’s criticism is lost if we do not read it as imaginative poetry. This is not to say that his criticism should be considered imaginary but rather that Benjamin’s readers can apprehend content as it is found within and developed from Benjamin’s work when read through imaginative faculties that sometimes employ dynamic biblical parallelism. The critical form of Benjamin’s “poetry” renders it more possible for his audience to share in imaginative play through the medium of his work. Clearly, through structure and intensity, Benjamin forges a new sense of the biblical that Bernstein advances. Both writers provide materials for new ways of reading.

Benjamin asks that we “understand direct creativity as a form of communal activity” (*Selected Writings* 1: 42). Benjamin’s “The Life of Students” is pre-

mised on the folly and impossibility of academia separating the imaginative faculties that develop through learning from all forms of passion. That it is difficult for us to consider Benjamin's criticism as poetry speaks to the crux of much in Benjamin since, according to Benjamin, "the uncompromising hostility of the academy toward the life that art requires can be interpreted as a rejection of every form of direct creativity that is unconnected with bureaucratic office" (42). Benjamin's poetry is formally unconnected with the bureaucratic office of poetry. However, speaking as a poet, it is disheartening to consider a living poetic tradition that cannot read Benjamin as one of our greatest twentieth-century poets, and I cannot imagine a vital twenty-first century poetry or criticism that cannot consider how poetically Benjamin fuses dynamic linguistic, cultural, ethical, spiritual, historical, and aesthetic concerns. This terrible inability would seem to be a triumph of "Official Verse Culture" (*Attack* 33).

Benjamin's "poetry" is quintessentially "difficult" because it is definitively "un-facile" in the sense we now generally use the word "facile." Benjamin's great work can be neither shallow nor superficial because it is shaped by simultaneous critical and creative processes that can, according to his last major work, "On the Concept of History," "blast open the continuum of history" (*Selected Writings* 4: 396). This grand difficulty is implicit in Benjamin's "poetry-criticism" and concerns his writing's multi-dimensionality, which poetically shuttles amongst philosophy, history, and literary criticism. And yet it might be said that Benjamin accomplishes a most difficult poetry-criticism through a relentless yet perceptive ease that recalls Benjamin's appropriation of Baudelaire's flâneur and the flâneur's "propensity that perhaps proves the true efficacy of idleness in human affairs" when walking within the "closed room and airy nature" of "the Jardin d'Hiver, a colossal greenhouse" (*Arcades Project* 422-3). This enclosed yet open space emblemizes much that is central within Benjamin's thinking and writing process: the nineteenth-century Parisian arcades, the modern city, the creative collector and collection, and Benjamin's writing itself. From the time of Benjamin's formative years, inclusiveness is crucially integrated within his subject and method. In "The Life of Students," written in his early twenties, Benjamin asserts that "the creative spirit" requires "the necessary inclusion of women" (*Selected Writings* 1: 44). This observation is in keeping with the creatively critical project Benjamin charts for himself early in his career when "The Life of Students" characterizes a "focus on the system as a whole" as "the exclusive task of criticism" (38). Indeed, one might argue that, in this new sense of criticism, every aspect of a Benjamin work bespeaks the whole. However, Benjamin cognizes the creative, poetic, and critical straightjacket this aesthetic condition can

impose, and, in *The Arcades Project*, he insists upon the dissimilarity and “destruction” that facilitates similarity and “construction,” thus very literally and specifically anticipating and systematically using deconstruction several decades before its formal inception.

In preliminary fashion, “The Life of Students” prefigures Benjamin’s ultimate task of “blast[ing] open the continuum of history” (*Selected Writings* 4: 396). Benjamin’s early essay begins by challenging the historian’s “faith in the infinite extent of time” and “concern . . . only with the speed or lack of it, with which people and epochs advance along the path of progress, . . . correspond[ing] to a certain absence of coherence and rigor in the demands it makes on the present.” Benjamin says that he will instead “delineate a particular condition in which history appears to be concentrated in a single focal point” (*Selected Writings* 1: 37). Benjamin thus brings all history into the purview of something like a textual or poetic tense. History is not to be studied as “details” upon the conveyor belt of linear time. “Rather,” says Benjamin, “the task is to group its metaphysical structure, as with the messianic domain of the French Revolution” (*Selected Writings* 1: 37). To contact the sharply pertinent and “messianic domain” of all manner of past phenomena, such as the French Revolution, is perhaps Benjamin’s prime poetic and critical goal.

We might not normally consider that poetic “knowledge comes only in lightning flashes,” and “the text is the long roll of thunder that follows” (Benjamin *Selected Writings* 1: 456), but it behooves us to read Benjamin’s writing as poetry because it advances a tradition for poetry that accomplishes this extraordinary task. In *The Arcades Project*, he speaks candidly about his outrageous compositional system: “What for others are deviations are, for me, the data which determine my course. On the differentials of time (which, for others, disturb the main lines of the inquiry), I base my reckoning” (456). Poetic impact is necessary to history because history can be understood “only through the awakening of a not-yet conscious knowledge of what has been” (464). Conversely, the critical, or as Benjamin also puts it, the “scholastic” can be valued as requisite for art.

“One moment swaggering, and the next scholastic” is how Benjamin positively describes “the Marxist theory of art” (*Selected Writings* 1: 465). “Swaggering” can be likened to poetic in that air-tight proof is not the initial primary concern. Bernstein questions “the academic culture of the humanities,” which he says, “places more emphasis on learning its ropes, on professional conformity, than it does on actual research, writing, thinking, or teaching of the people who make up the profession” (*Attack* 16). Bernstein sees a place for his criticism outside accepted rules of evidence and “narrow” “institutional culture” that “deform our thinking to fit its image of rigor” (*Attack* 16).



Bernstein faults academic journals for “permitting the publication of a wide range of ideas—as long as the ideas are expressed in the dominant style” (*Attack* 16). For both Bernstein and Benjamin, the style of writing that we might call “poetry-criticism” is in itself of great import. Benjamin calls a similar kind of writing one of “poetic politics” (216), which is fueled by “the true creative overcoming of religious illumination resid[ing] in a *profane illumination*, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson” (*Selected Writings* 2 Pt. 1: 216).<sup>14</sup>

Profane illumination and poetic politics connect writing with an “image field” that makes it much more relevant than the “bad poem on springtime, filled to bursting with metaphors” of “the programme of the bourgeois parties.” Writing in 1929, Benjamin equates this bad poetry with the bad politics of the liberal politicians of his time and their unqualified “optimism . . . and unlimited trust only in I. G. Farben and the peaceful perfection of the air force” (*Selected Writings* 2 Pt. 1: 217-218). Benjamin writes here several years before Hitler takes power, the German air force’s military buildup, and I. G. Farben’s manufacturing of the poisons used in concentration camp gas chambers. The uncannily accurate prophecy within Benjamin’s own profane illumination and poetic politics substantiates his methods.

Benjamin, like Bernstein, combines the roles of political and historical analyst, poet, and a kind of “materialist” visionary. For Benjamin “the concept of the present” is theoretical and always in “a transition, but in which time takes a stand [*einsteht*] and has come to a standstill. For this notion defines the very present in which he himself is writing history” (*Selected Writings* 4: 396). Benjamin makes a present or a “now-time, which, as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation, coincides exactly with the figure which the history of mankind describes in the universe” (396). “A messianic arrest of happening” provides “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.” In the past the writer sees a “constellation into which his own era has entered” (397), “(to put it differently) . . . a precious but tasteless seed” of and for “the nourishing fruit of what is historically understood contain[ing] time in its interior” (396). “How much . . . depends on [the past] being made present” (405). Only a “visionary gaze” sees the present, which is hidden to those “who ‘keep step’ with [the present]” since, “says Turgo . . . ‘politics is obliged to foresee the present’” (405). Benjamin prophesizes from a past in the now, unlike optimistic liberal politicians in 1929 who assume I. G. Farben and the German air force will benefit all Germans. Benjamin’s more penetrating poetic politics is not fooled so easily. Past horrors shed Benjamin of these illusions. He

refuses to rely on notions of an enlightened historical progress to ward off fascism and genocide.

Benjamin's work and life are ever-present anchors within Bernstein's writing. Bernstein's poetry exists in a post-Benjamin world that has absorbed Benjamin and been absorbed by him. Without knowledge of Benjamin, one misses much in Bernstein. For instance, Bernstein's short poem "The Measure" addresses Benjamin's mode of prophecy and warning from a vibrant past. The poem begins paradoxically by noting an "enthron[e] on a border," which one would assume is a kind "no man's land" that is not appropriate for a border but rather bespeaks a thin and in some ways non-existent line between past and present. The poem merges "the privacy of a great pain" that is "enthron[e]d" with the more public military sense of the speaker's "borders" and the pain's "command" "to stay at attention" (*All the Whiskey in Heaven* 90). A seemingly past pain has become a present one and "commands": "Be on guard/ Lest the hopeless magic." The pain of the past warns against the truly "hopeless" hope of a private yet apparently political hint of "magic." Bernstein and Benjamin, both working within secular Jewish tradition, eschew the dangers of false political divination. Because "regret" is correlated with a past fashioned into "the/ foggiest avenues," this non-profanelly illuminated magic "of unconscious/ Dilemmas grab hold of you" without a more clear apprehension of past pains that political poetry has enthroned. Bernstein, like Benjamin, seems a buffer to progress.

Prefiguring Bernstein's unusual use of "borders," Benjamin alludes to the Romans' borders, called "limes," when he says, "Redemption is the *limes* of progress" (*Selected Writings* 4: 404). Bernstein's poem "Pockets of Lime" also echoes Benjamin. The title "Pockets of Lime" suggests an imaginary space of delimitation, a pocket full of a bordering, or "liming," mechanisms that resists bordering, defining, and narrow limitation so that "Everything has happened, nothing/ possessed" (*All the Whiskey in Heaven* 80). The object/field of "The lawn engages/ Its constituent appraisers," implying that it is more than its appraisers, putting their appraising in question. "Pockets of Lime" is in short a playfully interlinked catalogue of revelation of unreality of over-definition, of an "end that has no beams" (88).

It might be argued that I am treating Bernstein's great poetry like prose. Indeed, Bernstein's training as a poet was no doubt crucial in honing his prose skills. Nonetheless, if as Benjamin maintains, "great prose is the creative matrix of the various metrical forms" (*Selected Writings* 3: 154), it would follow that the greatest and most concise poetry would paradoxically be written in prose or something like prose, even as that writing made use of a plethora of poetic technique. A sense of traditional poetic metrics and prosody guides

the composition of words as they are first thought, written, and shaped. It is telling that Benjamin says that “good prose . . . is composed” in a “musical stage” (*Selected Writings* 1: 455). Such a musical stage presumably corresponds with many poetic techniques. However, such music is not an end in itself and seemingly un-poetic prose can be the most poetic. Benjamin indeed writes that “in the messianic realm . . . language is liberated prose—prose which has burst the fetters of script.” Within this “realm,” such prose “festively enact[s] history” (*Selected Writings* 5: 404).

This is in keeping with ancient Israelite prosody. Adele Berlin, developing the insights of Roman Jakobson, calls the organizing principle of biblical poetry “dynamic parallelism.” Dynamic parallelism juxtaposes syntactic, semantic, and other correspondences of small and large verbal units that are adjacent or far-removed within a poem or narrative. Robert Alter identifies parallelism and poetic intensification as the dynamics of discernible linguistic intensities. In other words, biblical poetry functions by setting up a distinguishing feature or binary opposition of any kind. If, as Ferdinand de Saussure long ago convincingly maintained, language is based on series of oppositions, then Hebrew poetry is an intensification of language itself. Benjamin’s “liberated prose” calls attention to the ongoing and non-line-stopped nature of prose in continual opposition to the commodified, pseudo-precious nature of poetry that Benjamin called “bourgeois.”

Bernstein realizes the special powers of poetic parallelism. He takes poetic parallelism to an ontological realm. For instance, the entire text of the body of Bernstein’s poem “A Poem Is Not a Weapon” is “[THIS POEM IS REMOVED FOR INSPECTION AND VERIFICATION.]” (*Girly Man* 184). This bracketed remark plays upon an implication that the poem itself has a fixed existence that the few words given in the poem paradoxically are not a part of. There is some truth to this since although a poem, or the way we tend to think of it, is composed of language, and language in itself is inherently reproducible, nonetheless poems can be banned from given publications, exhibitions, and performances. Therefore “A Poem Is Not a Weapon” is a poem conveying the surveillance, control, and censoring of poetry, although the “inspection and verification” is presumably not valid since the author and press could have presumably already inspected and verified it.

Bernstein, therefore, demonstrates in poems such as “A Poem Is Not a Weapon” that poetry can be produced independently of any ostensible poetic technique. After all, though, as Adele Berlin puts it, “in a certain sense, parallelism is the essence of poetry,” “it is a common feature of all language,” and “parallelism is not in and of itself a mark of poetry as opposed to prose, or even of elevated style as opposed to ordinary discourse” (*Dynamics* 4).

In accord with poetic parallelism, by proposing what is not poetry, Bernstein creates a site where anything that is not “not poetry” is potentially poetry. Similarly, later Bernstein poetry often carries ostensible markings of poetry. Poems such as “The Ballad of the Girly Man” rhyme and present perhaps overly understandable and non-difficult poems. This poetic strategy of Bernstein is an analogue of his critical strategy supplied in the essay, “The Attack of the Difficult Poems,” which matter-of-factly dismisses all possible stigma involved with being associated with “difficult poems” (*Attack* 3-6). Such poems and essays might seem to eschew “both ends” of poetry-criticism. However, they create a context wherein the noble sentiments they voice—the acceptance of anti-war and non-macho behavior, of, in Benjamin’s words, “going against history’s grain” and seeing beyond the powers that write it—can paradoxically be voiced through the implied and conceptual context generated by reading these works within the context of Bernstein’s oeuvre. In both the verse and prose forms, what must be said can be said, and a certain social function is performed within the context of poetry-criticism. These forms constitute a kind of “Nude Formalism,” as Bernstein entitles a booklet. “The Ballad of the Girly Man” is one of Bernstein’s crowning achievements. Bernstein presents something that is similar to bad writing, but it functions as, in accord with Benjamin’s in “Doctrine of the Similar,” an alien basis igniting “intention” (*Selected Writings* 2 Pt. 2: 697), which in this case is a collective notion of poetic prosody. From the perspective of an experimental poet, this is certainly a profane illumination.

“We have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim,” Walter Benjamin proclaims (*Selected Writings* 4: 390). One suspects that, if our messianic power were not weak, it would not be messianic. It is therefore fitting for the avatar within Charles Bernstein’s oeuvre to be a strong girly man.

Benjamin and Bernstein may not, of course, write a new bible for the same reason Benjamin says Kafka demonstrates our need for a new one: “The consistency of truth has been lost” (*Selected Writings* 3: 326). When, as Benjamin puts it, Kafka hears the tradition, he transcribes parables that can never rest. “To be *more* than parables,” says Benjamin, Kafka’s parables “must cuff doctrine with a mighty paw” so as paradoxically to generate wisdom without being wise, and, since wisdom is “an attribute of tradition,” kindle a tradition of truth that cannot find truth (*Selected Writings* 3: 326). Through non-sensuous similarity, poetic politics, cleaving, a blending of poetry and history with all other language, dynamic biblical parallelism, poetic structures of intensification, modern prophecy, going against the brush of history, material and poetic dialectic and discourse, the flâneur, and profane illumina-

tion, Benjamin and Bernstein bring us a much needed radical secular Jewish poetics. Whether or not this poetics is biblical, it is consistent with what Benjamin felt in 1938 as Brecht described fascism's astonishingly far-reaching powers and plans. "While he was talking," wrote Benjamin, "I felt moved by a power that was the equal of that of fascism—one that was no less deeply rooted in the depths of history than fascism's power. It was a very strange feeling, wholly new to me" (*Selected Writings* 3: 340).

## Notes

Epigraph. According to Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin wrote the last sentence, "And everything that Moses accomplished long ago would have to be reaccomplished in our world's age," as a note to Benjamin's previous passage in Scholem's copy of Benjamin's August 11, 1934, letter to Scholem (*The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, 135, note 2).

1. See Lisa Fittko, "The Story of Old Benjamin" in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 946-954, and "Appendix: The Aura of Benjamin's Death: Interview with Lisa Fittko" in Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible*.

2. See Edward Rothstein, "CONNECTIONS; A Daring Theory That Stalin Had Walter Benjamin Murdered," *New York Times*, June 30, 2001, for a contextualization and vetting of Stephen Schwartz's suggestion in a *Weekly Standard* article that Stalin's secret police may have killed Benjamin in Spain at a time when, with the Hitler-Stalin pact still in effect, Soviet operatives were openly working with the Gestapo and Spanish Franco fascists. According to Schwartz's theory, Stalinist forces wished to confiscate a theoretically lost last Benjamin manuscript because it might have been more explicitly anti-Stalinist than Benjamin's 1940 essay, "On Concepts of History." However, even if Benjamin himself might have believed his manuscript lost when he died, the manuscript might have in fact been "On Concepts of History" and *The Arcades Project* since he would have had good reason to doubt that the copies of them that he left in Paris would survive the German occupation as they did due to the efforts of Georges Bataille and good fortune. Therefore, even if revised versions of existing Benjamin works or, as horrible as it is to contemplate, an unknown work were lost, one might still be thankful for the recovery of important Benjamin works that were almost lost.

3. Alfred Hitchcock's portrayal of himself as a "stuffed animal" prefigures Charles Bernstein's notion of "absorption" as a kind of poetic or literary "intention-intensification" (*Artifice of Absorption* 21) that is "central to all reading & writing" (17). Absorption forms a creative poetic synthesis with the formal and/or seemingly verbally resistant element of "artifice" or "impermeability" (21). Adding to Hitchcock's forecasting of Bernstein's work, Hitchcock's self-characterization

as “stuffed” corresponds with Bernstein speaking of a very absorbing poem as a “bloated poem” (17). In addition, Hitchcock’s films are perhaps the best examples we have of “absorbing cinema” since possibly no other films better account for the constant flow of their audiences’ attention. A more full and precise version of Hitchcock’s “stuffed animal” quotation from the May 26, 1957, episode of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, “The West Warlock Time Capsule,” is:

“Good evening, television watchers. Tonight’s masque is entitled, ‘The West Warlock Time Capsule,’ the tale of a timid taxidermist. This gives me the excuse to exhibit this prize of mine and to discuss taxidermy. I feel I know quite a bit about stuffed animals. After all, it takes one to know one. This, I shot myself. You see, deer poaching is one of my hobbies. It took only two shots. The first one hit a bearded old man wearing a ridiculous red suit and riding in a sleigh. I’m having him stuffed, too. It probably sounds silly to you, but I’m sentimental that way. But enough of this. Here, in a moment, is ‘The West Warlock Time Capsule.’”

4. Much like Barthes, Benjamin’s *The Arcade Project* isolates and traces the unconscious ideological lives of French and other European “living myths.”

5. Benjamin accomplishes much of the theoretical work that Foucault later makes possible by postulating unconscious synchronic cultural relationships absent of direct influence. However, Benjamin goes further by formulating theories and practices, particularly in *The Arcades Project* and “Concepts of History,” that assist inter-era relationships and the critical influence of the present moment upon the past. Benjamin, like Foucault, acknowledges how practices of power structure society, but he also accounts for the power of powerlessness and the “weak messiahs” and the “brush[ing] of history against the grain” set up by the accepted historical “document[s] of barbarism” of “On Concepts of History” (*Selected Writings* 4: 392).

6. Startlingly, perhaps even before Derrida is born or certainly when he was a child, Benjamin comes close to formulations not far from the heart of deconstruction, which links construction with destruction: “It is important for the material historian, in the most rigorous way possible, to differentiate the construction of a historical state of affairs from what one customarily calls its ‘reconstruction.’ The ‘reconstruction’ in empathy is one-dimensional. ‘Construction’ presupposes ‘destruction’” (*Arcades Project* 470).

7. By analyzing the effects of film and radio as media in themselves completely independent of content, Benjamin anticipates by a couple of decades McLuhan’s “medium is the message” manner of media studies, stressing the effects of media when it is collectively and individually assimilated. Interestingly, Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and other writings seem to see beyond McLuhan by seeing beyond film and radio to the Internet, since

the kind of individual-to-collective dialectical participation and self-publication that Benjamin feels film and radio cause make much more sense in terms of the Internet. In addition, one might say that Benjamin anticipates the McLuhanesque cool participatory quality of television.

8. See Michael Lowy 28-29 for a discussion about Benjamin as a precursor of Catholic liberation theology.

9. “We might say that there are two sections through the substance of the world: the longitudinal section seems representational; it somehow contains the objects. The cross-section seems symbolic; it contains signs” (*Selected Writings* 1: 82).

10. This includes post-World War II “pogroms.” Many more Jews, for instance, remain in Poland after World War II than is generally realized. However, decades of postwar pogroms and anti-Semitic harassment exile most of them. See Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*.

11. “1933” still resonates a sense of impending, inescapable disaster. Note Paul Krugman’s December 11, 2011, *New York Times* column in which he warns, “High unemployment isn’t O.K. just because it hasn’t hit 1933 levels; ominous political trends shouldn’t be dismissed just because there’s no Hitler in sight” (“Depression and Democracy.” *New York Times*, A23: 12 December 2011).

12. See for instance Mark S. Smith’s *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, William G. Dever’s *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?*, and Stephen Paul Miller’s *There’s Only One God and You’re Not It*.

13. See Dever.

14. Benjamin adapts “profane illumination” from Sigfried Kracauer’s use of the word “profane” when he says “For today access to the truth is by way of the profane” (see Britt 78). Kracauer considers the profane as a way of using contemporaneous culture to unlock the inspirational power of the Bible. Karkover did not accept Buber’s assumption that meditation upon the Bible in itself led to any valuable meditative ends, that there was something in itself sacred about the Bible as we now encounter it.