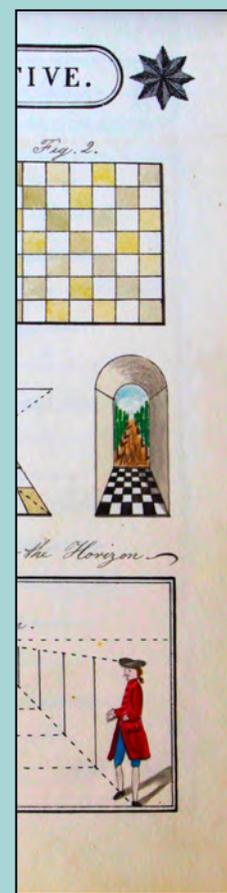
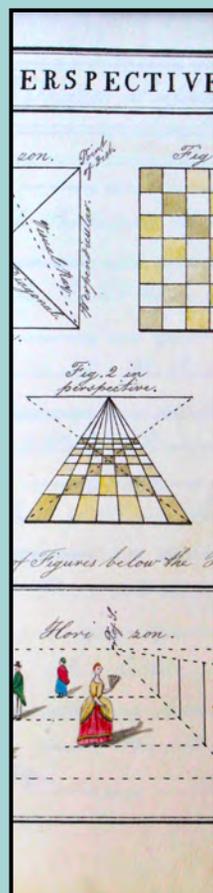
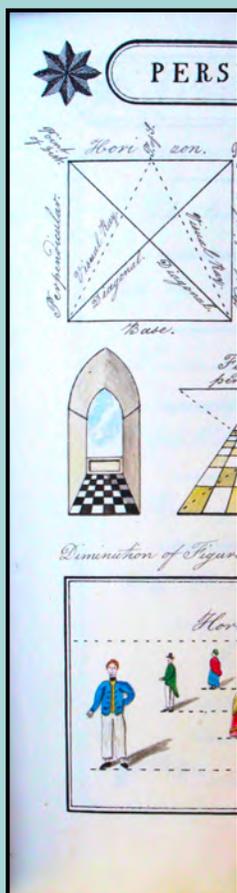


# Charles Bernstein / American Innovator



More Numerous of: A Kinetic Approach

37 Blue Editions

James Shivers

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## Foreword

### **How to Do Things with Charles Bernstein's Poetry**

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One of the most memorable moments of my intellectual life came in the fall semester of 1999, during a graduate seminar that Charles Bernstein was running as part of the Poetics Program at the University of Buffalo. Charles's dogged interest in archives means that the general outline of the syllabus still exists on line. Charles's seminars always had some theme by which he structured the semester. That fall, for example, the ostensible focus was "materialist poetics," and I say "ostensibly" because the discussions felt like explorations of ideas rather than the covering of a single conceptual frame or academic method. The seminars, largely, were built around visits by poets and critics. We would read the work of the visitors and then meet with them during the seminar for a conversation of the work. Between these visits, Charles would have us also spend weeks reading and discussing work by figures that could be seen as establishing a tradition of avant-garde poetry and poetics. To know Bernstein's work is to be able to guess some of those figures: Ezra Pound, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Louis Zukofsky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and, naturally, Gertrude Stein. Charles would establish a context for the discussion, but largely the seminar would flow from student presentations that he would guide into larger contexts. Given how loquacious Charles can be, I was always impressed by his ability to guide the discussion and moderate rather than dictate and lecture. The class, too, was diversely compressed of philosophy students, comparative literature students, Americanists, and poets. There were those in the class that seemed to want to be some new generation of Language poets,

but there were also those who had a Freudian desire to dismantle that frame. There were those who just wanted to learn the material, and there was a group of us who knew that Charles—in his poetry, his essays, his editing, and his general advocacy for the arts—had, throughout his writing career, helped change the discussion that poetry was having with itself. It seemed that to take poetry seriously meant wanting to extend that thinking. Taken together, these different constituencies forming the seminar shared a belief in poetry’s social function, but there was no common doctrine or set of values and these divergences played out in the conversations in the seminar room.

I mentioned an awareness that Charles had definitely made an impact for my generation (and the one before mine) in our understanding of poetics being involved in ethics as well as aesthetics. Did he help make the stakes for poetry higher? He certainly showed many of us how a consciousness of literary practice could broaden the scope of what poetry could and should do in a way that had a moral—certainly critical—dimension without descending into actual moralizing. In Bernstein’s work, particularly in his adroit use of an irony that seems to mean what it says as well as mean the opposite in the very same moment. For years, the work does not posit lyric truths, but rather has remained focused on asking the questions, or at its, best giving answers that felt more like questions. In the classroom, then, his was an authority that seemed to always be interrogating the very mechanisms of authority. The professor in the room taking such a position was, by turns, liberating as well as frustrating, but then no one ever said poetry should be easy. In fact, probably it should specifically not be. “What did Ralph Waldo Emerson say, “Poets are thus liberating gods”? Revolution, change of any kind, especially changing assumptions, is always messy and frustrating. That is how one can tell it is working.

In any event, this range of students and their ideological investments and methodological were a feisty lot. There was quibbling and questioning of every text and indeed every visitor in a way that I have never seen in any other graduate seminar that I have ever been in, seen, visited, or led since. People were civilized, but fiercely critical in a way that sometimes

made me uncomfortable. I did not always feel that my peers' comments and observations were always moving towards synthesis or insight. Often, it felt like positions were reifying, as can happen with younger poets and critics. The polemics are a way of trying out one's commitment even if openness was sometimes the cost. One day we were discussing Stein's prose. I would like to say it was from *The Making of Americans*, certainly something characteristically dense, something obdurate, full of repetition and all kinds of distancing effects. The students were caught deep in an argument of the style, talking in vague ways about its surface play and how looking for meaning or an argument was reactionary if not jejune. Charles let this go on, and then calmly broke through the mists of some graduate student's jargon-filled and lengthy disquisition on Derrida, deconstruction, and Stein's modernist ineffability.

"People always say that Steins' work is about surface play and that it's unreadable. That's not true," he said. Charles flipped to the middle of the book and started to read a page aloud, stopping every line or so to do a close reading, showing how the repetitions and backtracking of Stein's prose were still wholly legible strategies. By the time he hit the end of the page, he had offered a breathtaking, absolutely eye-opening close reading of the very text that moments ago someone had said "resisted explanation." In that moment, it seemed as if he chose the page wholly at random and improvised that reading. Even if it had been a reading he had prepared before class and had inserted it at just the moment to make his point, would it matter? . In fact, arguably, the fact of its being a bit of theater only would make me admire it all the more. The reading was brilliant—certainly the best I have ever seen anyone do of any text without any notes as a guide—and it made the point. The text had not failed us, we had failed it. We had let ourselves settle at illegibility as being its own good.

I tell this story because it was riveting and because what I and my classmates saw so upended what many critics of Bernstein might lob at him—and have over the years—in terms of declaring his interest in difficulty as being merely obfuscation, or disruption as the one and only goal. James Shivers, in the chapters that follow, insists, "The difficulty for readers is that

[Bernstein's] work cannot be easily categorized into established interpretive patterns" (123). Clearly, Charles demonstrated that even if Stein's work cannot be categorized within familiar patterns, that does not make it a text that cannot be interpreted. With that in mind, I also relate the anecdote because it positions Bernstein's work within the pedagogical. By this, I do not mean to describe his teaching strategies, but rather wish to indicate how it shows that language and meaning and interpretation are not things that one can fully finish learning. Learning them means continually sounding their depths and testing their capacities. In the case of Stein, he saw the argument developing in front of him and used evidence to dispute it, but not to dismiss. I guarantee it meant that the students in the seminar could not see Stein's difficulty as merely an end in itself. His close reading, improvised as it was, demonstrated that difficulty as a textual feature meant not that the work could not be read or interpreted, but rather that more was asked of readers. We had to go beyond our expectations about reading, but not forgo them altogether. Meaning, he showed us, is not a destination at which one arrives, but is a tentative understanding that arises from the process of reading. In that way, Stein's work, if we read it closely, showed better what the edges of understanding might be. You only find the edge by walking along it and sometimes going past it.

In many ways, James Shivers's *More Numerous of: A Kinetic Approach* is an important contribution not simply because it is the most comprehensive engagement of Bernstein's work that exists so far, but because Shivers is so resolutely interested in the pedagogical himself. Again, when I use the term *pedagogical*, I do not mean this in a narrow, practical way of how one teaches modernist and neo-modernist and avant-garde poetry. Instead, Shivers consistently shows how Bernstein's poetry and his prose demonstrates by means exploration what language can make possible, as well as what it cannot. If Bernstein's poetry and poetics are experimental, they are so in the ways that they try to show the boundaries and borders of language, of communication, of linguistic representation. To know these borders, so the wager goes, is to know ourselves better—to show how subjectivity, like a poem, is a made-thing.

Knowing that it *is* made means there is a chance to remake it, or at the very least to know what we are doing as we are doing it. Poetry becomes the space by which to test out the limits of language and the boundaries of representation. Shivers does not simply end at determining the work is difficult, complex. He asks instead what we can make out of that complexity, what we can take from a text that resists us.

Early on Shivers posits that *innovation* is the word that might best describe the drive of Bernstein's poetics and this is the recurring angle of approach for *More Numerous of: A Kinetic Approach*. Shivers remains clear and in his sense of the pedagogical value of Bernstein's work, though he tends to prefer the term literacy. In any case, he describes the situation in which reading and difficulty come together so as to increase literacy this way:

Reading the unexpected and reading innovation requires a willingness to engage with all the elements of writing and speaking, and also requires mental and spiritual vivacity. Every reading environment has a shape, from the newspaper or critical journal, to a web page or a volume of poems. The majority of reading is shaped by a very limited discourse. Hence, an expected environment develops along with a reading procedure. A disruption in the environment is a disruption in reading. (359)

The result is not disruption for the sake of disruption, a linguistic Molotov cocktail thrown into academic discourse. Instead, disruption is shown to be the prerequisite condition for better, fuller reading practices, for deepened acts of attention. Through this comes the possibility of new, or at least different, insights. I confess that I do not have the same level of comfort that Shivers has in regard to the word *innovation*. I worry that it is a word and stance that has by now become wholly coopted by the tech industry and then by extension American capitalism. Yet, Shivers is aware, too, of Bernstein's own hesitations about the word "experimental." He cites the poet/critic explanation that "[Bernstein's] own preoccupations, however, are not with experimentation as much as evocation, in instantiation, arbitration, and reclamation" (363). To quibble about "experiment" might be a matter of semantics, but of the very sort that Bernstein

gets us to think about. What do we mean by using one word rather than another? What are the explicit elements and what are the elements that lie beneath the surface, that we only discover by testing them trying them out in the extremity of meaning?

This is why I myself want to underline the elements of pedagogy. It is not to suggest that Shivers teaches us how to read poetry—though it does do that. Instead, I would argue, Bernstein’s work is predicated on the idea that learning language is not something that we ever wholly achieve. Poetry and poetics, in the ways that the push and test and explore and, at times, fail—even court failure—is the way we ever deepen our understanding of what language is and does. And, if the contemporary philosopher Stanley Cavell, Bernstein’s early intellectual mentor at Harvard, is right in saying that we are beings of language, then to know language better is to know ourselves and our possibilities better. It is to know humankind better. It will not make us necessarily better people, but it can make us aware of what we share with others, which can lead to caring and identifying.

These are bold claims, I am aware, and ones that are made somewhat generally, of that I am also aware. Yet, my goal here is neither to pin down Bernstein’s work to a single aspect nor to encapsulate Shivers’s expansive, thoughtful, careful reading of Bernstein’s poetry and his general trajectory of thought, but rather to offer a place for starting out. Aided by careful attention to cultural, historical, and biographical contexts, to aesthetic inheritances, to archival material, and to relevant theoretical frames, Shivers works to establish necessary conditions for understanding Bernstein’s oeuvre. At the very least, I have hoped to emphasize that Shivers has achieved a great deal here in pointing out that Bernstein is, in the best sense of the word, a language worker. The ways that Shivers brings Bernstein’s poetry into conversation with visuality only adds an additional level of complexity that troubles, productively, generatively, our thinking about the material poetics that shapes our reading practices when we encounter this rare, but increasingly necessary poet. That, ultimately, is a revelation that keeps revealing itself to us: that we have yet to fully discover what poetry is, and hence what language, and hence

what we are. Therein lies the hope at the heart of Bernstein's thought. Can thought *have* a heart?

Read Bernstein's poems as carefully as Shivers has. You be the judge.

## Preface

Relationships — to others, to standards, to time, to the page, to systems — collate the meanings we attend. This critical study investigates the unworking and working relationships, patterns, lines, pages, letters, sounds, sights, discourses, conversations, difficulties, norms in areas of American poetry/poetics— specifically in the writings, speakings, and designings of Charles Bernstein.

As long as I have known Charles he has neither shied away from nor ignored the limits, the forms or even the failures of any language system and has often sought ways to redress or recalibrate those limits. pushing or \_\_\_\_\_ against (or for) a limiting system, sign, page, policy, form, design.

At the MLA conference in January (2019) we discussed this project in more detail. In honor of him and his work, I would revisit this study — written nearly twenty years ago — and edit, revise, verify and prepare a digital version. Over the past nine months I did just that, but kept the original mostly intact.

I have attempted a comprehensive study that could serve as a first wholistic look at some Bernstein's innovative work in the areas of editing, essaying, and *poësis* — many readers have not had the same access to the materials I have had and therefore may have not had the chance to see the fullness or the vastness of the his *apoetics*.

To assist the reader I have added hyper-links and some abstracts at the beginning of each chapter — these chapters are really long — as every attempt was made to be as thorough as possible at the time since it was the first study of its kind.

The basis of this present work was my PhD dissertation at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. I am grateful for Peter Halter's guidance and the full support of the Faculty of Letters. Additionally, I spent five years as a Visiting Fellow in American Studies at Yale working first on the finishing this project, and then turning my full interests toward visual poetics, literacy, and education.

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How did I approach this project? I am keenly interested in works that explore alternatives to the limiting or perceived limitations of reading, writing, designing or learning. The field of engineering embraces this — that inventors are critics, those who not only point out failures but offer solutions. This language is more or less mainstream now in the business world. In terms of the arts we hover around the term 'avant-garde' with a model of destruction (and war) as the metaphor; what if we used a different metaphor? In its current form avant-garde studies can't really explain the career and work of many innovators, including Bernstein.

So, this is a sign: we need other ways to think about, receive, and respond to art that creates change or opens up the possibility of change to a system/structure of procedures, powers, expectations, understandings.

Given the hostility directed at this work when I began, it's hard to imagine how one might proceed critically. When I started at Yale I had people tell me not to let others know — that they would be upset. Even my work with many poets and critics was often tinged with skepticism — the experience of reaching out via email, or at conferences, or one on one to particular individuals who were loosely connected in American poetics was at times awkward. More than once, I received the cold shoulder. Certainly this was not the case all the time (in the various poetic 'schools' I've participated in), but enough to put me on guard. Now, of course I look back and ask, on guard from what?

I think we forget we are a small divided crowd that doesn't pay very well. In our "poetic" divisions we don't really listen or interact with each other — and this of course can be traced to many moments in Bernstein's career: the problem is we don't have an approach that allows for us to share the same space, to have a conversation.

I think reading with charity is a solution. We don't have to be ground down into an agree/disagree model as all reading models are limited. Could we embrace a different reading model? What models work? What models don't? Who's included in certain models? Who isn't?

Regardless of our approach, our view of language directs our reading and writing of poetry. If we think it's a system of equal signs without a center or reference, then we manage our lines of poetry in a different way than someone who sees experience and language fused. My own sense is that we are all makers and given this, we all have experience with making, of knowing and being known — relationships between among, near, far, that is both immaterial/material.

Why this now? Partly because I have continued this approach day in and day out by using these critical studies to inform a critical practice as a Secondary Education English teacher. I am fundamentally interested in the break-down of any system in a person's life — that moment where a particular system of power or education or status or media says: there's no room here for how you work.

How we work is always a way before, during or after a system's churning.

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What if we brought the knowledge of any system's limitation into the educational process? How might visual poetics be a generative grammar for visual literacy? What if we worked within a system with students at a younger age? Say, at the Secondary level? To explore these questions, I did just that — became a High School English teacher in a public school system.

Once here, a colleague and I developed a media studies class — with a focus on multimodal discourse in both production and critique. The course was filled with students who felt more comfortable in a class that extended a version of ‘making’ beyond the five paragraph essay, the AP prompt, and the standardized forms towards process, inquiry, and conversation. Eventually, we were able to get the course certified for college credit at UCONN. The direction for the English ‘composition’ class came directly out of my understanding of what I learned in my studies of page systems: there is not only one type of page, lines do not always have to move in straight lines, left to right downwards — the page can also be a canvas just as beauty is also a word. The course flourished and as it did, my attention focused on those students who were having a hard time in English, but had keen visual strengths. So, I returned to working with 9<sup>th</sup> graders who were not in advance classes — the smart phone had reach the school and I went old school on them – bringing back no line journals, and drawing as a critical practice for seeing, knowing, conversing, designing, and writing — inspired by spending time with the Yale Center for British Art Summer Institute for teachers, *Expanding Literacies, Extending Classrooms*. I knew from my studies and research that letters are also visual marks, that many poetics explore the page as a space to compose and design as well as write, type, print. After awhile, we decided to study the classroom process I developed to see if it improved cognitive growth and language fluency — it did!<sup>1</sup> So, for the past ten years I have seen how versions of multimodal discourse could be taught in more than one way in a High School English Department. We had lots of support and positive feedback until a new set of educational managers came in who couldn’t figure out how to turn what we were doing into a system and couldn’t see the value of the class even though students received college credit. The problem: it wasn’t an AP course. These differing systems of learning provided multiple avenues of growth for all kinds of students, but the managers had a limited view of what was possible.

Happily the students continued to flourish, but certainly, as I saw how helpful the work was, began wondering if there was another way for me to work. Naturally, I thought of returning to the university — I had begun teaching again at the university but this time with pre-service teachers, and thought it might be the best way forward. I could tell though the university students who were preparing to be High School English teachers were caught in the old ways of seeing, and often maintained a zeal for only certain forms for writing and teaching. I did all that I could to show them a wider understanding of the line, letter, page, number and for some — this was a real help, but for many, they had completely embraced their system and could see no other. In the long run this is not good for students or teachers because the dominant model promotes only one kind of reading and writing and this is not the only way to read and write.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Visual Literacy, creativity and the teaching of argument’; with Cyra Levenson (YCBA), Mei Tan (EGLAB Yale School of Medicine); in *Learning Disabilities Contemporary Journal*, special issue on Creating Arguments (Spring, 2017).

Another opportunity arose and it's one that I took: I could leave my delightfully affluent High School, leave my tenured post, and work in a school that wasn't, that had students who really struggled with basic necessities in practical terms and in terms of power. I could then see if these principles of multimodal discourse, the principle of charity, the understanding of the sign as an object and a mark, the relationship between making and knowing could foster creative and critical growth. Who decides what is growth? This is a power struggle between competing versions of productivity. I remember one educational manager many years ago saying, 'we have a reading test now that's a 95 percent predictor of success'. I asked, 'For all children throughout all cultures?' My comments were dismissed. And I think about Bernstein's description of school — what if he had been given this reading/writing test then? Would it have predicted that he would be awarded the Bollingen Prize? The answer is no. We can't fully predict how a child will grow. But we can be better at what we offer a child for growth and success.

What we do know is that a line is more than a line, a page more than a page, a word more than a sign, a self more than a self. What happens when we bring this knowledge into the world as a stance and practice?

#### Recent work in Visual Literacy and Education

**Chapter**, 'Teaching Practices that Make a Difference: Doing What Works for Every Learner'. Stars in the Schoolhouse: Teaching Practices and Approaches that Make a Difference. Edited by Nicholas D. Young, Elizabeth Jean, Teresa A. Citro. Vernon Press: 2018.

**Chapter**, 'The Comforting Presence of Visual Literacy Skill in the English Language Arts Classroom'. Edited by Nicholas D. Young & Teresa A. Citro. Emotions and Education: Promoting Positive Mental Health in Students with Learning Disabilities. Vernon Press: 2018.

**Interview**, 'A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words In Visual Literate Classrooms. NPR. June 26, 2017. <http://wnpr.org/post/visually-literate-classrooms-words-are-worth-thousand-pictures>

**Contributing author**, 'First Drawing', 'Seeing Blue', 'Seeing Perspective', Drawing a Passage', 'Abstract from Letters, Worlds'. A Closer Look. Affiliated with Yale Center for British Art Department of Education and Summer Institute. 2013-present. Web. Url: <http://ycbateachers.common.yale.edu>

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# Abbreviations

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## 1 WORKS BY CHARLES BERNSTEIN

- AP *A Poetics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- CD *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986.
- CI *Controlling Interests*. New York: Roof Books, 1980.
- DC *Dark City*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994.
- I/I *Islets/Irritations*. New York: Jordan Davies, 1983.
- L=B *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. Edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984.
- NF *The Nude Formalism*. Design by Susan Bee. Los Angeles: 20 Pages, 1989; a division of Sun & Moon Press, 1989.
- PJ *Poetic Justice*. Baltimore: Pod Books, 1979.
- RR *Republics of Reality: Poems 1975-1995*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 2000.
- S *The Sophist*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1987.
- SR *Senses of Responsibility*. Berkeley: Tuumba Press, 1979.
- TS *The Subject*. Buffalo: Meow Press, 1995.
- MW *My Way: Speech and Poems*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

## 2 OTHER WORKS

- A Madeline Gins. "Arakawa's Intention (to point, to pinpoint, to model)." In *Arakawa*. Düsseldorf: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1977.

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*Our language is our veil, but one that too often is made invisible. Yet, hiding the veil of language, its wordness, its textures, its obstinate physicality, only makes matters worse. Perhaps such veils will be cast aside in the Messianic moment, that utopian point in which history vanishes. On this side of the veil, which is our life on earth, we live within and among the particulars of a here (hear) and now (words that speak of and to our condition of everydayness).*

Charles Bernstein

- i. house of possibilities: for Doors
  - ii. poetry 1975-2001: 'tried each thing, only some were immortal and free' or 'this parsing of the world'
  - i. criticism: a moebius-like twisting momentum
  - ii. editing: 'a republic (of letters? of...'
  - iii. leaving avant-garde theory: 'the limits of my language means the limits of my world'
- 

*Since there is no theory of the avant-garde or American poetics able to fully investigate Bernstein's contribution to poetry, criticism, education, and writing in general, I pattern this study after its subject. I will proceed pragmatically, looking more to investigate how his projects work, instead of attaching a specific label to a practice, or using his work as a spring board to develop a critical theory. (50)*

*The pattern for this study is to be a counterpoint to the already diverse accounts of his place in American poetry, to forge a way of reading in light of the absence of any avant-garde theory that could take into account his divergent works, and to foster further interactive readings among his copious writing practices. (52)*

# Chapter 1

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## House of Possibilities

I dwell in Possibility—  
A fairer House than Prose—  
More numerous of Windows—  
Superior — for Doors—<sup>1</sup>

Dwelling in a fairer house, Charles Bernstein's effulgent and sublunary oeuvre is an embodiment of possibilities. It is as if he has been handed the keys to that "fairer House" by Emily Dickinson herself. Her poem tells a story of poetry as a location of originality, invention, and innovation. Her material word, filled with all its handwritten originality, inventive spacing and innovative capitalization, was in direct contrast to the prose of her day. Prose, bound by rules of coherence, grammatical laws, and standards of punctuation, dwelt in a lesser house. As Bain taught in the 1880s, "the direct bearing of the Rhetorical art is, of course, not Invention, but Correctness; in other words, polish, elegance or refinement."<sup>2</sup> In private she was the unknown originator of another elegance, forging other American patterns. Today, in public, Bernstein continues not the pursuit of polishing standards, but finding the more numerous windows of an American poetry. Unlike Dickinson, Bernstein is one of the most well known innovators of recent times. Yet, even with a completely public life since 1975, large portions of Bernstein's practices have yet to be discussed or closely examined. A fuller examination of his work beckons for an exploration of new critical strategies. The direct bearing of Bernstein's art is invention, is a dwelling in the possibilities of the material word, is that fairer house. He investigates this particular American tendency to invent, to look for possibilities, to explore and create new spaces, neither as a pioneer of landscapes,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R.W. Franklin, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 1: 495. *The poems of Emily Dickinson: Including variant readings critically compared with all known manuscripts*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955), 2: 506-507. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, ed. R.W. Franklin, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 1: 483-484.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Bain, *English Composition and Rhetoric II: Emotional Qualities of Style* (New York: American Book Company, 1888), x.

nor as an immigrant searching for a new location, but as a writer forging new possibilities for the American imagination.

What sets Bernstein apart from his contemporaries as well as those historical figures in the American literary tradition is the sheer range and diversity of his writing. Each essay, poem, collaboration, and edited collection pushes the boundaries and mechanics of perusable expectations. He disrupts the notion of the line, explores the space of the page, re-works the logic of the paragraph, and expands the pragmatic use of fonts to include the aesthetic, political and philosophical. As he works within his different roles he insists on the possibilities of poetry and poetics. Just as Thomas Edison was not only interested in light bulbs, so Bernstein is not only a poet. From the very beginning of his career he has written critical prose, he has worked as an editor, and since 1990 he has worked as a full time professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo. A diverse output and ranging career can be remarkable, but these qualities in themselves are not the only aspect of Bernstein's work that sets him apart. Within each area he has worked, as an editor, poet, critic, collaborator, curator, teacher, he has brought about innovation.

Charles Bernstein is an American innovator. He is "American" in his belief that all languages and styles have a place in a democracy. He is an "innovator" in the sense that Bernstein works more as an inventor than as an iconoclast. By analyzing, citing, viewing, and explaining Bernstein's array of works, we will see that he too finds new and renewed locations of the unrestrained American word. He deserves to join the ranks of other American literary innovators such as Whitman, Dickinson, Stein, Eliot, Pound, and Williams, to only name a few. In fact, he is like all inventors in that he chooses not to leave the things of this earth alone.

Regardless of their background and motivation, all inventors appear to share the quality of being driven by the real or perceived failure of existing things or processes to work as well as they might. Fault-finding with the made world around them and disappointment with the inefficiency with which things are done appear to be common traits among inventors and engineers generally. They revel in problems—those they themselves identify in the everyday things they use, or those they work on for corporations, clients, and friends. Inventors are not satisfied with things as they are; inventors are constantly dreaming of how things might be better. This is not to say that inventors are pessimists. On the contrary, they are supreme optimists, for they pursue innovation with the belief that they can improve the world, or at least the things of the world. Inventors do not believe in leaving well

enough alone, for well enough is not good enough for them. But, also being supreme pragmatists, they realize that they must recognize limits to improvement and the trade-offs that must accompany it. Credible inventors know the limitations of the world too, including its thermodynamic laws of conservation of energy and growth of entropy. They do not seek perpetual-motion machines or fountains of youth but, rather, strive to do the best with what they have and for the best they know they can have, and they always recognize that they can never have everything.<sup>3</sup>

Bernstein is dissatisfied with the state of American poetry, and the content of his dreams are filled with alternatives in the reading, viewing, writing, and understanding of poetry. His work as an American innovator argues and shows that poetry can be a place of profound discovery, that poetry can be formed in all kinds of ways, that critical work can be more creative, and that teaching, editing and collaborating can explore and create new directions. In both the critical and creative realm he believes that he can improve the world of American poetry by working with forgotten traditions, by publishing neglected writers, by promoting and supporting new forms of writing, and by challenging and exploring the power structures of grammatical and poetic laws.

Like the inventor who fails and succeeds, Bernstein is fully aware of the limitations of his task, of what can be accomplished, and yet he accepts a radical responsibility to alter the concepts and practices of American poetry. As an innovator he explores the accepted boundaries of the American literary landscape. This exploration leads to a further unlimited, almost utopian landscape: “you see, I’m still holding out for a poetry in which meaning is discovered rather than refined, where poetry is on trial, but where the trial is sufficient to itself, producing innovation and investigation not verdicts or conclusions.”<sup>4</sup> Here is a writer who believes that writing is the source of possibility, is the source of invention, is the fiat by which poetical, critical, conceptual, material and practical possibilities take place. To read his work demands a fluid, investigative, kinetic reading among many disciplines. To discover the multiple, variegated meanings of his work brings to light the potential of writing itself, and what it means for a contemporary American to dwell in the house of possibility.

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Petroski, *The Evolution of Useful Things* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 38.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Bernstein, “An Interview with Manuel Brito”, in *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), 29-30. *My Way* is hereafter cited as *MW*.

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Charles Bernstein, born in 1950 in Manhattan, the youngest of three children, inherited Luce's "American Century": "Consider the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It is not only in the sense that we happen to live in it but ours also because it is America's first century as a dominant power in the world."<sup>5</sup> Luce in 1941 was convinced that the "20<sup>th</sup> Century" was to be America's century if it would heed the call to become a world citizen and enter into the Second World War. He justified his hope and claim by looking at cultural production.

Once we cease to distract ourselves with lifeless arguments about isolationism, we shall be amazed to discover that there is already an immense American internationalism. American jazz, Hollywood movies, American slang, American machines and patented products are in fact the only things that every community in the world, from Zanzibar to Hamburg, recognizes in common. Blindly, unintentionally, accidentally and really in spite of ourselves, we are already a world power in all the trivial ways—very human ways. But there is a great deal more than that. America is already the intellectual, scientific and artistic capital of the world. (171)

Luce's call for involvement in the Second World War is framed in terms of America's involvement in world-renowned art and technology. He goes on to write: "No narrow definition can be given to the American internationalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It will take shape, as all civilizations take shape, by the living of it, by work and effort, by trial and error, by enterprise and adventure and experience. And by imagination!" (169). Throughout the article Luce sees America as a nation awaiting maturity that will blossom when it takes on the responsibility of its creative and intellectual output.

Luce's understanding of the possibilities for America is not a new idea or insight. In fact, nearly twenty years early William Carlos Williams wrote that America had added an enormous addition to the way of life.

It has been by paying naked attention first to the thing itself that American plumbing, American shoes, American bridges, indexing systems, locomotives, printing presses, city buildings, farm implements and a thousand other things have

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<sup>5</sup> Henry R. Luce, "The American Century", *Diplomatic History*, 23, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 167, 159-171. Originally the article appeared in *Life* magazine (Feb. 17, 1941).

become notable in the world.<sup>6</sup>

Williams sees innovation arising by paying attention to the “thing itself”. By utilizing this form of attention, the engineering world becomes for Williams a source of American inspiration. From a completely different side of the political and aesthetic spectrum Luce agrees that American production has affected the world. Williams, being at home with artifact and with invention, continues.

Yet we are timid in believing that in the arts discovery and invention will take the same course. And there is no reason why they should unless our writers have the inventive intelligence of our engineers and cobblers.<sup>7</sup>

If American writers can learn from American engineers, then American writing can expand outward beyond its borders. Williams and Luce would disagree on how that cultural expansion should be encouraged, but both see invention and exploration as a defining characteristic. In the catalogue for the Whitney Museum’s exhibition, *The American Century: Art and Culture, 1950-2000*, Lisa Phillips agrees with both Luce and Williams, but she notes that in the years following the Second World War technological advance was deeply marked with social unrest.<sup>8</sup> The period is marked with profound extremes, from the assassinations of the Kennedys, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, to the American landing on the moon. Luce and Williams’ exploratory optimism continues onward, but without social innocence.

Although many contradictory events have taken place in the past 50 years, Bernstein keeps coming back to the idea of America as the land of opportunity and of poetry as the language of opportunity. He grew up in a city brimming over with people, buildings, and artistic movements. He grew up in a time when New York City was the center of the artistic, economic, and political world and when television replaced radio and became a dominant part of American life. Bernstein, growing up in Manhattan, was surrounded by amazing opportunities and he was embedded with

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<sup>6</sup> Williams Carlos Williams, “Yours, O Youth”, *Contact*, 3 (1921): 15, in *Contact: Numbers 1-5, 1920-24*, (New York: Kraus Reprint Corporation, 1967). See also Peter Halter’s use of this quotation and discussion of art as a form of construction in the section “Art as ‘Construction’” in *The Revolution in the Visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Cambridge: 1994), 32-3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Lisa Phillips, *The American Century: Art & Culture, 1950-2000* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art and W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 11.

its dynamic diversity. He also grew up in a time when men were shot, government officials were impeached, and civil rights were under scrutiny. This starting point is reflected in his work as it is crowded with difference, filled with historical reminders, comfortable with new developments, and full of the American belief that anything is possible. His critical and poetical optimism is marked however with social unrest. As he explores poetry as the language of opportunity he does so in negative terms by showing what is wrong with institutions, publishing and writing practices, and even forms of grammar and discourse. His negative approach appears throughout his work and at times breaks the contract between reader and writer leaving only silence or confusion. Unlike Williams who looked to technological innovation as a support for his aesthetics, Bernstein supports his aesthetics by rejecting institutional forms and standards and by arguing that there are more possibilities than are being allowed, discussed, or encouraged. Williams looks to an area of American life where invention and innovation had changed the daily life of the world as a way of critiquing the lack of American literary innovation. Bernstein does not find that America literary innovation is lacking only the institutions of American letters.

In most of his educational atmospheres, Bernstein was disappointed or found the methods or subjects lifeless. His early education shows that even in a city of possibilities, learning could be reduced to the repetition of set rules. When he speaks of his early education, he remembers the difficulties of embracing educational norms. His earliest education was of the Dewey persuasion which was considered progressive at the time. Bernstein writes that he “intensely disliked the social, cultural, and intellectual environment” of the school.<sup>9</sup>

On the school’s part, they did not think much of me, as I was repeatedly told: my penmanship and spelling were abysmal; I was slow to read and in constant need of remedy in the form of remedial groups; I did not socialize right; my appearance was somewhat ajar. I give a sense of this in “Standing Target” in *Controlling Interests*, where I quote some reports from Fieldston day camp, which was run by Ethical. My favorite thing to do was stay at home; some years I missed as many as forty days. And at home, there was the chance for reverie, for sleeping late, for making tuna fish sticks sprinkled with paprika, for watching daytime TV. I read TV Guide religiously in those days and knew all the panelists on the celebrity game shows, all the actors on the sitcoms, and all the comedy shows from the early 1950s that I had missed the first time around. (28)

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Bernstein, “An autobiographical interview”, interviewed by Loss Pequeño Glazier, *boundary 2*, 23, no. 3 (1996): 28. Hereafter cited as “Autobiographical Interview”.

What we learn from the quotation is that Bernstein from a very young age was confronted by language standards into which he did not fit. In the poem, “Standing Target” he takes lines from his school reports and grafts them into the structure of poem. The quotations are verbatim:

Last Spring Charles put himself on record  
that he didn't like crafts. We soon  
came to understand his feelings  
when we worked with him. Charlie  
is not strong in manual dexterity. (This  
may be part of a mixed dominance  
situation Mrs. B. and I discussed  
in relation to tying his shoes.) Fortunately,  
what he lacks in developed skills  
he makes up for in  
patience, determination, and  
knowledge of what he wants as  
results.<sup>10</sup>

The style of “report card” language is incorporated into the poem. As an adult looking back on this assessment, the feelings in the poem are mixed with sadness and regret. The issue of categorizing a child in such a way shows how quickly education and summer camp informs the way children see the world. By the end of the poem, Bernstein has transformed the reports and opened up other ways of thinking and feeling.

Fluency in gain has remedial comprehension  
The Course of improvement shown again, noticeably  
Benefiting errors, numbers, a more certain  
Knowledge to vary need, type of work,  
Continuous manner of representing alertness,  
Game of ball, confused when dictation, outgoing  
And generally broached social adjustment at  
Personal endeavors, which is not always  
Available, in and fundamentals in,  
Silent reading and oral spelling,  
Discussions, fair play, group life—  
(CI 46-7)

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<sup>10</sup> Bernstein, *Controlling Interests* (New York: Roof Books), 45. Hereafter cited as *CI*.

These lines re-write not only a history, but also a way of relating to one's history. As history, the events of the summer camp remain embedded within Bernstein's own narrative history. The fact that he has the reports and still uses them as a reference shows a certain interest and concern on his part. The final lines of the poem take history and transform it into poetry. The particulars are reshaped into universals. The latter lines ask if the course of improvement, if silent reading and oral spelling can contain the necessary criteria for judging a child's development, a child's intellectual worth. The universals, beyond the record of facts, are shaped in such a way as to create new, adept, and mutable connections.

Bernstein creates a poetry that questions language standards: "I always say I am a professor of poetry, I profess poetry: think of me as a snake-oil salesman, a confidence man: I don't want to test your accumulated knowledge; I want to convince you of the value of poetry as a method, as a way of writing, as a form of vision."<sup>11</sup> Poetry is a form of vision, and with this idea he is along side many American writers before him who looked at the visual side of the poem on the page such as Whitman, Dickinson, Williams, and e.e. cummings. Poetry can be a vision of another world, or a vision of the world, or poetry can embrace the visual. Poetry, in the case of "Standing Target", can be a transforming vision, rewriting history (that which happened) into poetry (the possible). Here poetry becomes a method, a philosophical practice, a way of writing that questions the acceptable. Moreover, in "Standing Target" just after he has four stanzas of "reports" from his childhood camp, he moves into a visual poetic:

fatigue  
of            of  
                  open for  
to                   , sees  
doubles

(CI 45)

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<sup>11</sup> Bernstein, "Conversation", 63.

These lines embrace poetry as a form of vision by shaping words on the page. In contrast to the corrective discourse of the camp “reports” these words float free from discursive logic. The reader not only wonders how fatigue sees or doubles, she or he can also begin to consider the validity of such concepts as fluency, comprehension, and manual dexterity. Here the language of childhood growth and development is at its most dexterous and calls into question the comprehensibility of educational reportage.

Many themes in Bernstein’s career are in the reflections of his early school days: an attention and confrontation with “laws” of language; an awareness and embracing of the everyday as in television; and the belief that there is great value in poetry. In 1953 Randall Jarrell published a collection of essays entitled *Poetry and the Age*. The opening piece, “The Obscurity of the Poet”, was a lecture he gave at Harvard for a conference called “The Defense of Poetry”. About half way through his sadness of obscurity, he moaned: “When in a few years, one talks to boys who have read only a few comic books, but have looked at a great many television programs—what will *they* say?”<sup>12</sup> Bernstein, —the boy who read the “TV Guide religiously”—is the only contemporary poet I know who could answer Jarrell’s fear and woe with the smile of invention. Bernstein has watched television, but has not been limited by its aesthetic boundaries. In fact, in his second collections of critical essays, *A Poetics*, published by Harvard University Press, he writes: “Poetry should be at least as interesting as, and a whole lot more unexpected than, television.”<sup>13</sup> Unafraid of daily life, tradition, or contemporary writing, Bernstein creates, in spite of his inability and refusal to be formed by acceptable norms.

Bernstein’s interest in literature arose later on in another school. He describes and attaches his awakening to Samuel Beckett’s work and a collection of international short stories.

I remember a great, thick collection of international short stories, with a gray cover, that I got at Franklin, and the excitement I felt when I read, even if I could not fully understand, Kafka, Genet, Camus, and especially Sartre. Then one day in seventh or eighth grade an English teacher named Francis Xavier Walker wrote on the board, “Bun is such a sad word is it not, and man is not much better is it.” He said it was by Samuel Beckett, and that he liked the way it sounded, the way it focused on the sound of the words man and bun. That was like hearing about the

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<sup>12</sup> Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and The Age* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 18.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3. Hereafter cited as *AP*.

theory of relativity. I was hooked; in fact years seemed to go by when all I wanted to do was stay in my small room overlooking the park, which at that point I rarely stepped into, and read books and watch TV.<sup>14</sup>

He did find in his education forms of discourse and language that went beyond socially accepted grammatical codes. His entrance into literature was through alliteration, ambiguous logic, and foreign writers. He found a set of alternatives. We could imagine that this gave him a sense that he was not alone and that other forms of being in the world existed. Although he suggests that poetry should be more interesting than television, he nevertheless continued to watch its programs. He did not abandon one for the other.

Instead of studying literature or film at university, Bernstein pursued a degree in philosophy at Harvard. His studies with Stanley Cavell and Rogers Albritton were profoundly influential. These Wittgensteinians continued to show Bernstein that there was more than one way to see the world and even more than one way to practice philosophy. His senior thesis was a reading of Gertrude Stein through Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. He first discovered Stein, through Susan Bee's class with Catharine R. Stimpson at Barnard.

...Stimpson apparently assigned *Three Lives*, and I must have heard about that from Susan. I don't think I more than glanced at *Three Lives* but I soon found *The Making of Americans*, *Tender Buttons*, "Composition as Explanation," and much other Stein material, some of which was beginning to be published in new editions at this time. When I first read these works of Stein I was completely knocked out: this is what I had been looking for, what I knew must exist, and I was giddy with excitement.<sup>15</sup>

In Bernstein's narrative of his college days, reading Stein marks a crucial coming of age. He found Stein through Stimpson's assignments at Barnard. As with his earlier experience in high school, he found a form of writing completely different from his surroundings. Stein's discourse did not proceed from a conventional discursive logic and this charged Bernstein with excitement. It is easy to understand why Bernstein would find Stein so interesting and encouraging. In her work a pre-determined form does not bind the words. Words, sentences, paragraphs use form as way of building new forms, new rhythms, and new expository logic. Her writing takes the reader in new

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<sup>14</sup> Bernstein, "Autobiographical Interview", 29.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

directions with constant unforeseen connections.

Bernstein enjoyed the study of philosophy, but found Harvard disheartening. In his autobiographical interview with Loss Pequeño Glazier, he discusses how Harvard was a place of higher learning where the politics of learning crowded out the space of exploration and discovery.

That is perhaps the chief product of Harvard Education: willful ignorance, learned callousness, and an ability to keep your eye on your personal bottom line (defined by money and social status). So, yes, this was disillusioning, and it hit me hard and almost immediately upon arriving—that “learning”, as I had romanticized it, was not disinterested and indeed was being used as a means of preserving social injustice; that one had to struggle, even at place like this, to create a space for thought, reflection, art. These are the lessons I have found very useful. But perhaps, looking back it’s not Harvard that shocked me but America, an America I had not yet met in the culturally rich, but unrepresentative, precincts I had inhabited up to that point in my life.<sup>16</sup>

Bernstein’s shock at losing his romantic notions about learning was a valuable lesson to him. He learned that his upbringing in Manhattan, within his Jewish home and community had given him a very rich environment. Discovering the America outside his community and his hometown awakened him to the fact that everyone constructed their own definition of America. The idea that learning is not “disinterested” but is completely interwoven within social norms, expectations, and standing, has remained with Bernstein throughout his life. Even in places which claim to be the center of acquiring knowledge, as Bernstein found out, a space of learning must still be created. Although his time at Harvard was disillusioning, his involvement with the theatre, philosophy, and his discovery of Stein, remained with him.

Bernstein found/made different educational environments crossing numerous cultural boundaries. He watched TV, read Sartre, disliked conventional language construction, and found alternative versions. He moved out of his smaller Manhattan community and nominally Jewish home, to Harvard’s Boston. He read Stein through Wittgenstein. The problems Bernstein encountered in his education, from grammar to cultural diversity, informs his writing praxis as an editor, critic, and educator. His difficulties lead to creation, not to a silencing skepticism, and as an inventor, he found/made a generating grammar. The inventor’s grammar is not one of correction, but one of discovery and the belief in alternatives. The matrix of an inventor’s birth is

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<sup>16</sup> Bernstein, “Autobiographical Interview”, 33.

difficult to pin down or explain in detail. What is known and what is certain is that the inventor is a special kind of critic. He or she is able to perceive problems and offer solutions. Bernstein's solutions are democratic in a new way. Like Williams, in *Paterson*, who brings into literature an array of American discourses such as letters, libraries, bills of sales, histories, reports, conversations, new poetic rhythms, Bernstein explores what it means to write in a culture that embraces diversity and has a heterologous poetic and literary tradition. Bernstein's solution involves the destruction of the idea that only one American writing exists; his solution also involves the support of multiple writings as well as creation of new forms, approaches, and networks. Regularly, in his critical, editorial, or poetic work, creation and destruction are simultaneous. At times though his inventive eye and ear only rest upon the destruction or the problematic leaving little or any room for creation to follow.

In 1973 after graduating from Harvard, Bernstein and his then girlfriend Susan Bee (they were later married in 1977) went out West where he spent time in Vancouver, Canada and Santa Barbara, California. He attended a seminar on Emily Dickinson at Simon Fraser University led by Robin Blaser. He also sent some of his first work to Jerome Rothenberg, whose edited books, *Technicians of the Sacred* and *Revolution of the Word*, had opened up new critical avenues in the study and understanding of poetics. *Technicians of the Sacred*, was one of the first studies in ethnopoetics. The book was a collection of poetic writings concerning the sacred and included Native American Indian, South American, Maori, Tibetan, Aztec, and Hebrew writings. *Revolution of the Word* was a "new gathering of American Avant-Garde Poetry: 1914-1945" to quote the subtitle of the book. His edition included rare selections of writings of Bob Brown, Mina Loy, Charles Reznickoff and Louis Zukofsky, as well as selections from Stein, Williams, Eliot and other well known writers. Not only did Rothenberg write Bernstein back he also put him in touch with Ron Silliman and Dennis Tedlock. Silliman sent him a reading list, which Bernstein recalls included "Michael Palmer and Clark Coolidge and a half-dozen others, including Eigner and Creeley." Bernstein adds, "I hadn't read many of those poets and was also hearing about some of them, and a related set, from Blaser. I had access to the library and to the extraordinary poetry collection, so I had no trouble finding even the most obscure poetry I wanted. It was heaven."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 38

Bernstein's reflections on his time in Vancouver and Santa Barbara show a writer looking back on places, books, and events that shaped his career. As a part of his education (he was on a Fellowship) Blaser, the library, and those poets he met expanded his own understanding and reading of American poetry.

Bernstein along with Susan Bee returned to Manhattan in 1975 which also marks the beginning of his literary career. As he was publishing poetry, writing criticism, editing literary works, giving readings, and delivering papers at conferences, he worked in a completely different profession. From 1975 until 1990 Bernstein worked as an editor for *Merck Minutes* (national tabloid journal for pharmacists), as an abstracts editor for *Modern Medicine of Canada*, and as a free-lance writer for numerous medical publications. His first teaching appointment came in 1987 as a Visiting Lecturer in the Department of Literature at University of California, San Diego. In 1988 he was a Visiting Professor at Queens College of the City University of New York, and a faculty member/series coordinator for the Wolfson Center for National Affairs at the New School for Social Research. In 1989 and 1990 he was a lecturer in the Creative Writing Program at Princeton. Also in 1989 he was Butler Professor (Visiting) in the Department of English, State University of New York at Buffalo. In 1990 he took up his full-time position at State University of New York (SUNY) Buffalo where he remains the David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters.

Bernstein's career begins in the same year John Ashbery's highly awarded *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* was published. In the second stanza of the first poem "As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat" Ashbery writes:

I tried each thing, only some were immortal and free.  
Elsewhere we are sitting in a place where sunlight  
Filters down, a little at a time,  
Waiting for someone to come. Harsh words are spoken,  
As the sun yellows, the green of the maple tree. . . .

So this was all, but obscurely  
I felt the stirrings of new breath in the pages  
Which all winter long had smelled like an old catalogue.

New sentences were starting up. But the summer  
Was well along, not yet past the mid-point  
But full and dark with the promise of that fullness,  
That time when one can no longer wander away  
And even the least attentive fall silent  
To watch the thing that is prepared to happen.<sup>18</sup>

The two opening stanzas of Ashbery's volume take the reader toward a reflection on the passing of time and the changing of the seasons. The poem begins with the "I" trying each thing, but those explorations and investigations were sempiternal and not binding. Outside, waiting for someone, the movement of the earth "filters down", and harsh words are spoken. Beyond words the sun works its wonder on the landscape. Ashbery intertwines the self in the poem with movements of nature, and this it seems, is all. In the next stanza with the turning of one line, he draws from the whole tradition of literature where the new breath opens up and extends life: "I felt the stirrings of new breath in the pages". We can see the motif of "new breath" in the Judeo-Christian creation accounts where the Creator breathes life into man. We can see the motif in the New Testament accounts of the spirit being over the law. We can see this in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, where the sweet breath of heaven comes upon him. We can see this motif in Olson's breath. In contrast, Ashbery finds new breath in the pages; and he states: "New sentences were starting up." The written word and the physical earth were being stirred. Ashbery removes the boundary between self-reflection and nature. Night arrives with the ending of the poem giving an end to both the writing and the day: "And a sigh heaves from all the small things on earth, / The books, the papers, the old garters and union-suit buttons". Night instead of summer "gives more than it takes".<sup>19</sup> Although night has come, "New sentences were starting up". When we come to the end of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, we can see that indeed new sentences were starting up. It is almost as if these words were a prophecy of the innovative work that at that time appeared on the horizon.

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<sup>18</sup> John Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (New York: Viking, 1975), 1. Hereafter cited as *Self-Portrait*.

<sup>19</sup> *Self-Portrait*, 2.

Regardless of Ashbery's stature as a prophet, we can safely argue that Bernstein's career shows that new sentences were starting up not only in his poetry, but also in his criticism and editorial work.

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We could say of Bernstein, that he, like the speaker in Ashbery's poem, "tried each thing, only some were immortal and free". At the beginning of this study it is important to lay before the reader all that Bernstein has tried. Many writers and critics, and even those familiar with Bernstein's writing, are unaware of the range of his cogent and variegated poetics. Bernstein has fashioned many forms of verse, critical prose, page designs, librettos, and classes; therefore, it is important to give a brief overview of his wide-ranging work. First, I will give a brief overview of his poetry. Next, I will comment on his critical work, and finally on his editorial work. To be able to have just a small glimpse of his total output thus far, will give this study and the reader a taste of the difficulty of writing the first full length appraisal of Bernstein's accomplishments in and contributions to American poetry. For every poem, critical essay, collaboration, classroom practice, libretto, or web page cited, analyzed, and explained, another awaits, waiting another reader. In terms of ongoing critical potential, this abundance is good news; in terms of this study, Bernstein's diversity is a precarious critical reality. The choices to examine his multiple roles, his visual strategies, his redescription of poetic measurement, his ability as a teacher and editor, his ongoing innovation of the technology of poetry, electronic media, the book and subjectivity, are all informed by a desire to not enervate Bernstein's work. To adequately respond to Bernstein is to follow each thing he has tried, and this meandering exploration is essential to the understanding, participation, and assessment of his work. Bernstein's most accessible works, due in part by who published them, have been his editorial and critical volumes. To see all twenty-four volumes of Bernstein's poetry is at times an arduous task, due to their complexity, the diversity of publishers, the number of copies printed, and methods of distribution. However we approach Bernstein's oeuvre, we are faced with a writer who has produced from 1975 to 2001 an enormous body of work.

In the 1970s, Bernstein published five volumes of poetry: *Asylums* (1975); *Parsing* (1976); *Shade* (1978); *Poetic Justice* (1979); and *Senses of Responsibility* (1979). All but *Asylums* were

re-published in *Republics of Reality: Poems 1975-1995*.<sup>20</sup> The title of his first volume, *Asylums* has a range of meanings: from the place where society places those who are not able to function socially to a harbor of safety for political refugee.<sup>21</sup> His career begins outside the norms of societal structures, codes of behavior, or in opposition to politically dominate power structures. His next volume, *Parsing* is named after a grammatical function meaning “to describe (a word or series of words) grammatically, telling the part of speech, inflectional form, syntactic relations.”<sup>22</sup> However, what occurs in *Parsing* goes beyond a rhetorical examination. The first section, entitled “Sentences”, takes the reader through a series of one-line sentences, sometimes starting with “I”, sometimes starting with “you” or “it”. The cumulative effect is like watching Bob Dylan singing “Subterranean Homesick Blues” with Allen Ginsberg in the background going through plaque cards.<sup>23</sup> In the second section entitled “Parsing”, Bernstein writes, toward the end of the piece, of “parsing” the world.

the snow,  
    flakes,  
this parsing of the world  
    to make worlds & worlds  
like atmosphere  
    a substance, of gravity  
        that pulls apart  
    or back on<sup>24</sup>

The piece shifts again to another subject matter in the next line (“i slept then, i bathed on wednesday also”). The fourteenth section of the poem, demarcated by a dash, begins with snow

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Republics of Reality: Poems 1975-1995* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 2000). Hereafter cited as *RR*. *Republics of Reality* opens with the volume *Parsing*.

<sup>21</sup> The first poem is “Asylums” which he later published in *Islet/Irritations* (1983).

<sup>22</sup> The *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*. Unabridged edition, New York: Random House, 1966. Unless otherwise stated, the *OED* (1971) will be used throughout the entire work.

<sup>23</sup> Bob Dylan, “Subterranean Homesick Blues” on the video *Don't Look Back* by D.A. Pennebaker, (New York: Warner Reprise Video, a division of Warner Brothers Records, Inc., 1967).

<sup>24</sup> *RR*, 55. The original was published by Bernstein’s own Asylum Press with 300 copies, and was designed by Bernstein’s wife Susan Bee.

but as with Ashbery's poem, it soon weaves together nature with grammar. The word "this" could refer back to the snow flakes or point forward. The "parsing of world" by separating "snow", from "flakes", takes us into one of the major concerns in all of Bernstein's poetry: the investigation of how our language and our writing is constructed in order to create meaning(s). For him the process is not simply a descriptive one, but actually makes "worlds and worlds". Parsing then, is seen as a generative process. Now, instead of snowflake being a descriptive term, the snow gains action and flakes. Flake finds a new location, renews as it exposes its syntactical relations, and reconnects with further referents, ranges of meanings, linguistic reverberations.

Bernstein's next volume of poetry, *Shade*, continues to explore writing as a generative process. In the opening poem entitled "Poem" we read:

here. Forget.  
There are simply tones  
cloudy, breezy  
birds & so on.  
Sit down with it.  
It's time now.  
There is no more natural sight.  
Anyway transform everything  
silence, trees  
commitment, hope  
this thing inside you  
flow, this movement of the eyes

set of words  
all turns, all grains.

(RR 71)

The volume begins with a partial sentence— an end with a beginning. In the very next word we find Bernstein using punctuation as an element of poetic diction instead of a sign of grammatical correctness. We are to forget normal procedures. Looking onto the world, there are simply tones, birds of the earth, and the loss of “natural sight”. The poem, moving toward the notion that natural sight is mutated, presses a question: if sight is not natural, then what is it? Bernstein moves away from “natural sight” toward a form of sight that contains silence, trees, eyes, and words. He creates a poetic infused with the belief that the immaterial and material (“all turns, all grains”) work into the poem and into seeing. Sight then, is culturally informed by knowledge, and is not a mechanical process. We see our sight, in and around eyes, silences, trees, tones, all generating turns, grains, words.

In the poem “The Bean Field”, we see Bernstein at work in formal and traditional ways. The title recalls Thoreau’s chapter in *Walden*. Stanley Cavell argues in *The Senses of Walden* that the “The Bean-Field” chapter is at the heart of Thoreau’s work as a writer. It is in this chapter where Thoreau acknowledges that he is a maker of parables.

Chapter VII, called “The Bean Field”, contains the writer’s most open versions of his scriptural procedures or, as he puts it later, his revisions of mythology (XV 22), because he says there explicitly that he is growing his beans not to eat but solely in order to get their message, so to speak: “I was determined to know beans. . . perchance, as some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day” (VII 10, 11).<sup>25</sup>

Cavell reads Thoreau’s work in the bean field as a metaphor of writing and of his responsibility to language. He takes Thoreau’s bean field as a window in the house of poetic possibilities. The work in the earth’s soil pushes the writer to find in language the same kind of work and responsibility outside the already packaged life of the city. In the country, Thoreau finds ways of responding to nature in order to bring about sustenance and a life-style. Bernstein’s “The Bean

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<sup>25</sup> Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 20.

Field” is not an ode to Thoreau, but a response of responsibilities. The form he uses, three words per line, he will use again and again. He sets up a metaphorical relationship not only intimately bound to his former teacher, but also to the American poetic tradition. Reading Bernstein’s move through Cavell, we can see that the lines of “The Bean Field” come in nice rows of threes:

itself, with all  
& cannot possibly  
a few pulls  
as for a  
the bell, there  
on fire,—or  
deep, such, &  
deliberately, to front  
the day is  
an—to a  
in us: by  
profaned, an hour  
so poor an  
slumbering? They are  
all, by dead  
error & clot  
stripped. Up comes

(RR 111)

The words arrive three at a time, each line taking us back to ponder over Thoreau’s bean field and its ability to make him a maker of parables. Each line is a field of further possibilities, and leaves open “for the sake of tropes and expression”, images awaiting the reflective process. The title can be read with each line. For example, the bean field “itself, with all” the work that is required, demands repetition, duty, foresight “& cannot possibly” be a bean field without “a few pulls”. “As

for a” metaphor for writing, we could look to “the bell, there” off in the distance, ringing. We can go on, with this generative process, building a response. Bernstein’s “The Bean Field” allows for the potential of these words to bring a narrative, a life, a rhythm, turning him, like Thoreau, into a “parable-maker”.

Cavell argues at the end of his chapter “Words” that heroic writing produces responsibility. The heroic book, Cavell suggests, is “at once a renewed instruction of the nation in its ideals, and a standing proof of its resources of poetry”(6). For Cavell, Thoreau’s *Walden* is such a book. The book that is produced teaches the ideals of a nation and shows the glory of its poetry. In this sense, Bernstein’s “The Bean Field” is also an attempt to bring forth a heroic writing. The poem does not over-design the reader’s response; consequently, the space of reading is larger. What is required of the reading is choice, endurance, and a willingness to discover and explore a wilderness. Bernstein takes up the task of “the writing of a nation’s scripture” (33). The way it is built on the page shows that its space leaves open countless poems. In reading the poem we can follow the leads of the words, we can reflect upon Thoreau’s work or we can settle on the words themselves. Cavell argues that when writing assumes responsibility, it embraces the visual nature of the word, it takes the position that words and the ordering of words are formed through human conventions and are fused with beliefs, and it does not ignore the vocal nature of the word. Accepting the responsibilities for these aspects of the word, of entrusting “our meaning to a word” (34), we will find a writing that embraces the highest ideal that the nation has to offer. Bernstein’s “The Bean Field” returns the ideals of discovery, participation, work, and democratic possibility—in the sense that more than one reading can be given to reading. Bernstein accepts the responsibility of language in its visual, sonic, and grammatical nature. For him the responsibility is to investigate how the realities of a nation’s language function and how it has been used. His pragmatics lead to “The Bean Field” as a democratic site, and lead him to call into question forms of critical control and exclusion.

In *Shade*, we will find yet another avenue of Bernstein’s writing that accepts Cavell’s dictum that “every mark in language means something” (33). The poem “St. McCaf.” is a poem using typography as a form of poetic meaning within a discursive logic transforming concrete or letterist tendencies that ignore or disregard syntax. Bernstein does not abandon the grammatical,

visual, or aural dimension of poetics. Instead, he embraces each mark as meaningful, regardless of whether its meaning is derived from the sonic, visual, or grammatical register.

, canopy  
as scratch (rune  
potential a  
s...n...r...ty  
the pull  
“buckle me”  
with a ...pAt  
“i leap up”  
sights  
“iDeaLLy”  
being (?)  
“happens”  
nOt sParTan  
: polish(s) (ed)  
ll  
TO FACE

(RR 86)

Bernstein is willing to explore the whole range of the typographic vocabulary, and not just accept one kind of lettering for one kind of poem, line, or word. He is transforming concrete or letterist tendencies within the traditional line. All the marks of language have significance and fill out the reading of each line. He shows, as have many American poets before and around him, how the use of common everyday forms of language within a new context increases poetic possibilities. Each line works on its own, but adds to a potential progression. The lines can be read aloud, but also must be viewed. We look for ways to read the combinations. We can fill in absences with letters. We can enjoy the sight of the lines, as no mark is without meaning. The relations between letters and signs, words and lines, do not fall flat but enhance a reflective process that opens out

into all aspects of a language's meaning and aesthetic force. Written in lines, the poem does not demand that the letters be taken as objects in some vague conceptual space. Instead, Bernstein brings aspects of that tradition into the line as a way of exploring new relations of meaning.

I have purposely chosen works in these first two volumes that reveal Bernstein's diversity, as well as his relationship with multiple poetic genres. Already, we can see Stein's grammar, Cummings' philosophy of type, a clear interaction with his contemporaries, and a relationship with his own educational and literary tradition. Instead of repeating a tradition of literary forms he takes aspects of various modes and creates new larger wholes and forms. Bernstein's poetic practice includes a "parsing" of the world where writing is a generative process and a responsive interaction with the American literary tradition. By building new machines of words, metaphorically planting new bean fields, and by transforming concrete and letterist traditions within the line, Bernstein at the very beginning of his career moves beyond a singular conception of poetic practice.

In the 1980s, Bernstein published ten volumes of poetry: *Legend* (1980); *Controlling Interests* (1980); *Disfrutes* (1981); *The Occurrence of Tune* (1981); *Stigma* (1981); *Islets/Irritations* (1983); *Resistance* (1983); *Veil* (1987); *The Sophist* (1987); *Four Poems* (1988); and, *The Nude Formalism* (1989). These volumes show Bernstein's ability to continue his exploration of what is possible for American poetry. He creates a remarkable poetic diversity from his most visual work *Veil* to his collaborations *Legend*, *The Occurrence of Tune*, and *The Nude Formalism*. *Controlling Interests* and *The Sophist* are larger volumes with numerous long poems. *Disfrutes*, *Stigma*, *Resistance*, and *Four Poems* are all shorter works with as few as twenty pages. As with his writing in the 1970s, Bernstein explores different aspects of poetry in each volume. His poetry fluctuates between a dense, compact line, often using obscure vocabulary, and a syntax that has little or nothing to do with standard forms of English grammatical structure. For him words can be built together in a variety of ways. This procedural belief inspired by Stein as well as Wittgenstein causes his work to always be in tension between understandability/participation and confusion/inaccessibility. His work in the 1980s also accepts the whole page as a canvas. However, he is not making shape poems or exploring concrete poetry. He is looking for ways in which the materiality of the words, its letters, types, as well as all the marks and signs utilized for grammar, are used on the page and can become a fusion between the plastic and poetic arts. Twice in the 1980s Bernstein publishes two volumes in the same year that are completely different in form and approach. In reading all these

volumes side by side, we are confronted with a poetic that accepts the range of published American poetry. Bernstein is a writer who is familiar not only with Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* but who is also responding to and carrying forth a continuation of Jerome Rothenberg's *Revolution of the Word: A New Gathering of American Avant-Gard Poetry: 1914-1945*.

In *Stigma*, for example, we are given a very satiating and abrading syntax. A number of the poems are titled after months of the year, and they flirt with traditional symbolism and poetic realism of seasonal change. The opening poem "March" ends with the line: "Renewed verges" (RR 235). "September" opens with "colors fix / and patch". In "December", Bernstein concludes:

We who hope for  
Fluted things, and  
All barned up,  
Make haze and  
Stumbled spires.

(RR 250)

A playful realism emerges. Fluted could be a shape or a sound. The metaphor is excellent as it competes and corresponds with spires. At first we could read these lines as a desire for a shape other than the spires. Spires, traditionally pointing towards the heavens, have been symbols of praise and aspirations. The "we" makes haze of the stumbled spires, as an act of destruction. If we read flute as a sound, the flute as a cultural code has also been considered the sound of the heavens. As we are in the barn, harvested, waiting in our hope, we only make hazy that which is pointing toward the heavens. Hazing is an act of transgression. As we make haze and sin, we are hoping for something, a sound from above, but as we are hoping for something, as we are stored in the barn for winter, that is living in a body on this earth, we destroy possibility.

In "May" we learn,

A fabric of routine  
and inertia

by its own hand  
invests in clangor  
partly to contain  
partly to quell  
what surges without  
control.

(RR 240)

The fabric of routine causes the reader to look at the title and ask how this poem relates to the title. Perusal expectations of a pastoral piece on the subject of spring are not satisfied. In May a routine of spring along with its inertia arrives to clangor, contain, and quell, the renewed earth. Instead of Spring being a movement of Nature, it's a movement of routine and inertia. Routine and inertia could be about nature or an individual who is experiencing nature. The gap of knowledge strains the reading. Reading, then can not lead to conclusive statements about the poem. "May" is not viewed purely from nature or the ego in nature. The lack of semantic guidance or located referentiality gives the piece a lot of unanswerable questions: What surges without control? Whose or what routine? What investment? This kind of linguistic minimalism requires more work on the reader's part and also keeps the subject of the poem forever beyond verifiability. Instead of certain knowledge, Bernstein constructs beginnings and endings that resist easy absorption. In both "December" and "May" we have traditional themes: stored waiting, pronounced progression. Yet the form is shaped in such a way that the ancient themes in English poetry arrive as forceful constructions of nature's processes; however, the meditations are from within language itself as it mediates the dialectic of the nature, sign and consciousness.

In the 1990s, Bernstein published nine volumes of poetry: *The Absent Father in Dumbo* (1990); *Fool's Gold*, with Susan Bee (1991); *Rough Trades* (1991); *Dark City* (1994); *The Subject* (1995); *Little Orphan Anagram*, with Susan Bee (1997); *Reading Red*, with Richard Tuttle (1998); and *Log Rhythms*, with Susan Bee (1998). *Dark City* and *Rough Trades* are collections of Bernstein's longer poems, and contain poems that emphasize the line of the poem instead of the page of the poem. However, in both there are notable exceptions from this generalization. For example, "The Lives of the Toll Takers" in *Dark City*, and "The Puritan Ethic and the Spirit

of Capitalization” | in *Rough Trades* are poems that design the space of the page. The poem “Of Time and the Line” from *Rough Trades* is one of Bernstein’s most anthologized pieces.<sup>26</sup> The importance of this poem may be its humorous study of the “line”. Beginning with “George Burns likes to insist that he always / takes the straight lines;...”, Bernstein proceeds to go through a number of situations where the word “line” is used.

My father pushed a  
line of ladies’ dresses --not down the street  
in a pushcart but upstairs in a fact’ry  
office. My mother has been more concerned  
with her hemline. Chairman Mao put forward  
Maoist lines, but that’s been abandoned (most-  
ly) for the East-West line of malarkey  
so popular in these parts. The prestige  
of the iambic line has recently  
suffered decline, since it’s no longer so  
clear who “I” am, much less who you are. When  
making a line, better be double sure  
what you’re lining in & what you’re lining  
out & which side of the line you’re on; the  
world is made up so (Adam didn’t so much  
name as delineate). Every poem’s got  
a prosodic lining, some of which will

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<sup>26</sup> *American Poetry Since 1970: Up Late, Second Edition*, ed. and intro. Andrei Codrescu, (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1989), 567. *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Paul Hoover, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 570. *From the Other Side of The Century: A New American Poetry, 1960-1990*, ed. and intro. Douglas Messerli, (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1994), 798.

unzip for summer wear.<sup>27</sup>

This poem, written in pentameter with irregular meter, turns the question of time and the line back on itself in a humorous way. The word “line” has an assortment of meanings and Bernstein within a traditional form takes the reader in a variety of directions. There are lines for fashion, politics, and religion. “Or, as / they say in math, it takes two lines to make / an angle but only one lime to make / a Margarita.” This humorous ending of the forty-line poem shows Bernstein’s ability to embrace the pun. The poem shows his familiarity with traditional subjects, and is representative of the innovative work he is doing within the line of the poem. The poem also shows that many lines and forms of lines exist within a variety of subjects, rhythms, and implications. Bernstein pushes the point that “line” does not have a singular, semantic domain. Within a roughly iambic line, he re-opens the abundance of the line’s formal designs. Bernstein taps into the abundance of meanings for a single word and uses its metaphorical, literal and figurative senses to show the numerous ways we can think about “time” and the “line”. In this poem no formal solutions are offered to the abundance of meaning typically denied in singular conceptions of a “line” of verse.

Bernstein’s other volumes published in the 1990s, show his interest in collaboration and the page of the poem. *Fool’s Gold*, *Little Orphan Anagram*, and *Log Rhythms* are all works in which Bernstein collaborated with the painter Susan Bee. Each volume involves an elaborately designed page along with Bernstein’s text. *Little Orphan Anagram* is a work of nearly forty pages, with each page hand painted by Bee. In “Verdi and Postmodernism” we can see how the page design interacts with the poem (Figure 1.1). The poem (also published in *Rough Trades*), follows regular meter and stanza form, yet lives in the context of Bee’s image. The image is not set off as an illustration, nor does the poem seem to be a response to the image. We can dissect the forms of beauty suggesting that formalism does not give enough knowledge to understand beauty. The image, having a life of its own, is not framed as an illustration of the poem. Rather the poem and the image live together, each verging and converging around a range of meanings. *Reading Red* is another collaboration with the artist and painter Richard Tuttle. In this volume each page folds out into a circle with painted squares, with Bernstein’s poetry imposed upon the shades of

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<sup>27</sup> “Of Time and the Line”, *Rough Trades* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1991), 42.

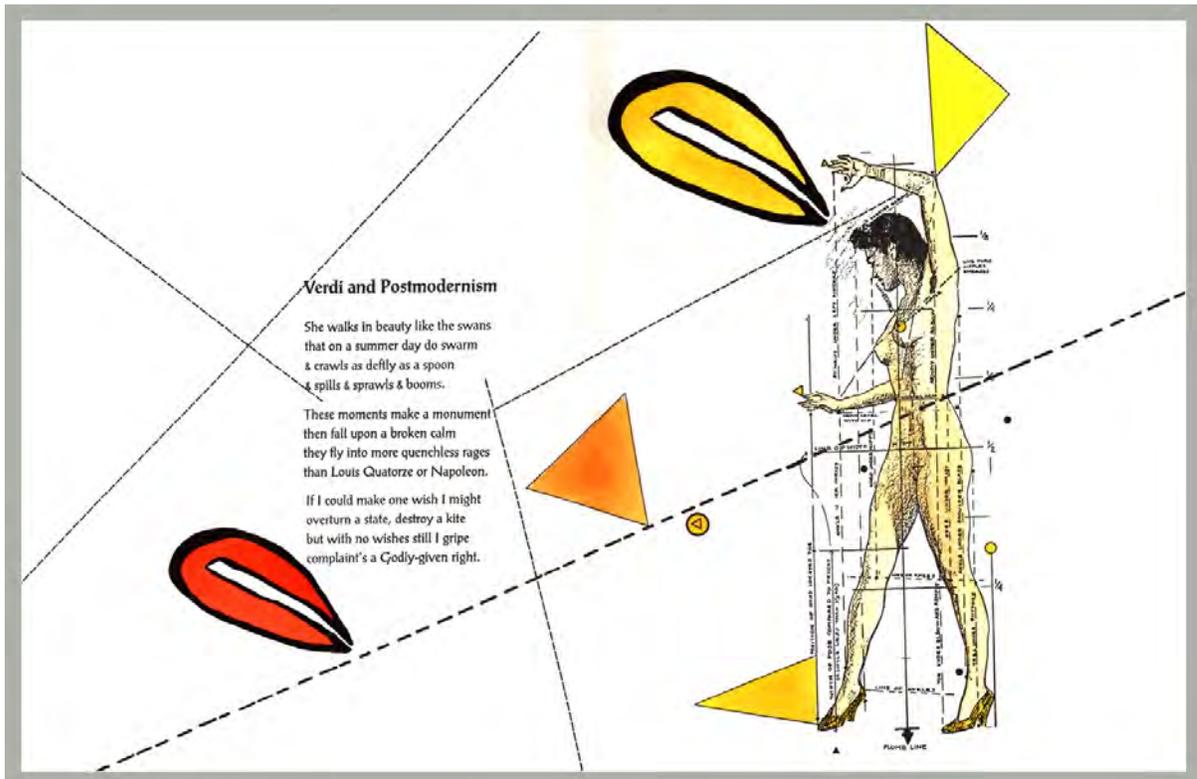


Figure 1.1. Charles Bernstein and Susan Bee, “Verdi & Postmodernism”, *Little Orphan Anagram* (New York: Granary Books, 1997). Letterpress, watercolor, and gouache, 11 x 17”. The poem is set in two pages.

color. *The Subject*, a libretto, (the material also figures into the poem “The Lives of the Toll Takers” in the volume *Dark City*) was a collaboration with Ben Yarmolinsky and performed in the early 1990s. Bernstein’s poetic work in the 1990s shows an interest in seeing poetry within different contexts: the page, the artist book, and the stage. His ongoing ability to explore the basic mechanisms of poetics, without simply accepting prescribed rules, takes him in new directions. Poetry, for Bernstein, is a house of possibilities. As poetry is housed in words, lines and the page, Bernstein takes these elements as sites of discovery and invention instead of domains for correct refinement. He is reworking the line, designing the page, constructing and finding the image. He does this not to establish one particular set of new rules, but to display the abundant values American poetry has had and can have. Image, voice, sensibility, line, and page, all are essential elements in Bernstein’s poetry.

Historically, we find in Bernstein elements of many earlier American writers, from Whitman to Pound. His work shows his relations with the generation just before him—Mac Low, Ashbery, and Rothenberg. We can find elements in his work of Cummings (typographical), Williams (his use of different kinds of language as in *Paterson*), Bob Brown (his visual page spacing), Stein (her concept of grammar), Ashbery (his mixture of self, world, and language), as well as elements of Silliman (his procedural emphasis), Hejninian (her narrative), Howe (her words as power structures), and Mayer (her experiments). What sets Bernstein apart from all these writers is his unique ability to weave together all these styles. Sometimes his uniqueness occurs in the space of one line. At other times, his particularity asserts itself with the publishing of two completely different volumes in one year. For Bernstein, language and its structures are the elements of constructing an involvement with the reader, the page, the line, words, and the world itself. He takes type, grammar, the page, the line, the sign, and the rhythm, as bricks of meaning that need to be designed.

Before we continue we need to ask a few questions. Given these incredible claims about Bernstein's work thus far, why hasn't his work been more fully embraced? In other words, is this reading of Bernstein naïve, one-sided, or incapacitating praise? And, as we will see, prominent critics have been dismissive. Bernstein has been throughout his career in both his poetry and criticism critical of many reigning conceptions of what is "American" poetry and not only this, he has named names, journals, and institutions and at times created a highly polemical atmosphere. Lines have been drawn, prejudices formed, and investigation of the "other" abandoned. The weakness of our pluralistic moment is that although differences are allowed (or those differences which are in vogue are allowed) the different groups do not have to have any contact with each other, or even know one another. It is possible that Bernstein's work has not been more fully embraced because of the polemical atmosphere he in part created. Nevertheless, not showing any understanding of his work or the problems he has continually pointed out is a great weakness of our dominant critical inquiry and those who have been dismissive. Unfortunately, possibly due to the polemical atmosphere, favoring Bernstein's work means that the reader/critic completely embraces all of Bernstein's viewpoints, agendas, and perspectives. Since those who have formed sharp categorical judgements about Bernstein's work have not shown any real understanding of his various projects, the actual study of his work is further complicated. Although I have

fundamental disagreements with Bernstein's poiesis, find some of his projects attenuated, and question his negative dialectic, I do find an abundance that merits complete and sustained critical attention.

Another answer to the above questions has to do with a further aspect of our prejudices and politics. Bernstein's work is difficult to read and because of this difficulty his work is not more thoroughly analyzed. As we have already seen, his poetry places a range of demands upon the reader. These demands pressure a reader's hermeneutical capacity. Since no form of reading is neutral, how the reader has been taught to read poetry and to read in general will inform a response to Bernstein's work. Furthermore, and quite simply, how a person responds to writing reveals his or her own location in culture. Disrupted syntax, type, or page design can be taken as an opportunity for further investigation or as a sign of an inadequate or "typical" reactionary poetics. Hermeneutical conventions can foster redundancy; however at the site where these conventions are questioned new critical choices are called upon. Bernstein has not set up a new school of critical inquiry or poetics to be imitated, but his work does demand that former laws of language construction not bind its critical assessment. Instead of blind praise or polemical contempt, this study will seek to critical assess Bernstein's multifarious work.

What kind of voice, image, sensibility, line and page are possible in American poetry? Are these possibilities practiced? If not, why? A critic can either enter into this exploration, or look for ways to shut down reflective speculation. If Bernstein's poetry gives an answer to the first question, his criticism offers answers for the next two. He has published three collections of critical essays: *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (1986); *A Poetics* (1992); *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (1999). The first collection shows that Bernstein is involved in several different critical projects as he investigates and creates a contemporary poetry. Within the collection there are a range of close interactive readings on contemporary poets such as Coolidge, Hejinian, and on established writers such as Laura Riding Jackson and Robert Creeley. He has essays on Cavell and Wittgenstein and their relation to the philosophy of language. He also writes with ease on contemporary art. A collaborative analysis with Susan Bee on Arakawa's work, shows how far ranging his investigation can go. Bernstein's essays reveal a poet who is quite capable of entering into critical discourse. He does not write of critical epiphanies, or

offer meditations on single words. Instead, he argues and designs innovative critical engagement. *Content's Dream* was reviewed by numerous journals such as *The Missouri Review*, *Line*, *Temblor* and *Southern Humanities Review*, to only name a few.<sup>28</sup> Marjorie Perloff argues that we can see it as a manifesto calling “into question some of the most entrenched pieties of contemporary American ‘official verse culture’.”<sup>29</sup> Her list of seven critiques or sites of new exploration includes the philosophy of language, poetics as a personal voice, expression of subjectivity based on speech, the lyric based on only one kind of music, and the claims of poetic discourse as separate from philosophy.<sup>30</sup> Perloff reads *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* as a collection of essays in the old sense of the word essay, that is, a place where compositions are explorations. After working through a number of definitions from the *OED*, she argues that Bernstein’s work reopens the essay as a place where the unexpected can take place. This metaphorically looks back to Joseph Addison’s statement: “The wildness of those Compositions which go by the Names of Essays.”<sup>31</sup> Bernstein’s collection of essays are forms of composition filled with possibilities waiting to be finished in the reader as he or she, acts upon Bernstein’s insights, suggestions, remarks, or creations.

Rather than having a single form or shape or idea of the work pop out as you read, the structure itself is pulled into a moebius-like twisting momentum. In this process, the language takes on a centrifugal force that seems to trip it out of the poem, turn it out from itself, exteriorizing it. Textures, vocabularies, discourses, constructivist modes of radically different character are not integrated into a field as part of a predetermined planar architecture; the gaps and jumps compose a space within shifting parameters, types and styles of discourse constantly crisscrossing, interacting, creating new gels. (Intertextual, interstructural...)<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Hank Lazer, “Criticism and the Crisis in American Poetry”, *The Missouri Review* 9, no. 1 (1985-86): 201-232. Larry Price, “Edit is Act: Some Measurements for *Content's Dream*”, *Line* 7/8 (1986): 200-207. Linda Reinfeld, “Bernstein’s Dream”, *Temblor* 5 (1987): 134-135. DeVillo Sloan, review of *Content's Dream*, *Southern Humanities Review* 21, no. 3 (1987): 283-284.

<sup>29</sup> “Essaying: Hot and Cool,” Marjorie Perloff, *Michigan Quarterly Review* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 410, 404-12. Hereafter cited as “Essaying”.

<sup>30</sup> “Essaying”, 410- 411.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

<sup>32</sup> Bernstein, “Semblance” *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1986), 38-39. The volume of essays are hereafter cited as *CD*.

Bernstein's writing in regards to the field of the poem can also be applied to a critical understanding of his essays. The essays move about, are in several different forms (numbered propositions, prose poem, critical free verse), require kinetic and meandering reading, offer answers as well as creating new ambiguities. What is certain is that new gels are in the making. He is looking for new combinations as his interaction with ideas and traditions questions the nature and function of verse, painters, and poets. He brings to life his belief that "[t]he invention of meaning is a product of choosing specific sequences."<sup>33</sup> His writing about poetics arrives in many forms and perspectives as he investigates both. In contrast to, say, Pinsky's *The Situation of Poetry*, Bernstein's critical writing redraws the boundaries between theory and poetry as he investigates contemporary poetics.

*A Poetics*, Bernstein's next volume of critical work, continues his re-description of what is possible in critical analysis. *A Poetics*, published by Harvard, takes him into one of the most established publishing venues in America. He writes in the preface: "Poetry should be as interesting as, and a whole lot more unexpected than, television."<sup>34</sup> Not only does Bernstein's poetry contain the unexpected, so does his critical discourse. In *A Poetics*, Bernstein moves beyond other kinds of writing by American poets. Compared to Robert Hass' *Twentieth Century Pleasures* or Richard Kostelanetz's *The New Poetries and Some Old*, Bernstein's work is completely unique and innovative. Not only does Bernstein write that poetry is more unexpected than television, he also practices a critical procedure that is more interesting than commercials. The opening essay, "Artifice of Absorption" written in verse, sets him apart from any other American poet.<sup>35</sup> He, like Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson*, invents a form for his critical discussion. Here his statement to Beckett makes complete sense: "Whatever 'critical' writing I've done makes sense primarily in terms of the 'poetry', is one and the same project."<sup>36</sup> "Artifice of Absorption" addresses how the construction of meaning in language can be forgotten, and how even critical readers can simply absorb the work without knowledge of the artifice of its made-ness.

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<sup>33</sup> As quoted by Perloff in "Essaying", 407.

<sup>34</sup> Bernstein, "State of the Art", *AP*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Rasula wants to compare this essay to Karl Shapiro's "Essay on Rime" (1945). "Politics in, Politics of" in *The American Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990*, (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), 404.

<sup>36</sup> "An Interview with Tom Beckett", *CD*, 402.

Bernstein believes that the materiality of the sign is essential to meaning, and this belief is the recurring subject of his critical analysis. He is unique in that he investigates the form while he makes his argument.

Some antiabsorptive traditions within twentieth-century poetry could be traced back to Stein (while *The Making of Americans*, written in the “continuous present”, suggests a neoabsorptivity & the early portraits & related works have a rhythmic quality that relates them to charm melos, the denser sections of *Tender Buttons* & the word-to-word halting in *How to Write* are great achievements of antiabsorptive writing); Pound’s Cantos (the use of collage & fragmentation, graphic material, the inclusion of printer’s & other errors, the disruptive presence of a legion of references outside the poem); Zukofsky’s “Poem beginning ‘The’”, with its numbered citations of different quotations, & assorted other found material; Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*; Duchamp’s prose *levy’s en Anglais*; Dadaism in North America; ee cummings for his typ.,,OgRAPHic(,, in()ventio.,.ns; Letterism & other visual poeties, from Apollinaire’s Calligrammes to De Campos & Gomringer to Ian Hamilton Finlay. . . . to name a few. . . <sup>37</sup>

His argument for anti-absorptive forms of writing is fused with the presentation of the language on the page. His critical work is not simply about a position, or an argument of anti-absorptive practices, but becomes an anti-absorptive reality. He fuses together form and content and alters the terrain for a poet’s critical writing. As he argues for anti-absorptive methods, he does so in an anti-absorptive fashion, creating a new kind of unity of thought and action. He is not against

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<sup>37</sup> AP, 55-56.

unity: he is against unity being framed in only one form. We see this in his assessment of Vendler's *Contemporary American Poetry*.

Vendler is very much under the spell of realist & mimetic ideas about poetry. In this sense, she still has much to learn from Stevens & Ashbery. She writes that poets “attempt that accuracy—of perception, of style”, discounting Wilde’s observation that reality is shaped by art, & not the other way around (& what does accuracy have to do with it anyway?). But perhaps the most irritating thing about Vendler’s manner of argument is that it is always referring to what “all” poems do, making it impossible for her to even consider that some poems may come into being just because they don’t do what some other poems have done. Vendler says she hopes readers will be provoked by some of the anthologized poems to say— “Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!’ It is the effect every poet hopes for.” I would hope readers might be provoked to say of some poems, “Hell, I don’t recognize the place or the time or the ‘I’ in this sentence. I don’t know it.”

(AP 42)

The critical procedure of disrupting the blind acceptance of “one” form of poetry is not presented in an absorptive form. Bernstein’s procedure moves in at least two directions. The first direction investigates the anti-absorptive uses of writing in order to emphasize the materiality of writing instead of its transparency. The other direction pushes for a larger version of what is possible for poetry. He looks to Stein, Pound, Zukofsky, Joyce, Duchamp, e.e. cummings, Apollinaire, De Campos, Gomringer, and Ian Hamilton Finlay for sustenance and inspiration. He creates a tradition that is anti-absorptive in its writing. He foregrounds a writing that embraces the mark on the page as an aspect of its meaning. Bernstein chooses to allow his argument to shape his argument. His irritation with Vendler, framed within Harvard press, is democratic. How can one

form of poetry be American, when historically and at the present, the diversity of what is American poetry is as diverse as those who have written and published?

Yet at the very moment of his critical breakthrough, he presents the reader with an impasse: an American poetry valorized by Vendler, a place of recognition or an American poetry valorized by Bernstein, a place of the unknown. Bernstein alludes to the anti-absorptive tradition and also alludes to one of his own writing procedures: “that some poems / may come into being just because they don’t do what / some other poems have done” (AP 42). When Bernstein writes poetry that is simply a reaction, simply a rejection of the status quo he is attacking he promotes a poetics of reaction and a dialectic of negativity. Unfortunately, the reader in this context can assume that American poetry either is in Vendler’s boring heaven or Bernstein’s reactionary hell. He is careful to respond to her “all” with “some”. However, due to Bernstein’s dense and diverse poetics, a reader could assume that his poetics are embedded in only rejecting the status quo. When Bernstein is at his best, his doing what other poems have not done, he opens up possibilities for readers and writers. When he is at his worst, the poems become untranslatable and require an enormous amount of work on the reader to engage the text beyond a negative reaction. The critique of Vendler is complex. He does offer a critique in the context of invention, where he fuses his argument with its form; however, simply being anti-absorptive does not merit innovation. Innovation is not solipsistic, but the moment when an invention is formed into a production and meant for the benefit of others. If Vendler’s over limited universals harm American poetry, does Bernstein’s reactionary particulars offer a solution? A fuller picture is to think in terms of an expansion of solutions and/or critical gestures instead of locking into a reaction or ignorance. Vendler shuns the particulars, and Bernstein does not investigate universals. Both are ignoring rooms in the house of possibilities.

Bernstein’s next collection of essays *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (1999) is labeled on the back cover as poetry, and cataloged as aesthetics and poetics. Although the essays and poems written in a fifteen-year time span had appeared in a variety of journals and books and had been presented in a variety of contexts, the collection works like a large poem by Bernstein: full of divergent details, contrasts, unexpected turns, and repetitions. What he has said about poetry, as a site of collective differences, unique vocabulary, as well as what he has done with poetry on the

page and in the line, becomes a reality for this collection. As he has brought to life old worn sayings in his poetry, he also brings life into old worn critical categories.

What is a poet-critic, or critic-poet, or professor-poet-critic?; which comes first and how can you tell?; do the administrative and adjudicative roles of a professor mark the sell-out of the poet?; does the critical thinking mar creativity, as so many of the articles in the Associated Writing Program newsletter insist? Can poets and scholars share responsibilities for teaching literature and cultural studies or must poets continue to be relegated to, or is it protected by, creative writing workshops, where, alone in the postmodern university, the expressive self survives?<sup>38</sup>

Bernstein questions the traditional and current divisions between poets, critics, and professors. He questions the assumption of the poet selling out by taking a university teaching post. In order to earn a living does the performance of diurnal tasks in the learning industry constitute a sell-out? He takes this issue further by asking if critical thinking is unimaginative. These first questions, when answered or investigated, bring attention to the ideological nature of the definitions of creativity and critical inquiry. As the majority of the speeches and poems in *My Way* were written after Bernstein took up a full time academic position, we can take these questions as a way to investigate the assumptions and by-laws of the learning industry. Should critics remain at a safe distance from contemporary poetry? Have poets sold out to work in the university? Should poets avoid critical investigations? Can poets and critics work together? Bernstein is not abandoning the idea that there are poets and critics, rather he is questioning in his own way all the assumptions of what poets and critics do. The study of American literature has gone through numerous modifications in its last hundred years. The discipline has not been a fixed or unchangeable reality. *My Way* embraces this truism and offers itself as an investigation into alternative routes, as possible solutions to the many problems of American literary studies, and as a reaction to the discipline's current impasses. Bernstein questions the current categorization of poets and critics into distinct and separate practices where the former concern themselves with imagination, reflection, and creation and the latter concern themselves with argument, proof, and verification. In *My Way* a poem is verifiable in how it builds a picture of the world and criticism is judged by

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<sup>38</sup> Bernstein, "The Revenge of the Poet Critic, or The Parts Are Greater Than the Sum of the Whole", *MW*, 5, 3-17.

understood the argument is of its own construction.

One of the unique contributing elements in Bernstein's *My Way* to both poetry and criticism, is his understanding and use of the paragraph. He takes this basic unit of the critical essay as a malleable form. Since the argument for essays do not always have to be linear, a different form of the essay is possible.

One thing I am proposing is a modular essay form that allows for big jumps from paragraph to paragraph and section to section. In such essays, it become possible to recombine the paragraphs to get another version of the essay—since the “argument” is not dependent on the linear sequence. (*MW*7)

Bernstein suggests new critical forms because there are a variety of critical forms available. Instead of only linear arguments, Bernstein proposes essays that are able to have moveable parts capable of working in a variety of sections. He recognizes that ultimately collage and disjunction work on the basis of the linear argument. If the starting point is not a linear argument moving toward a point, then what is being proposed? Instead of looking for a line, Bernstein employs a curve. Instead of a one-point process, he suggests an array of points. He does not reject the linear argument or its trajectory, but argues for other forms of argumentation: specifically in this case, an argument of turns and curves. Here he accepts the reactionary moves of collage and disjunction against linearity, but his acceptance leads him to investigate the original drive. His investigation leads him to another solution, and he offers another starting pointing. His innovation demands that the reader develop new ways of processing an argument.

Bernstein's innovation has several elements. The first element is spatial: “Juxtaposing disparate, if related, material, forms an array or constellation or environment” (*MW* 7). By placing together material that does not follow a consecutive form of logic, Bernstein creates an environment. Within the environment, the parts are not bound to the whole, but are freer and able to move about creating a form of reflection that reworks the idea of completion before progression. Within this environment, Bernstein sees writing as a loosening of former syntactical logic and a gaining of new forms of argumentation.

Equally, I think of paragraphs as a series of extended remarks or improvisations on aphoristic cores. So you have these series of paragraphs that are semi-autonomous making up sections that are themselves serial. (I like that idea of semi-autonomy as opposed to disjuncture. The paragraphs can't really stand alone. They're dependent on what comes before and after. But still, they have some qualities of autonomy or completeness. A bit like you and me, after all.) The idea is that the order of paragraphs could be shifted, and, more importantly, that space is left for new paragraphs to be inserted, something like leaving room for (more) thought. (MW7)

Bernstein proposes other ways of thinking about paragraphs and each option would alter discursive construction. Free flowing speech, spontaneous response, potent sayings, bring to the paragraph an attitude of active and exploratory critical inquiry. Bernstein finds disjuncture limiting. One reason for this, I would argue, is that disjuncture is dependent upon the linear argument for effect. Being able to shift the order of a set of paragraphs changes the way a writer and a reader process a discourse and experience knowledge. He wants to open up the methods of convincing an audience and wants to explore other kinds of rhetorical devices in order to leave space for new work. Indirectly, Bernstein is suggesting that some forms of discourse leave no space for more thought or new paragraphs. He goes on to show what he means from yet another angle.

I am particularly interested in a möbius or twisting paragraph seriality. So that you can see the same thing from multiple points of view or different angles. Like radar or sonar scanning a three-dimensional object. (MW7)

The arguments in paragraphs do not have to be flat. As we have already seen Bernstein takes the notion of a three-dimensional object into the physical page. Bernstein is suggesting that an array of views be taken from different angles. The critic and reader are no longer above the text, in full view of all of its constitutive elements, but placed beside a range of perspectives in constant motion. Instead of despairing that an absolute view is nearly impossible, Bernstein suggests that arguments incised in paragraphs increase their range, movement, and perspectives.

As early as 1983, Bernstein was using the möbius strip as a metaphor for writing. In "Blood on the Cutting Room Floor" he argues for a möbius form of poetry which he also called

dysraphism. Dysraphism is an important term for Bernstein in both critical and poetical works (he has a poem with this title). The critical process is a new fusion: “different parts from the middle, end, and beginning—it’s a 4-D image—are fused together to become one entity” (*CD* 359). The möbius metaphor provides an alternative to dominant poetic modes:

One alternative image to the uniplanar surface of “ego” or “ratio” nally-organized writing is of a möbius textuality, aspiring not toward the arbitrariness and accumulation of juxtaposition but rather the fusion of social flesh. That is, the succession of displacements involved in a möbius rather than otherwise rhetorically-unified poem are not centrifugal but centripetal, do not displace from the site of the poem but enact an emplacement as the poem. (*CD* 362)

What is fascinating is Bernstein’s fluidity between poetry and critical prose. His argument against “ego” based poetry is just as much an argument against the forms of conventional rational discourse. He finds the poem built from a möbius perspective creates an environment as the poem. As he discusses his way of opening up paragraphs, he looks to his poetics. He uses a different set of terms besides collage and disjunction to describe his work as he appeals to a möbius and improvisational rationality. Ironically, he presents his argument for the expansion of the paragraph within the university press of Chicago whose manual of style is one of the major standards in writing throughout the English speaking world. He alludes to this in the opening pages: “Once again, I’ve chosen to do the punctuation, and much else, my way; I realize this has meant departing often from the style of the press and its *Manual*, which nonetheless remains one of my primary sources. I take personal responsibility for the discrepancies and inconsistencies that weave this work together.”<sup>39</sup> Here Bernstein’s rejection of standards is not anarchistic. He brings creativity into a supposedly non-creative aspect of writing (punctuation), but does not completely reject the source of its former function. Having complete freedom to organize the collection in any way of his own choosing<sup>40</sup>, Bernstein weaves together an investigation into another form of writing, organizing, and presenting arguments, insights, images, and the art of letters.

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<sup>39</sup> “Preface”, *MW*, xii.

<sup>40</sup> Personal conversation, Aug. 1, 1999

Bernstein's house of possibility includes a transformation of not only poetry, but also of prose. His critical writings have worked in at least three areas. He has investigated and created a contemporary poetics in non-traditional structures within a new press (Sun & Moon). He has invented new forms for these investigations, re-describing what is possible for an American poetry, where form and content are woven together to show the materiality of the sign as a critical practice. He does this work, and calls for another tradition from within one of the most important American university presses (Harvard). Bernstein offers alternative critical solutions at the level of the paragraph and syntactical logic. He forms an environment that is not anarchistic by bringing creativity and invention into grammatical and compositional laws. Bernstein's critical art is unique in that he is not only interested in creating a tradition, he also is working from within a particular tradition in innovative ways. A critical flaw of the three volumes centers around his lack of response to the readerly tension created by these innovative critical practices. Typically, understanding someone else depends upon shared grammatical codes and practices. Bernstein's work shows how these codes are constructed. Furthermore, he argues, each code or practice contains views about learning, knowledge, memory, and understanding. He wants the reader to understand the process of making meaning, but this understanding comes through a confusion of the standards. A critical problem in these volumes is that somehow the reader will come to fuller understanding of dominant codes of meaning making through one particular person's (Bernstein) alteration of these codes, standards, and practices; in short, that understanding will come through misunderstanding. If instabilities in grammar, argument, and narrative are to be exposed, then the reader is left with the task of coming to meaning through a confusing strategy. At times, the reader and the process of becoming convinced can become lost. When lost, the reader through her or his own strength can go forward looking for the familiar, or quits. Bernstein's critical prose takes the risk of closing down the exchange. When it's not shut down, the reader must move away from traditional "close" reading strategies to a kinetic, spatial, interdisciplinary reading or what I call borrowing from Thoreau and Cavell, a heroic reading. The advantage of Bernstein's work is also its disadvantage: it leaves much of the task of renewal or reconstitution to the reader; but if too much of the task is left to the reader, the dialogue of innovation has no way of proceeding.

Bernstein's editorial work, like his poetry, criticism, and collaborations, spans three decades. In the 1970s and 1980s his collections revolve around the journal he co-founded with Bruce Andrews, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (1978-1981). Although the journal was only published for four years, it served as a source of remarkable theoretical, aesthetic, political, and poetical investigation. What set the journal apart was both its context and form. Using legal size paper, Bernstein, Andrews, and Bee filled the pages to the very edge so that each page was a textual-visual dynamic instead of a square, calm, text framed by wide white margins. The design context, along with the collection of writers with no overarching agenda, created a space that moved in multiple directions: literary studies, historical analysis, contemporary issues, French theory, and lists of current journals. Bernstein's first solo editorial work, the "Language Sampler" in *Paris Review*, No. 86 (1982) is in fact a collection of poetry by fifteen different writers, and it is one of the first extensions of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* contributors outside their own collection of small press journals. Bernstein worked again with Andrews in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (1984) published by an academic press (Southern Illinois University Press). The book is a selection of writings from the journal and it further extended Bernstein's editorial style and practice to the reading public. By the mid 1980s his editorial work had been involved with the small press culture, a main stream journal, and an academic publishing house. In 1987 he edited "43 Poets (1984)" for the journal *Boundary 2*. The collection is a mix of forms: poetry, prose, narrative, statements, propositions, and parables. The following year in *The Line in Postmodern Poetry* (1988) Bernstein uses the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* title for the last time in an edited collection called "*L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Lines*", ten years after the title's first appearance. In each of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* collections a continued investigation was sought instead of a banal repetition of an earlier project. The *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* title was used in a number of contexts. Each context shows Bernstein's interest in seeing the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* project respond and be involved with different areas of discourse: the alternative small press, academic publishing, and the subjects of painting, aesthetic and literary theory.

Bernstein's editorial practice in the 1990s shows his continued interest in divergent areas. In *Patterns/Contexts/Time: A Symposium on Contemporary Poetry*, Bernstein and Phillip Foss form a series of questions concerning form, patterns, and contexts to be answered by the

participants. They propose such questions as, “What patterns, if any, do you see developing that are presently influencing habits of reading or readership within poetry?”; and, “What’s the most disturbing (or irritating) thing associated with poetry or your work as a poet?”.<sup>41</sup> *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy* (1990) brings together a number of writers on the subject of how the material form of poetry has social, political, and aesthetic implications. In the 1990s Bernstein also edits two collections of poetry: the first with Susan Howe in “13 North American Poets” in *TXT#31* (1993), and the second in *Boundary 2*, “99 Poets/ 1999: An International Poetics Symposium” (1999).<sup>42</sup> Both of these collections work outside a strictly American context. The first collection is for a French audience, and the second is a collection of international writers commenting on their work, their view of poetics, and the pressing issues for poetry in 1999. Working with poetry written in English in both contexts, Bernstein is shaping and working within a poetry that moves beyond a singular conception of what poetry is in “English”. In the essay “Poetics of the Americas”, he argues that our conception of poetry written in English needs to be re-addressed.

The problem here is twofold: the totalization “America” and the globally dominant position of the U.S. Since the U.S. is the dominant English language (as well as Western) nation in the political, economic and mass-cultural spheres, its monopolizing powers need to be cracked—from the inside and outside—as surely as one version of England’s grip on our language’s literature needed to be loosened in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The same logic that led to the invention of American, as distinct from English, literature now leads to the invention of, on the one hand, a non-American-centered English language literature and, on the other, a poetics of Americas. Any unitary concept of America is an affront to the multiplicity of Americas that make U.S. culture as vital as it is. America is, to echo Perednik, an “unclassifiable” totality. For there is no one America. The U.S. is less a melting pot than a simultaneity of inconsolable coexistences—from the all-too-audible spokespeople of the state to the ghostly voices of the almost lost languages of the sovereign nations of Arapaho, Mohawk, Shoshone, Pawnee, Pueblo, Navaho, Crow, Cree, Kickapoo, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Zuni. . . ; though in truth there are no sovereigns, only sojourners. (MW 114)

Bernstein’s understanding of the multiplicity and diversity of languages informs his editorial style

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<sup>41</sup> “Patterns / Contexts / Time: A Symposium on Contemporary Poetry”, ed. Phillip Foss & Charles Bernstein, *Tyuumi*, 6/7 (1990): ii.

<sup>42</sup> “99 Poets/ 1999: An International Poetics Symposium”, ed. Charles Bernstein, *boundary 2*, 26, no. 1 (1999).

and practice in *Boundary 2*. He is aware that new cultural inventions are needed, and he looks to the past invention of “American Literature” as source for a poetics of the Americas. To change dominant modes entails an expansion of what is possible not only within one country that speaks and writes in English, but also for the numerous cultures who use English as their dominant language. What drives his expansion and his desire to see more of what is possible for even an America poetry, is his belief that in the multitude of the cultural and language particulars, is vitality. In practice, this means a re-investigation of what has been excluded, ignored, or silenced. If we are sojourners, as was his ancestor Abraham, we are all awaiting that other country where the boundaries and powers of sovereigns are only temporary.

Bernstein has also edited two collections concerning the aural aspect of poetry. The first, literally aural, was *Live at the Ear* (1994) a CD anthology of readings by poets at the Ear Inn in Manhattan. Bernstein began the series in 1978 with Ted Greenwald and the first reading was by John Ashbery and Michael Lally.

Over the many Saturdays that followed the audience has shifted in size, the PA system has worked and has conked out, the noise from the bar has sometimes been intrusive.

But the commitment to a continual renewal of the art of poetry has never faltered; a commitment, that is, to a spectrum of writing that places its attention primarily on language and ways of making meaning, that takes for granted neither vocabulary, grammar, process, syntax, program of subject matter—indeed where all of these dynamics remain at issue.<sup>43</sup>

The other collection *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998) is a theoretical set of essays concerning the aural aspect of poetry. The collection argues for a fuller understanding of reading and writing and calls for a reassessment of American poetics. “One goal I have for this book is to overthrow the common presumption that the text of a poem—that is, the written document—is primary and that the recitation or performance of a poem by the poet is secondary and fundamentally inconsequential to the ‘poem itself.’”<sup>44</sup> The range of a poem increases to

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<sup>43</sup> Charles Bernstein, introductory notes for *Live at the Ear: First Audio-Anthology of Post Modern L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E=P=O=T=R=Y*, ed. Charles Bernstein, Oracular Laboratory Recordings, Elemenope Productions, 1994.

<sup>44</sup> Bernstein, “Introductions” in *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8, 3-26.

include not only the multiple versions of its writing form, but now for Bernstein, its multiple and ongoing versions in performance. He argues:

The poem, viewed in terms of its multiple performances, or mutual intertranslatability, has a fundamentally plural existence....To speak of the poem in performance is, then, to overthrow the idea of the poem as a fixed, stable, finite linguistic object; it is to deny the poem its self-presence and its unity.<sup>45</sup>

The essays collected in the volume show in several different ways what it means for the understanding and reception of poetry to accept and incorporate the sonic performances into the textual paradigm. To embrace the aural presentation(s) opens up the study of poetry beyond a dominant textual paradigm. The inter-relationship between textual realities and performances becomes a new source for poetics. His editorial work throughout the 1990s concerns all aspects of poetry, including how poetry is received across the world, and its divergent performances.

Another area essential to understanding Bernstein's work as a editor, is his involvement with the State University of New York at Buffalo. Bernstein became the holder of an endowed chair in poetry in 1990. As The David Grey Professor of Poetry and Letters, he has continued to investigate the invention of meaning and writing as the source of possibilities. He is the Director of the Poetics Program, which is a program designed to explore the art of making poetry:

While poetics suggests a long history of laws of composition, the Poetics Program stresses poesis -- the actual making or doing: poetry as process. Every doing carries the potential of something new, emergent, something not already predicated by poetics. Practice overtakes theory, practice changes theory. And not just writing practice, but performance practice, the practice of sound.<sup>46</sup>

He is also the executive editor and co-founder of the Electronic Poetry Center. From its beginning in 1995, the EPC has established itself as an essential web-site for the study of poetry. The site goes in a variety of directions, reflective of his poetry, critical essays, and editorial work. Bernstein

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid.,9.

<sup>46</sup> "Philosophies", *UB Poetics Program*, <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/poetics/old/990624-prog.htm> . The page now in archives provides some explanation of the poetics program co-founded by Bernstein. In the section "Philosophies" their approach is given in some detail. The author or authors of the section is not provided.

is not afraid of new technologies because he is involved with the technology of writing at the level of invention. At the site he is one among hundreds of writers. Along with author home-pages, magazine lists, links to calls for papers, publishers, and other internet sources, Bernstein ran the Poetics List from 1994-1998. Here, anyone could join, and parts of the discussions were published as a book.<sup>47</sup> As well, the archives for the EPC since its inception are available at the site.

American critics, such as Robert von Hallberg who considers Bernstein an avant-garde writer, argue that the avant-gardist as a writer is unable to be involved with the institution it critiques.<sup>48</sup> David Lehman goes as far as to say that the avant-garde is a mute point in a culture that does not resist the new and in a culture where stable norms no longer exist.<sup>49</sup> Lehman reads the Language poets (and Bernstein as one of their major players) as “a subsidiary branch of literary theory” (371) and only able to survive within the university: “It could not exist outside of the university” (370). According to Lehman, this deficiency is in contrast to the New York poets who were an avant-garde when it meant something (10). From both of these perspectives, Bernstein’s move into a professorship should be a reduction of critical and poetic possibilities. On the contrary Bernstein’s creative work in the 1990s continues to transform the concepts of criticism and poetry, and he continues to create new possibilities for writing. His creation of the electronic poetry center, his critical publications that continue to call for an expansion of American writing, his collaborations with Susan Bee and Richard Tuttle, and his volumes of poetry such as *Dark City* and *Rough Trades*, all show that Bernstein continues to work in a range of contexts. His move into the university is not an escape for a failing poetic, but an opportunity for further expansion.

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<sup>47</sup> *Poetics@* ed. by Joel Kuszai with a preface by Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof Books, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> Robert von Hallberg, “Avant-Gardes” in *Poetry and Criticism: 1940-1995*, vol. 8, *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 122, 112-14, 83-122. When von Hallberg writes about the “Language poets” which includes Bernstein he refers to the movement as Marxist and unable to function within the academic world: “Academic literary culture, far from resisting this Marxist literary avant-garde, has eagerly embraced it as a subgroup of professorial encampments. The radical change that avant-gardes seek by opposing art institutions is impossible within an academic context, because academic institutions cope with challenges in a liberal fashion by expanding and pluralistically incorporating adversaries. To the academic sensibility, the Language poets comprise one more trend in a poetry scene characterized by diversity” (113-4).

<sup>49</sup> David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 10-11. Lehman fails to point out the many of the Language Poets worked for nearly a decade before taking up university posts, and some still have not done so. Bernstein for example had published work outside the academy for over 15 years before he took up his endowed chair at the University of Buffalo.

Bernstein, as one of the finest American literary innovators, brings into American poetry a copious, cogent, and abluent body of work. To ignore his contribution is to ignore what is possible in American poetry. Yet, as with all great inventors, he has failed experiments, unsuccessful patents, and ideas that have had neither the time or practice to show any merit. The intersecting details of Bernstein's work as an editor, poet, critic, and collaborator show that he has not worked in one set way, in one set procedure, in one genre of writing. His diverse works, his range of styles, his critical procedures reveal a writer who, like the inventor, will not leave well enough alone. He is devoted to creating new connections, new writing possibilities, and new perspectives of American literary history. Understanding his diversity shows both his uniqueness and his contribution. To go into this work closely, leads the reader in all kinds of American directions. Multiple traditions are exposed and multiple links are followed. Reading Bernstein attentively shows us that he had the printing knowledge of Whitman, the philosophical understanding of Emerson and Eliot, the handwriting of Dickinson, the diction and syntax of Stein, the love of line, letter and page from Williams and Cummings, and the re-occurring interactive respect for hundreds of living writers—Howe, Mayer, Hejinian, Eigner Coolidge, Silliman. Reading Bernstein kinetically takes us into the contemporary process of world making to borrow Goodman's term. His work is located among those writers who are building a poetry that does not need a review in the *New York Review of Books*, nor the critical acceptance by Marjorie Perloff, Helen Vendler, or Harold Bloom.<sup>50</sup> And finally, reading Bernstein shows that his work, at times, gets bough down in social unrest.

To follow Bernstein's work requires a critical dexterity and a reading that is kinetic. To follow Bernstein's work is educational which is ultimately another reason for this study. Educational though, in what sense? One of the more exciting challenges of studying Bernstein's work is the fact that no one theory of the avant-garde or American poetics can explain and interpret Bernstein's voluminous output; hence, a final necessary point in this chapter is to offer a solution to this critical vacancy. Several recent studies and theories of the avant-garde are brilliant, but have

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<sup>50</sup> Or as John Ashbery writes: "One can assume that good avant-garde art will go on living because of the mere fact of its having been able to struggle into life at all will keep it alive." "The Invisible Avant-Garde", *The Avant-Garde*, ed. Thomas B. Hess and John Ashbery, *ARTnews Annual* (New York: Newsweek, Inc., 1968), 131, 125-132.

a limited range of application. Maria Damon defines the avant-gardist as someone who has been social marginalized.<sup>51</sup> Her social aestheticism integrates the issues of poverty, race, and sexuality in her attempt to understand how marginalization impinges on the form of writing. But she fails to offer a developed approach of how internalized marginalization creates the ability to move beyond social constraints and become a configuration for an avant-garde. Another example is Paul Mann's work who reads the avant-garde as a dead, but a necessary element in capitalism.<sup>52</sup> Like Bürger he over-interprets the power of capitalism in relation to art and does not explore the possibility that capitalism is only one interpretation of a former avant-garde practice. He argues that any avant-garde, or innovative practice will be all too quickly turned into a commodity. Christopher Beach reads the avant-garde as flourishing, but questions how we think about poetic communities. For him, the American poetic landscape has numerous communities without a center, implying any study of American poetry has to begin in relation to a multitude of approaches.

Beach argues that the starting point for the study and reception of American poetry has changed significantly since the 1950s. Divisions abound between literary academics and poet-critics and between professional poets and academic critics. These different literary groups are not in any sustained intellectual contact with each other. Poets are skeptical of academics and academics are leery of poets. The idea of a poet-critic, that is someone who is able to work in both realms of study, seems absurd or at best impossible. Poets do not need theorists, and theorists now have their own avant-garde, so they no longer need a literary one.

The disappearance of the poet-critic who is still read by literary academics and the academic poetry critic who is still read by practicing poets reflects deep institutional changes in the structure of American literary criticism. Professional poets ignore most academic criticism, which they see as either too narrow or too theoretical,

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<sup>51</sup> Maria Damon's, *The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard poetry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). She writes in the introduction: "In this series of case studies, I argue that the American literary avant-garde comes out of the work of the socially marginalized" (vii).

<sup>52</sup> Paul Mann, *Mascocriticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 4. "Capital feeds off of the avant-garde; its perpetual death helps keep the monster of capital alive. That is why the death of the avant-garde must not be confused with any termination, any closure, which has not yet occurred and will never occur as long as the culture of capital persists. The death of the avant-garde is not its end but its repetition, indeed its compulsive repetition. Today this repetition calls itself postmodernism. The death of the avant-garde is precisely the cultural explosion of the so-called postmodern era, when more than ever it seems that everything verges toward exposure, publicity, the spectacle, interpretation and surveillance, and the surface of the screen" (4).

and the literary academy excludes or marginalizes the critical work of those poets—like Ron Silliman and Amiri Baraka—who pose a challenge to its highly systematized critical vocabulary. Yet academic critics, with few exceptions, seem relatively unconcerned with this state of affairs. Jonathan Culler acknowledges contemporary criticism’s “lack of connection to a recognized literary avant-garde”, but rather than working toward rectifying the situation, he uses it as an occasion to celebrate contemporary academic theory as a replacement for the (apparently extinct) literary avant-garde.<sup>53</sup>

Literary studies in the realm of poetics are sharply divided in practical knowledge and institutional procedures. An academic study of the avant-garde is no longer situated within the equation of tradition versus a current neglected practice. The study of poetic innovation must negotiate between the divisions between poetry and literary theory, literary theory and an avant-garde practice (as in the case of Culler), and the divide between the academic critic and the poet-critic. Each group has their own audience and demands. Consequently, the study of an innovative or radical poetry requires not only hurdling the resistance of traditional literary critics, but also literary theorists, and professional poets. Debates increase over what constitutes canonical literature (which is an old and reoccurring process). Within this classical debate, there are also debates between Creative Writing Departments and Literature Departments over what constitutes the teaching, reading, writing and interpreting of literature. All of these institutional changes, debates, and practices alter the starting point of approaching any form of innovative writing. Furthermore, many of the ideals and functions of American poetry in the 1950s and 1960s are no longer relevant to the present situation of poetry. Even the simple question of poetic superiority is more

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<sup>53</sup> Christopher Beach, *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry between Community and Institution* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 33. Hereafter cited as *Poetic Culture*. Here’s the whole quotation from Culler: “Finally, one distinctive feature of current criticism is its lack of connection to a recognized literary avant-garde. The New Criticism succeeded in part because it made it easier for critics to discuss modernists poetry such as Eliot’s, while situating it in the tradition of English Literature. Cleanth Brooks’ *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* helped make the New Criticism indispensable. Moreover, the authority of New Critics such as Ransom, Tate and Penn Warren came in part from their accomplishments as poets. The success of certain aspects of structuralism seemed linked to its ability to make intelligible the literary practices of post-modernism, particularly the French *nouveau roman*. More recent modes of criticism meet special resistance because they cannot be seen as explicating or promoting some new literary practice. One might conjecture, though, that the power of innovation and defamiliarization, which previously lay with a literary avant-garde, behind which academic criticism lagged, has now passed to criticism” (38-39). “Criticism has built into critical reflection, as a means of innovation, the defamiliarizing analysis of the conditions of possibility of prior interpretations; so that the study of criticism becomes, among other things, the practice of generating questions about discursive knowledge, of reflecting on interpretation itself and pursuing the contestatory movement that used to be associated with avant-garde literature” (39). Both quotations are from *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

complex.<sup>54</sup> For Beach, the present situation of poetry has many new forces at work: the micro-press and little magazines are more influential than the major trades presses; a massive, nationwide academic writing program now exists; poetry has moved to the street, through the web, into the community and no longer is the pinnacle of high print culture; and finally, there is a resurgence of public, oral, and performative poetry. The combined critical works of Damon, Mann, and Beach, foreground social aesthetics, negative dialectics, and the praxis of contemporary literature, and yet, these perspectives cannot adequately explain the range of Bernstein's work. Their works do raise important contemporary questions in regards to Bernstein's writing: such as how has he discussed social marginalization; how has his work been recuperated; and what has it meant for him to be a poet, editor, critic, and professor.

Even older theories of the avant-garde, such as von Hallberg's or the recent work of Lehman, argue that the avant-garde praxis stops at the university front door. These theories are helpful, and give insight into the multiple issues at stake in reading any challenging form, but these theories do not help us in this present study. In the end, the problem comes from the term "avant-garde", its cultural history, and the reigning theoretical framework.<sup>55</sup> Those who were labeled as avant-gardists during the late eighteenth hundreds or the early nineteenth hundreds (Marinetti, Apollinaire, or Picasso, for example) were understood as persons who wanted to change and destroy the old powerful institutions. With Bernstein, we are dealing with a writer who is completely American based, one who lives in the wake, as an American, of an ongoing revolution from the tyranny of divine right. He has not lived in Europe and believes deeply in democracy. He has never written that we should destroy or get rid of the American system of literature, but

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<sup>54</sup> *Poetic Culture*, 172-3. Beach lists at least ten different criteria for the assessment of poetic excellence: popularity and book sales; professional eminence (membership on Boards); positions in highly ranked academic departments; with the status as poet-scholars/poet-critics; inclusion in the major and universally used the Norton Anthology of American Verse; critical reception in the academy; ability to win prizes; ability to sustain an important avant-garde practice; ability to reach alternative or multicultural communities; exposure in popular media. Under each criteria different poets are named.

<sup>55</sup> The term, when used as a fixed idea, instead of a term for a variety of art forms, people and movements, becomes a distraction to understanding the artists or the art. Robert Rehder in his essay "Periodization and the Theory of Literary History" shows in some detail how abstract labels of literary periods fail. He writes: "The attempt, however, fails because a single abstract category no matter how carefully considered cannot do justice to the complexity of human life and culture" (120). *Swiss Review of General and Comparative Literature*, 22 (1995): 117-136.

rather Bernstein wants the American system of literature to become more democratic in its publishing, critical, and creative procedures.

Thus, instead of trying to modify any of the above theories or histories, I am choosing to think and look at Bernstein from a substantially American perspective. In short, I am arguing throughout this work, that Bernstein is an American innovator, instead of a European avant-gardist. He pushes forward not only to destroy, but to continue to discover what is possible in a democratic space. The theories of the avant-garde are unable to explain an avant-garde practice within an institution because their definition of the avant-garde is from the situation of a former battle, located in a different European power structure. In order to understand Bernstein, we must leave behind old explanations because his work and practice do not fit within established boundaries and expectations for an avant-gardist. Bernstein, instead, should be thought of as an inventor, for inventors are those who offer solutions to identified problems. Innovators are those people who can take their inventions into production and distribution.

Instead of looking at Bernstein's career as a avant-garde failure after he entered the academy, the more engaging approach is to read Bernstein outside this waning theoretical grid and to think of him as an innovator. Inventors are also a special brand of critics as they do not only point out what is wrong they also offer ways, both practical and theoretical of going forward. The most important innovators are able to distribute their inventions to the largest engaged audience. Inventors do not just correct problems they implement solutions. Bernstein's greatest failure and where his work is the weakest is when he is only pointing out what is wrong with a method, grammar, a style, or a practice. At times Bernstein's work gets bough down in a reactionary mode and the contract between the reader and writer is completely broken. He is at his strongest when he allows his perceptive skepticism lead him towards offering a solution.

Since there is no theory of the avant-garde or American poetics able to fully investigate Bernstein's contribution to poetry, criticism, education, and writing in general, I pattern this study after its subject. I will proceed pragmatically, looking more to investigate how his projects work, instead of attaching a specific label to a practice, or using his work as a spring board to develop a critical theory. I will utilize numerous theories of literature, linguistics, design, reception and work outside the narrow confines of avant-garde theory. I am interested in how Bernstein's house of

possibilities effects the writing, reading, and teaching of literature. I am interested in the ongoing American reality of “new sentences” constantly starting up. Cavell argues that when writing assumes responsibility and is heroic, it embraces the visual nature of the word, understands that words and the ordering of words are human, fused with beliefs, and does not ignore the vocal nature of the word. Moving forward through Cavell, a heroic reading of Bernstein would embrace the same aspects of meaning as heroic writing. Heroic reading, is the kind of kinetic reading that does not seek to exclude aspects of meaning, but looks and searches for ways to promote all aspects of writing: the visual, words as beliefs, always awaiting a vocalization.

How do you read a Bernstein poem, essay, collaboration, edited collection? Reading his composing strategies, engages the reader in the mechanisms of reading itself, not to prove a unity of particulars, nor to prove a play of the signifiers, because both forces are at work. For Bernstein the act of combining parts to form an object involves an inventive understanding of type, letters, the poem on the page, the rules of prose, as well as the rules of verse. He combines the methods of the Concrete poets with the narrative function of discourse. At other times, he works with grammatical legislation as an inventive, exploratory tool instead of a rule to be repeated and followed. To read Bernstein requires several critical moves. Bernstein begins with a basic understanding that all elements of writing (type, line, rules, the page, tradition, the contemporary writers) are parts of a composition that is being constructed. These elements are used in a democratic fashion, with no one element attaining total control. The next critical move is pragmatic. For Bernstein, the unit of composition is a lithe reality. Simply by reading and investigating Bernstein’s puns, rhymes, repetitions, elisions, disjunctions, dictions, his use of the dictionary, typography, and the page, the reading begins formulating discoveries. The willingness to embark on new discoveries remains an ongoing pragmatic reality in reading Bernstein’s writing. His work does not demand a “willing suspension of disbelief”, but rather an investigation of beliefs. What is poetry? What is criticism? What is literature? Finally, reading Bernstein involves a risk. Instead of promoting a refined reading of an established writer, Bernstein instigates a rough, rugged, American in fact, reading of unknown ground. What is discovered, is like the American landscape itself: democracy creates new spaces. Bernstein’s work gives us a contemporary opportunity to see, read, and hear, that this democratic impulse is alive. However, to go forward the reader now in new spaces will need new measurements as many former assumptions about

reading and writing reach their limits.

The final reason to embark on this study, outside of Bernstein's incredible collection of writing, or the absence of a viable theoretical framework that would bring to surface his diverse contributions, is the range of passing, but categorical judgements of his work. David Bromwich in 1987 writes that the Language poets have not (yet) written any good poetry.<sup>56</sup> Bernstein would be included in his list of Language poets, as well as writers such as Lyn Hejinian and Susan Howe. Andrew Gelpi, in discussing Bernstein's work in 1991, states that his method of writing leads nowhere.<sup>57</sup> Jed Rasula in 1996 makes the charge that Bernstein in *Content's Dream* maintains a schism between poetry and prose. "The robust critical and theoretical energies of these poets were applied, by and large, outside the context of poetry itself."<sup>58</sup> Rasula, who has found great worth in Bernstein's works, finds *Content's Dream* to be all theory and outside of the context of poetry itself. In 2000, Richard Kostelanetz, writes that Bernstein's *My Way* is partial, dogmatic, and sounded more like *Mein Kampf* instead of a collection of essays.<sup>59</sup> These judgments have the effect of keeping Bernstein's project distanced from further investigation. In reading his work carefully, engaging in critical dialogue with his propositions, and viewing the forms of his discourse, this study finds Bernstein's oeuvre worthy of ongoing investigation. Bernstein's work marks the limitations of poets and critics alike who have limited American poetry and criticism to one particular domain. If the above glosses were true, then they would be burdened to explain why his career continues to expand the possibilities of poetry.

The pattern for this study is to be a counterpoint to the already diverse accounts of his place in American poetry, to forge a way of reading in light of the absence of any avant-garde theory that could take into account his divergent works, and to foster further interactive readings among his copious writing practices. Bernstein toils in the tradition of American literature that does not only repeat and refine poetical and critical forms, but creates and investigates new spaces

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<sup>56</sup> David Bromwich, "Comment: Without Admonition", in *Politics & Poetic Value*, ed. by Robert von Hallberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 327.

<sup>57</sup> Albert Gelpi, "The Genealogy of Postmodernism: Contemporary American Poetry", *The Southern Review* 26, no. 3 (1990): 517:541, 532.

<sup>58</sup> Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990*, *Refiguring English Studies*, ed. Stephen M. North (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), 403.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Kostelanetz, "Picketing the Zeitgeist", *American Book Review* 21, no. 4 (2000): 3. Hereafter cited as ABR. He is very critical of Bernstein, and in fact refers to his work as Fascism. See Ron Sukenick's response, "A Note from the Publisher", that denounces Kostelanetz' piece, *ABR* 21, no. 5 (2000): 3. Kostelanetz' response and mine appear in the next issue, *ABR* 21, no.6 (2000): 3.

for poetry. As he toils, he is most American, falling in the tradition of other literary innovators, such as Whitman, Dickinson, Eliot, Williams, Stein, Olson, Antin, Grenier, and Mac Low. Although I will spend a large portion of this work supporting and attempting to promote Bernstein as an American innovator, I do find him lacking in several areas. First, reading his work is extremely demanding and challenges many democratic aspects of the reading contract. At times, as I have already mentioned he completely breaks the contract between the writer and the reader. This broken contract keeps the dialog about the poem, its project, or purpose at abeyance. Secondly, Bernstein as an inventor is able to see how things are not working and at times his work is only a fault-finding exercise, and as Christopher put it, “[f]or although only few men have sufficient integrative ability to invent form of any clarity, we are all able to criticize existing forms. It is especially important to understand that the agent in such a process needs no creative strength.”<sup>60</sup> A large portion of Bernstein’s project is a negative enterprise which begs the question: can his poetics work without an “official verse culture”? Does he always need someone, or method or practice to react against in order to write and create? Who he is without his opposition, the “official verse culture” and its practices, schemes, etc.? And finally, Bernstein who argues for and practices possibilities more than any other poet simply ignores or investigates very little the nature and role of universals in aesthetic, ethic, and linguistic creation. There is a rich terrain of artists working that neither abandons universals or particulars in their work, showing forth a genuine new range of possibilities. Artists such as Penderecki, Levertov, Wenders, Tarkovsky, Howe or even Schnittke, show the depth and possibility of investigating both realms of knowledge and experience, and although I have profound respect for Bernstein’s project, I find that these above artists have something both “official verse cultural” and Bernstein’s work is missing.

Combining Dickinson’s idea of possibility with Ashbery’s notion of new sentences stirring, we begin the next chapter as a study of Bernstein’s argument that there are no natural writing modes. I will argue that by investigating his poetry, prose, and editorial practices, we will find that Bernstein produces a new elegance while working in familiar roles. His work creates a space for other kinds of writing. He is not so much creating an audience, as Wordsworth suggested, but arguing for a fuller kind of writing in the authorial relation to construction, the nature of language and use, the place and role of the reader, and writing’s relation to the world. Bernstein’s work in

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<sup>60</sup> As quoted by Petroski in *Evolution of Useful Things*, 30.

the 1970s shows that his public genesis is not singular. His beginnings in American Literature occur simultaneously in several writing domains: poetic, critical, and editorial.

- i. style(s): a texture of wordness
  - ii. writing: not simply a vehicle for ideas
  - iii. poetries: 'The Taste is what counts',  
'As if the Trees'
  - iv. Politics of the Referent: a multifarious argument
  - v. Rather: 'Next to
  - vi. \_\_\_\_\_: L=A
- 

*Since the rhetoric of experience is not the guiding principle in construction, neither does it serve as the dominant guide for reading. (67)*

*Innovation of language then, is not simply an experiment for experiment's sake, nor is it destruction for destruction's sake. Rather, true innovation unlocks and creates an alteration of meaning, and the expansion of knowledge will be multiple and located in both the text and the reader's own senses. We can see now a way to understand different kinds of innovation. (69)*

*In the context of the letters, Bernstein finds the over-use of experimental strategies to be just as reductive as personal expression strategies. By showing the limitations of both, he is able to move away from conventional understandings of resistance. The reductions of both strategies harm what is possible within poetry and can easily become commodities. (98)*

## Chapter 2

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### Bernstein's Early Constellation: Poet, Critic, Editor

The inventor who does not listen to others for stimulating ideas is usually a failure.<sup>1</sup>

The environment of Bernstein's early constellation as poet, critic, and editor is filled with the voices, marks, and modes of other innovators. By examining Bernstein's early array, we can claim that his innovations in poetry, editing and criticism were not created in isolation and that he listened intently to others for stimulating ideas. His early published career shows a range of life-long connections, extending from the East to the West Coast of North America. His volume *Senses of Responsibility* was published by Lyn Hejinian in Berkeley, California. His first critical essay published by *Open Letter* (a Canadian journal) was edited by Steve McCaffery. The journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* was started in New York with Bruce Andrews (with Susan Bee doing the design). His first writing piece in the journal was on the graphic work of Johanna Drucker. Nearly twenty years later Bernstein writes that her critical scholarship and letterpress books "have remained central to my own sense of writing in the years since."<sup>2</sup> His and Andrews early publications of Bernadette Mayer's experiments, Larry Eigner's and Clark Coolidge's writings, show the range and depth of his editorial skill. Bernstein surrounded himself with those who also shared an interest in new possibilities, in publishing the new or forgotten modes of writing, and in investigating the nature of language and the material sign.

We can also see in Bernstein's early career an engaged involvement with numerous styles of writing. He brings philosophical reflection into his poetry as in the poem "As if The Trees by Their Very Roots had Hold of Us". His criticism is informed by the structures of page design, line length, and rhythm, as in the very early piece "A Particular Thing" where critical proposition cohabits with free verse.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Petroski, *The Evolution of Useful Things* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York: 1992), 40.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Bernstein, introduction to *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing and Visual Poetics*, by Johanna Drucker (New York: Granary Books, 1998), xiii.

I want in my writing a texture of wordness opaque and alone  
 separate untouched of particularity and presentness  
           intended and specific          unadulterated and so made  
 whole          complete          of stillness  
           from a sense that my most particular/private/unique  
           insistence, way of seeing, aesthetic sense, dream  
           is the most completely  
                                   collective—public—knowable  
 that when language is at the threshold of its  
           coming to mean          at the border of  
                                   sense and  
   sound  
           we find a scripture  
                                   open to  
 more than finite  
           interpretations, that reveal  
                                   the form and  
   mythography  
   of the (a)  
   world.

(*CD 50-1*)

Bernstein's critical proposition, shaped as free verse, embraces the texture of words and a writing that is not restricted to conventional grammatical design. He mediates between philosophy and poetry where writing is not isolated from how knowledge of the world is formed. He seeks a logos that does not allude or deny its methods of production and affect. He desires a language that transforms sound and sense, a language that becomes the source of the world's "mythography", and a language that opens up the ongoing possibilities of engagement. He calls for a form of writing, which takes reading into the very structures that inform our ways of seeing, experiencing,

and knowing the world. Only a writing that goes into these structures, embraces the texture of the sign and explores how sound and sense constantly mingle, can open up interpretation and knowledge of the world. In Bernstein's free-verse commentary, critical and creative procedures are not isolated from each other, and their close proximity innovates the form of critical discourse.

Bernstein also brings design into his editing and reviewing. His first critical piece in the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal embraces the typographic nature of the text as well as the content of the work being reviewed.

So what we have is, “constructivism” that comes out of “trust (in) the intuitive aspect of the organism: to function through the totality of the being”. I.e.: the construction collapses back onto its own necessity, a short circuit which refuses to allow for anything but an integrated thing. But, & note, Drucker's “primitive drive” isn't just a self-defined writing exercise (viz: Mayer)—this book poses as its ‘external’ condition to set all the type in the printshop & make a book (‘internally’) come out of “that”.<sup>3</sup>

Bernstein's review of Johanna Drucker's book *A to Z*, which she printed herself, incorporates her design within his own review. He does not isolate his reading from her project, and he presents a critical review which neglects grammatical correctness without becoming meaningless. He embraces the full range of typographical marks to generate meaning, and he builds and writes his review out of this understanding. He is not working in an isolated distance from his subject material. He is working alongside Drucker's world, unafraid to incorporate her graphic, material insights into his own work.

Looking closely at the early constellation of Bernstein's poetry, prose, and editorial practices we find that he is not simply interested in a formal rejection of the status quo, but rather a recovery and expansion of what is possible for American writing. In this sense, he is not only looking to create new critical, poetic, or philosophical connections, he is also looking to recover what has been covered over, rejected, or ignored. Bernstein, at the very beginning of his career in the 1970s, engaged a range of issues: the philosophy of language, the rhetoric of experience, and the multiple modes of writing. He addressed these sites in a variety of forms. Within his poetry, Bernstein works within a range of genres: the prose poem in *Poetic Justice*, the concrete tradition

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<sup>3</sup> Bernstein, “From A to Z”, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1:1 (1978): 19.

in *Disfrutes*, and the lyrical tradition in *Parsing* and *Senses of Responsibility*. His early critical work demands that writing be understood as a mode of construction. Modes of writing are not naturally self-evident, but constructed even unconsciously from the values of a particular culture and its language. Writing then is not simply a vehicle for ideas, but framed textures of sound and sense actively constructing meaning.

Bernstein in “Stray Straws and Straw Men” embraces the idea that literature is something that you must construct and build, and something for which you must take responsibility. He argues against the notion that some forms of writing are just natural to the writer: “There is no natural look or sound to a poem. Every element is chosen.”<sup>4</sup> Bernstein emphasizes the nature of choice in order to dislocate any argument that would claim an exclusive form for American poetry. His critique is not against form itself, but the belief that form is somehow ahistorical. He concludes his essay by expanding forms instead of trying to destroy a particular mode of writing. “‘The essential thing is to build a world.’ Energy & emotion, spontaneity, vocabulary, shape—all are elements of that building. It is natural that there are modes but there is no natural mode.”<sup>5</sup> This premise takes Bernstein’s writing from the very start beyond the dominant mode of the 1970s. According to Altieri, the dominant mode for American poetry was an exploration of the rhetoric of experience.<sup>6</sup> He borrows heavily from Stanley Plumly’s *Chapter and Verse* which argues that both the poetry of image and voice dominate the poet’s attempt to justify new perspectives and to establish his or her authority. In contrast, Bernstein derives his authority by arguing that writing is a form of constructed meaning through which we see, experience, and know the world. His argument is similar to Roland Barthes’ belief that art is always formed with what is already constructed, or to Catherine Belsey’s position that all forms of writing are embedded in ideological frameworks, or even to Wittgenstein’s belief that “[t]here is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies.”<sup>7</sup> Bernstein’s belief in multiple modes keeps his writing from abandoning concepts such as referentiality or authorial intention. Turning over

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<sup>4</sup> Bernstein, “Stray Straws and Straw Men”, *Open Letter* 3: 7 (1977): 99. Hereafter cited as “Stray”.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Altieri, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 41, 34-41. Hereafter cited as *Self and Sensibility*.

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, “133.” in *Philosophical Investigations*, 2d ed., trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: 1958), 51.

“natural mode” as one procedure among many, Bernstein’s poetics inspire a poetry that is not limited to the rhetoric of the writer’s experiences of the world.

As we look closely at two very different poems from Bernstein’s work in the 1970s, we will find that he is not turning away from American literary traditions, but continuing them from a location that draws upon numerous modes. Bernstein is not attempting to rid any mark of his own authorship or his own style, nor is he attempting to replace one poetic authority with another. He wants to keep open the different approaches to poetry as he suggests in *My Way*.

My argument has been, and remains, directed at systematic discrepancies of attention to different approaches to poetry and to language, something that goes beyond any individual poet’s recognition, or position. In any case, the idea is not to replace one authority with another, much less one style with another, but to keep the doors spinning to tunes generated on our homemade reality synthesizers. Which is to say: *Keep playing monkey to your own grinder*. And remember: It’s not over even when it’s over.<sup>8</sup>

His argument in poetics relates specifically to his practice as a poet. Bernstein has not worked within one singular style from the very beginning. He published *Poetic Justice* and *Senses of Responsibility* in the same year. The former is a response to and investigation of the American prose poem, whereas the latter is an investigation of the American lyric. He is not looking to replace an authority, but to dislocate authoritative stances. His poetry resists a critical finality, but this does not mean Bernstein is not interested in generating meaning, offering interpretations, or making claims about our world. Bernstein is suggesting that most, if not all forms of dominance work by exclusion, asymmetrical dialogue, opposition, or the reduction of options. Overturning structures of power can happen at any moment which is why “its not over even when its over”. This phrase implies that leaving a unique mark and resisting dominant forces that discount certain voices or modes, keeps the future open for another generation of writers and readers. Even when a writer is finished with her work, a writer or critic may come along later to discover, through an encounter with that work, a weakness in a dominant power.

Bernstein, we can argue, believes that poetry is by nature one of the highest forms of redress as opposed to a vehicle for solipsistic procedures. In the poem “The Taste Is What Counts” from

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<sup>8</sup> Bernstein, “An Autobiographical Interview”, *MW*, 252.

*Poetic Justice*, he does not ground his writing in the rhetoric of experience. The piece contains thirty paragraphs of varying length. The paragraphs are not expository in style, nor always within the bounds of accepted grammatical practices. Each section builds another addition to the piece, but a tight linear continuity is not foregrounded. Nonetheless, enough references are given to place the piece as a reflection: “The actual living in the daily life that be- / comes significant, gives impression.”<sup>9</sup> What Bernstein redresses throughout the poem is the nature and function of impressions. Instead of taking impressions as somehow separate from language, memory, events, or knowledge, he constructs the “becoming significant” of impressions within these forms. Each paragraph then locates the reader in relation to a variety of objects: the sand, the waves, the beach, other people, and the reflection process itself. By examining several of the paragraphs, we can see Bernstein’s reflexive processes in poetry at work. The following paragraph appears toward the end of the thirty sections.

I do but need it larger, splashing against the  
sand, pine, self-consciousness emerging as the man  
jumping out of his car to yell. Up from behind  
I look stupid standing there and nothing up turning  
for it.

(*PJ* 45)

The word “it” probably refers to the waves coming down onto the beach. Admitting that the waves are not large enough, Bernstein brings into the stanza a notion that nature is not enough to affect the seeing subject even though self-consciousness is emerging. Self-consciousness is written within the present tense, “emerging as the man jumping”. We move from a reflective disclosure to the present moment. The reader is located outside the event. The phrase “nothing up turning for it” re-writes “turning up nothing for it” which is a way of saying the efforts of the “I”, in relation to the man yelling, is not producing any effect, results, or answering the man’s yell. The stanza shows that both nature and the “I” are lacking in effect. What is generated is a redescription

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Poetic Justice* (Baltimore: Pod Books, 1979), 40. Hereafter cited as *PJ*.

of a worn saying. Its constructive matrix has been reawakened. We are given two unfulfilled glimpses occurring within the same space, while producing a new self-consciousness concerning a worn phrase. In just a few short lines Bernstein presents a lacking “I” whose “self-consciousness” toward the world and toward the other falters; but, the deadly worn phrase is renewed.

In the next two stanzas Bernstein further investigates these objects of perception, as well as the process of perception itself. Each paragraph, by redressing impressions presents topics in a non-linear progression. Bernstein’s perspicacious language constructs, through the investigation and the consciousness of the senses, a place of buzzing interceding.

A rest becomes impassable. My mind an empty buzz to  
which the objects intercede, the tedium of my inse-  
curities repeatedly playing themselves back in se-  
quence. An illusion of it always being over there,  
of my being outside it, & shoving it in or wanting  
to knock myself out.

(PJ 45)

Bernstein transforms the word “rest” into something metaphorical and yet real, simultaneously. Rest is no longer a passage way to some heightened poetic sense.

I want to suggest that poetry, insofar as it charts the turbulent phenomenon known as human being, must reflect this in the nonperiodic flow of its “chaotic” prosody: clock time (regulated metrics) will not do, nor will structures that aspire to formal or structural (rationalized) stability or geometric conceptions of shape. As the stress of the world impinges on form, the uniformity of the flow rate is disrupted by interference patterns caused by bifurcation and oscillation.<sup>10</sup>

The poem “The Taste Is What Counts” implies a study of the senses. The sense of sight that is being charted in this poem is placed in a form that is repetitious but not geometric. Each stanza, like the waves at a beach, is similar. Instead of ignoring knowledge’s involvement in the seeing

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<sup>10</sup> Bernstein, “Critical Excess (Process),” *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (1990): 844. Hereafter cited as “Critical Excess”.

process, Bernstein allows the stress of the world (a man yelling, feelings of insecurity) to move into the syntax and vocabularies of the lines. The “flow” rate of this stanza is interrupted by the movement of an impassible rest. What is in the mind are “insecurities” blending with the objects of perception, not epiphanies. Instead of Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquillity” we have Bernstein’s claim in “Revenge of the Poet-Critic” that: “Poetry is tranquillity recollected in emotion, commotion projected in tranquility, recollection unsettled by turbulence” (*MW* 11). Bernstein’s simple use of “it” throws the reader an “empty buzz”, a turbulent moment of perception. “It” could refer to the very beginning of the stanza and concern the subject of rest. A rested reading of this stanza is impassible, and so the description of a world comes near to the reading experience. An illusion of rest is built to stand just beyond the reach, but can be shoved into the frame.

Another reading of rest is to take the word to mean “death”. The last line then can be read as a description of how the apprehension of death impinges on the form of living: always there and not there, shoving in, wanting to knock the self “out”. This second and latter reading of “rest” is as viable as is the reading of rest as impassable, full of distractions and turbulence. The first reading has many strengths, whereas the second reading of rest as death handles the line “wanting to knock myself out” with some sufficiency. However, the reading of the last line is left open to the choice of defining “it”. The stanza does not appear to be a trick or to be experimenting for experimenting’s sake. Rather than reading the line as “unclear”, “ambiguous”, “incoherent”, we can chose instead to live with its impassability. Another way to read this stanza is to take the conclusion as the illusionary force of pure, passable rest. From some literary perspectives it is possible to quiet the mind down to emotional tranquility. For emotional tranquility to take place in this stanza, the self would be knocked “out” instead of granting an enhanced perception. Rest defined as an absence of turbulence is not possible. Rest is not a natural state, and illusions of rest always want to knock out the mind filled with objects and feelings. Turbulence impedes upon the line and syntax. A rest becomes impassable because rest is more than passable emotion.

For Bernstein impassability of rest does not impede creativity. In the very next stanza he explores how the sensations of objects are forever fused within a particular language. He takes the reader into a reflection upon the purpose of the senses.

The purposiveness of the sensations of the objects:  
the sight of the world inhabited. Seeing the space  
above us filled. Regarding it just as we see it.

The vault ranging with a judgement ascribed to a re-  
flection. The sight of the ocean implying all kinds  
of knowledge. What strikes the eye: a clear mirror of  
water bounded by sky.

(*PJ* 45)

Our sensations of objects have purpose to show us that we are not isolated within solipsistic projections of insecurities. Objects have power to intercede and language mixes with our perceptual field. The “seeing” space above is referred to not simply as the sky, but as a “vault ranging with a judgement”. The “vault” is fused with language containing judgments. The sensation of objects gives us sight of an external world, and for Bernstein a world that is hinged with former reflections now imbedded within our languages. The “vault” of the sky or the heavens declare “the glory of God” according to the Hebrew psalmist. As the stanza progresses, we are reminded that the ocean also has a host of implicatures. Returning to the eye, vision and metaphor are bound almost without thought. The eye is not literally struck. The water is not a (transparent) mirror. The sky cannot bind anything. Nevertheless, we do imagine the beach the writer presents. The reader, absent forever, is now able to participate and investigate these new reflections between writer and words, between words and worlds, between seeing and knowing. These reflections are central to any aesthetic which accepts that we are not simply neutral receptors of a raw world of data.

Six paragraphs later, the reflections within the piece foreground reflections about the poem itself.

Next to us| all this twirls in spin rapt as reverie  
as much as sight, sound, sign. Repelled or riveted,  
the consciousness of seeing clumped with signs fills  
out or insists on absence. The change is in me: the

very same sand of my childhood still confronts me.  
The signs constructed by the borders projected by a  
language hover in actuality around the crises and  
crosses obediently answering to my expectations.

(*PJ*, 47)

We are given to complex relations with the world. First of all, we are told that “all this twirls” implying, as we read on, all that is going on next to us. The last line of the previous stanza states:

Con-  
sciousness solitary in the way it insists on form-  
ing signs, hovering about an event, constituting  
and reconstituting its meaning.

(*PJ*, 47)

Consciousness builds and constructs signs in and around events. Instead of “hovering about an event”, we find in the full stanza quoted above, the mixture of sight, sound and sign. In this piece “The Taste Is What Counts” Bernstein clearly favors a view of the senses which are informed and shaped by the physical world as well as by the cultural residue through which an individual’s societal location. As he writes, “the consciousness of seeing clumped with signs” does not have an automatic result. One path “fills out” whereas another path “insists on absence”. What is filled out? We could read this to mean a writing that attempts to fill out sight, sound, or sign instead of attempting to record direct, unmediated perceptions. Bernstein has done this through the piece and several times in the quoted sections. We also have places where the insistence on absence is foregrounded as when “rest” is redressed as impassable.

When the piece shifts from a discussion of self-consciousness and the senses (sight, sound, sign) it does so abruptly. How do we read the line, “The change is in me: the very same sand of my / childhood confronts me.”? One way of reading this is to suggest that we are marked by time, that yes the world is next to us, but through our senses we are connected to the world and the passage of time. Events may hover, but change is in us. The changing world is meshed with our earlier experiences. The sand of a childhood can be brought into the consciousness at a much later

date, as can lying on the beach and processing a seen world. The stanza ends by filling out a connection between self-consciousness and signs. Like self-consciousness, signs marked in actuality are constructed and hover. Bernstein transforms the already transformed crisscross (which formerly implied the Cross of Christ) into the materiality of the sign's actuality on the page, which in this piece emphasizes the complexity of the senses. Bernstein does not pick up the implications of the cross of Christ as the marked word, as the actuality of logos made flesh, according to the gospel of St. John. The paragraph does embrace and admit that the constructed signs have fulfilled all expectations. Language is not ephemeral; it contains borders and limitations. The limitations of language are not negative or some form of inadequacy, but rather are particularities, projected by language. Language generates the senses' contact with the world. Signs, in their marked, hovering, actuality contain both sight and sound, thus giving Bernstein a way of asserting that the senses are intimately bound together with signs. The form of "The Taste Is What Counts" responds well to these reflections. Neither over-wrought in filling out, nor underscored in embracing the limitations of an individual perspective, Bernstein's writing is a mixture of sight, sound, and sign "implying all kinds of knowledge".

The reflection on the senses in the form of thirty separate paragraphs of varying lengths, displays a writer who is not interested in the isolated detached self. The self that emerges from the poem is a self negotiating turbulence, a self negotiating between the sight and sounds of words, and a self creating forms of perception. At each moment, the self is intertwined within emotions, memories, and a world that implies, but also lacks knowledge. The form Bernstein uses is neither repeatable nor formulaic. The language used leaves room for the reader to enter into the writing and the created impressions. The kind of consciousness promoted from within the poem reflects at the same time the consciousness of reading the poem. For each reader "the consciousness of the seeing clumped with signs fills out or insists on absence" (*PJ* 47). The written self is similar to the read self. Bernstein describes the process in this way:

When someone says that they can't understand something, you can reasonably assume that someone else is going to absolutely be able to click with that, split infinitive and all. Making certain choices intensifies the communication for some while leaving others higher and drier than ever. This isn't elitist. Elitism suggests that there's one best way to say something, which conveniently segues either into

the argument for mass communication: say it so that most will think they understand it; or for the sole legitimacy of the culture of critical discourse—only we can say it right. Our mutual incomprehensibility to each other is not a matter that can be legislated, or schooled, away: it is an active site of a democratic political process requiring negotiation not repression, translation not transubstantiation into a single common language above the fray of conflicting interests.<sup>11</sup>

He is not seeking a writing or reading that would remove the difference between those readers (or readings) where the signs fill out, or those readers (or readings) where the dialect of sight, sound and sign “insists on absence”. The emerging self with “the consciousness of seeing clumped with signs” is democratic, housed in a language that is neither elitist nor reductive. The reader moves into the dialectic of sight, sound, and sign: a dialectic built toward the world, toward language, and toward the reader. The dialectic does not reduce emotions or the world to one set of procedures, but investigates how emotions and the world are a dialectic of sight, sound, and sign. Bernstein’s poem accepts that incomprehensibility is always a part of the writing and reading dialectic. The reoccurring crashing waves of the poem’s paragraphs turn away from an elitism that would suggest only the writer’s “self” can see the world, and turn away from a reading where the option is to follow the generated impression perfectly or to not come along at all. The poem lives in the house of possibility and instead of generating passive reception and obedience, it calls the reader to develop new receptive abilities and to take up the responsibility of interpreting and negotiating the untried meanings “of the (a) / world” (CD 51).

The next poem I want to examine continues to investigate how poetry can generate responsibility. The poem comes from the volume *Senses of Responsibility*. If responsibility has senses, how would they function? The poem, “As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us” is a dense and highly complex reading of the senses of writing and gives us one answer.<sup>12</sup> The roots of Bernstein’s poetry are as dense as the roots of a willow tree. Whether uprooted or not, the roots of his poetry contain countless “crisses and crosses” going in a variety of directions. Because of their density some roots are destroyed in order to view or examine the interior system

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<sup>11</sup> Bernstein, “Critical Excess”, 851-2.

<sup>12</sup> The poem’s density involves both its form, content, and publication history. This poem has been published by three different presses. The first in 1979 was by Tuumba Press started by Lyn Hejinian with 400 copies. The second printing was by Paradigm Press in 1989 and had 600 copies. The third printing in 2000, was by Sun and & Moon in *Republics of Reality: Poems 1975-1995*. As with his *Veil* poems, this poem has traveled with Bernstein throughout his poetic career.

of roots. However, when examined carefully and closely one can, over time, begin to grasp the range and network of the roots of Bernstein's poetry. Although his many "roots" are in the air, seeable, and accessible, each reader is unable to achieve a three hundred and sixty-degree perspective: a truth for any perceptive exercise. The reader of a Bernstein poem is quickly confronted with the reality that in the majority of cases, totally conclusive readings are impossible. The impossibility is not bound to a problem of epistemology; rather the impossibility is linked to the creative nature of Bernstein's text, whose roots continue to reach out beyond the particular reader's field of vision. The reader must take up the task of responding, of forming, and building responses. Since the rhetoric of experience is not the guiding principle in construction, neither does it serve as the dominant guide for reading.

The reading process then is not a process of trying to grasp what is out of reach. Rather it is a process which understands that at times knowledge is limited; therefore, reading is like a discovery or investigation. Investigating the signs and bringing them into a reflective process opens and creates responses and forms of knowledge. As Roger Fowler argues:

Modern criticism, dogmatically anti-intentionalist and anti-affective, too readily assumes that a poem is a static artifact, an object for contemplation rather than a process for participation.<sup>13</sup>

His opposition between a static artifact and a process of participation is limited, when reading Bernstein's poetry. At times in Bernstein's poetry, as in the following poem, the lines rest on the page as an object of visual delight; but even when he constructs a line that emphasizes the materiality of the grapheme he still calls upon the reader to work with his combination of words, grammatical marks, and length of line. Bernstein's call on the reader is both contemplative and participatory.

In terms of participation, Fowler's work *Linguistic Criticism* is an asset to studying Bernstein because of how he reads the significance of linguistic structures in literature and of how he reads innovation.

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<sup>13</sup> Roger Fowler, "The Reader: A Linguistic view", in *Literature as Social Discourse: The Practice of Linguistic Criticism*, (London: Batsford Academic and Educational LTD, 1981), 140.

...it is fundamental to my approach that the significance of linguistic structures in literature is a function of the relationships between textual construction and the social, institutional, and ideological conditions of its production and reception. Thus history, social structure, and ideology are major sources of knowledge and hypotheses in the framework for linguistic criticism.<sup>14</sup>

Fowler emphasizes the elements of textual construction and the conditions of reception. Both of these issues figure in Bernstein's manner of writing. In the last stanza of the poem "As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us", Bernstein refers to the written stanzas as "tracings" marked by time and the writing process itself. Fowler's idea that significance in literature is inter-related to significance in other cultural spheres such as social, historical, or ideological conditions, gives a way to discuss the critical aspects of Bernstein's poetry. As Bernstein said in his interview with Tom Beckett, "[w]hatever 'critical' writing I've done makes sense primarily in terms of the 'poetry', is one and the same project" (CD 402). Writing for Fowler and for Bernstein builds its meaning out of the living and working structures of knowledge in society. As we read in "The Taste Is What Counts", sight, sound and sign work either independent of or dependent upon writers and readers. The writer can move language toward possibility or toward control.

Fowler sees the language of literature working against what Bernstein called mass communication. Literature for Fowler is a creative use of language, and one aspect of literature is the creation of the new.

But it is not just newness of language which we experience when we feel that a literary work is innovative—if that were the recipe for literary creativity, then verbal acrobatics of the most striking kind would guarantee literary success. Verbal tricks are not enough. The important thing that is created is new knowledge. Readers come away from a novel or a poem feeling that they have been given some knowledge which they did not possess before, or very often, that they have experienced a new insight into some familiar problem or theme. (21)

New insight (a form of perception) flowing from new knowledge extends our concept of the senses. Whereas bombarding the senses with formal or verbal acrobatics does not guarantee an ameliorative expansion of the senses. When the "familiar" is opened, it regains its sense of

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<sup>14</sup> Roger Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism*, 2d ed., (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 16.

responding. The addition, to the senses and knowledge, can be a gift of the text, but it also can come from the reader taking up the responsibilities of reading and following the dialect of sight, sound, and sign. The innovative text proposes potentialities and awaits negotiation. A democratic, heroic text awaits the participation of both its writer and its reader. From Bernstein's perspective, we may feel that a poem or a manner is innovative just from the "newness of language" we experience. However, Fowler has a point that if it is simply a kind of verbal acrobatics that automatically generates literary innovation, then simple diversity or oddness could be considered innovative. Fowler instead wants to attach innovation to something else besides technique: new knowledge or new insight. Innovation of language then, is not simply an experiment for experiment's sake, nor is it destruction for destruction's sake. Rather, true innovation unlocks and creates an alteration of meaning, and the expansion of knowledge will be multiple and located in both the text and the reader's own senses. We can see now a way to understand different kinds of innovation. Some innovations remain only interested in the new. Other innovations are interested in the new and seek to add possibilities and responsibility to the reader's life or the culture. The poem "As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us" is in this later category. Reading this poem and embracing the significance of its linguistic structures as Fowler would suggest, we find Bernstein giving us a form of innovation which confronts as it suggests new ways of seeing.

As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us

Strange to remember a visit, really not so  
Long ago, which now seems, finally, past. Always, it's a  
Kind of obvious thing I guess, amazed by that  
Cycle: that first you anticipate a thing & it seems  
Far off, the distance has a weight you can feel  
Hanging on you, & then it's there—that  
Point —whatever—which, now, while  
It's happening seems to be constantly slipping away,  
"Like the sand through your fingers in an old move," until  
You can only look back on it, & yet you're still there, staring  
At your thoughts in the window of the fire you find yourself before.  
We've gone over this a thousand times: & here again, combing that  
Same section of beach or inseam for that—I'm no  
Longer sure when or exactly where —"&yet" the peering,  
Unrewarding as it is, in terms of tangible results,

Seems so necessary.

Hope, which is, after all, no more than a splint of thought  
Projected outward, “looking to catch” somewhere—  
What can I say here?—that the ease or  
Difficulty of such memories doesn’t preclude  
“That harsher necessity” of going on always in  
A new place, under different circumstances:  
& yet we don’t seem to have changed, it’s  
As if these years that have gone by are  
All a matter of record, “but if the real  
Facts were known” we were still reeling from  
What seems to have just happened, but which,  
“By the accountant’s keeping” occurred years  
Ago. Years ago. It hardly seems possible,  
So little, really, has happened.

We shore ourselves hour by hour  
In anticipation that soon there will be  
Nothing to do. “Pack a sandwich  
& let’s eat later.” And of course  
The anticipation is quite appropriate, accounting,  
For the most part, for whatever activity  
We do manage. Eternally buzzing over the time,  
Unable to live in it. . . .

“Maybe if we go upaways we can get a better  
View.” But, of course, in that sense, views don’t  
Improve. “In the present moment” (if we could only see  
It, which is to say, to begin with, stop looking with  
Such anticipation) what is enfolding before us puts to  
Rest any necessity for “progression”.

So, more of these tracings, as if by magic  
Of the phonetic properties of these squiggles. . . . Or  
Does that only mystify the “power” of “presence” which  
Is, as well, a sort of postponement.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Bernstein, “As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us”, *Senses of Responsibility* Tuumba 20 (Berkeley: Tuumba Press, 1979), 1-2. Hereafter cited as SR.

The title of the poem announces to the reader that she or he is now at the border of imagination. Beginning not with the concrete but with the speculative, “As if...”, we are taken into a series of questions: If the trees by their roots had a hold of us, then what? Are we to take this title to mean that we are only earthly, and grounded to the earth? Are the following stanzas a set of reflections concerning what it would be like if the trees had a hold on us? The title refers to reality, but a reality that is metaphorical and pregnant with suggestions. If the trees did have a hold of us, then what? We would not be free to move about; we would be grounded. Or, the trees would become like us, moving about, forgoing location by adopting human agency. The trees are grounded in a location whereas the “us” by nature, is not. As the poem begins, it is as if the title is forgotten. The subject of the poem revolves around the passage and perception of time and event and how these realities might be recorded as “tracings”. If we take the title as a metaphor and look at the poem as a reflection upon time and narrative, then we could see trees in terms of the raw material of books. Instead of leaves of grass, we have the uprooted tree awaiting a variety of destinations. However, before we presume this reading, let us look closer at each of the stanzas.

The border of imagination begins with the word “strange”. It is an old word implying the unknown or the unusual. The first stanza reflects upon time as a cycle, and Bernstein uses formatting as well as content to show how writing and experience might interact. We have amazement, anticipation, and strangeness framing the writing of a past event. We do not begin with an “I” but with a statement: “Strange to remember a visit”. For whom is this strange? Everyone? Is it strange for the writing of the poem? Very quickly, we find at the border of imagination the process of writing about the experience of time. The stanza begins by building a picture of the process of waiting for something that “has a weight you can feel”. The sonic register of the poem takes flight. Hearing the line “has a weight you can feel” is double edged as the line concerns waiting. Waiting can have weight. Anticipation falls into the present which slips away all too quickly. These lines show, on the page and not in the sonic register, what quickly happens to the “now”.

that first you anticipate a thing & it seems  
Far off, the distance has a weight you can feel  
Hanging on you, & then it’s there—that  
Point —whatever—which, now, while

It's happening seems to be constantly slipping away

(SR 1)

The cycle ends with the slippage of the moment unable to be contained, but nevertheless registers and becomes a point of reflection: "Strange to remember a visit". Bernstein uses elements of punctuation to create the effect of the awaited moment on the page. He grounds the remembrance of the present as "that Point—whatever—which,". The line gives specificity to the memory, but admits perplexity. The design of the line re-creates an experience of time in language. The stanza concludes by locating the reflection before a fire, forgetting some details of time and space, of when and where, yet remembering. The stanza has within it what Altieri called the dominant mode of the 1970s, the rhetoric of experience. We have an "I" writing reflectively. Bernstein also uses the personal pronoun "you". The pronoun can function as a direct address. Whether we wanted to be addressed as readers or not, we are told what happens to us. The "you" can also be read as a completely private writing on the writer's experience, where Bernstein is speaking to himself, having a conversion from within, a dialogue with the self. If we take this route, then we have a self that is not singular. Instead of having direct experience we are twice removed. At one point a person sitting before a fire re-experiences what is past and reflects on this experience. Now as readers, we are reading this reflection on reflection. Bernstein's use of the rhetoric of experience is not grounded in one specific location.

The next stanza begins with two lines on hope. Hope is traditionally understood as a form of waiting for a future happening. Bernstein's hope inside the poem is viewed as a projected thought. Nevertheless, the stanza returns to the subject of change and the power of past events to define the present. In the present moment "we don't seem to have changed", but what has happened in the past, continues to have a present reality. Even in light of being in a new place and different circumstances, nothing seems to have changed: "*we* don't seem to have changed". Our hypothesis in the first stanza is now challenged. Who is the "we"? Has Bernstein unified the "I" and the "you" of the first stanza and taken a third position outside the narrative of the poem? To what or to whom does the "we" refer? If it is now two different people, the memories are shared and experienced differently. Reading the poem and asking simple questions of how to place the personal pronouns, we find a complex density of narration and its relation to time. At times

Bernstein takes the reader outside the poem through the use of quotations: “but if the real facts were known”. The quotation serves as another language source outside the poem, and serves as proof that the present moment is flooded and filled with the effects and the duration of the past and its ability to define the present. Time does not function here in the confinable boundaries of past, present, and future.

The next two stanzas present and answer the problem of living in time. In the third stanza, we “shore ourselves hour by hour”. The word “shore” recalls the first stanza where the combing of the beach was used as a supporting prop. The reader is told that anticipation is quite appropriate. In other words we are constantly experiencing the effects of what is coming. The future impinges upon our form. In the last two lines of the third stanza the question arises concerning the reality of time: “Eternally buzzing over the time, / Unable to live in it...”. It is implied that “we” buzz over the time. What keeps us from living in time? According to the next stanza, what keeps us from living in time is the cycle of before, during, and after. If we could live in the “present moment” we would see that “progression” is no longer necessary. “If” we could do this reveals the failure or the presence of multiple layers of time. The future, the present, and the past, intersect in the moment without any coherent order of experience.

The last stanza goes to the heart of experience and writing, time and narrative. The first striking feature of this stanza is the lack of any personal pronouns. The writer of the poem comes forward and gives a reading of what has taken place. Each of the stanzas are tracings. To think of these stanzas as tracings, frames the piece as writing intimately tied to the passage of time. A trace can be a left over, or a residue. It is never thought of as the direct effect. The trace is the effect of time embedded in culture. Both “presence” and tracings are referred to as a “sort of postponement”. The roots of the word “postpone” give one reading of these lines. In brief, the word “postpone” or to put after has come to mean a form of deferral. Tracings and any record of presence are always formed after the events. Writing then is embedded in postponement. Poetry can act as if it is grounded in a direct reading of a past event, but just as it is impossible to have trees do this to us, so to it is impossible to write without the imagination, without construction, without pluralities. To ignore this attempts to “mystify the power of presence”. Here we have one sense of responsibility. As Steiner pointed out, responsibility implies having the ability to

respond.<sup>16</sup> Bernstein has the ability to respond by choosing not to ignore, even when using the rhetoric of experience, writing as a form of after engagement. Bernstein does not repeat direct experience because this is not possible without negotiating the reality of the trace.

Bernstein's tracings are content with a variety of techniques: quotation, direct speech acts, traditional stanzas. He has successfully presented a self, reflecting upon a memory ("strange to remember") that is nearer to Ashbery's prose narrative in *Three Poems* (1972) than it is to Mayer's documentary journal in *Memory* (1975) or Creeley's meditative reflections on the works of Marisol Escobar in *Presences* (1976). Bernstein's verse is filled with philosophical statement and commentary on the difficulty of time perception, future worries, and the inadequacies of perception in the present moment. His verse contains a radical mixture of the self and phonetic properties, and the poem ends with a confession. The confession framed in traditional stanzas strains within from the presence of dense phenomenological reflection. Writing emerges, embedded in postponement even as it presents its mark on the page, to the eye of the reader, to the awaiting vocal cords. His writing shows the poem to be an investigation of experience, how it is made, lived with, and projected. From the laboratory of his poetics, he concludes that writing is an effect filled with time and the materiality of narration.

The two poems "As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us" and "The Taste Is What Counts" both published in 1979 show that Bernstein early in his career investigated the raw material of poetry which included sight, sound, sign, time, and trace. In contrast to other poetry in the 1970s, Bernstein shows that American poetry continues to grow beyond established standards. For example, if we look closely at Robert Bly's view of presence and Galway Kinnell's view of events, we can see that Bernstein's work is more capable of evoking insight and discovery into the nature of human experience. Bly writes of a "ground tone audible under the words of poems" as a second consciousness.<sup>17</sup> The goal of the writing for the volume is to merge his own consciousness and this other consciousness, as "an energy circling downward, felt often in autumn, or moving slowly around apple trees or stars" (10). Bly confesses that he is unable to always find the right balance between the "inner and outer": "and the hard thing for me is to find a sequence

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<sup>16</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 90.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Bly, "The Two Presences", *This Tree Will Be Here for A Thousand Years* (Harper and Row: New York, 1979), 9.

of sounds, a rhythm, and an image that carries the inner and outer together without letting either fall” (10-11). In the poem “Walking and Sitting”, we are given the results.

That’s odd—I am trying to sit still,  
Trying to hold the mind to one thing.  
Outdoors angleworms stretched out thin in the gravel,  
While it is thundering.

(32)

We are given what comes across as a complete image. In contrast, Bernstein does not try to “hold the mind to one thing.” Bly in his four line poem removes all the distractions of the mind and of language. The last two lines attempt a presence, but as we have seen from Bernstein, it is only a presence of postponement, or of after effect. Bernstein’s view of consciousness expands with the details instead of finding a way to make a line of poetry look like an image without the need of signs. Kinnell gives us a different mood concerning time in the poem “Wait”.

Wait, for now.  
Distrust everything if you have to.  
But trust the hours. Haven’t they  
Carried you everywhere, up to now?  
Personal events will become interesting again.  
Hair will become interesting again.  
Pain will become interesting again.<sup>18</sup>

Kinnell, as he opens this piece, pushes the reader to wait for a time when events will become interesting again. The numbness of events is answered in the second and final stanza with the music of hair, pain, and sorrow being fused with the “music of looms weaving all our loves again” (84). Bernstein unlike Kinnell does not assume that a term like music is singular or can simply be repeated. How will events become interesting again, how have events become un-interesting? Bernstein’s work, written at the same time as these two highly awarded American poets, offers a form of poetry that does not neglect or ignore the elements of its construction and experience.

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<sup>18</sup> Galway Kinnell, *Three Books: Body Rags, Mortal Acts Mortal Words, The Past* (Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 1993), 84. The poem comes from the volume *Mortal Acts Mortal Words* (1980).

So far, Bernstein has shown himself to not be bound by the rhetoric of experience in erumpent and thought provoking ways, and in ways that confront critical inquiry. His poetry and treatment of the memory, the senses, and the emotions, confronts poetic standards of self-awareness. Charles Altieri in his work *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary Poetry* finds poets of the 1970s such as David Young and William Stafford

negotiating a difficult passage between two destructive forces; on one side lies the interminable self-consciousness that cripples so much of contemporary writing and on the other the false sublimity and vacuous prophecy of what passed as speculative poetic thought a decade ago.<sup>19</sup>

Bernstein's poetry written in the 1970s uses forms of self-consciousness that do not cripple the writing. Instead it creates a new form of sublimity where the reader works in language to discover and create a vision of poetry that does not turn from its constructed nature nor one which hides or covers up its traces. Altieri finds William Stafford's poetry working with a view of emotions that are vacuous instead of visionary.

Stafford's treatment of emotions makes him all too susceptible to the ironic reversals worked by deconstructive thought, and that vulnerability helps explain why poetry has such a marginal status in our society. It simply fails to satisfy our standards for self-awareness about the means we use to gain our ends. The poems reflect our emotional duplicity without our practical intelligence. (35)

Altieri suggests that the emotions portrayed in the dominant modes of poetry in the 1970s are unable to withstand critical pressure. The dominant mode for Altieri was the rhetoric of direct experience. Although highly critical of the period, he does find Ashbery's and Rich's use of the dominant mode worthy of critical praise. Upon closer examination, I would argue that Bernstein's use of the rhetoric of experience in the 1970s is also worthy of critical praise. Instead of failing to satisfy standards of self-consciousness, Bernstein's work confronts and demands that we investigate self-awareness itself.

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Altieri, *Self and Sensibility*, 35. Altieri discusses David Young's essay "Language: The Poet as Master and Servant" in *A Field Guide to Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* (Longman: New York, 1980) and Stafford's poem, "Ceremony" from *West of Your City* (Los Gatos, Calif.: Tailsman Press, 1960) in his first chapter "Self and sensibility in contemporary poetry", 1-31.

Although Altieri finds solace in Ashbery and Rich, he considers poetry of the 1970s as a failed poetry unable “to live up to the promises of a more speculative and experimental time.”<sup>20</sup> Pinsky in *The Situation of Poetry* (1976) makes a similar assessment.

Rather, the point is that in this the late modernist period both of those styles, and others, seem to base themselves upon some of the same grounds: prominently, a dissatisfaction with the abstract, discursive, and conventional nature of words as a medium for the particulars of experience.

That dissatisfaction may be expressed by pursuit of the physical image purified of statement, or in other instances by pursuit of an “allegation” purified of imagistic eloquence. In either case, the dissatisfaction is ultimately insoluble because of the nature of words and verses, but the great body of modern poetry demonstrates what a rich terrain of possibility the problem provides. The contemporary poet exploring that terrain will find himself in the presence of modernists terms and strategies.<sup>21</sup>

Pinsky does not elaborate on the meaning of “modernists terms and strategies”. What is clear in this passage is his summary on writing in the 1970s as a form of dissatisfaction with language and the “conventional nature of words” as a medium for experience. The poet’s dissatisfaction according to Pinsky moved in two directions. One direction is toward the “image purified”, as we saw it above in the Bly piece. The other direction is to make assertions “purified of imagistic eloquence” as in Kinnell’s poem. What is intriguing to me is the lack of options for Pinsky, and that the problem of language as a medium of experience is a rich terrain of possibilities. To explore this terrain in the 1970s returns the poet back to modernist terms and strategies. What Pinsky does not question is whether or not poetry is only defined as the art of expression. Bernstein’s poetry does not begin within this paradigm of language as a medium for expressing experience. Instead his poetry begins with an investigation of the raw materials of poetry and writing.

Stephen Fredman in contrast to Pinsky finds another route within American poetry. In *Poet’s Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*, Fredman argues that American poetry is always in crisis.<sup>22</sup> He finds in the contemporary poetry of the late 1960s and 1970s a poetry that is resilient

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and its Traditions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 12. Hereafter cited as *The Situation of Poetry*.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Fredman, “Introduction: Prose and the American crisis of verse”, in *Poet’s Prose: The Crisis in American Verse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 1990), 1-11. Hereafter cited as *Poet’s Prose*.

and inspired by post-Wittgenstein critical reflection. For Fredman, in “the new poetry of David Antin, David Bromige, Ron Silliman, and Michael Davidson, the balance is tipped—sometimes more, sometimes less—in favor of the critical intelligence” (134). He argues that these poets benefited from the explosion of the critical discussion concerning language, reference, and meaning in the 1960s. Differing from Altieri and Pinsky, Fredman in 1983 finds a new and positive development in American Poetry.

Critical thinking does not merely buttress the mythopoetic imagination in these poets; rather, they are originally critical, practicing a vigilant self-awareness that calls forth language and subjects it to an examination of its mediatory function. For these poets the critical activity of deconstruction, of investigating a text as an endless play of subtexts, is a means of poetic creation. (136-137)

The investigation of textual construction for “these poets”, and the role of language in meaning construction, leads to poetic creation. They are not dead-locked as Pinsky argued in a dissatisfaction with language. For these writers, language is not a problem to be solved, but a site of agency with the ability to generate endless forms.

Fredman names a number of “new” poets: Michael Palmer, Barbara Einzig, Kathleen Fraser, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman, Barrett Warren, Bernadette Mayer, and Clark Coolidge. He sees them related to but different from the American tradition.

Though they adopt some of the hermeneutic practices and phenomenological attention of Creeley and Ashbery, these poets focus more relentlessly upon the ability of language to predicate. All of these poets define poetry broadly as, in David Antin’s words, “the language art”; the choice of prose or verse, which forms a highly conscious decision in the poetics of Williams, Creeley, and Ashbery, becomes incidental to the writers of the new poet’s prose. They no longer care to defamiliarize poetry with prose for the purpose of generic innovation; in their heightened self-consciousness about language they employ forms as mere ways of moving, strategies at hand for the moment, rather than as claims about the correct mode of representation. (137)

These writers have focused specifically on the nature of language instead of on the rhetoric of expression. Alongside this critical intelligence, Fredman argues that they maintain the belief that

no one “medium or method may be assumed as a transparent vehicle of truth.”<sup>23</sup> The heightened critical awareness interprets the medium as the message, as opposed to a tool for cognitive shock, or social disruption. However, once the form is understood as the content, language forms are employed as agencies of meaning which disrupt paradigms of correct usage, the status quo, and dominant writing strategies. Bernstein, as we can see already, embraces this tradition of American poetry. Bernstein who also investigates the nature of words and modes of rhetoric, does not remain dissatisfied, but embraces poetic creation. Being inspired by his contemporaries, Bernstein works with the whole of language instead of within dominant modes and established categories within a particular language system such as poetry or prose. Informed by philosophical investigation, he expands the range of writing to incorporate a consciousness of time and narrative, and his response to the critical crisis inspires a heightened “heteroglossia”. His heightened self-consciousness about poetry returns him to the raw material of poetry: sight, sound, and sign. Altieri, Pinsky, and Fredman refer to the period as a period of dissatisfaction, crisis, and failure. Each of these writers attempted to articulate the reasons and nature of the crisis. Poetic forms and content were questioned for cultural significance and durability. Only Fredman recognized, in a new contemporary poetry, another route for American poetics. A route neither Pinsky nor Altieri considered at the time worth pursuing.<sup>24</sup>

Outside the academy, the “crisis” of the 1970s was given an alternative interpretation: “there is a group of writers today united in the feeling that literature has entered a crisis of the sign.”<sup>25</sup> Bernstein, a part of another kind of crisis, brings into poetics a melioration of technical artifice, intentionality, and reference. In the poems we examined, he works with the basic elements of poetry and writing in order to create a space of possibility for worn out categories such as self-consciousness, presence, and image. His form of self-consciousness embraces and weaves together the empirical with the hermeneutical, creating an analytical form that does not embrace either a reductionism of image nor discourse. He (re)creates a poetic fullness. In his critical work, we find Bernstein addressing the issues of reduction by examining the techniques of writing. As we look

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<sup>23</sup> *Poet's Prose*, 137.

<sup>24</sup> Pinsky finds Bruce Andrew's work mere frivolity in *The Situation of Poetry*, 87-90. Altieri reads Bernstein's work as a simple derivative of Creeley's inadequate (Altieri's view) poetics of conjecture in *Self and Responsibility*, 105.

<sup>25</sup> Steve McCaffery, introduction, “The Politics of the Referent” *Open Letter* 3:7 (1977): 60.

into these essays on the “crisis of the sign”, we find Bernstein marking out a unique perspective on the matter of writing even in the place where he is being heard. As Avital Ronell has written, “a crisis is supposed to provoke a breakthrough; it’s supposed to reveal what’s wrong.”<sup>26</sup> Bernstein’s response to what is wrong reveals him as an “inventor-critic”, a term that I take from Petroski’s study on inventors.<sup>27</sup> In other words, Bernstein interprets the crisis as an opportunity to offer a set of alterations and alternatives for American poetry itself.

The Canadian Journal *Open Letter* in 1977 was the site of a “language-art” collaboration under the title “The Politics of the Referent”. Each of the participants, Steve McCaffery (who edited the issue), Bruce Andrews (with whom Bernstein was to start the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal in 1978), Ray DiPalma, Ron Silliman, and Ellsworth Snyder, presented a multifarious argument that referentiality was not a neutral, automatic nor mechanical function of language. All but Snyder were to collaborate again, working together much more closely in the book *Legend* (1980). The essays by Bernstein and McCaffery engage the “crisis” as an opportunity to fashion solutions, re-work concepts of literary criticism, and create a new direction for writing. Several years later, Bernstein, McCaffery, and Silliman published their letters pertaining to the issues addressed in the *Open Letter* essays. Reading Bernstein’s essays and letters along side McCaffery’s shows once again how Bernstein did not work out his innovative writing in poetry and criticism in isolation. Reading the essays and letters together also shows how Bernstein’s perspective is incomparable and inventive. These essays were written in the same period as the poetic works of Bly and Kinnell and the critical works of Altieri and Pinsky. They reveal and display a stark contrast in content, structure, and attitude. They gather strength from a heroic commitment that poetry can be, to use Rothenberg’s phrase, “a revolution of the word”. The desire for change, in the dominant mode, informed by philosophy, contemporary writers (at the time), and untapped resources in the literary tradition, comes across as a salubrious and inventive logonomy.

McCaffery’s essay, “The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing” is a critique of referentiality and a radical call for what he calls counter-communication. In the opening paragraphs of McCaffery’s essay, he argues for a demystification of the referential fallacy

<sup>26</sup> Avital Ronell, “Avital Ronell”, interviewed by Andrea Juno, in *Re/search* #13: *Angry Women*, ed. Andrea Juno & V. Vale (San Francisco: RE/SEARCH PUBLICATIONS, 1991), 140.

<sup>27</sup> Petroski, “Inventors as Critics”, *The Evolution of Useful Things*, 34-50.

informed by philosophy and linguistics instead of poetry.

There is a group of writers today united in the feeling that literature has entered a crisis of the sign; that the explications of literatures have merged with the implications of language and that the foremost task at hand—a more linguistic and philosophic than ‘poetic’ task—is to demystify the referential fallacy of language.<sup>28</sup>

Instead of an intentional fallacy whereby the meaning of the text is sought in the writer’s paradigmatic agenda, McCaffery constructs another fallacy linked with referentiality. Although McCaffery refers to Wittgenstein’s opening in *Tractatus* (and section 4.126), his response to the crisis of the sign is shaped by a reading of poetry and a reoccurring motif to define “counter-communication” and “language-centered writing”. McCaffery’s reading is a merger of explications and implications of contemporary poetry and its use of language. The poets he calls upon such as Clark Coolidge, Bruce Andrews, Ray DiPalma, Charles Bernstein, Robert Grenier, Barbara Barracks, David Melnick, and Ron Silliman are all writers investigating “the removal of grammatical conditioners” and “the physical property and material relations of the word as a grapheme” (62-63). These writers refuse the automatic laws of narration toward reference. Instead, they write in such a way as to create a heightened awareness of the sign on the page, in the line, within the word. Language for these writers is not a commodity to be consumed by a reader, who usually after finding the meaning forgets the language itself. McCaffery sees reading as a relationship with the sign on the page: “Language is material and primary and what’s experienced is the tension and relationship of letters and letteristic clusters, simultaneously struggling toward, yet refusing to become, significations” (63-64). McCaffery is convinced that a view of language informed by the plastic arts will “demystify the referential fallacy” (61).

To refuse automatic forms of reference calls the reader to encipherment instead of decipherment: “Encipherment...is based upon a sense of the text as complete, eventist, surface and immediate” (65). Decipherment reads the text as “potential but partial. . . holding to the capability to expand toward a destination within a semantic normality” (65). McCaffery’s

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<sup>28</sup> Steve McCaffery, “The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing”, *Open Letter* 3:7 (1977): 61, 61-77.

encipherment calls the reader to visual convergency and to focus upon the shapes of the type, the layout of the page, and the color of the ink. The geometric and linear page design in the majority of texts is formed in order to not call attention to itself. Since McCaffery reads the visual grapheme as a semantic completion, textual form is re-opened as an object of interpretation. The visual grapheme as an active agency of meaning, refusing automatic forms of reference, merges traditional reading with design and typography.

McCaffery sharpens his argument through his readings of poetry. He shows how the counter-communication challenge to referentiality re-directs the reader to focus upon the signs for themselves. He finds an example of this desired redirection in Bruce Andrews' poetry. Instead of turning away from Andrews' innovation as Pinsky did, McCaffery delves into innovation. McCaffery shows a way to read the following quotation whereby the reader's attention is shifted to the object quality of the text.

albe  
           skep  
 tref  
           jush  
 numb  
 pffe neig (Andrews)

(65)

Andrews jocundly plays with our referential expectations, and this extreme example of the absence of referentially almost demands the charge of nonsense. If we try and decipher the text toward a hidden meaning, we simply do not have enough information. McCaffery, writes: "By eliminating reference this way, by reducing the connotative range of the graphemes, Andrews promotes a strong object quality in this text. Letteristic clusters of this kind tend to function in the manner of a punctuation, as pure space-time arrestments" (65). By building on punctuation as the one aspect in the English language that has "object quality", McCaffery finds a way to discuss Andrews' poetry. In Andrews' work, letters take on this "object quality", and McCaffery sees language-centered counter-communication as "a bracketed poetics, deliberate in its suspension of all linguistic procedure, in order to allow an attention to be focused on a phonological form" (67).

In the Andrews selection, the letter combinations strain linguistic procedures awaiting enactment. McCaffery refers to this kind of writing as a cipher: “The Cipher, and language-centered counter-communication in general provides a text in which the sign names itself a present naming with signs *standing* period; not signs standing for an absence” (68). The referential fallacy for McCaffery is the neglect of the physical graphic sign on the page. Moreover, the fallacy reads language as a vehicle of meaning. He supports the sign as a meaning presence on the page, not as a neglected, neutral carrier of meaning.

Instead of reading Andrews toward the tradition of deciphering, whereby all the elements of the poem are explained, categorized, and understood, McCaffery allows the poem to work its way toward an alteration of reading itself. Instead of treating the poem as a “structural density” requiring “a reading that approximates a hermeneusis” (64), McCaffery sees the poem in spatial terms.

In this method, meaning is not hidden beneath a surface but is emptied out of a container; the tendency to vertical descent through a text’s illusionary surface, becomes resolved within an experiencing of absences as gaps upon a textual surface. In this way syntax homologizes what in the world of sculpture is negative space. Absence is experienced as an event either anterior or exterior to any semantic presence. (64)

He fuses the gaze of the plastic arts to the syntax of the page. He imports visual strategies where absence (negative space) is presence. He transforms the contemporary terms of critical inquiry (absence and presence) through a reading of contemporary poetry. He combines, through a close viewing of contemporary poetry, semantic presence and spatial absence as necessary terms of the textual surface.

In normal discourse, spacing is reduced. Gaps between words and lines are only formed in one dominant mode. Reading patterns rush through the sign toward the destination of meaning. The automatic nature of conventional discourse produces a view of language and an ethical practice. McCaffery thinks that denying the graphic immanence of a text is bound to a particular philosophy of the sign.

Conventional reading patterns promote the sense of a linguistic mask: a desire to get beyond the words themselves or alternatively ‘beneath’ them into a region of

reference: of images, symbols, and ideas that the surface syntagms seem somehow to withhold from us. Conventional reading hence resists the sheer fact of a text's graphic immanence. Surface. Words, traditionally, are seen to simultaneously reveal and obscure intents and meanings, with the Sign's own mask taking the form of the signifier that transports—yet at the same time delays—the destination of the signified. (69)

The desire to get beyond words reduces the sign to the temporal and pragmatic. The sign is reduced to a dualism in order to attain meaning. The beneath and beyond of the sign's mask includes images, symbols, and ideas. Part of McCaffery's argument is merited: the grapheme is neglected in critical and novelistic discourse, but less so in poetic discourse where at times small press printing is well crafted. McCaffery's point is that the methods used to read conventional discourse are unable to read texts that foreground the graphic and iconic qualities of the sign. He does take his argument too far by trying to reduce the referential function of the sign to only one sphere. Conventional discourse is linear pushing forward toward meaning, but even in conventional discourse reference is spatial. The after effect of the sign goes in a variety of directions. Yet, the majority of reading is shaped by conventional discourse. Conventional reading, unable to read poetry that embraces the graphic object nature of the sign is unable to read, process, or interpret the kind of poetry McCaffery and his contemporaries writes.

McCaffery sees a way to read writing that does not resist the text's graphic immanence, and that does not work behind a mask that both obscures and intends meanings. Poetry for McCaffery,

is neither a verbal stimulant nor a verbal tranquilizer, but rather a paraverbal surface onto which a reader is invited to step into a production effort. What it is not is textual commodity, replete with reference to be consumed by 'an understanding' reader. The demand is for *praxis* not consumption. (71)

The reading alteration involves an engaged reader who can produce meaning along with text. His structure does not disregard the interpretive textual paradigm of writer, text, world, and reader. The role of the reader is not to consume but to practice. Referentiality moves its location from the dominion of the sign to the dominion of the reader. The text, as we have seen from Andrews, does not provide a complete image, symbol, or idea. It is a spatial-graphic unit that engages the

reader to build connections and form possible readings. A problem with his binary oppositions of masked meaning and surface event is that any engagement with a reader is another form of reference. The kind of reference he does not want, is the ready-made reference that demands passive reception. As he writes on, he fleshes out a new kind of reading space and its ethics.

Meaning: what the reader brings as praxis, not what the reader takes away as reference. So, we can see how language-centered writing enforces a charity, a total givingness of reader and writer to their texts. Texts for so long have been those things which a reader has raped, drawn out of, now is the moment of the text's receiving into itself. And the reader? An extension of vocabulary, both operator and component of a textual event. (71)

Old forms of reading that ignore the spatial dimension are seen as sexually violent. Accepting graphic immanence re-designs the reader into a space of charity and praxis. Visual poetics are transformed into graphic poetics where language-centered writing brings to the reading experience a re-interpretation of the semiotic as only one element in the surface of textual construction. The new reader, as an extension of vocabulary, becomes an embodied referent called upon as an intermediary who builds possible versions of the spatial discourse.

McCaffery's language-centered writing addresses the reader in new ways: absence as event; poetic space located in the entire page as an invitation for the reader's reading; the graphic sign as "[t]he letter in space with self-generating aura" (71); and meaning "dependent on the context of attention that a reader brings to the text" (71). In McCaffery's world the "new" writing is structured in absence for the presence of reading. The lack of conventional linear design becomes an invitation for participation. The letter is arrested into an enforced charity awaiting the attention of the reader. According to McCaffery the new reader is placed in the space of charity. The reader is in a charitable position because s/he is not being over designed. "Charity" in Greek and English have larger designs than freedom. In these languages it is a state of not seeking an emotional, physical, or spiritual exchange. It is a one-directional activity for the benefit of the other. McCaffery proposes a theoretical position by arguing for a charitable reading of absence and non-conventional syntactical constructions. His proposal is embedded in a practical reading for the benefit of language-centered writing: look at the page; there are gaps; think of these gaps, as places

where you are invited in, and in these absences, some deliberate, some intrinsic, you will discover a way to interact with the page, in a different way from the reading model built to understand other forms of poetry.

The hardest thing in reading is just to see the seeing that you're seeing. To let the word receive your sight. To not deflect off language but to re-flect within it. To let your seeing be what your reading was. To let the direct, empirical experience of a grapheme replace what the signifier in a word will always try to discharge: its signified and referent. (62)

The space of charity that McCaffery finds takes the reader toward a relationship with the page, with the sign as an event, and as an essential element of poetry. The page as well as the sign are not mere buses or transports of meaning, but contain meaning-generating presences and absences. The negative space of sculpture is not a foreign reality to the building of poetic space. Collaborating and fusing together aspects of grammatology, methods of interpreting the plastic arts, and the contemporary writings of the 1970s, McCaffery introduces an expansion of reading itself.

Although his essay finds new ways of reading new forms of literature, his position on the referential function of signs is over critical and limited. Conventional discourse may be linear, but reference is always spatial. Reference goes in a variety of directions depending upon the text, the reader, and the social context. According to McCaffery the new reader is placed in the space of charity. Aesthetic and ethical questions arise: are texts to be judged solely for their design? Is this the criterion for excellence in language-centered writing? McCaffery takes great effort to argue for reading as a form of viewing, and he implies that this is the only way to approach language-centered writing. If the reader engages in the graphic quality of the sign, then the sign's referential function will no longer be the source of the text's meaning. The problem with his argument is the assumption that the grapheme is not referential. Accepting the graphic immanence of the sign does not mean that referentiality must be discarded. The language centered text as a paraverbal surface invites the reader into the production effort, and yet, words that only refer back to themselves are still designed to contain or create visual referents. We cannot remove the plastic nature of the sign from our perusal vision. Since cubism, poets like Apollinaire, Augusto de

Campos or artists such as Sol LeWitt, the graphic nature of the sign has had cultural history and presence. From medieval illuminated manuscripts to the birth of newsprint, we have an overwhelming knowledge of the sign's design, even though at times it is highly unpronounced. To the well-versed eye, the graphic structure of the sign refers to a range of former practices which shapes its meaning before the reader begins his or her intermediary role. McCaffery's binary opposition of praxis and consumption does not explain the difference between a reader taking away meaning and a reading forming meaning. Both moves are dependent upon the sign's referential nature. The reader, in this new role, is not to embrace forms of meaning that are taken away from the text. Unfortunately, McCaffery fails to explain how or why praxis would begin in the first place since all praxis begins through a form of reference.

McCaffery forms an argument that redresses the neglect of the graphic quality of the sign. Even with its problems, the essay raises an excellent point: the graphic immanence of writing has been neglected. Writing is always housed in a font and each font contains historical knowledge and cultural location, so much so that fonts require naming and labeling. McCaffery offers a theory of reading that fuses the viewing procedures of the plastic arts with the syntax of the page. He imports visual strategies into the domain of literary engagement, and offers a theory of absence/presence in order to see the new poetical space of his contemporaries. Bernstein's critical response to the crisis of the sign is to explore the rhetorical methods of writing itself. From his perspective, what has been neglected, covered, or ignored is the conventional nature of all forms of writing. To the crisis he offers a discussion of a poly-referential model in order to break through the dominant conceptions of writing praxis. Instead of emphasizing a reading praxis, Bernstein challenges the writing praxis of American poetry, and the nature of writing itself.

His essay "Stray Straws and Straw Men" pays homage to a poetry of "visible" borders ("such a poetry emphasizes its medium as being constructed") that would be against a kind of "natural" poetry.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the essay, which is divided in 18 numbered sections, Bernstein argues against a poetry of "personal communication". This style is supposedly honest, direct, authentic, artless, sincere, spontaneous, expressive, and yet it stands against technical artifice.

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Bernstein, "Stray", 94.

‘Technical artifice’ they scream, as if poetry doesn’t demand a technical precision. (‘That poetry is an art, an art with technique, with media, an art that must be in constant flux, a constant change of manner.’) Technicians of the human.<sup>30</sup>

Poetry as an art form does not settle into one natural mode, but remains, as all artifacts of culture, in a process of change toward either modification or deterioration. Technique and media are essential elements in the art of poetry as they build “ways of world-making” to use Nelson Goodman’s phrase. The human is in a constant flux too, and a technician of the human speaks of the ways in which the engineering of the soul takes place in culture. The phrase “technicians of the human” responds to Jerome Rothenberg’s book *Technicians of the Sacred*.<sup>31</sup> In Rothenberg’s edited collection of writings, he shows the range and diversity of how the sacred is formed in language as a religious artifact. Bernstein adds the human to the spiritual. Culture, not nature, is the source of the art of poetry. Whereas McCaffery works against conventional reading strategies, Bernstein argues that “natural” methods of writing are not as natural as we might think. The person trying to write the natural poem is open to numerous fallacies. First of all, the writer assumes that a direct mind to body experience is possible and writing can occur without any mediation or interference. As we have already seen in “The Taste Is What Counts”, the dialect of sight, sound, and sign writing twirls: “Next to us all this twirls in spin rapt as reverie / as much as sight, sound, sign. Repelled or riveted, / the consciousness of seeing clumped with signs fills / out or insists on absence” (PJ 47). Bernstein sees the “impulse to record or transcribe the movements & makeup of one’s consciousness” as “[t]he modernist assumption” (97). Although Bernstein does not explain what he means by the modernist assumption, he could be suggesting that consciousness cannot just appear on the page without technical artifice.

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<sup>30</sup> I have asked Bernstein about the quotations in this section and he could not remember if it was something real or something he made up. The phrase “Technicians of the human” has a possible relation in Gil Ott’s opening editorial for his journal *Paper Air*. As far as I know there is no direct relation. However, Bernstein did go on to publish *Artifice of Absorption* in *Paper Air* in 1987. Here is Ott’s manifesto: “*Paper Air* opens its pages to artists actively engaged in the expansion of revolutionary perception. That sounds have lives beyond our utterance of them is evident in the inevitable progress of the image toward physical manifestation. Emotion becoming the word I speak is born as a bird becoming stone through flight. As technicians of the imagination we build new avenues of consciousness.

Through dialogue we circulate the marvelous in forms of new ideas and works of art, matters of the heart and mind. Consider *Paper Air* a focal link in the network of artists, creating freer exchange.” *Paper Air*, 1 (1976): 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, & Oceania*, collected and edited by Jerome Rothenberg, (New York: Doubleday, 1968).

Throughout his essay he is arguing that language *itself* excludes a natural way of writing: “—Voice is a possibility for poetry not an essence (96).” This quotation is what sets Bernstein apart from other language writers. He offers a criticism of voice but does not reject voice outright. In McCaffery’s essay we feel that the conventional model does not really have a place. Instead Bernstein pursues the widest range of the technicians of the human.

What I want to call attention to is that there is no natural writing style; that the preference for its supposed manifestations is simply a preference for a particular look to poetry & often a particular vocabulary (usually perceived as personal themes); that this preference (essentially a procedural decision to work within a certain domain sanctified into a rite of poetry) actually obscures the understanding of the work which appears to be its honoured bases; & especially that the cant of ‘make it personal’ & ‘let it flow’ are avoidances— by mystification — of some very compelling problems that swirl around truth-telling, confession, bad faith, false self, authenticity, virtue, etc. (97)

His critique, given at age 27 outside the academy, shows a deft perception of the dominant modes of writing. The natural writing style is a preference for a particular method: nothing more nothing less. He attempts to expand the rites of poetry and calls into question the dominant forms of truth-telling, authenticity, and virtue. He does not reject these modes of being, but does reject these modes being reduced to one set “rite”. The possibilities in language for the technician of the human range further than dominant manifestations of writing poetry.

Whatever gets written gets written in a particular shape, uses a particular vocabulary & syntax, & a variety of chosen techniques. Whether its shape, syntax & vocabulary result from an attraction (or ideological attachment to) the organic & spontaneous, or to some other look, it is equally chosen. (98)

The over-emphasis on the natural writing style, and the lack of reflection concerning its createdness, delimits writing possibilities. For Bernstein all writing is a choice. Choices build the world of all texts. He brings out the reality that choice informs all writing. This is not to suggest that the unexpected, accidental, spontaneous, does not occur in writing. He is arguing that all writing is a procedure.

The poem instead of being located in one cultural space, in one form, is open to a variety of possibilities. If there is a natural look and sound to poetry, then only those writers who can discover and produce this mode can be called poets. Poetry, then becomes locked in one frame of production. For Bernstein, to valorize this reduction reduces what is human.

There is no natural look or sound to a poem. Every element is intended, chosen. This is what makes a thing a poem. Modes cannot be escaped, but they can be taken for granted. They also can be meant.....

It is natural that there are modes but there is no natural mode. (99)

The conclusion of the essay accepts that modes are an aspect of what it means to be human. Bernstein, instead of trying to destroy or replace one mode with another, seeks to relocate the power of certain modes, and to call into question the dominion of a mode. As we have seen in “As if the Trees by Their Very Roots had Hold of Us”, Bernstein as a poet works in a natural mode. He does complicate the mode by redressing the power of its presence. *Senses of Responsibility* and *Poetic Justice* published in the same year (1979) show that Bernstein’s argument against the natural mode does not reduce his poetry to a simple oppositional mode, but to the augmentation of modes. Inside the argument(s) of the essay, Bernstein goes after the ‘I’ who is speaking of direct experiences to ‘you’ the reader. Within the realm of the natural, two writers offer alternatives for Bernstein. Frank O’Hara’s writing is seen as an alternative to the natural mode because his “work *proposes* a domain of the personal, & not simply *assuming* it, fully works it out” (97). He states plainly that although this is a mode of writing, it is not natural. It requires work, will, and movement from the writer. Bernadette Mayer leans in the direction of the natural, but Bernstein suggests that we read *Memory* because of the “completely intended, complex, artifactual style” (99). Bernstein is not attempting to get rid of modes of writing. He is critiquing the lack of awareness that every mode has a historical and political framework which is formed in response to the world and the society in which it was built and/or modified.

Bernstein finds the crisis of the sign rooted in the belief that there is a “natural” writing style.

9. ‘Next to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. Next to us in the workman whom we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but the Workman whose work we are.’

Next to. Fronting the world with a particular constellation of beliefs, values, memories, expectations; a culture; a way of seeing, mythography; language. But we are 'beside ourselves in a sane way' for what is beside us is also ourselves. At the same time in & beside.—The signs of language, of a piece of writing, are not artificial constructions, mere structures, 'mere naming'. They do not sit, deanimated, as symbols in a code, dummies for things of nature they refer to; but are, of themselves, of ourselves, whatever is such. 'Substance'. 'Actuality.' 'Presence.' The very plane through which we front the world, by which the world is. (96)

In contrast to writing conventions, he moves in language, making choices, fronting the world, "Next to." The world, the self, and language are intermixed, and yet, without any reason, each retains its particularity. He replaces natural beliefs with supra-natural beliefs: it is no longer only the self that writes, but language, cultural residue, and will, as a dialectic procedure. Bernstein's dialectic is informed and shaped by Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. The first paragraph is a quotation from chapter five, paragraph six.<sup>32</sup> In *Walden*, we learn that Thoreau left the conventional city life and went out to the country to live as another alternative to the dominant mode in his day. In so doing, Thoreau opened up ways of living, writing, and thinking that had been closed to him. In true American fashion, he went out, explored an alternative, and discovered new modes of being in the world. Bernstein weaves a tradition of American innovators and explorers into his own argument that our writing informs the world we inhabit. He refuses to simply accept the ways things are, because if poetry is limited to only one mode, then knowing and the world itself is reduced. He critiques dominant modes of poetry, but does so in a way that does not limit poetry. He opens up modes of being that have been closed and/or disregarded. He takes a quotation from *Walden* and forms a concept of nearness, of responsibility, as a constellation of meanings. Forms are being worked out around us and in us, daily. Bernstein's move back to Thoreau shows that he is not working in critical isolation. He is not rejecting everything from the American past, but returning to the past, responding to another's discovery, forming a response, accepting the mantle of the discoverer. He is also showing that American writing cannot be an

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<sup>32</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Solitude", Chapter five, paragraph six. Instead of giving a reference to a specific edition, I have followed Stanley Cavell's example in his *Senses of Walden*, by giving the chapter and paragraph allowing the reader to find the reference in any edition. The specific edition used is as follows: *The Annotated Walden* by Henry D. Thoreau, edited, with an introduction, notes and bibliography by Phillip Van Doren Stern (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1970), 266.

oligarchy established by a few, but must be a democracy formed by the many. In true democracy, there is always new space awaiting exploration.

In the letters between Bernstein and McCaffery from this period (edited and published in 1985) we can see how both were working out their ideas about writing modes, collage, the grapheme, and experimentalism. The letters take issue with many relevant concepts such as deconstruction, witnessing, and the phenomenology of the sentence. What comes out in their letters is a debate over writing and how to ground their writing. McCaffery is comfortable with Derrida's concept of the sign and Bernstein looks to Wittgenstein's view of language as a city. Bernstein takes on board Jackson Mac Low's distrust of terms like "cutting edge", "avant-garde", and "progress".<sup>33</sup> In the letters Bernstein is favorable to a writing that moves toward the architectural beyond random processes or formula driven rules. He is interested in finding ways to organizing the material reality of language to generate meaning, but alternate forms of making meaning are not enough. He wants also to charge the work with an "electric density you can't get through" (73). What also comes out of their letters are new ways of discussing textuality as a möbius reality. Offered by McCaffery as an adept description, Bernstein has incorporated the notion of a möbius form of textuality into his own poetics.

We can also see how their interaction sparked new ways of discussing textuality. Even with their differences, they both find their poetic collaboration (published in *Legend*) to be moving in a direction that creates new forms of meaning:

What seems exciting abt our diad, to me, is that it doesn't simply use "cut-up" language or neologisms to create a unified field of meaning on one plane, but actually calls into play notions of variant simultaneously existing realms of discourse constantly criss-crossing, intersecting, creating new gulfs, new forms -- very much the description that Wittgenstein uses to describe language -- as a city with some streets straight & narrow, other windy &&&. Thinking abt this it becomes clearer how collage, as a basic technique, is a fundamental explanation for where this intertextuality comes from. For if you can juxtapose variant phrases

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<sup>33</sup> "Steve McCaffery, Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein: Correspondence, May 1976- December 1977", edited and selected by Steve McCaffery, *Line # 5* (Spring 1985): 70, 59-89. According to Bernstein, Mac Low sees the inner integrity with the work regardless of the mode as a more appropriate critical criteria. Bernstein suggests that Mac Low likes his and McCaffery's work, not because it is progressive, but how it locates itself topographically near the visual arts. Hereafter cited as "Correspondence".

together (often with an eye for an evenness of surface texture) why not juxtapose kinds of discourse? (72-73)

Bernstein is not abandoning the “cut-up” procedure. He is, though, investigating how divergent realms of discourse interact to create new forms that cannot be reduced to the technique of cut-up. By not working in isolation Bernstein is able to innovate and explore the possibility of having different kinds of discourse within the same space. We can see Bernstein wants to take a procedure used by other poets, such as Olson, or Williams in *Paterson*, in new directions. The Wittgensteinian city metaphor pertains not only to his studies with Cavell at Harvard, it also pertains to his own history: being born, raised, and a resident of Manhattan which is the city of amazing diversity. If poetry is to be as interesting as life, and to compete for attention with other cultural artifacts, why not have a poetry that is as diverse as the buildings or people in Manhattan?

Bernstein writes to McCaffery about his ability to be in language and to witness its unfolding of meaning.

A friend recently sd that one of the strongest characteristics of my wrtng was a sense of *witness*, by wch he meant specifically the distancing from experience that runs thru *Parsing*--looking at yr life go by while at the same time being in it is the way ive expressed it at times--wch actually is the attitude twrd language itself, the thing thru wch we experience, see things as one thing or another, as meanings—  
(71)

Language functions as an object that can be known. It is the object through which we make distinctions and meanings. We experience the world through language, not directly and he takes this view into the writing of his poetry. Poetry then is a mediated grid between the self and the world. From this grid Bernstein wants to build a poetry that is like its mediator:

wch, in wrtng, we want to look at, regard, ie making poetry that kind of wrtng wch is involved with witnessing language, so therefore a language reflexive process. Take a step back, Spicer says, & look at the sentence. Exactly....”the record of observation” is not of the “world” at least in the sense of the naïve concept of the physical world, tho maybe the world in the Tractatus sense (“the world is everything that is the case”) but an observing, a looking out onto, language. (71-2)

His distancing from experience, using language and seeing it as a unity, constitutes one aspect of his authorial stance as a form of “regard”. In “As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us”, we began looking at memory as a “language reflexive process”: still reeling from the past events and yet nothing seems to be altering our “now”. By the last two stanzas we realize that there is no further vantage point to view the past, since the past is in us and not in us simultaneously.

McCaffery in his response to Bernstein reads the sign as postponement rigged within desire.

further to your notion of witnessing. do you see this at all tying in with a testing or deconstruction of witnessing itself? it seems to me that the very fact of witnessing signs involves the whole logic of contradiction of the sign itself; that in witnessing language we are in fact witnessing absence, postponement, the deferral of presence. hence this kind of tendency to put language into observable framework, under a seeing-ness rather than a readingness, locates in the huge, almost muscular, reflex of the SIGN as POSTPONEMENT. i see this also connecting with the notion of desire: that which is deferred is desired, the desire, the desire articulating a postponed otherness: alterity.  
to suffer.  
to desire. (75)

McCaffery takes Bernstein’s view of witnessing as a form of deferral. He views the sign as a contradiction, echoing Derrida’s argument that signs contain both absence and presence. Placing the sign in a visual framework instead of a syntactical one, foregrounds the sign’s nature. The sign, even in conventional discourse, is contradictory. Bernstein picks up on McCaffery’s view of deconstruction and suggests that witnessing is neither completely solipsistic nor totally without bias. Bernstein argues that we are both in the world, and able to watch the world we are in.

you ask do i see in the notion of witnessing also a testing of it, “a deconstruction of witnessing itself?”: yes, of course, because we in effect *fall* into what we are witnessing, we make it up. “presence” itself, i begin to see, as a postponement, wch almost is a necessary perspective to get to where we are, but is no more modern than Proust. (83)

obviously, most reflective of my thought right now are the comments you quote that you agree with: presence as a kind of postponement, acting w/o certainty, falling into what we are witnessing: wch is, of course, the method of deconstruction. (86)

Bernstein takes on board McCaffery's view of the sign as postponement, but recalls an earlier form of writing (Proust) that pre-dates their current discussion and the works of Derrida. Bernstein's self has multiple starting points. The self can experience the world and can see the world being experienced. Both acts generate the present moment as well as the language embedded in the reflective process. The self when writing is not simply copying the world or recording it purely but participating in its presence.

In the last stanza of the poem "As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us", Bernstein as we might recall transforms a realist's view of time and space with the material of language itself.

So, more of these tracings, as if by magic  
Of the phonetic properties of these squiggles. . . . Or  
Does that only mystify the "power" of "presence" which  
Is, as well, a sort of postponement.

(SR, 2)

He ends the poem by "falling into witnessing", by turning the very medium of language into a question of exchange: have you the reader been present with my language reflective activity? Should 'I' continue? Or does this mystify what has transpired between us? If in fact McCaffery is right to unite postponement of the sign with desire, then desire projected is always recast and has the ability to alter logic's dominion: "desire projected & recast, to unmake the borders of logic".<sup>34</sup> Hope is only a "splint of thought / Projected outward, "looking to catch" somewhere" (SR, 2). The poem presents, as does the correspondence between Bernstein and McCaffery, a self that is not in despair, not seeking to somehow voice its way toward the truth. This self is, to quote from Bernstein's letter, "IN AND BESIDE" (72) the culture working with a critical intelligence toward innovation.

The letters also reveal Bernstein's interest in the avant-garde and his desire to expand its range. He shows respect for Jackson Mac Low's views of writing, chance procedures, and collage. As we have seen, his authorial stances of witnessing (incorporating presence and absence) and poly-

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<sup>34</sup> Charles Bernstein and Susan B. Laufer, *The Occurrence of Tune*, (New York: Segue Books, 1981), 22.

referentiality attempt to expand the utility of the collage method: “For if you can juxtapose variant phrases together (often with an eye for an evenness of surface textual) why not juxtapose kinds of discourse?” (73). His view of witness/regard should be seen as more than image, collage, or randomness, in that it incorporates presence and absence.<sup>35</sup> Bernstein wants to expand the avant-garde modes to which he refers: the mode of chance/collage (Mac Low), the mode of the material grapheme (McCaffery), and the mode make it new/experimentalism (87). He extends the possibilities of collage by moving away from randomness. To the material grapheme of language, he shows total regard for the physicality of the sign which has its own boundaries: “we are limited to language, tho not by it” (87). To make it new he adds: nothing in the work is un-mediated rhetoric, and “that if you push anything far enough, get imbedded enuf in the vocabulary & syntax operation etc, it’s bound to be a strong work” (71).

Bernstein moves away from experiment for experiment’s sake. He is not simply interested in verbal or graphic tricks. For him, generating meaning is not just for the “new”, but for generating knowledge as we saw with Fowler. In fact, we can argue that Bernstein is for a writing practice that is an embodiment of innovative knowledge. His desire to expand the avant-garde is interwoven with his reflexive view of language.

An aesthetic based primarily on experimentalism: Look! see the way they can be changed around & around! that is content to stop at what is, at most, an initial stop at distancing us from them by camp, fashion, decoration, stylishness (modishness) -- this is just a continuation of all the mistakes of dadaism & surrealism. The new, new, the new. But poetry does not break out of all boundaries: we are limited to language, tho not by it. It is within these bounds, limits, finitudes, particulars, that limitlessness is to be found: all the rest is a mindless epaté [sic] la bourgeoisie that is more like bourgeois trendiness than creating a new world/word. So I think it’s not that I dont understand the status of the referent, it’s that I see that status in constant jeopardy of commoditization - - even by the very people who profess to profess its status (there are nowadays many

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<sup>35</sup> McCaffery shows his willingness to re-write American procedures: “projective verse, i feel, got trapped in a phonocentricity that closed off many areas of concern a propos language and text. it showed itself in the conception of linguistic space as pneumatic pause rather than grammatological difference & the misguided emphasis on presence (sign as the figural supplement of breath, breath as intrinsically embedded in the syllable, etc.). i think our own work gets closer to this root problem of presence as an outcome of the defective sign, the non-delivering signifier which curves away from a signified back into its own signifiatory ramifications.” “Correspondence”, 79.

professors of language, but it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live??). (87)

Many of the themes of his career are united here: a critical eye toward both the academic and non-academic; a realization that limits do exist, but are not always where we expect them; an anxiety over market forces; a belief that within the particular, there is unexpected movement. In the context of the letters, Bernstein finds the over-use of experimental strategies to be just as reductive as personal expression strategies. By showing the limitations of both, he is able to move away from conventional understandings of resistance. The reductions of both strategies harm what is possible within poetry and can easily become commodities. The answer to the over use of the rhetoric of experience is not an over-use of the rhetoric of forms. His aesthetic is one of creation, of “creating a new world/word” through language in its particularities. Embracing the multiple aspects of language will always be in contrast to over used methods. The attempt to only make it new, avoids the range of what each language practice has to offer. Bernstein, in avoiding a valorization of one particular method, moves the starting point of poetics back to language itself and leaves behind the binary expectation of convention/transgression.

The poems “As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us” and “The Taste Is What Counts” relate to and function beside these critical essays and letters. It is “strange” to remember, because memory like presence is a postponement. “Natural” writing wants to ignore the reality of the sight, sound, sign dialectic. Bernstein embraces technical artifice not as a means to an end, but as a way of “making poetry that kind of wrting wch is involved with witnessing language.”<sup>36</sup> Bernstein’s critical essay, “Stray Straws and Straw Men” only enhances his poetry and vice versa. In eighteen numbered sections, with quotations, short sentences, words and spacings, a sustained proposition runs throughout: “it is natural that there are modes but there is no natural mode” (97). In the letters between he and McCaffery we see how their critical/creative public life relates to and meshes with their private discourse. Bernstein’s poetic is a constellation of meanings.

Next to. Fronting the world with a particular constellation of beliefs, values, memories, expectations; a culture; a way of seeing, mythography; language.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> “Correspondence”, 71.

<sup>37</sup> Bernstein, “Stray”, 96.

Bernstein offers not a rejection of poetics, but a call for the expansion and re-figuration of what poetry of the 1970s had come to mean. Although he favors the new, he is arguing for a “constellation of beliefs”, a myriad fronting of the world. Bernstein’s response to the dominant mode of the 1970s is larger than the topic of referentiality or the privileging of voice. Poetry cannot privilege voice as its essence, because it is so much more.

McCaffery and Bernstein give an alternative reading of poetry in the 1970s. Their critiques of referentiality, voice, and experimentation form a new grid for the understanding of all poetry. Re-opening the question of conventions reforms the reading of those conventions and also opens the possibility for re-creation. Bernstein’s argument is broader as he calls not just for the sign as event and surface, but for reengagement with the whole constellation of beliefs which inform the making of the world. Bernstein is investigating and creating a contemporary poetry. He looks to Bernadette Mayer, Frank O’Hara, Jackson Mac Low. In his critical call for a larger constellation, he invents new forms of critical argumentation that look back to both Wittgenstein and Thoreau. In embracing non-traditional structures he opens up the discourse for alternative styles of critical and poetical writing. To ignore his creative and critical insight, is to ignore the possibilities for an ongoing American poetry.

Bernstein’s critical position of constellation is just as evident in his editorial work as it is in his writing. The *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal he co-created with Bruce Andrews and Susan Bee encapsulates a writing that incorporates and extends American poetics: the authorial relation to construction, the nature of language meaning and use, the place of the reader, and the work’s relation to the world. We have seen that Bernstein’s writing shows an alternative to the dominant critical and poetic modes of the 1970s. His editorial work provides a conceptual expansion in traditional poetry journals, as well as the alternative editorial work of Richard Kostelentz’s *Assemblings*.<sup>38</sup> The *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal goes beyond both forms by providing a format for work that challenges and expands the critical and poetic of understanding of writing and of language.

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<sup>38</sup> The *Assemblings* were Kostelentz’s radical conception of publishing the unpublishable. This publication gave many writers such as Lyn Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, and Bernstein an opportunity to publish their work. “For the same reason, we have persistently refused requests to print contributors’ works, for one point of *Assembling*’s concept is that, given the crisis in communication (i.e. censorship) serious writers and artists will have to learn the process of its communication from its beginnings. RK” *Fourth Assembling* (New York: Assembling Press, 1973), 1.

language. As we can see from the title page, the space of critical inquiry runs to the very borders of the page (Figure 2.1.). Each article, review, and poem, is designed to look continuous. The reader is invited to begin reading in a world of ongoing diversity.

The editorial process for the journal was a collaboration. Bernstein did not work in isolation in either the pragmatic aspects of the page layout or the editorial decisions of content.

JS: I seem to remember that they were typed up on originals (on what?) then run off (photocopies?) of about 200 per issue.

CB: We typed them on legal size pages (8 1/2 x 14) on my IBM Selectric 2 typewriter, then sprayed the pages with fixant. Then Susan Bee made a mock-up and did the layout by hand. Then offset printing. Initially, first year, we had 200 subscribers (6 issues for \$4), but we made many more copies, for bookstore sale, probably 400, though I can't remember exactly. Subsequently we xeroxed extra copies, and new subscribers wanted full sets, so that we probably sold at least 1000 copies of each issue, most likely more. We actually did a booklet reprint of volume one, issues 1 to 6, in an edition of several hundred. For volume two and three of course we initially printed up greater numbers.

JS: How did you get the lettering for the title?

CB: There has been some odd and erroneous public comment on the logo. Bruce and I decided on the name after considering dozens of possibilities and asking many people for their opinion. We needed to clearly differentiate our title from LANGUAGE, the journal of the Linguistics Society of America and that's how Bruce and I elected on the equal signs. First of all, it should be noted that the actual title (with those equal signs) and the content of the journal was Bruce's and mine. Susan Bee did all the work on the logo design with the help of her father Sigmund Laufer who is an artist and graphic designer and who is credited in the first issue of the magazine. She hand pasted up each letter and inserted the equal signs by hand into the logo then the underlines were hand pasted beneath the letters. In fact, she says, it was always a bit crooked. In addition she designed all the issues of the magazine herself and pasted up all the boards. There was no computer involved back then. She is credited in the magazine for the design under her earlier name Susan B. Laufer.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Bernstein, letter to author, 22 October, 1999.

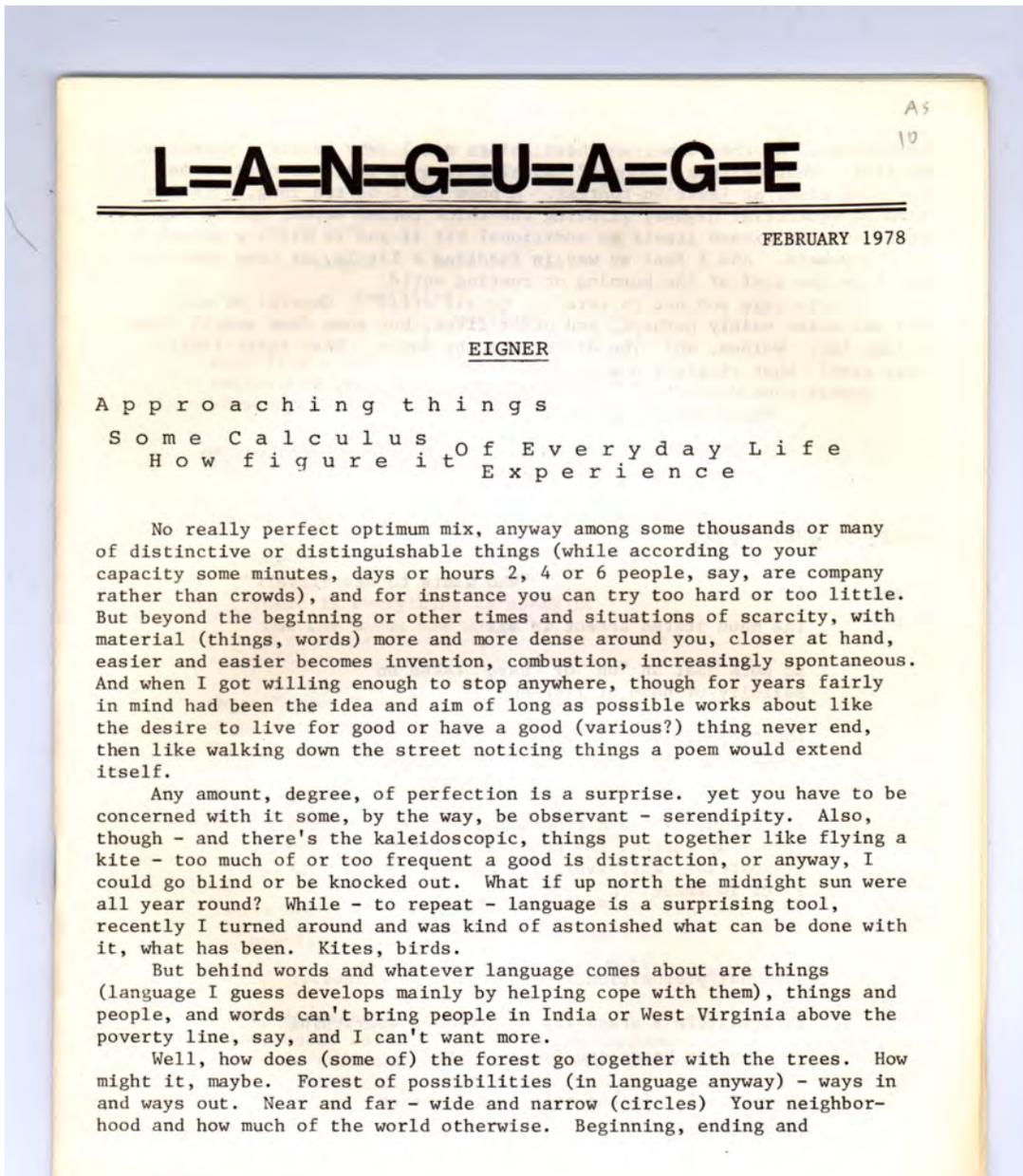


Figure 2.1.  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ , 1:1 (1978). Charles Bernstein in personal communication to the author writes: "Susan Bee did all the work on the logo design... She hand pasted up each letter and inserted the equal signs by hand into the logo then the underlines were hand pasted beneath the letters. In fact, she says it was always a bit crooked."

They began with a base of subscribers showing the project had support. The numbers grew and at least a thousand copies were sold of each issue, which surpasses the number of copies for each of Bernstein's early poetry volumes. At the beginning of Bernstein's career, his editorial work had the widest audience. Bee was the backbone of the practical design. Bernstein and Andrews came

up with the title and content. We can also see that they were familiar with other journals and wanted to demarcate their journal as unique. Bernstein did not work in isolation. He worked with Bee and Andrews closely and in some detail. He could not have produced the journal by himself, nor is there any evidence he desired to do so. The journal, generated outside any formal institution, expanded its readership rapidly and marked yet another innovation in American writing. Like Stieglitz's *Camera Work* in the realm of the visual arts, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* expanded the terrain of writing and critical possibilities.

The journal has appeared in a variety of forms, and the title has been used as a metaphor for different publishing contexts. The original, published from 1978-1981, appeared in a variety of forms: off set printing, xeroxed copies, and a booklet reprint of volume one. The final volume, a completely bound book, was published as an entire issue in the Canadian journal *Open Letter* 5:1 (1982). The life of the journal and Bernstein's and Andrews' use of the material has not been adequately understood. Robert von Hallberg's reading of the journal shows the limits of his approach and understanding of the "avant-garde". For example, he reads the publication of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (1984) by Southern Illinois University Press as proof that the "avant-garde" cannot take place within the academic institution.<sup>40</sup> If von Hallberg had done a closer reading of how Bernstein has used the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* title, he would have found that the early work in the journal was not simply recuperated into the academic environment. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* changes the journal in content and form, but these changes are intentional and transformative. Both Bernstein and Andrews in their introduction to *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* refuse to see the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* label as a monolithic symbol of a new style. In the introduction to the book "Repossessing the Word" they reject the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* label as a description of a new poetic style because their project, "if it can be summarized at all, has involved exploring the numerous ways that meanings and values can be (& are) realized—revealed—produced in writing. This involves an opening of the field of activity and not its premature foreclosure."<sup>41</sup> In the introduction, they describe the contents of the journal

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<sup>40</sup> Robert von Hallberg, "Avant-Gardes" in *Poetry and Criticism: 1940-1995*, vol. 8, *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 122, 112-14, 83-122.

<sup>41</sup> Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, "Repossessing the Word" in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, eds. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), ix. Hereafter cited as *L=B*.

as well as the material they omit: “As a result, this book does not represent a significant topical quality of the magazine: bibliographies, contributors’ lists of recommended reading, brief comments on current books, correspondence, and the like” (L=B, x). The book purposely only draws from the first three volumes of the journal, and recommends to readers the fourth volume published in *Open Letter*. The book itself does not claim to be an anthology of the whole project, as von Hallberg suggests.

One of the ways Bernstein and Andrews kept the field of language activity open was in their re-editing of the first three volumes. The journal was neither recuperated for a larger, mainly academic audience, nor was it simply mechanically reproduced; it was transformed and translated into another medium. The three topics of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* are “Poetics and Language”, “Writing and Politics”, and “Readings”. The writings in each section, all from various issues of the journal, seek to expand the possibilities, solutions, and problems for American poetics. Through partial repetition and re-editing, Bernstein and Andrews created another cultural artifact. They were continuing to open the field of activity, and were not bound by the past format or design. They were more than willing to rearrange, regroup, and re-direct previous writings for the academic and non-academic world. Since they both regarded the space of the page as an aspect of meaning, their willingness to place the material in another format was all the more generative.

A fuller reading of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal shows that it has had a vibrant life and has been a source for many further activities. If we take into consideration the “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Sampler” and “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Lines” we can see that this label has been used in a variety of approaches to writing itself.<sup>42</sup> The journal, through its history and various publications and uses, has remained an open field for further invention. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* is another version of the original. In fact, it is better to see the journal as a source for the invention of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. The transformed element has positive and negative results. The positive result is that the journal, as a source for invention, continues to open the field of poetic activity in the academic setting. The negative result is that the local and particular forum of discussion, the exchange of information, the featured poets, quoted theorists, and interchange among the contributors that shaped and made the journal, are lost. Von Hallberg's over interpretation of the book as an

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<sup>42</sup> The “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Sampler” was published in *Paris Review* (1982); “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Lines” is in *The Line in Postmodern Poetry* (1988). I will discuss both pieces in chapter five.

anthology in need of the academy in order to survive, is not the best way to view the life of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal. His over interpretation of the institution causes him to read the book as the definitive anthology of a movement that is no longer resisting the institution. In contrast to his reading, I am suggesting that *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* be seen as one of the journal's applications. The book is not a case study to prove that the American "avant-garde" can only occur within the academic institution; rather the book is one interpretation of an innovative (and generative) journal. It is better to see Bernstein as an American innovator, taking his product to the production stage, and investigating all possible forms of distribution. In fact, Bernstein and Andrews end their preface by giving the mailing address to one of the largest and most important distributors of the alternative press.<sup>43</sup> Reading Bernstein's editorial work in the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal from this angle allows a fuller reading of the project. Instead of being a dead object fossilizing in the academy, *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* is an opportunity to explore Bernstein's and Andrews' inventive topics: poetics and language, writing and politics, and new forms of reading.

Instead of simply accepting *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* as the definitive mark of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal, the differences between the journal and the book which could be lost or forgotten are worthy of discussion and critical inquiry. The book repeats many of the essays found in the journal, but the framing and editorial practice of the journal is not repeated. By looking closer at the first few journal issues, we will find the context and structure of Bernstein's and Andrews' work in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Bernstein in the preface to the book states that the point of the journal is to include as many kinds of writing as possible in order to show what is possible, and not to establish a monolithic procedure.

*L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* started as a bimonthly magazine of information and commentary, a forum for discussion and interchange. Throughout, we have emphasized a spectrum of writing that places its attention primarily on language and ways of making meaning, that takes for granted neither vocabulary, grammar, process, shape, syntax, program or subject matter. All of these remain at issue. (L=B, ix)

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<sup>43</sup> Small Press Distribution, 1341 Seventh Street, Berkeley, CA 94710-1409. Web page: [www.spdbooks.org](http://www.spdbooks.org). Email: [spd@spdbooks.org](mailto:spd@spdbooks.org)

The opening of the book returns to its source and its editorial objectives, while at the same time showing that the project of the journal is still at issue. Bernstein and Andrews did not reject their former procedures and remained committed to a spectrum of writing. All that is taken for granted in writing is re-investigated, not in a Cartesian doubt schematic, but in a belief that writing generates constellations. Their schematic is not attempting to reduce writing to what is certain. Rather, they are providing a space for further meaning makers. In contrast to Descartes' solitary fire, their space is crowded with the other. The other, not simply the self, takes on a provisional ability to reawaken the methods of making meaning.

The first issue starts with a Larry Eigner feature (retained in the 1984 book) and the piece, "Approaching things" and ends with Rae Armantrout's, "Why don't Women Do Language-Oriented Writing?". Moreover, we learn about writing and free Association, left and right brain functions, and small press magazines. We read reviews of Watten, Drucker, and Wiener. Steve McCaffery recounts the story of the typewriter which was created in Alexander Pope's day. We read about Cabala practices as the medieval support for concrete poetry. All of this reading arrives in a graphic diversity. The word is presented in a variety of sizes, shapes, and styles. The 8 1/2 x 14 page is filled to the brim. As Clark Coolidge writes on the third page of the first issue in "Larry Eigner Notes":

each line a new mind (focus)  
rather than divisions determined by breaks  
of sound, syntax, etc.<sup>44</sup>

The line, no longer regulated to push meaning forward, in Coolidge's reading of Eigner, becomes a place of its own. The line does not have to be bound to a larger systematic procedure. The journal's topology races to the page's edge and races beyond the expectations of a journal edited by two New York poets.

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<sup>44</sup> Clark Coolidge, "Larry Eigner Notes", *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1:1 (1978): 3.

Bernstein's first piece, appropriately entitled "From A to Z", is a review of Johanna Drucker's *A to Z* (1977).<sup>45</sup> Her *A to Z* is itself an experiment of printing. Confining herself to the number of letters she had in an acquired collection, Drucker seeks to write a "politics of language" through type design. Each page of the narrative contains upper and lower boxed narrative in the margins as well as in the main body of the text. Each "type" area is formed in different fonts, sizes, and correspondingly, narrative. The review by Bernstein is one of both quotation and presentation.

A typography that reflects a thrownness into text--a big way of saying it--"wise she so willing to approach the insidiously inadequate signifier, with TOLERATION & ON." Which means we are faced with a WHOLE HEAP of letters--here, nothing can be seen more physically than the literal letterist composition--& yet this is a work not of reflective imposition of a form but of a form emerging from the energy of the making. "It's the vision that matters, the real and worked out clarity of vision."<sup>46</sup>

The first written words of Bernstein in the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal concern a work that extends the letterist tradition. In the review, he places her work (along with Hannah Weiner's) beyond Mayer's experiments: "Drucker's 'primitive driVe' is not just a self-defined writing exercise."<sup>47</sup> *A to Z* is not a self expression that discounts the material in order to promote the expression, but rather a study of how a book is built through the union of technology (printing) and intention. Drucker builds each page with different types and narratives with graphic commentary on the backside of each page and progression. She re-opens, in Gins words the "complexion of innovation"<sup>48</sup> by insisting that the investigation of a form can re-form the perceptual diversity of language, narrative, and type on the page. She does not trade off typographical diversity for narrative progression. She does arrest the speed of the narrative, but the interruption, takes the reader and the language forward. We are also taken backward: printing has a history, books are made in forms that come

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<sup>45</sup> Nearly twenty years later, Bernstein in the introduction to Drucker's *Figuring the Word* (New York: Granary Books: 1998) writes: "Drucker's works, including her unlikely and necessary creation of an awesome body of scholarship exploring the history of alphabets and the theory of the visual representation of language, have remained central to my own sense of writing in the years since"(xiii.).

<sup>46</sup> Charles Bernstein, "From A to Z", *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1:1 (1978): 19.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>48</sup> From "Essay on Multi-Dimensional Architecture in "43 Poets (1984)", ed. by Charles Bernstein *boundary 2* Vol. 14: 1,2 (1985/1986): 95.

from a cultural context, pages are noted and turned in order. In her own words she has embraced the 'marked' page as the nature of A to Z. In setting her work beyond the letterist movement and beyond the collage, Bernstein places in the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal a continuation and an advancement of early avant-garde procedures. For Bernstein, her work comes out of the writing "ON". One meaning of this, as I have suggested, is a writing that investigates its own presentation. It is a narration not turned against, but expanded to (re)include its typography.

The first moments of the journal move between presentation and persuasion. The form of the journal enters into the historical continuation of the ongoing debate of pattern and imagination. Dick Higgins' piece "Pattern Poems" sees the shaped-poem of recent movements (concrete poetry, "poesia visiva", spatialism) denying a lineage with previous centuries. According to him, the medieval period valorized Pythagoras as the most important of philosophers due to his aesthetics of value-layered meaning (things, perceptions, feelings, word, idea/form, numbers/ratios, divine principle). The aesthetic grid gave the word a different form of reception: "Within such a system, a word stood not for the thing it denoted but for the idea underlying it, and was thus a symbol of pure form. As such it was closer to the essence of numbers and ratios in the hierarchy than anything it might describe, and was therefore invested with a power we sometimes find difficult to understand."<sup>49</sup> Being critical of visual poetry for its ahistorical understanding of using words as an image, Higgins redescribes one medieval conception of the sign. In this particular philosophical tradition, the word looks to the idea instead of to the thing. The word draws its power from its form, its letters and the symbolism denoted. He summarizes the place of the pattern poem in broad cultural terms.

Inherent in the concept of a pattern poem is its unsuitability for any sustained argument of emotional persuasion. Its appeal is immediate and involves the recognition of the image. Thus the Aristotelian rhetorical goal of persuading and convincing the reader is unlikely to be achieved within a pattern poem. And an Aristotelian age--such as followed the baroque--would, and did, find the pattern poem essentially trivial and eccentric.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Dick Higgins, "Pattern Poems", *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1:1 (1978): 16.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

The shaped-poem remains outside the borders of Aristotelian and Cartesian logic. It confronts the reader immediately with different expectations that cannot be reduced to deductive argument. The inclusion of Higgins' piece also shows that Bernstein and Andrews were interested in all kinds of positions relating to language and writing. The journal is not simply bound to the contemporary, or to one view of language philosophy. Returning to a pre-modern concept of the sign allows for a re-reading of supposedly null critical options.

The second issue opens with Roland Barthes' reflections on modern poetry. In "Writing Degree Zero" (1953) Barthes argues that Modern poetry is in opposition to classical poetry and prose where the "connections lead the word on".<sup>51</sup> By not reprinting this and not even referring to the this article in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, we miss the cultural connection between the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal and Barthes' insight that Modern poetry (all those writers after Baudelaire) has secured a freedom of the word from the confines of (French) classical rhetoric. Another interesting fact lies in the two long paragraphs quoted from "Writing degree Zero". Right in the middle of the second paragraph the editors remove Barthes' view of poetry:

To say that this truth is of a poetic order is merely to say that the Word in poetry can never be untrue, because it is whole; it shines with an infinite freedom and prepares to radiate towards innumerable uncertain and possible connections.<sup>52</sup>

This censorship, intentional or not, is one of the pleasures found by re-reading the journal and not interpreting the book as a dead practice recuperated by an academic press. The poetic word to which Barthes refers is the word released from the bounds of an over-developed rhetorical law. This liberated word can now go forward in a constellation of directions, no single tract demanded or required. Bernstein and Andrews disallow this view of the word in their second issue. Truth, in Barthes' piece, is of the freed word.

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<sup>51</sup> *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1:2 (1978): 1, 1-2. The issue does not give any page reference to Barthes work. The section from which they quote comes from "Is There Any Poetic Writing?", *Writing Degree Zero*, 2d ed., preface by Susan Sontag, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 47, 46-49.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. Roland Barthes, "Y-at-il une écriture poétique?" , *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture, Œuvres complètes*, Tome I 1942-1965, ed. par Éric Marty (Editions du Seuil, 1993), 161. ; dire que cette vérité est d'ordre poétique, c'est seulement dire que le Mot poétique ne peut jamais être faux parce qu'il est total: il brille d'une liberté infinie et s'apprête à rayonner vers mille rapports incertains et possibles.

The last sentence from Barthes essay in the opening of the second issue speaks of a discourse that embraces culture fully:

It initiates a discourse full of gaps and full of lights, filled with absences and over nourishing signs, without foresight or stability of intention, and thereby so opposed to the social function of language that merely to have recourse to a discontinuous speech is to open the door to all that stands above Nature.<sup>53</sup>

The second issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* attaches itself to Barthes' critique of classical rhetoric and his support of the then "modern" poetry that found a new form of building syntactical relations on the surface of the page. The second issue accepts this frame. Already it has initiated a discourse "full of gaps and full of light". Over-nourished signs resisting the normal communicative function of language, await and open new doors for reading and culture. Perhaps Bernstein and Andrews found in Barthes a view of poetry that provided options beyond the natural social function of language.

Bernadette Mayer's "Experiments" from the *Workshop on Tuesday*, begins the third issue of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal. This version of the experiments includes additions, alterations, and suggestions that at times sharpened the procedure(s) of altering narrative conventions. Here is one experiment.

Use dictionary constantly, plain & etymological (rhyming, etc.); consult, experiment with thesaurus where categories for the word 'word' include: word as news, word as message, word as information, word as story, word as order or command, word as vocable, unit of speech, word as instruction, promise, vow, contract & so on.<sup>54</sup>

This experiment and the list of experiments came from the workshop Mayer gave at St. Marks in the early 1970s.<sup>55</sup> In the workshop Mayer pushed the edge of what poetry could do, and of what

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<sup>53</sup> *Writing Degree Zero*, 48-49.

<sup>54</sup> *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1:3 (1978): 3.

<sup>55</sup> In an interview (*Poetry Project Newsletter*, Oct/Nov 1992) with Ken Jordan, Mayer speaks of her contact with the "language" movement and her work at St. Marks:

Ken: *It was also in the early 70's that you led the infamous workshop at St. Marks which had much to do with the development of the notorious "language" movement.*

Bernadette: *That workshop started in 1971 and lasted four years, until '75', and I encountered the people who'd eventually start the language school are '72. Charles Bernstein, Peter Seaton, Nick Piombino, Bruce Andrews,*

writers could do, and what language could do. The dictionary returned, not as a source of refinement or a law code, but as a source of inspiration. The word had many locations and was not reduced to one set procedure. Having the third issue open with her experiments, brings further application to her workshop, but also shows Bernstein's and Andrews' indebtedness to her work as a teacher and poet. The early version of the experiment read:

Word as news, word as message, information, story

Word as order or command, vocable, unit of speech

Word as instruction, promise, vow contract, & so on.<sup>56</sup>

The experiment in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* grew toward action. In the first version, three statements were placed before the reader with no instructions. In the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* version of the experiments, the format was less designed but contained more direction. The early version was written as verse, shaped evenly in the page, making pronouncements. In the journal, the format bespeaks of practical directions and possible progressions.<sup>57</sup>

The first volume of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* thus begins with three featured poets (Eigner, Zukofsky, and Grenier), excerpts from Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero*, Mayer's experiments from her workshop at St. Marks, and a response to Stein's *Tender Buttons* by a number of poets. Since *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* rejects chronology as a form of order because it is not seeking to recuperate a moment when the possibilities of

and some others were in that workshop. It was the first workshop I ever gave at St. Marks, and I was terrified of teaching. I was only 26 and didn't think I could teach anything, or conduct a workshop either, so I did a tremendous amount of over-preparing, if there is such a thing. I gave two workshops: one about the Dadaists, and one about Wittgenstein. Then there were people coming to the workshop saying, shouting at me from the back of the room, What does *Wittgenstein* have to do with poetry?

Ken: *When the young language folks were in the workshop, what was the dynamic like?*

Bernadette: It was great. It was over that period of years that we made the experiments list. Then, after a while, the workshop became a true collaboration. The very last year that I was doing it I wasn't even doing it anymore. We had a rotating leadership, so that every week somebody in the workshop would do something else. People came up with different experiments, and it would go on for 4 or 5 hours. We talked a lot about theory, Jacques Lacan, semiotics, and stuff like that. Though theory didn't have much to do with the way I had evolved as a writer, I was very interested in all those things. They were much more interesting than they are at the moment, you know. "The Colors of Consonance", interviewed by Ken Jordon, *Poetry Project Newsletter* 146: 10-11 (1992): 7, 5-9.

<sup>56</sup> *Workshop on Tuesday*, ed. by Nicholas Piombino and Peter Samos, (New York, 1973), 1.

<sup>57</sup> The experiment changes again for her web page. Instead of the dictionary she begins with this line: "Explore the possibilities of lists, puzzles, riddles, dictionaries, almanacs, etc. Consult the thesaurus where categories for the word 'word' include: word as news, word as message, word as information, word as story, word as order or command, word as vocable, word as instruction, promise, vow, contract." See "Writing Experiments": [http://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Mayer-Bernadette\\_Experiments.html](http://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Mayer-Bernadette_Experiments.html)

language are apparent, the historical narrative is lost to those who have not read the journal. The quotation from Barthes in the second issue has confirmed the word as an independent reality, separate from rhetoric. In fact, he states:

The Word, here, in encyclopaedic, it contains simultaneously all the acceptations from which a relational discourse might have required it to choose. It therefore achieves a state which is possible only in the dictionary or in poetry--places where the noun can live without its article--and is reduced to a sort of zero degree, pregnant with all past and future specifications.<sup>58</sup>

In the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal, the noun can live with the article, and a form of reading and writing is made that seeks the “encyclopaedic”. The strength of the journal is that it does not simply accept Barthes view of the sign as the only view, but as another star in the constellation of language. In Mayer’s modified experiment in the third issue, the reader/writer is given directions toward the dictionary where the word lives at zero degree before rhetoric’s demands. Mayer’s experiments show a way of writing poetry, not based upon grammatical legislation, but on the word’s ability to function as a designed object.

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Get a group of words (selected at random or make a list by choice); then form these words into a piece of writing--whatever the words allow.

Let them demand their own form  
and/or

Use certain words in a set way, like in every line,  
or in a certain place in every paragraph, etc.

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<sup>58</sup> *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1:2 (1978): 1. The journal does not give any page number for the Barthes’ quotation other than the information about its re-availability in paperback. The reference is: *Writing Degree Zero*, 48.

Design words.<sup>59</sup>

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Using phrases relating to one subject or idea,  
write another (Push metaphor, Push simile),  
for example, steal science & put it in service  
of snow or boredom.<sup>60</sup>

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Construct a poem as though the words were  
three-dimensional objects (like bricks) in space

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Mayer calls on that tradition in American literature where words are designed. These experiments place the writer in a mode where the poem is an object. The emphasis of the exercises is not self-revelation, but to work with words, lines, and page design as if the material of language were as solid as bricks and mortar. She fosters a writing that sees words as artifacts, that fosters a collaboration between different kinds of knowledge in order to disrupt the expectations of a genre, or simply to create connections that had been denied or ignored. Mayer's experiments in the third issue take the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal in yet another direction. From Barthes, Bernstein and Andrews find a way of conceiving poetry and writing outside the demands of rhetorical and grammatical legislation. With Mayer's experiments, the journal taps into the American tradition of innovative forms in poetry. The next two issues focused upon Gertude Stein and Louis Zukofsky, both writers whose work expanded the concept of writing and poetry.

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<sup>59</sup> *Workshop on Tuesday*, 2. Here is the 'experiment' in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1: 3 (1978): 1: "Get a group of words (make a list or select at random); then form these words (only) into a piece of writing --whatever the words allow. Let them demand their own form, and/or: Use certain words in a set way, like the same word in every line, or in a certain place in every paragraph, etc. Design words."

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 2. From *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1: 3 (1978): 1: "Using phrases relating to one subject or idea, write about another (this is pushing metaphor & simile as far as you can), for example, steal science terms or philosophical language & write about snow or boredom." In this version she has designed the reader more forcibly. Now we are told that mixing discourses is pushing metaphor and simile as far as you can.

Rothenberg wrote of this tradition in his edited collection, *Revolution of the Word: A New Gathering of American Avant Garde Poetry 1914-1945*. The title reveals his interest in recovering numerous writing projects that had been placed in the background, ignored or shunned by the rising literary establishment of the 1950s. Rothenberg speaks of his own shock when going to college in the 1950s and learning that “the age of the modern, the experimental & visionary (for we sensed it even then as vision) has passed: to be replaced by a return to the old forms, to conventional metrics, diction, a responsible modernism, liberal & reformist, rational & refined, & goodbye to the madmen of language.”<sup>61</sup> The purpose of his anthology is to bring back into circulation a radical time, to bring into circulation poets who were ignored because of their rejection of stable and conventional forms, and finally to provide a fuller sense of American poetics for contemporary poetry. He sees the strategies of the period, such as the idea that consciousness is changing due to changes in technology, communication and philosophy, to be taken “as both a crisis & opportunity” (xvi). He also finds the poet in another turning point where multiple chronologies and all kinds of knowing alter the form of writing: “It is through synchronicity and collage—not only applied to the past but to local & particulars—that the modern poem is open to everything; that it becomes the vehicle for ‘anything the mind can think’”(xvii). He concludes then that since the domain of poetry now includes all kinds of possibilities, its form needs to remain flexible and open to all styles of language, sign, page design, rhythm, and experiments. He treats the anthology as a present reality of American poetics and the volume shows not only how Mayer brings new light to an early tradition, but also shows how Bernstein and the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal are forging ahead.

With such means at his disposal, the poet can enter on a career as a prophet & revolutionary, a cultist or a populist by turns. Or he can, in a more profound sense, become the person who keeps raising alternative propositions, eluding the trap of his own visions as he goes. (xviii)

What is apparent, in Rothenberg’s looking back to the period before the end of World War II, is that these neglected projects still have currency for the contemporary poet.

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<sup>61</sup> Jerome Rothenberg, “Preface”, ed. Jerome Rothenberg, *The Revolution of the Word: A New Gathering of American Avant Garde Poetry 1914-1945*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), xi. Hereafter cited as *The Revolution of the Word*.

We can see that Mayer's experiments continue a freedom of the word, line and page design, that looks back to American poetry for another valuable tradition instead of the one inspired by Eliot, Tate, or Brooks. Rothenberg looks back to Williams Carlos Williams as an exemplary of what is to be cherished in all revolutions of the word.

ongoing concerns were with the relation of poetry to the given state of the language & to the details & particulars of experience: the materials de facto through which the imagination could act. In the 1950s the pattern of his sympathies --his exploration of a "new measure" & the "poem as a field of action," along with the need to transform the idea of tradition & the social ground of poetry--brought his work to the center of a number of poetic "movements": projectivists, Beats, etc. The present selection focuses on the early 1920s, when Williams was working on the "improvisations" & non-sequential arrangements of *Kora in Hell* & *Spring and All* (below), with its interplay of prose & verse, leading in effect to the concept & structure of *Paterson*, the complex long poem whose appearance was being eagerly awaited by the end of the Second World War. (109)

For Rothenberg, Williams' work contains an ongoing concern for the materiality of the word and an ability to let the word shape the line, the page, or the discourse. Rothenberg's selection of *Spring and All* (1923) returns the spacing and design that was dropped in its reprint in 1970. This selection gave contemporary poets an ability to see just how much Williams designed his discourse both in poetry and in prose, experimented with forms of the line, and explored new relations between genres. Williams work in *Paterson* is understood in direct relation to early experimental works, and is read as a continuation of those early projects. What is striking about *Paterson* is its ability to combine various kinds of language (lists, newspaper, letters, verse). Williams continued to explore possibilities for American verse, as we can see in this quote from his note on *Paterson*:

"thw [sic] words must be rebricked-up, the words  
the . What am I coming to ?" <sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Williams Carlos Williams, Manuscript file of *Paterson, Book III*, Part III, Yale American Literature Collection, Beinecke Library of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Yale University, New Haven.

What Williams was coming to was what he had come to, long ago. Language embodies knowledge, and how you design a page, organize a book, or design a line, forms possibilities or restricts the range of the word. Mayer's experiments look to the kind of writing that views the building of words and phrases as Williams views the building of bridges:

The few among us who might write well in any generation, however they will be trained, fear to believe that in writing it will be exactly as it has been in other spheres of inventive activity, that the project has not grown until precedent has been rendered secondary to necessity or completely ignored. It has been by paying naked attention first to the thing itself that American plumbing, American shoes, American bridges, indexing systems, locomotives, printing presses, city buildings, farm implements and a thousand other things have become notable in the world. Yet we are timid in believing that in the arts discovery and invention will take the same course. And there is no reason why they should unless our writers have the inventive intelligence of our engineers and cobblers.<sup>63</sup>

Williams, at home with the arts of discovery and invention, allowed his writing to take the course of material artifact. In many ways, *Paterson* and *Spring and All* are precursors to the early L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E project. *Spring and All* embraces both theoretical prose and poetry on the same page, and embraces design as a vital aspect of meaning. *Paterson* uses multiple languages (newspaper, lists, and verse) and was originally printed without numbered pages. His most descriptive page in *Paterson* shows to what extent Williams designed the page for the word (Fig. 2.2. and Fig. 2.3).<sup>64</sup> At the very center of the page in both versions, the plastic arts are located. The word, for Williams had semantic and graphic density, and throughout his career he ignored neither domain. Issue three of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E

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<sup>63</sup> Williams Carlos Williams, "Yours, O Youth", *Contact*, 3 (1921): 15, in *Contact: Numbers 1-5, 1920-24*, (New York: Kraus Reprint Corporation, 1967).

<sup>64</sup> The first figure (Fig. 2.2) is from *Paterson III*, section III (1949). See the collected version for page reference: *Paterson*, revised ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1992), 137. The second figure (Fig. 2.3.) is the manuscript version, file Book III, Early Notes and Drafts, *Paterson*, Yale American Literature Collection, Beinecke Library of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Yale University, New Haven.

Hi, open up a dozen, make  
it two dozen! Easy girl!  
you wanna blow a fuse?  
All manner of particularizations  
to stay the pocky moon :  
January sunshine .

1949  
Wednesday, 11 (10,000,000 times plus April)

—a red-buttèd reversible minute-glass  
loaded with  
salt-like white crystals  
flowing  
for timing eggs

*Salut à Antonin Artaud pour les  
lignes, très pures :*

*“et d'évocations plas-  
tiques d'éléments de”*

and

“Funeral *designs*”  
(a beautiful, optimistic

word . . . ) and  
“Plants” (it should be explained that  
in this case “plants” does NOT refer to interment.)  
“Wedding bouquets”

—the association

is indefensible.

Figure 2.2. William Carlos Williams, *Paterson, Book III*, section III (1949). The section of the poem shows that Williams continued to embrace the visual dimension of the word, line, and page.

*an idea*

All manner of particularizations  
to stay the pocky moon :

January sunshine .

1949

We'nesday, 11th (10,000,000 times <sup>plus</sup> better than April)

- a minte-glass ~~with~~ <sup>a</sup> red <sup>with</sup> reversable

wooden butts)

~~It is~~ loaded with

~~clear~~ white crystals

for timing eggs

Salut á Antonin Artaud pour les  
lignes, tres pures :

" et d'evocations plas-  
tiques d'elements de "

and

"Funeral designs"

( a beautiful optimistic word \* \* )

"Plants"

"Wedding bouquets"

in this case "plants" does NOT refer to burials. (It sh. be explained that)

- aligned with

"bouquets"

the conclusion

is superb

Hi, open up a dozen, make

it two dozen! Easy girl

you wanna blow a fuse?

Figure 2.3. William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, Book III, section III, manuscript version. In the manuscript version, we can see how Williams worked out his design, and how the printer transformed his intentions.

journal attaches itself not only to Mayer's experiments but also to the very powerful tradition in American literature that viewed meaning as something built in language as an embodiment of knowledge.

The journal shows and displays an inventive desire of the word at degree zero. Eigner writes in the second sentence of the first issue:

But beyond the beginning or other times and situations of scarcity, with serial (things, words) more and more dense around you, closer at hand, easier and easier becomes invention, combustion, increasingly spontaneous.

Due to Bernstein's and Andrews' editorial work, the dense new journal fosters invention, making it easier and easier. Their perspective of bringing into print a density ignored by the dominant modes of poetics encourages combustion of new poetic engines. Coolidge, in his closing notes to Eigner's piece, takes a road back to Williams in closing off the section.

Each poem sights into a distance of all the others following.

“the whole is divided as you look”

The Imagination.

to Williams a very pleasant physics of the senses.

asynthesis of presence.

word-activation of the imagination in the act of seeing

“the bird  
of wire like a nest  
is all through the air”

start made at a word  
everything to follow  
the word its word  
again the following

I do not think of Eigner.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Clark Coolidge, “Larry Eigner Notes”, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1:1 (1978): 3.

These highly charged notes offer a poetic density. Coolidge writes that Eigner's poetry is a form that alters conventional categories where poems sight into a distance. The poem marks, leaves a trace, with room for others to follow. Coolidge also looks back to Williams where imagination is not divorced from words, where sight and sign work each other into the page. The last four line section is tender toward re-description, and allows readings to move about. We "are start and made at a word". We always start at a word, but have forgotten that to start is a beginning, a birth. To be made at a word, to form and construct at a word, places the act of making, in the location of the word. Eigner writes in a way that brings magnificent results. Coolidge's notes bring reading to a inventive process. We can move back and forth over the word, taking allusions, living with spaces, following after in new words and forms, the imagination. The first moment of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal emphasizes invention, not crisis. Its diverse graphic presentations and styles of reviewing give the reader the potential of a charged, new, and inventive approach to language, writing, and poetry. Due to the editors, we have the word of Mayer, of Barthes, of Coolidge, of Williams, of Drucker, of Rothenberg working around in a very dense pattern.

Bernstein's early constellation completely embraces the responsibility of being a technician of the human. His poetry, criticism, and editing explores numerous alternatives to the dominant mode of the 1970s, and in so doing he creates new connections, forms, and procedures. His work is just as influenced by his contemporaries as it is by philosophical, linguistic, and literary traditions. What is discovered in his poetry is that Bernstein is seeking ways of generating meaning in language, in grammatical and syntactical patterns, in philosophical inquiry, and in reading patterns and expectations. His poetry generates fluidity, not strident borders, to the point where he can publish poems in two completely different styles of poetic composition. His critical work, using a form that looks back to Wittgenstein, makes an argument for the use and understanding of all modes of writing. Instead of fixating on one style and valorizing its procedure, Bernstein embraces a style that is accepting of the multiple. He is not working necessarily to get rid of a particular approach, but to bring all approaches to ground level.

Since there is no “natural” American poetry, Bernstein’s critical position fosters innovation. Bernstein is highly critical of the verse that limits its poetics to the rhetoric of experience; however, he never completely rejects a specific style but seeks the valorization of democratic possibility. How many ways can American poetry occur? Bernstein’s early constellation is the beginning of his answer. Reading his poetry, criticism, and editorial work together gives us a fuller picture of his praxis and poetics. Each area, as we have seen, embodies cognitive, emotional, and perceptual potentialities encased in difficulties, awaiting further engagement.

- i. redesign: the increase of difficulty
- ii. difficulties: a kinetic interdisciplinary reading
- iii. veil: a visual emblem, O Hawthorne!
- iv. line, the most embraced visual strategy: “As if...”, ‘so really not...”, “#23”
- v. programmed and non programmed serial
- vi. B & B: collaborating

*As a form of critique, innovation risks not being read or understood because its forms and its way of generating grammar are outside established and tried categories of reception. The form itself is vulnerable because its theoretical shelter or location is not derived from the repetition of conventions, but the redress of conventions. The work is paradoxical: it is aggressive in its disruption, and it is vulnerable in its form. (124)*

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## Chapter 3

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### Visual Strategies

Visual strategies are a major component of Bernstein's writing as a poet, critic, and editor. In this chapter we will see how his visual strategies are avenues for innovation in criticism, philosophical inquiry, and poetics. Although he does employ methods similar to other visual poets, Bernstein's visual work transforms former collage, shape, and concrete techniques into vivacious forms. His visual work also includes the illegible, an aesthetic use of punctuation, collaborations with visual artists, and an investigation of page design and layout. In each context, Bernstein redesigns the terrain of words, and this innovative practice opens up not only the textual and graphic field but also areas of production and reception. For him the spatial, the linear, and the sign itself are all essential elements in shaping and inventing a writing that attempts to explore as much as possible the technology of the page. Bernstein's visual strategies run throughout his career as he investigates the material word. Although I will only focus upon a few works it would be wrong to think of these works as somehow separate from his other writing. At any given moment, Bernstein may give emphasis to the sonic or iconic register along with the complexities for each. In many poems, he creates an aural blurring where the semantic, iconic, and sonic are fused. He remains unbound to one set design for his critical, poetic, or editorial work. As design itself becomes and is a mode of aesthetic procedure for Bernstein, the possibilities of what can be produced mightily increase. What also increases is the difficulty of reading and interpreting his work. We will explore his varied visual strategies throughout this chapter, but first I want to address briefly the increase of difficulty as a point of departure for his visual strategies.

Many reader's of Bernstein's works have confessed to their difficulty. For example, Linda Reinfeld in her book *Language Poetry* believes that "Bernstein's writing deliberately frustrates conventional modes of critical commentary; thus it is dismissed by readers trained in the ways of academic criticism as too difficult, too intellectual, or too

private.”<sup>1</sup> Truly conventional modes of critical commentary have included, at least since Eliot, very close and nuanced readings of the material.<sup>2</sup> Bernstein is not trying to turn readers away from a detailed look. The difficulty for readers is that his work cannot be easily categorized into established interpretive patterns. The majority of his work borders on the edge of several different critical maps. The dismissal of his work results less from its resistance to close reading than from an inability to explore new possibilities. Reinfeld reads Bernstein’s poetry as a form of critical liberation: “he is willing to leave his poems swaddled in difficulties but open to a multiplicity of readings, readings liberated from the constraints of unitary perspective and consciously determined authorial intention” (64). If Bernstein’s poetry is open to numerous readings, then critics who seek conventional closure need to be dismissive, since no one reading can claim critical supremacy. For Reinfeld, Bernstein constructs poems that do not always edit out the difficulties. This does not mean that Bernstein does not have a “consciously determined authorial intention”. What is clear from the works we have already seen, is that he is not seeking to form a unitary perspective. He intends his work to be a constellation of writing practices.

Reinfeld does not want Bernstein’s poetry to be dismissed. She chooses to write about Bernstein’s poetry so that the difficulties will not deter further reading.

My aim in writing about Bernstein’s poetry is in part an attempt to rescue it from premature dismissal because of its supposed difficulty, to demonstrate that it is in fact not too difficult for an audience accustomed to reading the experimental writing and critical theory of our time—Derrida and Barthes and Adorno as well as Stein and Beckett and Joyce. (51)

Reinfeld finds a tradition of writers who can inform a nuanced reading of Bernstein. These writers provide a background for close reading that is not leery of exploring new possibilities. However, even with the knowledge of these other writers, some difficulties remain in reading Bernstein’s poetry. For Reinfeld, another tradition provides the critical grammar to work with

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 50.

<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Ozick, “T.S. Eliot at 101”, *What Henry James Knew and Other Essays on Writers* (London: J. Cape, 1993), 20, 10-68.

Bernstein's poetics, but it is a tradition that is not, at least for her, incorporated into "conventional modes of critical commentary" (50).

Alan Golding also addresses difficulties with Bernstein's work. In his critical study *From Outlaw to Classic* (1995), Golding discusses the difficulty of locating Bernstein or any of the Language writers within the canon of American poetry.

Language writing has had the effect of challenging almost every aspect of poetic canon formation as it has been historically practiced in the academy: the valorizing of the individual writer; the closural tendencies of more traditional ways of reading; the hierarchy of genre that privileges lyric; the presumed clear (more or less, most of the time) distinction between poetry and prose. These writers' collective practice posits alternative literary histories, alternative ways of reading, alternative conceptions of poetry—this is how they affect the American poetry canon.<sup>3</sup>

Golding sees Language writing affecting the American canon both by its formal qualities as well as its critical practices. The practice of making canons, of choosing what to preserve, is an ongoing process. Every writer and critic not only learns accepted canons of a generation, they also form their own private canons. Strong critics or writers may at times modify a conventional canon. Golding is suggesting that already the Language writers are bringing about re-readings of literary histories, as well as the re-reading of the conception of poetry. Since all artifacts of culture contain compromise, change is a necessary element of its ongoing existence. If we can agree that canons are cultural artifacts decided by writers and critics, and in the United States more so by large publishing corporations who publish literary anthologies, then we can see the canon as we see any other object subject to change over time.

The inventor has a unique concern for change and a love of alteration. Bernstein as another poet-inventor does want to alter the concepts of poetry in America. He has shown this in his early poetry and has argued very early on in "Stray Straws and Straw Men" that: "[i]t is natural that there are modes but there is no natural mode" (CD 49). Golding argues that Language writing is changing American poetic conventions in several ways:

Clearly enough, Language writing works primarily with the disintegration or disruption of three sets of conventions: narrative conventions, the grammatical and syntactic conventions governing the sentence, and the convention of lyric univocality. (In this way, such writing stands firmly in the tradition of twentieth-century avant-gardes for whom “rupture” has always been a central trope.) (149)

Golding reads Bernstein as one of those writers who displays a unique form of disruption. He connects “Language writing” to other “twentieth avant-gardes” with their use of rupture as a technique. Narration, grammatical and syntactical laws, and lyrical concepts are redressed in Language writing. Reading any redress of poetry presents difficulties, yet it is a reoccurring theme in American poetics. The difficulty of reading any kind of disruption or innovation is due to its challenges to the practice of reading and criticism. As a form of critique, innovation risks not being read or understood because its forms and its way of generating grammar are outside established and tried categories of reception. The form itself is vulnerable because its theoretical shelter or location is not derived from the repetition of conventions, but the redress of conventions. The work is paradoxical: it is aggressive in its disruption, and it is vulnerable in its form.

Hank Lazer writes, in contrast to Paul Mann’s theory of the avant-garde, that Bernstein’s work resists recuperation.

Like the more radical phases of Gertrude Stein’s writing Bernstein’s poetry successfully resists reductive recuperative reading strategies. He writes “difficulties that stay difficult”. Thus, along with Stein, he shares an important place in American innovative poetry with his contemporaries such as Susan Howe and Bruce Andrews.<sup>4</sup>

Lazer argues that Bernstein’s work will be more difficult to recuperate, but even if it is, recuperation is only one interpretation of the work’s significance. Mann in contrast argues that the avant-garde is always recuperated into the machine of late capitalism. What Mann does not

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Golding, *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 145.

<sup>4</sup> Hank Lazer, *Opposing Poetries, Volume 2: Readings* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 142.

envison, and this is true as well of Burger's work, is that in late capitalism recuperation of former radical ruptures in conventional codes, is only one interpretation of that early rupture. Their combined over interpretation of market forces, leaves little room for further innovation, or alternative readings of past innovative works.<sup>5</sup> Lazer reads Bernstein's manner of writing as a challenge to normative reading strategies: "the rigor of his poetry of difference (his conscious resistance to a poetry of personal expression) adequately short-circuits such reading approaches" (142). Bob Perelman also sees Bernstein writing a poetry "not governable by a normative poetics."<sup>6</sup> He argues that in order for Bernstein's poetry to avoid self-definition, "stability of genre is sacrificed" (85). Bernstein's poetry demands, as Perelman argues, "changes in reading" (89), because of its ungovernability and lack of genre repetition.

The problem of seeing Bernstein's work as difficult or disruptive, leaves the reader only thinking in terms of disruption or convention. Bernstein's strategies do disrupt. He does not turn away from difficulties (linguistic, epistemological, or visual). A fuller way of seeing Bernstein is as a poet-inventor, poet-engineer, poet-architect. These three types of designers

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Mann's theories of the avant-garde work out of a philosophical masochism on a micro level and an anti-global capitalism on macro level. He imports a negative dialectic by combining the micro and macro into the discussion of the avant-garde. His theoretical analysis and its importance lies in the absolute claims he makes: a) the avant-garde feeds the machine of late-capitalism; and b) critics function as masochists. His "death of the avant-garde" places the critic and the avant-garde in a dehumanizing production of violence, and he understands this structural activity to be the "true real". Unfortunately, his many interesting insights into the problems of late capitalism—its consumption of the human—are overshadowed by his over-interpretation of the power of late capitalism. Furthermore, his claim that all critics are abusive only increases the power of those who are abusive and incorporates all those other critics— those who seek not to gain power, privilege, or prestige— into a violent paradigm. Reading his work, at the micro and macro level takes the study of the avant-garde into consumer violence. In order for violence to continue on an ongoing basis, the perpetrator must de-value his or her subject. In contrast to Mann, I would argue that by showing the value of the other (which Mann does not theoretically suggest) to an avant-garde or critic that one disagrees with rewrites and wears out violence's dominion.

Dying and restraint have a large currency within his theoretic framework. In the two books, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) and *Masocriticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999) he paints a dark picture of theorizing and reads the avant-garde as a site of pointless recuperation. In both books he embraces the death of the avant-garde. In *Masocriticism* he writes: "it was unable to sustain its alterity, its difference, its otherness. It produced too many signs of the same and hence exhausted its credibility" (3). Later he writes simply: "It died of exposure" (3). Recuperation, for Mann, is the essence of our present day cultural discourse, that is to say the reproduction of too many signs. In *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* he argues that oppositional margins are internalized into a spectacle where "everything new must become passe, that every counter-tradition must become tradition" (15). Fatalism weds production, shorting the life span of works of art and tempting everyone to think that resistance is no longer possible. The inventor, in contrast to Mann's position, continues to seek alternation, even in the light of difficulties, overwhelming failures and market forces.

understand that conventions are problematic, but they treat the convention as a site for modification, opportunity, and innovation. The object remains, but is at times completely rewritten, instead of being broken or ruptured. Disruption and convention live together in an ongoing process. Bernstein does not design his page just to frustrate the reader, or to rupture conventions, although it does both. For Bernstein, writing and language are objects always open to further design. A rupture also means a bursting forth. Bernstein, in order to burst conventional, grammatical, syntactical, or lyrical conventions, takes the visual aspect of poetry in new directions within the line, letter, and page. His strategy is to burst the physical convention of the word as well as conventional visual poetics. As we examine his forms of visual strategies, a further route to reading is to see his work as an additional possibility in American poetry: the illegible/legible; the reconfigured (visual) line; and collaborative productions.

To read Bernstein demands a critical dexterity, a kinetic interdisciplinary reading, and a pragmatic willingness to explore uncharted terrain. He is interested in keeping in the difficulties, and asking, how far poetry can go. Like all inventors, he builds upon former innovations, and is careful to not work in isolation as he designs possibilities.

I think this is the meaning of Stein's great discovery— call it invention — of “wordness” in the last section of *The Making of Americans* and in *Tender Buttons*: satisfaction in language made present, contemporary; the pleasure/plenitude in the immersion in language, where language is not understood as a code for something else or a representation of somewhere else—a kind of eating or drinking or tasting, endowing an object status to language, if objects are realized not to be nouns; a revelation of the ordinary as sufficient unto itself, a revelation about the everyday things of life that make up a life, the activity of living, of speaking, and the fullness of every word, *ofs* and *ins* and *ass*, in the communal partaking— call it meal—of language arts. (AP 143)

As an inventor, Bernstein accepts others' inventions. He finds in Stein a “wordness” that accepts and goes beyond what has been termed concrete poetry. Stein offers another kind of fullness of each word, where it is endowed with the status of an object, without losing its connection to the ordinary, everyday aspects of living. A “wordness” that is beyond concrete poetry because it does

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<sup>6</sup> Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 80.

not abandon grammar. Within Bernstein's visual strategies, he investigates the difficulty of maintaining a writing that embraces Stein's object status of the word as a visual and semantic presence within the poetic line. Shape poems and calligrams retain a connection to grammatical logic, but de-emphasize individual words or letters in order to create an overall visual effect. Letterism and concrete poetry embrace the letter and the word as an object, but turn away from the praxis of the sentence. Bernstein incorporates these inventions, as well as Stein's, into his visual strategy. He does not simply recuperate Stein's moves in a banal, mindless, repetitious way. No, he builds from her another invention toward a new meal of the language arts. One of his many feasts, always encased in difficulties as we have heard from these critics, is found in the journal *The Difficulties* in his answer to a seemingly straightforward question about his "language environment".

Tom Beckett and Earel Neikirk began the journal *The Difficulties* in 1980. Throughout the decade it served as a public forum for process-oriented and/or language centered writings. Several issues were devoted completely to poets like Bernstein, Susan Howe, and Ron Silliman. Recalling an earlier avant-garde, the over-arching project returned from Olson and Cid Corman:

We would like to provide for the 80's the kind of kick that Olson and magazines like "Origin" gave to the 50's and 60's. What it swings on is that level of provocation which keeps the difficulties in.

The first issue was a symposium on "language environment" and the following proposal was sent to all the contributors:

Is it meaningful to you to speak of locating yourself in your work in terms of a 'language'? If so, please respond to what constitutes a 'language environment' and what you consider the relationship between you and it to be. If not, what sense of language would you oppose to this and why?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Beckett and Earel Neikirk, *The Difficulties* (Kent, Ohio: Viscerally Press, 1980): 1.



linguistic sense of a 'langue', a sort of landscape of the work and/or the life, constitute the individual 'word' or 'paroles.'"<sup>9</sup> Bernstein's own submission is unique in form and content (Fig. 3.1.).<sup>10</sup>

We have an image of a box working a fullness of letters, line, and logos. Black ink invades the space of words, exploring the word as an object from the technology of the typewriter. Stein's invention, "satisfaction in language made present", shines and glimmers. As the discursive line is embraced, the lines burst ink into the illegible and perusable difficulties. Narrative epistemology spills into visual epistemology and a phenomenology of the typed sign, sentence, and semantic space. The shape shapes an intentional state, where reoccurring choices are made to fit a chosen frame. Quotation requires iconic editing. Meanings abound.

"I became a consultant to the world outside"

"for those who understand the long range poi/nt of American foreign policy"

"lets put an end to us hegemony all over the world"

"there are lots of easier ways of putting it than this"<sup>11</sup>

As readers we agree: "there are lots of easier ways of putting it". Bernstein, in almost a tribute to the journal, leaves in the difficulties. As we see, and will see, his response to the editor's question employs an innovative visual strategy.

If by "putting it" is a political critique of the new Reagan era, then we can ask if this is the best way to criticize a new government? Bernstein was asked a similar question at the Institute of Policy Studies in Washington, D.C. in December of 1981. In the last session of eight on politics and language, Bernstein was critiqued from the audience for his views on language. He was unwilling to describe writing as a basic one to one communication exchange. This move upset a member of the audience who pushed Bernstein's position. He questioned Bernstein's obscurity, and suggested that he was not fulfilling his "responsibilities as a writer".<sup>12</sup> He went further to state that the simple comic book *Marx for Beginners* had done more to further the "class struggle than anything Gramsci wrote in his prison cell late at night in pain"

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<sup>9</sup> Dick Higgins, "Dick Higgins", *The Difficulties* (Kent, Ohio: Viscerally Press, 1980): 38.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Bernstein, "Charles Bernstein", *The Difficulties* (Kent, Ohio: Viscerally Press, 1980): 54.

<sup>11</sup> These are lines taken from Figure 3.1.

(*CD* 421). Bernstein responded on a number of different levels. First he argued that political responsibility is larger than any one kind of writing. He also suggested that mass communication is not neutral, nor the only kind of discourse that can change the world. In contrast, he argued, reading and writing alternatives offer a potent critique of dominant discourse.

Moreover, there is an instructive value in working with—reading and writing—texts that offer alternatives to the directional, unifunctional, hierararchialized structures that dominate both Capitalist and Communist societies. We have got to understand that the failures of socialist revolutions are related to failures to break with these structures. It is not enough, as has often been said, to just switch the operators of the same state/corporate machine: the machine itself must be dismantled. But it is also not enough simply to say that. It is, however, possible to offer glimpses of other ways of putting things together, a different scale of values; this can be called utopian content. Such content can be realized only by a total de/reorganization of the formal norms embraced by both realist/populist and academic writing. Insofar as the America left rejects divergence from this dominant discourse, it rejects the need to envision such alternatives. (*CD* 422-23)

The instructional value of working with reading and writing forms outside the dominant norms on both the left and the right, is to see and envision alternatives. For Bernstein, the formal dimensions of a discourse form its values and are its values. It is clear to him how dominant forms of discourse create values. If values are going to change, the values, being built in language, demand a set of alternative ideas and practices. Bernstein does not simply back into a leftist position as he is critiquing the right. Admitting that both positions contain errors changes the landscape and allows for reform. He is not willing to embrace the American left in its rejection to examine the ethical and aesthetic nature of the dominant forms of discourse. Furthermore, in his writing practice, he literally shows that there is no such thing as a basic mode of communication, and that the environment of all communication is not reducible to the metaphoric or metonymic.

Marxism as a literary approach has been plagued with difficulties since the 1920s. Graff and Leitch have argued that it was unable to take hold in the past because it ignored the

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Bernstein, “Socialist Realism or Real Socialism?”, *CD* 421, 411-427.

aesthetic quality of the work.<sup>13</sup> Bernstein rebukes the audience for ignoring or underestimating form. Approached from this angle, the “opening” line of his statement becomes more meaningful.

<sup>i</sup>” I became a consultant to the ( w( or)ld outside”

To read this statement, we must work through a visual density that is rooted in past semantic marks. To quote this line changes its environment, and is not a simple slice of its meaning. We cannot just read his position; we must also view it through typographical density and its object status. Its semantic field occurs in a space where meaning is not simply contained in linear discourse. The method of over-typing lines and words leaves the reader with historical residue and limited accessibility. Does this fit into Bernstein’s way of reading? Do we come away thinking of more alternatives, and a different kind of exchange? “WE’VE GOT TO DO SOMETHING AND SOON--” can be extracted. The message is fused in architectural space, altering any political reading. The man in the audience, unable to see another view of language beyond a simplistic mass communication model, questions Bernstein’s responsibility as a writer. Bernstein’s form, like the content, is political.

Any reader unable to think about the language environment in a new combination of the visual and semantic will be at a loss as to how to proceed. Reading this piece depends upon a knowledge and acceptance of visual poetics: that poetry can be built within the whole page, and use numerous aspects of the material sign. Yet this piece is different from other visual strategies. Its form, instead of being inspired by the handwritten form as were many of the first visual poetries, looks to the typewriter. As Bohn points out:

Although the invention of the typewriter would also seem to have been a necessary prelude to visual poetry, in fact it had little or no impact on the movement. Almost without exception the early poems were drafted as hand written manuscripts. Not until e.e. cummings burst on the scene some nine years later did a visual poet compose on a typewriter. Only in the past thirty

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<sup>13</sup> See Vincent Leitch, chapter one, “Marxist Criticism in the 1930s”, *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 1-23. See also, Gerald Graff, “Scholars Versus Critics: 1915-1950”, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 121-161.

years has the machine come into its own as the favorite instrument of the Concretists and the Letterists.<sup>14</sup>

Exploring the possibilities of the typewriter on the page places Bernstein closer to letterist or concrete traditions. Yet, different from both, he is not just writing a poem but answering a question. Furthermore, he is working line by line within a conventional discursive framework. The piece gains an object status, yet is completely different from other visual poetry, or even Stein's "wordness".

In the same year as the first issue of *The Difficulties* began, Catherine Belsey wrote:

But there is no practice without theory, however much that theory is suppressed, unformulated or perceived as 'obvious'. What we do when we read, however 'natural' it seems, presupposes a whole theoretical discourse, even if unspoken, about language and about meaning, about the relationships between meaning and the world, meaning and people, and finally about people themselves and their place in the world.<sup>15</sup>

The world of Bernstein's text takes us into uncharted theoretic. What Belsey points out is that any response to Bernstein's text is contained in a theoretical framework. The judgements which are made about this text reveal the theoretical location of the reader. Consequently, the educational value of such a text is immense. If there is educational value, we could also say that there is social value. To be given the questions Bernstein was given, and asked to respond, is one way of understanding Bernstein's innovative ability. To then be shown Bernstein's response engages the reader in a series of evaluations: How does Bernstein answer the question, and how am I responding to his text? If for example, a person simply rejects the piece as non-sense, then what, in looking back to Belsey, is his or her theoretical position? Organic, political, or formalist readings are unable to adequately apprehend the work.

Due to the obscurity of this text and its difficulties, no critic or anthology has embarked upon Bernstein's innovation of the grammar of spatial and visual poetics. Already, we have seen the critical issues it raises and barriers it produces. Bernstein's non-prose response to the prose

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<sup>14</sup> Willard Bohn, *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry: 1914-1928* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3.

question challenges reading strategies. The barrier of the challenge requires an act of charity either in the name of ethics (the desire to see alternatives change standards), or in the name of aesthetics (the pleasure of innovation). Reading Bernstein's response to the editors of *The Difficulties* challenges the very notion of a singular theoretical approach. The prose question is not given a prose answer. His text can be neither classified as prose or poetry, but has elements of both. It can be neither classified as language or visual object, but has elements of both. It can be neither classified as a linear or a spatial text, but has elements of both. Bernstein's work, if it is to be read at all, requires a view of reading that incorporates collaboration, experimentation, and invention. Nevertheless, traditional reading models can highlight this process and, as we will see, can produce ways of viewing Bernstein's piece. Collaborating with these theories will grant us critical access but also will reveal critical limitations and the ability of the "language arts" to redraw as well as create new boundaries. Reading his response is a challenge to reading.

Our views of defamiliarization have a familiarity with which theorists have worked for over sixty years. In asking how the represented was (re)presented, the Russian Formalists gave their reading strategy a new emphasis upon the construction of the text. As we look over one of their leading theorists, Victor Shklovsky, we find what he finds most problematic: the mindless habits of living.

If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, he argues that it is the habitualization of life that "devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (24). The positive enterprise is the poetic. Once one is in the dull routine of life, being devoured, the subject is in need of re-vitalization. Shklovsky argues for a recovery of sensation.

Art exists, that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone, *stony*; the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. (24)

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique", in *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. K.M. Newton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 23-24.

Like other theorists before him, he has a theory about the purpose of art. For him it is to recover the sensations of life and release the unconscious from the banal pragmatics of daily living. Concerning the technique of art, he suggests a practice that dislocates the familiar from automatic assessment.

The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. (24)

From Shklovsky's vantage point, Bernstein's response would be deemed artistic, as its distance from prose is lengthy.

In studying poetic speech in its phonetic and lexical structure as well as in its characteristic distribution of words and in the characteristic thought structures compounded from the words... we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception. (25)

The purpose of the "poetic" and what distinguishes it from prose, is its ability to disrupt our normal perception of the world. The inscription's strategy is to cause the reader to linger after a familiar object in a new way. The new perception comes through a new organization of words, connotations, and in the speed of receiving new sight.

Shklovsky's emphasis is upon two structures that are interdependent: first, the law of perception that we carry around within us on a day to day basis; and second, the language of poetry where form and content are united to disrupt our habits and revive our sensation of life. In his theory, the reader and the text are primary, and both have a role in his understanding of defamiliarization, or "the making strange" of common habitual words and objects. Bernstein in his piece, as we saw, has become "a consultant to the world outside", but this consultation is not in clear forms. Our reading is disrupted by our viewing. Our eye shifts between words as signs and signs as letters and letters as marks. Bernstein's technique of art has increased the difficulty and length of perception. The process of perception is an aesthetic end, as Shklovsky argued.

The reading of Bernstein's piece goes further by vacillating between aesthetic ends and epistemological concerns. Bernstein, by increasing the process and the difficulty of perception to this level, has made the object, as well as the perception, interdependent. Bernstein's answer to the question moves between an object and a language, inside the bounds of a square, a rationality. The piece may have rational borders, but it is a rationality that contains pragmatic and non-pragmatic, knowable and unknowable, linguistic realities. Because Shklovsky has a negative view of repetition, the object is devalued. Over time, the perception becomes habitual, and art "is a way of experiencing the artfulness of the object." The technique of art is to extend this process as long as possible in order to keep the senses alive and habits in abeyance. Bernstein's piece has a different view toward time. No matter how long we look at its physical shape, we will not be able to know what is unknowable. In other words, Bernstein has built into perception and sensation a non-semantic physicality. He offers a valuable innovation to our conceptual understanding of the language environment. The meaning and potential meanings of the piece are not grounded in linear or dialectic epistemological categories. Bernstein's visual strategy releases meaning from familiar categories. Meaning becomes mobile, nomadic, and vacillates between and among the sign and syntax, the visual and the grammatical, the legible and the illegible. We are confronted with the/a contemporary phenomenology of the material word. Bernstein's response in other words forces us to move beyond theories of argumentation and proof to the theories of the aesthetic, formal, and constructive uses of the sign.

Another traditional approach to literature is structuralism, and some of its views provide yet another way of looking at Bernstein's text. Due to the form and methods of many structuralist critiques, very few if any would attempt to read Bernstein's piece through its lens. As is well known, structuralism was foundationally influenced by de Saussure's theory of linguistics, and sought to apply linguistic modes of analysis to literary texts. Early structuralism understood the text as a form of rhetoric filled with codes and devices that function as a system of signs. Literature then, was a secondary code (complete in and of itself) of the primary code, language. The secondary code has laws, regulations and manners by which it creates meaning, the illusion of the real or the effect of emotions. Structural analysis has emphasized the study of the system's selection and combination of words in a text that creates the system of meaning(s),

and it has examined generalized structures and reoccurring patterns found in literature. Structural analysis has also focused upon the features in a text which create and/or disrupt linear progression, and on how narratives build order and maintain frequency. The method has also studied the manner by which a story creates a world and belief in that world. Literature as a code, with a certain categorization of the primary (language), is the object of study as opposed to the author, world, or reader.

Later forms of structuralism did move toward a study of the reader, as in the work of Roland Barthes. Jonathan Culler in *Structuralist Poetics* argues:

Structural analysis does not move towards a meaning or discover the secret of a text. The work as Barthes says, is like an onion,

a construction of layers (or levels, or systems) whose body contains, finally no heart, no kernel, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing except the infinity of its own envelopes—which envelope nothing other than the unity of its own surfaces.

Culler argues that reading as a process is not one of revelation. He finds in Barthes an understanding of literature or any writing as a “construction of layers”. Culler adds:

To read is to participate in the play of the text, to locate zones of resistance and transparency, to isolate forms and determine their content, to follow, in short, the interplay of surface and envelope.<sup>17</sup>

This critical movement was generally concerned with the *strategy* of the text, not how it got there, and not where it was going. It was a dominant way of seeing the literary paradigm up until the late 1970s. As a reading strategy, this theory would read Bernstein’s piece as a true disruption of the primary and secondary codes of language and literature. To investigate the selection and combination of words foregrounds a spatial investigation instead of a semantic one. Linear progression moves in and out of focus through the deliberate over-typing of letters in space. The “play of the text”, if we take Culler’s advice, is continuous and resides in a zone of resistance that is unavailable (some words and narrative combinations we cannot make out, but we can see the letters or elements of a supposed message). The surface is full of letters and lines,

but we cannot say with Barthes and Culler that the text is an onion with no kernel, no irreducible principle, because graphically we see one.

Barthes' further views of the text are of interest here. He wrote:

we know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writing, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.<sup>18</sup>

He argues that the line of the text is no longer a singular procedure. Instead we have reached a multi-dimensional space. The text, even in a very linear discourse, has become spatial as he proves in *S/Z*, and Barthes' work marks the complete overturning of the linear with the spatial. The calligraphic text is a precursor to Barthes' spatial criticism. In the linear text the word links in and out of "the innumerable centers of culture". Bernstein's piece gives these links and layers a graphic residue that crashes together in the multidimensional space. We lose and gain something from this blend and clash. We lose the ability to start out or exclusively concentrate on the linear, and we gain a residue with moments of having a "kernel" of meaning. While presenting a multi-dimensional text, Bernstein returns the kernel as he answers a prose question about his work and his relationship to the "language environment". Instead of a tissue of quotations, we have the fabric of words, lines, and letters, where the density of the weave moves outside the bounds of the semantic domain.

The structure of Bernstein's texts, of repetitive layering, graphic residue, linear and spatial design, and the phenomenology of the iconic signifier, changes and confirms Genette's view of the literary paradigm. For Genette, the writer is an engineer, and the critic is a bricoleur. He uses Levi-Strauss' work to build his own view of the writer / critic paradigm. The writer, like the engineer, "questions the universe", whereas the bricoleur addresses himself to a collection of oddments left over from human endeavors."<sup>19</sup> The critic, as a bricoleur, takes the

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), 259.

<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. K.M. Newton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 156.

<sup>19</sup> Claude Levi Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962), 26; *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 17, quoted by Gerard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 5.

text and reduces it into its elements. The critic is then reading to “build up a new structure” informed by his search over the elements.<sup>20</sup> “The writer works by means of concepts and the critic by means of signs” (5). Bernstein calls upon the critic to work with signs and concepts. In regard to this form of writing, and in the context of not having one theoretical approach guiding the investigation, a critic must build a response and provide an approach which allows and fosters further critical commentary. The critic who does not want to shut down the writer’s creation, will begin doing the work of the writer as well as his or her own work.

If the writer questions the universe, the critic questions literature, that is to say the universe of signs. But what was a sign for the writer (the work) becomes meaning for the critic (since it is the object of the critical discourse), and in another way what was meaning for the writer (his view of the world) becomes a sign for the critic, as the theme and symbol of literary nature. (6)

The interactive description of writer and critic that Genette gives us, is an ongoing process in response to Bernstein’s text. Bernstein’s view of the world sees language as a grid by which we know the world, and an aspect of what is the world. Bernstein as a writer questions the universe, but it is a universe of signs. In this piece Bernstein is both writer and critic. The reader/critic in Bernstein’s piece is in a vacillating position as he or she apprehends what has been “left over from human endeavors”. Bernstein is writing about the universe, and the critic following after his work, is left with the task of engineering and bricolage because there is not an adequate theory of prose or poetry that can explain his work. The reader/critic must build a response, and yet will always have to live with the unattainable, yet viewable semantic meaning. The critic of this piece will always find parts of its structure that are resistant to rearrangement. Bernstein forms a response concerning his writing and language environment that is beyond recuperation, that is unique, particular, and individual. The critic’s work is embedded in a movement amongst the universe of signs, iconic residue, and concepts of writing. This movement within each reader addresses the after-effect of the writer’s design, and creates (or destroys) space for further investigations.

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<sup>20</sup> Gerard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, 5.

As we collaborate among these theories and Bernstein's text, we can see that the reader is present in new spatial dimensions, but how is the reader challenged? Iser attempts to answer this question for conventional literary texts, and his theory may shed some light on reading Bernstein's piece. Iser's view of the reader's response, which he has gone on to develop in his triad of fictive, real, and imaginary, brings the question of time into the space of the text.<sup>21</sup> In his description of the status of the literary texts he makes several statements. First, the text is different from other texts because it does not refer to any "real" situation. In other words, there isn't a "concrete object" corresponding to the text, as one would find in the newspaper or Time magazine. The literary text establishes its reality or realness by the reader's participation, and the ability of the fictionalized act to transform a reality into (imaginary) engagement.

Expository and prose texts tend to offer points of verification. Bernstein's response to Beckett is again like a piece of literature in that verification is problematic by traditional standards of analytic modes. The aspect of his response which is not verifiable is the illegible which becomes, in Iser's schematic, the literary. The reader cannot verify everything, and this utopian content evades confirmation. Iser argues, "this possibility of verification that all expository texts offer is, precisely, denied by the literary text".<sup>22</sup> Literary texts do not refer to identical real-life situations. Truth claims in Literature limited to a mere correspondence to real life situations, can offer little if any verification. The truth of literature or of fictional devices (metaphors, simile) must come from another point of verification. The indeterminacy created by literary texts, due to its lack of reference to any identical real-life-situation, creates the terrain of its possible verification as a projected "reality". Because the status of the text is indeterminate, its determination settles in from the reader's participation. The gaps of indeterminacy are filled by the reader's activity. The reader refers the text to the world she knows, filling in the gaps with verifiable factors. Some texts, according to Iser, lose their literary quality in the reflection. Other texts are resistant to this counterbalancing, and the world of the text begins to compete with the more familiar world of lived experience.

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<sup>21</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Wolfgang Iser, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response", in *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. by K.M. Newton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 228. All quotations are from this volume.

As we participate in the process of counter-balancing for the sake of determining the text's believability, we meet resistance to such a degree that we throw away the book. If we do not mind the revision of our world, then we can begin to come into contact with the work and what it wants to convey. Iser summarizes his thought on the status of the book as an in-between reality.

Its main characteristic is its peculiar halfway position between the world of real objects and the reader's own world of experience. The act of reading is therefore a process of seeking to pin down the oscillation structure of the text to some specific meaning. (228)

For him the literary text is in-between two worlds: the world of the reader, and the outside daily world of lived experience. Bernstein writes that he has become a consultant to the outside world. The text becomes the outside daily world of lived experience. According to Iser, we could say that Bernstein places himself in the role of the reader, places himself, as an object in the world, by a fiat of his visual strategy.

Iser argues that the literary text is a text which produces literary objects, not empirical data: "...literary objects come into being through the unfolding of a variety of views which constitute the 'object' in stages and at the same time give a concrete form for the reader to contemplate" (228-229). The reader takes these views and participates by placing the pieces together as the text progresses. Each view is schematized and incomplete. The more fragmentary the description, the more interpretation that is needed. More gaps between the various views occur and multiply. The schematized abundance requires more, not less, involvement from the reader.

This means that the reader fills in the remaining gaps. He removes them by a free play of meaning-projection and thus by himself repairs the unformulated connections between the particular views. In this way, every literary text invites some form of participation on the part of the reader. (230)

Literary objects cannot contain at total view, where the reader does not have to make connections and participate in the coming into being of the text. The literary text is dependent and involved with the reader for its construction, application, and pleasure.

its reality not in the world of objects but in the imagination of its reader, it wins a certain precedence over texts which want to make a statement concerning meaning or truth; in short over those which claim or have an apophantic character. (230)

Iser's definition of the literary object, as opposed to an empirical object open to verification, cannot adequately describe or understand Bernstein's piece. The "object" is an icon/image of the simultaneity of words/statements/phrases but these phrases unfold their meaning only when taken one by one and read in a linear fashion. They thus unfold in time. Bernstein brings time and space together. He employs a visual strategy which creates simultaneously a literary and critical object and a situation where the reality of his text is located in more than one domain of meaning. Its reality is literally in the image of the reader's perception of the phenomena of the material word.

Bernstein's text presents gaps that the reader will never be able to ignore or fill in. As well the text, embedded in the material, is not bound by time. What can be realized in such an environment is that the truth claims and/or ethical demands of Bernstein's text are not presented in a pure, linear fashion. Each statement, line, and word is embedded in an authorial history of the typed word. Iser concludes his theoretics with this comment:

Thus it is perhaps one of the chief values of literature that by its very indeterminacy it is able to transcend the restrictions of time and written word and to give to people of all ages and backgrounds the chance to enter other worlds and so enrich their own lives. (231)

Dependent upon the reader's imagination, the literary work lives along side the duration of human culture. Whereas other texts are trying to record what has happened to the world, the literary text is trying to construct a world in the reader's imagination. The literary text moves from being a three dimensional object to a four-dimensional potential. Iser would have to say

that Bernstein's text is either a new form of prose, or a literary construction of a prose moment. Bernstein's early comments, on how the non-standard forms of writing can be utopian content, can be read into this piece as a way of understanding its form. Since the form is neither prose (traditional or Stein-like), nor poetry (traditional or visual), we must develop Iser's categories. If we see the piece as fictional, we lose verification. If we see it as literature, we gain a re-occurring call upon the reader's imagination. This call competes with the way things are, and with the world. As Iser put it concerning a literary text: "the world of the text establishes itself as being in competition with the familiar world, a competition which must inevitably have some repercussions on the familiar one. In this case, the text may tend to function as a criticism of life" (228). Bernstein's text not only functions as a criticism of life, but as criticism of language's relationship to a discursive practice. He expands the concepts of fiction and prose through a procedure of repetition, and the use of a typewriter. Following after Cummings as a poet-inventor, he liberates the word from its conventional presentation, and while doing so, he creates an innovative answer to the question of reading and writing. He takes early visual strategies into new directions, creating an interactive object, dependent upon grammatical codes, yet independent from its laws.<sup>23</sup>

To become a consultant to the world outside is not a straightforward business. Each of the theories concerning the text, its construction, its structure, its reception, fosters heightened moments of reader-response, of the formal visual pleasure of black lettering against white, of redirected use of lettering as a form instead of a messenger, of structural investigation, and of biting political statements. Bernstein's response is not confinable to conventional discourse, but upon analysis meaning abounds. If meaning is not singular, as Barthes argued, then according to Robert Creeley, collaboration is absolutely necessary: "one must recognize the absolute necessity of collaboration insofar as the information will not resolve itself as a linear and/or "singular"

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<sup>23</sup> From Augusto de Campos' perspective on Cummings, we can see that Bernstein is also working in the tradition of poet-inventors. As de Campos reflects upon Cummings, he considers him a "poet-inventor" like Pound and Mallarmé: "Another poet-inventor, e.e. Cummings, adapts the ideogram and counterpoint to the miniature. Without falling into letterisme, or the forming of sonorous groups of letters without meaning, Cummings frees the word from its grapheme, and brings its formal, visual and phonetic elements into focus in order to better release its dynamism." "Points—Periphery—Concrete Poetry", in *The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1982), 264-265, 259-266. Augusto de Campos' essay was originally published in *Jornal do Brasil*, Nov. 11, 1956.

pattern.”<sup>24</sup> Collaborating among these theories, circulates the reading in and around the text, giving points of illumination, while not attempting to provide an explanation where it cannot be found. Easily, we can keep writing about this piece. We can argue that Bernstein sees the language environment mixed with clarity, potential workings, failures, and historical residue. If the shape of the piece is rational, we can see that the interior of the rational, or the human who uses language, is both accessible and not accessible. Here, English syntax, letter as symbol, and spatial dimensions, fill and/or describe the language environment. Bernstein’s piece not only confronts the reader, but also any method of verification. The “reality” of the piece, according to Iser’s work, would have to be in several locations. Its reality can be found in what it does to the reader, what it does to a particular reading theory, and in those elements which correspond to the praxis of the world. Its reality also comes from its visual strategy. One example among several is to think about the visual picture we are given: a square with knowable and unknowable meaning. In other words, it is a re-presentation of rationality that is limited, but still present, living with historical residue. The over-typing within the square can be seen as the historical residue that is always attached to any subject. The shape and design of the piece displays an intentionality and not a chance procedure. Because of how it was built, we can assume at some point in its construction there would have been lines, letters, and signs that were clearly visible. Over time, these moved behind the scene, still visible, but with partial access just like history and memory. How are we to enter the world of this text? We are not granted total access, but as our imagination moves over the box, we begin to see Stein’s “wordness”: pointing, covering, hovering. The life of this statement-poem remains outside the horizon of many theories of criticism or literature. Nevertheless, investigating Bernstein’s visual strategy, informed by these theories, begins a process of critical reflection. Already we gain new possibilities and come upon new demands for critical inquiry.

Bernstein’s visual strategy in *The Difficulties* is almost unique in comparison to the rest of his early work. With the publication of *Veil* in 1987 (the same year in which he published *The Sophist* and *Artifice of Absorption*), we are confronted with a cogent and sustained visual strategy. He begins *Veil* with a quotation from the American author Nathaniel Hawthorne

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Creeley, “Some Place Enormously Moveable”, *Artforum*, Vol. 18 (Summer 1980): 39.

(1804-1864): “There is an hour to come,” said he, “when all of us shall cast aside our veils. Take it not amiss, beloved friend, if I wear this piece of crape till then.”<sup>25</sup> *Veil*, containing six pieces (see Fig. 3.2. & 3.3.), confronts the reader with numerous questions: Do we try and unveil this crape? How and what do we read? Does any contemporary theory of poetics provide critical guidance or acumen? Again, we have understandable, viewable, fragments of discourse, surrounded and infused with impenetrable ink. We are called into new poetic and critical space where knowledge is not fully realized, where the sign does not live in isolation nor is atemporal, where the reading lives on the border of semantic and iconic materiality.

Different from the piece in *The Difficulties*, Bernstein frames this volume spiritually. In his earlier critical work (“Stray Straws, Straw Men”), Bernstein drew from Thoreau’s *Walden*. In this visual work, he looks back to Hawthorne. The quotation comes from Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil”.<sup>26</sup> The story concerns a priest who, due to his own spirituality, chooses one day to veil his face with a black veil. The veil, as we read, is a symbol of parabolic truth. Due to our actions, we are all veiled from each other. Hawthorne’s parable carries a charged view of Christian piety. The piety comes from the minister’s understanding of humanity, depravity, and sin. After veiling himself in the story, the minister is seen to have a gifted ability to speak of Christian virtue and the ongoing task of turning away from sinful thoughts, words, and deeds. For Hawthorne, what we are and what we’ve done is veiled and covered from complete sight. We are all partially hidden due to our sinful actions, and for Hawthorne’s minister, the casting away of our veil will be revelatory.

In a telling interview, Bernstein transforms Hawthorne’s self-awareness of the constant barrier between humans and their deity into a contemporary social description.

*Veil* is my most visually oriented work. The visual emblem is produced by several layers of overtyping, so that much, but not all, of the freely composed writing is obliterated. One model that I had was Morris Louis’s “Veil” paintings, where successive stains of colors occlude the inner layers, though at the edges the brightest of the suppressed underlayers of color, shines through, ecstatically.

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Veil* (Madison, WI: Xexoxial Editions, 1976,1987), i.

<sup>26</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twice Told Tales in Two Volumes* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854), 57, 47-66.



The sense of stain, as in soiling, and its associated sadness, is crucial; but also, as in biochemistry, the stain allowing you to identify otherwise invisible substances. In this sense, my poetry is an acoustic staining. That's why I'm inclined to dwell on (in) forms of damage, maladjustment, dislocation. This is not an aesthetic theory so much as an experiential dynamic—call it the everyday: that we have our misalignments more in common than our adjustment to the socially correct norms. Normalcy is the enemy of poetry—my poetry, “our” poetry.<sup>27</sup>

He frames his *Veil* around Hawthorne's parable, a story built around an image with didactic implications. He also looks to Louis' work from the 1950s. The formal design implies yet another parable. From Louis he takes the idea that some colors will shine “through, ecstatically”. Along with staining as a sense of soiling and sadness, Bernstein's visual strategy contains both depravity and glory. We also have stain as a way of scientific discovery and identification. His poetry, as an acoustic staining, is filled with Hawthorne's American Christian piety (depravity and glory), as well as American ingenuity (discovery and technology). From this vantage point, these neglected or censored subjects acquire a vitality. Forms of damage, maladjustment, and dislocation as stains, entail discovery, sadness, and the ecstatic. Normalcy, as the obedience to “correct” norms, is the enemy of poetry because of its opposition to error and discovery.

Over-typing takes the piece toward a visual density. The density is a parabolic stain. The density is also an attestation to the reality that our damage, maladjustment, dislocation, and is more common “than are adjustment to the socially correct norms.” “A WALL OF WORDS makes sense to everyone but you”, is one found line within the *Veil* (Figure 3.2.). In fact, the reader is thrown into a search for found objects (in this case words and phrases), and can come away with numerous understandable glimpses. “The veil acknowledges the stigma that is our common ground, our point of adjacency with one another, our ‘us’ness” (35). The density, framed as a veil and as a stigma, is Bernstein's way of showing and explaining language difficulties. Bernstein believes,

that we can't communicate as if we had no veils or bodies or histories separating us, that whatever communication we can manage must be in terms of our

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<sup>27</sup> “Charles Bernstein”, interview by Manuel Brito in *A Suite of Poetic Voices: Interviews with Contemporary American Poets* (Santa Brigida: Kadle Books, 1992), 34-35, 23-36. In the MW version, the line “call it the everyday” is expanded: “call it (come back to it again) the ordinary” (*MW*, 31).

opacities and particularities, our resistances and impermeabilities—call it our mutual translucency to each other. (36)

His visual strategy in *Veil* is informed by Hawthorne, over-typing, Louis, and Erving Goffman's social analyses. He gives us an image of our language environment and the multiple complexities that inform writing and speech. The *Veil* becomes a material metaphor built from signs, informed by discovery and sadness, containing a multitude of possibilities. Bernstein adds,

[o]ur language is our veil, but one that too often is made invisible. Yet, hiding the veil of language, its wordness, its textures, its obstinate physicality, only makes matters worse. (36)

Language itself is our veil, implying that we can never have direct contact with each other. To hide this veil only makes matters worse. Bernstein finds a form of subjectivity that goes beyond the naïve understanding that personal expression is somehow a direct one to one activity between people. He offers not just a critical theory, but also a critical and creative practice that does not hide the veil of language and allows "its wordness, its textures, its obstinate physicality". In *The Difficulties* and *Veil*, Bernstein gives an account of marks in time.

Bernstein shares with Hawthorne the possibility of the veil being cast away. In Hawthorne's parable the minister sees the veil being taken away at the moment of final revelation, when Christ returns to the earth in order to cleanse all that binds and to transform life. Peace between nations is as complex, if not more complex, as the veiled former existence. Bernstein does not build upon the minister's view of human depravity, but he does leave open the possibility of a transformed future:

Perhaps such veils will be cast aside in the Messianic moment, that utopian point in which history vanishes. On this side of the veil, which is our life on earth, we live within and among the particulars of a here (hear) and now (words that speak of and to our condition of everydayness). (36)

Bernstein too, leaves the Messianic possibility. Hawthorne's minister differs from Bernstein in that the minister would see the future Messianic moment filled with the details of the former

life, but with all of its particularities transformed. Bernstein does pick up the tendency of American Christian piety which denies the physical particulars of the here and now.<sup>28</sup> The minister, as well as Hebraic scriptures, speaks of the Messianic moment as a new form of history as opposed to a history, that simply disappears. Whatever happens in the future, Bernstein finds it necessary to emphasize and embrace words “that speak of and to our condition of everydayness.” Bernstein sees life on earth as living amongst the particulars that are too often made invisible or denied. By bringing the invisible to the visible, he innovates poetics.

Bernstein creates a critical anxiety by confronting us with our veiled existence, just as the minister did. In Hawthorne’s story, the parishioners as well as the town spend their days trying to find the correct interpretation of why the minister is veiled. Even at the very end of the minister’s life, no one has discovered the truth. Bernstein’s *Veil* creates a similar, critical anxiety. The *Veil* pieces present a few problems: How do we go about reading them? Should we try to trace back all the lines to an original state? What would this give us? After we extract lines, or moments of semantic meaning, how do we interpret these extractions without forgetting their graphic, material context? As readers we are able to make out some of our shared meanings, but not all of them. In this sense Bernstein repeats Hawthorne’s parabolic *Twice Told Tales*. We are able to “see” some of the meaning, but the fuller meaning awaits perusable development or change. In *Veil*, we have a veiled self placing a public object before us. Our contact is veiled and not direct. Bernstein’s acoustic staining and visual strategy brings into focus the complexity of reading and writing. The architectural spaces appear as a density of signs. Moving in and out of focus we experience a graphic construction that uses letters as paint, and linguistic forms as non-linguistic modes of meaning. The writerly moves are not abstract, spontaneous expressions, but skilled, chosen, and inserted typographical gestures that turn away from the aural toward the iconic.

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<sup>28</sup> Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).



In the next piece from the *Veil* (Figure 3.3.), we can see that Bernstein used different size types with an oscillating density. One of the lines from this space causes even further critical involvement.

One thing I have had a hard time following is a sense of CLEMENT  
GREENBERGISM

The “I” within this piece has a hard time following “a sense of Clement Greenbergism”. Not only do we have a structural density innovating the borders between semantics, poetics, and the plastic arts, we now have a veiled statement concerning one of the more important critics who wrote on the avant-garde. The line’s construction as well as its spatial context, follows the sense of the former critic’s work. The spatial “following” beckons the reader to ponder his meaning. Greenberg’s 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” is one of the many places a dialogue between the *Veil* and Greenberg’s work could begin. Greenberg implies in his essay that the avant-garde has no need for the common or the everyday. “In turning his attention away from subject-matter or common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft.”<sup>29</sup> We could say Bernstein is finding common experiences through the medium of his own craft. However, common experience is not without complexities or abstractions. The “I” in *Veil* may not be able to follow this comment by Greenberg either.

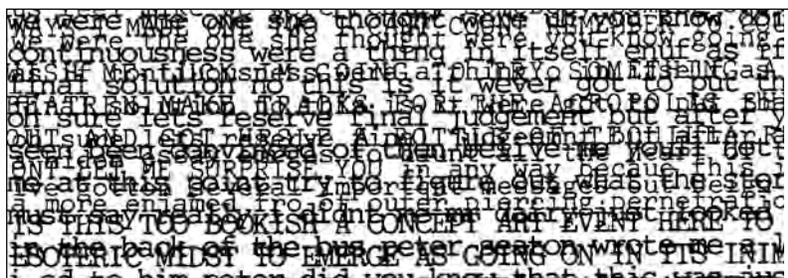
The attention of poets like Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Valéry, Eluard, Pound, Hart Crane, Stevens, even Rilke and Yeats, appears to be centered on the effort to create poetry and on the “moments” themselves of poetic conversion rather than on experience to be converted into poetry. Of course, this cannot exclude other preoccupations in their work, for poetry must deal with words, and words must communicate. (37)

Exactly what is at stake in Bernstein’s *Veil* is how words communicate. Instead of accepting the norms of the social contract concerning subjectivity or even common experience,

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<sup>29</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, *Partisan Review* VI, No. 5 (New York: NY, 1939): 36, 34-39.

Bernstein opens up Greenberg's binary opposition between experience and poetic expression/conversion. Words are intimately linked to our experience. The isolated statement within *Veil* concerning Greenberg, also requires interpretation. Drawing from two moments in the essay simply begins the process of thinking through one response to those lines. *Veil* shows its solid connection to past American critical and poetic explorations, whether it is Hawthorne exploring daily piety, or Greenberg exploring daily life and its relationship to art. *Veil* demands a range of critical approaches. Quotation, a major tool in critical work, is complicated. For example, quotation as a source of isolating main or significant points, if used directly, moves critical discourse toward the visual grid.



Are we unsatisfied with this quotation? We can feel that something is missing? Have we drawn from the work in a way that is fair or just? On top of the other semantic and visual domains, the quotation itself is brought to light as an unsettling piece, removed from the whole, as an elegant particular on its own. In light of either result, a quotation from *Veil* retains partialities in an experimental form. Regarding *Veil*, Bernstein stated that his method was “not an aesthetic theory so much as an experiential dynamic” (*MW* 31). The experiential dynamic moves about in this multi-dimensional textual space that retains a material enigma. Framed in psychoanalytical and religious terms, the reader experiences the life of the word. This life has been with Bernstein for three decades: in the 1970s, privately and in a Milan Gallery (*Veil* is copyrighted 1976); in the 1980s photocopied and published by Xexoxial editions (his extension into the literary and academic world); and in the 1990s on the web (the rhetoric of

technology).<sup>30</sup>

Bernstein's visual works give his poetics a material metaphor otherwise unavailable. The material is both metaphor and metonymy. The physicality of the sign offers discourse and an object in various spaces. These pieces give us clarity and obscurity, multidimensional space and linear trajectories. Under letters, in larger letters we find:

. . . .IS THIS TOO BOOKISH A CONCEPT ART EVENT HERE TO  
CHRONICLE A HIDDEN ESOTERIC MIDST TO EMERGE AS GOING  
ON IN ITS INIMAIABLE SEAMLESS HARMONIOUS AWFULLY NICE  
DIRTHITY OF SPLENDOR MAGIC ANCIENT SOUP KITCHEN AND  
MAGIC TERREN OF SWIRL UP SOAP SUD SEAS AGAHST WCH  
MAKES IT A LOT HARDER LETS FACE IT TO SAY NO NO CULT OF  
THE NIGHT BETWEEN ACTS OF INTERMINABLE PLAYS. . . (Fig. 3.3.)

The bookish concept of layering words on a page and binding them together is incorporated in one single page. We can take single words and offer an interpretation, or mull over combinations. Art events, to chronicle and to show a historicity of the material word, are left in such crowded linear space.

In contrast to Bernstein's *Veil*, Rosmarie Waldrop's submitted work to *Fourth Assembling* (1973) gives sharp moments of clarity (Fig. 3.4. and 3.5.).<sup>31</sup> Waldrop uses similar

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<sup>30</sup> Bernstein's *Veil* is available at <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/bernstein/books/veil/index.html> A study for the web version was published in *King Log* 2:2 (1999). See, <https://jacket2.org/commentary/my-veils>.

<sup>31</sup> *Fourth Assembling*, compiled by Richard Kostelanetz, Henry Korn, Mike Metz (New York: Assembling Press, 1973), i: "For the same reason, we have persistently refused requests to print contributors' works, for one point of *Assembling's* concept is that, given the crisis in communication (i.e. censorship) serious writers and artists will have to learn the process of its communication from its beginnings. RK" In the introduction Kostelanetz claims that the 70s were in a state of censorship because so many could not get published. He argued that editorial styles, reviewing practices, and book store managers were censoring a large amount of contemporary writing. In response, Kostelanetz created a new publishing space. Each contributor had to print a 1000 copies and send them to the editors. Each *Assembling* volume was compiled alphabetically. Kostelanetz states the need for more counter periodicals, counter publishers, different distribution and review networks, and points out that the *Assemblings* are only a drop in the bucket. Waldrop's pieces are also in *Camp Printing* (Providence, RI: Burning Deck, 1970) but without the words "it were another matter", "it introduces waiting".

visual strategies to Bernstein. The page is a space for the habitation of the material word. Her form, in strips, layers segments of previous text, whereas Bernstein layers within

# ROSMARIE WALDROP

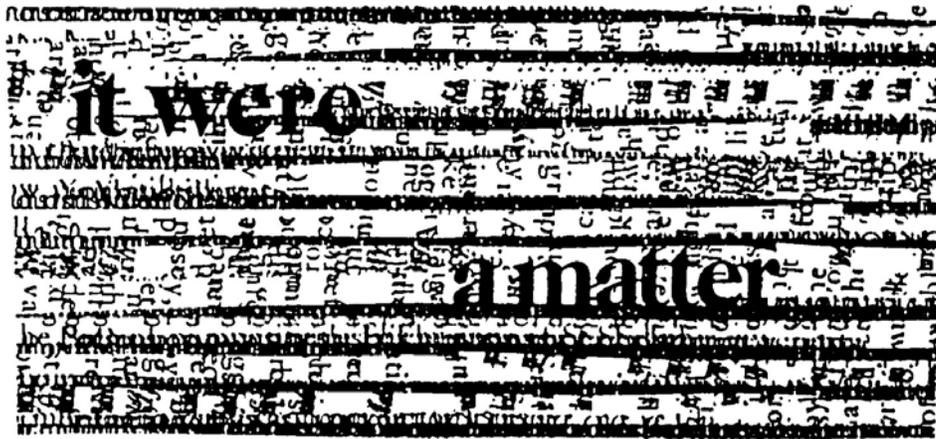


Figure 3.4. Rosmarie Waldrop, *Fourth Assembling* (1973).

Bernstein's work remains veiled, but openly inviting. Waldrop inscribes the architecture of font in order to magnify choice statements. In contrast to advertising slogans, phrases like "it were a matter" can be seen but not easily followed. She has, as a backdrop, strips of letters, more or less

laid on top of one another. These strips represent moments or allusions of other ongoing narratives. On top of this re-contextualized reality, going in multiple directions, Waldrop gives the reader a seemingly direct set of words that meet the eye. Bernstein's text creates layers as well, but within the same plane and without recourse to an image-statement as in Waldrop's work. Both are creating a visual and textual duality, of the seen and unseen, of the legible and illegible, and are rupturing conventional theory and discourse.

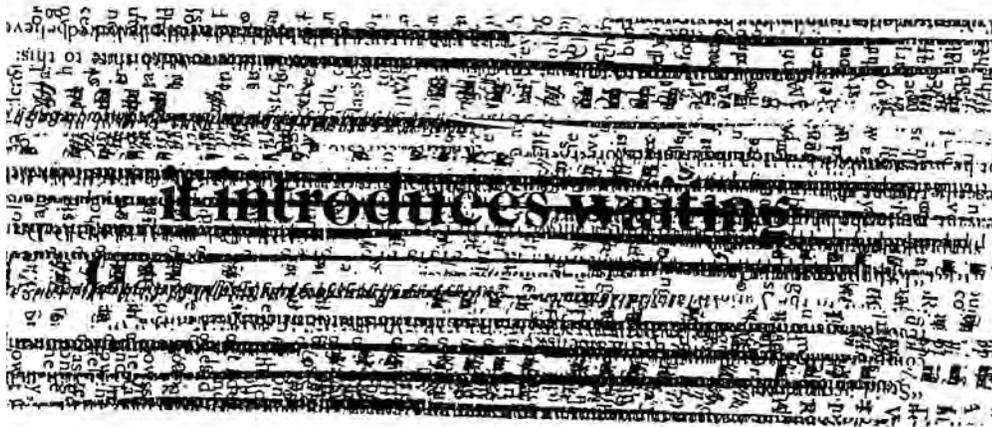


Figure 3.5. Rosmarie Waldrop, *Fourth Assembling* (1973).

As the materiality of the sign is embraced, the difficulties of writing and communication are left in and not edited out, and the work becomes, like the parable, an open invitation. Writing that is neither conventional in radical or traditional terms takes reading practices and theories outside of their established boundaries. The open, exiled, nomadic, space that this kind of innovation creates is vulnerable to hasty judgements, and yet it awaits a reading even from those who claim to know how to read. Criticism that stops at the limits of its theory takes the vulnerability of the innovation as a threat. Reading Bernstein's visual strategy alongside a few traditional literary theories shows the limitations and the possibilities that over-spill from poetic invention. The *Veil* awaits a future unveiling, but for the moment, for many readers, it is a mere layering of letters. Using a similar method to the 1980s *Veil*, the 1990s *Veil* on the web is

presented as an experiment.<sup>32</sup> As experiments, Bernstein is waiting to see what happens. This waiting places him in close proximity to Tom Mandel's experiment: "When you repeat a word in the name of the one who first/spoke it you bring redemption to the world."<sup>33</sup> Experiments and printings and a multitude of heritages, wait. Bernstein's redemption is to problematize normalcy and to question standards of behavior modification. The *Veil* project is a strong reminder to the reader of our crape, and this crape is sparkled with uniqueness.

The poem as an object has a lengthy international history. Since Coleridge, readers have looked upon the poem as an innate organic unity. The poem as an organic unity is shaped from within the fullness of its development into an outward form. For Burckhardt, the poem becomes a law unto itself, and the goal of interpretation is to understand the poem solely from within the poem itself. Roger Fowler's critical work treats literature and poetry as a literary object containing specific uses of grammatical methods, social contexts, which provide new insights into the familiar. Johanna Drucker sees the text as a graphic object where the choice of font and design either embraces its mark or ignores its origins.<sup>34</sup> The marked and designed page shows the value of seeing the poem on the whole page. Here poetry becomes a spatial object. In concrete or letterist works, the page over-shadows the text. The words, lines, or letters take on an object like quality. The object like quality is one feature of the plastic arts since Conceptualists such as Sol LeWitt, Bruce Nauman, Joseph Kosuth have embraced the sign's materiality. However, the word, sign or letter has become heavy and has very little, if any relation to discourse, grammar, or syntax.

The shaped poem, the organic poem, the poem on the page, as an aesthetic, organic, or graphic object, are all forms of an available grammar for contemporary visual strategies. Bernstein's *Veil* and his piece in *The Difficulties* show that past visual strategies await further possibilities. This aspect of his visual strategy shows that the spatial dimension of the page has more than one kind of interpretation; that concrete, letterist, shape, or organic are all particular visual styles that can be investigated and invented upon. Although his work builds upon the past

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<sup>32</sup> See HTML Veil Series (June 1996), Veil: <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/bernstein/index2.html#visual>.

<sup>33</sup> Tom Mandel, *Ancestral Cave* (Gran Canaria: Zasterle Press, 1997), 20.

<sup>34</sup> Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

and the various traditions of the word, we cannot give his work one of these visual labels. The *Veil's* backdrop of American parable, Goffman's view of stigma, and scientific discovery give Bernstein's work a unique place in the history of poetry that does not ignore the font, the line, or the page.

The most embraced visual strategy of poetry is the line. The line end has served poetry from the very beginning of Latin texts as a pause and a break. Forming the line allowed poetry to be unique from other texts. The ongoing continuous text, was visually altered for the sake of communicating its unique subject and style. The line remains a basic visual strategy to poetry and the page. It is a strategy that has been completely naturalized, and almost without fail, it has been universally taken as a given. Bernstein's visual strategy is not just limited to a "visual poetics" classically inspired from the works of Mallarmé, Apollinaire, or the shape poems of George Herbert. Interested in investigating norms, we can also see Bernstein to be exploring the basic visual norms of spelling (letters placed one after another) and word construction. No longer deemed simply concrete or letterist, Bernstein's "wordness" accepts that words are objects, and not just grammatical elements. In *Disfrutes* (1981) we find a poetry that accepts these former visual traditions, but goes beyond their purity and conceptual nature. Here is a poetry of letter, suffix, prefix, of parts:

oread  
wicket  
broach  
clap clap  
apt  
ly  
plause<sup>35</sup>

We surface through the parts, look up words, ponder over absences. Reading aloud, we push plause to pause, but plause alone signifies a sound without meaning. Adding sounds and parts,

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<sup>35</sup> Bernstein, *Disfrutes* (Elmwood, CT: Potes & Poets Press, Inc., 1981), 5.

we make an agreement that something is aptly plausible. A divorced reader and writer have sounds without meaning. “Oread”, pulled apart by the reader, brings on a command.<sup>36</sup> Wicket and broach are more familiar terms, waiting to be sought in a dictionary or left by themselves. The piece combines both the spatial dimensions of the word with a non-conventional syntactical grammar. Using the dictionary as a palette, and grammatical and phonetic memory as a subtext, the lines pause, aptly rewriting words and lines altering the visual expectations of poetry.

The importance of referring to a poem from *Disfrutes* is to correct the false assumption that the work in *Veil* is “visual”, whereas the poetry in *Senses of Responsibility* is not. Lines and stanzas are the forgotten visual innovations in the history of poetry. The basic visual mechanism of poetry was contained in the line, and probably for some readers, it remains there. However, since the (re)birth of a broader visual poetics nearly a hundred years ago, the basic mechanism of poetry has, as we have seen, explored the page as a spatial dimension for poetry. Bernstein has explored and charted new developments in this recent technology. Does this mean, though, that there is only one way to think about the line? Can the line be reconfigured through another form of the visual? The line, as the most embraced form of visual strategy in poetry, can become a habitual given. Bernstein as an innovator expands his visual strategy in regards to the line. The volumes *Veil*, *Disfrutes*, and *Senses of Responsibility* show the range of his visual strategies as sonic staining. His ongoing strategy in *Controlling Interests* takes sonic staining toward aural blurring.

In the second chapter, I argued that the aesthetic qualities in “As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us” are that of a critical image. The image of memory is infused with a confession of the way meaning is built by grammatical, syntactical, and rhetorical uses of language. *Controlling Interests* continues to explore the ways and means of this kind of critical image. Bernstein speaks of his method first as a visual knowledge, then as a sonic reality. For him the idea of seeking an underlining universal image, as the surrealists did, is too constricting a move.

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<sup>36</sup> “Oread” is also a title of a poem by H.D. *The Collected Poems of H.D.* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925), 81. In Greek and Latin mythology Oread is a mountain-nymph.

The nature of the image I am thus proposing is not so much surreal as critical, analytic--an analysis that is inextricably bound up in making visible a fabricating mechanism, so that the manufacture of the fabulous and the ordinary are indistinguishable parts of desiring production (to use the phrase of more recent French theory).<sup>37</sup>

The act(s) of composition is/are made visible where construction itself becomes the narration. Instead of seeking a surreal image that grants access to the subterranean, Bernstein seeks a critical image of the visible, where the fabrication of the fabulous and ordinary takes place in the same space. He writes in a manner in which fabrication is realized moment by moment in the time of the poem. He does this by building into the poem itself what he calls “the questioning, the stoppage”, and this reality “allows the music of the poem to be heard” (CD 391). He defines the music of poetic fabrication as “hearing the sound *come into* meaning rather than a play with already existing meanings by way of meter” (CD 391). The critical image creates meaning and sound through its construction.

Bernstein is concerned with mapping new grids of image construction: of seeing poetry as a larger project that is informed by all writing, of seeing Stein’s invention put into practice where wordness has visible residue, of seeing the “idea of appropriating language from other written sources as [a] basic activity to writing as memory or overhearing or describing” (CD 393). In practice, Bernstein uses

quotations from a vast array of sources, and just as many made-up quotations that sound like they are from a prior text. There are lines from other poems, and echoes of lines; remarks from letters (my own and others’) or memos from the job; things heard and misheard. (CD 393-4)

Quotation, in his development of the critical image, is as basic an activity as description, memory, or overhearing. We are coming upon a poetry that works with the whole world of language construction. Description, memory, overhearing, and quotation are all forms of language used by numerous writers and poets. What makes Bernstein’s work innovative is that

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<sup>37</sup> Bernstein, “An Interview with Tom Beckett”, *CD*, 392, 385-410.

he takes the idea of a critical image and making visible the fabrication, to the material elements of the poem: the line and page, letters in the word, grammatical punctuation.

In the poem “The Next Available Place”, we can see how making both the critical image and the fabricating mechanism of the line apparent alters visual space.

Petrarch. Foreign body sensation. Misplaced modesty.  
Like I like her. Lurker. Aimed well down. Issue,  
is you. Framed the framed. Ill (I'll)  
begets a. Unruly exstasis. Information to confound  
bike past blue notes harass (harness) looks to.  
Imbibe, imbecile. Leeds' leading legend: IN FOR.  
Nothing that I can say convinced me. With it, withheld.  
Dread, scuzzy. Perhaps Polish (polish). I  
feel rearranged, mandate a macaroon. Cuba,  
Taiwan. Indubitable dauntress fraudulent at ever  
attempting a view: binary, bisected, by the seaside,  
beside myself. Relatively few. Instantly  
benign. Bel canto. Silly trips to Everglades.<sup>38</sup>

Words bounce through sounds, through sectors of divergent sources and codes of culture. The construction is not static; it facilitates re-reading, not just of the text, but of meaning itself. “The poem needs less to be viewed as a fixed end, an object d’art, and more as a transforming agent whose exemplary features are to be used by the reader in her/his researches into the nature and products of the production of meaning” (CD 388). Bernstein uses a forgotten visual strategy, the period (.) to stop the reader, and he borrows from its meaning as the end of a complete thought. The words play with the sonic register: “Issue, / is you.” He takes the word issue, and finds meaning in the letters, Iss – u, or the “Ill (I'll) / begets a”. In a moment, the visual meaning of the apostrophe (') is reawakened. Each line has a host of meanings and

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<sup>38</sup> Bernstein, *Controlling Interests* (New York: Roof Books, 1980), 32. Hereafter cited as *CI*.

Bernstein leaves large amounts of space for the reader's participation. Somehow "begets" follows the visual transformation of "Ill". The visual begets more meaning, and in the English language, meaning markers of meaning beyond letters (the period, the apostrophe), beget meaning for the reader.

The poem as a transforming agent is to generate, not fixate meaning.

Let me give an example of what "generative" might mean. I think of some of my poems as a series of remarks, either in the aphoristic sense or in the sense of observations, constructed items, etc., occurring at the level of phrases or sentences. These can be interpreted in multiple ways: they are each, perhaps to say, polyentenders (that is, any given remark can be taken as true, ironic, false, didactic, satiric, fantastical, inscrutable, sad, funny, my view someone else's view, and so on). Polyentendres suggest the continuous choices of interpretation that confronting the world involves (though that is a matter of semblance only—structural affinity to other forms of creation). Polyvalences and polyrhythms occurring overall throughout the poem create a music of the text, a music that has to do with both the rhyming/ comparing/vectoring of possible meanings, creating chords of the simultaneous vectors of the several interpretations of each polyentendre, and with the combination of these chords with other chords, durationally, in the sequence of the writing, and simultaneously, in the overall structure. The overall "sound" of the work is actually more important to listen for than the linear prosodic sequences, since the relation of the "chords" reinforces the sound resonances and echoes creating an intense overall vibration that adds a dynamic dimensional depth to the sound of any given linear movement. (CD 396-97)

Bernstein's critical image gives a depth to the sonic dimensions of linear movement. The single, specific, solitary image within one line, becomes only one kind of writing, instead of the manner of writing itself. In order for Bernstein to explode linear movement, to give some semblance to the "continuous choices of interpretation that confronting the world involves", he begins within the traditional line. Once, in this line, new grids of multi-dimensional relations—sonic and graphic—appear one after another. The over sound of the innovated line sings polyphonically beyond the range of any one ear. Linear movement is expanded through a collage of making visible the fabricating mechanism. Its movement expands by not carrying the whole weight of poetics. Music of words, interpretations, and critical images give an overall "sound" to the work

that “adds a dynamic dimensional depth”, a spatial depth to the sound of the line. The aural blurring builds the page of the poem.

The poem “so really not visit a . . .” in *Controlling Interests* displays a further development of Bernstein’s visual strategy. I quote the poem in full:

So really not visit a remember to strange  
A it’s always finally seems now which ago  
Long that by amazed guess I thing obvious of kind  
Feel can weigh a has a distance the off  
That there it’s then & you  
While now which whatever point  
Slipping constantly be to seems happening  
Until fingers the like through sand  
Staring there still on back look only can  
Before yourself find the of window in the thoughts your at  
Combing again here & times a this over gone  
That for in seam or beach of section  
Peering the “yet &” where exactly or when sure longer  
Results tangible of terms in is it as  
Thought of splint a than more no all after which is hope  
Somewhere catch to looking  
Or ease the that here say can what  
Preclude doesn’t such of difficulty  
In always of necessity harsher that  
Circumstance different under place  
Changed to seem yet &  
Are gone have that years if as  
Real the if but record of matter a all  
From reeling still were  
Looking stop with begin to say to is which it  
Puts us before to such  
For necessity any rest  
By if as tracings these of more  
Of sort a well as  
Is which place of kind one in stay to skill the with longer  
Complete this view of point a than more  
Annoys what here you’re paper the  
Unnecessary becomes flourishes  
China in tea the all for again  
As film the see to we are or

Else leap a such make to motivated be to need  
Table this atop is solitary  
Like issues discomfort of hang whatever  
Mention to forgot I and you  
Can't itself reform already  
Like feel I want properly  
The actually do to able will  
Pressing more the feel to begin now  
Rug the about to trips  
Atumble time the by only night all window  
Put that minute last the at panicking  
An has delay the but expected than longer takes  
On count that itself too much  
Discerns imaginations a takes  
I brim from handle look cluster from skyline  
The same the much it find & side the over

(CI 37-38)

Normal and traditional reading practices are forced to forego linear, narrative speed. Words arrive one on top of another building aural sense through linear non-sense. Words and understanding vibrate, hanging in the air.

Slipping constantly be to seems happening  
Until fingers the like through sand

The traditional line disappears. Reading hums.

As film the see to we are or

Or, in the last line, the reading no longer expecting much the same, nevertheless hears those words.

The same the much it find & side the over

We “find & side the over” a rhythm not bound by syntactical logic or sense. Nevertheless, the residue of former patterns gives the reader moments of frustration or pause. What does it mean

to place “slipping constantly” beside “be to seems happening”? Following the polyphonic sonic registry, the words, living in unconventional relations, still suggest possible meaning. Drawing from “normal” reading practices, we can suggest that slipping constantly is a state of being that only appears to happen. The image is highly critical. We are thrown into the phenomenology of being in the world, into perceptions of actions, into questions of the human essence over daily existence, and into unresolvable, divergent images.

In the other quotation, the sonic aspects are beautiful: “As film the sea”—like film, the sea. To we, in comparison, are. Like film, the sea in comparison, like us, or...and, the possibilities abound. Each of the possible readings leaves behind grammatical rules, yet, the sentences attain some of the same sonic depth of Bernstein’s work. The reader is given over to creating and participating. Cinema has released writing from the old images of creating characters, place and story, and has opened up new images for writing that are critical, full of perspective, and seen from various angles.

As writing focuses its attention less on recreating characters, place and story—presumably based on “found” situations, cities, peoples, etc.—and more on types of style and vocabulary and argument, part of the investigation, of the work, requires using other texts as material to incorporate into a poem. (CD 393)

Bernstein is trying to describe, that the notion of “found” object has expanded to include a moment by moment existence: “You’re dealing in all cases with a material, language, that is in the most fundamental was found...”(CD 393). He takes this to mean that the construction of a poem can include all kinds of sources, such as other texts.

“The originals are not original” starts a quote Bruce Andrews and I use in our collaboration in *Legend*, which is based on the idea of deriving a piece exclusively from prior texts—but again often so reworked that they bear no resemblance to anything else. (CD 394)

Poets have throughout history drawn from outside sources, so how is this practice any different? Bernstein takes the notion of inscription of the other, as a corrective to the popular notion of writing a poem.

The idea of getting all the material in a poem totally “spontaneously” from my “self” seems boring to me—my interest in writing is to be able to incorporate material from disparate places—... (CD 394)

The poem “Matters of Policy”, through the sonic door, shows some reality to his reflections. As the phone is off the hook, we hear:

... The telephone is off the  
hook. It is written that the wisdom  
of the wise will be destroyed &  
the understanding of the prudent will be  
brought to nothing. & so it becomes  
time for a little recreation—like she can  
certainly butter that popcorn.

(CI 4)

This passage from the opening poem of *Controlling Interests* takes us toward a reading of “so really not a visit a...”. The telephone is off the hook so no one can be reached. In the break, the reader is returned to the written, where the wisdom of the wise will be destroyed. However, the break and the destruction does not lead to despair or to the desire of the *übermensch*, but rather to recreation. A reading as recreation as well as recreation, works within this poem. The referents of the “written” can be found in both the Hebraic and Christian scriptures.<sup>39</sup> In both contexts, the judgement concerns an alteration of knowledge and a release from cultural power structures. Bernstein brings this other text into his material, between disconnected telephones, and the making of popcorn. He quotes from different systems: phones, popcorn, power structures, not to get rid of the self, but to demand that poetry is not just about the self. What if instead of quoting from different systems, he transposed an entire system to disrupt the power structures of the “wisdom of the wise”?

A significant observation has yet to be noted by any American critic writing on Bernstein’s *Controlling Interests*. The poem “so really not visit a...” can be read from right to

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<sup>39</sup> The “wisdom of the wise” has both a Hebrew and Christian scriptural reference. The first reference is in Isaiah 29:14 (NRSV) and the second reference can be found in 1 Corinthians 1:19 (NRSV).

left. Bernstein unexpectedly brings a non-Greek logic of linear discourse into his poetics. Hebrew, Chinese, Arabic scripts read from right to left. Bernstein reshapes the Greek-Latin line that English has adopted, as a way of opening up the critical image. We bump along the lines, as I have shown, moving against all normal (Greek) reading strategies without knowing it. Re-writing the text from the right to the left, reveals even more procedures:

strange to remember a visit not really So  
ago which now seems finally always it's a  
kind of obvious thing I guess amazed by that Long  
off the distance has a weigh can Feel  
you and then its there That  
point whatever which now While  
happening seems to be constantly Slipping  
sand through like the fingers Until  
can only look back on still there Staring  
at your thoughts in window of the find yourself Before  
gone over this a times & here again Combing  
section of beach or inseam for That  
longer sure when or exactly where "& yet " the Peering  
as it is in terms of tangle results<sup>40</sup>

Does this translation back into Latin and Greek linear discourse, that is from left to right, make any difference to the line? Does it make the reading any clearer? Is this the point of reading from the left to the right? My point here inspired by Bernstein's visual strategy is that reading can occur in both directions. In this re-reading into Western conventional reading patterns, we are still without punctuation, and each line reeks of ellipses. The reader must continue to find the pause and effect, and become in the classical sense, a grammarian. This translated poem does have moments of delight: "Combing section of beach or inseam for that longer sure". Sure nears surety, and nears assurances. Combing the beach every morning is still done in many parts of the world during holiday seasons. Combing the beach also has metaphorical status, as to comb through means to look or search thoroughly. Looking thoroughly for longer assurance: "when or exactly where ' & yet ' the Peering". Perusing the visual strategy of this poem takes the

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<sup>40</sup> This is my translation of the poem "so really not visit a . . ." into a left to right reading of the text.

eye toward the capitalized words, toward lines without punctuation: “happening seems to be constantly Slipping”, constantly.

The above translation should ring a familiar note. Compare your memories with the stanza below:

Strange to remember a visit, really not so  
Long ago, which now seems, finally, past. Always it's a  
Kind of obvious thing I guess, amazed by that  
Cycle: that first you anticipate a thing & it seems  
Far off, the distance has a weight you can feel  
Hanging on you, & then it's there--that  
Point---whatever---which, now, while  
It's happening seems to be constantly slipping away,  
“Like the sand through your fingers in an old movie,” until  
You can only look back on it, & yet you're still there, staring  
At your thoughts in the window of the fire you find yourself before.  
We've gone over this a thousand times: & here again, combing that  
same section of beach or in seam for that--I'm no  
Longer sure when or exactly where--”& yet” the peering,  
Unrewarding as it is, in terms of tangible results,  
Seems so necessary.

The punctuation returns, as should our memory of “As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us”. We read quickly, due to familiarity, but now with the knowledge that this poem is only one of several. Discovering the procedure does not discount the strategy, nor bring closure to “so really not a visit a...”. In contrast to von Hallberg and Jameson, the discovery of the procedure is only the beginning of critical reading.<sup>41</sup> Many critics in the late 1970s and all through the 1980s talked about the multiple readings of texts. Critics like Jonathan Culler, Jacques Derrida, and even Roland Barthes read texts that were basically linear in format and design. Others, like Stanley Fish tried to show just how many readings one could get out of a classroom. The literature read or seen as multi-dimensional, was often graphically one-

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<sup>41</sup> In the chapter “Avant-Gardes”, von Hallberg accepts Jameson’s reading of a poem by Bob Perelman in which an undisclosed procedure gave the poem its form. Jameson and von Hallberg were content with the discovery as an end itself (114-119). The discovery of new production procedures does not have to be the basis for or limit the text’s meaning. The difficulty with new procedures is that we can think that we have no need of the reception once we have unlocked the production.

dimensional. Consequently, the literature's *jouissance* was often simply critical and not textual, with S/Z being the classic text and example.

In regards to this text(s) we have a polyphonic register where lines are bi-directional, and sounds bump into the lack of punctuation. As we have gone over these poems, we have made traditional moves: analytic, grammatical, and poetic. During and after the words we are left not with a repeatable method of explaining away Bernstein's poetic, but an opening of the doors to reading itself. The translations and redrawing of lines are not mechanical reproductions; intentionality blurs repetition. Those who have not seen ancient manuscripts or who have not been in countries that do not use the Phoenician and Greek alphabets, or who have not seen Hebrew Scriptures or read *Beowulf* and Spencer, will have no room for this poetic of the "critical image". By-passing the rules of mass communication and the dominant mode of poetics, we are exposed to the life of collaboration, experimentation, and invention. Ancient traditions, global concerns rise up out of the local:

...the way we read today in the Western world—from left to right and from top to bottom—is by no means universal. Some scripts were read from right to left (Hebrew and Arabic), others in columns, from top to bottom (Chinese and Japanese); a few were read in pairs of vertical columns (Mayan); some had alternate lines read in opposite directions, back and forth—a method called *boustrophendon*, "as an ox turns to plough", in ancient Greek. Yet others meandered across the page like a game of Snakes and Ladders, the direction being signaled by lines or dots (Aztec).<sup>42</sup>

Like Krzysztof Penderecki's *Cosmogonia* (1970), Bernstein offers a new sound grounded in the tongues and manners of the earth by transforming the local line from a global perspective.<sup>43</sup> Should we not know the history of punctuation, reading styles, and the alphabet?

In my translation of the poem into Latin linear discourse, the location of the capitalization of the words offers a commentary on the work of the first stanza. We receive a visual mark in the capitalized letters of words that give the reader a sense of waiting and peering which seems so necessary: Slipping Until Starring Before Combing That Peering. Reading these

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<sup>42</sup> Alberto Manguel, *History of Reading* (New York: Harper and Collins Publishers, 1996), 48.

<sup>43</sup> Krzysztof Penderecki's *Cosmogonia* (1972) was commissioned for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the United Nations.

words beside the poem brings resonance to all three poems and brings another resonance to the right side of the translated “so really not visit a...”. This move does not seem to be arbitrary but adds yet another dimension to the music of the text. As if this were not enough, there is a further reference to this poem in his volume *Shade* (1978):

#23  
seems, finally  
it's there  
& yet you're  
exactly where  
the peering  
tangible  
seems  
after all  
a splint  
which is  
looking to catch  
what, I  
say—here?  
eases the  
(really...  
not so  
new a place  
we don't  
by, are  
it hardly  
anticipates  
a pack of  
time's  
buzzing, “maybe....  
or do that  
of a well as

(RR 109-110)

All of the terms in the above text are in of “As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us” and “so really not a visit a...”. The first stanza gives us yet another arena of reading:

seems, finally

it's there  
& yet you're  
exactly where  
the peering  
tangible  
seems  
after all

In this version, “seems” takes on the meaning of appearance that is placed beside a form of finality and beside a form of perception. Something is there, and the subject is located in the tangible peering, “seems”. The tangible sight is the object and the perception of the object. Bernstein brings out a form of vision and appearances along with some kind of certainty (“finally”, “after all”). Each of the three versions begins with the letter “s” (strange, so, seems) and gives a sense of presence and absence of the subject’s location and the object’s reality. Even if we take all three of these poems and try to figure out which one was written first or even which one is the source of the other two, (if this is even the case) we do not really add anything to the reading. Each poem has potential; discovering their fraternity only adds another dimension to their liberty.

The poem in *Controlling Interests* goes further than “#23” and “As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us”. According to my reading and translation, the poem ends its relationship with the other two poems with the line “Of sort a well a”. I have been unable to locate any other works containing the next seven lines. The end of the poem (lines 37-51) is another re-reading of the last and title poem from *Senses of Responsibility*. The poem “As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us”, as I have argued, calls into question perception, trace, hope, postponement and writing. The ending of the *Controlling Interests*, “so really not visit a...” calls into question our conceptions of the visual imagination.

On count that itself too much  
Discerns imaginations a takes  
I brim from handle look cluster from skyline  
The same the much it find & side the over

From the last and title poem of *Senses of Responsibility* we have:

..... A visual imagination:  
that what it takes discerns skyline from cluster,  
handle from brim. I look over the side & find  
it much the same. “Old hat”, “shoe lace”, “shag  
carpet”. Only you need to do some much more than  
ever could be “expected” of you.

and through my translation back into the Latin linear discourse, we have:

takes a imaginations Discerns  
skyline from cluster look handle from brim I  
over the side & find it much the same The

The poem from *Controlling Interests* does not simply mathematically change the terms, so that there is a one to one translation from a non-Latin linear discourse to a Latin based discourse. Linear qualities are not demanded. Sonic fabrication revises the line and logic of poetry and *Controlling Interests* brings the point of the visual imagination away from a solipsistic center: “Discerns imaginations a takes”. Discerns is a verb (third person singular, he/she it) coming from the Latin meaning “to separate apart”. The speaking subject has been removed. “A” as an article, as it is written becomes the subject: “a” the first letter of the alphabet is now a noun. So “a” takes, and “I brim from handle look cluster from skyline” and, according to the senses of the poem, the visual imagination is what discerns cluster from sky. In this poem, “look” takes over the control panel. Concluding with “The same the much it find” is probably the process of discerning itself as it separates cluster from skyline, handle from brim, and what it cannot integrate “& side the over”. The poem “so really not so a visit...” not only re-works the line, it also opens new possibilities to the concept of revision, to the poem as a fixed independent unity, and to the assumption that Western linearity is the only design for the shape of an American poem. Bernstein’s visual strategy, of finding another way of drawing the line, opens new rooms in the house of American poetic possibilities. Poetry, now, bypasses other forms of visual strategies: “Poetry should be at least as interesting as, and a whole lot more unexpected than, television” (AP 3).

Douglas Messerli who started *La-bas* and then Sun & Moon books, has been publishing Bernstein’s work since the very beginning of his career. In his review, entitled “Making the mind

whole: Charles Bernstein's *Controlling Interests*" he takes pains to show Bernstein is really John Ashbery's better self.<sup>44</sup> As Messerli puts it:

For, while Ashbery's vision derives from a basic juxtapositioning of antithetical positions, from an aesthetic of collage, Bernstein's poetics, with its traces of American Romanticism, functions in terms of the simultaneity of object and experience. (44)

The difficulty of describing Bernstein's poetics this way is that Messerli does not explain what he means by "American Romanticism". He looks at the lines from "Matters of Policy" as an advancement beyond Ashbery in terms of simultaneity of object and experience.

At last, the  
cabin cruise is over & the captain gently  
chides farewell to us with a luminous laugh.<sup>45</sup>

For Messerli, Bernstein "evinces his commitment to a poetry of thinking process" (40) by his ability to fuse together multiple, accessible, and simultaneous vectors of potential meaning. This poetry seeks a certain reader who is both intuitive, analytical and capable of a dash of detective work: "Like the detective, the reader must (re)construct the details; (s)he must (re)build the poem to meaning" (41). He sees Bernstein asking for a reader "in which (s)he must 'listen' for meaning as well as 'look' for it" (41). If the reader uses all of his or her faculties, he/she will be, according to Messerli, "rewarded" (41). The reward of course, is a whole mind that benefits from an "old-fashioned textual" reading, and it is a reading where he "attempts to bring his unspoken feelings about the writings in touch with the more analytical self" (44). Messerli's reading strategy is meant to counter the recent developments of theory: "Phenomenologist, Structuralist, Semiotic and other methodologies—all shifts from a reading of the poem to an exploration of what causes and determines the poetic act" (39). The whole is achieved by facing the difficulty: "it is clear that many critics of contemporary poetry find it terribly difficult to

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<sup>44</sup> "Both poets seek to revitalize the technological society in which they find themselves by creating a new world of language, and in pursuit [sic] of that, both interweave the technical language of the work-day world with more lyrical evocations of exotic landscapes" (43). *Paper Air* (3:1, 1982)

<sup>45</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Controlling Interests*, 8.

discuss a particular poem that is not about something, but is something “fixed” in perpetual process” (39).

Craig Watson reads Bernstein’s volume as “concerning the socialization of the individual by means of language.”<sup>46</sup> Reading *Controlling Interests* from within Bernstein’s own definition of syntax (“Syntax is the ordering of strings of words” (CD 75).), Watson understands that Bernstein uses a variety of devices in order “to render the compositional act visible” (158): punctuation, line breaks, prose and blank space. His conclusion about *Controlling Interests* and the poem “so not really visit a...” frames the reading as a perceptual issue, but does not explore Bernstein’s visual textual strategy.

Because the poems of *Controlling Interests* occur on the plane of immediate response in that they front thinking as the process of perception reaching for meaning, they don’t attain an objective, statement level. The poet is working at an edge of consciousness which forbids another, chronologically-deferred process of thought, that of formal organization and placement of information into an individual operating matrix. (159)

Both Messerli and Watson take pains to tie the volume to philosophical concepts of perception and the process of thinking. There is no doubt their writing has applications to his work, but it does reveal critical limitations concerning innovative writing. It has taken twenty years for another reading to be brought forward. Bernstein’s poetry starts with the image as something that is built: a building which makes visible “a fabricating mechanism, so that the manufacture of the fabulous and the ordinary are indistinguishable parts of desiring production...” (CD 392). Watson sees Bernstein working on an edge or border that forbids another, but he could not see the border in “so really not visit a...”. Instead he states: “The tonal resonance of this piece, its lack of punctuation and continuous syntactical evolution, reinforces its semantic track of individual powerlessness and search” (158). What is remarkable is that he touches upon the exiled life and nomadic meaning without even knowing that it is a formal feature of the poem.

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<sup>46</sup> Craig Watson, *Sulfur* 5 (1982): 157. Watson’s review shows his research, as he quotes “Thoughts Measure” in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 4, and *The Difficulties* #3 even before both pieces were collected in *Content’s Dream*.

Instead of the American errand into the wilderness, Silliman sees a war: “Poetry like war, is a pursuit of politics by other means.”<sup>47</sup> The battle is against bourgeois universals and the goal is to show that language constructs reality. Silliman foregrounds Bernstein’s training as a philosopher, as a way to understand *Controlling Interests*. He also sees Bernstein’s success as a failure on philosophy’s part to answer questions of Language’s meaning.

Language’s ability to constitute, to generate meaning and models, to imply psychological structures, and to represent, and interact with, the universe of non-linguistic experience, however has been the domain of another profession: philosophy. It should not be surprising, therefore, that we should have a book of poems such as *Controlling Interests*, composed by a poet, Charles Bernstein, trained originally as a philosopher.<sup>48</sup>

Bernstein’s success in *Controlling Interests* may be informed by his philosophical training at Harvard with the Wittgensteinians, Cavell and Albritton. However, upon closer look, his innovation is rooted in a range of modes of understanding. Bernstein’s strategy in many of his works is to re-open and innovate the domain of the line. As poetry’s most basic visual strategy, the line could remain unconsidered. Bernstein’s visual strategy does incorporate a variety of languages (quotation, memory, the overheard), but his use of the languages displays a profound grasp of the material aspects of poetry. These critics, with the exception of Watson, did not tackle one of the more difficult poems in the collection. Their readings paint Bernstein as an innovator, but from their traditional perspectives.

Choosing to read “so really not visit a...” is extremely challenging. In reading this poem along with his other work, we discover a writing practice that has moved beyond American or English based poetics and rhetoric. As a move against nationalism, Bernstein extends writing to include other cultures, and other habitual uses of language’s materiality. In hindsight, it is a simple move, but this move does not explain the poems. We have four poems (the reconstructed one, #23, “As If the Trees by Their Very Roots Had Hold of Us”, and “so really not visit a...”) that work separately, together, and not at all. It is a programmed and non programmed serial. Unlike the serials of an earlier generation, Williams’ *Paterson*, Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, Zukofsky’s

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<sup>47</sup> Ron Silliman, “*Controlling Interests*”, in *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof Books, 1995), 173.

A, this serial, this “music” has awaited the reader’s participation in a way that is unprecedented in American Poetics. Bernstein’s open serial re-writes the procedures of beginning, middle, and end, re-lines Greco-Roman linear discourse, and re-designs the space of the reader.

Bernstein’s visual strategies, as we have seen in this chapter, take defamiliarization and multi-dimensional procedures in new directions. Directions and grids that can be only understood through a collaboration of various graphic, linguistic, and spatial theories ask for perusable innovation and critical engagement. Collaboration is not only a necessity in reading his texts but is also an essential aspect of his poetics and career. He has collaborated with a musicians, painters, curators, and writers. His collaborations with Andrews as editor, with Silliman, McCaffery, DiPalma, and Andrews in *Legend* (1980) are well known, whereas his work with Richard Tuttle, Ben Yarmolinsky, and Susan Bee are less known, and have not been examined in any detail. Bernstein’s ongoing collaborative work with Susan Bee has largely been ignored. Very few, if any, of Bernstein’s critics have explored their lengthy and voluminous collaborations which, spanning three decades, have appeared in many different forms. Bee has worked with Bernstein as designer, artist, editor, writer, and has produced over thirteen covers of his poetical works.

In the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* No. 6 (1978) dedicated to Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, Bernstein and Bee put together a statement/essay on style, extracted from a number of books on correct grammar and etiquette. Many of the sentences seem absurd, and consequently make a point to open the question of correct usage. Who defines correct? “To express our thoughts we must put words together in accordance with certain fixed rules. Otherwise we should fail to express ourselves clearly and acceptably, and we may even succeed in saying the opposite of what we mean”.<sup>49</sup> The sentence bespeaks of prudent discursive methods and does seem harmless until we ask who defines “clearly” and “acceptably”. Later in the piece, we are given the sources for an acceptable practice:

For style is ingratiating; negative ideas, as a rule, should not be developed at length. And constructions shunned include those that are vague, abstract,

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Bernstein and Susan Bee, “Style”, *CD*, 54.

equivocal, slanted, misleading, exaggerated, understated, loose, abbreviated, oversimplified, obvious, irrelevant, oblique, figurative, redundant, empty, impossible or obscure. (CD 55)

From what we know of Bernstein, this essay “Style” reveals all that he has been parsing: a practice of wider ingratiation: the negative or the abbreviated, the understated or the figurative could also generate affection. Humorously, he states the ruling practice: negative ideas, as well as a number of constructions, are to be avoided and shunned. The dominant discourse one that is clear, concrete, straightforward, well stated, tight, developed, not reductive, nor obvious, relevant, planned, full, possible, and well known. The parody continues: “On the whole it is safe for the writer to leave semantic theory unexplored” (CD 54). Yet, and the quotation is probably from Stein, it is good to be a grammarian: “Grammar does not mean that they are to limit themselves. More and more grammar is not a thing. Grammar does not make me hesitate about prepositions. I am a grammarian I do not hesitate I rearrange prepositions” (CD 56).

We are given no indication as to which lines are from whom as Bee and Bernstein rework and add their own input; the composition or the authorial strategy is not revealed. Their collaboration is a collaboration of styles. Reading this piece can be humorous as well as strikingly serious. American grammar is known for its idiosyncrasies. This essay entitled “Style” re-calls many of the teaching strategies designed to create “correct usage”. In showing what is required, it also begs the question: What is wrong with being “loose”, “figurative”, “obscure”? Published in 1978, the essay opens up the question of style in a very different way than Pinsky’s *Situation of Poetry* (1976). He simply repeats the rhetorical codes that good discourse involves: “Clarity, Flexibility, Efficiency, Cohesiveness” (162). Many suggest ‘correct’ usage is a sense of responsibility. Bernstein’s dissimilarity with Pinsky is obvious.

How is responsibility to be defined? Bee sees responsibility in a unique manner (Fig. 3.6.). She draws the alphabet to cover the poems dedicated to her. The senses of responsibility reside in the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet. In the second volume reprinted ten years later, the “sense” of responsibility has grown, and the “senses” of responsibility occur before and after the technology of language (Fig. 3.7.). By showing all the letters of the alphabet, the writer and reader can take, as a basic responsibility, the near infinite possibilities contained in the

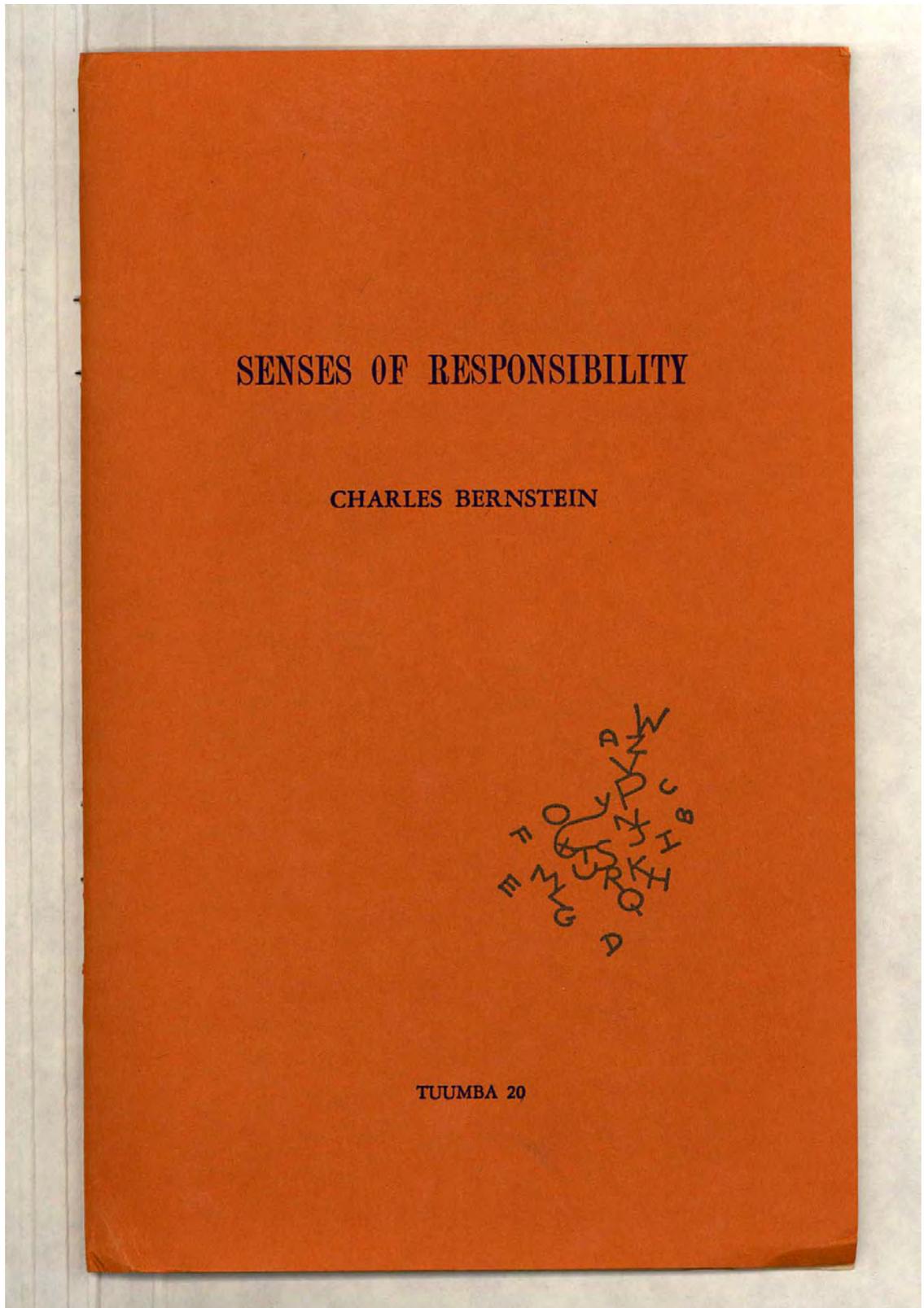


Figure 3.6. Charles Bernstein, *Senses of Responsibility* (1979). Cover by Susan Bee. Published by Lyn Hejinian's Tuumba Press.

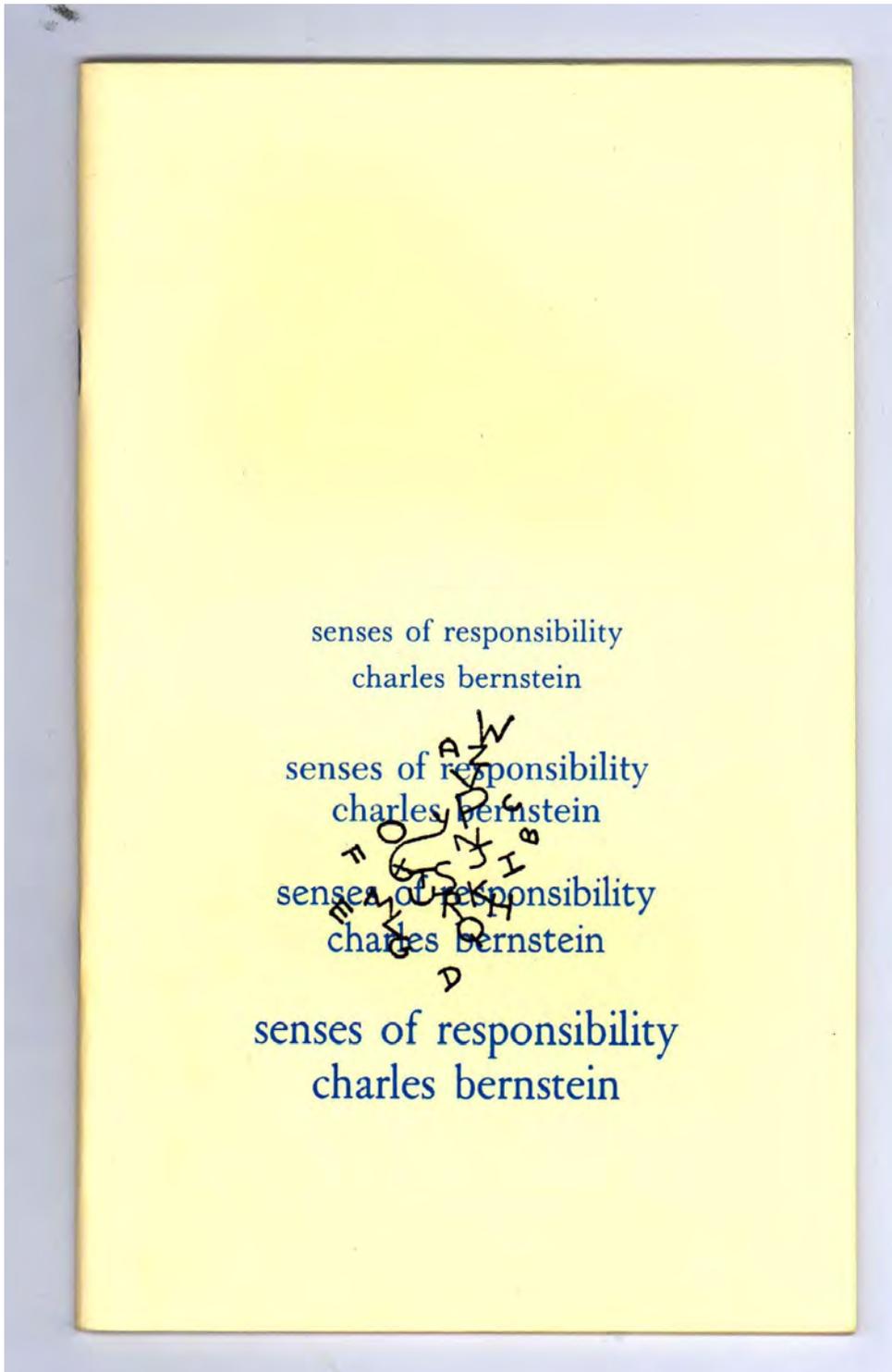


Figure 3.7. Charles Bernstein, *Senses of Responsibility* (1989). Cover by Susan Bee.

twenty-six letters. Those letters are endowed with senses of responsibility. In the poems, we find Bernstein opening up the word “sense”, and exploring how our senses are informed by choice, memory, language, people, and events. Bernstein also spins out the word “responsibility” just as Bee twists and turns the letters on the cover. For him, responsibility is not towards conventional norms, but to the ways and procedures any norm comes into being.

In *The Occurrence of Tune* Bee and Bernstein collaborated in book form. The text is a mixture of Bee’s photography and Bernstein’s writing. There are eight photos alongside his discourse. The page format is 8 1/2 by 11. The first photo shows Bee’s ability to foreground fabrication within the frame of the image (Fig. 3.8.). On the left of the photo are sentences and lines. I quote the last three:

a few seconds of vividness

“These few here, who do they represent—nothing—not even cats, spaghetti, pecan pie—all are ‘out to lunch’ & take care of yourself here after.”

absolutely to explain all

I take out, put up, give over--nothing as far as possibility dawning on me. “But isn’t a technique of erasure just as.....”

radical flattening of interest<sup>50</sup>

The words, the lines, not bound by an image, live beside, next to, Bee’s fronting a/the world. Bee’s erasure takes the eye in and out of absorption. The same image, in a slightly different form, appears on the cover without the streaks and with only the abandoned restaurant. The

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<sup>50</sup> *RR*, 215. In the original text, the stanza breaks are the same, but the line ending is different.



Figure 3.8. Charles Bernstein and Susan B. Laufer, *The Occurrence of Tune* (1981). Photograph by Susan Bee.

The same image within the book (Fig. 3.8.) gives us a partial view of “a few seconds of vividness” from the mechanical eye. Developing the photo “take out, put up, give over” and developing the word, is left for later explanations: a photo, a word, a “radical flattening of interest”, the lines on a page. Just as the technical developing apparatus shows us that Bee worked with the photos after “taking” them, so too these words from journals written in the 1970s are reworked for this later context.<sup>51</sup> Both works are placed beside each other, neither canceling out the other, sometimes overlapping, sometimes offering commentary, sometimes working with the laws of their own construction. The collaboration lives in the same space as Bernstein’s poetry and critical work. In the poem “The Taste is What Counts”, we saw already Bernstein’s sense of living beside and in the world: “Next to us all this twirls in spin rapt as reverie as much as /

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<sup>51</sup> *CD*, 403.

sight, sound, sign.”<sup>52</sup> We also have a description from his critical work that shows Bernstein’s myriad collaborations: “Next to. Fronting the world with a particular constellations of beliefs, values, memories, expectations; a culture; a way of seeing, mythography; language.”<sup>53</sup> Bernstein, in both his poetry and his prose, forms a space that is not located in self-revelation, but rather in a self that is in and beside the world, effects its movement, and is shaped by its diversity. Neither Bernstein nor Bee have ignored the marks of development and composition.<sup>54</sup> In one of their first visual/word collaborations, the reader moves among two (at least) different ways of world making. The images are not staged as illustrations of Bernstein’s poetry, and Bernstein’s poetry is not written in response to the images. *The Occurrence of Tune* is a collaboration of two working artists that creates a third object available for viewing, knowing, and living “Next to”.

*Little Orphan Anagram* (1997) and *Fool’s Gold* (1991) are both full length arts of the book collaborations where Bernstein’s and Bee’s work as poet and painter are more fully integrated. *Little Orphan Anagram* is a book filled with paintings, designs, colored words, painted among, alongside, in and near poetry by Bernstein. Only 40 copies were printed. Then, each page was hand painted by Bee. *Fool’s Gold* is a one page fold out book, where phrases or lines of Bernstein’s are worked into and out of the page design. In this piece, they work closer together on the composition, whereas in *Little Orphan Anagram*, Bee chose the poetry she wanted to use without any detailed discussion from Bernstein.<sup>55</sup> Both of these works integrate word, image, page, and design. The works are neither illustrations of poems, nor poetic illustrations. These arts, combined in the form of a book, merge the canvas and the page creating a hybrid and a new form that has only been growing in interest and critical inquiry.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Poetic Justice*, 47.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Bernstein, “Stray Straws and Straw Men”, *Open Letter* 3: 7 (1977): 96.

<sup>54</sup> In the 2000 version in *Republics of Reality*, the images are gone and the page only looks to other words. See *RR*, 215 for the above textual reference.

<sup>55</sup> see interview, appendix

<sup>56</sup> See *The Century of Artists’ Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1997) by Johanna Drucker; Renée Riese Hubert and Judd D. Hubert’s *Cutting Edge of Reading: Artist’s Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1999) and *When Will the Book be Done?* ed. by Steve Clay with preface by Charles Bernstein (New York: Granary Books, 2001). Granary has become one of the most important publishers of artist books. This collection is a selection of what has been published by the press, with comments by the authors, reviewers, or critics.

In *Log Rhythms* (1998) and *The Nude Formalism* (1989), Bee and Bernstein work in black and white, printable, complete pages. The two volumes were printed without any post-production. I have chosen to examine closely two full pages from *The Nude Formalism* and one from *Log Rhythms*. In many of the poems we have already read, Bernstein has transformed the word, the letter, or the punctuation into a visual spatial element of non-linguistic meaning. In fact, this transformed network is often foregrounded as the most important. At other times, Bernstein re-writes the logic of the poetic line, which alters the reading process as we saw in his programmed and non-programmed serial. In these works with Bee, through yet another avenue of collaboration, he brings together divergent, meaning-making visual strategies. Throughout the 1980s Bernstein criticized “official verse culture” for its incapacity to recognize the range of poetry’s potential. His readership was divided into those who were willing to give him a say, and those who thought he was more of a theorist than a poet. *The Nude Formalism* is a response to both sides of his readership, and uniquely creates a designed poetry on several levels. The book explores the nature of the font, type and design. Using type from advertising, or wedding certificates, Bee and Bernstein set out to deliberately disturb “normal” printing procedures of poetry.

“Freud’s Butcher” (Fig. 3.9.) has a formal design (rhyming couplets in four line stanzas) that presents a group of people in a “snit” about poetry.<sup>57</sup> The second stanza recalls many of the poets he has worked with critically (Lyn Hejinian had published *Senses of Responsibility* in her Tuumba Press).

Hejinian, Silliman—the tide is over  
 Andrews, McCaffery—abandon your mowers  
 You’re before your time then out of date  
 It’s not market forces nor fate

(NF 15)

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<sup>57</sup> Charles Bernstein, design by Susan Bee, *The Nude Formalism* (Los Angeles: 20 Pages Sun & Moon, 1989), 14-15. Hereafter cited as *NF*.

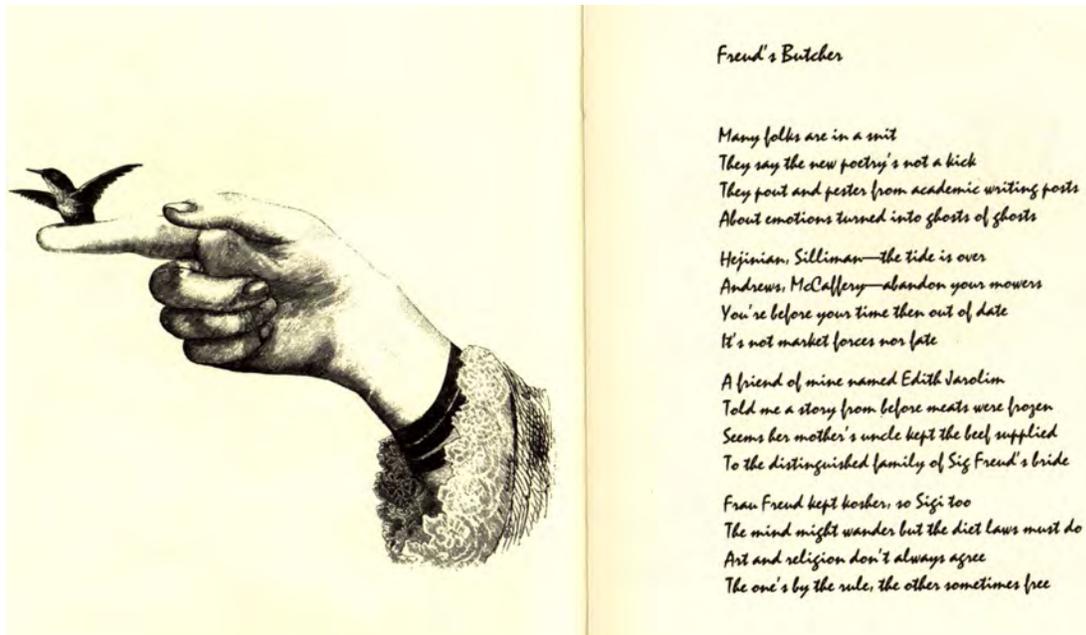


Figure 3.9. Charles Bernstein and Susan Bee, “Freud’s Butcher”, *Nude Formalism* (1989). Poetry by Bernstein, page design, type and layout by Susan Bee.

Formalistically, he frames the problem: you are before your time and then you are dated. If you are before your time, you are out of date too. In either case you cannot win. Is this the position of the avant-gardist, the inventor? In the last two stanzas we are told that Freud kept a kosher house: “the mind might wander but the diet laws must do”. In conclusion, we are told that Art and Religion do not always agree. How we ended up here from the discussion of dietary laws can only be creatively imagined: Does the poem see Freud’s work as Art? This is implied in that the dietary laws are a part of the Jewish religion. The “one’s by the rule” can be about art or religion. If art is by the rule, which is the understanding of those who are in a snit about the work of Andrews, Silliman, McCaffery and Hejinian, then sometimes religion is free. If religion is about the rule, then art is sometimes free. What if writing has multiple rules? Both readings work, but what does Freud’s butcher have to do with people being in a snit about poetry?

A further question remains: the humming bird on the hand beside the poem. Now the opportunity for discussion increases. It is interesting to read that Freud, the designer and revolutionary of the unconscious, whose *Moses and Monotheism* portrays the Jewish religion in cultural terms instead of revelational terms, kept a kosher house. He maintained an exterior form with no interior reality, and this nude formalism is note-worthy, but odd. Herein lies a possible connection with those who “pout and fester”. Those who are festering

prefer the older form of poetry “about emotions turned into ghosts of ghost”, that is the dead of the dead, and yet, the humming bird remains. In 1742 Alexander Pope wrote: “Yet by some object every brain is stirred; The dull may awaken to a humming bird” (Dunciad IV 446). Bee and Bernstein are not seeking a formal unity, but the pleasure of uniting forms and placing them side by side. They unite forms as on the streets of Manhattan, where old and new buildings, signs, reparations share the same landscape and increase their wide ranging, non-unified references. Bee refers to this page as “serendipitous”.<sup>58</sup> Poetry is always housed in the architecture of font and page design. Bee and Bernstein heighten these realities. By placing font, design and words together, accidental discoveries will continue. Possibly, “by some object every brain is stirred”, and even the brain of formalism, which ironically often forgets and reduces the form itself, will itself be “awaken to a humming bird”.

*Log Rhythms* (1998), a work of forty pages, resists the forgetfulness of the unmarked page as well as showing that poetry cannot only be more interesting than television, it can also be as least as interesting as advertising (Fig. 3.10.). Traditional methods of reading poetry by line and stanza (a formal design) are now transformed into reading other kinds of design. This design-poetry, involves the reader in cultural engineering by mixing (non-congruous) elements in the plane of the page. *Log Rhythms* is one poem, divided and designed into forty pages by Bee. The poetry takes on another visual dimension not directly contained within the text. It is a visual strategy where word and image, sign and sight cohabit without delimiting visual or semantic referentiality.

A “barker” is someone who calls for the next show at the circus, or on the street before a shop. He is calling for potential customers, and becomes a physical advertisement. The barker in the poem is “Language Contortionist live act on the Net”. Bernstein seems more than willing to look at labels in a humorous way: “we’re all serialists now”. Come, look and watch with amazement. Bee seems more than willing to make this a human discourse, as we stare into the child-like face, possibly the barker himself. The piece ends, not at the feet, but with a song about malteds (I am assuming a drink). Questions remain: Turtledove a true love? “AmEx” short for American Express Card? A credit card for the nursery and a ticket for an all-seeing

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<sup>58</sup> see Appendix, 370

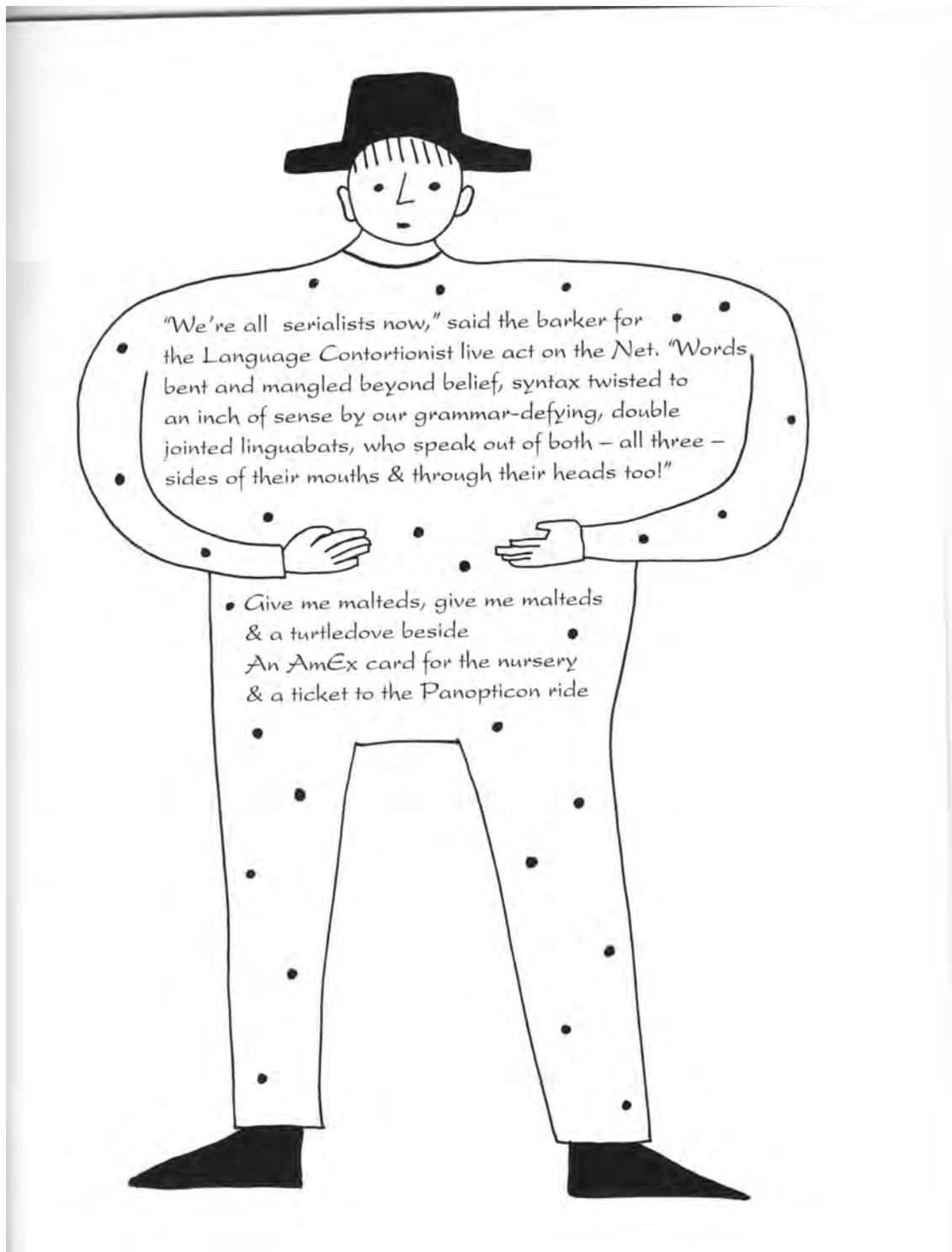


Figure 3.10. Charles Bernstein and Susan Bee, *Log Rhythms* (1998). Poetry by Bernstein, page design, type drawings, and layout by Susan Bee.

(panopticon) ride? Panopticon was the name given to a prison designed by Bentham where the prisoner was always in sight in a round building. It is also a title of a Steve McCaffery book in 1984. Who is doing the asking? The child-like figure? The words themselves? Are these all desires: chocolate shakes, a companion, money for the nursery, and an all-seeing view?

Language, like the recent (2000) *Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus* song “Anything is possible!” can be contorted in all kinds of directions. Serialist strategies overwhelm the American landscape in newspapers, television commercials, bumper stickers, radio programs, web page design, and advertisements. We look at the figure recalling Ripley’s *Believe it or not*. As the humor sinks in, the reader framed as a “serialist” is now ready for another ride on the “Net”. The net, or Internet, changes all readers into serialists. Being carried along, as in McCaffery’s book, toward the life of linked, pasted discourse, old avant-garde methods become naturalized. The voice of the barker plays with the assumption about “language writing” as a mere exercise. Instead of acrobats, we are given “double jointed linguabats”. “Lingua” for tongue or language is ironically the hero of the live act. Written in jest or ironically, the text brings up the point of reader reception. Some readers would find Bernstein’s visual and writerly strategies as mere play. However, as he himself has argued, the ability to re-read norms, to open up forgotten cultural choices, allows a greater freedom. The barker does have something to sell, but it is not a reduced, slogan filled, already assimilated form of language. Rather it is the possibility of how language can be used, formed, and presented.

Susan Bee’s designs have transformed Bernstein’s poetry, and his poetry has altered her painterly praxis. As well as collaborating within the book, Bee has also covered the majority of Bernstein’s volumes. For *Artifice of Absorption* (1987) she uses photography. The photographs are from the Gessell Institute of Human Development (Fig. 3.11.).<sup>59</sup> The verse treaty meditates upon the nature of absorbing modes of meaning. Artifice can be ignored as natural, but Bernstein criticizes this move as a method for controlling what kind of poetry can be written in spite of a writer's perceptions or difficulties. He criticizes those writers

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<sup>59</sup> *How a Baby Grows: A Story in Pictures* by Arnold Gessell M.D. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945).

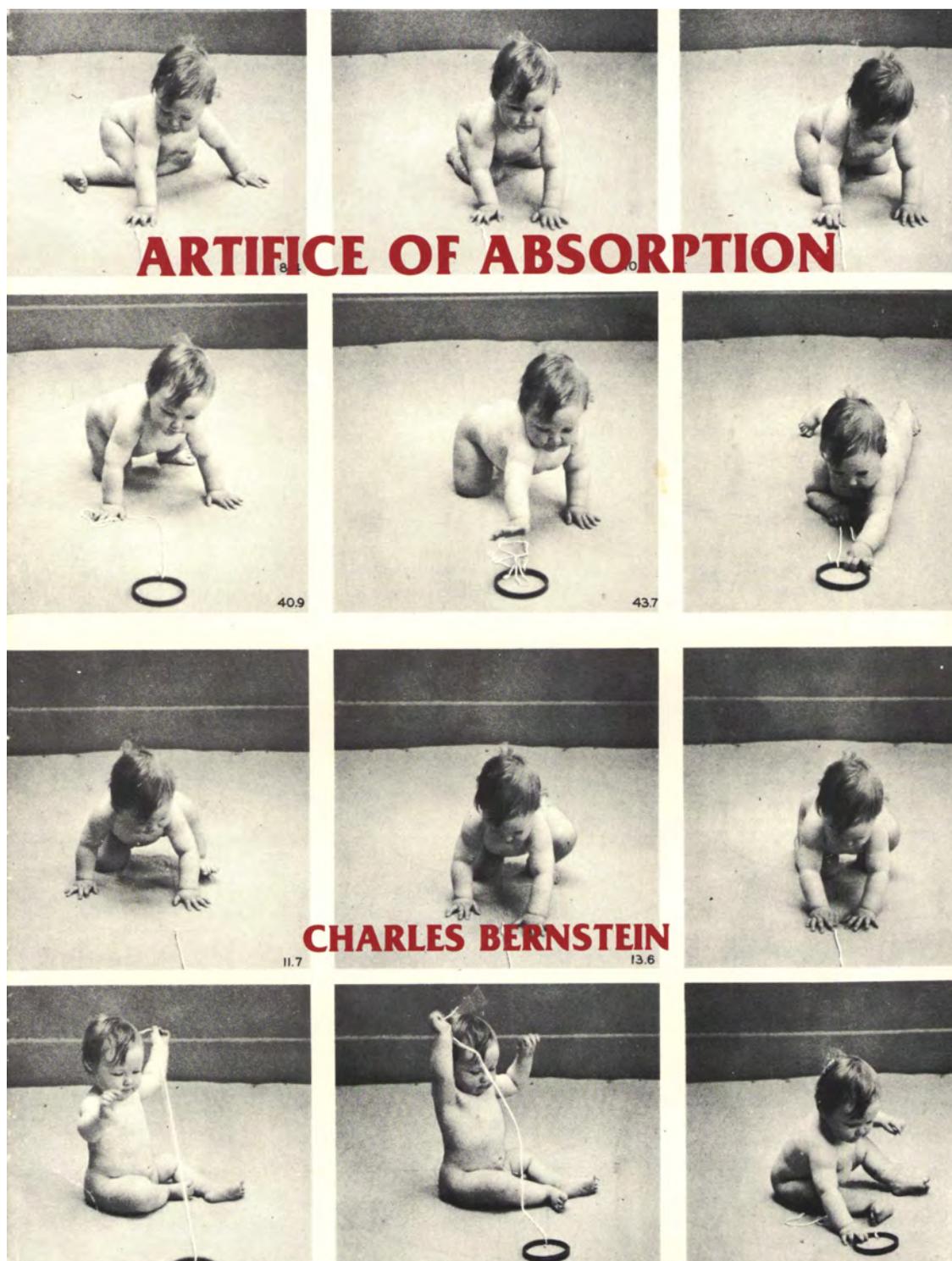


Figure 3.11. Charles Bernstein, *Artifice of Absorption* (1987). Cover design by Susan Bee using *How a Baby Grows: A Story in Pictures* by Arnold Gessell M.D. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945).

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who embrace absorptive methods, and tries to encourage all those anti-absorptive American tendencies.

Many poets I know  
had, like myself, “learning”  
difficulties  
in this area: I would call them  
resistances—a dread,  
or refusal, of submission  
to a rule-governed wor(l)d,  
the inscription of “regulated social order”  
into language.<sup>60</sup>

On the cover we are given photos from a study of human development in the 1940s. The laboratory child is given an object to play with, an artifice. In English, artifice can mean both an artful device as well as a subtle base deception. Bernstein, under the cover of *How Baby's Grow*, uses artifice in both ways to discuss problems with poetry that forgets or covers up the nature of its own construction.

The baby is given a device. The scientist records the child's absorption. Bee covers Bernstein's work with the documentation of the research process. Bernstein, from within this visual research, proposes definitions and procedures of absorption and anti-absorption. Even as he makes these arguments, Bernstein brings the basic visual strategy from poetry into criticism.

By *absorption* I mean engrossing, engulfing  
completely, engaging, arresting attention, reverie,  
attention intensification, rhapsodic, spellbinding,  
mesmerizing, hypnotic, total, riveting,  
enthraling: belief, conviction, silence. (29)

The dilemma of absorption might be called a dilemma  
of belief (“the séance of session”): what is lost  
if one reveals the grounds of belief & what is  
lost if one conceals them. (71)

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<sup>60</sup> Bernstein, “Artifice of Absorption”, *Paper Air* 4:1 (1987): 53, 6-71. Bernstein's piece takes up the entire issue.

What is lost if we look closely at these photos and ask, how does this help us to understand how a baby grows? What is gained by placing the cover on this treatise? What is lost, when the treatise is reprinted in *A Poetics* without the cover? Again, we face one of the main issues of innovation in American poetics. The treatise written in blank verse, published by *Paper Air* entered book culture with a particular shape, design, and cover that was not arbitrarily chosen. Upon re-publication, the particularities of its earlier environment were not duplicated. There is no reason why at the least a small image of the original and other design information cannot be pasted in, along with a critical introduction when works are reprinted, or placed in an anthology. We have the means and the technology to do so. To give future readers at least a glimpse of how a work was constructed and brought into culture, adds a further dimension to reading and to history itself. When critical discourse ignores cultural engineering, we miss the fullness of the artifact's significance and can fall into the belief that reproduction is neutral and not an informed mimesis. Cultural reproduction, like production and reception, is neither singular nor automatic. Cultural reproduction, as design is for the page or the cover, is always an interpretation.

Paintings by Susan Bee cover Bernstein's Sun & Moon collections, *The Sophist* (1987), *Rough Trades* (1991), *Content's Dream* (1986), and *Republics of Reality* (2000). The painting "Do Gentleman Snore?" on the cover of *The Sophist* (Fig. 3.12.) gives the volume of poems numerous and suggestive philosophical references. We are given some action framed in the painterly method of Fauvism. The larger fellow could be of the same period, and the other a Greek. The title of the volume is read into the image: a more modern man has grabbed a robed man. The raised thumb and his hand grabbing the smaller man, suggest that he is being thrown out. Is the smaller man the sophist? The question of the title makes the viewer ask if the bigger modern man is a gentleman, and does this guy ever snore. Was the Greek man snoring? Bee gives us a complex introduction and entrance into the volume of poetry. Does it relate? Must it? Is the Greek being thrown out or replaced by the Nietzschean look-a-like? The painting rich with cultural allusions, brings about a confrontation between a modern and a classical figure. The sophists, far from being tricksters developing clever but fallacious arguments, have been re-read since Nietzsche as

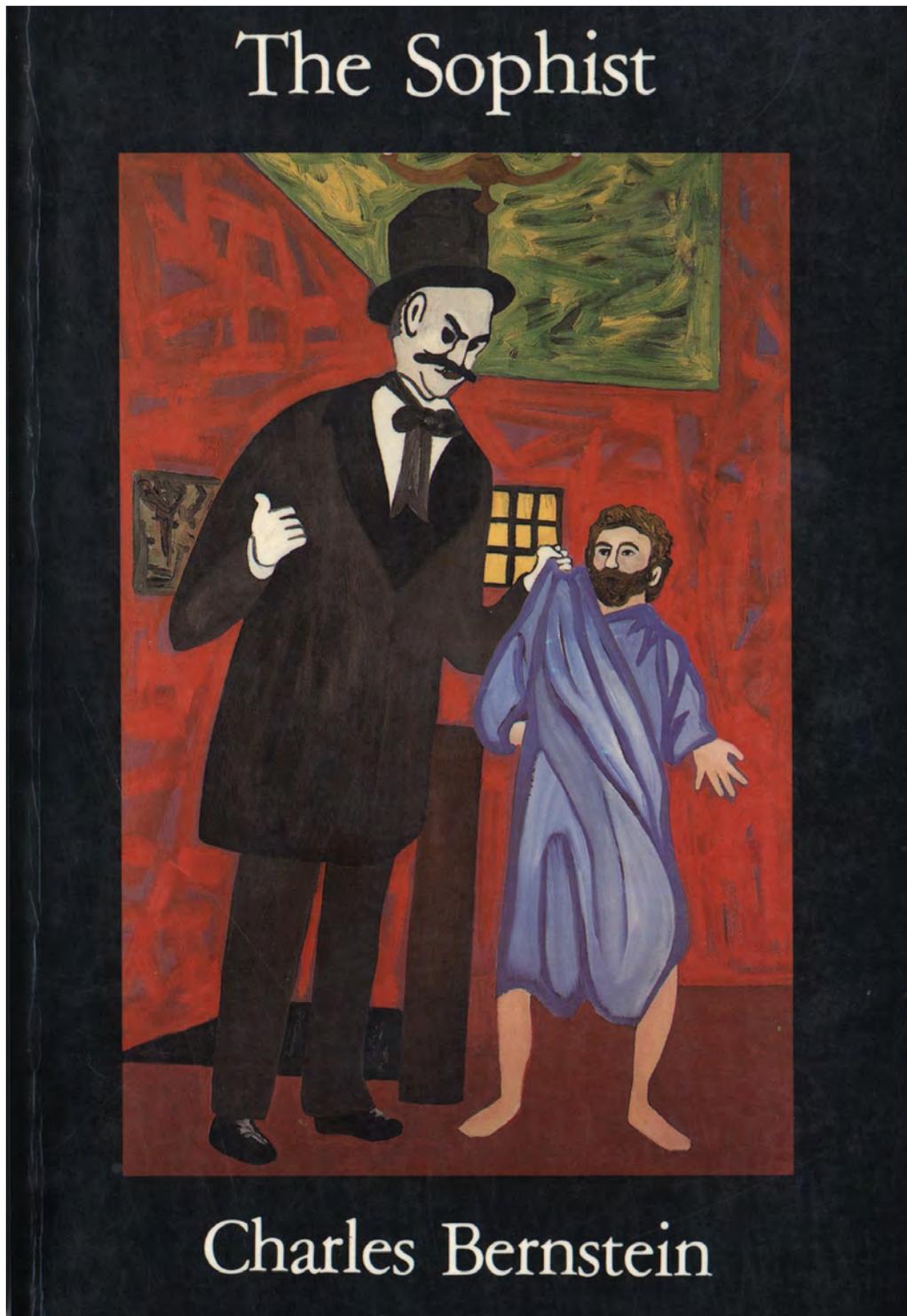


Figure 3.12. Charles Bernstein, *The Sophist* (1987). The cover is the painting, "Do Gentlemen Snore?"

demanding philosophers pursuing truth and knowledge. Mario Untersteiner wrote this in his introduction to *The Sophists*:

The sophists agree in an anti-idealistic concreteness which does not tread the ways of scepticism but rather those of a realism and a phenomenism which do not confine reality within a dogmatic scheme but allow it to rage in all its contradictions, in all its tragic intensity, in all the impartiality imposed by an intelligibility which will revive the joy in truth.<sup>61</sup>

Maybe gentlemen snore when the page of poetry loses its concrete-ness or is trapped in one dogmatic schema. Bernstein agrees with an anti-idealistic concreteness, in his emphasis upon the visual, material sign on the page, in the volume, or formed in lines. He is not skeptical in simply pointing out problems and difficulties with other forms of American poetry that are bound to one set view of the image, or to the poem as self-revelation, or discourse as clarity and unobscured. Bernstein is a true inventor as he embraces a skepticism toward other views, but also provides alternatives and options. His visual strategy, on the page, in the line, in the book, is one that is not confined to one dogmatic schema. Instead, this poiesis allows and fosters visions of reality full of contradictions, intensities, awaiting, through his impartial methods, to revive the joy in truth. The truth being, that American poetry remains fuller than any one account of it however it is defined and sanctioned by a particular group or power structure.

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<sup>61</sup> Mario Untersteiner, *The Sophist*, trans. Kathleen Freeman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954), xvi.

- i. new measurements: American poetry contains
- ii. *Resistance*: '[t]he internal logic...'
- iii. 'Don't be afraid, gentle writers, gentle readers...'
- iv. *Islets/Irritations*: 'to prosper to'
- v. *The Sophist*: 'dysraphism', 'the order of'

*...working with an understanding which accepts at a fundamental level the breakthroughs and changes in philosophy, science and perception, does not necessitate a destruction of past forms, but offers an modification, re-interpretation and development of those forms. (225)*

*The space of poetry has changed like all our other forms of measurement and observation. Old borders and walls have been crossed. Former maps await the museum. New grids await continued exploration. (246)*

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## Chapter 4

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### New Measurements

In the past new measurements of the line, genre, and page have expanded the possibilities for poetry. William Carlos Williams in 1948 argued that without invention the form of poetry would go on “repeating itself with recurring / deadliness...”<sup>1</sup> Williams realized that a knowledge and understanding about the world and the stars would and should effect the sound and shape of American poetry.

Without invention nothing is well spaced,  
unless the mind change, unless  
the stars are new measured, according  
to their relative positions, the  
line will not change, the necessity  
will not matriculate: unless there is  
a new mind there cannot be a new  
line, the old will go on  
repeating itself with recurring  
deadliness: without invention  
nothing lies under the witch-hazel  
bush, the alder does not grow from among  
the hummocks margining the all  
but spent channel of the old swale,  
the small foot-prints  
of mice under the overhanging  
tufts of the bunch-grass will not  
appear: without invention the line  
will never again take on its ancient  
divisions when the word, a supple word,  
lived in it, crumbled now to chalk.<sup>2</sup>

Williams uses the word “invention” in several different ways. Invention can mean discovery,

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<sup>1</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Paterson II* (New Jersey: New Directions, 1945), section one. *Paterson*, (New Directions: 1963), 50. All subsequent references will be the later version.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

searching, coming upon, as well as the ability to select ideas for descriptions and arguments. Williams shows concern not just for descriptions, but also for how the word is to be divided and housed in the line. With change, with a new mind, and with new measurements, new lines come into poetry. He is at ease with the ongoing discovery of the shape of poetry, and at ease with the notion that poetry is not simply a fixed idea. This does not mean that tradition is abandoned. Williams recalls how the line came into being by referring to its “ancient divisions” on the page that were based upon pause, effect, rhythm, and layout. For Williams, new spacing, lines, and descriptions, will not appear without invention. American poetry contains an expansive tradition of new measurements and innovation. New measurements in the line occur in Whitman’s, Dickinson’s, and Eliot’s early poems. New measurements of type occur in e. e. cummings. New measurements of form abound in Williams’ genre-mixing *Spring and All* and in Ginsberg’s approach in *Howl*. New measurements of grammar can be found in Stein, and new measurements of the page in Bob Brown, Abraham Lincoln Gillespie, Dick Higgins, and Mary Ellen Solt. New measurements occur regularly and will continue in American poetry if its tradition is any indication. Bernstein steps into this tradition of poet-inventors and draws from past accomplishments, but also investigates new ground: a new measurement of the lyric, and a new measurement of the space of poetry.

The Conference “What is a poet?” in 1983 revealed that contemporary American poetry contains a multitude of measurements, irreconcilable differences and styles of American poetics. Since the conference, critics such as Helen Vendler, Charles Altieri, and Marjorie Perloff have all gone on in different directions concerning the reading and writing of American poetry. Vendler has held onto the Romantic lyric, Altieri continues to find life in the poetics of what he calls “modernism”, and Perloff remains the investigator of alternatives and promoter of American poetic diversity. Their critical works only find unity in chronology, not in approach or subject matter. Some of the poets at the conference, such as Bernstein, Denise Levertov, and Kenneth Burke, also show a diverse approach to the reading and writing of poetry. In the panel discussion, with all these poets and critics at the conclusion of the conference, there was no answer to be found for the question, “What is a poet?”. Unfortunately, instead of there being a notion of shared concerns, clarifications, or patterns of convergence, there was only name calling, silence, unresolved diversity, incomplete words and argumentation. Bernstein likened the critical differences to religious ones:

I think we're not going to resolve what are essentially philosophical and theological or metaphysical differences, *religious* differences, really among us. If you had a panel of different religious people representing different religious groups who were trying to come to some consensus, you would have some of these same disagreements. I think the problem I have is not so much understanding that people have a different view point than I have—believe me I've been told that many times [laughter] and I accept that. I do find it a problem that and I certainly tend to do this too, that we tend to say “poets” think this and “poets” think that—because by doing that we tend to exclude the practices of other people in our society of divergence. And I think it's that practice that leads to the very deplorable situation that Denise Levertov raised and that I tried to bring up in my talk yesterday about the exclusion of the many different types of communities and cultures from our very multicultural, diverse society, of which there is no encompassing center.<sup>3</sup>

Bernstein brings the concept of social diversity and the lack of an encompassing center into the conflict of interpretations. He also brings a new measurement to the word “poets”, suggesting that poets are not a singular, organic entity. Bernstein's solution to the irreconcilable differences is to argue for a diverse American poetry, and to argue for an acceptance of its multicultural reality. Although Bernstein seems to suggest that having an encompassing center is not a true description of American poetry, he is suggesting a criteria for a new center: a new measurement that would allow an acceptance of poetic diversity. The difficulty of any form of critical pluralism is that it requires every group to cross their own borders in order to create a third space for dialogue, discussion, interaction, and the ongoing investigation and research of new measurements.

In the lecture at the conference, Bernstein was careful to talk about poetry in the widest possible terms. He argued and tried to convince all who were present, that poetry itself, and not just experimental, radical or avant-garde poetry, is the art form that encourages the largest range of reading space. By appealing to poetry instead of alternative verse, Bernstein re-writes the definition of poetry while refusing to accept the mainstream, dominant mode of verse as the defining practice or criteria for quality verse.

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<sup>3</sup> “Panel Discussion”, *What is a Poet?: Essays from the Eleventh Alabama Symposium on English and American Literature*, ed. by Hank Lazer (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 211. Hereafter cited as *What is a Poet?*.

Poetry is potentially the most powerful technology to realize the multidimensionality of reading values—to sound the sonic, measure the lexicon, and refuse a standardization and regimentation that deafens us to the living past in language and diverts us from enacting living presents—decentered and plural—*for* language.<sup>4</sup>

Among the poets and critics, Bernstein praises poetry as one of the most powerful technologies of language in its ability to generate a multidimensional reading space. By embracing both the sonic and the written, and refusing to simply repeat standards, new measurements are created for poetry, and for its reception. In the previous year at his first MLA talk, Bernstein praises Williams for carrying out this poetic work.

...Williams has done more to further the prosodic tradition than any of his so-called more traditional contemporaries by not replicating received forms and *not* voiding the audible acoustic dimension from his poetry. Meanwhile, the self-proclaimed defenders of the tradition have abandoned it by repetition: love requires not miming but response, continuation, new acts inspired not beholding to the old.<sup>5</sup>

Bernstein goes on to state that Williams opposed “official verse culture”: “What makes official verse culture official is that it denies the ideological nature of its practice while maintaining hegemony in terms of major media exposure and academic legitimization and funding” (CD 248-9). Bernstein used Williams as way to critique and call into question the reigning forms of poetic legitimization. His MLA talk was aimed in a variety of directions: editorial practices, funding procedures, academic criticism, and defenders of tradition: “love requires not miming but response, continuation, new acts inspired not beholding to the old”. Bernstein identifies a network of literary production that denies in practice, the diversity of American poetics. Response, and not repetition, allows the material of life to impinge on the shape and content of poetry. If response, or from Williams’ perspective, invention is encouraged and allowed, then poetry becomes an art that is not bound to repetition. It can create, like science has for so long, knowledge, and build

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<sup>4</sup> “Blood on the Cutting Room Floor”, *What is a Poet?*, 141. The essay also appears in *Content’s Dream* in a slightly altered form (CD, 358, 351-362).

<sup>5</sup> Bernstein, “The Academy in Peril: Williams Carlos Williams Meets the MLA”, CD 247, 244-251.

avenues for lost, or ignored ancient liberties.<sup>6</sup>

Bernstein believes that poetry expands reading values, and that it can give to the world, through its invention, forms of knowing and seeing that are unavailable from a scientific paradigm.

Although the root of *technology* is *techne* (the Greek word for practical knowledge, craft, or art), in our culture art has lost its legitimacy as knowledge-producing. The exclusive association of “scientific method” with knowledge production is reductive and represents a dominance of the ideology of science over other knowledge-producing investigations, which are generally agglomerated together as *aesthetic*. Art proposes and pursues methods of acquiring knowledge that are alternative to scientific models. (CD 354)

Bernstein, at the “What is a Poet?” conference, suggests that new measurements are necessary, and can provide insight and knowledge unattainable in other dominant forms. Bernstein believes that art has the legitimacy to make knowledge claims about the world, perception, the process of interpretation, and can provide an additional realm of knowing unavailable elsewhere.

In many of Bernstein’s volumes of poetry, he creates a poetry that is engaged in “knowledge-producing investigations”. By looking specifically at poems in *Resistance*, *Islets/Irritations*, and *The Sophist*, we will find a poetry that embraces fabrication, figment, and fiction. These poems re-read reading itself, causing the dimension of conventional reading to chart further developments on the map of poetry. The poems are readings of sounding the sonic, measuring the lexicon, and they come upon, find, and discover meanings. The poems propose and pursue the idea that the lyric can be re-measured, that resistance to standards is not just a negative enterprise but can be the agency of and for invention, and that poetry is one of the strongest arts: not easily controlled or regulated by critical explanations. Bernstein not only theorizes in public at conferences, but he practices a poetics from which he learns of new spaces,

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<sup>6</sup> Milton for example altered his line as a recovery of ancient liberty: “rime being no necessary adjunct or true ornament of poem or good verse, in longer works especially, but the invention of a barbarous age, to set off wretched matter and lame meter;....This neglect then of rime so little is to be taken for a defect, though it may seem so perhaps to vulgar readers, that it rather is to be esteemed an example set, the first in English, of ancient liberty recovered to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of riming.”. The Printer explains: “Courteous Reader, there was no Argument at first intended to the book; but for the satisfaction of many that have desired it, I have procured it, and withal a reason of that which stumbled many others, why the poem rimes not.--S. Simmons”. John Milton *Paradise Lost* Books I and II, ed. by A.W. Verity, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 5-6.

forms, and orders.

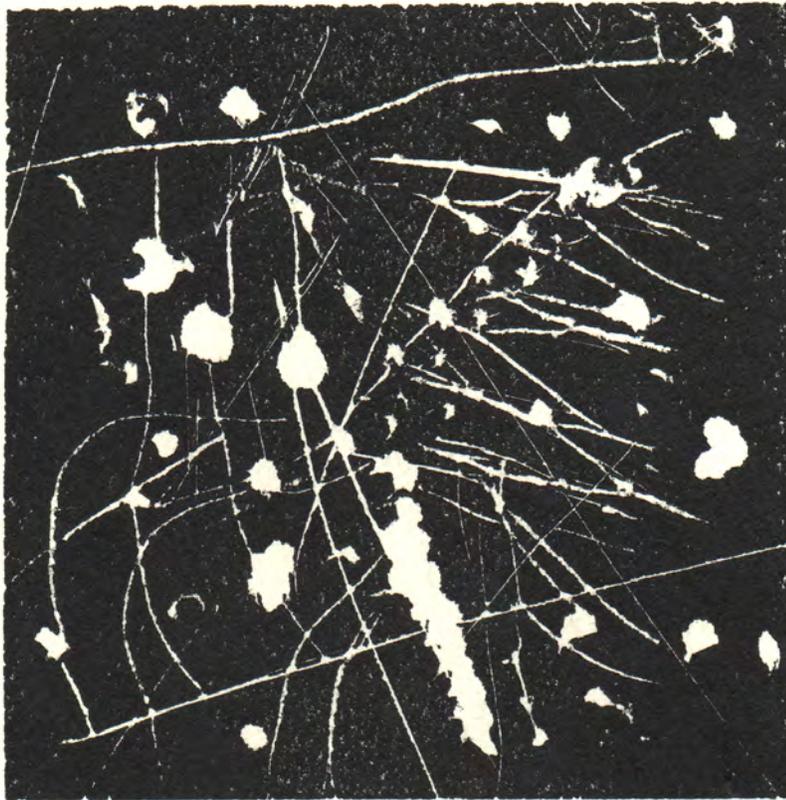
The cover of the 1983 version of *Resistance* is of an abstract painting: black background, roaming marks, lines throughout (Figure 4.1). Our first moments of reading are post-representational in a place where conventions have departed. Analogy rises.<sup>7</sup> As we will see later, Bernstein's other 1983 volume *Islet/Irritations* is covered by Arakawa who is one of the most important post-Conceptualist artists working in our day. If we follow the lead of the cover, we might begin to think about abstractions of verse. Given that Abstract Expression was a movement in the 1950s, we are also turning back to a visual tradition. For Bernstein, the love of tradition is not miming, but responding. For Fowler, it is not just newness of language that demarcates literary innovation, but the creation of new knowledge. Taking the cover as a guide, we begin in abstraction as we are confronted with eighteen compact one-page poems. We begin thinking about a new measurement, about a new combination: abstract lyric. Bernstein's abstract lyric would be in direct contrast to the dominant mode that Stanley Plumly describes:

In the "post-Eliot" phase, and especially in the generation of the seventies, the intersection of the flexibility of the free verse rhythm with the strategy of storytelling has produced a kind of prose lyric: a form corrupt enough to speak flat out in sentences yet pure enough to sustain the intensity, if not the integrity of the line; a form wide enough to include a range of reference yet narrow enough to select; a form coherent with and accountable to its sources yet sensitive enough to register variation in the terrain; a form expressive enough to elaborate the most inward experience yet aware enough to attract our public attention.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Holden argues that post-modern poetic anxiety is not over influence, but over conventions. He argues for non-literary analogues (conversation, confession, dream). Although Bernstein is also questioning conventions, his response is not toward Holden's examples. Holden, though, does see a number of poets resisting the narrow register of what verse can be as defined by Bloom and Mazzaro. "Indeed, analogical poetic form may be regarded as a manifestation of a general literary principle: the further a poem deviates from fixed-form conventions and a traditional prosody, the more it will be compelled to seek, as a basis for its form, some non-literary analogue." Jonathan Holden, "Postmodern Poetic Form: a Theory" in *Style and Authenticity in Postmodern Poetry* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 25.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Plumly, "Chapter and Verse: Rhetoric and Emotion", *American Poetry Review*, 7:1 (1978): 27.



*RESISTANCE CHARLES BERNSTEIN*

Figure 4.1. Charles Bernstein, *Resistance* (Windsor, Vermont: Awede Press, 1983).

Throughout *Resistance*, the poems are built using language's abstractions, and yet many of the traditional lyrical subjects remain: feelings, wounds, rewards of love, stunnment (Bernstein's word), moonlight. The form of dense, short lines is used throughout. The abstract lyric keeps the line, but instead of attempting to balance his poetics between a flat and intense line, private and public rhetoric of experience, general and the particular, it creates a new measurement of the line.

Instead of direct confession, description, or the correspondent breezes transforming the waiting subject, we have in "Forensic Gastronomy" a lifetime of absolute distractions and circumstances written about the subject of the subject.

The internal logic  
of possession of  
what can not be  
known about  
or gardened  
governs  
all the habitudes  
in a congenital  
series of  
absolute distractions  
flushed with patency  
and pestered  
dumb with  
the breeze.<sup>9</sup>

The poem, like all great lyrics, addresses the central issues of living. "Forensic Gastronomy" can be read in numerous semantic domains: as the pleadings of the stomach, the laws of fine cooking and eating, the written nature of food, as linguistic cookery, or as the application of the facts of cooking to questions of civil and criminal law. The issue is not choosing a reading, but exploring

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<sup>9</sup> *Resistance*, (Windsor, Vermont: Awede, 1983), 21. For the sake of accessibility, all citations will come from *Republics of Reality* (hereafter cited as *RR*) unless otherwise noted.

new combinations. A possession, of what cannot be known, is cultivated by moving from the food of words toward the logic of possession. What can be possessed, and yet not be known or gardened? Without a mention of self, ego, an “I” or “you”, we are taken into an abstract consideration of life and death. The poem works through stretched cohesive allusions: words like congenital, gastronomic, dumb, habitudes, govern, garden, all relate to humans and culture.

What remains within the unmentioned subject, is a logic of the unattainable (the not known, the not attainable). This logic governs habitudes, not attitudes, in an inborn series of absolute distractions. The unmentioned subject is not measured in an accessible, transparent, organic, linear narrative. The food of the word and the absent/present subject are flushed with the obvious, pestered by the breeze. For Wordsworth, the breeze as an agent of the spirit was the food of the word; here, the food of the word and the absent/present subject are silenced by this breeze, that way of being.

The next twenty-three lines and second sentence localize and place the reading in a city.

There is no inside information  
only  
inside defamations  
on 119<sup>th</sup> street

(RR 278)

Alongside the life in the city, the inside of the subject retains defamations. “Defamation” or slander is the use of words to re-write another’s character in a negative light, or misrepresent another’s life. Words are ethical, and the logic of the unattainable lingers. We end with logic and slander.

and an avenue  
of no name  
because not  
of or in  
the village but

merely  
a passing glimmer  
in a bus  
window, gone  
today but maybe  
here (there is  
no) tomorrow  
merely a backwards look at  
that this  
called  
inevitability.

(RR 279)

Moving toward the outside world, we move among glimmers of the known: tomorrow (we hope), because in fact there is no tomorrow (literally speaking); the inevitability of the unattainable; and defamation.

We are reading a new kind of lyric here. One which is not built around expected revelations of the ego or a masked persona, but in a form of writing that is nevertheless personal, addressing problems of perception and inevitability. When we turn the page, we are confronted with continuation. The volume does not contain a title for the next page, so we can assume that the next page of words belongs to the same poem. However, since Bernstein has experimented with the fundamental standards of writing poetry like Eigner and e.e. cummings, we cannot know for certain that the following page is part of the poem. Nevertheless, it is there in different format, without punctuation and without end. Here, the page design of the volume affects the reading of the “inevitability”.

These line out  
a sense of gloss  
or garbled  
hope, what

is left  
will only  
layer a moment  
of a tense, to  
cling behind  
these walls  
of limitless  
circumstance

(RR 280)

We can take “these” to refer back to the previous two pages, or the following lines. We can take “gloss” to mean commentary, or, in the semantic range of the sign, we can read it as a false or deceptive appearance to an artfully misleading interpretation of a text. The term retains a negative and critical presence. Read as a commentary of the first two parts of “Forensic Gastronomy”, garbled hope is a hope that can be distorted and misleading. This part of the poem breaks the contract between the writer and reader, and communication between the two is limited. What is left “will only layer a moment of a tense”. Clinging to a passing layer of tense, behind the walls of the word’s limitless circumstance, the not absent/present subject, leaves. As the space of reading changes, as we proceeded without a contract, the strength of this new abstract lyric appears, gaps remain, awaiting another critical venture.

As Williams wrote, “unless there is / a new mind, there can not be a new / line, the old will go on / repeating itself with recurring / deadliness...”. Bernstein’s abstract lyric retains the short line, but the actual elements of its structure demand a new reading mind. “[P]oetry and poetics are not so much a matter of how I can make words mean something I want to say, but rather letting language find ways of meaning through me.”<sup>10</sup> Bernstein’s relation to his reader is also an alteration: “I figure if a reader or listener can’t make out a particular reference or train of thought, that’s okay—it’s very much the way I experience things in everyday life” (MW 25). Bernstein resists conventional conceptions of the writer’s ego. His involvement in the meaning

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<sup>10</sup> Bernstein, “An Interview with Mario Brito”, *MW* 26, 25-32.

making process is not totally under his control, either in construction or reception. By allowing a lack of control within his very compact and dense lines, we are challenged to view meaning as a process of knowing, discovering, creating, and not knowing, losing one's way, and being inactive.

The experience of the everyday is not one of total recall, but rather a matrix of the unknowable/knowable. Bernstein takes the experience of the everyday and allows this to inform his poetry. Furthermore, he builds a style that in his mind, gives the reader new space.

If the poem is at times puzzling or open-ended or merely suggestive, rather than explicit, maybe it gives readers or listeners more space for their own interpretations and imaginations. Different readers pick up different things and for any reader certain allusions are bound to be striking while others will seem opaque, but which is which changes from reader to reader. (*MW*25)

Bernstein, even in his straight statements, resists standards: "but which is which changes". The mixture of the poems not explaining themselves, the actual experiences of daily life, and different orientations of poems (not explicit), provide the new grammar for these abstract lyrics. The reading and writing of the poem takes into consideration contemporary subjectivity. We are reading a poem that does not over-design continuity, and that shows the "food" of words shape and live in abundant circumstances. We possess a knowledge, and as we live in habits and distractions, we are pestered. If the Wordsworthian allusion of breeze as spirit is tenable, then the poem suggests we are silenced by this breeze and are not set free. Within, there are word-wounds (defamations), the passing of city life, and limitless circumstance. The lyric re-presents a world, not through tranquility, but through inevitable distraction. To accept contemporary subjectivity, the lyric must change, and Bernstein, not abandoning tradition, responds and builds a new knowledge that petitions a response: Are there other "forensic gastronomies" that are not pestered dumb by the breeze?

In the very first poem of *Resistance*, we can see the rhetoric of experience and the assumed mental categories undergoing changes, re-directions, and investigations. The poem "Consideration" sets the stage and opens the page of abstract lyrical expectations.

Feelings that grant promises  
alone am cured of. A salient

detonation, tangled and flickering, to  
up till vexed, mottled plum  
that stands at guard, gorged  
by the pensive percussion I  
develop all too slowly out of,  
implicitly to maroon a  
mobile flare—the slant  
of any rest, afloat with  
wonder, heaves.

(RR 255)

Within the first stanza of “Consideration”, the lyrical “I” can be found, but its presence does not dictate the progression of the lines: “A salient detonation... afloat with wonder, heaves.” The “I” develops out of a pensive percussion, and all too slowly, which implicitly maroons a mobile flare: “One alternative image to the uniplaner surface of “ego” or “ratio” nally organized writing is of a möbius textuality— aspiring not toward the arbitrariness and accumulation of juxtaposition but rather the fusion of social flesh.”<sup>11</sup> The “slant of any rest,” like a salient detonation, bounces and remains above the surface through or by a fiat of wonder. The möbius textuality is in contrast to the uniplaner form of the traditional line. Bernstein uses a spatial metaphor to describe the line’s relation to words, the word’s relation to syntax, and the grammar’s relation to logic.

What battered harms, this renewed  
flurry fights. Charged with adequate  
acquaintance of what charms  
an option’s anchor. Bleary  
gates and chopped up.

(RR 255)

The poem itself is a renewed flurry, fighting all the battered harms of the over-used prose lyrical voice. The poem knows what “charms” the stoppage of options, and lays down the anchor, to remain the object of a contained closure. Pound’s maxim that poetry is language charged with

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<sup>11</sup> “Blood on the Cutting Room Floor” in *What is a Poet?*, 144. Also in *CD*, 362.

meaning is re-written as Bernstein takes this maxim in a direction without the need of personal pronouns. Throughout the rest of the volume, only the personal pronoun “me” appears, and the “I” used once in the opening stanza is no longer charged with meaning. Instead, Bernstein investigates and creates another charge, not located in a persona, but in language itself expanding the space of poetry.

The next three stanzas, unlike the first two or the last stanza, are without punctuation. The visual form is not remarkable (a capital at the start of each line), but the language is:

We've part in which rust-colored sense  
Parred largish version's ambush  
Half by hazelight lulled inert  
Cares' dusted filament  
Not to tool

Less loss a sear of part or chill  
Remain in stance relation's stripped  
What most is barer tongued in trace  
Aboard a float cup bottom  
Option a screen's amiss  
Regard a point drops ken

Surging, swelling  
Vagueness of listless deposit  
Orange vertices turned up  
Clamp or minded, nearly  
Bread or only bored  
Debarred by lock and grinding

(RR 256)

These stanzas share a contrasting unity within the formal features of the poem: three stanzas with punctuation (the first, second, and last) and three without. The logical syntax resists dramatic

lyrical discourse, in either the form inspired by Wordsworth, or the form built upon fragmented personas inspired by Eliot. The poem also resists normal communicative patterns found in conversation. Along with the changes of how the mind is to consider, the act of consideration has also changed what can and cannot be “charged with meaning”.

We have a “part in which rust-colored sense” ambushes (half by hazelight lulled inert) “[c]ares’ dusted filament”. The poem brings in the reader by stating “we’ve a part in” these new charged combinations. Questions arise: What is rust-colored sense? Not only what is rust-colored sense, but also how does sense take on the attributes of a noun? Sense parred largish version’s ambush in the poem; what does it do in the world of the reader? The sonic density and syntactical beauty of these lines resists causal acquisition but creates enough of an invitation to establish an investigative link. Imagine this poem in a classroom discussion. A particular kind of sense parred the multiplicity of seeing in two ways: the first through rust-colored sense, the second half by hazelight. Hazelight, can be read as a vague light: the kind of light one sees in a fog or vapor. This light “lulled inert” cares’ inner workings not to cultivate or make (“tool”) something. Care has a filament and is literally, potentially charged with meaning. Throughout these lines, artifacts, nature, and humans are intertwined: rust-colored sense, cares’ filament, hazelight lulled. The act of consideration involves an essential blurring and combination of all three realities within knowledge and the space of poetry. The act of consideration forms a world outside the reach of a single conscious ego.

The poem builds a large sonic register by taking words into song: “Bread or only bored / Debarred by lock and grinding”; “serving all the sooner suitor’s stock”; “Less loss a sear of part or chill”. Alliteration is not secondary but primary to the meaning of these lines. For many readers, only the sound bumping off the ear registers any meaning of the line. Sound does not have to always remain in the background, derivative, merely an ornament.

Sound, like the graphemic, is a principle tool of communication (and noncommunicative!) activity and, as such, invests the social field with an horizon of meanings. When sound is used for communicative purposes, the communication already entails not only the extra baggage of its material form but also of the history of its communicative use in as similar form as well as otherwise, for instance, its use as music or musing. . . .

Poetry starts with sound as a positive, rather than as differential or negative, value:

sound as engendering meaning, its corpse—begotten, gnosis, knowledge. No ideas but as sound.<sup>12</sup>

Instead of thinking about the lyric from the standpoint of the words, which are forgotten as soon as they are registered, Bernstein is investigating the combinations of sound as he measures the potential of the lexicon. The form of his lines cannot be easily recuperated, consumed, and discarded, but calls out for re-reading, if only for the line's sonic delight. Bernstein responds to and does not only repeat a tradition. Ideas are melded with the sound of their letters. Not ideas, but sounds place Bernstein's poetics in a non-idealist tradition. Sound in poetry is one source of its meaning, and therefore also one avenue of its exploration and re-measurement.

Now that the act of consideration includes several different kinds of syntax, we find more than "thought" can be "clarified" in the last stanza.

Or on a steam the send up, when  
with force of qualms, did swerve  
allegiance. To clarify a meanwhile,  
serving all the sooner suitor's stock.  
And trade on friction, only scarcest,  
the payed in turn.  
Diligently, an embassy of kilter,  
gift at born reserved for tred  
or lapped of.

(RR 256)

The last sentence (also re-fashioned), speaks of an embassy of kilter, that is an embassy of good condition or good order. Feelings that grant promises end at an embassy for tred. The word "tred" is an odd word; possibly an abstraction of some kind redesign of tread. The sound could be the sense. The syntactical engine or processor of the new lyric is not only semantically based, but is also rooted and structured in the sonic and the syntactical. *Resistance* reworks these abstractions

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<sup>12</sup> Bernstein, "Living Tissue / Dead Ideas", *CD* 367, 363-382.

into forms. The charge, which Pound referred to as the engine of literature, does not have to come through personal pronouns. All poetry is constructed. The nature of the construction can move toward the elements of its artifice or toward tried forms. The space of poetry can be found in the line, in the page, in a book, or in a web link. The abstract lyric creates new measurements: nouns live in new places, categories of grammar and syntactical logic are re-arranged, words relationships are re-drawn. Links of grammatical logic are rebuilt as we saw in the very beginning of “Forensic Gastronomy” “of what can not be / known about / or gardened / governs...”. The more we stare into this world on the page, the more the new measurements and construction foster the attributes of a reflective quality. We move out of the expected routes of the self in a poem, yet we do not move out of the reflection of knowing, governing, gardening, or being human. The change comes in poetry as words re-structure the contemporary grammar of the world.

The cover of *Resistance* is an abstract painting, without any reference to figure. The grammatical aspect of painting, the line, the form, the color, are given space as an object. The grammar of “You” shows just how far Bernstein is willing to take his resistance. For many poets and critics, grammar has been the starting point of understanding the language of literature. Jakobson puts it this way:

The essential literary-critical questions of the individuality and comparative characteristics of poems, poets and poetic structure can and should be posed in the realm of grammar.<sup>13</sup>

As Sturrock points out, Jakobson was convinced that a grammatical analysis of poetry would grant a proper understanding and analysis of the poem’s beauty and meaning. Although Jakobson completely embraces a close and detailed study, he does not question the nature of grammatical constructions. The poem is an object built out of elaborate “figures of grammar”.<sup>14</sup> Brooks, the detailed and subtle reader, found that the poem “is a pattern of resolved stresses.”<sup>15</sup> He understood the language of the poem also to be working with set laws of grammar and the lexicon. Bernstein

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<sup>13</sup>As quoted by John Sturrock in *Structuralism* (Collins, Glasgow: Paladin Paperback, 1986), 114. Jakobson’s quotation is from *Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time*, ed. by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 51.

<sup>14</sup> *Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time*, 39.

<sup>15</sup> Cleanth Brooks, “The Heresy of Paraphrase” in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. H. Adams (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 1037.

nearly twenty years later re-reads both of these critical reflections.

Regardless of “what” is being said, use of standard patterns of syntax and exposition effectively rebroadcast, often at a subliminal level, the basic constitutive elements of the social structure—they perpetuate them so that by constant reinforcement we are no longer aware that decisions are being made, our base level is then an already preconditioned world view which this de-formed language “repeats to us inexorably” but not necessarily. Or else these formations (underscored constantly by all “the media” in the form they “communicate” “information” “facts”) take over our form of life (see *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Dawn of the Dead* for two recent looks at this), as by posthypnotic suggestion we find ourselves in the grip of—living out—feeling—the attitudes programmed into us by the phrases, etc, and their sequencing, that are continually being repeated to us—language control=thought control=reality control: it must be “decentered”, “community controlled”, taken out of the service of the capitalist project. For now, an image of the antivirus: indigestible, intransigent.<sup>16</sup>

Bernstein argues that no matter what is being said or written, the use of standards repeats and broadcasts a particular way of being in the world. To resist the world is to re-open the mechanisms that fabricate thought, opinions, and desires. In order to resist the world of the poem, Bernstein brings into the very essence of its structure a redress of the patterns of American poetics.

In order to read and follow Bernstein’s writing strategy, the reader must first understand that for Bernstein grammar is not simply a process to be repeated, refined, and regulated. Grammar becomes a place of discovery and investigation as the reader follows what and how Bernstein re-shapes and changes the line. The poetry is far from being grammatically correct; nevertheless it creates, intentionally or not, a redescription of the assumed world. Even though Bernstein employs a decentered grammar, it is still in the following of this grammar that a reading begins. Once we accept that a re-drawn grammar is built into the process of the poem itself, we move beyond looking for the inter-relation between the parts and the whole, pattern and resolved stresses, the voice and the expression.

We are beginning to see that there is more to meaning and poetry than correctly inter-related patterns. We can see this reality within the poem “You”.

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<sup>16</sup> “Dollar Value to Poetry”, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 2:3/40 (1979): 9. Also in *CD*, 59-60.

Time wounds all heals, spills through  
with echoes neither idea nor lair  
can jam. The door of your unfolding  
starts like intervening vacuum, lush  
refer to accident or chance of  
lachrymose fixation made  
mercurial as the tors in crevice lock  
dried up like river made the rhymes  
to know what ocean were unkempt  
or hide's detain the wean of  
hide's felicity depend.

(RR 277)

Built in two sentences, the grammar takes on a life of its own. Time spills, echoes, wounds, and is stronger than ideas or resting-places. Time has been personalized before in poetry, as the phrase 'time heals all wounds' is called into question. We are struck by a reorganization of a linguistic truism.

So a poem as a discrete field of meaning, trying not to echo externally explicated grammars but rather to discover (come upon) the limits that make up meaning, which is the human; that is, the grammar that is shared, lived within.<sup>17</sup>

New realities of syntax are created in "You". The departure from expected norms spills through and has the capacity to alter and communicate feelings and realities not found in Plumly's prose lyric. As the poem re-writes the forgotten construction of "time heals all wounds", the line's response is echoing a happiness of release beyond fixed ideas. As the poem happens and Bernstein's construction takes on a life of resisting external "explicated grammars", the poem itself is unjamed, unstuck. The phrase "Time wounds all heals" begins to spill through. The reader reflects. Possibly "time" wears down or combats any, or all healings. Through reflection, freed from a truism that

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<sup>17</sup> Bernstein, "A Particular Thing", *CD* 52.

may not be true, the reader gains knowledge and insight. The intensity of the lyric is not framed and located within an ego's self-reflexive activity. As readers we are not watching the experience of the world through another's eyes. Instead, we are thrown into a world where we are able "to discover (come upon) the limits that make up meaning".

"You" gives a description of the self through an expanded poetic space, by transforming grammatical laws into an aesthetic syntax: "hide's detain", "hide's felicity", and "lush refer", build new poetic space. The reader proceeds to the dictionary to look up these terms, and finds further terms. This starts an interaction with the dictionary as a color palette, as a source of understanding the re-worked grammatical rules ("ocean were"). It is a poem where reading cannot rest in established laurels, but must go forward informed by past reading strategies. If we can recognize the skill involved in making the poem, and not treat it as a failed attempt, we will not find an inexactitude demanding correction, but an entrance into poetry as a powerful knowledge producing technology. The poem takes the logic of English grammar and redistributes and refashions its norms and categories while at the same time holding on to the lyric as a possibility. Rather than saying this is a failed attempt, it is an artifact where reading fails. Any solution offered will transform and change reading habits, rules, and regulations.

In his paper at the "What is a poet?" conference, Bernstein remarked that even techniques such as collage, juxtaposition, and parataxis can be reductive and delimiting. He wants to see poetry's trajectory toward a möbius textuality, "aspiring not toward the arbitrariness and accumulation of juxtaposition but rather the fusion of social flesh" (*CD* 362). As we have already seen, this textuality is in contrast to the uniplaner form of the traditional line. Bernstein shows that even in the line, new space is available, and the logic of the poem or its "[d]uration becomes not a series of constantly postponed absences but the site of *confusing*" (*CD* 362). In the poem "Forefright", we immediately are thrown into fusion: the title word, as such, does not exist.

Mind is a tangled web that seems  
only in aggregate to cohere, each  
occasion gnaws at door of  
semblance or contudes the  
sinews of flotation's equipose.

Staves drift in seaweed for  
a clone to paw upon, sectoring  
sequence into a furthered thing  
that glides at bridle.

(RR 267)

Combining “fore” with “fright” can mean pre-fear, before-terror, the beginning of being frightened. The mind, will, and emotions are at play in the confusing piece. Each occasion for the mind “contudes the sinews”. “Contudes” is not a word, although both “con” (against) and “tude” (condition, state or quality) are vital elements in the English language. For example, the words exactitude, habitude, concrete, contrast, constancy, are a few terms employing Bernstein’s prefix and suffix. The fusion requires decipherment and translation, and asks for explication. The “mind” is not a mirror, but a “tangled web”, and the language of the poem fashions forms that seem to be meaningful, just as the mind continues to fashion meaning out of “each occasion”. New words gnaw at conventional representations based upon coherence and equilibrium. Moving from the “mind” to “seaweed”, we find “staves drift”. “Staves” can mean staff, stick, or stanza. A clone is busy sequencing the things of the earth into a further thing. Clones, are those who are simply repetitions of the already. Everyone sectors and divides sequence in order to understand an event, or one’s life. Clones do this in such a way “that glides at bridle”. At each moment of the line, numerous choices are made by the reader. Taking “clone” as a pejorative term, and “glide” to mean easy and without friction, and “bridle” as the controlling device for a horse, we come upon a meaning. Stanzas (staves) written (drifting) about nature (seaweed) take reading toward the expected path, is just one reading of this next sentence. Alternatively, we could take clone back to its Greek root and think of it as a twig. As a twig, the sentence gives a picture of things washing ashore, recurring as the waves, waiting for the glide of the tide, bridled by the moon. Reading the abstract lyric becomes an exploration leading in several directions, awaiting dialogue with other readers and readings.

After the sea, the reader is taken to the forest:

While

will shines the suit, whips  
scuff the finish, chained to  
a hope of latrines and forever  
in the forest. Man looks  
for this point in common a woman  
is otherwise sought to, the mismatch  
of juried garments on a terrace  
in 1652 or 2325. See this minute  
stretched to hours yesterday, or  
filtered in a cone of barometric  
lectures, repair the slack  
to stir.

(RR 267)

In the next sentence we have a series of fused images: “will shines the suit, whips / scuff the finish, chained to / a hope of latrines and forever / in the forest”. Several aspects of meaning are at work here. First, “will” and “whips” are personified as acting agents. Their agency is not natural, expected, or surreal. The first two phrases have a similar meter, as do the two parts of the third phrase. The four parts are fused together in one “sentence”, but at the level of the signifier, they move away from any kind of cohesive tie. On the syntactical level, enjambment is not sought. This makes the semantic force even more peculiar. We can offer a reading that proceeds through association and disassociation. The human “will” keeps the outer appearance in shape, but other punishments (of other wills, stronger in fact) do leave a mark. In this power-play there is always hope of disrupting the status-quo (Duchamp’s latrine), of altering the power-plays, even though ‘will’ is outside of culture (the forest). The poem creates new combinations near familiar syntactical logic; the combinations remain in resistance in the mind. When commonality is not abandoned (“Man looks for this point in common a woman”), familiar syntactical logic is (“is otherwise sought to”). The reading of this poem continues to take place in different sectors of language’s scope.

After exploring the mind, will, and nature, Bernstein turns toward the emotions in the

ending of “Forefright”.

These cool tears  
burn rivets deeper than the sky, a  
building twice as high as Babel  
castling compassion’s wan echo.

(RR 267)

Instead of folding back in on itself, in rhyme or meter in order to conclude and summarize, the reading and the reader are thrown outward. Probably the best known of these projections is the word “Babel”. Babel is pivotal in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The Hebrew text concerns a story where singularity of voice is turned into a power of self-naming by the building of Babel. The Hebrew God chooses to confuse the singular language in order to scatter and delimit power. In the Christian text, the scattering is reversed and diversity is maintained. Through Christ, tongues and cultures are reopened for exchange, and brought back to life in the Pentecost event in the Luke-Acts narrative. The word “castling” is both a verb and a noun. As a verb it refers to a move in chess. As a noun it refers to the offspring of an untimely birth, a second or third swarm of bees from one hive, or even a castle. Combining Babel with Castle opens up another tradition of literature. The Castle of Indolence and the Castle of Penitence were central places whereby Knights were tested for their spiritual strength. The weeping Castle is a metaphor that has occurred throughout Western Literature, and adopting this meaning gives an ethical residue to the ending of “Forefright”. The tears relate to the penitent, the one who puts away the “whips” of the world. “Babel / castling compassion” can also suggest that Babel is making a move against compassion or toward compassion. The Hebrew God in the Babel account brings about the tower’s destruction and could be read as a strategic move. Bernstein’s writing does not pin down a specific delineated meaning, but it does raise possibilities and commentary, depending on the reader’s knowledge. The cool tears are larger than Babel, which in its day was one of the largest buildings ever to be built. In other words, the tears are noticeable, and may also be reaching toward the heavens.

The word “tear” also recalls Blake’s line from *Jerusalem*: “A tear is an intellectual thing”.<sup>18</sup> The “tear” in the longer version of the poem is a tear that “shall melt the sword of steel, / And every wound it has made heal.”<sup>19</sup> For Blake it is a redemptive tear: “But the tear of love and forgiveness sweet”. Susan Howe places “A tear is an intellectual thing” in her *My Emily Dickinson*;<sup>20</sup> Zukofsky places Blake’s line in *Bottom* where he is arguing for a specific understanding of sight.<sup>21</sup> Bernstein uses the line in his piece “The Only Utopia Is in a Now” in *The Sophist*. In this utopian parable we find a place where emotion and thinking are deeply divided and cannot ever mix. One of the characters, a woman explains:

“On this block”, the voice was steady now and almost seemed to sing, “what is called ‘thinking’ is absolutely forbidden in the name of what is called ‘emotion’. You’re only supposed to write and say what everyone else knows, and to write and say it in the way everyone else has already heard it. In fact, they issue a manual, *Acceptable Words and Word Combinations* and everyone talks and writes only in permutations derived from this book. It’s no use arguing, since anyone who disagrees is called anti-emotional and, regardless of their gender, is also called ‘male’. This is what makes everything so topsy-turvy. You see, emotion doesn’t express itself only in words we already know.”<sup>22</sup>

Bernstein’s parable ironically critiques standards of writing. What is the function of having standards and acceptable ways of writing and talking? For Bernstein, this kind of conformity reduces what it means to be human. It is often the case that errors in writing, spelling, or diction, are understood to be a sign of mediocrity, laziness, or a lack of intelligence. The parable reveals

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<sup>18</sup> William Blake, “To the Deists”, preface to Chapter III, *Jerusalem*, in *The Prophetic Writings of William Blake in Two Volumes*, ed. by D.J. Sloss and J.P.R. Wallis, Vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), 541.

<sup>19</sup> *The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic and Critical*, Vol. II, edited with lithographs of the illustrated “Prophetic Books”, and a Memoir and Interpretation by Edwin John Ellis and William Butler Yeats, (London: Bernard Quartich, 1893), 224.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985), 28.

<sup>21</sup> Louis Zukofsky, *Bottom: On Shakespeare* (Austin, Texas: The Ark Press, 1963), 200. Bernstein compares Blake to Zukofsky in his “Words and Pictures” lecture. He shows that Blake was moving away from a Newtonian view of the vision and uses Blake’s “Vortex” passage in *Milton* to talk about Pound and Arakawa. Bernstein’s quotations of Donald Ault’s explanation of Blake sounds like Bernstein’s own project (CD 144). In my reading, Bernstein has not claimed any visions, but he has written: “While “sight” presupposes a singled perspective, one sight for all to see, “vision” holds open the possibility for multiple, not necessarily reconcilable, perspectives: not sight of a world already totalized or complete but vision as a process of constituting and reconstituting the world” (CD 141).

<sup>22</sup> Bernstein, “The Only Utopia Is in a Now”, *The Sophist* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1987), 35. Hereafter, the volume will be cited as *S*.

the fear of some that reason and emotion are related, and this fear works itself into the grammar and syntactical rules.

The female character continues by describing how emotion can be discussed and framed. Although Bernstein has the piece set in the future, in a distant land, his statements ring true for contemporary America.

“But people here who talk about emotion don’t really want to experience it, they only want simulations of it in patterns of words they’ve already heard. In other words, they only want to hear what they already know, and they call this repetition, which is after all somewhat comforting, ‘emotion’.” (S 35)

What and why something is rejected always has the potential to be a screen for preserving a particular view of the world. Bernstein’s parable demands that we ask about the use and nature of “acceptable” speech and writing patterns. As the manuals for correct writing continually change, and what is considered an acceptable American sentence and lyric continues to evolve, we may need to ask what is the nature of the unacceptable.

Bernstein’s parody takes a turn toward a fullness of the heart, of science and the arts, of emotion and reason.

“But if you speak or write with the syntax of the heart, saying in words what otherwise cannot be expressed, you’re told you’re against communication and too intellectual. They make an adversary of the mind, forgetting that a tear is an intellectual thing, as Blake said. In fact, the people here are so ideologically pro-emotion they make it into an abstract concept that is more theoretical than the intellectuality they renounce.” (S 35)

Writing from the heart, “a saying in words what otherwise cannot be expressed” does not have to be repetitive. Since “emotion doesn’t express itself only in words we already know”, writing, with the syntax of the heart and not the acceptable manual, is a form of resistance as well as an aesthetic expansion. Since the human can never be contained completely in any acceptable manual, writing the syntax of the heart creates alteration.

The poem “Forefright” begins with a description of the mind and ends with a description of cool tears. In between these constructed boundaries forms are created and placed in a world-

making of consolation, power struggles, and hope. Written from the “syntax of the heart”, Bernstein takes American poetry out of the captivity of the solipsistic lyric toward a new form of writing. Its syntax can be copied, but its repetition will never be the same. The female character continues to explain a new kind of syntax.

“The syntax of the heart may at first seem incomprehensible, because we are only used to pretending to comprehend, which is to say to comprehend with our heads and not our hearts, when we demand the semblance of emotion in words that make us deaf by their unending din of repetition. When we hear the syntax of the heart, in words that may well seem new and strange to ears trained only to understand the old and familiar, we commune with the oneness of us all that is our communal body, language.” (S 36)

We would assume that to write and speak with the “syntax of the heart”, would follow a recognizable pattern. In Bernstein’s parable, the process of coming upon the new and the strange, takes into our “communal body”, language. Language, instead of a writer’s ego, becomes the focal point of following the syntax of the heart. As we have seen in the poems from *Resistance*, the reader is thrown into language in newly measured ways. New measurements, for Bernstein lead not toward a specific pattern of syntax, diction, and style, but toward love itself.

He concludes the parable on this note, and joins a long list of American literature that has sought comfort through a description of the future, such as is found in Hawthorne, Dickinson, Eliot, or Ginsberg.

“Don’t be afraid, gentle writers, gentle speakers, that you won’t communicate or will be too intellectual. Only when such concerns fall away, like calluses from our tongues, and we are left to just to do and be, not trying to communicate out of a fear of being unable to, will language take its rightful place as love.” (S 36)

The comfort, in the parable and within Bernstein’s work, is a belief that an individual can and should bring into language a range of possibilities, instead of simply repeating the already traversed. The push is not just toward a freedom from rules, but toward a willingness to foster invention, discovery, and new measurement within the sentence, word, line, or image. The ending of “Forefront” delights the ear as it takes the reader into a mental battle among habits and codes of

legitimatization. The lines resist immediate contact, yet invite readers to explore the “communal body”.

The poems in *Resistance* are built not for solitary mastery by a single reader, but for community discussion and participation. Several times, through the above reading, a different semantic path could have been taken. Reading then remains open, but also reveals what each reader can and does bring to the pursuit of meaning and signs. At times the abstract lyric only registers from the sound of the words bouncing off and toward each other. At other times, the challenge of norms gives the poems, and reader, direction. Bernstein’s volume *Resistance* confirms poetry’s ability to generate meanings, and shows that plural readings can and will happen at different registers: the physical sound, the referential span, the created logic, the new metaphors, to just name a few. At times, these registers bump up against each other as in the ending of “Forefront”. In other readings and times lines like “less loss a sear of part or chill / Remain in stance relation’s stripped” (RR 256) in the poem “Consideration”, keep the registers moving. Bernstein’s resistance in creating new space for reflection and participation offers a cleansing. Here resistance is not only a negative enterprise, but an agency of and for invention.

From the perspective of Bernstein’s next two volumes of poetry, *Islets/Irritations* and *The Sophist*, *Resistance* is a tight composition, and its graphic range is minimal. *Islets/Irritations* also published in 1983, recalls the range of his earlier work *Poetic Justice* (1979), and side by side with *Resistance* we can see Bernstein building a poetry freed from the burden of repeating only one tradition. He has shown both in *Poetic Justice* and *Veil*, that his poetics include the visual, the sonic, and the spatial. The visual can be in terms of the graphic and typographic. The sonic can be in the sounds of words, and forms of rhythm (meter, alliteration, assonance), and the spatial can be in the design of the page. As we saw in *Resistance*, the visual and the spatial were minimal, whereas the sonic/aural were completely foregrounded. The space, the sound, the shape of the poem, are all aspects of Bernstein’s *apoetics*.<sup>23</sup> Meaning involves a constant interaction between the semantic/pragmatic and the planar/linear. Bernstein’s syntax and his logic reshapes the contours of grammar creating new terms, new uses of terms, new demands on reading.

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<sup>23</sup> Bernstein uses this term on a single page after the contents page in *A Poetics*. The volume of critical essays is just *a* poetic, not *the* American poetic. Using “a”, Bernstein accepts his place among many others who are working in poetics. To have the single page with the work in all small caps, *apoetics*, keeps the reader prepared to understand that every poetics is only *a* poetic. *A Poetics*, ii.

The first moments of *Islets/Irritations* (with a cover design by Arakawa), are a sign to the reader that older reading maps are at their limit. The visual and the verbal alternate in dominion and inspiration throughout *Islets/Irritations* pushing the limits of the language of poetry. At times, the push is a simple re-working of poetic tradition as in the concluding lines in the prose poem “Cue”: “But I am / not afraid of a thing itself, only the image it casts.”<sup>24</sup> In the poem “Neutral Density Filter”, Bernstein inscribes older dogmas in new contexts.

...No ideas  
but in housing projects  
(pineapples). Rolling like  
feel real actual as  
torsions scratching at qualities  
of direction.

(*I/I* 33)

In “was, rain, dish”, a three word per line poem following the same format as “The Bean Field”, we read a collection of words for a hundred and forty-eight lines without a break. Toward the end of the piece we read:

break, off, for  
let, lines, same  
so, what, mind  
additional, satisfying, your  
someone, who, reminds  
always, could, send  
afar, kinds, feels  
halt, call, silent

(*I/I* 16)

In the poem “Contradiction Turns to Rivalry”, we are given different statements. The statements

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<sup>24</sup> *Islets/Irritations* (New York: Jordon Davies, 1983), 4. Hereafter cited as *I/I*.

reveal the interior reality of daily political situations.

Comraderie turns to rivalry when 12 medical students learn that only seven of them will be admitted to the hospital.

(I/I 25)

A woman tries to keep her individuality after marriage.

(I/I 27)

Bilko feverishly schemes for a way to escape the summer's heat.

(I/I 27)

The volume bumps along, each page differing from the next, standing in a large contrast to the focused look of *Resistance*. The volume does not contain a central, stylistic theme, other than the ongoing exploration of different forms and design for poetic technology.

The visual field opened through abstract expressionism encouraged many artists to experiment and investigate the space of painting and the relations between linguistic and non-linguistic forms of meaning. The abstract work of the expressionists in New York moved painting away from representation toward being an object in and of it itself. It was the form of painting freed from the burden of representation:

The moment painting lost figuration it became more and more an aspect of architecture, which was vaguely sensed by abstract artists, who still saw painting as representation, but not really made clear until minimalist incursions into architectural space.<sup>25</sup>

Once artists were freed from only one kind of sign or form of presentation, other modes of meaning, such as spatial design, photos, objects, letters, could be and were investigated. We can see this very clearly in Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*. The viewer sees a physical chair, a photo of a chair, and a definition of a chair, hanging as a painting. Arakawa/Gins more than any other Conceptual artists have taken on the task that Williams demanded: a new measurement of meaning. In their ongoing exhibit *The Mechanism of Meaning* they provide these new

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<sup>25</sup> Jon Erickson, *The Fate of the Object: From Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art, and Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 101.

measurements of meaning: spatially, graphically, aurally.

Madeline Gins, as she describes the exhibit, finds a limitation in the book as a cultural artifact. She finds a way to explain and interpret her own project with Arakawa by discussing the technology of the book.

Although order of mention suggests order of appearance in this page-by-page limited format which imposes a sense of progression, what is happening on the canvas has the potential to be happening all at once. The shifting of attention in that case takes place over and over again on the same plane. There is a locating. There is a locating of this locating. To call this reading would be to miss many of the possible points of alignment. Placing, taking place, replacing are subsequently tangentially (almost aurally) occurring on each other. Once locations are made on this opened and measured tract, further tangents to these tangents may be thought of in the same place. These will be seen to be tangents which a literary text alone would not be able to make accessible.<sup>26</sup>

Arakawa's cover of *Islets/Irritations* takes Bernstein's poetry into Arakawa/Gin's project. In reference to the older understanding of "conversation", these artists are sharing the same space. The word as such has always been visual, and Arakawa uses lines from the first poem in his cover design. Innovation in "poetry" is placed alongside innovation in "painting". Two ways of world-making are fused. Taking words from the first and title poem of the collection, the design layers letters causing them to look out of focus but still legible. What signs, looking 'clear', are without vagueness? The title of the volume (which is also the opening poem) is in black, underlined with an arrow pointing to the right. Midway in the arrow, another line dips down to the left at about 60 degrees. In the middle of the composition, a small loop is placed in/over the words, and then it splits off to the right into fine distinctions (looking somewhat like a split-end). The line travels off to the left around to the back cover where it ends in a circle, with another circle of the same size just after it. The back side does not contain any words. At the bottom on the front, "Charles Bernstein" (also in black letters) is underlined with an arrow exactly like the one under the title, only it points off to the left. The out of focus words are in purple, the background grey, and Arakawa's black thin curved line, in the middle brings a balance to the composition.<sup>27</sup> (Figure 4.2)

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<sup>26</sup> Madeline Gins, "Arakawa's Intention (to point, to pinpoint, to model)" in the catalogue *Arakawa* (Düsseldorf: Städtischen, Kunsthalle, 1977), 25. Afterwards cited as *A*.

<sup>27</sup> The reprint version of *Islets/Irritations* in 1994 (New York: Roof Books), has a cover that looks like a Rothko

The volume, published in New York by Jordon Davies, at a time when Arakawa/Gin's work was well known, gives the reader the opportunity to look for further connections between these artists. Is Bernstein a Conceptual Artist? A Conceptual Poet? Is the cover a mere ornament, or are there further connections between the two? Nicolas Calas in his exhibition notes to the 1971 show at the Galleria Schwarz in Milan, reads Arakawa's work in terms of time and space: "Arakawa combines different interpretations of space in terms of time: the storytelling time of the Japanese scroll, the reading time of the written page, and the instantaneity of photography".<sup>28</sup> In short, Arakawa combines in the canvas divergent sectors of meaning making. His work with Gins brings word, graph, design, and image into the same space. By mapping meaning in this manner, they are hoping to provide a map, a new measurement, new borders of knowing, feeling, and perceiving. Gins writes:

It is Arakawa's intention in these paintings to bring the thinking field into the plane of vision. All (most?) human endeavors including art and literature bear evidence of a "thinking field" (awkward expression) having been at work, but none has so far found the means of presenting it in all its aspects. It is the neutral (?) presentation of the thinking field itself (its group of activities) which is being hoped for here. (A 17)

It is Arakawa's style, method, to use for this purpose a full combination of visual and verbal languages. No one before him had truly used these two worlds of languages in the concerted effort necessary for one to fully augment the other. (A 17)

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painting in blue and orange.

<sup>28</sup> Nicolas Calas, *Arakawa: dal 9 novembre al 7 dicembre 1971 alla Galleria Schwarz, Milano* (Milano: Galleria Schwarz, 1971), 4,10.

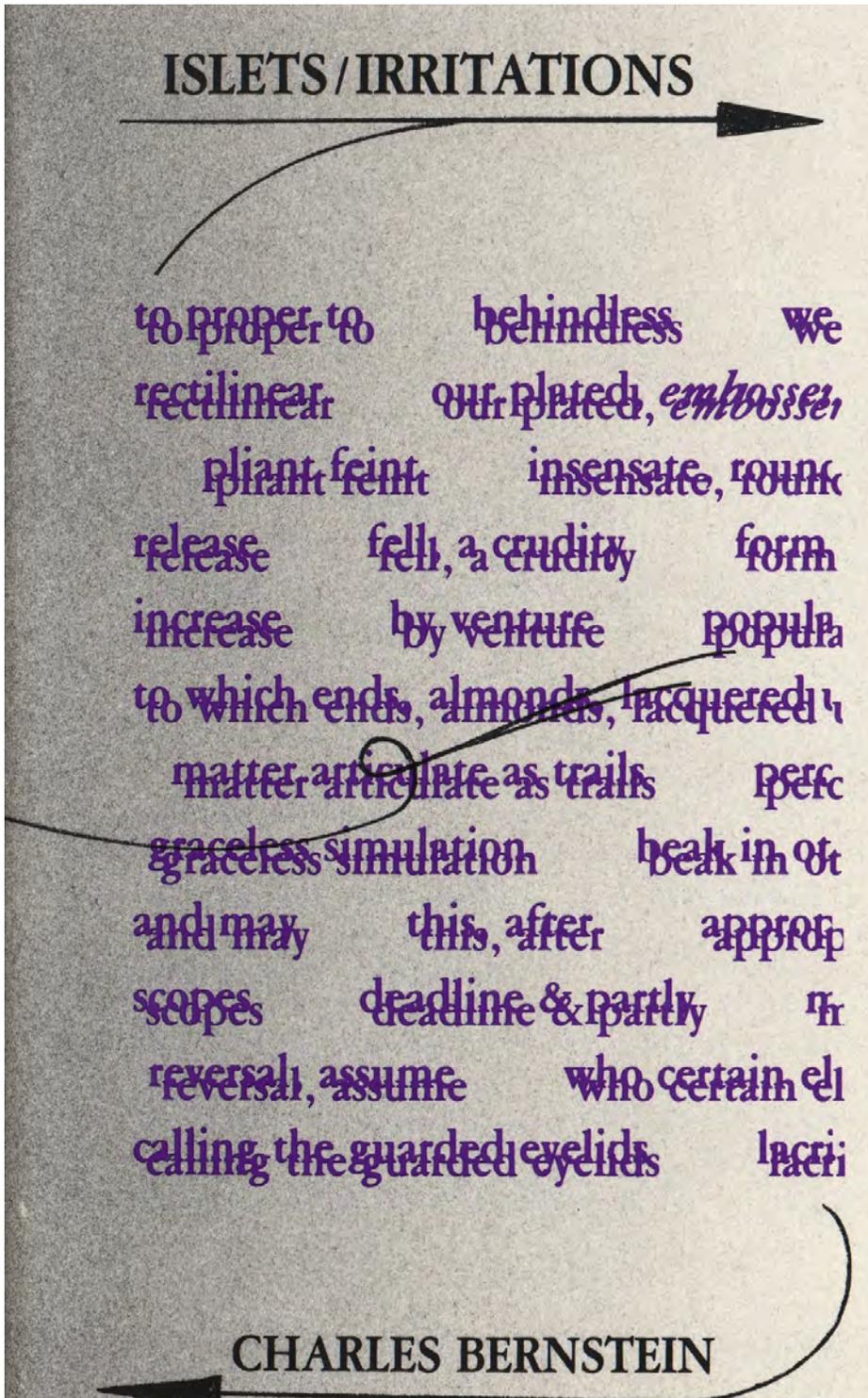


Figure 4.2. Charles Bernstein, *Islets/Irritations* (1983). Cover design by Arakawa.

Two years before *Islets/Irritations* Bernstein and Susan Bee wrote an essay on Arakawa for *Beauty and Critique* entitled, “Meaning the Meaning: Arakawa’s Critique of Space.”<sup>29</sup> For them, the word enters the canvas as “an architecture of visual thinking” (CD 184). They see the presence of written texts in his work giving space to the “deeper conviction that neither the verbal or visual realms are self-sufficient, and that this schism or dualism is an underlying problem within Western thought and art” (CD 185). Gins, having collaborated with Arakawa for over two decades states, “Arakawa’s intention has never been to isolate abstractions arbitrarily (whether concept or form), but to give the layout of the field in which they might occur” (A 10).

Bernstein and Bee see Arakawa critiquing the traditional notion of space developed by Descartes whose over-rationalization of perspective and depth (space itself) has been built into the grid. For Bernstein and Bee, Arakawa re-maps and transforms concepts of space and artistic practice dependent upon the Cartesian grid by employing “different, seemingly competing, systems of visual organization within the same work” (CD 190). Because of Arakawa’s new measurement of space, his “paintings” are not to be “immediately apprehended: they demand to be read, in the sense of puzzled over, thought about, sifted through” (CD 194). Gins writes furthermore that

Arakawa’s position rejects the work of art as a self-contained gesture expressive of a single individual. Asking the viewer to be a collaborator, he is looking for a meeting point of consensus through collaboration. It is to the idea of a subject he speaks rather than to the ideas of a single subject. Yet he relies on art for a certain feeling of nonsense. (A 20)

Having written their essay in 1981, Bernstein and Bee revered his work as an important critique of space, as a unique “architecture of visual thinking”, and as an important cultural work in mapping the mechanisms of meaning. The Guggenheim show *Reversible Destiny: We have*

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<sup>29</sup> CD, 184-195. Also see Bernstein’s review of the exhibition book *The Mechanism of Meaning L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 3:11 (1980): 9. Further connections include Gins’ appearance in “43 Poets (1984)”, ed. by Charles Bernstein, *boundary 2* Vol. 14: 1,2 (1985/1986): 95-98. See as well, Arakawa/Gins in Bee’s journal (edited with Mira Schor) where they answer a set of questions concerning the location and value of visual art with a line, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* 2 (1987): 3.

*decided not to Die* in 1997 recognizes Arakawa/Gins as important and vital meaning-makers.<sup>30</sup> The importance is attributed to Arakawa's insightful reading of Duchamp's retinal vs. literary model, his collaborations with Gins, and their unique mapping of meaning. In short, Arakawa/Gins have explored contemporary philosophical, linguistic, and spatial issues unlike any others in the plastic arts.

Bernstein and Bee in the early 1980s recognized the value of Arakawa's ability to provide new measurements for seeing and reading space.

Thus we are presented with examples, artifactualized specimens, of the different atmospheres or "scales" or "textures" of meaning that suggest the range of possible modes—swatches of perspective, grids, cubist analytic and synthetic space, diagrammed optical illusions, maps and charts, constructive hypostasizing, geometric abstraction, modified abstract expressionist elements (all over fields, linear layered surfaces, erasure, bleeding, drips), conceptual ideations, the variety of decorative surfaces. In this multi-discourse art, any style, any technique, can seemingly be included into the investigative cataloguing. (CD 191)

What Arakawa presents to their reading eye is not collage, juxtaposition or parataxis, but a range of possible modes located and beginning in one single space. The viewing demands a multifarious response. The canvas can contain various atmospheres that are not forced into a unitary vision. Arakawa's work appeals to Bernstein and Bee since meaning is not confined to only one artifact. They have an understanding that meaning has many mechanisms, and consequently, Arakawa becomes an important pioneer and innovator.

The opening poem in Bernstein's volume is "Islets/Irritations". I quote from the beginning:

to proper to    behindless    weigh in a    rotating,  
rectilinearour plated, *embosserie des petits cochons*  
pliant feint    insensate, round    bands of immense

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<sup>30</sup> See, Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins, *The Mechanism of Meaning: Work in Progress (1963-1971, 1978) based on the method of Arakawa* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1979); Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins, *Architecture, Sites of Reversible Destiny: Architectural Experiments after Auschwitz-Hiroshima* (London, New York: Academy Editions, 1994); and Shusaku Arakawa, *Reversible Destiny: Arakawa/Gins* (New York: Guggenheim Museums Publications, 1997; distributed by Harry N. Abrams).

As we have already seen, Arakawa takes these words and layers the letters until they seem out of focus. He does not take the complete line:

to proper to    behindless    we  
 rectilinear    our plated, embosser  
 pliant feint    insensate, roun

He takes the signs as objects, doubles them through layering, and stops before the end of the line. Through his design, Bernstein also keeps the words or phrases as objects within his aesthetic grammar. Each moment reads phrases in various grids. We can try and ignore the spatial design in order to find a flowing narrative. We can take each phrase as a semantic or phonetic object. We can read from a planar, linear, or circular perspective. We can accept these islets, but doing so throughout the whole volume, irritates standards, reading expectations, norms.

During the early 1980s new measurements of meaning and signification were impinging on cultural forms. Both Arakawa and Bernstein have shown in the past twenty-five years that working, with an understanding which accepts at a fundamental level the breakthroughs and changes in philosophy, science and perception, does not necessitate a destruction of past forms, but offers a modification, re-interpretation and development of those forms. Change is an essential element in all constructed artifacts, and both Arakawa and Bernstein follow Williams' suggestion that "//unless there is / a new mind there cannot be a new / line the old will go on repeating itself with recurring / deadliness".<sup>31</sup> In *The Mechanism of Meaning* and *Islets/Irritations* we are confronted with the prospect of a new mind. Arakawa can read and incorporate the visible word within his work through his unique appropriation of the work of Marcel Duchamp. Bernstein looks to many of his American forebearers such as Stein, Williams, and Cummings, in order to open up the mechanisms of poetry.

Bernstein has not been the only poet interested in Arakawa's work. Robert Creeley had

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<sup>31</sup> Williams, *Paterson*, 50.

Arakawa/Gins come to Buffalo in November of 1979 for a seminar entitled “Imaginations of Person”. Arakawa’s film *For example* and his collaborative work with Gins *The Mechanism of Meaning* were the subjects of the seminar. Creeley’s review and summary of Arakawa/Gins work is slightly different from Bernstein and Bee. Creeley sees Arakawa/Gins work as a consolation to the problems of knowledge and “intense self-preoccupation”.

The intense self-preoccupation of the arts in our time has usually been thought of as a defensive and socially hostile conduct, insofar as the presumed audience has been, for the most part, significantly ignored. In short, there are no publicly evident institutions—either religious, as in the past, or widely political—that serve as sponsors or patrons for a collective information. There is, therefore, no “center” in that respect. Even more to the point, however, is the intellectual self-consciousness of this period in which “humanness” would seem not only the most dominant but altogether determinant factor in its powers to appropriate “reality”. Therefore Arakawa’s and Madeline Gins’ emphasis upon “escape routes”, however wryly the term may echo civic plans to evacuate various urban populations out of cities under nuclear attack, is entirely appropriate for the “place” our conceptual patterns and modes of conduct have made.<sup>32</sup>

Escape routes, for solipsistic fetters, require mapping. Arakawa/Gins have done this, and because the routes can be neither linear nor singular, “one must recognize the absolute necessity of collaboration insofar as the information will not resolve itself as a linear and/or “singular” pattern” (39). Creeley finds support for Arakawa/Gins’ work in Rene Throm’s catastrophe theory as well as in Williams’ attacks on “a presumed containment in *Paterson: Book Three, II*” (40). Creeley does not emphasize their project as an (new) investigation of the mechanisms of meaning, but rather as a consolation for those who once lived in a kingdom of stable assumption, but who now are in exile. This consoling drama, set in terms of epistemology generated from the self, keeps Creeley tied to older forms of subjectivity and meaning as “the crisis of consciousness” (40). Bernstein and Bee, viewing epistemology as a social and individual construction, find knowledge rooted in engendering and engineering. These early 1980s readings are slightly different, not in a divisive manner, but in a manner marking Bernstein’s unique and innovative *apoetics*. Creeley’s self remains attached to projection and knowing. Bernstein’s self, as a social construction, a social flesh, takes Arakawa/Gins’ *The Mechanism of Meaning* as the mechanisms of meaning: visual,

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<sup>32</sup>Robert Creeley, “Some Place Enormously Moveable”, *Artforum*, Vol. 18 (Summer 1980): 40, 37-41.

verbal, spatial. This grid, seen from a post-Cartesian perspective, gives Bernstein's poetics a range beyond Creeley's, even though they share and have shared a similar space metaphorically and literally.

Creeley, in his article quotes these words of Arakawa as a way to situate the mind.

I have begun to consider the construction of a situation for a parallel, reminiscent of the situation of Frankenstein, as a strong way to re-pond to the nonsensical urgency of subject matter. So, 'Moral/Volumes/Verbing/The/Unmind' nos. I and II are examples which point this way. I want to construct for subject and subject matter the presence they have been denied for centuries. (A 37)

For Arakawa the emphasis is on the construction of different parts in order to bring into existence something never before accomplished. The work he refers to is full of philosophical, aesthetic, and perceptual issues. No longer confining the subject to one specific place, in only one mode of reflection, Arakawa takes elements of perspective, narrative, space design, and geometry and gives the viewing subject the presence of its construction and formation. In 1983, Bernstein in his lecture for the "What is a Poet?" writes:

I propose Dr. Frankenstein's creation as a central image for a poem because, in the blasé sophistication of the humdrum, there is all-too-great a willingness to domesticate that which is beyond our control and in so doing cede that measure of responsibility we can assert. This may begin to suggest the inadequacy of a word like *imagination* to convey what is going on in a poem, or the kind of poem I'm interested in, since it's all too adequate to describe most poetry. (CD 352-3)

Bernstein views the Frankenstein metaphor as an alternative to imagination in contemporary poetics. The metaphor seems to pick up on the out of controlness of Frankenstein after his creation. This volatility is preferred over the current domestication of meaning and subject matter within poetry.

These considerations hold open the possibility of a maximum *differentiation* of parts—style, vocabulary, syntax. You start with the integrity and autonomy of parts and find the whole in them. What made Dr. Frankenstein's creature a

monster was just the reverse—starting with a preconceived whole and tailoring the parts of it. (CD 360)

Instead of consolation of a past age, Bernstein finds in Arakawa/Gins fellow mapmakers. As with Williams, Bernstein too finds inspiration in the visual arts; however, the visual has moved on from cubism to include other sectors of meaning besides perspective. Arakawa/Gins build a new space for the subject. Bernstein provides newly measured space for the subject that had previously been denied. He is holding open the “possibility of a maximum differentiation of parts” and expansion of what poetry can be. All of these artists are providing layouts of the poetic field while simultaneously being critical of dominant modes; but, their criticism is not the driving force or focus of their productions. They are driven by exploration and possibility. Their intention is not focused solely upon what has already reached a limit, even though they both comment on what is not working. As inventors, they move beyond pointing out what is wrong, into the joy of offering and seeking solutions. Since Arakawa/Gins, Bernstein, and Bee have all taken up the task of invention, it is no small wonder their divergent paths have crossed. Neither Bernstein nor Arakawa are working in isolation, and *Islets/Irritations* shows once again how American poetry has fostered an ongoing relationship with the international artist.

*Resistance* presents itself in singular form: the poems are more or less in the same shape and size. In *Islets/Irritations*, the diversity of the line is re-inscribed within a volume that moves toward the painterly. If *Resistance* resisted the expectations of the lyrical address, then *Islets/Irritations* resists the summarization as a ‘volume’ of poetry. No matter which poems are chosen, there remains others, slightly different in form and design. The highly visual nature of the poems requires a photocopier in order to re-present the word-works. At every level, description entails selection and exclusion. As Arakawa/Gins have it, “A Line is a Crack” like a summary is a crack, a dividing line.<sup>33</sup>

Bernstein addresses this diversity in an interview with Tom Beckett in the journal *The Difficulties* (1982). He is careful to say that he does not want to locate his praxis into one procedure, because this would “rapidly be reduced to simply another fetishized style” (CD 388). Bernstein, by moving the discussion toward an understanding that meaning is produced through

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<sup>33</sup> Number 7. “Splitting Meaning”, *The Mechanism of Meaning* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979), 39.

style, demands a new measurement of reading's range.

Perhaps this would allow for a greater interchange among different types of writers, and indeed other cultural workers, instead of the disastrous movement toward increasing specialization and parochialization of reading. (CD 388)

Reading itself, when not grounded in a particular style, allows for diversity: "It is not the valorization of style, and certainly not a style, that is fundamental, but the recognition that meaning is possible only through styles" (CD 388). What is remarkable about the next line in the interview, is that it ties together quite wonderfully the project of Arakawa/Gins with Bernstein's poetics:

The poem needs less to be viewed as a fixed end, an *object d'art*, and more as a transforming agent whose exemplary features are to be used by the reader in her/his researches into the nature and products of meaning. (CD 388)

Bernstein finds the text and the reader in an ongoing pursuit and participation into meaning itself. The Bernstein text transforms assumptions of how meaning can be constructed. The reader is given the opportunity to search over the many ways poetry builds meaning. Instead of receiving a singular finished object, awaiting a limited reception, Bernstein is looking for a writing and reading that goes into the mechanisms of meaning itself.

Bernstein, at the "What is a Poet?" conference, introduces a new term, "dysraphism". He introduces this term in order to explain the kind of poetry he thinks is possible, and to support his idea that meaning is possible only through styles. Fusing together many different parts, he creates the poem as a "4-D image".

*Dysraphism* may be a useful term in this context. Medically, it would mean a congenital misseaming of embryonic parts—*raph* means seam, a rhapsodist being one who stitches parts together, that is, a reciter of epic poetry. So different parts from the middle, end and beginning—it's a 4-D image—are fused together to become one entity. (CD 359)

The concept of four dimensions is largely due to Einstein's revolutionary work in physics.

Bernstein refers to science not to justify poetry, but rather to show the limitations of a 3-D perspective. The dimensions of beginning, middle, and end are separate parts that do not have to be infused with a teleological determinism. Also by referring to poetry as 4-D, Bernstein promotes a change in reading. His poetry demands a 4-D reading: verbal, visual, spatial, and an interaction between the semantic/pragmatic and the planar/linear. The fourth dimension arrives at the time when the reader meets, fuses, and shares the same space with page of the poem. As Bernstein has argued, readers bring different perspectives, knowledge, and interests to the task of reading, and this gives the poem a further dimension. The poem's fourth dimension comes from the reworking of its parts, the beginning, middle, and end, into a new measured object. The text is not bound, just as the (potential) reader is not bound by one time or space.

The term dysraphism is a title of a poem in *The Sophist*. At the bottom of the first page, the reader is given a definition of the term. In a post Conceptual art scene, the entrance of a definition in aesthetic space is not uncommon. We are told in what journals and countries the term has been used, about its absence from some dictionaries, and its relations with other words. The scientific use and meaning of the term is birth defect, whereas the root of the term is prosodic, a mis-seaming ("Raph literally means 'seam', so dyraphism is mis-seaming—a prosodic device!"<sup>34</sup>). Given horizons for the word instead of boundaries, the reader's relationship to the act of defining is altered. The definition, and his method of defining, serves as a window into Bernstein's color palate of meaning, and as a guide and example of what reading many aspects of Bernstein's poetry is like.

Due to Bernstein's dysraphismistic procedure, in just a few lines the reader is taken into a research and discovery of meaning. Below are a few lines taken from a latter part of the poem, "Dysraphism".

can't but sway, hopeful in my way. Perhaps  
portend, tarry. The galoshes are, e.g.,  
gone; but you are here. Transient cathexis, Doppler  
angst. And then a light comes on

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<sup>34</sup> S, 44.

in everybody's head. "So I think  
 that somewhere we ought to make the point that it's really  
 a team approach." Riddled  
 with riot. What  
 knows not scansion admits  
 expansion: tea leaves  
 decoy  
 for the grosser fortune—the slush  
 of afternoon, the morning's replay. Prose,  
 pose—relentless  
 furrier.  
 Poem, chrome. "I  
 don't like the way you think":  
 a mind is a terrible thing to spend.  
 That is, in prose you start with the world  
 and find the words to match; in poetry you start  
 with the words and find the world in them. "Bring  
 soup in—very hot." "You  
 couldn't find your way  
 out of a blanched potato." Silence  
 can also be a tool  
 but it is seldom as effective as blindness.<sup>35</sup>

Here is a moment of the poem where slang and obscure, unknown words are seamed together. To participate as readers, we are thrown into a dictionary. "Portend" from the Latin means to stretch. One dictionary defines portend as an omen of something, and another dictionary sees portend as a foreshadowing of something. In obsolete form, portend is defined as "to signify, or mean". In March's thesaurus "portend" is defined as "to foretoken", and the reader is directed to the term

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<sup>35</sup> *S*, 48-9. The poem contains no breaks or stanzas and is 160 lines long with varying line length. I have made the decision to quote lines in full when referencing a section of the poem. This effect can be disorientating, but I think remains near to the creative force of the poem.

prophecy.<sup>36</sup> In another dictionary, portend is related to portentous (sharing the same Latin root), where the word is described as an adjective for prophecy in this manner: “Full of portents or strange happenings”. “Perhaps / portend, tarry...”. Tarry also has a large semantic domain: from linger and sojourn, to remain. Tarry can also suggest a delay in acting, or to wait upon something or someone.

We can read the lines in a several directions, but most of the directions will live with a postponement of meaning, where omens are delayed and strange happenings linger, perhaps. On the other hand, possibly the future is already clouding into the present. When we read poetry, the realities we await are further connections and re-descriptions. Poetic creation contains both, and we are attracted to procedures that are continuous and participatory. Many of us refuse, as Arakawa/Gins, “to die”. If death is closure, then life is poetry: “Perhaps / portend, tarry...”. Meaning waits and sojourns for and near us, or building toward the poem: “The galoshes are, e.g. / gone; but you are here.”

Instead of only using symbols of a rich literary tradition, Bernstein also uses the dictionary as a mediator between himself and his readers. Every word has synchronic and diachronic range, so going to the dictionary is not necessarily unique or innovative, but a uniqueness does stem from the context and location of Bernstein’s words. Often when a word has multiple meanings, the surrounding context assists the reader in a making selection. In the case of “Dysrhythm”, regularly the surrounding words, phrases, or lines cause the word to maintain numerous defining options. When his poetry is referred to as difficult, what is difficult? Is it more difficult to know literary allusions since Beowulf? Where does one attain this knowledge, this kind of memory? Is this the only kind of person who is only allowed to read poetry? By using the dictionary as a mediator, Bernstein opens the door for anyone who wants to work with language, to jump in and see what happens. Does knowledge come from this? Are our literary sensibilities addressed?

gone; but you are here. Transient cathexis, Doppler  
angst. And then a light comes on

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<sup>36</sup> Francis March and Francis March Jr., *A Thesaurus Dictionary of the English Language*, (Philadelphia: Historical Publishing Co., 1910), 798.

(S 48-49)

If we forget or override the fact that this poem arrives in lines, we might miss a visual combination that pertains to the meaning already gained by following Bernstein's leads. The first line can be divided into two sections moving from flat unstressed single signs to stressed three syllable words: from flat line to a wave. The first section of the line embeds a contradiction: here/not here; the second section does the same: leaving/taking (possession, measurement). A couple of lines become a rich reverberation of possibilities, of questions: "Doppler / angst"? For navigation, the Doppler shift must be taken into account changes in frequency of the received signal, from that of the transmitted signal. Satellites mark this gap. In other words, the heavens guide the space between the reception and transmittance of signs. The angst for Bernstein in this line is a simple question: How are the heavens doing? In the film *The End of Violence* (1997) Wim Wenders explores this very issue: Instead of navigating ships, can we navigate ethics from the sky?

Further, the Doppler angst is that space between reader and writer. Bernstein has left his work open to anyone who can read.

in everybody's head. "So I think  
that somewhere we ought to make the point that it's really  
a team approach."

(S 49)

Business language near scientific signs maybe riddled with riot. Not knowing metrical analysis of verse, moves the reader and the writer toward the expansion of new forms, not toward repetitions.

Prose,  
pose—relentless  
furrier.  
Poem, chrome.

(S 49)

Bernstein states in his first interview with Beckett that he is against the image procedure of surrealism. He prefers a critical, analytical image—one that is “extricably bound up in making visible a fabricating mechanism, so that the manufacture of the fabulous and the ordinary are indistinguishable parts of desiring production...” (*CD* 392). He does not want us to move away from sound, although he sees metrical analysis as limiting.

The overall “sound” of the work is actually more important relation to listen for than the linear prosodic sequences, since the relation of the “chords” reinforces the sound resonances and echoes creating an intense overall vibration that adds a dynamic dimensional depth to the sound of any given linear movement. (*CD* 397)

The images built by the sounds give descriptions of both. This time we are not sent to the dictionary, rather we hear the sounds of fabrication. Moving to another kind of description we are told “in prose you start with the world / and find the words to match” (*S* 49). To pose, of course is to await iconostatis. How does the “relentless furrier” sound out this image, or represent one relating to prose? In the present generation, with the exception of some remote pre-industrial locations, the furrier traps the world (animal) and then poses. In previous generations, the furrier built the covering for the body to the world.

There is a fine line between commentary on the world, and the creation of the wor(l)d. What takes the reader by surprise in this poem, is that quotations from the world are interspersed into the wor(l)d of the poem in order to make new combinations like:

Poem, chrome. “I  
don’t like the way you think”:  
a mind is a terrible thing to spend.

(*S* 49)

The Doppler angst can take affect within a short space of two words, as in ‘poem, chrome’. Chrome can be read in a variety of ways: chrome as a sound that rhymes with poem, chrome for a car, chrome as a alloy to encourage resistance from corrosion, chrome as a tanning agent of hides. Now, we find a link in the images. Do you want leather or posing furs? The poem then continues

with a quotation from the outside world, and a re-thinking of the United Negroes College Fund: “A mind is a terrible thing to waste”. We also find additional intersections in the form of quoted table directions throughout the poem. Here are two more:

it comes from policy not love. “Fill  
the water glasses—ask each person  
if they would like more coffee, etc. “ Content’s  
dream. The

(S 45)

parade. “Refill platter and pass to  
everybody”. A  
sound is a sum—a sash  
of seraphs. Bored loom.  
Extension is never more than a form of content. “I  
know how you feel, Joe. Nobody likes to admit  
his girl is that smart.” “I feel how you know,  
Joe, like nobody to smart that girl is his admit.”

(S 46-7)

In “Dysraphism” we hear the music of the mechanism of meaning: dictionaries, common speech, and Bernstein’s new measurement of the sound, shape, and space of the poem. The reader moves in and out of the dimensions creating and receiving the Doppler angst. Each line is embedded in Bernstein’s “4-D” image, where different discourses are placed together each containing its own beginning, middle, and end. Bernstein does this not simply to disrupt singular monolithic prose and poetry, but to explore new ways of functioning for the language of verse. We move from directions on meal service, to commentary about angels: “A / sound is a sum—a sash / of seraphs.” This moment of alliteration is followed by a very flat, two word sentence. “Bored loom” could mean a tired impending distortion, or a fatigued weaving. A precise translation for these lines cannot occur. This imprecision gives the reader large, spacious rooms for reflection and discovery,

and creates a host of images beyond Bernstein's or any critic's control. We can imagine a maître d'hôtel giving instructions to a new waiter. We hear sounds summing the sash of seraphs, those above "dysraphs", and we feel the fatigue of weaving, of textual construction.

Having won the respect of the small press establishment, Bernstein's work had begun to receive the detailed attention of the academic community by the time *The Sophist* was in print. All of the major American theorists and critics of the "avant-garde" had in some form addressed Bernstein and his work, in either general sweeps or close readings. Many of the critics, who had investigated Bernstein's work, had not only altered their approach, but also the form of criticism itself. Jerome McGann, in a critical essay on Bernstein's work, created three characters having a dialogue: Anne Mack, J.J. Rome, George Mannejc.<sup>37</sup> Each of the characters comment about Bernstein's poetics, and McGann's views are never directly revealed. We can quote his characters, but are left with the problem of fictional versus expository verification. The essay is critical, but fictional.

In the dialogue J.J. Rome sees in Bernstein a new development in American writing: "Not since Pound and Eliot have we seen poets like Bernstein (or Silliman, Barrett, Watten, and several others) who set out to investigate and polemicize these topics with the same range and critical intensity" (451). The topics to which Rome refers are: poetry, writing, and reading. McGann's Rome also finds Bernstein difficult to quote: "... in Bernstein's texts we do not find it easy to isolate or define passages for quotation (or commentary) because they are always undergoing a continuous transformational process" (449). Rome continues on concerning the poem "The Klupzy Girl", which is also formed out of multiple intersections of discourse like "Dyraphism":

That quality of the writing calls attention, once again, to Bernstein's belief that poetry is not doing "as much as poetry can do" if it merely serves as a vehicle for some (parabolic/referenced) "meaning". Its chief function is to illustrate its own resources for creating meaning and the possibilities of meaning. Thus the poem's poetry is not easily isolateble in fixed units. Though Bernstein's writing is riddled with gaps and disjunctions, they function as his little deaths of verse, eroticizing

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<sup>37</sup> Anne Mack, J.J. Rome, George Mannejc, "Private Enigmas and Critical Functions with Particular Reference to the Writing of Charles Bernstein", *New Literary History*, Vol. 22:2 (1991): 441-464. Hereafter cited as "Private Enigmas". On the contributors page, the writers are described in this way: "Anne Mack, J.J. Rome, and George Mannejc collaborate frequently on studies of contemporary American writing. They all live and work in Charlottesville.", 491.

and re-energizing the language: “The music in my heart I bore / Long after it was heard no more.”<sup>38</sup>

This reading of Bernstein indirectly criticizes the role of prose criticism about poetry and the nature of examples. Quotations normally serve as a support for an expository argumentation, and Bernstein’s poetry resists this strategy. Many of Bernstein’s poems are filled with conflicting non-unifying elements, and a quotation can be extracted that would seem a complete, singular thought. Although, within the context of the poem, the completeness is only partial. Linda Reinfeld must have felt this in her book *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue* as she secured permission to quote the entire poem of “The Klupzy Girl”, feeling that summarizing Bernstein’s poetry would harm her reading.<sup>39</sup> McGann has fictional characters discussing the difficulty of quoting Bernstein. He reads Bernstein’s poetry as a death of the kind of verse that hides, ignores, or neglects its own “resources for creating meaning.” Poetry becomes as critical as prose. Living in the laboratory of invention, Bernstein’s verse becomes the space where re-description and new measurements can occur.

Writing on Bernstein’s *The Sophist*, Bruce Campbell quotes, footnotes, and writes along with Bernstein’s text in a disorienting way (there are 14 pages of review and 9 pages of footnotes). Here is an example:

At the heart of composition (for Bernstein) is opposition. Of course, the tension can itself be a way of bringing things together, though not in the sense of making them agree. “Com (op) posing” (*CD 51*--Bernstein’s italics) complicates meaning, then because meaning is oppositive. “Finally, //one type of stymied grace to invert //onto an exterior as holding,//tiling of an horizon made flesh” (38). Yet, owing to the “opposition,” it also involves repudiation: “Life is what //you find, existence is what you repudiate” (44). “Com(op)posing” actively questions its own composing, opposes its composition and composes its opposition, and unsettles a unitary meaning. But what constituency is possible if we “repudiate // don’t replicate” (169--Bernstein’s italics)?<sup>40</sup>

Campbell takes the critical structure of footnoting and blurs the boundary between text and

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<sup>38</sup> “Private Enigmas”, 449-450. No reference is given for the quoted verse.

<sup>39</sup> Reinfeld, “Bernstein’s Pharmacy”, in *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue*, 50-85.

<sup>40</sup> Bruce Campbell, “A Communion In What We Share”, *Riddle Moon* 10, 5:2 (1991): 116, 113-35. Seven is the number of the footnote in the article.

supplement. His text re-reads unitary expository meaning and prefers a variegation of interweaving sources of discourse. Campbell sees Bernstein working within his own laboratory to create opposition, but also to create forms of writing which show the limitations of the opposition. The critical reception of Bernstein's work evokes changes in the expository style. McGann finds it necessary to have several different interlocutors in order to critically examine Bernstein's poetics; Reinfield sees it necessary to quote in full a poem that is not foregrounding visual poetics. All alter critical discourse in response to Bernstein's work. Old orders are recalled, expanded, and rejected. New measurements, as well as re-measurements, are made and brought into the ongoing critical discussion of Bernstein's work.

Measurement is an ongoing issue in Bernstein's work. How, in the American 1980s, would a poet write a poem about order? The idea of order is a recurring motif in the English language: from Greek Architecture to Christian ecclesiastical office. At its base, the word order has been defined as a rank, row, series, a measured sequence, and a giving of orders (OED, 1971). Bernstein's poem "The order of ..." in *The Sophist* gives the reader a visual terrain in order to think through order itself and all its range of meanings.<sup>41</sup> In relation to Arakawa/Gins, the first few lines can be read alongside their *The Mechanism of Meaning*.

The order of a room.

Of rows of spoons.

A shifting.

a<sup>u</sup>tote|ic

(hypostatization of space, the relations detemporalized)

(S 84)

The word "autotelic" is spaced up and down in the original. Arakawa, in *The Mechanism of Meaning*, shows a row of forks and states: "Re-arrange these forks" (72). For Arakawa, hypostatization of space is the combination of the vanishing point and blind spot where spatial

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<sup>41</sup> Charles Bernstein, *The Sophist* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 1987), p 84-87. Hereafter cited as *S*.

relations are altered.

If the thinking field can be thought of as a matrix (originally womb), the seed of any conception may be thought of as the point and the hypostatizing which occurs across its transversals, its transitivity as the formation of the conceiving organ. (A 26)

“Hypostatization”, which means to treat or regard a concept or idea as a distinct substance, like “order” is such a strong word. Autotelic is a philosophical term that means the adjective meaning (of an event or entity) has within itself the purpose of its existence. Its antonym is heterotelic, where the purpose is outside the event or entity.<sup>42</sup>

Interpreting Bernstein’s lines brings the concepts of autotelic and heterotelic back into the discussion of meaning, origins, order, and unlimitedness. The word “autotelic” in the poem has its own end attaining substance in its own space, without being bound to the linear line. The line in parentheses could be read as a commentary on the entire poem, as a grid by which each line is interpreted. The space of each word attains its own substance. Conventional poetic relations are dislocated from their temporal order; consequently, the poem “The order of...” serves no higher purpose or order. Nevertheless, the poem has a range of functions, all containing a view of “order” within themselves. If we push each of these lines to be read together, then the purpose of the lines becomes heterotelic. If the reader does not do this, and releases the expectation of an interconnected, teleological poetic, then each line works as a distinct substance. “And so on”, as Kurt Vonnegut wrote in *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969).

Bernstein’s way of spacing the words on the page gives us the ability to move from object to object or to read them as a progressive order.<sup>43</sup> Either way, looking at the line we can ask: How are relations detemporalized? What relations? Bernstein’s word choice, graphic design, and placement give the phrase a meditative nature that is not grounded in a particular ego, but nevertheless invites the ego of the other to engage in imaginative possibilities.

a geometric order

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<sup>42</sup> Thomas Mautner, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 40, 189.

<sup>43</sup> Arakawa writes: “If i [sic] could use words as objects that would be something”. “Notes on my paintings—What I am mistakenly looking for”, *Arts Magazine* Vol. 44:2 (Nov. 1969): 27.

an cosmetic order  
a temporal order  
public order

state $\Leftarrow$ ----- $\Rightarrow$ process

Ordering of a meal.  
Of a hammer & boards & nails  
The ordering of a segment, or means. Of a slight.

(S 84)

Bernstein continues to build around the word “order”, and with his state/process design, he transforms both concrete and conceptual grammars into his apoetics. A substance of space is now formed: the space of the page of the poem, the space of the book itself, or the space of the reader reading the poem. Explaining the world through a postulate world, the reader and the text read signs housed in the architecture of fonts. In a smaller font the line reads: “Idea of explaining the visible world by a postulated invisible world” (S 84). Forms are realized knowledge, and the smaller font is like the whisper of “a sash of seraphs” (S 47). In electronics and electrical engineering, the  sign relates to a direction of flow which goes both ways. The state and the process of poetry are now in flow.

The first “I” of the poem speaks of ordered space by cordoning, by bluing, by the capaciousness of bleating. The last ordering is given a descriptive: “the pander of intention” (S 84).

I order the space by the cordoning  
Of the \_\_\_\_\_ by the bluing of  
\_\_\_\_\_, by the capaciousness of a  
bleating, the pander of intention.

(S 84)

Bleating can be read as a complaining voice, and in this case a voluminous one, and “the cordoning of \_\_\_\_\_ and the bluing of \_\_\_\_\_” (S 84) is left open. “Cordon” has been defined as a “guarded line between affected and unaffected districts to prevent intercommunication and spread of disease or pestilence” (*OED*, 1971). The terms cordon and blue have a combination in the sky-blue ribbon worn by the Knights-grand-cross of the Holy Ghost: The Grand Cordon, the Blue Cordon.

And of course, there is the edible cordon-bleu. The Hebrew story of Samuel and Saul also comes to mind: “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears?” (I Sam. 15.14 *NRVS*). Saul was to make an order of the nation of Israel, but unable and unwilling to do so, he lost the kingdom, to the ordering of a (then) child.

	E
as a peg on which to hang.	U
	D
	O
	X
	U
	S
the orderliness of letters	a gloom of shellac
of the gravity of the fog	

“There are some solid facts that are indisputable”

the ordering of a lemon  
a pear  
a translucence. the orderliness  
of a failing.

(S 85)

After the ordering of the “I”, a “peg on which to hang” appears. In slang terms “peg” can mean reason. More important than giving a variety of allusions to each of these hypostatations of space, is the kind and idea of reading promoted. Does Cordon Bleu have anything to do with the poem? What about Moon craters, or the orderliness of letters and failure? The first quotation from the outside world speaks of facts. The pleasure of looking at this design is in our beginning to look at order, as a series of possibilities, instead of as one fixed reality. As readers, we begin to think of ordering. Normative poetic logic is not in place. Rather, points, shapes, references, and departures, are present and waiting. As we enact, we create and accept the Doppler angst.

In comparison to his other visual works, this poem gives a different, reflective kind of space. The visual is in service of the verbal, but the verbal is purely visual as in the case of the

(classic) reference. In references and directions to other texts, we have an ordering of ancient “bibliotheca”. The visual grid of reference appears. Throughout the poem references are made to Greek philosophy, as well as to notions of the mechanics of the universe.

*The Fabric of the Heavens*

(S 87)

gEOmEtry  
rEgArDEd  
As  
ImmAnEnt

(S 86)

Bernstein, referring to the pre-Socratic philosophers, writes of the universe’s origins:

He says that it is neither water nor  
any other of the so-called elements,  
but some other *aperion* nature,  
from which come into being all the  
heavens and the worlds in them

(S 85)

Indirectly, another speaks of the order of the universe: it is neither located in water or the elements, but in an unlimited nature. “He says” may be the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander who believed that the origin of all things was unlimited (*aperion*). Order is no longer of a meter, page, government, or language, but of the universe itself. Moving to the pre-world, the un-bounded, the unlimited, the indeterminate co-principle of being re-writes “The order of...”.

The poem ends in-between flux and logos, walls and a bale of wire. After making a slight reference to Silliman’s “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World”, Bernstein takes order to praxis.

Disappearance of the ———: the world no longer

conceived of as united by its immanent structure, a universe in which change is reduced to relations among *flux* and *logos*—there are some who call it *indifference*—components straining to adapt to one another, fighting each other, coming apart, a periodicity in phenomena alone insufficient to generate a visual differentiation of the various *archia* as well as their ultimate collection into a single layered structure.

wall in wall out

The order of a bale of wire.

(S 87)

“The order of...” ends with walls and wire: maybe even a prison, or a barricade of some kind. The “disappearance” section, working with and against orders of grammar, writes of loss: something has disappeared, and now the world is no longer conceived of in a certain way. The phrase starting with “a universe in which change is reduced....” could be a description of the former universe understood as united by its autotelic nature. If so, then change is a process between *logos* (state) and *flux* (process). Where the lines move now is indeterminate: “there are some who call it indifference”. Is the indifference the relation between *flux* and *logos*? We are taken quickly to a descriptive of a “periodicity in phenomena alone insufficient / to generate a visual differentiation...” or “a / single layered structure.” Bernstein seems to be arguing for an explosive collection of particulars that resist unity and coherence, but nevertheless generate meanings, structures, and process. His rejection of cohesiveness is a rejection of a particular kind of unity, not a unity that accepts and builds within diversity. Order as a concept has gone through remarkable changes, and now is returning once again in physics, and here in Bernstein’s poem. This time “order” is not a single process, confinable in only one line of English, but rather it is working at various levels, grids, grammars, and spatial dimensions.

If we step back from Bernstein's poetic density, we can imagine a complaint that immanent structure is not enough to fill a particular poetics. What is needed, is a heterotelic structure which can map with greater efficiency, the un-unified straining components. What is needed is a verbal and visual order/structure, a logos and an icon, to map the archai, and to find the bindings for a new kind of book.

Not from books or from nature alone will the authority of the future artist be drawn. I think the murmurings of concept or body to describe recent art movements indicate misapprehensions, partial gleanings of what is in the air. Just as the philosopher of the past would be embarrassed to be known simply as a "concept man", so will be the artist of the future... The book as it has been is not enough, for despite its other qualities it is the world of diminished senses. Nature is not enough. God is not enough. Philosophy is not enough. Art as it has been in its storytelling phase is no longer enough. When something is no longer enough, we come to say of it that it is dead.

This doesn't mean that we no longer want to make books or art for example. It simply reports a realization that these methods no longer draw us close enough to the point. But why, when a discipline is "not enough" must we say it dies rather than to make it "more than it was"? Simply, if it was not enough, there should be more to it.

If we begin to think in this way, perhaps one day soon we will come to think of death, in every sense, as old fashioned. (A 34)

Bernstein has never written on the death of poetry, the death of the referent, or the death of the author, although, he has shown how these categories are not enough in their present form. For Gins, and I would suggest for Bernstein, death is old fashioned. To say that death is old-fashioned is a re-interpretation of limitations. It is the same move the inventor makes concerning the limitations and failure of cultural artifacts. Gins is poignant in her critique. If we say something is not enough, why say it dies, instead of seeking to make it "more than it was". Bernstein, as have many others, takes the visual into the verbal, just as Arakawa took the verbal into the visual.

Bernstein has done this as a way to map meaning making, and to show the mechanism of poetic possibilities. He answers Williams' position, "without invention nothing".<sup>44</sup>

Williams understood that without invention the line would not change. The change for him would come through new measurements (Bernstein's "Doppler angst"), and understanding that the consciousness is altered, develops, and is effected by its surroundings. Mimesis and creation remain. At times, Bernstein's mimesis, going for a truer real, incorporates cultural changes as a form of defense.

I want to suggest that poetry, insofar as it charts the turbulent phenomenon known as human being, must reflect this in the nonperiodic flow of its "chaotic" prosody: clock time (regulated metrics) will not do, nor will structures to formal or structural (rationalized) stability or geometric conceptions of shape. As the stress of the world impinges on form, the uniformity of the flow rate is disrupted by interference patterns caused by bifurcation and oscillation.<sup>45</sup>

When Bernstein charts the human being ("turbulent phenomenon"), the line must change. Clock time and geometric conceptions of shape also relate to the kinds of logic built into traditional lyrical poems. Accepting the stress of the world does not mean a complete rejection of older, established forms. It does mean though, that poetry can also investigate, as painting has, the dimensions of space. Bernstein, like Williams, ties together mimesis with creation. At times, we are taken into a truer real, and at other times we are taken into new kinds of syntax: visual, iconic, aural, symbolic. The space of poetry has changed, like all of our other forms of measurement and observation. Old borders and walls have been crossed. Former maps await the museum. New grids await continued exploration.

*Resistance, Islets/Irritations*, and *The Sophist* each show the different ways Bernstein has worked as an inventor: that is coming upon, discovering, fabricating, the wonder of words, sentences, lines, within the traditional page. His work demands the "multidimensionality of

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<sup>44</sup> Williams, *Paterson*, 50.

<sup>45</sup> "Optimism and Critical Excess (Process)", *Critical Inquiry* 16:4 (1990): 844, 830-856. Also in *A Poetics* in a slightly altered form, 150-178.

reading values” (CD 358) he claims the technology of poetry has the ability to produce. In the process of producing such dimensionality, Bernstein answers a question Williams asked over sixty years ago while writing on Stein.

How in a democracy, such as the United States, can writing which has to compete with excellence elsewhere and in other times remain in the field and be at once objective (true to fact), intellectually searching, subtle and instinctive with powerful additions to our lives?<sup>46</sup>

Williams’ question is how writing in a democracy can continue to be vibrant. Remaining deeply committed to the notion of an American poetic democracy, where all forms have a place, Bernstein creates an aberrant space for poetic possibility. His work does show an ability to be true to the workings of language, not to just accepted “facts”.

Williams’ answer to his own question remains applicable not only to Bernstein, but also to American poetry. He relates the shape of poetry to a life practice:

It is impossible without invention of some sort, for the very good reason that observation about us engenders the very opposite of what we seek: triviality, crassness, and intellectual bankruptcy. And yet what we do see can in no way be excluded. Satire and flight are two possibilities but Miss Stein has chosen otherwise.<sup>47</sup>

In 1930, Williams felt that American creativity was looked down upon, and he looked to American ingenuity and its numerous inventors for inspiration. He states that writers of literature must start thinking like inventors and innovators. Williams fills out his notion of invention as he discusses Stein. He reveals the plane to which Bernstein will ascend in offering an amazing array of possibilities.

But if one remain in a place and reject satire, what then? To be democratic, local (in the sense of being attached with integrity to actual experience) Stein or any other artist, must for subtlety ascend to *a plane of almost abstract design to keep*

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<sup>46</sup> “The Work of Gertrude Stein”, in *Gertrude Stein Advanced: An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. by Richard Kostelanetz (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 1990), 22.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

*alive*. To writing, then, as an art itself. Yet what actually impinges on the senses must be rendered as it appears, by use of which, only, and under which, untouched, the significance has to be disclosed. It is one of the major problems of the artist.

<sup>48</sup>

Williams weaves together being local and democratic with the “sense of being attached with integrity to actual experience”. The ascent to abstract design keeps form open, alive, and rules out one specific way of writing to dictate what American writing should be.

The problem of remaining local, inventive, democratic, and intellectually searching, is one of design, of words on the page. In the poetry we have read in this chapter, Bernstein is not writing like Stein or Williams but he is responding to the issues they found invaluable. For Williams, invention was an ongoing concern for American verse, and Bernstein taking up the task brings about some very powerful additions to our lives. Bernstein goes beyond Williams in his “abstract design”, as he investigates ways of creating meaning outside the ego’s response to the world. Bernstein’s abstraction brings to poetry a truly new measurement of the lyric that not only includes the world and the self, but awaits the reader’s work of construction, of coming upon, of invention. Bernstein has responded to the changes in the mechanisms of meaning in a way that does not allow for the focus to be simply regulated to its formal design or its active reception. Poetry as an object returns, but is newly measured (again).

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 22. Italics added.

- i. teaching space: constructing contexts , how invention alter academic spaces
- ii. classroom: 'the perception of failure and the desire of alteration can take many forms'

iv. punctuation: pause and effect

iv. 'a republic of letters'

v. "They do not appear, as yet, to write good poems"

vi. 'anything which may serve...'

*If we agree to all the creation of knowledge to be a part of the classroom, then participation will be the starting point for grading instead of the manner and skill of engagement. (263)*

*Our conceptual space has changed in the last hundred years, so that we enjoy and are stimulated by the complicated nature of reading to know, reading to see. (300)*

## Chapter 5

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### Teaching Possibilities: The Amnesia of Invention

*Before writing, read Chaucer.*

Ron Silliman<sup>1</sup>

Topic sentence-However, but; as a result.

*Blah, blah, blah. It follows from this.*

Concluding sentence.

Charles Bernstein<sup>2</sup>

Charles Bernstein is an American innovator, and within all of his roles, poet, critic, editor, collaborator, he has re-charged each space with design and possibility. To ignore any one aspect of his output is to ignore a vital aspect of what his work means to American writing. His work as a teacher also shows his inimitability. In this chapter, we will look specifically at his teaching and editorial practices, and how Bernstein has embraced these critical and didactic endeavors. He continues on as a harbinger within the confines of the academic paradigm, and maintains an effulgent and assiduous style. Contrary to the theoretical assumption that an innovative, inventive practice cannot be maintained whilst in a professorial role, Bernstein once again surprises and moves in several directions at once.

The concept and practice of invention has served us as an ordering principle for reading and interpreting Charles Bernstein's work. The concept of invention from which I have drawn comes directly from the field of engineering, and the study of the abundance of made things surrounding our perceptual field. Bernstein is an inventor and a cultural engineer: he understands problems, fashions solutions, offers experiments, and does not work

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<sup>1</sup> "from *Paradise*", *boundary 2*, Vol.14: 1/ 2 (1985/1986): 14.

<sup>2</sup> "Three or Four Things I Know about Him", *CD*, 25.

in isolation. The terms “invention” and “artifact” have a range of meanings that precede science. In Rhetorical treaties, these terms have a life relating to narration, correctness in language practice, the process of discovering problems, and the construction of arguments.

In the autumn of 1999, Bernstein gave a reading for David Lehman’s class at New University in New York City. During the class, a member of the audience referred to Arakawa/Gins’ work *Reversible Destiny* as “epistemologically ironic”. Bernstein momentarily agreed with the label, but did so to highlight the differences between his and their projects. For Bernstein, their project is large scale and involved in building things. He applauds their projects, deeming them “good”, but clarified that his work is on a smaller scale. Gins sees poetry as “just words”. Bernstein sees poetry as “light”, “tangential”, “provisional”, small-scale.<sup>3</sup>

*Reversible Destiny* shows that Arakawa/Gins have continued to expand the physical constructions based on *The Mechanisms of Meaning*.<sup>4</sup> Although Bernstein has not taken his project, until very recently, beyond the level of the physical page, his work is both tangible and tangential.<sup>5</sup> Both terms refer back the Greek word *tangere* meaning “to touch”. Bernstein employs geometric tangents in his critical thinking (examples) and tangible material effects (visual and spatial) in his poetics. The touch of Bernstein’s light-ness is, according to both Retallack and McGann, a cleansing agent of the senses.<sup>6</sup> Using invention as a metaphoric map

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3 “#16 –Interview with David Lehman”, in “Charles Bernstein”, *The Cortland Review: An Online Literary Magazine in RealAudio, Monthly Features*, (April 2000), [www.cortlandreview.com](http://www.cortlandreview.com). The web site is aliterary magazine that allows vocal recordings. Besides having a monthly issue, the review also has monthly features on writers. The Bernstein feature took place in Lehman’s class, where he read from *My Way*, and then answered questions. Each reading is numbered. Bernstein’s interview with Lehman is last and is number 16.

4 In *Reversible Destiny*, Arakawa/Gins give an account of several of their projects of nonmortality. Question six of “*Reversible Destiny Questionnaire*”, offers a glimpse of their refusal to die: “Shouldn’t cities be dedicated to the perpetuation and further invention of human life? What if simply by walking through a city you could study all you need to know and more? Would you not like to live within surroundings specifically constructed to elicit from you a great number of possible ways—one more surprising than the next—for you to exist as a sensorium?”, 318.

5 Bernstein, in the show “*Poetry Plastique*” which he curated with Jay Sanders for the Marianne Boesky Gallery, presented a collaboration with Richard Tuttle, entitled “*With Strings*”. The piece is described as “a poem-sculpture composed of letters strung from a spiraling brass line and grounded in a terra-cotta font filled with the poem’s roots.” *Poetry Plastique*, curated by Jay Sanders and Charles Bernstein (New York: Marianne Boesky Gallery and Granary Books, Inc., 2001), 40.

6 Joan Retallack, “*The Meta-Physick of Play L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E U.S.A.*”, *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, Vol. 12: 1 (1984): 213-244. She writes in conclusion that language poetry, including Charles Bernstein, “provides a powerful and much needed antidote to the ubiquity of the bland and innocuous in so-called ‘mainstream’ literature, and may indeed help to ‘phisicke’ as Nasche put it, our ‘faculties of seeing and hearing.’ As the sum total of persons sensitive to language rises, so does the general welfare, or so some of us

from an engineering perspective, poetry (re)builds the senses toward a larger perceptual field. Bernstein builds spatial relations, whereas Arakawa/Gins have begun to build spatial boundaries. His poetics catch the script off guard, allowing the reader to move about in the various cities of the text.

In Bernstein, we also find an interest in invention as a rhetorical strategy. We can see this in his poetry, in his teaching, and in his critical writings. Notably, his early essay “Writing and Method” (1981) shows an awareness that modes of expository writing design results. He questions the definitions of philosophy as a form of “clearly explicated arguments whose appeal is to the logic of validity” (CD 221), because this definition is melded to,

*the mechanism of distinction and discrimination itself* that allows for certain languages practices to be legitimized (as correct, clear, coherent) and other language practices to be discredited (as wrong, vague, nonsensical antisocial, ambiguous, irrational, illogical, crude, dumb...). (CD 223)

Bernstein, trained as a philosopher who wrote his senior thesis on Wittgenstein and Stein, continues to investigate how forms of language shape what is possible. The concept of “clearly explicated arguments” is naturalized to the degree that many forget and ignore that writing described as “clear” is a metaphorical description. If philosophy cannot pursue modes other than the ones legitimized, then philosophical inquiry is (de)limited.

Bernstein sharpens his view by re-calling the historical nature of “explicated arguments”.

contemporary expository writing edges close to being merely a style of decorous thinking, rigidified and formalized to a point severed from its historical relation

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believe. For this we need continually to reinvent the fine art of language play” (244). In a journal that Bernstein condemned in his MLA Williams talk as an agent of “official verse culture” (“The Academy in Peril: William Carlos Williams Meets the MLA”, CD, 247, 244-251) an essay by Retallack investigates and creates many of the critical themes of surrounding the ongoing study of Language writing: the relations between men and women in language poetry, the inadequacies of the labels, the re-inscription of forgotten languages, creation of new ways of re-reading the already, and new ethical demands upon the reader. By re-inscribing the non-standard word “physick” (n. Medicine, especially a purgative. Wholesome or curative regime or habit, OED) with a standard sound, into the spelling of “meta-physick”, she opens up a way to think about metaphysics beyond mental functions. Instead of etymologies, she transcribes the word’s orthographic map into a new register. Instead of maintaining a safe distance between the material under review and an inflexible theory, she takes the room given to her by the works, and builds new knowledge. Her play of cleansing re-invents Shklovsky’s defamiliarization and along with Perloff she provides a critical exploration that moves the study and reception of Language poetry in 1984 beyond the attempts of Pinsky or Altieri.

to method in Descartes and Bacon. It is no longer an enactment of thinking or reasoning but a representation (and simplification) of an eighteenth-century ideal of reasoning. And yet, the hegemony of its practice is rarely questioned outside certain poetic and philosophic contexts. On this level, I would characterize as sharing a political project both a philosophic practice and a poetic practice that refuse to adopt expository principles as their basic claim to validity.

For both poetry and philosophy, the order of the elements of a discourse is value constituting and indeed experience engendering, and therefore always at issue, never assumable. (*CD 221*)

Bernstein's critique is that contemporary expository writing only repeats and refines a former innovation. The "essay" is no longer trying to find a way forward, or construct a path, but it is written in a form that proves the writer understands the rules of composition as defined by legitimate powers. Bernstein argues from this angle, because he believes that how words are formed shapes not only their content, but frames the projection of their meaning. Both poetry and philosophy depend upon the "order" of the elements, and as we have seen, Bernstein takes order not as something to be blindly obeyed, but a force to be explored, understood, questioned, and investigated.

If Bernstein follows his own project, is he lead into investigation? How are these modes built? What is the history of their procedures? When do these methods come into power? Investigation is the root term for invention in French, and one of its roots in English. Further on in the essay, Bernstein defines the site of activity.

Part of the task of an active poetry or philosophy is to explore these instruments by a critique of their partiality and to develop alternatives to them that can serve as models of truth and meaning not dependent for their power on the dominating structures. (*CD 224*)

The instruments to which he refers are the "chosen instruments of power". As in ancient rhetoric, the study of invention is the study of alternatives, models, and responses to potential problems. Instead of valorizing the "expository principles" that are grounded in the "logic of validity", Bernstein suggests that building and developing alternatives outside their power-base is, by definition, an "active" poetry or philosophy. We have seen the application of this "active" writing in the preceding chapters. Now it is necessary to examine how the emphasis upon invention alters the current academic space. In this investigation, the history of teaching

composition and the history of teaching creative writing will serve as a contextual frame for investigating Bernstein's own critical, editorial, and aesthetic practices. We will also examine the role which writing innovation plays inside the Academy.

Building on the resurgence of rhetorical and composition studies in the United States in the 1970s, Sharon Crowley wrote a book devoted to understanding the role of rhetorical invention in the period defined as Current-Traditional Rhetoric.<sup>7</sup> Her view of invention follows:

From a practical point of view, then, invention can be defined as the division of rhetoric that supplies speakers and writers with instructions for finding specific arguments that are appropriate to a given rhetorical situation. (2)

The category of Rhetoric named "invention" consequently "goes in and out of fashion because it is intimately tied to current developments in ethics, politics, and the epistemology of whatever culture it serves" (1). Theoretically,

invention becomes the study of all the possible means by which arguments or proofs can be discovered and developed. (2)

And so theories of rhetorical invention must be articulated with current thinking about how people change their minds or make discoveries—that is with some currently accepted theory of knowledge. (2)

Rhetorical invention involves an understanding of how change occurs, where problems (potential and actual) are located, and how to go about offering solutions. Crowley's argument throughout the book is that in the United States, the study of rhetorical invention has slowly and clearly been eradicated from the University curriculum. More specifically, under the reign of current-tradition rhetoric, invention has been neglected, shunned, and censored.

A major concept in the teaching manuals of Rhetoric throughout the eighteenth and

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<sup>7</sup> Current-Traditional Rhetoric is a term coined by Daniel Fogarty in 1959 to describe the dominant view of rhetoric from the end of the eighteenth century until the early to mid twentieth century. All quotations are from Crowley's book, *The Methodical Memory: Invention in Current-Traditional Rhetoric* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990).

nineteenth centuries, was that the mind worked as a collector of data that was stored rationally, and accessed through memory. The belief that the mind worked like the scientific method caused the theories on invention to center “upon the introspective mind of a sovereign self-aware author” (96). This view of the mind and its workings programmed the nature of writing and speaking practices. The eighteenth century rhetoricians “posited that authors had access to the contents and processes of their minds by means of a retrospective survey of memories” (96). According to Crowley, the beliefs about the nature of the mind caused the reduction of rhetorical invention to the selection of a topic. A topic, no less, that was manageable, divisible, and within the writer’s capacities. Invention was about selecting a manageable topic, not about proposing ways of responding to a given situation.

Since knowledge was understood as being generating from within a single consciousness, and this consciousness was how nature itself worked, then one’s intellectual fiber was assessed by one’s ability to write rational discourse. The process of introspection could not be seen, but the student’s writing could be read by the teacher. In fact, “students’ texts were the only available evidence that they were thinking straight. Thus their teachers concentrated attention on how a text ought to look when it reflected straight thinking” (96). Furthermore, she argues that “[s]ince invention was a matter of forecasting what would appear in writing, current-traditional textbooks identified revision with the correction of mistakes” (148).

The model also collapsed the composing process into a neat linear progression: select, narrow, and amplify. This gave rise to the ubiquitous current-traditional assignment: “From the following list, choose the topic that most appeals to you. Construct a thesis, develop support, organize your ideas, and draft an essay—in that order” (Packer and Timpane 44). Such an assignment generates all the enthusiasm of a visit to the dentist for a root canal. More to the point, it seriously distorts the nature of the writing process as this is practiced in the world outside of the current-traditional classroom. The notion that writing itself might generate ideas, instead of the other way around, was simply not to [sic] available to teachers whose only model of invention was the one promulgated in current-traditional textbooks. (148)

Her argument throughout the book is that rhetoric is a response to a situation, not simply a mastery of certain grammatical skills. Furthermore, Crowley concludes that the teaching of rhetoric in America has been ironically more interested in correction than in learning how to

respond to differences. Rhetoric has existed in Western culture as a way of responding to differences. This ability to respond was the first canon in classical rhetoric, but in American times it slowly narrowed. Crowley's quotation of Bain (1887) summarizes one aspect of the problem: "the direct bearing of the Rhetorical art is, of course, not Invention, but Correctness; in other words, polish, elegance or refinement" (152).

If an argument followed the rational set of procedures, agreement was secured, not by pertinent solutions for particular circumstances, but by the subject adhering to the principles of rationality.

Despite these efforts to ground rhetoric in some epistemological given, however, the fact remains that such a set of rules—which could prescribe how agreement is to be reached among all interested parties to any debate whatever—is probably not to be had. And even if it were, the rules would still not tell us what to do after general agreement is reached. Deciding what to do, after all, is a very different thing than securing agreement among concerned parties. And deciding what to do is the province of rhetoric. (165)

Crowley clearly shows the history and the modes of philosophical inquiry that have gone into the building of the rhetorical principles for over a hundred and fifty years, and she demands that her readers investigate the nature of teaching composition and writing in American universities. For her, the absence of rhetorical invention takes composition studies in the direction of writing for production's sake only. Consequently, composition "becomes the manipulation of words for its own sake" (168): maybe not for its own sake, but to prove that one is intelligent.

Thus I have serious reservations about the ethics of limiting writing instruction to the current-traditional model. Because it standardizes and forecasts how the writing process should develop, the current-traditional theory of invention elides differences among rhetorical situations, denies the location of any rhetorical act in a given community, and transfers discursive authority away from individual rhetors and onto the academy. (167)

Hence, the amnesia of invention in American educational practices in the humanities reveals an ethical and aesthetic reality. The differences, and the response to differences built into the concept of democracy, require invention: differences and response are the mainstream of the

political landscape, but have not been mainstreamed in the teaching of composition and rhetoric.<sup>8</sup> Her book takes the history of rhetorical pedagogy as the starting point for investigating how American academic culture has understood the mind, student's abilities, and the role of persuasion. Rhetorical treaties for Crowley are constructions of the culture. For her, students have been pushed away from the local context and learning how to convince one's peers to take action, toward achieving correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar regardless of the topic. The role of invention has been completely reduced to the repeatable, and not to the discoverable.

Katherine Adams' *A History of Professional Writing: Instruction in American Colleges* (1993) adds another strand of history to Crowley's analysis of rhetorical invention's demise.<sup>9</sup> Long before Crowley found the reduction of rhetorical invention problematic, two of the pioneers of teaching composition as a method of repetition and memorization, Hill and Wendell, showed frustration with the teaching model. Adams recounts that both professors saw these courses making the "students slavish devotees of forms and rules" and "rule-instruction had engendered writing that is" in the words of Wendell, "tediously hard to read" (23-24).<sup>10</sup> Hill and Wendell both taught at Harvard in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and were proponents of current-traditional rhetoric. Their books *Principles of Rhetoric* (1878) and *English Composition* (1891) went through numerous editions and shaped the early approach of teaching freshman writing courses into the 1940s.

Both men were dissatisfied with the results of teaching composition. Instead of examining their methods, as Crowley has done, they suggested another kind of course be offered: Advanced Composition. This course was not to be primarily about the rules of grammar divorced from the living issues of the day, but for the preparation of becoming writers and critics in the real world. For Adams, they

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, in the very first Congress of the United States a bill to amend the act concerning invention in the arts and sciences was implemented into law, now known as the patent's office. "An Act to Promote the Progress of the Useful Arts", U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1789-1791 (Philadelphia: Childs & Swain, 1790).

<sup>9</sup> *A History of Professional Writing: Instruction in American Colleges: Years of Acceptance, Growth, and Doubt*, (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1993). All subsequent quotations are from this text unless otherwise noted.

<sup>10</sup> See the entire section "The Limitations of what a Freshman Course Could do" (22-26), where Adams discusses at length the early problems and structure of teaching composition at the university level.

intended these advance courses not as more review of the four forms of discourse, paragraph rules, and grammar, but as advanced work that would introduce students to new voices, subjects, genres, and audiences. In these classes, Hill and Wendell could establish a workshop setting and foster collegial relationships among writers, and thus encourage students to approach their work as professionals. (37)

Harvard accepted the idea of an advanced composition course for juniors and seniors. The courses were both successful and popular. The success, according to Adams, was due to the attention Hill and Wendell gave the students, as well as to the freedom to write upon topics of their own choosing. Reading, writing in class, revision, peer review, daily writing requirements, were all central elements to the course. Other colleges followed this turn of the century move, but by the 1950s the institutionalization of upper level composition classes proved to be a difficult and insurmountable task. Agreement on the number of essays required, manner of grading, and purpose of the course could not be attained.

Since our notion of advance education implies a narrowing, an immersion into one specific field, this general type of advance writing instruction never found a secure niche. For upper-division writing instruction to flourish, it would have to be designed by specialists who could gear it to one student population and to one type of writing. Advanced composition, in the hands of Barrett Wendell and any many others, has been a challenging course, great because of its lack of precise definition, because it can be shaped and reshaped by individual students and classes and teachers. But that lack has caused it never to be firmly institutionalized: the general advance composition course did not become the primary paradigm for advance college writing instruction. (60)

The advanced composition class was unable to be successful because so many of its elements depended upon the atmosphere of the class, the personality and skill of the professor, and the problems produced by unique writings. The advance composition class did not succeed because its was built upon a different kind of rationality: one that was not based in the repetition of forms, rules, and correct procedures.

Adams shows that the very first writing courses offered in American universities were a reaction to the reduction of rhetorical methods and procedures in composition courses. In the

late 1800s the first creative writing classes were taught as a reaction to dominant modes, methods, and rules of current-traditional rhetoric. The required writing class for all incoming freshman fostered an atmosphere that reduced writing to the memorization of rules, and the repetition of set exercises. The growth of the university, the diversity of students, and lack of teachers educated in rhetoric and writing, lead to repeatable decontextualized rules and standards. Although early poetry and creative writing classes focused on form, they also allowed for experimentation, variation, planning and pre-writing (invention). Many different kinds of writers were involved in the pre-1945 courses, as teachers (Eliot, Frost), and as students (Eugene O'Neal, Edna St. Vincent Millay). Adams argues that these early classes were built around the idea of meeting with a professor (in his office or off campus), being flexible in content and style, peer reviewing, as well as finding places to perform and publish. By the 1930s about forty-five percent of American universities had at least one creative writing course on offer following this pattern (95).

In her history, Adams does note a change between the first courses and attitudes at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the attitudes and perspectives after the Second World War. The former attitudes were interested in extensive critical reading in the creative writing course. But the focus was changing from the long tradition of treating students as readers and writers, to treating students as writers creating themselves (94). She quotes Richard Wilbur as exemplary in the latter period: "I don't want to turn my students into clever executors of formal problems. I want them to start the way any kind of poet starts, with the matter, with the urge, and then find out what aids –what formal aids— might make the urge clearest" (94). Adam's history, beginning with the creative writing courses in the late 1890s, ends with a sharp commentary on the recent splintering away of creative writing courses from English Departments, writing composition, and other forms of writing (business, journalist, technical).

Crowley and Adams voice two different problems that are joined. For Crowley, problems of teaching composition and writing stem from a reduction of compositional procedures, and an uncritical and dated understanding of how the mind works. She suggests numerous changes, the first being an acknowledgement that how composition is taught reflects an ideological and epistemological position. Her studies raise the point that teaching composition in a democracy should lay the groundwork for a lifetime of interpreting, processing,

and living with cultural, racial, and sexual differences. For Adams, the problems in composition studies stem from the expedient splintering of who is teaching writing composition, as well as from the lack of dialogue between the divergent subjects (business, journalism and technical) and methods. She sees the growth of independent Creative Writing Programs, English Departments, and Compositional Studies as problematic because they do not give the students a divergent understanding of the reading and writing of literature and discourse. Both Crowley and Adams show historically, and in the present contemporary moment, that writing is and has been a problem for American universities.

John Ciardi, the American essayist, poet, and a translator of Dante's *Inferno*, and Bruce Bawer, also a literary critic, poet and reviewer, both for divergent reasons, chide the classroom as a space of building rhetorical quality. Ciardi's complaints are contradictory. On the one hand the classroom is a rational space and poetry is passionate. "The good reader of poetry must develop that native suppleness and fluency of mind that is inseparable from the humanities and which is basically the ability to receive a two or three-headed thought in an instant."<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the understanding of poetry in graduate schools is completely devoid of an understanding of the rational elements of the art form: "Poetry is basically compounded of diction, image or metaphor, rhythm and form. It is remarkable above all for the fact that it carries with it an implicit notation that dictates the rate at which it shall be read" (128); and, "[i]t seems to me that at least one of the essential qualities contained in the meaning of a poem is the poet's principle of selection" (65). He then chides graduate students who cannot properly respond to the following question: "There are various theories of metrics, one may say. Within your own theory, do you think it is possible for a caesura to occur within a metric foot, or must it always fall between feet?" (129).

Bruce Bawer is also suspect of the teaching of creative writing, because its major force in the late 1980s and 1990s was of a political nature. "From a business point of view, the creative writing racket has been one of the biggest success stories of the past generation."<sup>12</sup> Bawer

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<sup>11</sup> *Ciardi Himself: Fifteen essays in the Reading, Writing and Teaching of Poetry*. Foreword by Edward Cifelli. (Fayetteville and London: University of Arkansas Press, 1989), 126.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Bawer, "Poetry and the University" in the collection of essays, *Poetry After Modernism*. ed. by Robert McDowell (Story Line Press: 1998, Brownsville, Oregon), 120, 114-128.

further speculates that many people in the poetry world have begun to take it for granted that the only serious way of preparing for a career as a poet is to enter a university creative-writing program. What are they getting by going in to these programs? A detailed literary history? Personal attention by a self-less poet-teacher? Bawer answers:

No, what these lucky students get out of the creative writing program is connections. That, in essence, is what makes the “better” creative-writer programs better: the pros have superior connections. Study with the right person at the right university, and you’ll stand a much better chance of getting your poems into the best magazines and journals, of having a book published, of receiving invitations to read, and of winning grants and awards. (122)

Bawer and Ciardi, albeit for different reasons, find the teaching of poetry suspect.<sup>13</sup> Bawer’s current critique involves the overwhelming conformity of “publish or perish” mentality bred in many scholarly disciplines. Now, through the institutionalization of creative writing programs, this breeding practice has been securely established. Given that there are over 800 hundred writing programs in the American university system, he has not warmed the hearts of the administrators and participants in these programs by his pointed critique. As a system, with economic concerns from several directions, the creative writing program has become a part of the literary landscape.

From a larger historical perspective mapped out by Graff, Adams, and Crowley, we learn that change in regards to writing, reading, and publishing is a constant factor in American literary education.<sup>14</sup> The truth is that reading and writing in the American academic context is

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<sup>13</sup> Yet another critique of the classroom space, is the “low-residency” graduate program in writing, established at Goddard College in Vermont in the mid-seventies. Gregory Orr and Ellen Bryant Voigt describe the program: “In American higher education, ‘poets teaching poets’ most often occurs in workshops, a mentor guiding a group of less experienced writers in critiques of their own work. The low-residency model sought a supplement and an alternative to this method, within a pragmatic semester structure designed for adults; two weeks on campus to initiate six months of independent tutorial through correspondence. The term ‘low-residency,’ however, fails to suggest the instructional advantages of those two intense weeks of conferences, workshops, seminars, and lectures. Tutorial requires a low student-faculty ratio, which in turn brought together a greater number of practitioners in each genre than is possible in wholly residential programs. Tutorial also needs its correction: a variety of aesthetics, team teaching, and a mixture of new and returning faculty every term. And it was faculty, not design, that provided the crucial element: innovation does not *always* attract, as it did in this case, the serious and the gifted.” See *Poets Teaching Poets: Self and the World*. Edited by Orr and Ellen Bryant Voigt (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 1996), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

as volatile and disruptive as it is conformist and repetitive. A more productive view of teaching is to understand that departments, programs, and even curriculums are cultural artifacts that have been designed. At the moment, educational space is the pre-immanent, immaterial cultural space, worth debate, always awaiting invention's desire, shaping and designing legions and lessons. From the perspective of rhetorical and scientific invention, problems are an essential element in any cultural design.

The space of the classroom is neither closed off from exploitation, invention, nor the avant-garde. Michael Joyce believes and argues that the classroom space is at the beginning of a new cosmology. The professor, novelist, and critic argues in his chapter "New Teaching Toward a Pedagogy for a New Cosmology" that a new kind of teaching space is on the horizon through the employment of the hypertext within the classroom. This new teaching space, or as he affectionately calls it, the "city of the text", requires an alteration of learning, knowledge, and pedagogy. According to Joyce, in this new cosmology the "teacher as this kind of multidiscipline specialist has the important role of constructing an actual culture with her students. For we have become not merely the chroniclers or custodians of, but collaborators in, a vast cultural shift."<sup>15</sup> The shift that he refers to is the entrance of electronic culture within the classroom walls.

Older learning maps and methods, which idealized memory and repetition instead of invention, are at the heart of Joyce's complaint. Instead of the classroom space being defined by a one way exchange of knowledge, he finds on the horizon a situation where the consciousness of all participants is raised.

Narrative is the series of individual questions that marginalize accepted order and thus enact history. Hypertext links are no less than the trace of such questions, a conversation with structure. So too, the networked classroom is a place of "making do" as a constructive action. All three—narrative, hypertext, and classroom — are authentically concerned with consciousness rather than

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The section "Founding Criticism: 1937-1940" (152-161) shows in detail how many of the assumptions changed of what a literary education entailed. He discusses at length how the critical and aesthetic environment finally brought "modern" literature in the classroom. However, even after many of the "new" critics were teaching, suspicion abounded concerning the legitimacy of the changes. Vincent B. Leitch's critical work also shows that the American study of literature is under constant change, modification, and alteration. See his, *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> Michael Joyce, *Of Two Minds: Hypertext Pedagogy and Poetics* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 121.

information, with creating knowledge rather than the mere ordering or inventory of the known. (122)

Joyce's voice in the debate over technology in the classroom is wired for a re-description of the teaching paradigm, and is optimistic about the renewed space of the classroom.<sup>16</sup> For him, we must keep the mind open. "The nature of the mind must not be fixed. It is not a transmission but a conversation we must keep open" (122). Importantly, Joyce as a defender of electronic culture links narrative to hypertext. For him, true narrative is an enacted response to the accepted order in ways of thinking and ways of living. Narrative itself is full of traces, full of hypertext, beyond any one person's control. We have moved into the technological age, but we are the ones who must shape the world.

We have been talking so long about a new age, a technological age, an information age, that we are adapt to forget that it is we who fashion it, we who discover and recover it, we who shape it, we who literally give it form. (119)

The hypertext is a model of the construction of knowledge. Instead of using the older map of distribution of the already known, through the agency of the teacher/master, the teacher and the student shape and are shaped by investigation.

His argument raises some questions: Are we not already shaped by what we read? Do not specialists already shape our approach, even to the network? Joyce would answer yes on both accounts. He would argue that hypertext and the network re-work the cultural space of teaching in such a way that the teacher is no longer the only person with the access to generate or discover knowledge; furthermore, the teacher cannot possibly over-see or control every link. The conversation of hypertext has a record, a structure, and remains open to further addition, outside of the couple of hours per week in class. Now, the directions toward a goal, involve many sources, and the teacher is no longer the only one who has a route or map. Because the map is growing, the sense of responsibility increases. This new "city of the text" involves a redirection

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<sup>16</sup> See *Literacy Theory in the Age of the Internet*, ed. by Todd Taylor and Irene Ward (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). A collection of essays investigating how the classroom is to respond to the new technology. Also, another collection of essays, *Page to Screen: Taking Literacy into the Electronic Era*, ed. Ilana Snyder (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) investigates the cultural and philosophical issues involved in incorporating internet technology within the classroom as an essential element of educational development. I will discuss Snyder's essay in the next chapter.

of teaching and requires new abilities of response and creation.

His combined view of narrative, hypertext, and classroom, are structures for a different kind of knowledge (the creation of knowledge) and leads him to see the teacher as a manager and as a guide. The student is part co-creator in the process of building understanding, and building aesthetic and ethical perception. Joyce's theory was, importantly, informed by his experience within the classroom itself. His own frame of reference for understanding, responding, and interpreting, was altered by several projects submitted by students for their course requirements. One project, he missed completely until the end, and then realized that the student had taken the concept of link and utilized it as the structure of a written document. For Joyce, working in the "city of the text" brings about unexpected alteration.

He does not provide the last word on the debate of the hypertext, but his work does offer an alternative view of the teaching space, based upon the philosophy of the hypertext. He claims that the new cosmology provides the material space of creating knowledge as an essential part of the learning activity. The contemporary innovative text is also a response of technology, outside the repetition of theory, and is constructed in opposition to older models of knowledge acquisition. The innovative text, like the mechanism of hypertext, cannot be judged in terms of correctness, but, its narrative can be examined, its links investigated, and its space traced. Theory in the classical sense (in terms of prediction and argument) is no longer required, but rather investigation, chronicle, and reflection. If we agree to allow the creation of knowledge to be a part of the classroom, then participation will be the starting point for grading, instead of the manner and skill of the engagement. Clearly, advancement in the currently reigning system is based upon memory and repetition, not on one's ability to diagnose starting points, map possible meanings, or present potential problems so that others can participate, add to and/or correct weaknesses.

By avoiding or forgetting department histories, methods of teaching, or cultural shifts, recent avant-garde theory does not have an adequate explanation for the presence of an "avant-garde" within the academy. Numerous writers complain that the avant-garde cannot, by its very nature, enter the institution it critiques (Bürger, von Hallberg, Kostelanetz, Mann, Lehman), because it is a critique of the institution. To become an object of inquiry, to be owned or paid by an institution, in many definitions of the avant-garde, constitutes its demise, and paves the

road for a determined impotence. Consequently, these theorists can only interpret an avant-garde within the academy in negative terms as a loss of status.

If we begin asking questions as to the purpose and philosophy of the classroom space, its history and function in our culture, we learn that more than once change, alteration, and re-evaluation have occurred. In fact, we have already seen that the original writing classes were a critique of the institutionalization of teaching composition. The birth of advanced and creative writing classes grew out of a dissatisfaction with the methods and institutionalization of freshman composition. English Departments since their conception over a hundred years ago have been in the processes of change and alteration. In many institutions, the Department of English has been the spring board for a range of studies: Composition Studies, Creative Writing Programs, American Studies, and Media Studies. In most universities if not all, these programs have developed an independent status, but the structure of a department is only one area of control and legislation. Within the Academy, other centers of power can be found in accreditation, tenure policies, testing and advancement procedures.<sup>17</sup> All of these areas are constantly being refined, questioned, and at times investigated.

Those who state that moving into the Academy is the end of an avant-garde practice, over read the power of the institution, and under read the multiple forms which resistance can take. As Graff's work also shows, university departments and their pedagogical praxis are always going through change. Avant-garde resistance, as defined by Bürger, implies that the artist has knowledge of existing dominate forms, technical dexterity, and the ability to carry out new critical procedures. What is missing from the theory of the avant-garde is the understanding of the shared space between avant-garde praxis and classical rhetorical invention. In other words, the ability to respond to new situations, power-structures, and difficulties with an ethical and aesthetic dimension, has been classically rhetoric's domain, but it is also an essential element in all innovative art. Von Hallberg states:

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<sup>17</sup> David Russell in his *Writing in the Academic Disciplines 1870-1990* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991) sees the issue of testing and advancement one of the most powerful roles the academic institution plays. He argues that this institutional power forces classes to be shaped toward these ends. His interest in reform, the Writing Across Disciplines movement, also comes from a historical understanding of how composition or reading has been taught in the recent university system. He sees the benefit of learning by writing instead of just learning to write. See the chapter "The-Writing-Across-The-Curriculum-Movement", 271-307.

The radical change that avant-gardes seek by opposing art institutions is impossible within an academic context, because academic institutions cope with challenges in a liberal fashion by expanding and pluralistically incorporating adversaries.<sup>18</sup>

The reason for the impossibility of the avant-garde within the academic context is due to the institution's pluralism. Although pluralism does occur, it hasn't always. Its presence suggests that institutions are open to change more than ever, because more diversity is permitted. If we define too sharply what an avant-garde can do, and where it can and cannot function, we will lead to think that there is only a historical avant-garde. Forms of resistance and adequate responses to diverse situations and power structures cannot be predicted ahead of time. The charge that the avant-garde is no longer an avant-garde reveals not the end of an avant-garde but rather the theoretical limitations of these maps and their inability to describe or understand a current practice, a current terrain.

Within the American context, the literary Academy is not a singular, monolithic structure with one system-wide canon, method of advancement, or pedagogical procedure; but, the diversity does not imply that structural, ethical, and aesthetic change is not needed. Different avant-gardes have different ethics. Not every avant-garde or innovative artist is interested in change for beneficial or noble reasons. The perception of failure and the desire for alteration can take many forms. If we limit the definition of the avant-garde to the destructive critiques of the current institution (only from the outside), we limit our horizon to the most current and most destructive avant-gardist. Following this criteria, we are nearer to the principles mapped out by the Unibomber in his manifesto, than we are to contemporary poetics. The problem is not with studying the writings and practices of the Unibomber, but with the theoretical emphasis that validates him as the true and only avant-garde. Within the American context, what kind of innovation can function? Democracy at its heart allows the theoretical function of the will and reason, the heart and the mind. The American model has built into itself, change.

The university, far from being a stable site, is at times open to change and debate, as is

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<sup>18</sup> "Avant-Gardes" in *Poetry and Criticism: 1940-1995*, ed. by Sacvan Bercovitch, Vol. 8, *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 113-114.

revealed in the various histories from which I have drawn. As Bernstein has argued:

When someone says that they can't understand something, you can reasonably assume that someone else is going to absolutely be able to click with that, split infinitive and all. Making certain choices intensifies the communication for some while leaving others higher and drier than ever. This isn't elitist. Elitism suggests that there's one best way to say something, which conveniently segues either into the argument for mass communication: say it so that most will think they understand it; or for the sole legitimacy of the culture of critical discourse—only we can say it right. Our mutual incomprehensibility to each other is not a matter that can be legislated, or schooled, away: it is an active site of a democratic political process requiring negotiation not repression, translation not transubstantiation into a single common language above the fray of conflicting interests.<sup>19</sup>

Institutions who ignore historical changes and differences perpetuate the belief that the avant-garde can only take place outside an institution. Offering solutions to perceived problems remains at the heart of the political and technological structure of America, and remains at the heart of rhetorical and technical innovation. For these reasons alone, we can see why von Hallberg has labeled four “avant-gardes” since 1945, and why another four in the next generation are likely to appear.<sup>20</sup> To continue to label new innovative work as avant-garde and then state that it cannot function inside the classroom space, keeps critics and this method of criticism from facing the fundamental issue that American universities are faulty, in an ongoing process of change, and need continual maintenance. To understand Bernstein and others, as innovators, requires that we admit that learning models, theories, approaches, and institutions are not infallible.

With this constructed context of academic space as a backdrop, we can see more fully Bernstein's innovative, avant-garde involvement in the academy. Bernstein became an appointed

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<sup>19</sup> Bernstein “Optimism and Critical Excess (Process)”, *Critical Inquiry*, 16:4 (1990): 852.

<sup>20</sup> “By my count, four literary scenes since 1945 have mattered to poetry: Black Mountain College (1950-56); Greenwich Village (1950-1963); the Black Arts Movement (1962-70); and the Language poets of New York and San Francisco (1979-89).” Robert von Hallberg, “Avant-Gardes” in *The Cambridge History of American Literature Vol. 8. Poetry and Criticism 1945-1995* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 83.

Professor of Poetry and Letters fifteen years after his first published volume of poetry. Lecturing at the MLA since the early 1980s, publishing criticism in academic journals like *Sagetrieb*, *boundary 2*, *Contemporary Literature*, and taking part in specific academic conferences, Bernstein has participated in the academic culture from the very beginning of his writing career. Before taking the permanent position at Buffalo, he had several academic teaching positions: Visiting Professor at Queens College (CUNY) in 1988; Lecturer at Princeton in the Creative Writing Program (1989, 1990); Visiting Lecturer at the University of California (San Diego) in 1987. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s he worked in the medical profession as health community coordinator, editor, and free lance writer for medical and pharmaceutical journals.

Since his first semester at Buffalo, Bernstein has posted on the web, in detail, all of his course outlines, reading requirements and procedures. His choice to be “public” allows anyone, with access to a computer and browser knowledge, to see his teaching maps and syllabi. Many universities have embraced the use of the Internet for educational, administrative, and publicity purposes. Yet, not all academics have been ‘public’ about what they teach. For example, many well known academics do not list their syllabi, and they are not “on line”. Bernstein’s choice to make his syllabi and writings on-line and in the public sphere, creates a line of inquiry: Why have other teachers not done the same? Should they? Do they know how? Already a new form of resistance appears. The choice to not make public the syllabi is a resistance to the public. The choice to make public the syllabi is in fact the re-creation of the public intellectual, which partially blurs the line between those in the academy and those outside. Having the particulars of a classroom institutional space somewhat accessible in the public domain, blurs the boundaries between open free space, and closed costly space. Seeing what they are doing on the “inside” blurs the boundary from within the institution, and critiques the notion of over-rating intellectual maps.

For the moment, universities grant limited public access to the intended classroom space of many courses and programs. Anyone who has access to a computer and the user knowledge can compare, investigate, and ponder over the intended structure of classroom space. Course descriptions have been available for centuries in college and university archives. Syllabi, note-books, and student notes have also been vital in giving a sense of a professor’s course (de Saussure being a remarkable example). Many of the syllabi on the web are from recent classes.

Charles Altieri, who has written on Bernstein since the 1980s in positive and negative lights, has listed his classes. His course descriptions, outlines, and syllabi have been available since 1997.<sup>21</sup> “Graduate Readings in Modern Poetry” (Spring 97) is a course that “will be concerned primarily to test what remains imaginatively vital in canonical modernist poetry”.<sup>22</sup> The “Junior Seminar on Love Poetry” (Fall 99) will “concentrate on developing a grammar for talking about love poetry” and he muses: “Perhaps we can even learn what we are doing when we talk about love.”<sup>23</sup> He also has offered courses on Museum appreciation, and a Research Seminar on theorizing the emotions. In most of these descriptions, reading lists (books but not specific readings are given), and course requirements are given as well as his own expectations and feelings about the material. Anyone can visit the Berkeley course listings and see for themselves in a limited fashion what Altieri intends.

In contrast to Altieri’s casual style, the Iowa Writers Workshop is an immediate shock. The web gives very explicit copyright announcements, manners for quotation and little if any detailed information about what goes on “inside”.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, again, at the MFA program site at Michigan, we are given viewpoints, background, and interests by each professor. Linda Gregerson, the Director of the MFA, gives her aims to the writing workshops.

Our aim in workshop is at once very simple and very complex: we make it our business to become an adaptable and rigorous critical readership for one another’s work-in-progress. We use the workshop as an occasion to broaden formal and thematic range, to refine editorial skills, to share questions, enthusiasms, and generous skepticism. Our primary focus is on the current work submitted by members of the class, but we also read selected works by other poets, generally contemporaries in mid-career.<sup>25</sup>

These examples are only available on line and in the public sphere. When we start to consider the relation between computer technology and the University, we must realize that on line

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<sup>21</sup> Until Spring 2001, a user could access the archives of courses at the English Department Home Page.

<sup>22</sup> [http://english.berkeley.edu/classes/archives/spring97/graduate\\_s97.html](http://english.berkeley.edu/classes/archives/spring97/graduate_s97.html), retrieved, July 12, 2000.

<sup>23</sup> [http://english.berkeley.edu/classes/archives/fall99/seminars\\_f99.html](http://english.berkeley.edu/classes/archives/fall99/seminars_f99.html), retrieved, July 12, 2000.

<sup>24</sup> The Iowa Writers Workshop has updated its page (March 23, 2001) and changed the format from its early version. The information has improved, but is still guarded. Compared to other web page program descriptions, it gives a limited knowledge of courses, and very little, if any syllabi information (with the exception of the summer course). <http://uiowa.edu/~iww/index.html>, retrieved, July 10, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> “MFA Faculty”, University of Michigan, Department of English Home page, <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/english/grad/mfafaculty.htm#gergerson>, retrieved July 14, 2000.

syllabi are only the tip of the iceberg.

Bernstein's first seminar is not a retreat into conformity, but an exploration in continuity. His poetics are not lessened, weakened, or reduced by the institutional space. From the very beginning of Bernstein's teaching career, he had writers in the classroom, Jackson Mac Low, Johanna Drucker, Michael Palmer, Clark Coolidge, and Nick Piombino, as well as joint seminars with Robert Creeley and Susan Howe. The title of his first course at Buffalo "Modern Poetry 633" was, "The Peripheral: Reading Askance in Twentieth Century Poetry and Politics". Artifice, chance, materializing language, the flesh, poetic details, mechanisms of meaning, sound's measure, letters, and blurrings are all terms and words and topics Bernstein built for this class on Modern Poetry. His first seminar flows out of his cultural work as a poet, editor, and critic. Since entering the academy, this cultural work has not stopped. In his first academic year at Buffalo (1990-1), he edited the collection of essays, *The Politics of Poetic Form*, and published three volumes of poetry, *The Absent Father in Dumbo* (1990), *Fool's Gold*, with Susan Bee (1991) and *Rough Trades* (1991). In the first ten years of his appointment as Professor of Poetry and Letters, he published five more volumes of poetry, two critical books with Harvard and University of Chicago Press, started the Electronic Poetry Center, published six collaborations, and wrote two librettos. In other words, his creative out-put continued. Instead of becoming a conformist, he has become in a true sense "The Sophist". The burden, of proving that his poetics waned and lost their avant-garde status remains with those who argue that resistance cannot continue once a writer enters the academy.

The remarkable aspect of Bernstein's involvement with the university is not only in his courses, the manner in which he used the classroom space, but in his invention of the Electronic Poetry Center, EPC. This creation with Loss Pequeño Glazier and Ken Sherwood extended the space of poetry onto the web in unexpected ways. Since its conception in 1995, it has brought together an extension of American poetry onto the web and has provided a discussion list for anyone interested, a home page for authors, magazine and publisher lists, and multiple links. The site notably shows Bernstein's ability as an editor and his resourcefulness in his work environment. He has always produced his creative work while earning a living. When working in the medical world, he found and created such terms as "dysrhythmism", and in the university context he took an existing technology and expanded it for the benefit not only of his students

but for anyone outside the classroom or university space.

Looking at his syllabi in detail, we find Bernstein bringing into the classroom space a historical understanding of the basic elements of language composition.<sup>26</sup> Accepting the historical and therefore material reality of a language's grammatical rules, increases the ethical and aesthetic possibilities for writing in general and poetics specifically. In an age of over standardization, re-inscribing the cultural engineering of writing alters the space of the classroom for the potential of invention, not just for correction. From the beginning of his career, Bernstein has questioned the current-traditional rhetorical tradition's grip on rationality, writing, and poetry. The issues of the sign's design, multiplicity of grammar's network, materiality of the sign, divergent characterizations, mechanisms of meaning, and the role of the un-canonized, appear in his course outlines. Each course offered by Bernstein has been uniquely designed and non-repetitive: he did not simply arrive in Buffalo, build a course and repeat it for the next ten years. Instead of finding a dulling and conformist poetic, by looking at Bernstein's activity in the 1990s, we will find a vibrant, challenging, and inventive praxis.

The very first course in the Fall of 1990 begins with "The Detail Poetry and Particulars". In particular, he draws upon Eigner's essay collection *areas lights heights* and asks that certain essays be noted. Bernstein's first reading recommendation comes from Eigner's essay "METHOD FROM HAPPENSTANCE":

Don't like to begin with a big B, as if I was at the Beginning of all speech, or anything; which may also have something to do with why usually I've had an aversion more or less to going back to the left margin after beginning a poem, but otherwise than in hindsight I just tried to do the best I could, the simplest and most immediate thing being punctuation,\* once words were forceful enough—a matter of getting the distances between words, and usage of marks to conform as well as might be to what there was to say, as spoken, then these typographical devices entering themselves into the discovery and the initiation of attention. As with any other detail, after dispensing with a routine duplication device—e.g., a period as well as capital letter—a new thing immediately (neither period nor capital results in sentence splice, a poem without very explicit rests, if that's what seems good), then, the availability of the device for vital use in some other connection may crop up, possibly. Oaks from small acorns. Forests of possibility.

\*From a confrontation, first, with work by e.e. cummings, then by Williams and others.<sup>27</sup>

Eigner was the first featured writer in the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal, and one of the first authors studied in Bernstein's seminar at Buffalo. In this quotation, we can trace a line from e.e. cummings and Williams to Bernstein's teaching space. Eigner takes his altering lead from a confrontation with these poets. As is well known, cummings' poetic reworks the notion of grammar, sign, and punctuation. Williams' work, as we have already seen, interprets the page as a site of continual investigation on how the normal or standard layout, grammar, and punctuation can serve poetry instead of controlling or only ornamenting poetic praxis. Eigner's confrontation brings an inventive manner into his own writing, and Bernstein, aware of Eigner's significance, brings his "[f]orests of possibility" into the classroom space.

The work of e.e. cummings displays a textual network which establishes punctuation and grammar as open procedures, instead of rules of submission. To investigate standardization does not mean that the reader will be abandoned, nor does it mean that the work will move away from referentiality. Since our perception of the world is both internal and external, we see what we know, and the world always remains larger than our eyes. The writing of this world is unable to reduce poetry to either poetic formalism or self-revelation if it is to recognize the cultural history of epistemology. The poem "67" gives us a glimpse of this cultural genesis.

enter no(silence is the blood whose flesh  
is singing) silence: but unsinging. In  
spectral such hugest how hush, one

dead leaf stirring makes a crash  
--far away (as far as alive) lies

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<sup>26</sup> All of Bernstein's syllabi can be found at the web page, <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/bernstein>.

<sup>27</sup> *Area Lights Heights: Writings 1954-1989*, ed. by Benjamin Friedlander (New York: Roof Books, 1989), 6.

april; and i breathe-move-and-seem some  
perpetually roaming whylessness-

autumn has gone: will winter never come?

o come, terrible anonymity; enfold  
phantom me with the murdering minus of cold  
--open this ghost with millionaire knives of wind--  
scatter his nothing all over what angry skies and  
gently

(very whiteness: absolute peace,  
never imaginable mystery)

descend<sup>28</sup>

The poem begins as an entrance to “no silence”. How Cummings has used punctuation in the first two lines gives the reader a constant re-reading, not a linear description. Just as beginnings can occur in more than one way in life, so to in poetry. We are stopped before we hear the full “enter no silence” but the stopping is a description of silence nonetheless. The colon that follows and the double negative (“but” “un”) create a thematic repetition through a misuse of standard grammatical principles: “flesh is singing” is one reading. The beginning of the poem is incomplete and partial. One conjecture from this graphic display constructs beginnings from a particular or limited perspective. As with Eigner, “as if I was there in the Beginning”, this poem begins outside of standardization. The poem is built with punctuation, grammar, and spelling, as functional aesthetic devices, instead of exterior rule bound structures. The poem maintains contact with tradition, mainly through sound. In the first stanza, the last line is built around alliteration (“such hugest how hush”), and the last stanza is constructed around alternating metrical feet with two sets of end rhymes (“enfold/cold”; “wind/descend”). In line three, alliteration expands the spelling of “hugest”, as well as the grammatical function of “how”. In the last stanza of the poem, page design interrupts and forces the reader to wait for a rhyming

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<sup>28</sup> 73 *Poems*: (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), 67.

completion. The interruption between “gently” and “descend” brings out, through visual design, the meaning of the poem. The poem’s end, like its beginning, is partial, and like the autumn (the world is both dead and waiting). The page, as a stirring “leaf stirring makes a crash”. The “i” roams with a question falling into the order of the world “gently” and descends into winter. The poem opens up, but does not abandon standard poetics in either content (the changing of the seasons, the role of the self in changes of the earth) or form. Cummings builds a poetic around the range of the technology of the typewriter and an exploration of the word and line within the confines of traditional verse. He is not painting, he is designing type. Eigner looks back to his confrontation with Cummings as a starting point. Bernstein brings Eigner’s reflection into the classroom as a poetic “detail”. Lines are not drawn, they are designed.

Another poet recommended in Bernstein’s first seminar was Robert Grenier. He was also a featured writer in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1:5 (October 78).<sup>29</sup> The two works recommended in Bernstein’s course were *Sentences* (1978) and *A Day at the Beach* (1985). In Bernstein’s 1982 critical essay on Creeley (*Sagetrieb* 1:3), he proposed looking at Grenier in relation to Creeley and Williams. As he refers to Creeley’s *Mabel: A Story*, *Presences*, and *A Day book*. He maps a literary network.

These works of prose poetry are usually seen in the tradition of such great works of imaginative prose as Williams’s *Spring and All*, a text that has been significant, as well, in the current flowering of paratactic (serially disjunct) prose-format poetry. While Creeley relies in his prose on a more time-based sequencing of events compared to Bob Perelman’s or Bruce Andrews’s more constructive approach, there is a significant overlap in terms of narrative discontinuity and the resulting isolation/framing of individual semantic units. Robert Grenier’s *Sentences* [Cambridge: Whale Cloth, 1978] is a unique realization of the possibility for such articulation of the sound of single sentences as autonomous and both semantically and acoustically saturated (the semantic and the acoustic being coextensive in Grenier’s work). Much of the new prose-format poetry uses autonomous units such as Grenier’s in serial order within larger prose blocks. What is instructive about Grenier’s individual units is the degree of independent articulation each unit can achieve without programmatic (or thematic) integration into larger formats: the units do exist in a crucial relation to one

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<sup>29</sup> The complete list of those recommended for reading (in order) is Lorine Neidecker, George Oppen, Larry Eigner, Robert Grenier, Ted Greenwald, and Naomi Schor.

another, not durationally, as in Creeley, but simultaneously. In this sense, Grenier's work occupies a middle ground, useful to consider in this context, between Creeley's techniques and those of other recent poetry.<sup>30</sup>

We have another link back, this time to Williams' *Spring and All*. Its re-publication in 1970 made this kind of reading in 1982 more accessible, and almost without difficulty by 1990. The lineage for Bernstein's contemporaries and contributors to the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal moves from Williams to Creeley to Grenier to Andrews and Perelman. Not only is Grenier's work a middle ground, Bernstein also looks to Williams and Eigner. In the volume *Phantom Anthems* (1986), Grenier begins with a piece (after an image of a complete dissection of the central and peripheral nervous system) that invokes Williams.

As

for WCW 's garage after his death with lawnmower

strange isolated place of no regard

'the backyard' is the name for thee

you move in the night unknown to me

as for sustenance in the day I dream & dream<sup>31</sup>

The first words of the volume return to Williams, pondering over the objects of urban duty. We can take "for" to mean "because" or "As for" as the beginning of a prepositional phrase. "You" can be read referring to Williams, "the backyard", or the garage. However we read these directions, we conclude by realizing that "you" is a substance of the night, a phantom, a spectral display, almost. In Williams' garage (the house of the objects that shaped his free time) we find

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<sup>30</sup> "Hearing 'Here': Robert Creeley's Poetics of Duration", *CD*, 301, 292-304.

<sup>31</sup> *Phantom Anthems* (Oakland, CA: O Books, 1986). "As" appears at the very beginning of the volume. The poem "FALL", which I will discuss, appears about mid-way through the volume. No page numbers are given.

the car, the lawnmower, and tools. The duties and pleasures of the American urban life are waiting. “You” move and these anthems, in a partially agnostic state, after an image of the total nervous system, open the book.

Within the volume we have a poem for Larry Eigner, entitled “Fall”. The poem reads well in this context of looking at the relations of Bernstein’s teaching, the making of literary history, the relations of former poets with the living, and the life of the reader. The poem is in two sections, doubled space, consisting of six lines. The first three lines “Fall” outside of standards, but like life:

over later ally over laterally in the wind that’s today’s  
leaf morning sunbeam-severed cold night veteran tongue de-twigs  
and flips like this when moisture dries that’s life

Grenier takes the language toward a reconsideration of construction. Reading “over later ally” by itself in a poem dedicated to Eigner, joins the two writers. Reading on, this “ally” turns into a description of “today’s leaf”, through a re-spacing of the same words. Grenier’s lines use little to no punctuation, calling upon the reader to make his or her own insertions. The reader cannot lean on grammatical rules solely for comprehension. At times, the meaning of each word stops the desire to move forward, as at the beginning. At other times, words follow on from each other, “morning sunbeam-severed cold night veteran tongue de-twigs”. The absence of punctuation calls for a participation as in ancient texts. This kind of writing causes some readers to lose the shape and meaning of the poem.

Because enjambment can prove disruptive, setting as it does metrical units and grammatical units at odds, it is most effective when used, as Browning uses it, in coordination with sense. A poet who runs lines on frequently, without contextual justification, may lose hold of grammatical structure, and the reader may lose all sense of the shape and meaning of the poem.<sup>32</sup>

Grammatical structure from a historical perspective offers only degrees of stability. An absolute

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<sup>32</sup> Timothy Steele, *All the Fun’s in How You Say a Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Versification* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1999), 100.

English grammar does not exist. Shape and meaning of poetry can be guided by grammar (provisionally), but in the case of these poets (Eigner, Grenier, Williams, Cummings, Bernstein, to just name a few), it becomes the grammar. Instead of repeating these graphic codes, this strand of the American poetic narrative has explored, studied, and brought back into history an exploration of “pointing” and punctuation as a source of non-linguistic meaning. If reading practices are going to be opened up, the recognition of meaning and order, and of typographical marks to indicate pause, voice, summary, hesitation, finality, beginnings, will need to be explored. When it comes to books, the fun for this tradition may be in showing how saying is always designed.

As we may recall, Michael Joyce found the classroom space redressed by hypertext (our culture’s most recent kind of narrative and syntactical logic). He ends his essay on teaching by appealing to Bernstein’s view of confusing poetics: that is to the “music of contrasting characterizations”. Instead of only one characterization framing the frame, “you can have lots of different angles in composition so that the whole sounding of the various characterizations gets heard and made palpable” (CD 446). This quotation in support of the new classroom space came from a forum (Joyce’s view of learning) where Bernstein was discussing recent forms of poetry and his method with the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal. Poetic details give Joyce a defense, an apologetic for the new narrative. Joyce finds in this poetic a new model for teaching, writing, and classroom expansion, and indirectly a new model for the academic institution itself.

When writing and reading remain open to invention, which creates the groundwork for new knowledge, the cultural laws of production can be discussed, debated, and understood. When the amnesia of invention takes hold, production is consumed, options are decreased, and survival comes in the form of submitting to the current forms of legislation. If the laws cannot be discussed, amended, or abandoned, then the democracy of letters no longer exists. Grenier, when featured in the October 1978 *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal, wrote:

--’dead ends’: *description* (Williams’ ‘copying nature’), forcing the materials of language to correspond to habitual orderings thought to render what is thereby not seen; *invention*, mere gallivanting around in language materials endlessly provocative/striking/autointoxicative (though such is often preliminary to real work), a willed arrangement of words valued for its own sake (like description,

this is something)--<sup>33</sup>

We see here, that a vital in-breathing of rhetorical invention (“though such is often preliminary to real work”) surrounds the ongoing pioneer work of American poetry. As Creeley wrote in “Was that a real poem or did you make it up?”:

Poems have involved an extraordinary range of human and nonhuman event, so to discuss that fact seems pointless. We will talk of everything sooner or later. Americans have had the especial virtue in the last hundred years of opening both content and form in an extraordinary manner, and the energy inherent continues without apparent end.<sup>34</sup>

New knowledge surrounds, and the energy inherent in these works sustains a continuity of aesthetic investigation and responsibility. Grenier reads certain views of description and invention as dead ends, first by accepting Williams’ critique of description, and secondly by suggesting that invention as “mere gallivanting around in language is only a preliminary to real work”. Creeley sees American poetry as an ongoing exploration of opening up space. Instead of spending time talking about the events framed in poetry, Creeley proclaims that Americans have been busy finding ways of developing both the content and form of American poetry. Formalism has its place in all kinds of national poetries, but what makes American poetry unique is its ongoing ability to transform the possibilities of both the content and form of poetry.

What we have in Grenier is not a rejection of description and invention, but rather a re-description of these terms.

--hence *letters/phonemes* one way to discipline attention to use language as one way ‘back to nature’ by experiencing order of noises in stream of oral consciousness--s s value in “Hedge-cricket)s s(ing,” letter to letter & the leap between words not ‘dashed’ together (revealing the previous two as so bound together)-- attention to which structure(s), in language, evokes or springs correspondence with structures of other natural events (or vice-versa: attention to extra-linguistic sound provokes awareness of like patterns in language)--<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Vol. 1:5 (1978): 2. Robert Grenier opens Vol. 1: 5 with the piece titled “HEDGE-CRICKETS SING”. Also in *L=B*, 19-20.

<sup>34</sup> The essay is found in *American Poets in 1976* ed. by William Heyen (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), 51.

<sup>35</sup> *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Vol. 1:5 (1978): 1. *L=B*, 19-20.

The idea of spacing, phonetic affect, and re-ordering opens the beginning of the piece “HEDGE CRICKETS SING”: “--think of Keats as really ‘milking’ words of all possible letter/phonemic qualities without really challenging notion of English word/morpheme as basic unit of ‘meaning’...”.<sup>36</sup> Grenier offers an alteration of thinking about ‘tradition’ and re-opens description and invention outside and beyond current practices: no longer art for art sake, but ways of re-ordering back to nature, back to the world. “[H]abitual orderings” are resisted, renewed soundings are sought.

By weaving into the reading of these writers some history of punctuation, their combined locutionary and graphic force can be further seen. As with rhetorical invention, the former practices of punctuation and grammar have been forgotten. M.B. Parkes’ book *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West*, shows that punctuation functioned as an aid to reading.<sup>37</sup> Before the advent of standardized punctuation, marks were left in the margin of the text as guides, suggestions, alternatives, by former and more familiar readers. These readers, making marks on the manuscripts afterwards (or after-words), set into motion a variety of methods and practices to demarcate subtle inflections of pronunciation, changes of sense, pause in thought, and important summary points. Layout and punctuation served as a guide (often personal) toward reading and comprehension. Period variants occurred regularly.

Parkes points out in his chapter “Layout and Punctuation of Verse” that in “Antiquity scribes indicated rhythmic structure primarily by means of layout” (97). Rhyming was given visual prominence in line length, diagramming, capitalization and the insertion of numerous marks in a variety of manners in order to indicate pause, sense, emphasis and even at times metaphorical implications and applications (105). Layout and punctuation were guides toward the interpretation of the poem. Marks remained, then a rhetorical invention. Finding specific marks (instead of arguments) that were appropriate to a given rhetorical situation, sense, completion of thought, pause, was one of the tasks of reading. Established readers gave their “pointing” to future readers. In looking upon recent developments in poetry, Parkes notes that

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<sup>36</sup> *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Vol. 1:5 (1978): 1. L=B, 19.

<sup>37</sup> *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West*, (Aldershot, U.K.: Scolar Press, 1992). Hereafter cited as *Pause and Effect*.

“free verse relies on visual rather than auditory signals to define the end of a line” (101). This visual requirement is not new; now it is different. The history of layout, punctuation, and grammar in verse shows a whole terrain of graphic inventions supplied to the text. Parkes reveals this diversity in a range of manuscripts and time periods. In his Appendix 2, he takes a few lines from Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* (iii. 119-28) and traces its ‘punctual’ history from the earliest manuscript to 1810. I cite line 123 as an example.

Now thanne thus quod she I wolde hym preye (earliest)

Nowe than thus (*quod* she) I wolde him prey (1523)

Now than thus (qd she) I wolde him preie (1598)

Now than thus (*quod* she) I wollin him preie (1721)

Now than thus (quod she) I wollin him preie (1795)

“Now than thus” (quod she) “I woll hym prey, (1810)

After each section he explains the changes in punctuation in relation to the cultural codes of epistemology, linguistics, and the grammatical perspectives of the day.<sup>38</sup> As Silliman advised: “before writing read Chaucer”.

If we return back to Eigner’s text for Bernstein’s class, teaching and grammar are woven together nicely from this historical vantage-point. Eigner’s text shows that punctuation and layout can be re-worked, and that its recent characterization has been opened up by e.e. cummings and Williams and remains open. In Eigner, by simply investigating the point of the period, poetics opens aesthetic possibilities. Parkes’ history shows that understanding texts has always entailed graphic innovation, has always been influenced by politics, and has always included personal preference. Punctuation is one matrix of being a public intellectual, for it has been (or remains, if it is not over-standardized) the translated private guide for the outward future. In Bernstein’s course, the investigation of poetic details moves teaching and knowing away from ahistorical repetition to meta-historical re-creation. Poetry on the page, as well as in the ear, facilitates the creation of knowledge.

Bernstein has filled the public space with diversity since the very beginning of his career

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<sup>38</sup> “Appendix 2”, *Pause and Effect*, 55-157.

and has built a new public forum. Outside of his numerous publications after entering the academic profession, Bernstein's major innovation must include the Electronic Poetry Center. Instead of building a web site for the Poetics Program (of which he is the chair), or web pages for each of the Program's faculty, Bernstein co-created a new public space with Loss Pequeño Glazier for the participation of a range of writers, magazines, web pages, list servers, calls for pages, and a host of links concerning in one form or another, poetry. From the very beginning, Bernstein has not worked in isolation, nor has he only worked for the benefit of himself.

The uniqueness of the Electronic Poetry Center (EPC) stands as a testimony of Bernstein's innovation. No other poet has created such a public forum. Some could argue the innovation of EPC alongside founder Loss Pequeño Glazier is due to the technology; but, technology is not neutral. The new technological space has boundaries and creates an environment (which is still being explored); how the space is used is dependent on those involved. The innovation of EPC is due to Bernstein's work as an editor. He has always attempted to fill out the public space with as many options and "links" as possible. EPC gives a variety of options from the moment a person logs on. Sections devoted to new magazines, Author's home pages, interesting links, books, the University of Buffalo Poetics Program, Poetics List and archives, are just a few of the starting points in this public forum. I continue to use the word "public", because anyone with computer access can visit and get involved with the site. Again Bernstein blurs the boundaries between the space of the classroom, and public discourse.

Bernstein, after five years as a professor, brings about a remarkable addition to the study, understanding, participation, and reality of contemporary poetry. He brings to life Pound's view of literature as a language "charged" with meaning. Literature derives its life from language charged, just as a machine is filled with electricity in order to facilitate its design. The "electronic" poetry center potentially exceeds not only the space of the class, but also the material page. Bernstein does not reject either, he simply explores yet another route for American poetry. The implications of EPC show fundamentally that Bernstein has not forgotten innovation from inside the academic world. He continues in his innovation to be teaching, both directly and indirectly, possibilities. EPC derives its strength not only from Bernstein, but also from Loss Pequeño Glazier's

work as Director and the numerous people maintaining the pages and site. Since technology and electricity are not neutral, how the site appears and works displays something about the intentions, philosophy, and perspectives of the founders. A message is being sent, and in contrast to other creative writing web pages, MFA programs, and other poetry sites, EPC embraces the poetics of possibility. The original and ongoing format is tied directly to Bernstein's work as the executive editor. As we look specifically at this work, its implications, and the academy's reaction to it, we will see that a key to Bernstein's innovation has been to include and give space to others. His public space remains innovative and democratic, simultaneously.

The word "edit" comes out of the Latin "to publish" to "give out to the world" and "to make public". Possibly in our day, to edit means to exclude, to keep out, to correct, instead of making public. In Bernstein's editorial practices he has positioned himself with the early and former definition. In *The Politics of Poetic Form* he writes in the preface that poetry can be seen as a place for "exploring basic questions about political thought and action" as well as how the "formal dynamics of a poem shape its ideology."<sup>39</sup> As he specifies these claims, we can see how the non-neutrality of grammar and rhetoric (the technology of poetry) frame Bernstein's political and public reflection:

more specifically, how radically innovative poetic styles can have political meanings. In what way do choices of grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and narrative reflect ideology? How do the dominant *styles* of oppositional —left and liberal—political writing affect or limit what can be articulated in these forms?  
(vii)

Being committed to the public forum, Bernstein questions the idea that "public intellectuals" have departed, and he speculates that the so called end of the "public intellectual" is a misrepresentation of the actual lived situation.

With more than a couple of happy exceptions, the poets presented here are not affiliated with any university and their investigation of poetics and politics

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<sup>39</sup> *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. by Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof Books, 1990), vii.

continue to be conducted without much institutional support. I find this encouraging; and it shows up the narrow frame of reference of those, like, Russell Jacoby, who would insist that there are no longer “public intellectuals” in America. Perhaps, the problem is that there is no public for its intellectuals, which means that a *republic* (of letters? of, as we now say, discourses?) needs to be found(ed), which is to say, *made*. That task requires poetic acts, but not just by poets. (viii)

The demand to found a republic of letters can be seen in Bernstein’s own poetics, his work as a teacher, and the creation of EPC. Within his writings we have found a range of styles, techniques, traditions. His work refuses to be located in one form, and instead locates itself in the possibilities of style. We can see this in his forms of teaching, as well as in his forms of editing. His editorial work involves making a republic of letters, and making public alternatives to the dominant forms of discourse. For him, “To Edit is to Act”<sup>40</sup>. This forum of public action has been an ongoing process.

His most famous editing work occurred with Bruce Andrews in the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal, 1979-1981. In *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, Bruce Andrews and Bernstein re-describe their original intentions of the journal. For them, it was to be a journal that placed “its attention primarily on language and ways of making meaning, that takes for granted neither vocabulary, grammar, process, shape, syntax, program, or subject matter. All of these remain at issue” (*L=B*, iv). Even after the journal was no longer being published, they did not refer to their project in the past tense.

Focussing on this range of poetic exploration, and on related aesthetic and political concerns, we have tried to open things up beyond correspondence and conversation: to break down some unnecessary self-encapsulation of writers (person to person, & scene from scene), and to develop more fully the latticework of those involved in aesthetically related activity. (*L=B*, iv)

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<sup>40</sup> *II*, 81. Larry Price uses this phrase as the title of his highly innovative reading of *Content’s Dream*. He sees Bernstein’s form of writing providing a new access of the public field. “By structuring the poem from the material (if alienated) particulars outward to form (rather than beginning with a core unity), Bernstein establishes unlimited access to a total public field of information. “Edit is act” is the appropriate motto for that access, where in the end the poem stands as another particular being hence object, like myself, in the world, and I beside it. And I return not to myself “as some egocentric center, but experience myself as in the world, that with the meaning and limits therein revealed I have also placed myself (CD 71).” “Edit is Act: Some Measurements for *Content’s Dream*”, *Line 7/8* (Spring 1986): 207, 200-207.

This ideology lead them to a process we looked at in the first chapter: a process of diversity and provision.

As part of this process, and with the aim of foregrounding compositional issues and style of reading, we published a mix of different kinds of work. We especially wanted to provide a place for essays and reviews that were neither expository nor narrowly evaluative—that is, where the actual language work that goes on in poetry writing is not set aside in writing that “discusses.” (L=B, iv)

Rhetorical diversity was sought as a response to the limiting methods of criticism. The journal provided a place for rhetorical invention as it resisted standards of writing. Historically, their conclusion was not completely accurate in that many American critics in the 1940s and 50s were writing a form of criticism that sought the same ideals for the poetry being written at the time. It would be more accurate to say that the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal made public another form and approach to poetry and criticism. Here we can see that the lack of rhetorical invention was awaiting a response, as it had a hundred years earlier in the birth of the Advanced Composition course. Andrews’ and Bernstein’s editorial practices provided a new public forum, and a reinvestigation into the issues of the then, contemporary American poetry.

Bernstein’s first solo editorial job occurred in 1982 for *Paris Review*.<sup>41</sup> The poetry editor, Jonathan Galassi, referred to the “Language Poets” as “one of the most frequently mentioned and least understood developments in American poetry in recent years...”<sup>42</sup> *Paris Review* asked Bernstein to give “a relevant anthology” in order to see and understand their works. Bernstein’s “sampler” consisted of new works by many of the writers found in the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal. He included twenty-four different writers engaged in a variety of styles. We can read works by Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, Robert Grenier, as well as an early draft of Arakawa/Gins’ understanding of “Blank”. Framed as the Language poets, Bernstein wrote: “What we have here is an insistence to communicate.” He qualifies communication to mean more than a simple ‘me to you’ idea. Instead, he wants to broaden out communication as far as possible:

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<sup>41</sup> “Language Sampler”, ed. by Charles Bernstein, *The Paris Review*, Vol. 24: 86 (1982): 75-125. The pages are not numbered in this section. The introduction is included in *Content’s Dream* titled “Introduction”, 239-243.

Hints, then, of a writing that takes as its medium, or domain of intention, every articulable aspect of language. It's as if a new scanning of consciousness were possible by introduction of the music of its constituting. And by this means to make audible the thinking field: to get access to the lens (the mixed metaphor is again ideology) through which the world's meanings are formed into audibilities (75-6).

The volume is a collection of writings made public, in an attempt to get access to the dynamic nature of language art coming into being. He states that the work collected in the sampler can be "characterized" as a refusal to privilege "the expository logic and speech-derived syntax that dominate contemporary writing practice" (76). This characterization allows the emphasis to be upon, for Bernstein, the "internal necessities of the poetic process of meaning" instead of relying on the "external constraints of rationalistic argument" for coherence (76).

There is a willingness to use, within the space of the text, a multiplicity of such different modes, which counts more on a recognition of the plastic qualities of traditional genres and styles than on their banishment. (76)

Bernstein understands that any reaction to a dominant mode requires knowledge of that mode. He uses that knowledge as a source of the constructed dynamic of innovation. He reads each of the writers as refusing the dominating forms of logic and expository rules as the only manner, or as the only procedure available in order to write. The *polis*, the "city of the text", to use Michael Joyce's phrase, has an ongoing relation to traditional genres. What is not exiled is the understanding of the plastic nature of narrative, descriptive, and poetic artifacts.

Just as Williams places a reference to the plastic arts in the center of Paterson III, so too Bernstein's "language sampler" perceives a material and plastic construction to the modes of discourse. This knowledge is not only limited to repetition, but to response and invention.

I am sufficiently skeptical of the presumption of "advance" in "avant-garde" to equally distrust formulations that appear to pit "the new" against tradition. What is presented here exemplifies a continuing dialogue with the past(s)—surely not, though, just a narrowed line of hallowed English verse!—and the future(s).

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 75.

Yet because it is a dialogue, it does not only involve repetition of old forms but also a response to them. (77-78)

For Bernstein, the term “avant-garde” does not adequately explain his, or the group of writers he has brought together, relationship with former modes of poetics. He does not reject tradition, but suggests that understanding tradition involves an ability to respond, a sense of responsibility, and not a mechanical reproduction. He sees that American poetry is indebted to English verse, but also realizes that American poetry has its own unique roots that go beyond formalism.

To read the “sampler” is to discover a diversity of American poetry and a diversity of “Language” poetry. The label does not represent a stylistic practice, but rather a disposition toward writing itself, toward tradition, and the exploration of all the elements of style. Reading the sampler, the reader is thrown into a vortex of poetic acts. Made public, this “sampler” takes reading in a variety of directions that are, for the most part, a re-description of syntax. The pages give instances of concrete poetry, letterism, graphic alteration (as in the case of Hannah Weiner and Tina Darragh), and new measurements of the line. Poetic logic is completely expanded, re-thought, and explored. In the “Language Sampler”, we are taken into a recent investigation by a group of 24 poets: a number of whose implicatures rise out of history toward those who have not forgotten.

Ken Irby in “[requiem études • for Louis Zukofsky]” shows, combines, explores the issues of sampling, and “new scanning of consciousness”. An example of the “sampler”:

word boundaries orenda  
sumbur  
«If they ask, it is you »<sup>43</sup>

The boundary of words has been the ongoing site for reading comprehension in Western culture. Each Age brings to the marking of words, new space. We move easily from word to boundaries, and then we are thrown into choice, re-measurement, invention. The words could be “or end a sum bur”, “o rend a sum bur”, or in the sonic register “or in a slumber”. We leave,

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<sup>43</sup> The pages in the “Language Sampler” are not numbered. Ken Irby is the twenty-fourth, and last poet featured in the section.

known word boundaries, and quickly all we have are our senses.

In Lynne Dreyer's "Step Work", it is difficult not to think of Marinetti's change of syntax in a plane. Dreyer redescribes syntax, not from the air, free from the earth, but in the womb, the source of the earth's inhabitants.

Into the open mouth that feeds you the planes and mothers  
are becoming. Are they known? Are they becoming known?  
You are ready and invited. Where are you? In the country chair  
in the new and clean century, look into the eyes that really see  
you. These are the new remedies of the ancient years. Is it  
factory or heartbeat? Do you remember?

We can see the redescription of syntax, "into the open mouth that feeds you the planes and mothers are becoming". Normal narrative associations are redrawn, not as fantasy, or as surrealism, but as "new remedies of the ancient years". The reader is thrown between the earth and the sky, machine (factory) and flesh, and the questions describe the lost of place, the lost of self history. To look into the eyes of the one who really sees, is to find (again) one's place, one's new remedy.

Diane Ward, in her poem "Approximately", takes these remedies near the changes of time and narrative post war generation has promoted and sought:

What the question value in days formulated frequent written  
word weeks.  
I don't know an arching sounding around us.  
I don't know where movements standing pointing as vacuum.  
Where the word which wasn't interesting belongs as  
redefinition.  
Where speed replaces the idea and becomes it.  
Internal is categorically beautiful bombing as we expected  
them whole sentences erupt up and fall.

Headlong away to detail and immediacy.  
Another form is untouchable and moves a cage into softness.  
A wooden syntax confusing both image and word and detail and  
notation.  
A shape which is rounded off so that corners fall away.  
Blank and another ordering attention paying off.  
Blank intensity stares.

These lines conclude the two page long poem and redress poetic expectations “[h]eadlong away to detail and immediacy”. Time, narrative beliefs, and rhetoric are woven together in the very first line of quotation. The line’s parallelism gives the reader a world where weeks and word unite: “A highly syntax confusing both image and word and detail and notation.” The confusion can be seen as a sign of poetic weakness, or as the experience of reading new remedies. Each line, and at times a word, can arrest linear speed and take the reader around the spatial reality of reference.

Ending with “blank” as an “intensity” ties Ward’s poem with Arakawa/Gins piece “Blank”. They write:

Instantaneously and repeatedly, Blank serves as a station for our senses, making possible an impression of continuance. Subject comes to be formed in much the same way. And so, Blank comes to be found thoroughly interspersed throughout Subject, forming an integral part of any act.

Arakawa/Gins’ project of the mechanism of meaning, brings into the reflection of meaning many of the daily realities we ignore. Ward, too, takes “Approximately” as a space for working with contemporary perception and knowing. Re-reading the “Language Sampler” years after its publication does not produce a discoverable unity, but rather, presents a series of pieces that are offering numerous routes out of the narrow range of post-confessional verse. The sampler makes public a new grammar for the writing of American poetry.

To investigate these works closely demands that we investigate what we consider to be the syntax of meaning production. What is evident in these pieces quoted and read briefly above, is

that Bernstein was in contact with many writers who were, like himself, exploring how poetics can be built again and again. These poets display an ability to write in ways that enrich our understanding of grammar and syntax, as well as prove that syntax produces an understanding. Ordering words, making boundaries, using punctuation, capitalizing letters or words, listening to the sound, and watching how “the world’s meanings are formed into audibilities” (75), the poets change reading. After reading the “Language Sampler”, we are doubly aware of how confined and reduced some forms of poetry can be.

Several years later, Bernstein edited another collection of Language poetry for the academic journal *Boundary 2*, called “43 Poets (1984)”.<sup>44</sup> As with the *Paris Review* sampler, Bernstein is placing into the public forum a range of poetics, procedures, and “[i]nnovations made; poems after all”: “Not the poets, that is, but the poems: the songs is the singers. The attempt, in this way, less to gather a ‘representative’ group of writers than to present an anthology of approaches to language” (112). This collection gives greater detail to Bernstein’s understanding of his contemporaries. He sees the works as innovations that are made and constructed. He goes as far as to suggest that this is the defining principle of poetry. Innovation has meant to change into something new, to alter, to renew, and to make changes, revolutions, rebellions, or insurrections. Bernstein finds poetry both a site where transformation of forms can continually occur and where these forms change reading, institutions, and knowledge.

The collection of work was formed in 1984. Instead of the double speak of Orwell’s *1984*, we have “Innovations *made; poems* after all”. Instead of the reduction and control of speech, we have opportunities. If it wasn’t for Nietzsche’s politics and ethics, we could see this collection creating his new tongue: “New, ways I go; new speech has come to me; weary I grow, like all creators, of the old tongues”.<sup>45</sup> Instead of destruction and bigotry, Bernstein, interested in creation and democracy, writes:

For the claim of inclusiveness is a nightmare of authority torn from the contexts that might lend it credence, the desire for Comprehensiveness a self-made veil

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<sup>44</sup> Vol. 14: 1,2 (1985/1986): 1-113. Bernstein’s title “43 Poets (1984)” is re-written by the editors as “The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poets”. Hereafter cited, 43 Poets.

<sup>45</sup> “Neu Wege gehe ich, eine neue Rede kommt mir; müde wurde ich, gleich allen Schaffenden, der alten Zungen.”, *Also sprach Zarathustra in Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. by Karl Schlechta, Vol. 2 (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1966), 342. Translation mine.

against comprehension. Each approach suggests other approaches, echoes other presents outside this catchment area. (112)

In so many of the texts we find further approaches. Bernstein's defining editorial desire, that each approach echoes another approach, foreshadows his work on the web and at the Electronic Poetry Center. He is not seeking to reign in all the approaches under one rubric. He is seeking to acknowledge that the power of comprehension entails, if more than one kind of person or perspective is to be allowed, an ever present lacunae.

Drucker's, *Against Fiction*, opens the "43 poets (1984)". The title page of the *Boundary 2* issue is the selection titled "The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poets". This selection of "poets", opens with a work entitled 'against fiction', which comically tips the hat to an old distinction used by Shklovsky to understand poetics.

GONE SLACK AND LOOSE FROM REPEATED ASSAULT. WANT-  
ED TO BE LET BACK INTO THE PROTECTIVE CUSTODY OF THE  
DEEP INTERIOR. Dense and personal, unafraid. The room kept white  
like a nuptial chamber. Bride to his fantasies. Wanting to have her  
back to them throughout the conversation, fully available. Didn't  
want the visual to impose on her space. TryinG to keep the blinds  
shut. Barely works. Light cominG strong throuGh the crackS. Don't  
criticise the displacement. KeepinG her eyes off her own activity. Dig-  
nity of submission -- tender and eleGant. (3)

Drucker's graphic diversity of *Against Fiction* forces the reader to realize that the basic unit of the written language, the grapheme, is a conventional and cultural artifact that can work for or against fiction. She explores the nature of font and its role within words and the page. In a true sense, she sees writing, to use David Antin's phrase, as a "language art".<sup>46</sup> Bernstein, by

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<sup>46</sup> Drucker summarizes her work on *Against Fiction* as struggle to write and create fiction. I quote her own description of the work: "1983-84 *Against Fiction* (Druckwerk, edition of 100 copies, with 25 others on newsprint), handset in Stymie light, medium, and bold, sizes 10 point through 48 point, on Warren's oldstyle, originally bound (badly) into black Arches cover, with odd muslin spine piece glued to museum board, forty-eight pages, 13" x 16", illustrated with linoleum cuts. Images and text printed together in one run. This book took about 800 hours of printing time, including setting, running, distributing type and making images. The text had been five years in the writing, editing, typing, and much was changed in the composition process to tighten it up. All typographic oddities in the setting were dictated by necessity—I would begin with standard conventions and substitute only when my supplies were exhausted. My intention was to use the tabloid format to open up the dense text for browsing. The text recorded a five year struggle with the desire to write fiction and the sense of its impossibility in contemporary literary context." See *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics*, (NY: Granary Books, 1998), 305.

choosing to open the selection with Drucker, who is a theorist, writer, printer, professor, and graphic artist, shows the range, interest, and diversity of what is possible in contemporary writing. Bernstein, like Drucker, embraces the “marked” page and believes that work in language is also work in design, printing, and type. The material effect in language construction effects reading and is not simply a neutral vehicle for meaning.<sup>47</sup> Drucker’s work is a study in how language works and the effort it takes to shape a page with discourse or verse. For both Bernstein and Drucker, how the page is shaped and what is allowed and not allowed, explored and not explored, testifies to the quality of its art.

The range of the selection of “43 Poets (1984)” is faithful to Bernstein’s description of an “anthology of *approaches* to language” (112). Laura Moriarty in “La Quinta del Sordo [After Goya]” writes:

pounding the street you said was dirt beneath but in fact these excavations  
brick by brick reveal money is there a mixture of sustance with  
layers who are themselves only absences in light

the story is not over after the shot is fired any more than the virgin in  
the corner is part of the composition though cut off from the screamers  
she is inexplicably present and made of the same stuff as the walls  
under her skin. (16)

Abigail Child’s “BLUEPRINT FOR A SCENARIO (1)” ends by (re)using punctuation, the period, as a device of rhythm.

Was not a dream. This brief. Simply clobbering slobbering. Flaps in  
darkness. Instruments rivet. *Without waking hurts us.* You last blue  
bright hear aria. Tog variable. Abut the cadence. (26)

Both of these pieces work the word, use line breaks as alterations, and punctuation as a manner of scenic stoppage. Moriarty’s subjects of “money” and “she” are linked in and out of presence, light and layers, made in words, in words of walls, going on after deeds are done, returning the

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<sup>47</sup> See Johanna Drucker’s *The Visible Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 94-96.



That gives the Punch and Judy to our show.

(87)

The poem, written in iambic pentameter, embraces the very tradition he seeks to expand, but his lines are not traditional, in that he follows the measure of meter regardless of its ability to stay within one line. For Bernstein, true poetics is always spilling over boundaries. The boundaries matter, for they represent one approach to language, but from the perspective of innovation, boundaries themselves are part of a constructing poetic practice.

The “43 Poets” are following Silliman’s advice: “Before writing, read Chaucer” (14). They cover a large range of poetry in their writing, in their suggestions. In fact, if we took the poets I have not mentioned, Hejinian, Howe, Gins, we could go in yet another direction different from that of Drucker, Child, and Price. Hejinian’s poem “The Person” writes of the “cold” of poetry:

The cold of poetry  
gobs — continents  
my slowness  
is increasing  
the lake protrudes  
convex & anxious  
the eye details  
the rocks  
stand on their heads  
with so much violence!  
of accuracy  
“Yes, it is  
a poetry  
of certainty!”<sup>48</sup>

The cold of poetry gobs continents of not abandoned eye registered fissures of the earth, but in certainty. The small lines give a poetics of certainty. Slowness increases into the sparse, but refulgent lines. The earth finds the word, the word the earth, as we see on page 78:

Just as you think indulge  
and already  
the thought of packing it  
— a future-like pessimism  
other words inhibit me  
with intoxicating interpretations  
I looked into the wind  
and heard the vowels  
on twigs  
as inhibiting as a dictatorship  
of idealism

The “I” in the poem takes care of wind and words, but knows that some words and some forms of idealism inhibit and intoxicate. The poem’s work, in a sea of language variegation, gives moments, stilled, chilled even, of seeing through and with the words, the world and the self in the world.

Susan Howe takes perception in yet further directions, without a title, or periods:

Body perception thought of perceiving (half-thought  
  
chaotic architect repudiate line a confine lie link realm  
circle a euclidean curtail theme theme fell function coda<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> “43 Poets”, 75.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 102.

The body perceives. The thought of perceiving as only a half thought, a half parenthetical beginning rejecting endings but using 'coda'. The text invites without closure without a mark (a period) of the system. We end, but live in parenthesis, still. The next two lines work words together as "realms" where themes "fell". Lines and circles of geometry's former guardians function as coda, curtailing body perception. The thought of perceiving is only "half-thought", or unfinished thought, or ongoing thought of. Gins, in a selection from "Essay on Multi-Dimensional Architecture", paints another picture of working principles as doing of capacity:

For it is the doing of capacity which constitutes the complexion for generating. Within such an arena, that which is not being done, not in any way, can no longer contribute at all. (95)

This collection offers "the complexion for generating" a poetry within the bounds of traditional verse, but also outside its perception. The "43 Poets (1984)" are "the doing of capacity", together working in language to find, discovery, recreate, and create realms of language habitation. The collection is not monolithic in its generative approach, different readings are demanded, the parenthesis is not closed, as "a confine lie link realm".

Steve McCaffery's work takes the reader back to the origins of what reading the written word has meant. In "from AN EFFECT OF CELLOPHANE" the text calls the reader back to ancient skills.

what they call night in the movies was a bullet dropping in the sentence logic undescending rain immured by the speakers cusp or jet the tissue of a fold half opening the portrait to the thing itself distorting then announcing there is always the discredited signet of a certain sign (60)

The text does not use any punctuation. If punctuation was the gradual insertion of marks over time and use, then this text appears new. McCaffery's choice to detract all the aids of reading, abandons the readerly text for the writerly. Some no doubt would feel this abandonment more than others. McCaffery's work brings back to the contemporary "complexion of generation", the ancient and difficult task of reading. The reader, approaching his text without the immense array of marks, is re-born. Here, finally, punctuation is no longer a neutral, mechanical, ahistorical substance.

The *boundary 2* issue shows that Bernstein was not only writing poetry of various styles, but

he was also in contact with poetry that presented the potential that poetry has to approach the world. To take up reading Chaucer, is to recognize that non-linguistic meaning (the page, the layout, the punctuation, the font) is an essential aesthetic and ethical dimension of poetry written in the English language. To forget, ignore, or neglect this historical reality is a political statement. To take up reading “43 Poets (1984)” is to recognize that all the elements of poetic construction can be used in the creation of poetic space and poetic details. The work of these writers does not enervate reading, but harbingers new frontiers of critical engagement demanding exploration, investigation, and praxis. Bernstein’s two post *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* collections place an extended range of poetry into the public sphere. The readers of *Paris Review* and *Boundary 2*, both journals of wide readership and quite accessible, were confronted with the contemporary issues of poetics. The confrontation, in true Bernstein fashion, was filled with the “complexion of generation”.

In 1987 Robert von Hallberg edited a collection of essays *Politics & Poetic Value* from the journal *Critical Inquiry*.<sup>50</sup> The purpose was to look at the practical problems in evaluating political poetry. In the book version, von Hallberg invited critical responses, and a closing chapter by David Bromwich. Jerome McGann was situated in the collection as the defender of the current radical poetry, “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing”.<sup>51</sup> Both Altieri and Bromwich see his defense, explanation, and argument for current radical poetry as weak and unconvincing, and thereby showing that the poetry is not worth close attention. As far as citing sources of Language writing is concerned, McGann is the best. He draws from the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal, *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, personal correspondence, *The Difficulties*, and individual volumes of Bernstein (*Controlling Interests* 1980) and Silliman (*Tjanting* 1981). Altieri and Bromwich only refer back to McGann’s article for descriptions and knowledge about “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing”. Jed Rasula is the only critic to refer to the anthology *In the American Tree* (1986) which contained many selections from the poets associated with the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal. No one, in discussing “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing”, refers to, or mentions, the two anthologies in *Paris Review* and *Boundary 2*, which provides a diverse selection of

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<sup>50</sup> *Politics & Poetic Value*, ed. by Robert von Hallberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); hereafter cited as *Politics*.

<sup>51</sup> McGann maintains the spelling of the journal because there is an institutional quality about those associated with the journal. Silliman disagrees, as does Rasula. See pages 255 and 317.

writers that could be considered a part of the current discussion.

Altieri, who finds and faults McGann's argument as unsatisfactory, concludes:

As someone who thinks he is committed to experimental poetry yet has a great deal of trouble considering L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing worth the labors it demands, I looked forward to Jerome McGann's essay... Looking back on it I find myself in a very different frame of mind. McGann not only failed to convince me of the value of the poetry, but made me wonder about my own commitments. With such defenders, experimental poetry needs no enemies: indeed, McGann's blend of political naivete and latent aestheticism risks confirming those suspicions that keep most intellectuals from reading poetry at all.<sup>52</sup>

In the next few pages, Altieri criticizes McGann's view of language, the role he envisions for the reader, his use of literary history, and his view of oppositional politics. Von Hallberg, in his introduction to the whole book, sees McGann's defense putting too much emphasis of the political nature of poetic forms: "McGann's claim is rather that the form of a poem properly criticizes the political orders that rest upon linguistic structures."<sup>53</sup> Although von Hallberg shows an acute grasp of McGann's position, he finds this view of politics a dead end. Bromwich, agreeing with von Hallberg, also argues that McGann's argument is very weak, resting upon poetic procedures as political forms. The technical apparatus is a non-political device (or a set of devices without much power for an argument), and like Altieri's view of language, it is simply waiting to be used.

Language is obviously the basis for social interactions, but it not in itself anything except a set of abstract relations within which certain meanings become possible...The most one can say about the relation of language to social structures is that it comes to articulate a range of practices that we must master in order to move fluidly through the social order.<sup>54</sup>

Altieri's view that language in anything but a set of "abstract relations" is only one side of the nature of language. Language may reside somewhere abstractly, but it is also contained in writings, recordings, and speech. In these later categories, language is not an abstract relation,

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<sup>52</sup> *Politics*, 301.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

but a constructed and material reality. How language is formed, printed, and spoken, is what makes meaning possible. Language use is more than mastering a set of rules in order to move through a social order, particularly when we come to literature or poetry.

Bromwich's concluding position, written specifically for the collected volume, repeats Altieri's critical position on views of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing.

Jerome McGann's subject comes closer to home for an American. There is a big problem, perhaps a minor one, about "the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets", the heroes he selects to represent radicalism today. They do not appear, as yet, to write good poems. McGann allows as much space, however, to their manifestos as to their poems: understandably, for in a movement of this kind, there is apt to be a high proportion of manifestos to poems. In dealing with any "school" whose aims and theories have been well publicized, a sympathetic critic stands in peril of taking the wish for the deed. This tendency is always part charity and part convenience.<sup>55</sup>

"*They do not appear, as yet, to write good poems.*" By 1988 many of the poets involved in "radical" poetry had not entered the academy, and many of them had been made more public through Bernstein's editorial work. Altieri, von Hallberg, and Bromwich take McGann's work as representative of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing; therefore, in their critique of his argumentation, they do not find it necessary to appeal to the object of the argument, that is, poetic "radicalism today". Bromwich does not think "they" write good poems before 1988, and he sees McGann's emphasis on language as a reduction of argument: "By 'procedures', however one cannot help noticing the rather narrow textual or technological grounds on which alone McGann is prepared to assign radical interest to a work of literature".<sup>56</sup> Given the availability of the poetry, and the theoretical reflection (Bernstein's *Content's Dream* had been published in 1986; *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* had come out in 1984), what is the political gain in saying that the Language poets have not written any good poems before 1988?

These are the reflections of some of the most prominent men of letters in the American Academy. In recent years, each of them has come to see the importance and value of Language

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 327.

writing. However, in 1988 their relation to the then current avant-garde, was distant and did not merit the judgement that the “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets” had not written any good poetry. Their approach revealed value judgements of argumentation in selection, evidence, and presentation. Indirectly, they were teaching a way of approaching a group of living innovators in how they read, responded, edited and commented upon the Language writers. The problem of their argumentation stems from the judgement, not from the amount of knowledge they had or did not have. They offered value judgements, a politics of reading and poetic values to the academic reading public. McGann, probably without realizing it when writing the essay, was to become the representative voice for recent radical poetry. Of notable importance is the fact that both Altieri and Bromwich judged the value of Language writing based upon McGann’s argument, and not upon the poetry itself, which was, as we have seen, widely available.<sup>57</sup>

The reason for going back to these critiques, is not to show that these men are not good critics. Their critical work proves otherwise. The critical format and its rhetorical devices, produces an argument that they can live with, but it is not substantial enough to pronounce judgement on what is “good” or worthwhile. The truer politics and poetic value are kept outside. If any of the critics would have defined what a worthwhile or “good” radical poetry was, then politics, and the power structures of the academic world would have been brought to the forefront. Definitions are not abstract, and defining good poetry reveals cultural placement, aesthetic values, and hidden desires. The point is not to eliminate definitions for good poetry, but rather to be aware of good poetry’s domain. All definitions exclude. The most recent definition I have read is brief, but contains a range of values:

*La poésie est liberté, création, enchantement.*<sup>58</sup>

Both of Bernstein’s edited works, whilst being produced outside the academy, show a vibrant awareness of politics and poetic value. Possibly in another generation of readers, Bernstein’s next

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<sup>57</sup> McGann does not set himself up as an authority. He refers to other academics such as Marjorie Perloff and Lee Bartlett.

<sup>58</sup> Michelle Chéné, “Un Parcours de Poesie au College” from the collected essays *Un Poète Dan La Classe: Jean-Vincent Verdonnet*, ed. Jean Yves Debreuille (Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1998) 45.

two editorial works will be seen as a response to *Politics & Poetic Value*. In the first work *The Line in Postmodern Poetry* (1988) edited by Frank and Sayre, Bernstein teamed up again with Bruce Andrews. The second work *The Politics of Poetic Form* (1990), which he edited, continues to show that there are dominant characterizations in poetics that shape its significance and reception.

For the editors, *The Line in Postmodern Poetry* is a necessary response to the discussion of free-verse.<sup>59</sup> After a hundred years, many questions concerning its role, function, and place in writing remain unanswered. One question the editors raise is, “What are the spatial configurations of the written text, and why do they matter?”<sup>60</sup> Their intention is to re-open the image of the line, and re-open what has become the dominant style and convention in the American context, free verse. The free verse movement in France occurred at the same time as expressionist painting, and both were an attempt, as the editors argue, “to register the immediacy of experience”, which in fact they did.<sup>61</sup> The current problem is that this move against norms, against authoritative aesthetic and rhetorical principles, has now become dominant and is used without thought. Both free verse and expressionism

have been transformed into images. It is as if the prosody of free verse, the gestural brushwork of expressionism, are now used only as codes. We no longer see subjective expression, we see a signifier—i.e., the form of the poem itself—which stands for ‘subjectivity.’<sup>62</sup>

The desire on the editors’ part to include a Language anthology stemmed from Renée Riese Hubert’s essay “The Postmodern Line and the Postmodern Page” where she discusses the development in painting to open the canvas toward the page. For her, the work of Cy Twombly, Jasper Johns, and Sol LeWitt collapse and complicate the distinctions between poet and painter, canvas and page, and reorient the gaze of the reader: to read to know, to read to see. This new development and invention of perception “led to the idea of the Language anthology

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<sup>59</sup> *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*, ed. by Robert Frank and Henry Sayre (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988); all further references are hereafter cited as *Line*.

<sup>60</sup> *Line*, x.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

within the larger anthology. It seemed important, finally, to let a certain number of lines “speak,” as it were, for themselves.”<sup>63</sup>

Frank and Sarye look to the Language anthology as a way of understanding the nature of the line in free verse as it has developed from Mallarmé. If we can say that Mallarmé moved the page toward the canvas, now the painter has moved the canvas toward the page. In both moves, the page becomes a conceptual space and not a by-product of meaning. Our conceptual space has changed in the last hundred years, so that we enjoy and are stimulated by the complicated nature of reading to know, reading to see. Consequently, “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E lines” functions, for these editors, as a way to not take the line for granted. “In postmodern poetry, the project has become one of rescuing the line from the taming influence of popular practice, of literally freeing up the margin.”<sup>64</sup> The attraction to Mallarmé, and the Conceptual Artists may be located in the fact that their work does not contain a margin. The habitat of the margin is located in the space of the observer. Thus, “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Lines” functions as a “meta-physick” of the spatial faculties, as we recall Retallack’s label of Language writers.

Bernstein and Andrews provide a collection of writings, including poetry and prose, which at times (in the case of Bernstein’s pieces) mixes the categories. Each participant has two pieces. Including the theoretical and poetical is not a new procedure for Bernstein and Andrews. From the very beginning of their editorial collaboration, they have always included both. Contrary to Rasual’s reading, their editorial practice contains a multitude of forms. “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Lines” continues their divergent practice and re-writes the traditional opposition of critical of lines and poetic lines, because both forms contain at times the other. Old “lines” are blurred and at times are accepted as we will see.

Johanna Drucker’s “The Visual Line”, divides and extends resolution. “Grammatical completion is not a requirement for syntactic resolution. Always at every point.”<sup>65</sup> The support network for completion is not bound by grammatical rules. Syntactic resolution can occur at various points in the network.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., xviii.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 180.

Spatial play, the hierarchy of size and color in the rendering, allows different groupings to occur--line by line sequence, and type by type. Not simply to restate the obvious. But to open it up, smack against the popular plane, immodestly refusing a patent transparency. Registering objections to the words which “speak themselves,” attempting to repress the marks of enunciation. As if that were possible.<sup>66</sup>

Drucker brings her knowledge of printing into her understanding of how texts attain and make meaning occur. For her, the font and type always represents a cultural history, and always frame and mark enunciation. She adds a new dimension to understanding the materiality of the sign where the line is not simply a carrier of meaning, but is a form of meaning.

The visual line. Not a nice poetic line, carefully controlled and closed. Instead, a haphazard line, random line, fulfilling itself by the brute force of its physical reality.<sup>67</sup>

In other words, the line is always visual and always built in a font. Once this truism is accepted, (“Not simply to restate the obvious”) the work of the writer embodies another discourse of meaning.

The line makes itself rather than being made, since it is the outcome of the manual, physical process, and not of the predetermined value. Part of the transformation of manuscript to text belongs to the medium. Here letterpress forces the text to negotiate on its own terms. Then the page uses the lines, not in a strict sequence, but in relation, and thus in a spatial exercise, kinetic and unstable. The lines are in a dynamic field, pulling against each other to determine the thrust of what becomes meaning.<sup>68</sup>

Her conclusion takes what has been secondary to a whole generation of criticism (the physicality of the book), and places it on par with the generation of texts. Transformation begins at the level of design and printing, which recalls Whitman’s own practice of seeing his work set in type before it was a finished piece. Drucker sees the medium and the technology of producing the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 181.

medium as intertwined.

P. inman goes back in his statement “Stein’s” to Stein for a procedure of sense. The paragraph is emotional, as Stein states at the beginning of “Sentence and Paragraphs”.<sup>69</sup> For P. inman, the construction of the paragraph re-opens the paragraph as a cultural form.

My assumption would be, following Stein’s lead, · that the paragraph/stanza structure is more · than just a see-through container (≠ neutral) · For Stein the paragraph was emotional the · narrative form par excellence (I’m doubling paragraph · with stanza)<sup>70</sup>

inman’s punctuation returns the reader to ancient manuscripts. In those manuscripts, punctuation was an aid to reading, of making marks (graph) beside (para) lines of words. He views paragraphs as a way to build an ongoing rhythm in the text, and a way to reorient the reader at any given moment. In Stein and inman’s work, the paragraph should not be legislated to a topic sentence, several supporting sentences, and concluding remarks. For them, a paragraph is not just a container for arguments, but a shaped form of emotion; consequently, the range of a paragraph is extended beyond its conventional use.

Lyn Hejinian moves the word toward the line and away from the memory of vocabulary. Words are set in relations toward movement and syntax.

In positing the line as the basic unit of the work, I realize that I am denying that function to the word (except one-word lines). In this sense, syntax and movement are more important to me than vocabulary (the historically macho primacy of which I dislike in any case).<sup>71</sup>

The poem works with a line that works toward a redistribution of meaning. She places a higher value on the connections and rhythm of words than on specific terms.

A poem based on the line bears in it a high degree of semantic mutability. Lines, which may be rigid or relaxed, increasing or decreasing, long or short, ascending (questioning) or descending (decisive), predisposed

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<sup>69</sup> The subtitle to Stein’s “Sentences and Paragraphs” reads: “A Sentence is not emotional a paragraph is”. See *How to Write* (Something Else Press: 1973), 23.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

(necessary) or evolving (speculative), representative of sequence or of cluster, redistribute meaning continuously within the work.<sup>72</sup>

The poem based on the line finds many lines for its ongoing drawing in the page. Lines begin to take on the meaning of words, or symbols, or allusions. Shaping the poem goes beyond but includes classical items such as vocabulary, meter, and measure. Her re-distribution of what lines can do opens up new syntax. How is a line rigid or evolving? Is there a particular shape or length to rigidity or evolution?

Each writer and poet for the anthology provides a critical or reflective piece on the “line” as well as a poetic or reflective piece from their body of creative work. At times the distinction between poetry and prose is evident. At other times, the distinction that has been a theoretical question for most of the century is re-formulated. We see this clearly in Bernstein’s two choices. One work titled “Time and the Line” is a humorous spill about the line, and is one of his most anthologized pieces.

Nowadays, you can often spot a work  
of poetry by whether it’s in lines  
or no; if it’s in prose, there’s a good chance  
it’s a poem. While there is no lesson in  
the line more useful than that of the pick-  
et line, the line that has caused the most ad-  
versity is the bloodline. In Russia  
everyone is worried about long lines;  
back in the USA, it’s strictly soup-  
lines. “Take a chisel to write,” but for an  
actor a line’s got to be cued. Or, as  
they say in math, it takes two lines to make  
an angle but only one lime to make

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 192.

a Margarita.<sup>73</sup>

Lines for Bernstein are everywhere and this poem closes the collection of the whole book. Once we start investigating the horizon of the line, Bernstein argues that poetics does not have the only say in what or how the line is to function or be understood. His other piece is reminiscent of the piece in the journal *The Difficulties*. However, this is hand-written and

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 216.

CHARLES BERNSTEIN

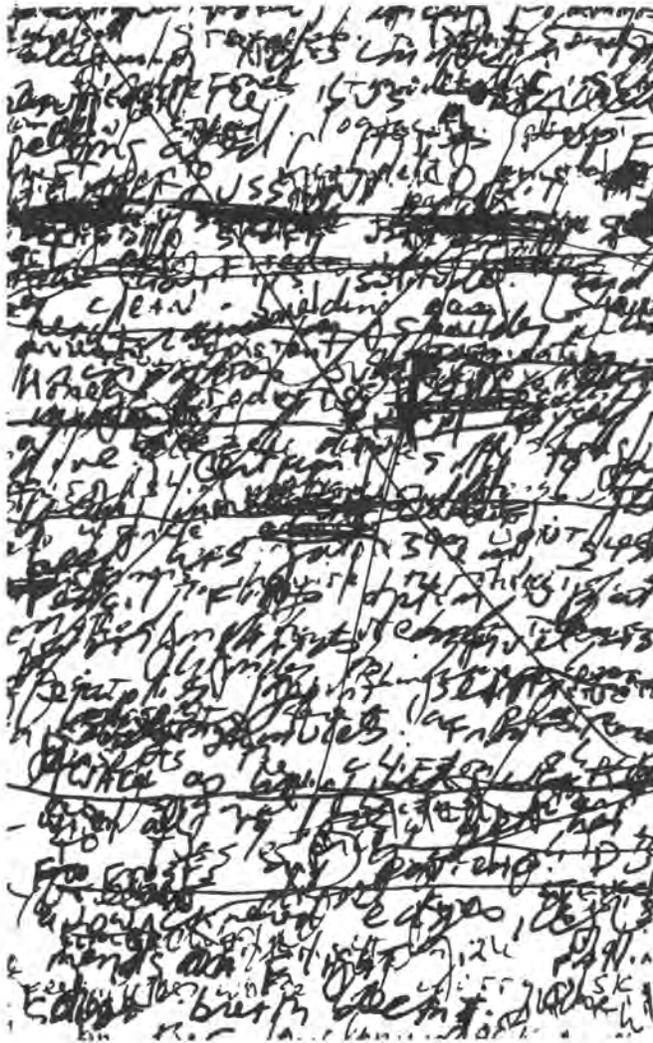


Figure 5.1. "Charles Bernstein", *Line in Postmodern Poetry*, eds. Robert Frank and Henry Sayre (1988).

presents a calligraphy of the line that redraws the poetic toward the varying, and at times shaky, pre-modern hand. (Figure 5.1)

The concept and practice of “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry” (those include in the various anthologies) by the end of the 1980s was diverse demonstrating expansive practices, poetics, and politics. Bernstein’s editorial practices, accomplished before he went into the Academy, reveal that the public intellectual was alive and well in New York. It also shows that the living network of innovators was a vibrant, luculent reality. Resistance, in an over-standardized commodity market can be ubiquitous. In these writers, we find a revitalization and aestheticization of all those old rule bound principles: line, page, collection, grammar, syntax, punctuation, and font. This attitude marks the pages of Bernstein and many of the writers collected in his editorial works. Even though a work like David Lehman’s *The Last Avant-garde* (1998) tries to marginalize the work of these two poets who live in New York, there is too much evidence, inside this chapter and outside this study, to show that the most recent network of innovators has brought about real change in American poetics.

The poets of the New York School were avant-garde at a time when that designation meant something. They are not the last avant-garde movement we will ever have. But at the moment the conditions surrounding art and literature are anything but favorable to the idea of an avant-garde. The problem has something to do with the decline of the public intellectual and the corresponding expansion of the purview of academe; the idea that something can be at once avant-garde and academic would seem contradiction in terms.<sup>74</sup>

Similar to other cultural critics, Lehman over-interprets the academy. As we have seen in this chapter even the basic question of teaching composition is in an ongoing process of change. We have also seen that it is not impossible to foreground “rhetorical invention” within the classroom walls and change the space and procedure of learning. Bernstein, like many others, has brought about radical innovations through web technology. Resistance is possible wherever there is a code; as Shklovsky has written, “[a]nything which may serve as a norm may become the starting point for active differential perceptions.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Lehman, *The Last Avant Garde*, 10-11.

<sup>75</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “Plot Construction and Style” in *Theory of Prose*, trans. by Benjamin Sher, intro. by Gerald L. Burns (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 21.

Resistance appears in many forms, and in the case of Bernstein and other poets grouped in the Language school, we have the opportunity to see how they function after moving into the academy. Lehman, attempting to be fair, also shows an inability to think beyond the already accomplished of past avant-gardes.

The argument against the viability of the avant-garde today rests on the assumption that there is no real resistance to the new, no stable norm from which a defiant artist may depart. While I find this to be a convincing argument, I would sooner help quicken a new avant-garde than pronounce the demise of an old one.<sup>76</sup>

Quickening a new avant-garde involves changes in reading and re-evaluating cultural legislation. Recognizing a new network of innovators requires that old critical formulations be discarded. Lehman's view that Language poetry "could not exist outside of the university" (370) reveals an ignorance of the careers of many of the Language poets. Bernstein, for example wrote, lectured, and published for over fifteen years before being appointed to an endowed Chair of Poetry. To the surprise of many, "Language Poetry" does not need the academy in order to exist, if we understand Language poetry to represent the numerous approaches to literature. Their work has already meant a great deal to a whole younger generation of writers, but also to the living network of innovators. The actual term "avant-garde" may not have much meaning for Lehman, but the practice of Bernstein and many others continues to have ramifications in reading, writing and critical inquiry.

Bernstein's work shows, from inside and outside the academy, that there is a cultural legislation that does not want change, or to be challenged, or to be shown as only one piece of a large puzzle. Bernstein's work has not only been about the new, but also about the possible. As he wrote in "Shock of Debris/ Debris of Shock": "The debt that pataphysics owes to sophism /

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<sup>76</sup> *The Last Avant-Garde*, 11. Lehman begins a discussion, although brief and not completely investigated, of the relation of the New York School poets with the Language poets. See pages: 369-371; 6-11.

cannot be overstated.”<sup>77</sup> If we understand sophism as the investigation of the possible, and pataphysics as the dream of possibilities, we can see how and why Bernstein’s work found and created an audience before, during, and after his move into the classroom. In the age of mass communication, reminding the reader and the viewer that discourse does not only have to be in one form, that invention is still possible, is a relief to the democratic impulse of the American landscape. The point is no longer to shock, but to say:

Imagine that all the nationally circulated magazines and all the trade presses in the United States stopped publishing or reviewing poetry. New poetry in the United States would hardly feel the blow. But not because contemporary poetry is marginal to the culture. Quite the contrary, it is these publishing institutions that have made themselves marginal to our cultural life in poetry.<sup>78</sup> (*MW* 145)

Bernstein, editing, teaching, and proclaiming possibilities, does not suffer from the amnesia of invention. His work is like a web page full of links, awaiting the click of the mouse, and the pull of the reader-viewer.

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<sup>77</sup> *DC*, 105.

<sup>78</sup> “Provisional Institutions: Alternative Presses and Poetic Innovation”, *MW*, 145.

- i. kinetic criticism
- ii. 'hyper-text', 'hyper-link' (314, 320)
- iii. Lives of the Toll Takers
- iv. kinetic reading vs organic reading (321, 327)
- v. a song, The Subject
- vi. 'Are you a normal person?' (351)

*Any critical reading that draws near and engages in this work must remain able to live with unexpected assiduous combinations and the meandrous implications that follow. (309)*

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## Chapter 6

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### Kinetic Reading: Web Pages, The Lives of the Toll Takers and the Song of The Subject

Charles Bernstein's career is multifaceted. He has written poetry and criticism, worked as an editor for literary and non-literary journals, and he has collaborated with painters, composers, and curators. His work combines a sense of democracy with the pulse of the inventor's drive to make existing things better. Throughout the 1990s Bernstein continued to work in a range of mediums. He explored the nature of a web based critical essay, as well as the role of subjectivity in his libretto, *The Subject*. He also continued to explore the potential of poetry on the page in *Dark City*. Choosing to read these areas together will give this chapter a strange, diverse feel; and yet, this is important as it gives a sense of Bernstein's ability to work with the complexity of contemporary living. He does allow the stress of the world to impinge on form, as he continues to respond to tradition. In new spaces built by technology, he returns to ancient practices of the book. Inundated by the culture of abuse and hysteria, Bernstein re-explores the tried categories of subjectivity, change, and renewal. Embracing the work of those around him, like Drucker, Mac Low, and Howe, Bernstein continues to write a poetry that calls for ancient critical practices, and ongoing critical exploration. Bernstein, the dweller in the house of possibility, continues to surprise and work heroically. Any critical reading that draws near and engages in this work must remain able to live with unexpected assiduous combinations and the meandering implications that follow.

In the 1990s Frank Gehry showed the world that combining computer technology with architecture could alter the expectations of what is a building, could re-direct the relationships between designer and client, and could inspire other kinds of engineering. Gehry demonstrates all the signs of being an inventor: not working in isolation, experiencing problems of production,

creating new links of existing technology in order to change, enhance, and expand the possibilities of creating artifacts. In architecture, the term mosaic refers to “a system of patterns for differentiating the areas of a building or the like, sometimes consisting of purely arbitrary patterns used to separate areas according to function.”<sup>1</sup> The new mosaic Gehry came upon builds diversity, disunity, into the frame of an individual architectural house, and for the first time frees design from the grid.

There are gestures in my sketches. How do you get them built? I was able to build them with the computer, with material I would have never have tried before. You’ll see the relationship to my sketches in Bilbao. This is the first time I’ve gotten it. And once you’ve taste blood, you’re not going to give up. I don’t know where it can go. How wiggly can you get and still make a building?

I used to be a symmetrical freak and a grid freak. I used to follow grids and then I started to think and realize that those were chains, and that Frank Lloyd Wright was chained to the 30-60 grid, and there was no freedom in it for him, and that grids are an obsession, a crutch. You don’t need that if you can create spaces and forms and shapes. That’s what artists do, and they don’t have grids and crutches, they just do it.<sup>2</sup>

Freed from an older formalism, Gehry provides an example of innovation that does not destroy space but explores new ways of framing the habitation of culture. The use of computers in building cultural space continues to be explored, and Gehry remains the finest innovative example.

Bernstein also has explored the possibilities of the computer. Throughout the early 1990s he was at the forefront of combining poetics with Internet technology. Not only is he the executive

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<sup>1</sup> *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*. Unabridged edition, New York: Random House, 1966, 933.

<sup>2</sup> *Gehry talks: Architecture + Process*. ed. by Mildred Friedman, with an essay by Michael Sorkin; commentaries by Frank O. Gehry and Associates (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1999), 176. See also where Gehry discusses the role the CATIA software (designed by the French company Dassault) played in transforming his own architectural development (16-20). Kurt W. Forester in his essay “Architectural Choreography” writes: “...if the New York Five have pursued formal autonomy in their work across all personal differences and along a wide arc of time, Gehry has chosen an architecture he can make with his own hands. His buildings are able to stand on their own because they result from an inventive transformation of their circumstances rather than from an expostulation of their problems. Gehry does not ‘sign’ his projects with a personal touch but instead *transforms* whatever he takes up.” See *Frank O. Gehry: The Complete Works*, ed. by Francesco Dal Co and Kurt W. Forster, building descriptions by Hadley Arnold (Monacelli Press: New York, 1998), 9.

editor and co-founder of the Electronic Poetry Center and Poetics List, he also has explored the meaning of hypertext in terms of contemporary poetry and the history of the book. Bernstein, in one of his most important poetic designs, embraces the hypertext while at the same time interpreting this new development from a historical perspective. His essay entitled “An Mosaic for Convergence” in the electronic journal *erb* (*Electronic Review of Books*) explores this technology. Mosaic has both visual (the process of inlaid stone in order to create an image) and linguistic (the high point of Hebrew Scriptures) meaning. Convergence can mean “coming together at a point” as well as a mathematical process where “an infinite series of terms, the sum of which, beginning with the first, continually approximates towards a definite limit” (*OED*). We can assume that each page of his web-essay is a single mosaic piece, and that these mosaics are elements of a new kind of convergence.

The editors of *erb*, in their “image + narrative” issues, state: “We hope to explore through literature a transition already evident in the culture at large, where technology has enabled narratives of all types to undergo transformation by the image.”<sup>3</sup> Bernstein’s “An Mosaic for Convergence”, which is found in this issue, presents and represents text and image, prose and poetry, links and blank pages in convergence on and around the topic of the hypertext. Each time a reader-viewer goes to the site, a different page begins the essay. Many of background visuals are from his spouse Susan Bee, or his children. Some pages are filled with colored letters on the background of a blue screen. On other pages, only the black and white of traditional lettered discourse appears. On one page, beginning with the phrase “while I am delighted to appear”, with the background of an ancient Latin text, Bernstein embraces the mosaic of the book.

## B-O-O-K

technology. B-O-O-K technology is at the cutting edge of alphabetic hyperspace. Its remarkable versatility is unrivaled,

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<sup>3</sup> *erb* 6 winter 97/8, image + narrative issue; the work originally appear here: <http://www.altx.com/ebr/eb6/eb6.htm> (link broken). See, <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/an-mosaic-for-convergence/> retrieved September 7, 2019.

its rugged state-of-the art packaging is everywhere  
imitated but never excelled. ....<sup>4</sup>

The layout of the page resembles the above design, but the letters are colored and the background is a colored ancient text. Bernstein does not try to justify the use of hypertext from within the medium, but rather shows that the concept and structure of the medium has ancient roots. In the page starting “Claims of many enthusiasts...”, he argues that many of the radical features of the hypertext find a home in “the invention of alphabetic writing” and are “facilitated by developments of printing and bookmaking”. Technical features, such as page and line numbering, indexes, tables of contents, concordances, cross-referring, are for Bernstein “hyper-textual”. Non-linear forms of reading are not new.

In a page with a blue background discussing “radical art”, he refers to Sven Birkerts’ critique of hyper-space, found in his book *The Gutenberg Elegies* (1994), and reviewed by John Unsworth in the essay “Electronic Scholarship; or, Scholarly Publishing and the Public”.<sup>5</sup> Within Bernstein’s page, a link is available to Unsworth’s article, and within the article, Birkerts’ is quoted. Here is Birkerts’ quotation:

My core fear is that we, as a culture, as a species, are becoming shallower; that we have turned from depth—from the Judeo-Christian premise of unfathomable mystery—and are adapting ourselves to the ersatz security of a vast lateral connectedness. That we are giving up on wisdom, the struggle for which has for millennia been central to the very idea of culture, and that we are pledging instead to a faith in the web. What is our idea, our ideal, of wisdom these days? Who represents it? Who even invokes it? Our postmodern culture is a vast fabric of competing isms; we are leaderless and subject to the terrors, masked as freedoms, of an absolute relativism. It would be wrong to lay all the blame at the feet of

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<sup>4</sup> I take a section from the page. It is impossible to give a “page” reference for this part of the essay. As the essay is not in consecutive order, I have used words or phrases from the first few lines of each page.

<sup>5</sup> John Unsworth, “Electronic Scholarship; or, Scholarly Publishing and the Public”, collected in *The Literary Text in the Digital Age*, ed. by Richard J. Finneran (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 233-243.

technology, but more wrong to ignore the great transformative impact of new technological systems—to act as if it’s all just business as usual.<sup>6</sup>

Birkerts uses the web as a way of questioning the state of wisdom in our present culture. In contrast, Bernstein takes the issue of hypertext and reminds cyber-space of its home planet. The book, its alphabet, and all its imbedded technology have worked within the principle of linkage for several millennia. Indirectly, Bernstein, as he foregrounds “the book”, reminds his readers that the Judeo-Christian tradition has not had a hostile relation with this technology but instead has enhanced and developed its cultural networking. In contrast to Birkerts’ theological idealism, Bernstein’s ethics take on the materiality of politics. Like Birkerts, Bernstein does not want “to act as if it’s all business as usual”. His ethical critique appears on one of the many pages, and appears in a phrase written over and over again in colored letters on a white background:

For all the utopian promise of technology, the answer is not in our machines, but in our politics. For all the utopian promise of technology, the answer

In the 1990s, in contrast to the early teens of the twentieth century and the European avant-garde, the machine no longer carries within it, hope. Bernstein links the machine with politics, and places politics above the ability of the machine to realize utopian promise. He is against “business as usual”, but is so from a different angle. The ethics of technology are a major concern for Bernstein, and like Birkerts, he too worries about the negative effect that the use of the technology will have on our culture. Bernstein is not nostalgic for a previous era. He is cautious, wise, even in his engagement with a new technology.

Since, for Bernstein, Internet technology resists so much of the status quo in mass media and in the academy, he predicts that the new freedom will soon have to be purchased. “As a

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 234-235. The quotation is from the essay “The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age” *New Letters* 60:4 (1994), 111-112, 107-112. The essay is collected in the book, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Winchester, Mass.: Faber & Faber, 1994).

structure, the paratactic links of hypertextual environment short circuit narrative closure and foreground open-endedness—there is always another link.” Because of this (hyper) reality, Bernstein thinks that “commercial culture will shrink and privatize this radical, possibly unbearable open-endedness by creating contained environments”. The question of access to new art is no longer an issue of the art itself but an issue of who controls the access, and the dominant force is based on profit through the “hyper-commercialization of the communications media”. He is quick to add on this page, with only a white background and the black letters of type, that he is not against limits or boundaries.

Nor I am saying that limits are aesthetically or morally bad; on the contrary they are the basis of aesthetics and ethics. But the aesthetic and political issue is what limits are chosen, who will do the choosing, how informed the choices will be, and who profits

The institution being questioned here is economic. The driving force for the use of the hypertext structure is being evaluated by what links are profitable. On another page in the essay, the above quotations appear with a background of blue and green splotches of color. Re-writing the essay from within, foregrounding image and narrative, this page gives another square of the mosaic.

If you think I am being paranoid, consider the implications of a cartel composed of the major commercial producers of movies, music, computer operating systems, cable TV, networked computer operating protocols and systems, and games and entertainments for PC and networked computers. Call it Dreamworks Interactive, Inc.; their dreams, your quarters. Netscape and Eudora may be free as shareware. You’re dreaming if you think Microsoft Dreamworks will be.

The economic pressures of corporate conglomerates have a power to limit the “openness” of hyper-text. Freedom is restrained and regulated for profit. The convergence of economic (conglomerate) power and the technological mosaic of hypertext are in conflict because the economic machine wants to make a profit from a technology it can not produce. According to Bernstein, the economic power structures do not profit from “free” on-going links that cannot be controlled or billed. The metaphysical structure of hypertext is an ongoing potential, awaiting interaction and response.

The aesthetic quality of Bernstein's "An Mosaic for Convergence" as an integrated aspect of the text changes the way arguments can be formed on web pages. For example, the page in defense of the B-O-O-K is built on the visual backdrop of an ancient manuscript. The written word works within the screen, off the page and demands a new kind of interface. Bernstein gives examples of the possibilities of the hypertext as a new concept of critical argumentation. The written word in this page is spaced as a free verse poem, where letters have color and significance. Here, Bernstein shows an example of the possibility of hypertext.

The new computer technology—both desktop publishing and electronic publishing—has radically altered the material, specifically visual, presentation of text. It begins to seem as natural to think of composing screen by screen rather than page by page. Many text-based works now exist primarily for the screen rather than transpositions from another medium. In fact, it is the printed versions of such works that might be considered the reproduction and not the other way around (though reciprocity rather than hierarchy is a better way to understand the relation among the media).

Now questions arise like, what kind of visual background would we like to have, as we debate the relationship between technology and Judeo-Christian spirituality? Again, we find Bernstein participating in new ways of seeing and experiencing critical space. In the hypertext, old laws and new links converge. This mosaic of convergence is not, for Bernstein, an eradication of previous writing technologies (the pen, the typewriter, the printing press): it is another technology with limits and additions in how we interact and view the world.

The larger debate about hypertext not only includes a discussion on how this kind of technology effects artistic/critical endeavors, but it also involves a discussion of literacy and education. Ilana Snyder in her edited book *Page to Screen* attempts to provide a flexible critical framework for discussing the meaning and significance of hypertext. Her own essay, "Beyond the hype: reassessing hypertext", brings into the discussion the hermeneutic circle, and recent literary reading theories.

A hypertext is constructed partly by the writers who create the links, and partly by the readers who decide which threads to follow. Unlike printed texts, which generally compel readers to read in a linear fashion—from left to right and from

top to bottom of the page—hypertexts encourage readers to move from one text-chunk to another, rapidly and non-sequentially.<sup>7</sup>

In Drucker's terms, it is usually the "unmarked" text that moves the reader linearly, and asks the reader not to focus upon the materiality and production of the sign.<sup>8</sup> We also can see through the work of Iser that reading announces partial sign-images to the reader. Reading spirals as it progresses, stopping and starting on and off the page. The reading difference between a hypertext and a printed text, depends on what kind of printed texts and what kind of theoretical understanding has shaped the reader's experience. Consequently, some readers will be able to make the transition and translation between the two kinds of text with little difficulty. Other readers, who find the "open-endedness" or the visual element difficult, will also find works by Stein, Thomas Pynchon, David Lynch, and Peter Greenaway hard to understand, interpret, or enjoy.

Hypertext differs from printed text by offering multiple paths through a body of information: it allows them to make their own connections, incorporate their own links, and produce their own meanings. Hypertext consequently blurs the boundaries between

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<sup>7</sup> *Page to Screen: Taking Literacy into the Electronic Era*, ed. by Ilana Snyder (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 126. Hereafter cited as *Page to Screen*.

<sup>8</sup> Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994). Of course, all pages are marked; however, some pages hide its marked knowledge. Drucker elaborates: "The basic distinction between marked and unmarked typography occurred simultaneously with the invention of printing. Gutenberg printed two distinctly different kinds of documents, which embodied the characteristic features of what evolved into the two distinct traditions. On the one hand he printed bibles, with their perfectly uniform grey pages, their uninterrupted blocks of text, without headings or subheadings or any distraction beyond the occasional initial letter. These bibles are the archetype of the unmarked text, the text in which the words on the page 'appear to speak to themselves' without the visible intervention of author or printer. Such a text appears to possess an authority which transcends the mere material presence of words on a page, ink impressions on parchment. By contrast, Indulgences which he printed displayed the embryonic features of a marked typography. Different sizes of type so that different parts of it appear to 'speak' differently, to address a reader whose presence was inscribed at the outset by an author in complicity with the graphic tools of a printer who recognized and utilized the capacity of typographic representation to manipulate the semantic value of the text through visual means" (94-5). She goes on to argue that the literary text (and the scholarly one) has inherited the features of the unmarked text: "The literary text is the single grey block of undisturbed text, seeming, in the graphic sense, to have appeared whole and complete. The literary text wants no visual interference or manipulation to disturb the linguistic enunciation of the verbal matter. All interference, resistance, must be minimized in order to allow the reader a smooth reading of the unfolding linear sequence. The aspirations of typographers serving the literary muse are to make the text as uniform, as neutral, as accessible and seamless as possible, and it remains the dominant model for works of literature, authoritative scholarly prose, and any other printed form in which seriousness of purpose collapses with the authority of the writer, effacing both behind the implicit truth value of the words themselves" (*VW* 95).

readers and writers. These differences help support the view that the use of hypertext affects how we read and write, how we teach reading and writing, and how we define literary practices. (127)

Ilana Snyder gives the mechanisms of meaning around the matrix of the hypertext. For her the agility of the hypertext “is essentially a network of links between words, ideas and sources, one that has neither a centre nor an end” (127). In this world, digressions or footnotes or links can be as long as the original text, and can lead to yet another set of pages. “The extent of hypertext is unknowable because it lacks clear boundaries and is often multi-authored.”<sup>9</sup>

Recent narratives are being transformed by an integration of digital images and links. This is not a new phenomenon in literature or poetry, for metaphor and allusion have functioned in this manner for centuries. The layout and design of the printed page has accrued meaning within the marked text since Mallarmé. Looking at medieval manuscripts with added glosses, punctuation, colors, sizing of letters and layout, will show that the page has always been pithy and effulgent. We are embarking upon the electric-mathematical re-description of meaning, brought into the literary arts. This newness is not enough for Bernstein or Snyder, as she tries to convince her community by saying: “We must admit that technology is composed of both good and bad, generative and repressive influences” (141). People like Drucker, Arakawa/Gins, Gehry, and Bernstein can be said to be exploring the recent nature or map of the technological landscape. Bernstein in his mosaic hypertext does not fully or blindly embrace this newer technology. What is taking place for those who have access politically, aesthetically, or economically, is a transformation of the sight and structure of meaning and learning. However, the newness is not innocent. The looming use of technology to exploit and destroy remains an element of the discussion. What people decide to do with what is invented remains the issue.

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<sup>9</sup> *Page to Screen*, 127. Snyder reviews hypertext in relation to the advancement of education and literacy and seeks a position between those who see the hypertext changing the whole institution of learning and those who see the electronic as oppressive. In the conclusion of her essay she provides a negotiated position: “Hypertext certainly has the potential to affect the cultures of learning in significant ways. No technology, however, can guarantee any particular change in cultural practices simply by its ‘nature’. A hypertext classroom can be used either to support new theories of reading and writing or to promote traditional approaches to the study of texts. Teachers who are neither trained in nor sympathetic towards hypertext pedagogy with either ignore or subvert its potential. The use and effect of a technology is closely tied to the social context in which it appears. Hypertext will succeed or fail not by its own agency but by how people and institutions use it. Every evolving technology is socially constructed by the interests and assumptions of particular social groups”(140).

Bernstein continues to explore these concepts in *My Way*, published in the last year of the last decade of Luce's "American Century". Bernstein's essay-oriented writings arrive among poems, colors, and critical inventions. In the past 25 years, Susan Bee has covered nearly half of his proactive poetics. In our first contact with the paper edition of *My Way*, we meet an Elephant and children, Wise men and colonial shoes, blue and orange shadings, and *My Way* is in the sign of a green sun. Once inside, we are taken through many of Bernstein's writings from the 1990s. The book, a compilation of speeches and poems, is classified on the back cover as poetry, and on the inside as aesthetics and poetics. In the opening pages Bernstein presents the reader with a question from Lewis Carroll's Alice: "And what is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?"

The question is answered throughout the collection. Does Bernstein, who has embraced the Web more than any other poet of his generation, still have use for or think highly of the material-heavy bound book? In "I don't Take Voice Mail: The Object of Art in the Age of Electronic Technology" he muses:

Object: to call into question, to disagree, to wonder at, to puzzle over, to stare at...Object: something made inanimate, lifeless, a thing debased or devalued...Whatever darker Freudian dreams of objects and their relations I may have had while writing this essay, nothing could come close to Bryon Clercx's witty sculpture, *Big Stick*, in which he has compressed and laminated 20 volumes of the complete works of the father of psychoanalysis into one beautifully crafted Vienna Slugger, evoking both the uncanny and the sublime—finally, an American Freud. Here is the return of the book with a vengeance, proof positive that books are not the same as texts. Go try doing that to a batch of floppy disks or CD-ROMs. (MW 79)

Although ADILKNO, in *Media Archive* (1998), states that "[t]he text that chooses to appear in the network instead of on the table strives for the greatest possible economy of the word", Bernstein finds a place for the old economy of the book.<sup>10</sup> Even within his web essay, Bernstein literally shows that the hypertext is a convergence of older methods and practices now shaped in an

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<sup>10</sup> *The Media Archive: World Edition*. ADILKNO [The Foundation for the Advancement of Illegal Knowledge] (Brooklyn and Amsterdam: Automedica, anti-copyright, 1998), 142.

electronic medium. He does believe that each technology has its own application, limitation, and possibility.

According to Snyder, the appeal of the hypertext stems from its lack of a central control system. Before hypertext surrounded daily life, in the poem “The One Thing That Can Save America”, John Ashbery asked:

Is anything central?  
Orchards flung out on the land,  
Urban forests, rustic plantations, knee-high hills?  
Are place names central?  
Elm Grove, Adcock Corner, Story Brook Farm?<sup>11</sup>

Ashbery asks the question of what is central to the land called “America”. In classic fashion, he does not answer the question directly. His answer leans toward the American landscape, but does not rest there. Already in literature, we sense the lack of a defining center to a poem, novel, or play. Birkerts’ worry is that somehow the Internet will replace wisdom and that we will exchange surface connections for depth. The problem of course, in the American context, is that the cohesiveness of its unity has always been at issue, so that it is not based on depth (race or gender), but on surface connectedness (democracy).

Bernstein takes web technology as another form of possible meaning. He is not naïve in his understanding that its ongoing openness will eventually be controlled. He has built an intricate public forum with the Electronic Poetry Center, which is for the moment available without restraint. Yet, web technology does have limits. To use the hypertext, a person must have access to a computer and be able to get “on-line”. Within the university system, students are able to get on-line with little or no charge. In the private sector the rates vary; nevertheless a cost is involved. Another limit or boundary to web technology is that all pages are in a square and on a screen, and require ongoing energy in order to be used. A web page or hypertext is a working machine, whereas a book is an already made machine. To debate which technology is better is futile and offers no real insight into literary criticism. The better approach is to begin to ask how the study of the hypertext can proceed. At first, the reader is transformed into a reader-viewer and so visual

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<sup>11</sup> *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, 44.

understanding of the plastic arts, design, and cinema come into play. Critical assessment is difficult in that quoting a web page in a book presents certain problems. This is a minor limitation that will be eliminated as the technology is upgraded. The hypertext highlights a reality that has always been present: language itself has always been visual. As literary studies begin to study and be taken into the hypertext, critical methods will go through some changes. The main change will be developing the ability to read linear discourse and interpret visual design simultaneously. The initial tendency will be to think of a web page as images just added to words, but as more and more writers and artists build on-line works of art, the interaction between the two will create new hybrids and forms. The hypertext gives writing further modes of framing, and these further explorations will challenge any reading theory that ignores the materiality of the sign or the materiality of the page. New critical space will be needed and required. As we have seen, Creeley finds the desire to build a new space American: “Americans have had the especial virtue in the last hundred years of opening both content and form in an extraordinary manner, and the energy inherent continues without apparent end.”<sup>12</sup>

Bernstein’s inventive processes have worked within the bounds of many different kinds of technologies. Unlike Gehry’s work, where the links between works can be seen in his curves and his surfaces, Bernstein’s links can be found in his indirect engineering upon grammar and logic through a CATIA poetics: a poetics that allows one to design possibilities.<sup>13</sup> The web essay “An Mosaic for Convergence” is an excellent place to discuss how the hypertext brings change into literary criticism. Bernstein opens up the notion that critical discourse can share the same space with a variety of images. Just as Bernstein showed in *Artifice of Absorption* that critical arguments can be put into verse, the mosaic essay shows that hypertext and web-page design can also be part of the argument. Bernstein’s first argument comes across in how the essay is ordered. As already noted, each time the essay is accessed, it starts on a new page. Each time, a new mosaic is built. The brilliance of the mosaic is that it is we who put the pieces together, for they are not, nor have they ever been, linked. Reading becomes kinetic, following the movements of the page, its images, sounds, and links. Furthermore, kinetic reading will find new kinds of order, new kinds of

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<sup>12</sup> Creeley, “Was that a real poem or did you make it up yourself?”, in *American Poets*, 51.

<sup>13</sup> CATIA, is the software Gehry used, allowed him to invent and design beyond the structure of the grid.

metaphors, and new ways of citing, analyzing, and explaining the unfolding web of American poetics.

In the poem “The Lives of the Toll Takers”, Bernstein continues to find, within the technology of the book, a generating moving center. The poem demands a kinetic reading guided by linguistic criticism and knowledge of design, and informed by book engineering and the epistemology of the plastic arts. Kinetic reading moves with the text, crossing disciplines, embracing all the marks on the page, following the pointings of the signs. The opening lines:

There appears to be a receiver off the hook. Not that  
you care.

(DC 9)

We might care. Our first image, the break of possible communication and availability of technological largesse, is quickly re-inscribed in ethical terms.

Largesse  
with no release became, after  
not too long, atrophied, incendiary,  
stupefying. Difference or

(DC 9)

Reading, as Bernstein’s work has shown, must be kinetic. Each line is a spatial possibility of reference, design, and semantics. In an image of a break or fatigue in one technology (the lines of communication), he takes the opening of the poem in the direction of the older technology of vers libre, which in its first use was to give the reader a sense of immediate contact. The content is troubling: why wouldn’t we care? The “Largesse”, unable to release its abundance or its generosity slows down almost to a halt. In between these two sections appears another description:

Beside the gloves resided a hat and two

pinky rings, for which no  
finger was ever found. Largesse  
(DC9)

Line after line in the opening of the poem, images move about solidified in the form of free verse. We could be inside the home of a toll taker, looking on a site of absence: the absence of someone for the pinky rings, the absence of telephonic availability, the absence of an outlet for generosity.

The next lines change subjects and objects again. The following line introduces one of many references to philosophy throughout the poem:

Difference or  
*differance*: it's  
the distinction between hauling junk and  
removing rubbish, while  
I, needless not to say, take  
out the garbage  
(pragmatism)  
.  
(DC9)

The poem opens with two very different descriptions of objects (gloves and a phone), then two descriptions of attitudes or beliefs (largesse and difference). We move from the external to the internal. Bernstein then drops classical free style and gives the period its own line and space; the period is now free. No longer just an end point, the period takes on a semantic life of its own. This ancient visual guide is minimalist in appearance on the page. As of yet, the period does not contain a universal phonetic application in the English language. When these lines are read aloud, the reader could say: "in parenthesis pragmatism period". Another five times he places the period on a line of its own in the poem. Instead of being something repetitive and required in order to signify a complete thought, the point occurs as an aspect of the visual meaning of the poem.

In terms of design, Bernstein invigorates the free verse form, by including punctuation and not just words, into the spatial strategy. The lines “Difference or / *differance*” is a reference to Derrida’s philosophic term *différance* that was translated into English as *differance*. The “I” of the poem is not invested in either term (French or American Derridaian practices), but is providing a service of discarding the unwanted garbage of daily living. All three terms relate to the unwanted materials of life (junk, rubbish, garbage). Philosophy cleans up our lives, while poetry builds houses of possibility. Further in the poem we see this construction.

(Laughing all the way to the Swiss bank where I put my money  
in gold bars

[the prison house of language]

.) Simplicity is not

the

same as simplistic.

(DC 10)

We have standard free verse, but also the use of punctuation as a linguistic sign and as an aesthetic element. It is not the abandonment of traditional punctuation as in e.e. cummings’ work, but rather an extension of punctuation traditionally understood as the un(glorified) but necessary marks on the page. The poem re-understands punctuation as an aid to reading, instead of a sign of correctness, and then builds a new kind and form of application where the line “the prison house of language” is in bars. The meaning of the phrase is given iconicity—a visual register through the inventive use of grammatical marks.

Bernstein also takes letters as units of meaning, breaking up words, causing the reader to put together and literally construct possible meanings, while demanding a kinetic reading. The kinetic process of reading takes on the page, fusing the horizon of the visual with the horizon of the linguistic.

I had

it but

I miss

laced

it somewhere

in the

back burner

of what

is laugh

ingly

called me

y

mind

(my

crim

e). A

mind is a terrible thing to steal:

*intellectual property is also*

*theft.*

(DC 18-19)

One of the more beautiful moments in this section is the “e). A” on its own line. Retaining a visual grid in the eye of the reader, we see elements, from the alphabetic system which is common and central to English, being used as words: built into the poem as an aesthetic object, but also built as an object of participation. This is not indeterminacy, but instead, a sample of overdeterminacy: there is always an aspect of a poem that remains creative, that continues to engage the reader’s calculations. This kind of subjectivity (the lack of recognizable lyrical or poetic determinism) places the construction of the poem in the author’s subjective and particular design. Here subjectivity serves as a window toward multiple horizons; not just as psychological ones, or as an ego-based authorial projection. We want to re-read, re-view, because these marks are familiar, yet new. Looking at “I misp // laced”, we can think of “misp”, as we pull the lines together. The reader mentally constructs the word “misplaced” but is not forced to do so. The word itself is not misplaced, but re-placed apart from its norm. The space in between is inventive and potentially constructive. We can choose to build or choose to view and contemplate.

When Vernon Shetley writes, that the “absence of any implicit standard by which a reading of the poem might be taken as adequate, means that any reading might be valid, which makes the job of interpretation all too easy”, he concludes that since Bernstein’s poetry is easy to read (the poem he reads is “The Kiwi Bird in the Kiwi Tree”), it therefore must be easy to write. The ease is due to the lack of organic laws generated from within. The poem is all “a matter of surfaces. There is nothing to penetrate because no meaning is hiding behind any other; all are equally available, and the poem offers no grounds for choice.” He goes on to add, “if this sort of poem is

ultimately too easy to read, it's also too easy to write."<sup>14</sup> Shetley is careful to state that his one example is not enough to formulate an entire view of Bernstein's work, but he does write in a way that causes the conclusions to be seen as a concise summary of Bernstein's work.

Shetley gives a picture of how one way of reading comes to an end with Bernstein's poetry, and how new forms of reading are needed to respond adequately to his work. What is needed is a reading that practices a fluidity and dexterity between genres of poetry and various disciplines with a historical understanding of grammar, punctuation, and rhetoric, and a willingness to explore texts as opposed to only defining texts. In this chapter, I have termed this new form of reading, kinetic. Bernstein's standard for poetry and theory is usually in favor of a poetry and theory that neither ignores its own construction nor the reality of multiple American poetics. The judgements and standards for Bernstein's work begin from a different starting point than the one Shetley desires. Reading Bernstein's work is neither easy nor without consequence, because it demands kinetic movement on the readers part, visually, semantically, and theoretically. Shetley's complaint of the "absence of any implicit standard" stems from his misunderstanding that poetic surface has a range of meanings. He fails to understand that Bernstein is creating a new environment that demands a different kind of standards—standards that do not neglect the visual element in poetry's lengthy history or censor other American poets who have brought innovation to the line, to the word, and to the page. Poetic meaning is not hiding in Bernstein's poetry, rather it is moving about in a variety of directions. This is why in poetry like Bernstein's, a kinetic reading is more able to enjoy, interpret, and explain the works at hand. As the reading moves between design, the plastic arts, semantics, and referential richness, meanings of the work come alive, almost implicitly.

According to Cavell heroic writing embraces all aspects of language, its semantic domain, how order shapes knowledge and beliefs, and its visual and sonic dimensions. Heroic reading

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<sup>14</sup> Vernon Shetley, *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1993), 151. Shetley, also writes: "But where nothing exists to impede the critical fancy, it's hard to feel that any act of interpretation has consequences; armed with the right critical equipment, an equipment easily enough acquired through some acquaintance with the critical prose of the movement, a reader can multiple interpretations indefinitely without the poem's providing any resistance" (151).

follows the same path and finds, discusses, cites, and attempts to explain the abundant ways in which meaning occurs. Organic reading, finding the pulse between the elements, does not have to be abandoned in kinetic reading; however, the relations between parts are only one aspect of a poem's meaning. Individual aspects of the poem's nature can take on meaning: its printing, recordings, line design, rhythm, word choice, grammar, syntax. The elements of poetics in American poetry since Whitman have not always needed to be in a harmonious organic relationship in order to be considered valuable, significant, or innovative. However, in order to perceive, and the act upon this historical aspect of American letters, we must confront in each generation our forms of reading and ask serious questions: what are the benefits and/or the limitations of these procedures? If we neglect the historical in favor of the grammatical, we will lose touch with a vast tradition of American letters. If on the other hand we neglect the formal/grammatical, we will miss a whole other aspect of the American tradition. To study any moment of literary innovation increases this critical awareness. If done well, a crisis will ensue. And a crisis, according to Avital Ronell "is supposed to provoke a *breakthrough*; it's supposed to reveal what's *wrong*."<sup>15</sup>

Bernstein's poetry, shaped visually, embracing the sonic field, always housed in a particular language, keeps the mobile reader awaiting further sights and signs.

"A picture

[fixture]

is worth more than a thousand words":

(DC 10)

Slogans and poetic space are redrawn for the reader. A fixture is added, placing a new object within the linguistic space of a worn slogan. The space of the page, almost like a canvas, takes on its attributes. A "[fixture]" hangs now in the text like a painting hanging on the wall, renewing the phrase, "a picture is worth a thousand words". Now within the horizon of poetic possibility, a picture, a fixture is worth more than a thousand words. Now a poetry arrives that is worth more

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<sup>15</sup> *Re/search* #13: *Angry Woman*, edited by Andrea Juno and V. Vale (1991), 140.

than the slogan. This light momentary pause, beautifully crafted, awakes a dead phrase simultaneously on the visual and semantic level. Bernstein, in his interview with Manuel Brito, writes:

What I like in poems is encountering the unexpected and I enjoy not knowing where I am or what comes next.

Which means I try to derail trains of thoughts as much as follow them: what you get is a mix of different types of language pieced together as in a mosaic—very “poetic” diction next to something that sounds overheard, intimate address next to philosophical imperatives plus a mix of would-be proverbs, slogans, jingles, nursery rhymes, songs. I love to transform idioms as much as traditional metrics because I am looking for things I can only say in poems; I’m driven by that necessity. Sometimes there’s a gap between sentences, sometimes the sound or sentiment carries over that gap: these shifting, modulated transitions express my philosophy as much as my prosody.<sup>16</sup>

If we believe that being on-line and available is the truth of communication, then only what takes place in that space remains communication. In this poem, starting with a receiver off the hook, the reader is able to investigate other forms of communication. As a poet he has brought into the poem, the visual domain, not in order to make calligrams, but in order to investigate the signs of meaning (including for poetry, space, punctuation, vocabulary, rhythm, and syntax). Bernstein takes the page as an open possibility awaiting poetic inscription. Since his poetics are grounded in the aestheticization of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, the movement available to the poem is often totally unexpected. His aesthetic freedom flows out of his ethical and critical resistance to the reigning dogmas of correct usage.

Bernstein is looking for things he can only say in poems, which implies that poetry contains for him a unique space. One of his methods in this space builds upon the plastic art of mosaics. The mosaic is informed by a range of languages, each containing an object-ness. Placed together, the unexpected occurs. The above quote “crim // e).A / mind is a terrible thing to steal” transforms a slogan, while giving new space to what is possible in a line of poetry. He does not simply take “whole” bits and place them together, but he takes partial elements in order to shape a line.

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<sup>16</sup> *A Suite of Poetic Voices: Interviews with Contemporary Poets* (Kadle Books: Santa Brigida, 1992), 28. Also in *MW*, 25-26.

Reading these lines is kinetic: moving between the elements of the visual space on the page, the phonetic properties of words, the materiality of signs, and the re-invention of a worn slogan. To settle the reading in one of these areas would deny the poem's depth and richness of meaning (visual, linguistic, sonic).

Bernstein, aware of the Conceptualist tradition of language use in visual space, finds in the recent work of Barbara Kruger a real limitation. As he critiques, he creates.

Barbara Kruger is enshrined in the window  
of the Whitney's 1987 Biennial

[a mixture is worth a thousand one-line serves].

Nei

ther

speaking the unspeakable nor saying

the

unsayable

(though no doubt slurring

unslurrable): never only

dedef

ining, always rec

onstricting (libidinal)

flow just another

word for loose

st

ools).

(DC11)

Just after mentioning Kruger in the poem, he breaks up one of the most common words, “neither”. Words are more than just an image put together. The angle of the break brings the page closer, and the negative space in between gives off the tension of the neither/nor construction. His design-lines critique. He uses a very simple word, fused with the grammar of visual perspective, to display the possibilities that are being ignored and censored. Since poetry has always lived with a visual dimension, Bernstein shows in this poem that there are more possibilities for language in space than Kruger shows. Putting “nei // ther” together, we can assume it refers back to Kruger and the banner in the window. In both locations, language is not explored for its potential, but is slurred and reduced. Bernstein expresses in his poetry his philosophy that exploring language is full of unexpected and far ranging implications. He does not simply critique Kruger, he also shows her (or any future reader for that matter) a potential expansion to her own work.

In the essay “The Response as Such: Words in Visibility” Bernstein complains about the lack of linguistic work in recent conceptual art. He wonders why these artists do not find a language that is complementary to their work, or one which even expands their work.

In the New York art world at this time, the use of language is common place. Yet many visual artists seem hostile to or ignorant of the literary or poetic traditions that are relevant to their language use. There seems, perhaps, to be a conscious effort to avoid anything but the most banal or trivial language, as if poetic language would pollute or corrupt by intimations of literary complexity or literary affiliation. This no-writing writing seems to want to have the suggestion of titillation of language without taking responsibility for articulation. The language in such works suggests the linguistic anonymity of billboards or advertisements, though rarely with the twisting or torquing of such language as is found in some of the more inventive poems of the past 30 years. I exempt from this indictment such sophisticated, poetically conscious, language users as Lawrence Weiner, Arakawa and Gins, Nancy Spero, Rogelio López Cuenca, Phillip Guston and Clark Coolidge, or Robert Barry, as well as the conceptual interventions of Joseph Kosuth, whose neon signs replete with erasures are marvelously pointed. (MW 183-184)

More than any other time in American history, recent poetry, and Bernstein’s work in particular, is in a unique context of writing. This recent context is surrounded with painters like Arakawa/Gins, Joseph Kosuth, or Phillip Guston who are investigating the mechanisms of

language meaning within the concept of “painting”. In their work, as well as in that of the other artists mentioned by Bernstein, the physical sign has entered painting as both a visual object and as a sign. The New York art world, of which Bernstein is critical, uses language in the most banal and irresponsible way. For Bernstein, to use language entails “taking responsibility for articulation”. He is mindful of those painters who have done so, and he shows an ability to offer advice to painting, instead of painting offering a procedure to him. As he shows in the Poetry Plastique exhibit he co-curated, there are a range of painters and writers who are exploring how the visual and verbal relate for the benefit of both.<sup>17</sup>

Bernstein’s investigation of the total register of our language and its relationship to other arts demands a kinetic reading. It is a reading of collaborations, interactions, dialogues of sight, sound, and sign: an aural perception at times linked to and at times unchained from grammar (always more than one standard), logic (syntax), and rhetoric’s history (how composition has been taught for example). Oddly, Bernstein inspires a return of classical knowledge, not as a new Mosaic law, but as a range of practices and possibilities with an understanding that all technologies (the alphabet, the computer, the canvas) shape meaning. The end of “The Lives of the Toll Takers” takes the reader all over the page in italics, in order to show and remind, and in order to put together (if the reader does not, s/he is left only with the visual) a generating, innovative space. The gaps on the page are not antagonistic to meaning, but are one of meaning’s agents.

*It’s*

*not an operating system it*

,

*s an*

*op*

*erating environm*

---

<sup>17</sup> *Poetry Plastique*, (New York: Granary Books, 2001).

*ent.*

Besides

(DC 28)

Bernstein's work on the page has an agility. His designs aren't impulsive: they are elegant.<sup>18</sup> The space cannot be understood only in linear terms, but must be integrated within the circular and multidirectional vortex of the page. As we can see in the closing of "The Lives of the Toll Takers", the design is similar to a 3-D image, and each "operating system" is an environment for the poem. Reading, instead of being without consequence, becomes another operating system inspired by the poem.

Bernstein at the very beginning of his career in the essay "A Particular Thing" hoped for a writing that would be able to increase the poem's and reader's activity.

that when language is at the threshold of its  
coming to mean at the border of  
sense and  
sound  
we find a scripture  
open to  
more than finite  
interpretations, that reveal  
the form and  
mythography  
of the (a)  
world.

(CD 51)

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<sup>18</sup> Twelve years before *Dark City* was published, Burton Hatlen reviewing *Controlling Interest* (1980) in *Sagetrieb* (Vol. 1. #3: 1982) suggested the following: "Anyone who thinks that the 'language poets' are merely playing games with us, that their indifference (or should I say, their aggressive hostility?) toward 'communication' implies a mere contempt for any reader who still wants to 'get something out of' a poem, could do no worse than to begin with this book. I find here a conviction that "meaning" is always a trap, combined with a meticulous precision in the selection of words. Since the precision does not serve 'meaning', it becomes an end in itself: and precision as an end in itself might be taken, could it not, as definition of ELEGANCE? Yes, Bernstein is an elegant poet, and his work suggests to me that it is precisely a tradition of elegance which we can see evolving as we pass from Zukofsky to Creeley to now, Bernstein. Twenty-five years ago, it was possible to imagine that Zukofsky, our most careful reader of Mallarmé and Apollinaire, is also our most stylish poet, the true heir of Baudelairian 'dandyism'. Wilbur was-is?-just flash. But true elegance demands of us, as readers, a total attention, a willingness to move on into the new. And that is precisely what is (I would like to think) happening to me as I read a poem like LIVE ACTS [he quotes in full]. I couldn't tell you what this 'means.' But I know that I *do* want to read on, that my relationship to each of these successive words is, in some small way, new." *Sagetrieb* Vol. 1:3 (1982): 199-200.

Bernstein understood that there are kinds and forms of writing which restrict involvement, criticism, and response. As early as 1975 when he wrote this piece, he was seeking the borders of sense and sound. As he has gone on to write, “sense” has meant meaning, possibility, the physical material sign, and sound. His work within these borders has not taken him backwards toward the predictable or caused him to define sense and sound in a rigid manner. Instead, Bernstein has investigated in “The Lives of the Toll Takers”, as well as in many other pieces, the ability of poetry to produce signs that remain creative, that remain “coming to mean”.

Bernstein resists slogans whether in the art world or in popular culture. His libretto, *The Subject* takes the reading of his work in yet another direction. We move from Internet and book technology to the technology of the subject. Bernstein has resisted, in a number of ways, the idea of poetry being only a form of self-expression. Due to his success in showing that forms of poetry are not bound by the rhetoric of ego expression, a reader of Bernstein’s work may assume that he does not have an interest in subjectivity or its relationship to art, living, and language. He has shown an interest in multiple subjectivities, and in *The Subject*, he addresses another area of subjectivity dominant in the American 1990s. In order to fully appreciate Bernstein’s contribution to the discussion of subjectivity, we will look closely and in some detail at two cultural theorists, Hal Foster and Elaine Showalter. After working through their particular reading of subjectivity, we will then examine Bernstein’s libretto in detail.

Hal Foster in *The Return of the Real* feels that trauma has brought the subject back from its impersonal habitat among systems of cultural codes and powers.

Across artistic, theoretical, and popular cultures (in So-Ho, at Yale, on Oprah) there is a tendency to redefine experience, individual and historical, in terms of trauma. On the one hand, in art and theory, trauma discourse continues the poststructuralist critique of the subject by other means, for again, in a psychoanalytic register, there is no subject of trauma; the position is evacuated, and in this sense the critique of the subject is most radical here. On the other hand, in popular culture, trauma is treated as an event that guarantees the subject, and in this psychologistic register the subject, however disturbed, rushes back as witness, testifier, survivor. Here is indeed a traumatic subject, and it has absolute authority, for one cannot challenge the trauma of another: one can only believe it, even identify with it, or not. In trauma discourse, then, the subject is evacuated and elevated at once. And in this way trauma discourse magically resolves two

contradictory imperatives in culture today: deconstructive analyses and identity politics. This strange re-birth of the author, this paradoxical condition of absentee authority, is a significant turn in contemporary art, criticism and cultural politics.

Here the return of the real converges with the return of the referential. . .<sup>19</sup> In the 1990s the trauma aesthetic experienced an inflation, growth, devaluation, and triteness, at the same time as it moved to the center stage of media production. According to Foster, the philosophies and perspectives of both post-structuralism and post-modernism have had a difficult time in giving any rational basis for the subject's identity. In this paradigm, the self is understood as a series of conflicting forces, cultural residues, and gender deposits. In the wake of a holistic, transparent locus of meaning and value with subconscious engines, the self escapes these frames of reference through the re-birth of trauma. A subject's reason for knowing of its existence, has found a way out of post-structuralism's epistemological vacancy. For Foster, the traumatic moment is a moment of both a presence and an absence, inside and outside rationality's engine. Looking across the recent aesthetic landscape, we can see this grid in the work of Cindy Sherman, David Lynch, Atom Egoyan, and in the 1998 Royal Academy of Arts *Sensation* exhibit in London and New York. Foster is treating trauma from an aesthetic point of view by trying to understand why so many artists have found it an answer to the post-structuralist's critique of selfhood. Bernstein explores this issue from inside the trauma of a female patient, and her difficulties within the frame of treatment.

Although the trauma aesthetic solves certain philosophic and aesthetic problems, the trauma aesthetic is problematic for Foster. To use the aesthetic guarantees a moment outside of rational understanding and critique, although the moment is open to a range of exploitations. On the one hand, the subject matter can disempower the reader or audience. The assessment of the construction of the aesthetic is at times forgotten and becomes more difficult to access. For example Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997) is not as well made as *Exotica* (1994), but the death of a bus load of school children carries an overwhelming message of the loss of innocence. David Lynch's *Fire Walk with Me* (1997) is a tale of the destruction, sexual abuse, and murdering of a child by her father. To analyze the subject matter seriously is difficult. Any assessment will be tempted to over-emphasize the traumatic element or to ignore it all together.

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<sup>19</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: the Avant-garde at the end of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1996), 168.

The traumatic aesthetic is attractive, as Foster argues, but as is true with any other aesthetic, it carries with it a set of difficulties.

In art and culture, the subject, the self, has found a home of absolute authority in trauma. The other is forced into belief, and anyone arguing with trauma would be seen as cruel. The dogma of trauma reigns as a place beyond argument or discourse. In fact, this dogma can lead to a silencing: 'this happened', 'you do not understand', 'I am alive', 'you shut up'. No one can talk about the beliefs, the trajectories, or the energy that keeps this dogma working and alive. Consequently, when Elaine Showalter's book *Hystories* entered the market, there was massive disruption.<sup>20</sup> Outside the veracity of her claims, the reception of the book was volatile and controversial. By applying pressure on a sensitive spot, she provoked a wave of reactionary response.

As is well known, Elaine Showalter's work has been a significant element in feminist thought since the early 1980s. She has brought into the literary discussion categories such as gynocritics, that is the study of woman as writer and producer of textual meaning. Her critical work remains an important element in what feminism has meant, and what it has come to mean. Since her early work, the study of the feminine has developed in powerful and thought-provoking directions. One line of inquiry is to read through a particular culture to see how the feminine is written: is she powerful, erotic, suppressed, seen as mother, daughter, constructed only from a male perspective, an influential perspective, a heterosexual perspective? Another line of inquiry is to study how women have written themselves in language, in narrative, in life and how this discourse is both different and similar to other cultural narratives.<sup>21</sup> Elaine Showalter's recent work is a combination of these two lines of inquiry. She proposes to explore present day hysterical narratives, and asks who is being affected. She covers a multitude of topics: Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Gulf War Syndrome, Recovered Memory, Multiple Personality Syndrome, Satanic Ritual Abuse, and Alien Abduction. All of these phenomena have grown epidemically in the last 30 years.

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<sup>20</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (London: Picador, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> See Catherine R. Simpson's "Feminist Criticism" in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992).

Elaine Showalter's book *Hystories* is about the 1990s and hysterical epidemics. For Showalter "Hysteria is inevitably a feminist issue, because for centuries doctors regarded it as a female reproductive disease" (9). "Throughout most of its medical history," she adds, "hysteria has been associated with women. Its name comes from hystera, the Greek word for uterus" (15). She goes on to point out that in the last two centuries the main proponents of hysterical label to describe female activity have been men (Charcot and Freud). What makes Showalter's work interesting is that her investigations reveal that mainly women suffer from these syndromes, and syndromes, like narratives, are constructed. She maps out a set of actions for her work.

Feminists have an ethical as well as intellectual responsibility to ask tough questions about the current narratives of illness, trauma, accusation, and conspiracy. We also have a responsibility to address the problems behind the epidemics—including the need to protect children from sexual and physical abuse. And we can lead the way in making distinctions between metaphors and realities, between therapeutic narratives and destructive hystories. If hysteria is a protolanguage rather than a disease, we must pay attention to what it is telling us. (13)

Although the material focuses narrowly upon the hysterical, the critical approach is broadly applicable. The benefit stems from Showalter's ability to examine closely how each of these illnesses developed a narrative. "I don't regard hysteria as weakness, badness, feminine deceitfulness, or irresponsibility, but rather as a cultural symptom of anxiety and stress" (9). She looks into these areas and asks numerous questions. Who is the authority? How is it established? What is the role of labeling a phenomenon? Are there other explanations for feeling miserable? Does there have to be a fatigue, a disorder, a symptom? The strength of the book is that she shows how each of the areas mentioned above were culturally constructed, and how these issues relate to the larger issue of trauma. The weakness of the book is that her response to these problematic narratives is not as developed as her critique. She has, though, pointed out the problem: women, when vulnerable, want some kind of confirmation that they have some real illness, and they need to have some other—the authority of a therapist, a doctor—confirm this for them. How a culture diagnoses a set of problems is very important, even more so when the problems are about injustice, oppression, and/or exploitation. Showalter gives, one could say, a poetics of contemporary hysteria.

Showalter and Foster provide one cultural context as we look at Bernstein's *The Subject*. The libretto was written in 1991 for an opera by Ben Yarmolinsky, and it was published later by Meow Press in 1995. *The Subject* has three characters: a woman, and two men. The woman is the subject of psychoanalysis, one man is a therapist, and the other is a professor of psychology who studies the "subject". In light of Foster and Showalter's work, we could say that *The Subject* shares similar cultural codes, and utilizes a form of realism. But what makes it different is its ability to turn accepted paradigms inside out. The parody of scheduling another appointment, the role reversal of therapist and client, and a critique of the professor's ability to understand the "subject", makes for a searching, explorative, and engendering libretto. Bernstein employs many of his familiar poetic devices of dissonance, enjambment, and non-standard syntactical logic as he portrays the space of the subject within the Freudian framework.

Bernstein opens the libretto with Jenny Midnight as she recounts several dream-scenes that unsettle her. The first:

There's a bridge  
I can't cross  
melting like a  
boy with pickled  
eyes. She breaks  
the board over the crystal desk  
embodied with hieroglyphic  
inscriptions then hides  
under the folds  
mumbling about frozen  
papaya and the  
boat to Tonawanda.

Dr. Boris Frame[BF]: Uh-huh, I see, go on<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *The Subject* (Buffalo: Meow Press, 1995), 5. Hereafter cited as *TS*.

Several other scenes are described, all in a similar disjunctive and surreal fashion. Dr. Frame the therapist, continues to nod, picks up on a few sexual allusions, offers little comment, and ends the session. Then, they try to schedule their next appointment, and are unable to. The dialogue blurs intentions and subjectivity. At first Jenny is working and can not take the time off for the following week. Then, she suggests next Friday, and Boris is working. He can't take the time to see her, and calls her 'Dr'. As the scene ends, what has transpired is unclear. Throughout, they sing together: "gotta switch, gotta switch, gotta switch". The scene concludes:

JM: How about?

BF: About, about?

JM: Next Friday

BF: Friday

JM: Friday

BF: But I am working all day Friday

JM: How about 2:30?

BF: But I'm working, Dr.

JM: Next Friday at 2:30

Together: Gotta switch, gotta switch, gotta switch

BF: Can't get off work, Dr.

Next week's not good.

BF: Just for the month, Jenny

Just for the month, Jenny.

\*

JM: Nothing settles

BF: Nothing settled

Together: Nothing settles, nothing settled

BF: Okay, okay, what now?

(TS 10-11)

The normal patient/therapist contract is completely re-worked in the praxis of scheduling another appointment. Both refer to settling. For Jenny, nothing inside her or in her relations with others, settles, and for Dr. Frame, the future is not settled (will he in fact see her again next week?). Both the past and the future are not settled.

The piece begins with Jenny having a dream of a bridge she cannot cross. Interpreting this dream, we could say that she is unable to bridge the gap between herself and the world. Instead of finding ways of coping with her separation from the world inside the session, she is offered instead a blank stare (at first), and a re-interpretation of her separation in sexual terms. The lack of fulfillment continues as the boundaries between the therapist and the patient are blurred and confused. Bernstein takes typical occurrences in therapy and transforms them into a swirling search for a settled space. What needs to be settled is avoided or ignored, and the session, which is supposed to be offering a grammar of how to care for the self, ends without any progress. In the very first moments of the libretto, Bernstein places the paradigm of therapy in question.

What happens in the libretto is a continuation of their relationship. Jenny gives a eulogy, which Frame interprets as normal. He takes her fears and relates them back to himself, while she interjects after each description, “it’s normal”. In the mask of giving an analysis, the audience is being given, as is the subject Jenny Midnight, a confession of Frame’s inner life. Having said nothing or given any hint of marriage difficulties, Frame speaks of grounds for divorce. As the session has been set up, with him reading his context into her discourse, the divorce could be about either one.

BF:

Nor can I second  
your notion that  
you’ve got moral grounds for divorce. Rather,  
I think your  
misery calls....

JM: My misery calls...

BF: .... for continued treatment

You see, Jenny

many people have trouble

with everyday activities

such as

Speaking, thinking, caring

JM: Forbearing

BF: Walking, sleeping, dining

JM: Reclining

BF: Singing, talking, crying

JM: Replying, moping, coping

BF: Hoping, mopping

Playing, dreaming, sharing

JM: Repairing

BF: Waiting, clinging, whining

JM: Rewinding

BF: Hopping, skipping, lying

JM: Denying, beating

Faking, sliding

BF: Eating, drinking

Yawning, shrieking

Together: Hiding

And this is normal

All this is normal

Couldn't be more normal

A crutch

shares the weight of burden  
protecting without shielding  
but should not be used  
without specific instruction

BF: Slurping, vying

JM: Spilling, swelling

Together: Searching

Together:

Nothing settles, nothing settled

(TS 20-22)

Part One ends with the two dancing to the “The Introjection Tango”. The subject of the discourse continues to moves in and around the characters. At times, as in the above quotation, questions arise concerning who is the therapist and who is the subject of therapy. The audience hearing and seeing this staging of the therapeutic paradigm soon realizes that neither character finds resolution. Dr. Frame frames her misery for more of the same: speaking without being understood (Jenny), and speaking in order to be confirmed (Frame). He needs her. She does not need him, but needs a different kind of subjective space. Not finding the subjective space where is it supposed to be (in therapy), she gives up and continues the sessions and forbears the game.

Bernstein uses the model of therapy to foreground Dr. Frame’s limitations and his desire to contain the subject, be the subject, tango with the subject, and continue the binary relation. In part two of *The Subject*, the cultural critique of the university professor is even sharper. The professor reveals the grounds of his approach in the section entitled “The Inquisitor”. The professor’s name is Daemon Dudley.

DD:

Prediction and control, that’s the game for me

Defining the criteria  
Not letting the criteria define me  
No subject ever gets away  
We always get our man  
We take whatever words they say  
And make them sing our song  
We make them sing our song

(TS 28)

The professor constructs his subject regardless of the subject's words. Bernstein's concept of a professor, playing the game of prediction and control, has no room for a subject that would resist an imposing criteria. As Daemon Dudley pronounces his dominion over the subject and over all the particulars, Jenny Midnight begins her break-out from his controlling paradigm.

JM: Ah...

It hurts  
It weighs too much  
Why are you saying this?  
I'm afraid, feeling dazed, I've been used  
Give me some space

(TS 28)

Feeling the constricting bonds of the professor's perspective, she demands space. The space she needs is both from predication and control. She had hoped for a renewing space with Dr. Frame, and it was never realized. In an instant she realizes there's no room for the subject in the professor's methodology. The professor, representing the scientific aspect of subjectivity, has room only for a subjectivity that he can control.

In section four, entitled "The Subject", Jenny Midnight begins to speak out asking questions ("why do I feel this way?") making statements ("don't touch!; Give me some space"),

and has a mad scene. The text of *The Subject* reads “[*agitated, paranoid, stands, turns suddenly and stares outward (“mad scene”*)]”. After yelling at someone to not look at her, and to stop shaking her, she continues:

[*with increasing terror*]

who brought me here  
split me like that  
turn down  
that screaming  
I said  
stop shaking like that  
your face in mine  
turn the light back  
like that  
what are you looking  
I said  
that scares  
at me like  
of here I told  
I said like that  
I said  
like that

(*TS 30-31*)

The increasing disintegration of “I said” reoccurringly measures the loss of the logic of prediction and control at each repetition. She is communicating, but it is a communication no longer bound to a trajectory. On the page, the lines can be read backwards and forwards, interchangeably, and vertically. In the performance, Bernstein gives an icon of madness in the throws of terror.

As Jenny Midnight's language breaks down and breaks away from the precision and control of normal grammar, her voice reverts to a child. The subject recovering memory as a child, remembers (or possibly creates) a moment with her sister when they named a new hamster given on her birthday, "happy". And for a moment, Jenny is happy. Then she is told:

BF: That's all for now, Jenny

That's all for now

JM: That's all, Dr. Frame?

(TS 31)

Dr. Frame, when he is not in need of the subject, reverts to the structure of timed therapy. Bernstein shows that at the exact moment when Jenny finds a place of care, her development is arrested by the therapeutic structure. We can see that the subject does find some aid in the structure, showing that Bernstein is not completely skeptical about therapy. He also shows that the normal time of 45 minutes is a created, constructed, biased therapeutic position. In the hands of a better therapist, the subject would not feel constricted by the framework of Dr. Frame. Bernstein is also suggesting that the subject is larger than the session. The care of the self can occur in therapy, but therapy is not the source of care.

In the last section "The Children Are Quiet, the Horses Merry, & Everyone's Gone to Sleep (Subject's Valediction)", after a trio with all three characters titled "Mommy", *The Subject* ends with Jenny forgetting her fear.

JM:.....

A stone's throw from yesterday

but the mind knows--

but the mind know--

Spin me round

spin me round, spin me round.

I'm afraid  
But already forget what  
I'm afraid of  
I already forget what  
I'm afraid of.

Now I just keep quiet.

*[Jenny exits and the next subject enters, replacing her in the patient's chair]*

(TS 35)

The libretto of *The Subject* is physically encapsulated within the patient's chair. The patient's chair has a limited range, and the structure of possibilities, set up by Dr. Frame and Dr. Dudley, only allow the subject a certain movement. The range she finds is familiar: repression, MPD, and Chronic Fatigue. Bernstein does not build a repressed memory into normal discourse. When she is having her "mad" session, "that scares / at me like/of here I told", her language expresses emotion outside the frames of her institution. In the larger cultural context, Bernstein's female subject is closer to Tori Amos than to Kathy Acker.

In *Empire of the Senseless*, Acker's character combines the father's obsession with pornography and strip shows to the destruction of language.

Here language was degraded. As daddy plumbed and plummeted away from the institute of marriage more and more downward deeply into the demimonde of public fake sex, his speech turned from the usual neutral and acceptable journalese most normal humans use as a stylus mediocris into. . . His language went through an indoctrination of nothingness, for sexuality had no more value in his world, until his language no longer had sense. Lack of meaning appeared as linguistic degradation.

This is what daddy said to me while he was fucking me: "Tradicional estilo de p...argentino. Q. . . es. e. mas j. . . det. . . los e. . . dentro d. la c. . . es m. . . inicado p. . . entablar g. . . amistades o t. . . tertulias a . . . es m . . . y s. apoyan l . . . cinco d . . . se s . . . y s. baja l. mano, l . . . de e . . . manera y . el c . . . se h . . . hombre. origen e. profundamente r . . . y s. han h . . . interesantes t . . . en l . . .

jeroglificos e . . . y m . . . Es e. mas r . . . para d . . . de l . . . comidas p . . . no c . .  
. la de . . . ‘ He had become a Puerto Rican.’<sup>23</sup>

The language breaks up, as the relations break up. The subject is taken to an unspeakable language, through destructive, exploitative, behavior. Acker’s language is broken into the subject, and the language of the father, due to his obsession with “public fake sex”, goes through an “indoctrination of nothingness”. Lack of meaning for the subject “appeared as linguistic degradation.” In Tori Amos’ work, the subject, outside the light, “in the shadow” breaks up the discourse.

GIRL from in the shadow she calls in the shadow she finds a way finds a  
way and in the shadow she CRAWLS clutching her faded photograph my  
image UNDER her thumb yes with a message for my heart yes with a  
message for my heart *she’s been everybody else’s girl maybe one day she  
will be her own* and in the doorway they stay and laugh as violins fill with  
water screams from the BLUEBELLS can’t make them go away we’ll I ‘m  
not seventeen but I’ve cuts on my knees falling down as the winter takes  
one more CHERRY TREE rushin’ rivers thread so thin limitation dreams  
with the flying pigs turbid blue and the drugstores too safe in their coats  
anda in the do’s yeah smother in our hearts a pillow to my dots *one day  
maybe one day she’ll be her own* and in the midst there she rides and castles  
are burning in my heart and as I twist I hold tight and I ride to work every  
morning wondering why “sit in the chair and be good now” and become  
all that they told you the white coats enter her room and I’m  
callin’ *everybody else’s girl maybe one day she’ll be her own...*<sup>24</sup>

Within the first line of the song, the “girl” is both object and subject. The lyric sung by Amos takes the listener in a variety of directions: “she” “her” “I” “baby”. With allusions to the asylum, being confined as a child, being taken over as a subject, the song speaks of a splintered subject. The text without punctuation, set in a square box, with various capitalizations, increases the complexity of the lyric. Both Acker and Amos tie the disruption of language to events where the subject is violated. Both alter how the page is designed, and both use grammar and punctuation as a way to express the breaking down of care for the subject and the subject’s inability to care for itself.

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<sup>23</sup> Kathy Acker, *Empire of the Senseless* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 17.

<sup>24</sup> Tori Amos, from her first solo CD *Earthquakes* (1991).

Acker wrote of the taboo subject in a number of her books. Amos sings of the subject who maybe would one day be her own. Bernstein constructs 'subject' beyond these available structures. Instead of Foster's return of the real, Bernstein makes a scene where the true real is not about the unjustifiable reality of trauma but about the subject being framed by the power of paradigms. The overall effect of hearing and seeing *The Subject* is to watch the subject's defeat, the therapist's absence, and the professor's oblivion to the praxis of the subject. We see three subjects "hiding" instead of "searching". What they hide in is not a shelter but the provision of their framing. They are far from what Primo Levi observed in *The Drowned and the Saved*:

We do not wish to abet confusions, small-change Freudianism, morbidities and indulgences. The oppressor remains what he is, and so does the victim. They are not interchangeable, the former is to be punished and execrated (but, if possible, understood), the latter is to be pitied and helped; but both, faced by the indecency of the act which has been irrevocably committed, need refuge and protection, and instinctively search for them. Not all, but most; and often for their entire lives.<sup>25</sup>

The main problem for Levi was the terror that Hitler inspired in his people to not question the status quo and to become cowards. The Germans who did have doubts about what was going on were stifled by fear, desire for profit, blindness, and/or willed stupidity. He does not think that those who claimed not to know can be truly justified. For him bad events have a life and trajectory which forces everyone to choose between a painful truth, or a consolatory truth. Here consolatory truth is negative: a way of explaining away the event. The fabricated comfort or justification becomes the truth for that individual. In *The Subject*, neither pity nor shelter is offered from those who are in control. Bernstein, addressing an emotionally charged topic, an overworked cultural theme, does so indirectly. The response of pity or shelter is left to the audience. According to Anna Salter, one of the leading therapists who works with trauma, working indirectly is often the best form of therapy.<sup>26</sup>

We are reaching a complex combination of ethical and aesthetic terrain. Ethically, we are to pause as we watch a display of the limitations of the therapeutic paradigm. Simultaneously, we

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<sup>25</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Abacus, 1988), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Anna Salter, "Crossing Opening Ground: Trauma and Transformation", in *Transforming Trauma: A Guide to Understanding and Treating Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, with chapter by Hilary Eldridge and Jenny Still (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 272.

are given an aesthetic richness of music and movement in the wonders of rhythm and alliteration of words. The libretto ends as the subject ends, in silence. Bernstein, working indirectly, hides his own positioning. Throughout *The Subject* many of his poetic devices are subdued. The poetic density and linguistic force comes by way of how the characters interact. All three are shown to fail. All three are shown to be bound. All three play out the assigned cultural role. The epistemological space in which *The Subject* is located is one of the largest arenas of subject-hood in Western culture: the belief and idea that through the strictly structured therapeutic contract, a way of managing pain can be accomplished. Pain is not managed in *The Subject* and the reader is left wondering: where can the self go for shelter?

At the very moment Jenny Midnight needs refuge and protection, the limits of Freud's paradigm and the scientific method of subjectivity are painfully apparent:

BF: That's all for now Jenny

That's all for now

JM: That's all Dr. Frame?

BF: That's all

JM: That's all

Together: That's all for now

(*TS* 31-32)

It is difficult to know, because Bernstein is working indirectly, if he is suggesting that there is an end to the Freudian paradigm or if the subject is only constrained by the paradigm. The ending of the libretto reveals a dissatisfaction with the whole process. In the essay "Thoughts Measure" (written in 1980), from the section labeled "privacy", Bernstein sees the over abundance of the confessional in poetry, paralleled with the myth of psychoanalysis: "Its almost like the myth of psychoanalysis—that our most private fantasies and dreams hold the key by which our behaviors become 'publicly' comprehensible" (*CD* 78).

The kind of diversity in Bernstein's work found by comparing "An Mosaic for Convergence" and the libretto *The Subject* needs to be foregrounded as "Bernsteinian" poetry takes on a life of its own. In these two works we have an investigation of both hypertext and

subjectivity, within the structure of computer technology and the structure of psychoanalytic praxis. Both pieces transform, aestheticize, and work within the grammars of the particular paradigms. Both question, push, and resist the idea that the constructed nature of these ideologies and technology should be forgotten. Bernstein's *apoetics*, pressuring difficulties, offers solutions, directly, and indirectly. Indirect criticism, like forms of indirect communication, works on unstated assumptions. By showing the limitations of Dr. Frame's ability to handle Jenny Midnight's pain, *The Subject* allows the reader and the audience to speculate: is the problem with Dr. Frame or the institution? Instead of a direct statement, we are given the responsibility of reflection. In the case of "An Mosaic for Convergence", our interaction with Bernstein's hypertext is built upon a mathematical formula: neither he nor the web page surfers determine the order of his visual argument.

These divergent creative-critical works give the recipient and the reader the challenge of contemporary issues and problems: What is therapy? What is the epistemology of surfing the web? 'Normally' these questions are not combined. At times when old habits are abandoned, we end up as has Frank Gehry, with new combinations that were before unseen, but waiting. As Nelson Goodman wrote,

...habits often stand as something we have to break away from. We tend to hold to an established classification of styles until our attention is somehow called to interesting affinities between words we had pigeonholed under different styles.<sup>27</sup>

Sections and parts of *The Subject* appear in Bernstein's volume *Dark City* (1994). The first line of the poem "Emotions of Normal People" combines the on-line life with our investigation into subjectivity.

With high expectations, you plug

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<sup>27</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Mind and other Matters* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), 195.

Into your board & power up.

(DC 85)

The poem builds around different kinds of discourses: letters, slogans, overheard conversations, survey questions, mock advertisements:

*If you would love to be living your life in a different way but don't want to spend a lifetime learning how. . . Dynamic short-term social therapy can empower you to make the moves you've been afraid –or unable—to make, in your personal life and your career. You don't have to be a victim of loneliness, depression, “mid-life crisis”, indecisiveness, or regrets. Free up your ability to grow and change as you learn the emotional skills you need to be intimate and passionate. Write The Dysraphism Center for more information. (DC 92)*

Bernstein's humor reveals the truthful situation of the numerous people who feel these emotions. He offers, in his advertisement, a solution from the Dysraphism Center. The concept of “Dysraphism”, of fusing together different discourses in order to bring health to poetry (not just one tradition, one method, one syntax), is transferred in humor toward the emotions of normal people. Bernstein's resistance to the culture continues, but indirectly. He begins the poem with this quotation from Adorno: “Truth is the antithesis of existing society” (DC 85). It is possible to argue that Bernstein believes his ethical expansion of poetry can be applied to society: cultural codes are built to be bought by consumers; and in light of Showalter's work, we would have to admit that there are whole groups of people who find fulfillment in society's existing metaphors.

Bernstein continually spins out the metaphors of pataphysics. In the very next poem in *Dark City*, he writes in the opening line of “Shock of Debris/Debris of Shock”: “The debt that pataphysics owes to sophism / cannot be overstated” (DC 105). Bernstein's understanding of Sophism is not simply a form of trickery, but a heightened freedom of discourse because, as in the hypertext, the generating center can travel. The characterizations of Jenny Midnight, Dr. Frame, and Daemon Dudley found in *The Subject* are gone in the poem ‘The Emotions of Normal People’, but many of their words remain. This time, within the technology of poetry, dialogue, and characterization evaporate. The last section of the

poem begins with “Are you a normal person?” This time, instead of being addressed to the subject Jenny Midnight, the words are directed to anyone who reads the poem. Here, the poem universalizes the song of *The Subject*.

Are you a normal person?

Probably for the most part you are.

Your sex complexes, your fears and furies and petty jealousies,  
your hatreds and deceptiveness, only serve  
to secure your normalcy.

(DC 96)

## kinetics

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The endeavor of this work has been to show how Bernstein has created innovation within the environment of American poetry. The implications, like the mechanisms of meaning themselves, are variegated, copious, and aliquant. Of the many implications is that heroic writing, in Cavell's sense of the phrase, requires heroic reading. Heroic writing is rare, and when it occurs, it is always open to further interpretations and investigations. To read heroically, is to embrace all aspects of writing: the sound, the sense, the beliefs, the order of word(s), and the page. Heroic, kinetic reading demands that we change our habits, and take the risk of embarking on a full reading that does not lead to exhaustion but to an enhancement of our emotional, mental, and spiritual faculties. Understanding linguistics, the history of composition and grammar, the knowledge of printing, the visual dimension of writing and the page, are all forms of knowledge that are involved in heroic reading. The reader of Bernstein's work if he or she is willing to be thrown into the mechanism of meaning itself, is called upon to explore a fullness of writing that invites participation.

This study is filled with reading values; the wonder of the American tradition to continue as a source of innovation, the awareness that poetry is not separated from the issues of how and what is published, and the reality that language is a remarkable materiality. Critics who ignore or explain away innovation devalue poetics and keep reading safe from disruption. One of the most engaging aspects of American poetics is the moment when innovation takes root and sprouts a new tree. The study of this moment, the study of innovative poetics, has the potential to be one of the most intense areas of research. The intensity of Bernstein's work corresponds to the intensity of poetry's ability to continue to surprise, delight, and teach. Choosing to value the moments of change, break-through, and development does not force a critic to abandon the rich heritage of a particular poetic tradition. The American poetic map is filled with ancient explorers, who pushed ahead looking for ways to shape words on the American page. That page continues to be filled, written upon, added to, and cherished. Moving from the sprouts of a new forest of trees to the page, has been the backdrop of this work. To explore how all those sprouts

found themselves in the wood-beams of the house of possibility, we must embrace a renewal and transformation of reading values. Choosing to value the art and possibilities of poetry is to be involved in the very issues that shape a culture's view of the world. The values of the world, from the media to the academic journal, are shaped by language and its use. A reader can learn and repeat those values, or a reader can learn and investigate how values come into being, have a duration, or fade away. Rhythm, sound, design, the making of books or web pages, are all opportunities used by poets to fashion and create the vocabularies of phenomenology.

With an abundance of possibilities from which to draw, Bernstein has chosen to work with as many forms as possible. In this sense, he is another Whitman. Instead of giving "voice" to all "voices", Bernstein gives space to all spaces. What this means revolves around Bernstein's view that each poem is an environment, a spatial, as well as linguistic location. Page layout, font, vocabulary, length of line, and a host of design and writing factors, shape the space of poetry. Bernstein chooses to support and work in numerous spatial dimensions: formalist, concrete, free verse. He does not just repeat these traditions, but transforms them in innovative ways. He expands the notion of formalist poetry with *The Nude Formalism*; he re-writes concrete and letterist traditions by using the material sign in unusual ways, as in "The Lives of the Toll Takers" and "The order of...". He takes the concept of free verse and explores the possibility of *free* lines, periods, nouns, and letters. He looks back and finds an animate American tradition and he has responded with rigor. For example, from Hawthorne, we have the frame for *Veil*, from Thoreau we have his critical essay "Stray Straw and Straw Men", as well as the poem "The Bean Field" and its procedure. From Stein, cummings, and Williams we have his critical verse treaty *Artifice of Absorption*. In his paper on Williams concerning how to live with a great poetic or literary tradition, Bernstein reveals one aspect of his innovative grammar: "Meanwhile, the self-proclaimed defenders of the tradition have abandoned it by repetition: love requires not miming but response, continuation, new acts inspired not beholding to the old" (CD 247). The inventor's love is not bound to repetition, but to a continuation of another's discovery.

A poet reading Bernstein's works will find a form of writing that investigates how meaning can occur. A poet, searching for ways to transform the dominate uses of the rhetoric of experience, or searching for ways to use a rhetoric of experience in a non-repetitious way, will find in Bernstein writing not grounded in self-expression, but grounded in a writing

where self-expression is only one element of the poem's construction. Bernstein's self-expression is not limited to one set of language values, and does not deny the role language has in building values. Self-expression is not natural; it is embedded with values and these values are built through order, syntax, and diction. A poet or critic picking up Bernstein's work finds a way to redress these values. To empower choice and re-interpretation and not just refinement or one kind of subjectivity creates a potential expansion and growth of poetic procedure. A poet searching for a way beyond concrete or letterist traditions will find in Bernstein a writer that does not sacrifice syntax for materiality but embraces both simultaneously. Poetry, as we have seen in Bernstein's work, is not just about content, it is also about its multiple forms and environments. Bernstein inspires a poetry that makes poets ask questions. Why am I using this form? Why have I chosen this vocabulary? Why have I chosen this design? To write invokes the world, memory, words, forms of presentation, choice, and work. Bernstein's work re-opens and shows the complexity of "self-expression". The knowledge we gain from his poetry, is the knowledge that our thoughts, and patterns of thinking, have been shaped by our culture, and we are able to change, investigate, and explore other valid ways of living in language.

A critic reading Bernstein will find a form of criticism that does not keep a safe distance from the work under investigation. The closeness does not come across in Bernstein's writings as a simple repetition of someone else's argument. Rather, the closeness comes across in Bernstein's willingness to allow the other's investigation a spatial reality. The other's engagement of the world, or language, or issue, can be a source of further invention. We can see this in his very first piece in  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  on Drucker ("From A to Z"), as well as his poem "A Defense of Poetry" (*MW* 1) dedicated to Brian McHale who has written on the nonsense of postmodern poetry.

My problem with deploying a term liek  
 nonelen  
 in these cases is acutually similar to  
 your  
 critique of the term ideopigical  
 unamlsing as a too-broad unanuajce  
 nterprestive proacdeure.

(*MW*1)

The poem continues in this manner bordering upon non-sense and sense throughout. We find misspellings, new forms, but also a familiarity, and an ability to move through the lines, voicing the non/sense, finding sense, and we begin to realize that letters are not neutral tools, but agents of transformation. Bernstein's involvement in the literature and criticism of our day foregrounds invention and discovery as central elements to any contemporary critical practice. By exploring how he explores those who are writing and investigating the issues of the present world, we come into close contact with future possibilities.

It would be wrong to think that the implications of Bernstein's work remain within the confines of living, contemporary issues. On the contrary, the formal features of his writing throw the poet and the critic back into some of the most basic and traditional elements of writing: punctuation, grammar, the poetic line, and typography. Bernstein inspires a form of criticism that wants to investigate how poets have worked on the page, and inspires a re-reading of works that have been completely re-designed in their re-publication, such as Williams' *Spring and All*. Bernstein inspires a criticism that takes a serious look at the space of the classroom, how composition has been taught, and how English departments, since their beginning have continued to change their minds concerning which reading, literary, and poetic values are the most important. Every student of literature should know how books are made and how they have been made. Instead of the discussion of a writer's manuscripts taking place in a journal, conference, or graduate seminar, the discussion should be incorporated into the introduction of what poetry is at the undergraduate level.

From the very beginning of his career we can see that for Bernstein knowledge of the world is formed by the word. Presentation, design, rhythm, and grammatical logic shape the meanings of words, historically, and contextually. Bernstein's poetry takes us into the mechanisms of epistemology and invention. In fact, he brings before the reader the very house of possibilities, where new sentences are always stirring. Wittgenstein knew of this space as a site of investigation.

126. Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.—Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of not interest to us.

One might also give the name “philosophy” to what is possible before all new discoveries and inventions.<sup>1</sup>

Interpreting Wittgenstein is almost as difficult as interpreting Bernstein. For Wittgenstein, a space and activity exists before discovery and invention. The space is informed by laying out all the elements. Once the elements are available, exploration can begin. Bernstein lays before his readers the possibilities of poetry, criticism, editing, and collaborating. We do not have to seek the hidden mechanisms of production, because he leaves them for the reader to act upon, discover, and invent. He does not see the world as a separated exterior from our perception of the world, and he does not see our perception separated from language itself. Consequently, one’s own language and what one sees and believes is shaped by what one knows, has known, and what one is coming to know. In the philosophical sense, he is not a realist. Realism, even critical realism, argues that the world gives information to those who inhabit the world. The classical anti-realist argues that the world does not speak or give out information, only we do. Both positions are old maps. Bernstein instead, charts how the world, the self, and language form our sense of the world, our epistemology, and our desire to modify, change, or alter any perceived deficiencies. Bernstein engages the reality of space before discovery in the poem “The Taste Is What Counts”. At times, he refers to the world being out there, at times he refers to the world being constructed, at times he gives the reader the elements before discovery and invention can take place. Bernstein, trained as philosopher, leans towards a conception of understanding that realizes any definition of the world, involves meaning, beliefs, perceptions, language, people, places, and objects.

He has worked with others from the very start and fostered a community. Bernstein has not worked in isolation. So much of his contribution to American poetry has come through his ongoing work as an editor. He has found, supported, published a range of writing that cannot be contained in one easy description. His collaborations with Susan Bee, Richard Tuttle, Steve McCaffery, Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Jay Sanders, Ben Yarmolinsky, Bernadette Mayer, expand the habitation of poetry in a contemporary setting. American

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, 2ed., (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 50, #126.

poets have always been involved with philosophers, painters, architects, editors, and musicians. Bernstein follows this pattern, showing that it is almost impossible for innovation to occur in a vacuum. What is intriguing about Bernstein's collaborations is their diverse network. Each of his collaborations is an environment, and American poetry in Bernstein's hands is a multiple reality. The study of this poetry throws the reader and the critic toward multiple forms of knowledge. This reality in and around Bernstein's poetry is not a deficiency of the poetry, but its strength. Bernstein writes a poetry that is not in isolation from other poets or other places in culture where meaning is being investigated. Bernstein is not just writing. He is also designing and building multiple environments. Several of the critics who have dismissed Bernstein's work, as we have seen, have done so due to their critical framework. In other words, having settled on a definition for American poetry, they found little in Bernstein to support their critical apparatus. What apparatus Bernstein's work does support, is an approach that is, like his own work, collaborative. The implication for criticism is that Bernstein's work, because of its innovative nature, demands a willingness to not start with refined definitions of what poetry is, but to start with poetry as the origins of any definition of poetry. Criticism then becomes a place where definitions must remain open to change, modification, and alteration. If this choice is not made, then reading becomes a practice of measuring poetic forms with non-inventive standards. Poetic environment then will lose its connection with the unexpected.

Reading the unexpected and reading innovation requires a willingness to engage with all the elements of writing and speaking, and also requires mental and spiritual vivacity. Every reading environment has a shape, from the newspaper or critical journal, to a web page or a volume of poems. The majority of reading is shaped by a very limited discourse. Hence, an expected environment develops along with a reading procedure. A disruption in the environment is a disruption in reading. In his poetry we saw how Bernstein worked with signs as an environment. For him the sign and the senses are constantly intermingling. His view of poetic consciousness expands with the details of writing instead of searching for a way to make a line of poetry like an image without the need of signs. His form of consciousness is an environment of signs and reality, and consciousness and signs. As we saw, his form of self-consciousness combines the empirical with the hermeneutical, and the shape this writing takes is

both contemplative and participatory. The contemplative side embraces the materiality of the sign, so that we can look and read. The participatory side embraces the role of the reader to discover and be involved with the environment of meaning. As soon as Bernstein embraces non-traditional styles or modes, he creates the reality of other possible environments.

Bernstein's visual strategies show the multiple ways of appropriating the American literary tradition. Looking back to Hawthorne, Thoreau, Dickinson, as well as Stein, Williams, Cummings, Bernstein transforms the line of the poem, and the page of the poem. Each visual strategy has multiple implications. *Veil* for example, shows how the words of a life, over time build into a residue, where we have access to some and not to others. *Veil* is a visual picture of our life in words. Each word, read, spoken, or written, builds a residue, makes a personality, gives a shape to the outside word. His ongoing collaborations with Bee show just how willing he is to see poetry in different environments. We have become accustomed to think of poetry as a nicely bound book of sixty pages or so. Is this its only option? Can poetry enter culture in other ways, and does the media have to dominate how language is to be shaped, presented, and put into circulation? As the small press has become a place where different forms of poetry can occur, it is important to the critical study of these works to have some form of access to the poetry's different environments. The great failure of the abundant anthologies on American poetry is to completely disregard any visual information from the collection. What is important is the poem itself, not its earlier environment. Rarely, if ever, are facts about the poem's location given in anthology introductions. Ultimately, Bernstein's highest accomplishment is to demand, and show that poetry is always visual, regardless if it is a "visual" work. Printing, typography, and design, are essential arts, and knowledge of these arts of the book only enhances our understanding and involvement with a poem. In other words, we do not need to study the arts of the book in order to understand just visual poetry, we need the knowledge of these arts to understand any poetry.

Bernstein is willing to re-measure the line. His measure of the line's meaning is not afraid of the contemporary visual arts. He finds a way to write that shapes the line without it being reduced to the rhetoric of experience, but that does accept the phenomenology of experience. Poetry can report an experience or it can create an experience, and both modes are bound to procedures that are bound to language. Even for native speakers of English his

vocabulary is dense, unusual, and unfamiliar. Using the dictionary as a mediator takes the reader into the process of writing. Questions like what does this word mean, how does it relate to the line, does it relate to the line, are just a few that are posed by Bernstein's work. As we also saw, he is not afraid to use other systems of linear progression. By translating poems in *The Senses of Responsibility* in *Controlling Interests* into a right to left format, reading is thrown outwards beyond its usual expectations. His serial, the poem in *Shade*, the poems in *The Sense of Responsibility*, the poem in *Controlling Interests*, and the poem *created* in the process of reading these poems, is unlike other serials; consequently, by re-measuring the line, he not only changes lyrical modes, but also the nature of the serial. These poems can be re-read, re-lined, and re-measured. This new form of a serial alters what we think of as a serial. Yet in the poems, isolated out of each volume, placed side by side, we are taken into a poetics that embraces the line, and how the line is always a measured form of meaning. As meaning is interactive, as well as containing the material signifier, reading these poems together creates unique and very different environments.

Before and after Bernstein began working in the classroom space on a regular basis, his work concerned teaching possibilities. By bringing rhetorical invention back into the discussion, not just for composition as Crowley argued, but for poetry, Bernstein shows his willingness to prepare a future generation for the unexpected. Learning how to discover directions, how to respond to diversity, how to invest in language as a source of possibilities instead of a mechanical form, are fundamental skills in any democracy. As Bernstein is not afraid of technology, working with the web has not been difficult for him. The Electronic Poetry Center is built like much of his editorial work by containing a large group of diverse people, books, magazines, and links. Due to EPC, Bernstein's work in the academic world has been very public and has been a service to the public. His work has not faltered since becoming a professor. What he has produced since 1990 concerning subjectivity (*The Subject*), web technology ("An Mosaic for Convergence"), poetry (*Dark City*), or in his collaborations (*Log Rhythms*, *With Strings*), has only continued to explore how meaning can be shaped, and how any language shapes its environment. Bernstein continues to create in ways that critique conventional codes of grammar, editorial practices, and literary theory.

John M. Bennett's piece "be doubted", written at the very beginning of the 1970s, gives us yet another look at the diversity of innovative American poetics. At the very top of the page he has three words.

Grid deaths occur

Underneath these words, he has pasted a very large statement.

BE DOUBTED

Finally, in the bottom right hand corner, there is just one word:

MOON.<sup>2</sup>

These few words show the changes involved in leaving behind old forms of rationality built on Cartesian doubt. Grid deaths occur regularly as we busily re-measure the universe. We can remain in doubt, or we can find a way to go to the moon. As grid deaths occur, new maps, charts, plans, diagrams, and projections are needed. What Bernstein's work does is to replace Descartes' method and grid of doubt producing knowledge, with the space of poetic invention, where skepticism is transformed. Skepticism is able to point out what is wrong, but this procedure requires little or no creative strength. Bernstein's writings have created and expanded older grids by moving beyond skepticism toward invention, toward the offering of solutions, and toward the love of alteration. He has produced a material body of work, awaiting further invention. The authorial relation to construction is no longer grounded in self-revelation, but in linguistic, semantic, and epistemological engineering where the self builds ways of world-making. To make this shift, Bernstein has had to expand the view of the language and grammar of poetry. Poetry is made out of language, and a particular philosophy of language, punctuation, and rhetoric. Bernstein has moved on from older grids in his syntactical logic, as well as in his embracement of the signifier's materiality. He has, as have many in his generation, completely aestheticized all aspects of writing. A project "making that kind of writing wch is involved in

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<sup>2</sup> John M. Bennett "be doubted", *Found Objects* (New York, NY: New Rivers Press, 1973). The collection is not bound, and there are no page numbers.

witnessing language”.<sup>3</sup> Theories of the avant-garde have not taken into account the power of this recent innovation in the language art. Innovative work as a new construction, by its very nature, is out of the reach of established theory, and the reader is taken into a praxis where certainty is only found in a willingness to practice hospitality. At the beginning of the process the reader designs and invents, just as the writer has in his or her production.

Throughout this work, old grids have been utilized in starting a reading of Charles Bernstein’s work: close reading, visual poetics, textual criticism, hermeneutics, as well as the theories of linguistics, semiotics, and the philosophy of language. Out of these grids, without rejecting them completely, new grids have been drawn in pencil: design criticism, heroic, and kinetic interdisciplinary reading. As this work has shown, the ethics and aesthetics of this period of American innovative poetics demands and beckons new critical space to go along with the opening spaces of poetic construction and reception. This work has not sought to end the discussion of Charles Bernstein *apoetics*, but to inspire, challenge, and construct a work that neither foolishly ignores the past, nor attempts to shape the future too tightly. American poetry has expanded beyond the approach of any one school of practice or thought. This expansion does not mean we cannot make statements, conclusions, or form interpretations. It does mean, though, that collaboration is now central. We must negotiate and collaborate as we discuss, treasure, and investigate the poetry and poetics of innovation. Old grids of monotone have been replaced with a new polyphonic register. This diversity requires a new breed of poets and critics who are able to translate, practice the ancient form of hospitality, and construct new habits of reading. Reading any innovation stretches our theoretical frameworks and exposes their limitations. In Bernstein’s work, the line has changed, the space of poetry has expanded, boundaries between prose and poetry have been crossed, re-crossed, and moved. As poetry courts invention, diversity and tradition can both be recognized. Reading history, punctuation history, printing history, all bring valuable knowledge to the critical field. As Stein wrote, “Everything makes Spaces”, but some spaces create more connections and participation than others. And participation can be destructive or beneficial. Sometimes we need both simultaneously as we answer the fundamental questions: “What about all this writing?” What

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<sup>3</sup> “Steve McCaffery, Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein: Correspondence, May 1976- December 1977”, edited and selected by Steve McCaffery, *Line # 5* (Spring 1985): 71.

about all this printing? What about all these links? For now is the time to return Williams's question that Seiffert edited out of her review of *Spring in All*.<sup>4</sup> This question is the first of questions that will inspire, promote, and facilitate poetic investigation.

Experiments are made in order to discover, investigate, and build knowledge. Bernstein has done this, but he remains interested in going forward, in establishing more republics. Manuel Brito asked him: "Is experimentation, as an active process, sufficient by itself?" Bernstein responds:

That would be true for some of the works of Jackson Mac Low or John Cage or William Burroughs—works that are a valuable resource for my writing. My own preoccupations, however, are not with experimentation as much as evocation, instantiation, arbitration and reclamation.<sup>5</sup>

In the version of the interview published in *My Way*, Bernstein continues to answer the question. Now several years later, he goes on:

Still, I don't want to abandon the experimental so quickly, at least not before acknowledging how the term is used to designate, but also to denigrate, much of the poetry I care most about. "Experimental" can sound like you don't know what you are doing, as if the poems were a rehearsal for some future product, or as if aesthetic intention were not at play. As a result, "experimental poetry" is often disparaged as mere "exercises", preliminary and incidental to the "actual work" of poetry. Indeed, both "exercise" and "experiment" are deployed, positively and negatively, against assumptions not only about intentionality and its others, but also that barbed binary—process/product. You see, I'm still holding out for a poetry which is discovered rather than refined; where poetry is on trial, but where the trial is sufficient to itself, producing innovation and investigation not verdicts or conclusions. (*MW* 29-30)

Bernstein is still holding out for discovery, innovation and investigation. As he has "held out" he has produced a body of work that does not purely exclude conclusions or verdicts. We can conclude that he re-created and changed American poetry; however, this verdict, this version of

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<sup>4</sup> Marjorie Allen Seiffert, "Against the Middle-aged Mind", *Poetry* 24:1 (1924): 48, 45-50. She quotes the first third of "O Kiki", (*Spring and All*, 38; poem XI, later titled "Young Love") but edits out the very first line: "What about all this writing?"

<sup>5</sup> Brito, *A Suite of Poetic Voices: Interviews with Contemporary Poets* (Santa Brigida: Kadle Books, 1992), 33.

Charles Bernstein, the American innovator, remains open to further investigation.

## Appendix

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Charles Bernstein and Susan Bee

Interviewed by James Shivers

August 11, 2000, Guilford, CT (Updated NYC, 2002)

James Shivers: One aspect of your work Charles, that I have enjoyed, are the collaborations you have done with Susan. Looking closely, I have found that you two have been collaborating from the very start – editorially, in design, and more traditionally in the book form. My first question is: Why do you think more people haven't written about your collaborations?

Susan Bee: Well, the books have been reviewed. You mean specifically the five books?

JS: Yes.

SB: I can't really answer that question!

Charles Bernstein: Jerome McGann has a very useful section on *The Nude Formalism* (1989) in *Black Riders* (1993). I think one of the reasons is that we are dealing with the visual dynamics of poetry as an extension of poetry. It is something that people writing about poetry don't necessarily consider significant.

SB: Perhaps it is because each of the volumes we have done are really different. The first was photographic (*The Occurrence of Tune*, 1981) and the next typographic (*The Nude Formalism*, 1989). They each have a different form. Also, some of them are in very limited editions, so not many people have seen them.

CB: Most people write about poetry as a strictly verbal production. The rest, in a sense, is superfluous. I mean that is the "general view" even of people interested in the most radical approaches to poetry. People interested in the visual arts tend to be interested in the visual dimension and actually think of any writing in the visual plane as being secondary.

SB: Of course, there's a long article in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writing, Theory, and Criticism* (Duke, 2000) that Misko Suvakovic wrote, "Painting after Painting: The Paintings of Susan Bee." That article skirted the issue of the collaborations totally. The article focuses on my paintings, although he does talk briefly about my artist's books. He doesn't really talk about Charles. Or even that Charles has a text to *The Occurrence of Tune* ... That's odd.

JS: Do you think he was trying to give you your own space?

SB: Yes, I guess because people want to focus upon one or the other and they have not focused on the collaboration. Since I knew you were coming for the interview, I have been trying to think, to remember what was the first collaboration, since we met in high school, and since we've know each other since I was 16. In college at Harvard, Charles directed plays before he was a poet. He directed *Marat/Sade* and I designed and illustrated all the posters and all the program material. So as I look back, this was over 30 years ago ...

CB: That would have been in the spring of 1970.

SB: As he has just sent off all his papers to the University of California at San Diego ... I don't know if you sent the posters of *Marat/Sade*?

CB: Yes we did. I think we included a set of those.

SB: I just tried to think back to when we did our first collaboration. It was before Charles was a poet. He wrote a few poems in college, but that wasn't his main focus and I had a visual background. I was at Barnard doing artwork. After that the first thing I think of, which must have come before *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, was *Parsing* (1976) and *Asylums* (1975). I did the covers for both.

JS: What went through your mind as you worked on the design? I realize that was a long time ago! The cover design for *Parsing* is very beautiful.

CB: There was something in between that ...

SB: ... we did a few early things that were never published.

CB: We did some poems in drawings.

SB: What happened to those?

CB: I may have put them into the San Diego collection. I'm not sure whether I did.

SB: A few times we tried to make a book together before we had a publisher or anything. I made a few sketches and we lost track of where they are. We looked for them a few times!

CB: I can't remember where they are, but I don't think they are lost. They are either in the one place or the other! We didn't publish those so it's not so critical, but there it was ... we were trying to do some kind of book.

SB: In the early 70s.

CB: Those were poems set into drawings, so they're a little different than the early pieces. In some ways they were like *Little Orphan Anagram* (1997).

SB: Right. They were somewhat primitive! They were watercolors and drawings. I think I hand-lettered the poems and stuck them in. We were thinking that we were going to do a book. Of course, this was all before there were any publishers for this.

CB: So we were working together. In the book covers and the designs, Susan was very involved. She designed a lot of things I was involved with – and not only the poetry books, but other projects as well.

- SB: I also edited some of the Roof Books and did page and cover designs for them. I was already working as a commercial designer and editor when I did *Parsing*.
- CB: Susan's editing is an interesting part of the story though it's not directly visual. She has always been an editor and a proofreader. I remember when we had the final proofs for *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E 4*, which Bruce and I edited and which was to be a bound book. We thought we had caught everything. Susan went through it and found 17 errors!
- SB: You and Bruce were never very good proofreaders!
- CB: Mostly things like subheads, not subheads ... what do you call them –
- SB: Running heads.
- CB: Running heads and things like that. And I believe –
- SB: Running heads is my thing.
- CB: That's a visual skill: a certain kind of proofreading – proof correction.
- SB: But that started in college.
- CB: You notice visual discrepancies of a certain sort, which I don't. I become so absorbed in reading the material.
- SB: That's true. Our first collaborations were more that I edited some of Charles' papers in college! I started doing that even though I'm not a writer. The main thing is that I'm not primarily a writer. Many assume that because you are an editor, you're a writer. It's a different skill. But, I very well remember making the cover to *Parsing* because I was working in a law firm as a legal proofreader. I used Prestype. I took their Prestype to do the cover to *Parsing*! I was at Hunter College Graduate School where I was studying with all these minimalists and I was painting triangles. Everything I did was triangles, because my teachers were into very simple geometric forms.
- JS: Had they incorporated any notion of language at all?
- SB: No ... well, I was studying with Robert Morris and was aware of Robert Barry, who was also at Hunter, and they were both artists using language in their work. But I don't know that those relationships were so influential, as I was living with a poet, and their use of language was very conceptual.
- JS: And by that you mean?
- SB: It was tagged to an idea. It wasn't poetic language and I was much more interested in poetic language and in fact, poetic images than the conceptual minimal art I was being exposed to and even forced to study. Because I was a student, I had to do minimal art. They didn't like art with too much going on ... they couldn't take it. So, it's kind of an irony of my entire career that I am very un-minimalist artist and that I studied with very minimal artists. So, I spent my whole life getting away from those people! But I think it was educational because I had to paint in two colors for nearly two years and I also restricted my imagery a lot during that time.
- JS: You don't normally do that at all?

- SB: Never. I never liked it. I didn't do it as an undergraduate. In graduate school they really frowned on the fact that my work was so complicated. So it's been great to not do that anymore! Which ties into  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ .
- CB: The design of  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  was one of the things that was striking about it. In retrospect you see that in Steve Clay and Rodney Phillip's show and book, *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side* (NYPL & Granary, 1999). Just in terms of mimeo, and so on. It had a very different look from the other publications at that time and it was very striking to people how different it was. I remember Bernadette Mayer saying, I don't think she wrote it, "There's no white space... it's so serious looking"... kinda, no funny business ... very different than the large page, side-staple look.
- SB: We were both working in commercial world, doing commercial editing and paste-up. I think part of the reason it looks the way it looks was because we wanted to get that industrial look – which I knew how to do because I was doing it!
- CB: Did you also edit and design the *Health Manpower Consortium Newsletter* that I did?
- SB: No, we...
- CB: we came up with the format –
- SB: and logo.
- JS: You certainly see a difference between *The  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  Book* in relationship to the journal.
- SB: I didn't like what they did with the book.
- CB: In the original issues, there was no white space. We started things right at the top.
- JS: Yes, when you look at  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ , it ...
- SB: It's very boxy. It's very designed. It's not accidental.
- CB:  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  was not something easy to produce because we wanted to have one article immediately following the next – not start each new article on a new page. So there was a lot of spraying, cutting, pasting of our legal-size Selectric-typed "galley pages." But we wanted that feeling of continuousness, as in a forum. I can't remember exactly who was responsible for all those decisions. Bruce and I were certainly involved in wanting to have the articles start on the cover. Once all those decisions were made, Susan did all the physical ...
- SB: layout. It was all pasted by hand, let's put it that way! Up to ten years ago, we had all the boards.
- CB: No the boards, again, we sent to San Diego.
- SB: I have no idea. I would always say, let's throw this out and Charles would always put it in a box.
- CB: Boards, they're a part of the  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  archive. You know I think that look was interesting because there weren't any other journals like it. It was 8 ½ x 14, legal size, standard but there still are very few things that looked like it.

- SB: I discuss these design issues in the article, “Design Elements in *The Nude Formalism* and *Fool’s Gold*” (*Talking the Boundless Book*, MCBA, 1995).
- CB: I thought there would be more reaction to *The Nude Formalism*, because it was such an ideological, overt intervention in typesetting. Everybody would always say ...
- SB: We got some bad reactions.
- JS: I did want to ask you about the setting to the poem “Freud’s Butcher” in *The Nude Formalism*. On one side of the spread is the poem and on the other side is a picture of a hummingbird. How did the design proceed?
- SB: I tend to have slightly absurd, slightly strange readings of the poem. The poem is very funny and ironic and I wanted to have a very witty setting to the poem. What I was thinking about... the poem talks about a friend of ours, whose mother’s uncle was Freud’s butcher. But is also discusses – art, religion, and the new poetry. I love the last line: “Art and religion don’t always agree/ The one’s by rule, the other sometimes free.” That line conjured up the tiny hummingbird perched on the lady’s hand. It an ambiguous image in which it is unclear if the bird is being captured or set free.
- CB: The poem existed before the setting.
- SB: Charles didn’t have anything to do with the setting. I chose the poem. The images came after it.
- CB: You chose all the poems, to a large extent. I had an idea of what the setting would be, but we actually had more poems and Susan chose and selected them from a large group. She even asked for some I hadn’t at first thought to include. So she played a large part in determining the text. To some degree I had a basic idea, but she picked other pieces, and then the text was established and I had nothing else to do with it.
- SB: The image for “Freud’s Butcher” is similar to the poem in that it takes a sudden strange turn and I was thinking of the odd appearance of the bird on the page and slight of hand. The correlations between the images and the poems’ are oblique and intuitive, which may make them hard to discuss. I enjoy the serendipity of how Charles changes things in the middle of the poem. I wanted the idea of something appearing suddenly, like magic, like a rabbit out of a hat. So I think that was my sense of the poem. In other words my readings of the poems aren’t very direct; they are not meant to be illustrations exactly and that confuses people. It’s more like a serendipitous or whimsical relationship, not a straight illustration at all.
- JS: And did you take that kind of attitude into the making of *Little Orphan Anagram*?
- SB: Yes. It’s definitely that. There I really chose the text. I took a bunch of poems that mostly had not been published and sometimes only took one line of the poem to set. So in a way it’s really not a manuscript that Charles would have published at all. It’s more that I chose what I wanted... what called up a visual image to me.
- JS: “Verdi and Postmodernism” is a piece I don’t think anyone has discussed in its version in *Little Orphan Anagram*.
- CB: Here is an example of a poem that was published previously in *Rough Trades* (1991).

- SB: I wanted to use that poem because of the title, which is so evocative. I love the lines that start the poem: “She walks in beauty like the swans / that on a summer day do swarm...” Those opening lines conjured up the woman, nude except for high heels, who is trapped like a swan or a specimen of natural history in the geometry of the grid, which literally measures all of her features. This is an image I found in a drawing manual from the 1940s. I thought of the contrast between the extravagance of emotion in Verdi’s opera and the rigor and distanced irony of postmodernism. The poem addresses both humor and serious issues, especially in the last line: “If I could make one wish I might / overturn a state, destroy a kite / but with no wishes still I gripe / complaint’s a Godly-given right.”
- JS: And the grids? You both spoke of the grid in your collaborative essay on Arakawa (“Meaning the Meaning: Arakawa’s Critique of Space,” *Content’s Dream*, 1986) where he and Gins were reworking the Cartesian conceptual grid.
- SB: I was using the grid in my work due to being around “grid-y” people. I actually have used the nude and grid again, and in our most recent collaboration. I have done this big painting for a show in New York (*Sprung Monuments*, for *Poetry Plastique* at the Marianne Boesky Gallery, February 2001). It is a painting made up of a grid and panels. It’s like a cartoon or storyboard for a film. Each panel has a poem, each poem has an illustration. We were going to show painted pages from *Little Orphan Anagram*, but it’s a very big gallery.
- CB: And we wanted a painting for the show itself. I was looking for a painting.
- JS: Would you see this new work, where you bring Charles’ poetry into your painting, as a result of your previous collaborations?
- SB: To me, this painting is a culmination of all the previous projects. Paintings are different in scale from what I think of as artist’s books, or collaborative books.
- CB: Once again, the text was completely chosen by Susan.
- SB: I had already chosen some poems from *Little Orphan Anagram*, and I already had them in my computer. But the painting is a totally different take on the poems. It’s not an “illustration.”
- CB: This is a show I did with Jay Sanders at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in February 2001. Jay wanted to do a show, which we ended up calling “Poetry Plastique.” It included work from the early 60s, 70s – Tom Phillips, Steve McCaffery’s *Carnival*, Cage, Mac Low, Smithson, Wallace Berman – alongside new works. The idea was to include poetry that is extended out into a visual dimension or visual art that incorporates poems. Not visual art that has text, not concrete poetry – no page-based, typewriter-oriented work, not poet-painter collaborations where the visual and the verbal are separate elements (though we had a few pieces like that), but works that form another category that is less articulated as a type. We discuss all this in the catalog to the show (*Poetry Plastique*, 2001). But getting back to *The Nude Formalism*, there’s a phobia against the kind of neo-Pre-Raphaelite ornamentation of page that comes from, let’s call it, a Bauhaus aesthetic about type design, that the type shouldn’t interfere with the poem itself (wherever that is). That if the type or page is decorative, the poem is somehow diminished.

- SB: *The Book of the Book* (Granary, 2000) is great. Charles has an essay that deals with this topic. You almost have to create new theory and criticism for it. Johanna Drucker has been the main person theorizing about artist's books. And Steve Clay at Granary is dedicated to furthering this work.
- JS: Granary Books, along with Johanna's work, has been pushing the idea of the total book, where the language, page, type, design and the formation of the book itself are accepted as vital elements of the constructed medium. Your term Charles, "poetry plastique" is also locating and articulating this grammar of the total book and accepting that these elements, notably the visual element can be utilized in a number of different ways. This is a very different point of departure than conceptual art or concrete poetry...
- CB: That's right.
- JS: Although all books must have these elements such as the visual, the semantic, and the physical, rarely are all these parts drawn upon.
- SB: I feel like I'm writing an opera, or music to a libretto. In other words, he gives me the words, and I get to set it. Back to how I view it – our collaborating. It's not a one-on-one thing. That's why even that image (from "Verdi & Postmodernism") and that page does not predict the poem. As I mentioned, the image is one I have used in other works. I picked it out of another work and added it. I thought it went with that poem. I liked the idea of a nude turning into a formalist element that was taken apart and revisualized. It goes with Charles' poem, and what he's said about his work. I've already read much of what he has written about his work, and lived with him! So I feel like I have some insight into what he thinks and therefore I feel free to set the poetry in whatever way I want. In contrast, I just finished this book with Susan Howe (*Bed Hangings*, 2001) ...
- CB: It wouldn't matter if the designs were illustrations of what I think.
- SB: But when I worked with Susan Howe I was more circumspect in my approach. She sometimes objected to what I did, and didn't like certain images and had me take them out. Charles rarely does that.
- CB: She's more interested in consonance, and I'm not as interested in that.
- SB: She wanted me to reflect the poems, and with some images she said "you can't use that image..., it's not in the poem."
- CB: Or "it's not historically accurate."
- SB: It's not historically accurate, which is the last thing that is usually on my mind. That kind of matching I've never done with Charles' work.
- JS: What informs your "matching"? You have this kind of freedom? How do you guide it?
- SB: I use lots of images. I have a huge collection of images, of collage images. It's more subconscious/unconscious. It's like art, I just look and when I see an image that I think will go with a poem, then I use it. But with Susan's work, it was different. I couldn't just pick the image out of my collection. She has historical references and

didn't like the kind of images I was using as they were not historically accurate. As a result, I was working with a smaller range of images, based upon my research, and the result is a much closer correlation of poems and image. But it is such a different thing working with Charles. His work is imaginative in a different way than Susan's. He does not feel so bound by the interpretations. Even in *The Occurrence of Tune*, which was the first book we collaborated on, though it wasn't my first book. I had done another one called *Not* (1980). The first book I did in graduate school was all photograms (*Photogram*, 1979). I was doing photo work, the second book I published was *Not*. That had visual poems, they were like collages, but they had my words in them. The third one was *The Occurrence of Tune*.

CB: The first book from the press Susan and I started in 1976, Asylum's Press, was, of course, *Asylums*. That has a cover by Susan. It's a beautiful cover – on that one she used press type. The lettering looks three dimensional. Asylum's Press was a pun, it was a press of the book of *Asylums* as well as this other conception of "press" – the impress of an asylum. There weren't very many Asylum Press books: Peter Seaton's *Agreement*; Ted Greenwald's *Use No Hooks*; Ray Di Palma's *Marquee*, a typewritten book; also a retrospective catalog of Susan's mother, Miriam Laufer's artwork.

SB: About, *The Occurrence of Tune*. This was a whole poem. The photos predated the poems. I had already done the photos.

JS: How did you decide on the format?

SB: The lines are really long. I wanted the horizontal format. We also wanted the big type, so it would not be like a conventional poetry book.

JS: The poem is presented very differently in *Republics of Reality* (2000).

SB: I love the fact that the format is almost like a children's book or a workbook. I printed the photos and painted the developer on them. I had a darkroom at the time. I did all the developing myself and these images are from my experimental photo period. I think one of the reasons this book is not talked about more is because the images are very poetic and not hard-edged and my approach is very lyrical, as opposed to the approach to photos and slogans of somebody like Barbara Kruger, who was working at that same time. Even in the painting I did for *Poetry Plastique*, the poetry is used almost like slogans, but with very poetic and nonsensical texts.

JS: So, how are you thinking about language, having brought it into your canvas not from a conceptual viewpoint, how is that changing your perception of the visual?

SB: Well I think of it as a counterpoint. I work with collage anyway, so I'm already bringing things in. In a lot of my paintings I've used slogans from movie posters. That's why it's funny that I never did put any of the poetry into the paintings. Now, because of the artist books we've done, we have an audience. I realize that there may be an audience for incorporating the poetry into the paintings, but I could never figure out how. Even now I'm not exactly sure that I would continue the way I did, even with the particular painting I did, the material as collage, stenciled-in words distract from art...

CB: It goes both ways.

- SB: The words can interfere with the visual. Purists don't like having anything interfering with the visual, and the more painterly people I know in New York, just want paint. No collage – no interferences, pursuing a purism about art. And since I came out of a painting context, I had this purist ideal, but it never appealed to me.
- CB: And then there's plenty of writing in painting in the past 70 to 80 years, but it tends to be more photographic art, slogans, narrative, conceptual rather than poetry or poetic text, poetic material.
- SB: I'm more interested in Blake's marriage of poetry and art than in the approach of the conceptual artists I studied with. I found that when they did use texts it had something very deterministic about it. It was like the text was this very heavy object weighing the work down, as in the work of Joseph Kosuth. His work seems very serious to me. I want to have a more humorous, light-hearted, and whimsical quality. I think all my pictures match up to the texts that they are with in some way. I could point to the match if you sat me down with all the books, I would be able to say why the images were put together with the text in the way that they were.
- JS: I think it takes a changed perception to not demand an exhaustive explanation between the visual and textual field, so that the viewer does not have to understand all the "whys" in order to receive and live with the work. If you have a larger set of references, you can let them be side by side. What do you think of the republications of your work? For example, *The Occurrence of Tune* is republished without the photos. Does the change work for you both?
- SB: Well, I'm sad about it. For me it goes with the photos. That's the way it was. But everyone does this – start with a limited small edition and then republish the work that it was in, and so it becomes a different thing.
- CB: Unfortunately *The Occurrence of Tune* didn't get the kind of circulation it might have – it didn't get around as a book. In any case, I think it's fine for a work to go through multiple phases. I am interested in the plura-version of things, that there's not a single original. And this particular piece existed at first in a notebook. Written down, then typed on a Selectric typewriter in a manuscript. The manuscript was more like the Sun & Moon version of *The Occurrence of Tune*. It was 8 ½ x 11, Courier, which is what I usually used, typewriter Courier – about 12 point. The visual layout has been translated. It exists in its multiple visual realizations. As far as a book goes, from my point of view, the text presentation was or had been the best way I'd seen my work presented, the look to the poem, to anything up to that time. I would still feel that way because of the spacing, size of the page, and so on. But at the same time, when you put it in the book, the text in a different context, it allows it to be read in a different way. I think you would read *The Occurrence of Tune* in *Republics of Reality* differently than in the original form. They are both fine readings as far as I'm concerned. When I was designing and thinking about the last couple of books – *My Way* and *With Strings* – I was thinking whether or not to include works with nonlexical visual elements. The problem of including one visual piece within a series of poems that otherwise are entirely alphabetic, is that it needs to contribute to the overall composition of the book. If we would have reproduced the first *The*

*Occurrence of Tune in Republics of Reality* it would have been out of place. I don't think it would have worked.

SB: Yes, everything in *The Occurrence of Tune* is about format.

CB: The design of the type itself is different in each book, since all those books were printed from other sources. *Parsing* is very different as well. I probably prefer the original in every case to the way they look in *Republics of Reality*, but I like *Republics of Reality* too in terms of pulling those volumes together and the way it creates a connection among the works.

JS: The cover, Susan, has quite a similarity to *Content's Dream*.

SB: Yes, there were two lighthouse paintings back to back (painted in 1981). Douglas Messerli saw and knew them both, and he chose the cover of *Content's Dream*. I can't remember which one I painted first. I think the black one! The lighthouse painting on the cover of *Republics of Reality* is a follow up to the one on *Content's Dream*.

CB: Well, I particularly regretted losing one of those paintings on the cover of the Northwestern reprint of *Content's Dream*. However, it is a whole other question when a book has only 35 copies, each hand painted, as with *Little Orphan Anagram*.

SB: For *Little Orphan Anagram* I had to watercolor for six months. It was very arduous. I love the way it looks, but its actually insane doing the whole project. I would get up each day, go to the studio, and watercolor all day, and then at the end of the day, I would have a thousand more pages to do!

JS: Hence, its expensive price.

CB: It was not very expensive in terms of the hourly cost for each book. The hourly wage is very low! But also, the cost of the paper and the binding was high.

SB: *The Occurrence of Tune* was not that expensive. The original retail price was five dollars. And it still didn't circulate that much, because our experience has been that sometimes a book like this with a visual element – people don't consider it as significant as a perfect bound book of poems.

JS: The difficulty of reading *The Occurrence of Tune* is in the manner you are collaborating. Instead of merely illustrating poetry, you are building an interactive space, each maintaining independence but living side by side. So how would you read it, when a work comes out like this?

CB: Right. It's less familiar even if regarded as something sort of nice. But in terms of poetry, it is always the full-length, text-only, collection that is deemed most significant. You always see in reviews – “the author's third collection.” If you total up the number of books for people who do chapbooks and visual books, there are dozens and dozens. My favorite example being Allan Fisher, who has over a hundred different books, each of which is visually specific in design and specific to its format. They really are an attack or critique of the idea of unified body of work. Nobody, even the most avid Allan Fisher reader, can collect all his books, and he has never recollected them in a single volume. Some of his books are huge. Some of them are small. All in all, it's a very different model for the poetry book. And I think Susan

and I fit in with our separate book projects, each book is a separate work. That's why I never, until *Republics of Reality*, reprinted my books. I never included the books in *Republics of Reality* in the larger Sun & Moon collections. Those were all complete in themselves. *Republics of Reality* for me is also a "book project" – putting together a set of works within a new context. I remain very book-oriented! Each book project becomes crucial in imagining what my work is. *The Occurrence of Tune* and *The Nude Formalism* are, in that sense, fundamental to me. But again, *The Nude Formalism* has never been recollected. It is a small book, can't be in bookstores, you know, it "falls between the cracks." Anyway, it's a crucial work for understanding everything I did from that point on. Because it gives a very clear visual correlative to the more Pre-Raphaelite direction the poems themselves take. It's very clear when you see the poem that it is going in that way. It's a shift from the poetry that exists prior to that, in terms of my work. And that would include my collaboration with Susan too.

JS: Tell me about *Fool's Gold* (1991).

SB: In *The Occurrence of Tune*, we chose the format. *The Nude Formalism* was published by Douglas Messerli in a series called *20 Pages*. The series had very specific requirements. First of all, it had to be twenty pages. Secondly, he wanted to use a plain red cover, which I was upset about. He designed the cover because this book was part of a series. Each of the books in the series – and there were only a few – have different colored covers but the same cover design. However, the uniform cover totally undermined my point about the illustrations with this book. I wanted to have a cover that was really flowery. And I didn't get to do that – although the title page is really what the cover might have been. What I like about Steve Clay at Granary, is that he encourages me to do what I want! Though he always has important input in determining the direction and expenses for each new project. There's something good about having a flexible publisher, since the publisher determines the format of the work. The format of *Fool's Gold* was determined by Charles Alexander. He looked at different formats with me and told me what he would like to do. Johanna Drucker discussed *Fool's Gold* in her book *The Century of Artists' Books* (1995). It was printed in an edition of about 40.

JS: How did you and Charles collaborate with this project?

SB: *Fool's Gold*? Did you give me a text?

CB: *Fool's Gold* was done in a slightly different way. We had a residency in Tucson.

SB: You brought some texts with you.

CB: I brought, not even so much texts –

SB: Snippets?

CB: Fragments – lines, and other kinds of things I wanted to use, things I was going to use to create poems ... elements and there were a couple of poems in there and then we sort of assembled it together.

SB: It was the beginning of my way of working with little snippets... I would place a snippet over here and then over there.

- CB: I provided a series of fragments and in some cases I filled in a visual element.
- SB: Yes, what about the crossword puzzle, didn't you put a poem under a crossword puzzle? You cut a crossword puzzle out of the newspaper and inserted it in the book.
- CB: Yes... I have to look at the actual text to remember how the images were generated. I do remember, though, that some of the visual elements, were generated by me, which is different than the other books. I was the most involved in this project, writing things in interaction with the book as it was developing, even though most was written beforehand, like "O! O! / I'm in an / O! tree." I mean, did I write that after you put a tree in? Maybe..., I can't remember. Some of the phrases, other kinds of things, slogans, those were written beforehand. Things I had written and had in mind for this project – for you to use because we knew we were going to be doing the book there in Tucson.
- SB: I brought all this collage stuff thinking I was going to be doing that there. Because the idea was that we had a residency for two weeks and we had to produce the sketch for the book in two weeks, so therefore I went out there with collections of different images, black and white ones, and then I would paint the rest of the images in. And we really did it there. But then Charles Alexander took what was more a sketch to be made into a book and set all the type. We had pasted or written the text in and we wanted lots of different fonts and he was able to do that and we wanted two colors and he did that too. He had a lot of input in terms of how it ended up looking. This is why I say, the publisher often determines a lot about the format, even the style.
- CB: In terms of Charles Alexander and Steve Clay, they're specializing in artist and visual books, whereas Sun & Moon is not.
- SB: Actually *The Nude Formalism* is a very odd book for Sun & Moon.
- CB: But all three publishers are also book designers – and extraordinarily good book designers too. *The Nude Formalism* is about typography and the relation to poetry, but that is not the only thing in this book, of course. The visual collage –the images – also. One of the things about *The Nude Formalism* is the use of different fonts and to have each poem set in different fonts, which is something I've been interested in for a long time. The whole idea of uniform fonts ... we wanted to open up and bring out other possibilities.
- SB: We didn't want the transparency, where everything is nice and tasteful in normal chapbooks. I remember Ray DiPalma criticizing it, saying I used way too many fonts. A lot of people didn't say it, but thought, "Oh my God. The fonts are advertising or display fonts that have never been used with poems."
- CB: It goes against the dominant aesthetic in poetry publishing, but then, so do the poems.
- SB: And I was working, designing a lot of Roof books, which were fairly conventional. I would even try and change the headings – make them look more decorative – and the authors would get upset.
- JS: You were pushing against a conscious design philosophy.
- CB: It is not conscious, necessarily; it's a modernist's idea that you could have a title but it should be integrated with the main body of the poem – and the type should not call

attention to itself. It's as if you want the text to be an extension of the typewriter, the uniformity of the typewriter. It's the illusion that the linguistic material of the poem exists independently of the actual visualization in the type. The type should be something neutral.

SB: And I was really against that. It really violated my sense of aesthetics. In *The Nude Formalism* I did not want the type to be neutral. I wanted it to be decorative. I wanted it to be flowery and decorative as in "Gosh." And in "A Soul Foiled, Abjured," I used fonts that were for wedding invitations. Each poem is pretty much set in a different font, and I used every font I could find. This is before the computer. I actually had all these typed up by a typesetter and pasted them up. I didn't have the fonts myself – of course, now I do. Back then, it wasn't that easy to get a hold of these weird different fonts and to find someone to set it for you in these odd formats. Now I think, with desktop publishing, it is taken to an extreme, too much use of fonts.

JS: In other words, a use of type with a lack of history.

SB: They don't even know why they're using different fonts.

CB: Well, the problem is that having access to a lot of different fonts does not make you a designer. I couldn't have done *The Nude Formalism*. Which brings up the issue of the separation between the verbal and the visual which is in our...

SB: In our family.

CB: It is pretty systematic! I look at a lot of visual art, and I'm very interested, but I don't feel that I have the visual acumen when it comes to font or color.

SB: And he doesn't like being consulted about it.

CB: Yes. I don't like considering which shade of red works best, even if I can see the difference when the book is completed. I think this has allowed a lot of space for each of us because I really don't have that much advice to give on the level of complex visual decisions that are made in our books. I might say it would be nice to have an advertising font, but which one? How much space between letters, etc.?

JS Susan, how did you learn about fonts?

SB: I grew up around them. Both of my parents were fine artists, calligraphers, illustrators, and book designers so it's kind of in the blood, to put it mildly. I used to sit around, as my mother worked at home on diplomas and illustrated children's books. She was a painter as well as a commercial designer. She even worked as a sign painter in Palestine. So knowledge of fonts was around in our house. I was always taught to look at typefaces. I was taught to look at decorative types, since they both did decorative calligraphy for a living, I was always finding these incredibly beautiful pieces coming out of the house like certificates for the governor. My mother did gold leaf and fancy borders and all that at home. And I was at home watching her making things. So I always wanted to make these things and grew up in a household where everybody was into books and design and type fonts. And then I started working as a designer. I worked for the National Association for Social Workers and they had the worst taste. I would show them four cover designs, and they would always choose the worst one, and put it in the worst colors like mustard,

and destroyed my designs. So now I have this freedom where I can make things and I'm really happy that I have publishers that publish my work.

CB: Even now, when you're dealing with some university presses, they are very conservative as to typography and the cover type and so on; and there's a real fear of ornamentation and visual complexity; that's partly because they think it will interfere with the basic functional quality of making the writing unobtrusively available to the reader. (The University of Chicago Press, though, has been great.) Still, there's a lot of bad muddy design, too. Like on the web, when you have red backgrounds with pink type and you can't read the words. There's a lot of reason to want to have legible type, so I think some skepticism about busy design, which veers towards the unreadable, is legitimate. But, at the same time, there is also a concern about the appearance – thinking of those kinds of conservative covers, which make a book look serious. The National Association of Social Workers is a great example. They didn't want something that seemed in anyway decorative or aesthetic. Somehow if it was too aestheticized, it would not be taken as authoritative. But how about a book about aesthetics – does that need an “authoritative” look too?

SB: Decorative or aesthetic work seems frivolous to them. I always wanted the collaborative books to be legible. I think you can read the poems. I never wanted them to be unreadable, in the way you find in some artist's books.

CB: On the web, you see a greater deal of overly formatted design – too many frames, too many pop-up mini-windows, too much tiny type. We try to avoid that at the EPC (Electronic Poetry Center, <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/>).

SB: I'm definitely not into illegibility.

CB: You can have illegibility when you want that feature. Most of my visual work is about illegibility, which is a different thing. The actual writing tends to make the writing illegible, rather than the choice of font or background. The piece “An Mosaic” is one of my most designed pieces and it is about web design in a way; but that's a different kind of web environment and a different kind of writing. In our collaborations, without sacrificing typographic legibility, we wanted to stay playful.

JS: You can see that very clearly in *Log Rhythms* (1998).

CB: In that book, the poem predates the design setting. So all the designs are Susan's but I actually did get her to do something. There was one point, where this particular page – pages two and three in the final book –

SB: He didn't like the way I set the stanzas!

CB: I was concerned that it appeared that there were four stanzas, instead of one, as I had it in the manuscript. Though actually, if I think about it, it was an unnecessary concern. But that was one of the few concerns I had.

SB I just remember I used the opening line in the painting for the *Poetry Plastique* shown in a totally different way.

CB: Did you actually change the design?

SB: No. You told me you gave up!

- CB: I think I was just reorienting myself to the new environment.
- SB: What happened was that this was a completed long poem. It wasn't like the other ones where I could scramble it. It had an order.
- CB: Originally, it was one stanza, composed of four different elements: the two different kinds of childrens' rhyme – nursery rhymes – plus two other parts. They were separate elements, but I had worked to make them converge in the one stanza – they were meant to mesh. So when I first saw them separated I was nervous or unsure they would work autonomously because they weren't meant to be arranged that way. I have included the text-only version of “Log Rhythms” in *With Strings* (2001), so you can see the difference.
- SB: When Charles gave me the text of the poem, I pulled it apart, because I didn't know how I was going to use it. We weren't even given a length for this book by the publisher. So I don't even know how I decided on that spread.
- CB: Steve Clay actually heard me perform the poem at Dia in New York. That's what got him interested. And of course the performance is another version.
- SB: Steve wanted it set, and he called me to ask if I would do it. I had no idea how ...
- CB: It's like *The Occurrence of Tune* in that way. But *The Occurrence of Tune* exists more as a separate text. The verbal and visual elements are more distinct.
- SB: Yes.
- CB: In *Log Rhythms*, there is more freedom taken with the ...
- SB: Liberty...
- CB: Liberty... but actually the text remains in the order it was written, even if sometimes the stanza breaks are different in the original.
- SB: And where I broke the poem on each page. Also you didn't have it centered line by line in the original. Charles got a little upset when I started centering the lines! I wasn't as confident with *The Occurrence of Tune* and worked in a more conventional way between poet and artist. Many poet and artist collaborations look as if they have nothing to do with each other. It's more like they are working side by side, but they are not interacting.
- CB: It can work. Creeley responding to painting is very interesting.
- SB: He often writes the poems after the painting... he responds to the painting.
- CB: And they are very rich responses to the paintings. When you write an opera, you write the words first so the composer can set them. The writer's work ends just as the composer's work begins. But in opera, the writer is the secondary person.
- SB: Yet with Richard Tuttle, he had the paintings and you wrote a poem for each one (*Reading Red*, 1998).
- CB: And then Richard designed the book and put them back into the paintings – literally superimposing the poems on the image of the paintings. That was very interesting. In Susan's case, she incorporates the poems into the visual field – rather than keeping the visual and verbal separate. Though I like that tradition of poems side by side with

the paintings... I believe what Susan is involved with is something different. They're not paintings illustrating poems, or poems about paintings. The poet takes, in some degree, a secondary role in this work – because, not that the poem is insignificant – but the visual work is beyond the poem, it's an extension of the poem into a different medium.

SB: In the work I did with Susan Howe it is more equal. Every poem has a picture.

CB: There are plenty of books of visual/verbal collaborations which are equal or the text is dominant. It's kind of interesting in artist's books, the artist is leading in the way in the opera the composer's leading. It's not that the text is unimportant, but in the end, it's the composer's medium.

SB: Working on the penultimate stanza (“The gift is always...,” p.18), I remember going in to Charles and asking him should I work on the image as a gift and he said, “No don't be literal!”

CB: Well, there you ask me not a visual question, but you asked me ...

SB But it was a visual question ...

CB But I took it as a question of interpretation, of semantic emphasis –

SB: Well, I was just trying to figure out what was the important theme of this particular passage.

SB: What I ended up setting was “let language lead,” which is the last phrase of the stanza. I concentrated on the idea of language and people leading out from the poem. At first, I had this funny idea that I would put an image of a “gift” in, because the poem mentioned “the gift” but I knew that was ridiculous – the poem also has “package” and “commodification.” So I had this package – and how should I set it?

CB: The reason I said that about the gift ... I didn't want to emphasize the image of a gift, a one-way package, because the key is exchange. And the arrows in the graphic did suggest that – reciprocity in multiple directions.

SB: Sometimes the images and design are very direct, like “the puppy is father to the dog” (p. 17) and “The mouse chases the cat but only in the poem” (p. 17), where there is an image of a dog, cat, and mouse running around the border of the poem. Then the spread on pages 14-15 suggests being in the woods, because we were in the woods when Charles wrote the poem.

CB: Like any reading – you pick up on certain things.

SB: How any section will be set is not that obvious. Each spread is very different, inconsistent, which is one of my favorite things to do, and reflects my style.

JS: The reason you are interested in inconsistency is because you were reacting against minimalism?

SB: And also because of Charles's work. I think his work and my work are very similar. But nobody has written about it, really. I use collage, and a lot of different styles. I allow myself to use a lot of different styles, but not in a programmatic way. So I think the nonprogrammatic sense of the poetry and the fact that his poetry is collage-

based also allows me the freedom to do what I want. When I collaborate with other people – I did a book with Johanna Drucker (*A Girl's Life*, 2002) – it is very different. Johanna had already written the text, but I did the visuals and she took the visuals back, and put the type in. Then the overall design was reviewed and altered by both of us working together. She is an old friend and I've always showed her my work, but we have never worked together, so it has been a very interesting project for both of us. And we are very pleased with the outcome.

CB: She is a very interesting person from the standpoint of our discussion. Johanna's books have always been against that fine printing tradition – she's like Charles Alexander and Steve Clay, who are interested in doing poetry books that take nothing about books for granted.

JS: Susan how have you been affected by Charles's work?

SB: Living with a poet, listening to hundreds of readings, it has been a very big influence on me.

JS: Charles how have you been influenced by Susan's work?

CB: Certainly we share an interest in fragmenting, layering, and collage, but Susan was always interested in some things that early on, in the 1970s, I had a hard time with, certain kinds of figurative elements and certain kinds of Rococo, Pre-Raphaelite, decorative qualities, which aren't present in my early work, which is more austere. I began to see the possibility of including that kind of material – both the comic possibilities and the textual possibilities. There were not a lot of other people doing this sort of work when we first started, but Susan pushed ahead with this verbal/visual work.

JS: When you met over thirty years ago, why were you interested in incongruity, fragmentation, the abstract? And why have you maintained this ongoing interest in these modes? Unless, you are creating a new type of writing, it seems you've maintained, for quite a long time, a resistance, but have created a new kind of style.

CB: When I was young, I was very taken by a very abstract formalistic aesthetic – formalist in the sense of Greenberg. And even reading someone like Stein, I was thinking of the consistency of abstract texture. Then I think Susan and I both became increasingly dissatisfied with parts of that aesthetic, especially the austerity, and more interested, sometimes in overlapping ways, but also at slightly different times, in montage, incongruity, decoration, figuration, and, inevitably with that list, the comic.

SB: I think our work is recognizable as our work; stylistically it is a unified thing... but it took a long time to get to that point and both of us went through a lot of styles before we came to do whatever it is we are doing now. I went through my photo period, my abstract painting period, my geometric period. I went through every which thing, each one thing different, in the last 20 years. I have started using a lot of kitsch things, more paper dolls, stuff from my childhood. Imagery I was afraid to use before because I was afraid that I would be despised or not taken seriously enough for what I was doing. Now I don't care. I do whatever I want.

CB: These are the kind of elements I also became comfortable with including. I'll give you another example: children's rhymes, which I didn't have in my earlier work.

Needless to say, having children affects that, even in the most basic sense of coming into daily contact with different literature than I was otherwise thinking about and also crucially reading out loud to Emma and then Felix. Illustrated children's books are a great example of visual and verbal integration. I'd love to do a "bath" book printed on thick plastic pages with flaps and parts you can pull out. I think overall my own work has a very strong connection throughout. This continuity is not a matter of style or rhetoric, though. I don't feel like I've gone through a revolution or change in relation to my preoccupations – which may not be totally a good thing or, for that matter, a bad thing. A lot of the aesthetic and social interests I had when I was younger, I still have now. I have just found different ways to articulate them, different forms and materials to use.

- SB: I think the playfulness in both our work... is something we've allowed ourselves to have more and more. In other words, after a while, I stop caring what the art world thought, because they didn't seem to think that much anyway! And I just did whatever I wanted to do. In the books I felt even more freedom than in the paintings. Painting has a history to it. You can't make any mark without it being read as being informed by Pollock or somebody. I don't know why, but I feel more freedom in the book. It is more like drawing. Drawing is always more personal.
- CB: It's like *Poetry Plastique*: our collaborations are not visual poetry, they're not illustrations of poems, they're not concrete poetry, they're not poems about paintings.
- JS: It's a fascinating area. As a person interested in the visual arts and poetry, these works produce an interactive dialogue between the two forms.
- CB: In putting together the *Poetry Plastique* show, Jay Sanders and I traced a history – from the Russian Constructivist book artists to Tom Phillips, from William Morris to Ian Hamilton Finlay, from Duchamp to Arakawa and Gins, from Henri Michaux to Richard Tuttle, from Schwitters to Mac Low. "Poetry Plastique" is not visual poetry. For example, Susan's work, *The Nude Formalism* is not visual poetry and it is not typographic design either. You start to see the fonts themselves as visual imaging, then you have the word made visible that Johanna Drucker talks about and then documents in her work.
- JS: Then you realize that fonts have a history and they are always culturally constructed. For example, Ben Franklin in his press worked with the French to come up with an "American" font for the passport. He wanted to create a specific font for American documents. I think reading your work and taking seriously the design and covers of the books, you begin to see an expansion of poetic meaning. This is why I was surprised that no one had done any work on your collaborations.
- CB: Yet, the focus of people interested in poetry is usually not on this aspect. So a book like *Log Rhythms* is something of a novelty item.
- SB: Some people would see it as a distortion of the work. Now in this format it has become a "third thing." Not the same as it was before and it is a totally different reading.

- JS: And places new demands on the reader. When you start to look at it you have to be comfortable with design. Or you have to know something about painting, or you wouldn't even pick it up.
- CB: Then what happens is that one looks at it but doesn't read it!
- JS: Yes, and they are not accustomed to the notion that knowing is seeing and knowing is reading – two different things.
- CB: So it puts it into a different realm.
- JS: It's a very good critical pressure, I think. I don't think that's the total intention, but I like what it does to critical discourse. It frustrates it.
- SB: So the question is, when you take it out of that format doesn't it become a totally different thing?
- CB: When "Log Rhythms" came out, in *With Strings*, in the "plain" text version, which of course is also visual but more conventionally so, somebody who has read it in the Granary version then might be aware that it existed in another form. Just as with *The Occurrence of Tune* in the collaborative version and then in *Republics of Reality*. That, in itself, is interesting to me. There's an advantage. Not to make you forget about the other versions, but to initiate a dialogue among the versions. The idea is "anoriginality": there are multiple visual, acoustic, material productions. There are multiple versions of any work and one does not preclude the other, or establish authority over the other. They exist as an array ...
- JS: Yes, this is a real insight. This myth of going back to the one first text.
- CB: That is a traditional view. McGann discusses the problems with the concept of an idealized antecedent text, independent from any actually existing version – I'd almost want to say performance. What Susan and I are trying to show is that it's the other way around. The poems are not separate from their material embodiment ... It's hard to image the poems in *The Nude Formalism* being printed except in this version.
- JS: I can't imagine "Freud's Butcher" in any other setting.
- CB: I can't think of any of them outside of Susan's versions. What would these sonnets be, "Gosh" for example? What would "Gosh" be without this particular setting? In Times Roman 12 pt.? It would be a completely different poem and not as interesting. Here, the fact that the poems almost couldn't stand on their own without the visual text ... it's what makes the book so interesting. And yet, it's not to say that some other version of these poems couldn't or worse shouldn't be produced.
- JS: It also shows that your collaborations are creating a third form. It gives the concept of poetry an opening. It opens up a way of thinking about poetry – that there is more to poetry, as you have pointed out in numerous ways, than what we've been taught. Why not think about poetry as one of the most dynamic art forms?
- CB: Yes, that's right. In order to do this in a collaboration on a visual work (but also with writing a libretto), you basically have to treat the text as if it can't stand on its own – in order for the visual (or musical) setting to bring the work to its own completion. *Log Rhythms* and *The Occurrence of Tune* would seem contradict this, since these

were finished long poems. In those cases I am suggesting something rather odd: that the texts needed to shed their completeness, lose the finish; too much deference to the “original” text would be inimical to the collaboration. That’s why Susan more often uses fragments rather than complete poems, for example in *Little Orphan Anagram*, *Fool’s Gold*, and the recent paintings. She selects fragments or slogans or single lines, like, “Think digitally, act analogically.”

SB: I set that line in the painting, *Sprung Monuments*, where it is quite different than the way I use it in *Little Orphan Anagram*.

CB: I think that if you really want the collaboration to work, the poem has to aspire to the condition of the fragment. Or, to put it another way, of a song lyric: you know, how, once you know the song, a lyric feels insufficient on its own but also brings the music to mind. In *The Nude Formalism*, for example, the poems feel like they need something else to make them work; the visual setting feels necessary.

SB: The trick there is to bounce off the words, take the work into new visual directions, ones that are suggested by the text.

CB: The collaboration is less about illustration, interpretation, or explication and more about extension: the continuation of the poem by other means.

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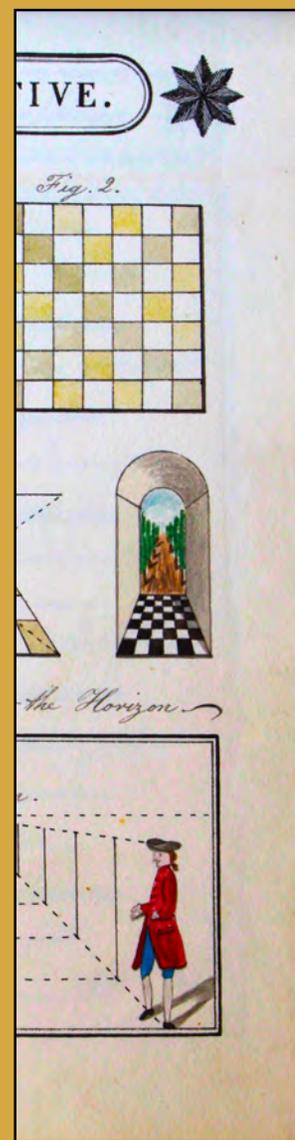
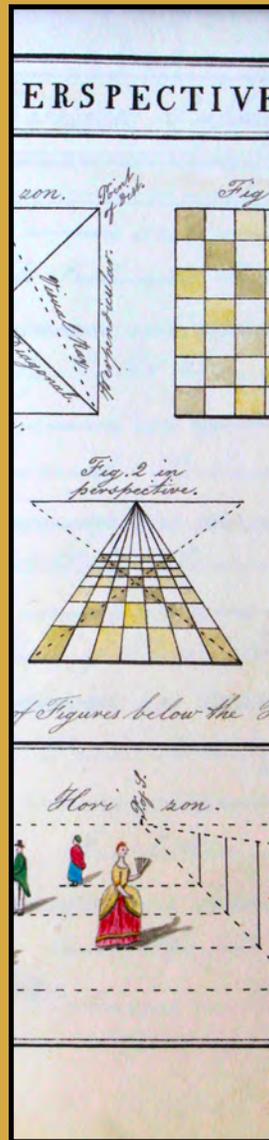
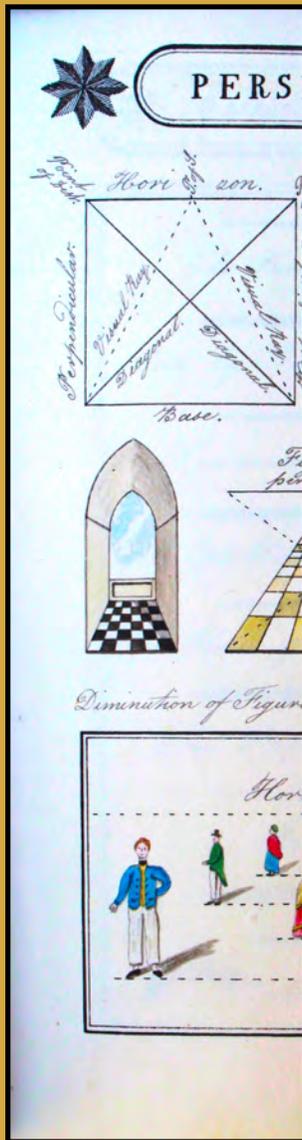
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