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Beyond the Valley of the Sophist: Charles Bernstein, Irony, and Solidarity

[Sophism] has ultimately shown itself to be right: every advance in epistemological and moral knowledge has reinstated the Sophists.
—Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*[1]

. . . every last professor teaching today benefited from the claims which shocked Plato so deeply when the Sophists first made them.
—Jacqueline de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*[2]

In some sense, the sophists were the first theorists of ambiguity.
—Ramona Naddaff, *Exiling the Poets*[3]

If someone proclaims themselves a sophist, is it possible to believe them?

By which I mean—given that "sophist" has been used for millennia as a term of derision signifying deceitfulness, artificiality, and self-interested professionalization—is it possible to be a self-proclaimed sophist? "I am a liar by nature and by profession, but I am not lying to you at the present moment [although presumably I am speaking to you in my professional capacity]" might be another formulation

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 233.

2 Jacqueline de Romilly, *Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 6.

3 Ramona Naddaff, *Exiling the Poets: The Production of Censorship in Plato's Republic* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2003), 23.

of the problem. Charles Bernstein raises the problem of how one can believe the self-confessed sophist in his 1994 book *Dark City*:

> The debt that pataphysics owes to sophism
> cannot be overstated. A missionary with a horse
> gets saddlesores as easily as a politburo
> functionary. But this makes a mishmash of overriding ethical
> impasses. If the liar
> is a Cretan I wouldn't trust him
> anyway—extenuating contexts wouldn't amount
> to a hill of worms so far as I
> would have been deeply concerned about
> the fate of their, yes, spools. Never
> burglarize a house with a standing army,
> nor take the garbage to an unauthorized
> junket.[4]

Whereas the pataphysicist (in Alfred Jarry's terms) devises imaginary scientific solutions to nonexistent problems (thereby parodying scientific discourse), the sophist calls into question the sincerity of all discourse. The sophist and the pataphysicist cross paths in Bernsteins's writings in their refusal of literal truth and first person lyric sincerity. The answer to the question of how one distinguishes a lying sophist from a truthful philosopher, it turns out, depends not only on one's personal perspective, but also on how institutions and traditions (the proverbial "standing armies") differentiate between truth and falsehood, between art and commerce, between languages and dialects.

In his essay "Revenge of the Poet-Critic," Bernstein makes the claim that "problems of group affiliation (the neolyric 'we') pose as much of a problem for poetry as assertions of the Individual Voice (the lyric 'I')."[5] The sophist figure in Bernstein's writing, I argue, has allowed him to negotiate the gap between a "neolyric 'we'" (which would be implicit in Language writing's collective political and aesthetic project) and a "lyric 'I'" (which would constitute the mainstream notion of poetic "voice" which Language writing attempts to reject). This helps to explain why the sophist (or conman) figure

4 Charles Bernstein, *Dark City* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 1994), 105.

5 Charles Bernstein, *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1999), 8.

has been so central in Bernstein's poetic and critical writing from his contributions to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (published from 1978-1982) to his book *The Sophist* (1987) to his most recent collection of poems, *Girly Man* (2007). Bernstein's sophist foregrounds important issues in contemporary poetic production—especially issues of audience, voice, discursive practice, and professionalization. The sophist figure, in short, continually draws attention to the rhetorical nature of poetic production and circulation, and places in doubt the personal mode of what Bernstein dubbed "Official Verse Culture" in his 1984 MLA speech "William Carlos Williams Meets the MLA." Perhaps to a greater degree than any other prominent American poet of his generation, Bernstein draws attention to issues of professionalization in his criticism and poetry, and his writings on the subject often employ an ironic humility: "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."[6] Like Simonides, reputed to be the first poet to accept money for his poetry, and like Protagoras, reputed to be the first professional teacher of rhetoric, Bernstein must ward off charges that becoming a professional poet and critic has adversely affected his writing.[7] This essay largely sidesteps the complex question of whether or not becoming a university professor has compromised Bernstein's writing—instead I focus on how Bernstein has employed the sophist figure to discuss questions of: 1) sincerity and authorial perspective, 2) the possibility of a politically constructive version of

6 Quoted in Paul Bové, ed. "Charles Bernstein: A Dossier." *boundary 2* 23:3 (Fall 1996), 28.

7 For more on Language writing and its relation to academia, see Andrew Epstein's "Verse vs. Verse." *Lingua Franca* 10.6 (September 2000), 45-54; see also Alan Golding's "Provisionally Complicit Resistance: Language Writing and the Institution(s) of Poetry" in *From Outlaw to Classic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 144-170; and Golding's "'Isn't the avant-garde always pedagogical': Experimental Poetics and/as Pedagogy." *Iowa Review* 32.1 (Spring 2002), 64-71. For more general historical accounts of the Language movement, see Bob Perelman's *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Ann Vickery's *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000); George Hartley's *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989) and Barrett Watten's chapter "The Secret History of the Equal Sign: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E between Discourse and Text" in *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003): 45-102.

irony, and 3) Language Writing's collective understanding of itself as a movement. Correspondingly, along the lines of Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (to which I suggest Bernstein offers an implicit response), this essay is divided into three sections which discuss sophistry, irony, and community in Bernstein's poetics.

1. Sophistry and Sincerity

Self-deprecatory in the extreme, Bernstein's sophist (or Bernstein-as-sophist) is fundamentally parodic. In an important essay on Bernstein's work, Susan Schultz discusses Bernstein's irony by emphasizing his concern with fashion and appearance. Schultz suggests that "what Bernstein has done throughout his nearly thirty-five year career is to critique fashions of writing that attempt to conceal their status as fashion."[8] Schultz argues that "Bernstein takes on the role of parodic poet, adman and artist combined. For Bernstein there is no paradox, or the paradox is itself a grounds for poetry and the business of advertising it."[9] Schultz chronicles Bernstein's metaphors of fashion, reading them partially as allegories of his own life as well as of his own practice. (Bernstein's father, who appears occasionally, if obliquely, in his poems, was a dress manufacturer.) Bernstein's critique of fashion is in part a meditation on gender relations and anticipates *Girly Man* in its interest in the (self-) fashioning of gender roles. The sophist can also be figured as an effeminized intellectual, as in "White Mythologies" in which Jacques Derrida suggests, "Whoever does not subject equivocalness to [the] law is already a bit less than a man: a sophist, who in sum says nothing."[10]

Bernstein's sophist, by contrast, is saying something, even if no one is necessarily listening. The sophist in Bernstein's work is not merely a self-interested ironist, he is also a defender of poetry and of political action. According to "White Mythologies," "the Sophist . . . is the very figure of that which doubles and endangers philosophy."[11] Perhaps poetry too "doubles and endangers philosophy," given that at least since Plato's attack on the sophists in the *Republic*, poets and

8 Susan Schultz, *A Poetics of Impasse in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Susan Schultz. (Tuscaloosa: Univeristy of Alabama Press, 2005), 181.

9 Ibid., 184

10 Jacques Derrida, "White Mythologies," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago Press , 1985), 248.

11 Ibid., 271.

sophists have been linked. The Sophists were "the first theorists of ambiguity," according to Ramona Naddaff in *Exiling the Poets*, her study of censorship in Plato's *Republic*. Contrary to Socrates' idealization of *eidos* (the realm of unchanging forms and ideas), the sophist Gorgias held that *logos* (in the sense of "speech" or "language") was the most powerful of all masters. The Sophists capitalized on the need of an educated aristocracy to defend itself in the public agora—working either as professional teachers of rhetoric or as "logographers" (speech-writers on behalf of wealthy patrons). Perhaps the most important characteristic of sophistry was its commercialization of knowledge. As Jacqueline de Romilly writes in her history of the movement, "The meaning of the term 'Sophist' was in principle relatively wide . . . The word itself means professionals of the intelligence. . . It could be applied to anyone thoroughly qualified to exercise his profession, be he a diviner or a poet."[12] Gorgias' fifth-century contemporary Simonides was thus a sophistical poet, having been the first to accept money rather than gifts for his talents. As Anne Carson points out in *Economy of the Unlost*, her study of Simonides and Paul Celan, this represented an epochal shift that troubled many Greek intellectuals, Socrates among them.[13] Commercialization has arguably always been more troubling for poetry than for other literary modes. Schiller's eighteenth-century denunciation of sophistry as supremely anti-poetic typifies an attempt to reconcile idea and statement, feeling and poetic utterance—in short to overcome irony and insincerity:

> At that first fair awakening of the powers of the mind, sense and intellect did not as yet rule over strictly separate domains; for no dissension had as yet provoked them into hostile partition and demarcation of their frontiers. Poetry has not as yet coquetted with wit, nor speculation prostituted itself to sophistry.[14]

For Bernstein, there is no such golden age before the intellectual division of labor between poetry and philosophy, between amateur and professional, or, more loosely, between intellect and feeling.

12 de Romilly, 1.

13 Ann Carson, *Economy of the Unlost* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999).

14 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Wilkinson and Willoughby (New York: Oxford UP, 1967), 31.

In the critique of confessional poetry set forth by Bernstein and the Language poetry movement, sincerity is not enough. In its most radical form, the critique offered by Language poetry suggests that individual lyric sincerity itself is subject to the fetish character of language under capitalism—in a sense, given the commercialization of literary production, this makes all professional poets and critics into sophists.[15]

Bernstein recognizes that the term sophist is potentially broad in its application, and in his 1986 book of criticism *A Poetics* he adopts a working definition of sophistry from Michel de Certeau:

> Sophism, says de Certeau, is the dialectics of tactics. 'As the author of a great strategic system, Aristotle was already very interested in the procedures of this enemy which perverted, as he saw it, the order of the truth [by] 'making the worse argument seem the better' [in the words of Corax] . . . this formula . . . is the starting point for an intellectual creativity as persistent as it is subtle, tireless . . . scattered over the terrain of the dominant order

15 In the context of the Language movement, the question of the degree to which language under capitalism takes on a fetish character was perhaps most forcefully discussed by Ron Silliman, who employed the term "referential fetish" to describe what he called "normative realism" in literature. The term "referential fetish" appears in the first version of the essay "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World" (originally printed in February 1977; reprinted in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* in 1982), but then disappears from the revised version of the essay in *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof Books, 1985). Silliman argues that "Things which appear to move 'freely,' absent all gesture, are the elements of a world of description. The commodity fetish in language becomes one of description, of the referential, and has a second higher-order fetish of narration" (126). As opposed to narrative, which is more fully inscribed in the fetish, "poetry can work to search out the preconditions of post-referential language within the existing social fact" (131). Since, as Silliman admits, "the primary institution of American poetry is the university" ("Canons and Institutions: New Hope for the Disappeared," in *The Politics of Poetic Form*, ed. Charles Bernstein. (New York: Roof Books, 1990), 157.), it is particularly incumbent upon poets to challenge the "normative realism" of English departments. It goes beyond the scope of this essay to investigate this problem in detail, or to discuss the reasons for Silliman's dropping of the term "referential fetish," and a fuller discussion would need to investigate the complex relation of Language writing to Marxism. It is important to emphasize that Silliman claims English departments have a primary role as arbiters of literary value, as well as of parameters for acceptable generic conventions.

> and foreign to the rules laid down by a rationality founded on established rights and property.' [16]

As soon as he puts forward this loose definition of sophism as "the dialectic of tactics," Bernstein begins to doubt the power relation implicit in Aristotle's recuperation of rhetoric, given the latter's defense of aristocracy and the existing political system. The rhetorician, rather than being a defender of poetry, might just as easily be a defender of property:

> But isn't this just another trick of the tactician—to feign dispossession in the face of a stagnant assurance of ground? For the strategist and his 'strong' philosophy, deception is not a matter of tactics but a form of self-blindness: defending territory that belongs to no one, accumulating knowledge that would have value only in use. This is as if to say that syntax makes grammar, but grammar is only a reflection of the syntax that once was. The strategist-as-grammarian is the nomad, for he possesses his home in name only: his insistence on occupation and territorial defense precludes inhabitation. The syntactician makes her home where she finds herself, where she attends—and that is the only possession that's worth anything, a soil in which things can grow.[17]

The trick, it would seem, is how to remain nomadic in the face of a linguistic system that is contaminated by its territorialism and by its self-serving insistence on directness. Unlike the strategist with a "'strong' philosophy," the syntactician takes account of the shifting terrain of language at the level of grammar and syntax. The syntactician is not a dogmatic polemicist, but rather someone who recognizes the inherently rhetorical and grammatical nature of what he proclaims. Like the Sophist, the syntactician is an itinerant teacher of tactics rather than of unconditional truths. The syntactician merges poetic, philosophical, and rhetorical modes under the general heading of attention to the forms of linguistic usage. Bernstein refers with particular regularity to the "rhetoricality" of poetry, as in his 1979 poem/essay "Poetic Justice":

16 Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986), 164.

17 Ibid., 164.

> Not mere grids of possible worlds, as if truth were some kind of kicking boy, a form of rhetoric. Truthfulness, love of language, attending its telling. It's not unfair to read intentionality into other people's actions. The mocking of language (making as if it were a mock-up) evades rather than liberates. The world is in them. I can feel the weight of the fog. Hung. The hum is it. Touch it as it hangs on you. It feels good. I say so. I am not embarrassed to be embarrassed. My elementary school teachers thought I was vague, unsocial, & lacked the ability to coordinate the small muscles in my hands. The way it feels. The mistake is to think you can put on the mask at work and then take it off when you get home.[18]

In a sense, this passage recapitulates *in nuce* an educational experience: the mature Bernstein now wears a mask of authority unavailable to him in the restrictive environment of the elementary school classroom. Rather than truth and rhetoric being opposed, rhetoric is a "kicking boy." The poet comes to stand in for a whole range of socialization processes, a whole culture of shame and indoctrination—which would presume to teach an oversimplified version of the world where truth is truth and identity is transparent. As Schultz points out, Bernstein is hardly reticent about including overtly biographical details in his poems. Here, the poet comes of age not through a withdrawal into authentic selfhood, but instead through an appropriation of a persona analogous to that of the sophist.

Bernstein's sophist is crucially a pedagogical figure, and Bernstein's concern with the sophistical nature of teaching, I would suggest, is not unique. During roughly the same period (from the late 70s to the late 80s) in which Bernstein was most actively interested in the figure of the sophist, a new movement called "Neosophism" arose within rhetorical studies. Although I can find no evidence that Bernstein was directly aware of the movement, his deployment of the sophist character bears remarkable resemblances to the writings of Sharon Crowley in particular, whose 1979 essay "Of Gorgias and Grammatology" is usually taken as inaugurating the movement.[19] Crowley argued from a feminist perspective that:

18 Charles Bernstein, *Republics of Reality* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 2000), 146.

19 Sharon Crowley, "Of Gorgias and Grammatology," *College Composition and Communication*, 30.3 (October, 1979), 279–284. The figure of the sophist seems to have gained a particular currency in the late 1980s—not only in the neo-Sophistic

> Modern teachers do not often think of themselves as professional participants in political or social issues. I want to argue that, on the contrary, those who are engaged in teaching discursive practice are always engaged in Sophistry; and, because of this, that they cannot escape the public aspect of their work.[20]

Influenced by deconstruction, advocates of Neosophism sought to ground the teaching of writing in an understanding of the radical constructedness of language, and to take into account what Bernstein would call the "positionality" of the teacher. Kenneth Lindblom summarizes the aims of the movement thus:

> Neosophism. . . requires from teachers of writing attention to two principles: (1) recognition of the constructed nature of all knowledge and (2) conscious engagement of political obligations. Neosophistic teachers must themselves know their own knowledge rhetorically by working to understand the "multiplicity of truths" in their own disciplines and by working to understand and value the public or common discourse at the heart of all forms of evidence. Neosophistic teachers must also engage their political obligations by recognizing and remaining aware of the political and social stakes of their every personal and pedagogical choice and by making the political decision to focus their curricula on the task of encouraging students to view knowledge rhetorically.[21]

While the description offered by Lindblom bears a strong resemblance to Bernstein's discussions of the political obligations of the poet/teacher/critic, Bernstein frames the problem of the relation of rhetoric to overlapping fields of knowledge in more dramatic terms:

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movement—but also in works such as Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1989) as well as Stanley Fish's *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric and Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1989).

20 Sharon Crowley, "A Plea for a Revival of Sophistry" *Rhetoric Review* 7.2, (Spring 1989), 330.

21 "Toward a Neosophistic Writing Pedagogy," Kenneth J. Lindblom, *Rhetorical Review*, 15.1, (Fall 1996): 93-108, 101.

> The poetic—the aesthetic—the philosophic—the rhetorical: these intertwined figures dissolve into the art of everyday life, the multiple and particular decisions and revisions, recognitions and intuitions, that make up—constitute—our experiences in and of the world. The poetic is not simply another frame of interpretation to be laid down next to the psycholinguistic and sociohistorical. The poetic is both a hypoframe, inhering within each frame of interpretation, and a hyperframe, a practice of moving from frame to frame.[22]

To question the relation of hypoframe to hyperframe is to place radical emphasis on context as well as on content. The poetic is "not simply another frame of interpretation," in that it permits greater freedom in terms of its ability to engage everyday (presumably private) life. But poetry is not necessarily a privileged form of discourse that can be considered as either truer or more ahistorical than any other genre. As Bernstein puts it in his poem "The Kiwi Bird in the Kiwi Tree":

> I want no paradise only to be
> drenched in the downpour of words, fecund
> with tropicality.[23]

Like the title of Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse*, Bernstein puns on trope/tropical, suggesting that poetic language might transport us to warmer figural climes—not a utopia of exact meaning, but rather a paradise of metaphor—of language in transition. The best hope of the poet-critic-teacher, then, might be to have frame (critical philosophy) and form (poetics) correspond—through inventive language, but also through community. Ironic self-identification becomes a cornerstone of ensuring that such a community remains open to recognizing itself as a linguistic and cultural construction. To (re-) appropriate a characteristically Bernsteinian (re-)use of cliché, "extenuating contexts" do "amount to a hill of worms" when it comes to pointing to the potentially sophistical nature of all communication.

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22 *My Way*, 44.

23 Charles Bernstein, *Rough Trades* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 1991), 11.

A comparison with Rorty's understanding of irony is instructive here in helping to understand Bernstein's notion of irony, as well as in understanding what Tom Beckett calls the "anti-ironic" writing of other Language poets such as Howe, Hejinian, and Silliman. If Language poets have been united in their resistance to mainstream poetry, I would suggest that they have not been as united in their attitudes toward irony. Rorty's pragmatic anti-ironism is not necessarily of a piece with that of the anti-ironism of the Language poets just mentioned. Nonetheless, I would suggest that Rorty, like more mainstream anti-ironists (a good example would be Jedediah Purdy), has little patience for what Bernstein refers to as meta-irony.[28] In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (published just two years after Bernstein's *Sophist*), Rorty defines an ironist as

> someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve those doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old.[29]

Bernstein's irony (or his sophistry) would seem to fulfill all three of Rorty's descriptive formulations—except for his third category. It is not that Bernstein necessarily thinks he has a "metavocabulary" better than others, but that he continually refers to himself as embedded within a community which is able to overcome the ironic

28 For a denunciation of irony in this vein, see Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (New York: Vintage, 2000). For a merciless meta-ironic response to Purdy, I recommend Todd Pruzan's "Jedediah in Love," *McSweeeney's* [online], October 12, 1999. Accessed: http://www.mcsweeneys.net/1999/10/12jedediah.html

29 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 73.

disavowal of public meaning and collective action. For Rorty, irony is irreducibly private and undermines any sense of community:

> But even if I am right in thinking that a liberal culture whose public rhetoric is nominalist and historicist is both possible and desirable, I cannot go on to claim that there could or ought to be a culture whose public rhetoric is ironist. I cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization. Irony seems inherently a private matter. On my definition, an ironist cannot get along without the contrast between the final vocabulary she inherited and the one she is trying to create for herself. Irony is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated.[30]

In addition to objecting to it due to its private nature, Rorty objects to irony in that it

> unsuits one for being a liberal . . . One can make this claim plausible by saying that there is at least a prima facie tension between the idea that social organizations aims at human equality and the idea that human beings are simply incarnated vocabularies. The idea that we all have an overriding obligation to diminish cruelty, to make human beings equal in respect to their liability to suffering, seems to take for granted that there is something within human beings which deserves respect and protection quite independently of the language they speak. It suggests that a nonlinguistic ability, the ability to feel pain, is what is important, and that differences in vocabulary are much less important.[31]

In this one paragraph, Rorty grounds his vision of "liberal hope" in utilitarian, sentimental, egalitarian and human rights arguments. At the same time, he de-emphasizes the effects of ideology and of language. Twenty years later, this passage sounds somewhat high-

30 Ibid., 88.

31 Ibid., 88.

toned, given that liberalism has faced such difficulties in articulating its ongoing project. The ability to empathize has not by itself solved the world's social and political problems. It could be objected that Rorty's project dwells more explicitly in the realm of moral philosophy than does Bernstein's, and perhaps to compare the two is to compare very different critical projects. It should be underscored that even if the two differ markedly in seeing irony as fundamentally antithetical to community, they also share a concern that a defeatist irony might circumvent the political effectiveness of intellectuals.

The problem of a cynical irony or a passive irony which would undermine community is, I want to suggest, what Bernstein wants to avert through a metairony which would make one self-conscious of one's embeddedness in larger networks of communication and (self-) identification. Whereas irony is private, metairony is public, recycling songs, advertisements, and clichés. Metairony is inescapably rhetorical, and revels in academic battles. To overstate the case slightly: Socrates is an ironist, Gorgias a metaironist, having confessed his ironic stance from the beginning. Perhaps the New York School poets are ironist, the Language poets metaironist. But this might be taking the analogy too far—by pushing the distinction between irony and metairony, I mean not to impose well-worn categories associated with the modern and the postmodern, which would suggest that the postmodern is characterized by a greater self-consciousness. Rather I mean to suggest that Bernstein is making the case that poems convey meaning on many levels other than the literal—on the levels of sound, reference, dialect, performance, critique as well as self-critique—in short, on the levels of context and form.

Irony, it should be emphasized, has a complex relation to sophistry—just as philosophy has a complex relation to irony. Socrates after all was a great ironist—he presumes to know nothing, which is a far more skeptical position than Bernstein's or Rorty's in terms of epistemology (that is, if we take Socrates at his word). A comparison with Kierkegaard's "Concept of Irony" is useful. According to Kierkegaard, "Irony oscillates between the ideal *I* and the empirical *I*; the one would make Socrates a philosopher, the other a Sophist; but what makes him more than a Sophist is that his empirical *I* has universal validity."[32] Socrates posits transcendental ideas, and thus for Kierkegaard he overcomes the materialist skepticism of the

32 Soren Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), 21.

Sophists. Socrates aims at the Good; the Sophist aims at the useful. Although Bernstein does not champion idealist values of the same variety as Kierkegaard, he would probably be in agreement with Kierkegaard's emphasis on irony as a tool of self-consciousness. Irony is "subjectivity raised to the second power, a subjectivity's subjectivity, which corresponds to reflection's reflection."[33] Whereas Socratic irony is implicitly founded on transcendental ideals, Bernstein's irony is often historical and polemical, and would stand to disprove Kierkegaard's claim that "irony actually is never able to advance a thesis."[34] The problem with irony may not be that it is private (as it is for Rorty), but that it is non-hortatory in that it refuses all claims to certainty.

In his discussions of irony, Paul de Man uses the term "authenticity" in lieu of "certainty," or "universal validity," but he follows Kierkegaard and Schlegel when he suggests that:

> ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity. This does not, however, make it into an authentic language, for to know inauthenticity is not at the same time to be authentic.[35]

The realm where an inauthentic statement multiplied by an inauthentic statement equals an inauthentic statement is the realm of the "metaironic," a term de Man uses in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (translated in 1983). For de Man, "Baudelaire speaks, without apparent irony, of a semimythical poetic figure that would exist beyond the realm of irony." De Man asks,

> Could we think of certain texts of that period—and it is better to speak here of texts than of individual names—as being truly meta-ironical as having transcended irony without falling into the myth of an organic totality or bypassing the temporality of all language? And, if we call

33 Ibid., 24.

34 Ibid., 34.

35 Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1983), 214.

> these texts "allegorical," would the language of allegory then be the overcoming of irony?[36]

As opposed to partaking of the allegorical mode which de Man associates with "organic totality," Bernstein's self-characterization is metaironic in that it rejects the notion that there can be a "semimythical poetic figure," and instead posits a radically contingent poetic subject who is a product of many overdetermined historical, educational, and cultural factors. De Man seems troubled by metairony—"to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic"—whereas Bernstein champions the metaironic. It is not that Bernstein necessarily endorses the inauthentic, but that he recognizes a radical social situatedness involved in judging the authentic.

Bernstein's (meta-)irony, then, rather than remaining private, attempts to interrogate the private. A Bernstein-like notion of irony as communal and performative can be found in Kenneth Burke's understanding of irony as inherently dramatistic. Burke sees irony as arising not out of isolated deception or skepticism, but instead out of competing terms and arguments:

> Irony arises when one tries, by the interaction of terms upon one another, to produce a development which uses all the terms. Hence, from the standpoint of total form (this "perspective of perspectives"), none of the participating "sub-perspectives" can be treated as either precisely right or precisely wrong. They are all voices, or personalities, or positions, integrally affecting one another.[37]

Bernstein's irony too, I want to make the case, is inescapably public, and represents a refusal of what Rorty refers to as a "metavocabulary"—precisely because Bernstein is ironic, and/or metaironic about his own vocabulary. Irony, Bernstein suggests, can constitute a mode of engaged rsistance, as well as constituting a mode of cynical complacency:

> . . . the comic is anything but a unitary phenomenon, and the range of comic attitudes goes from the good-humored

36 Ibid., 223.

37 Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society*, ed. Joseph R. Gusfield (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989), 255-256.

> to the vicious, from clubby endorsement of the existing social reign to total rejection of all existing human communities: Poet as confidence "man," deploying hypocrisy in order to shatter the formal autonomy of the poem and its surface of detachment; the sincere and the comic as interfused figure, not either/or but both and. For our sincerity is always comic.[38]

In other words, the self-proclaimed conman in a classroom is far less dangerous than the conman with an army and a navy. To be truly communal is to accept responsibilities, and to be part of a community, it goes without saying, precludes a "total rejection of all existing human communities," whether those communities take themselves seriously or not.

3. Solidarity (Situatedness)

> I am a language
> poet wherever people try to limit the modes of
> expression or nonexpression. I am an experimental poet
> to those who value craft over interrogation, an
> avant-garde poet to those who see the future
> in the present.
>
> —Charles Bernstein, "Solidarity Is the Name We Give to What We Cannot Hold."[39]

> This is Charles Bernstein speaking . . . from the Upper West Side of Manhattan, home of Zabar's and Barney Greengrass, the Sturgeon King. With thanks to Jerry, Marjorie, Jackson, Pierre, Rachel, and the rest of the Poetics "Jews" and Protest-ants (irregardless of ethnic origin) who insist on debating what they/we cannot understand. & now for some further sophistry: "the critical activity that destroys faith"[40]
>
> —Bernstein, "Pound and the Poetry of Today"[41]

38 Charles Bernstein, "Comedy and the Politics of Poetic Form" in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof Books, 1990), 242.

39 *My Way*, 34.

40 Ibid.,, 155.

41 Ibid., 155.

Particularly significant about Bernstein's sophist is that it is not, for the most part, a figure of alienation or despair. Rather, as in the case of Bernstein's discussion of Pound's anti-semitism "Pound and the Poetry of Today," the sophist admits his own prejudices and limitations, and continually describes himself as a member of a community. In this way, the sophist gets beyond private irony through situatedness, complexity, and "positionality." In connecting the figure of the sophist to the figure of the Jew, Bernstein rejects a Poundian poetics that would take insufficient account of the dangers of taking oneself too seriously, or of isolating oneself from one's friends (as in the case of Pound's troubled friendships with Jews such as Louis Zukofsky). "Pound and the Poetry of Today" begins with a quotation from Pound: "What Greek logomachy had in common with the Hebrew poison was debate, dialectic, sophistry, the critical activity that destroys faith."[42] In redeploying Pound's attack on sophistry as "the critical activity that destroys faith," Bernstein both parodies and supplements Pound's views of Jews as essentially sophistical in the challenge they present to a unified—i.e. "sincere"—culture, which would conceal its own rhetorical and even philosophical underpinnings. As if in answer to Eliot's famous statement that "reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable," Bernstein summons a provisional community of Poetics "Jews" and "Protest-ants."[43] Crucially, "Jews" is in quotation marks and "Protest-ants" is hyphenated. The community Bernstein constructs is inclusive; rather than being exclusive and based in race or ethnicity, it is based in a shared insistence on tolerance for debate and ambiguity.

Pound's and Eliot's poetics presume that it is possible to get beyond logomachy (or polemic); Bernstein's poetics presume that logomachy is an inescapable dimension of poetic production, and that the writer is implicated within literary and cultural movements which make their appeals through rhetorical means. Bernstein's comedy is contextual (rather than situational) in that it uses irony in the service of larger polemics:

> Making claims is an aspect of a poet's work that has vast potential—staking out ground to inhabit—especially insofar as these claims preempt or needlessly complicate subsequent, ostensibly more accurate, critical approaches. (They often have the opposite effect.) This means speaking for yourself in different tongues, even if other people might speak for you more accurately: for it is just this accuracy that you might with to contest. That is to say, you might wish to make claims for your work and the work you support that are inaccurate and need to be put out in order to misrepresent that work properly. *Now is that remark ironic or his humorous or is it comic?* What I'm emphasizing is the provisional quality of the enterprise of poetics. In other words, I think that the activities such as this one have to be understood as situational.[44]

An irony that admits its own artifice, and that emerges from a ventriloquist rather than from a confessing voice, cannot be private, nor can it reinforce a view of private life where the emotive experiential life of the poet is paramount. Bernstein's irony is neither of the situational variety, nor of the cynical solipstic variety.

> So, again, I do not propose some private voice, some vatic image of sincerity or the absolute value of innovation, as an alternative to the limitations of the voices of authority I can never completely shake off. For I am a ventriloquist, happy as a raven to preach with blinding fervor of the corruptions of public life in a voice of pained honesty that is as much as a conceit as the most formal legal brief for which my early education would have prepared me. If my loops and short circuits, my love of elision, my Groucho Marxian refusal of irony as an effort to explode the authority of those conventions I wish to discredit (disinherit), it constantly offers consoling self-justification of being Art, as if I could escape the partiality of my condition by my investigation of it. But my art is just empty words on a page if it does not, indeed, persuade, as it enters into the world of self-justification or self-flagellation or aesthetic ornamentation rather than as interaction, as conversation, as provocation (for myself and others).[45]

42 Ibid., 155.

43 T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934), 20.

44 *A Poetics*, 156.

45 "Comedy and the Politics of Poetic Form," 239-240.

The irony of all ironies, it would seem, is that Bernstein's "positionality" frames him within a context of peers; thus it counteracts private irony, but may result in something like a semi-private irony—or what James Joyce (borrowing from the medieval writer Michael of Northgate) might have referred to as "inwit," an inside joke variety of irony primarily available to a specific community of like-minded intellectuals. This does not in my view fundamentally blunt the theoretical force of Bernstein's response to high modernism's rejection of an irony that would undermine a "homogenous" (Eliot's term) tradition. But it may be the case that avant-garde literature is fated to a semi-private irony. It may also be the case that poetry need not always be apologetic about its limited audience (as Bernstein makes the case in his essay "Against National Poetry Month as Such").[46]

For Bernstein, to make his "positionality" continually apparent through ironic self-presentation becomes a kind of talismanic precondition for communicative action. This does not mean, however, that his writing is uniform in its ironic modes. Bernstein's most recent poetry has arguably become much more direct in its social criticism. There is no irony in "The Ballad of the Girly Man" (with the possible exception of the poem's title):

> Things from hell have taken freedom's store
> The rich get richer, the poor die quicker
> & the only god that sanctions that
> Is no god at all but rhetorical crap.[47]

The poem is unapologetically direct in its scathing indictment of the current political order. But a poem like "Thank You for Saying Thank You" is supremely ironic (or metaironic):

> This is a totally
> accessible poem.
> There is nothing
> in this poem
> that is in any

46 See Charles Bernstein, "Against National Poetry Month as Such." [Essay which first appeared on the University of Chicago Press web site, April 1999]. Accessed: http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/044106.html

47 Charles Bernstein, *Girly Man* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007), 180.

> way difficult
> to understand.
> All the words
> are simple &
> to the point.
> There are no new
> concepts, no
> theories, no
> ideas to confuse
> you. This poem
> has no intellectual
> pretensions. It is
> purely emotional.[48]

The poem is a performative parody of popular conceptions of poetry as emotional expression with few prospects for innovation, and fewer prospects for political or philosophical content. The poem ends:

> [This poem] follows
> no fashion. It
> says just what
> it says. It's
> real.[49]

As Bernstein's writing has repeatedly shown, there is no stepping outside of fashion, even on dress-down-at-work day (or even for the proponents of the "Nude Formalism").[50] Nothing says exactly what it says, and to proclaim that one is uniquely able to "keep it real" is simply to fall into a different register of cliché. The title "Thank You for Saying Thank You" is an instance of epanalepsis: To thank someone for saying thank you is to fall into a hermeneutic circle of the everyday and the banal, but it is also to establish a communicative reciprocity, even if that reciprocity is constrained by cliché and convention.

In his most recent work, Bernstein finds a way to get beyond irony by placing himself within an increasingly familial poetics.

48 *Girly Man*, 7.

49 Ibid., 9.

50 Susan Bee and Charles Bernstein, *The Nude Formalism* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 1989).

To champion the oxymoronic "girly man" is to redeploy Arnold Schwarzenegger's campaign remark about his opponent—which in itself was the politician Schwarzenegger quoting the actor Schwarzenegger. Like the Sinatra title of Bernstein's collection of essays and poems, *My Way*, "girly man" is cliché diverted to new ends. In fashioning himself as a man with an unmanly profession, a man in solidarity with his son, his wife, and with feminism in general, Bernstein is tapping into a new kind of irony, an irony of clarity or even satire, premised on an examination of codes of masculinity. This would be a communal irony of a type not described by Rorty. Given his interest in Hegel in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, it seems odd that Rorty omits mention of Hegel's famous assertion that women are "the everlasting irony [in the life] of the community."[51] For Hegel, women threaten to undermine the public sphere by introducing private irony. Seyla Benhabib offers a succinct account of Hegel's view of women and their relation to the ironic moment of the dialectic:

> Spirit may fall into irony for a brief historical moment, but eventually the serious transparency of reason will discipline women and eliminate irony from public life . . . . Hegel's Antigone is one without a future; her tragedy is also the grave of utopian, revolutionary thinking about gender relations. Hegel, it turns out, is woman's gravedigger, confining them to a grand but ultimately doomed phase of the dialectic, which "befalls mind in its infancy."
>
> What about the dialectic then, that locomotive of history rushing on its onward march? There is not way to disentangle the march of dialectic in Hegel's system from the bodies of the victims which it treads. Historical necessity requires its victims, and women have always been among the numerous victims of history. What remains of the dialectic is what Hegel precisely thought he could dispense with: irony, tragedy, and contingency. He was one of the first to observe the ironic dialectic of modernity: freedom that could become abstract legalism or selfish pursuit of economic satisfaction.[52]

51 Quoted in Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 288.

52 Ibid., 256.

Hegel's association of irony with the feminine produces a number of expected misogynistic tropes (or is produced by them). Irony for Hegel emerges within the privacy of the family and discourages the active male from participating in public life. Women introduce deception, arbitrariness, and superficiality into the community. By means of her private irony, the female restrains the active heroic spirit of the male:

> Womankind—the everlasting irony [in the life] of the community—changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of some particular individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family. Women in this way turns to ridicule the earnest wisdom of mature age which, indifferent to purely private pleasures and enjoyments, as well as to playing an active part, only thinks of and cares for the universal. She makes this wisdom an object of derision for raw and irresponsible youth and unworthy of their enthusiasm.[53]

Woman-as-ironist is much like a sophist—"something less than a man" in Derrida's terms. Irony represents, in this view, a fundamental untruthfulness on the part of an other, a moment of falsehood that must be overcome. The female ironist, like the sophist, threatens to undermine the confident project of the State. Claire Colebrook suggests, by contrast, that we not think of irony as a defining feature of any particular social group. For Colebrook, if there is a private irony, it can only be overcome through a recognition of the collective performativity of language. The potentially ironic nature of all language makes it impossible to oppose an inauthentic private irony to an authentically open and transparent public speech:

> Irony, for writers like Butler and de Man is not a figure of speech that "we" can choose to use or not use. There is no such thing as faithful and literal speech, which is at one with its world, and then ironic or distanced speech, which

53 G.W.H. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford UP, 1979), 188.

> would speak with a sense of distance, quotation or otherness . . . . We cannot, as Richard Rorty suggests, adopt our language with a recognition that it is merely a language. Such a hope would rely on a notion of language as other than ourselves, as something we might have to use, but which "we" would always recognize as provisional and arbitrary.[54]

By placing "we" in quotations, Colebrook acknowledges that irony often misidentifies subjects, and yet irony in itself does not threaten the social any more so than any other linguistic formation. Perhaps the effeminized irony described by Hegel constitutes a sub-language, while post-Romantic irony (a sublation of a sublation) is a metalanguage that overcomes inaction. Bernstein's irony could be read as bridging the gap between irony as sub-language (the language of a community of poets) and irony as meta-language (the language of the larger community of intellectuals in the face of their increasing marginalization within political life as a whole).

Bernstein's poetry thus addresses not only the misrepresentations of private irony, but also the misrepresentations of public lying—in the purportedly unironic speech of the "war on terror," for instance. In "The Ballad of the Girly Man," Bernstein advocates a communitarian ethic, without placing much hope in faithful and literal speech:

> Poetry will never win the war on terror
> But neither will error abetted by error
>
> We girly men are not afraid
> Of uncertainty or reason or interdependence
> We think before we fight, then think some more
> Proclaim our faith in listening, in art, in compromise
>
> So be a girly man
> & sing this gurly song
> Sissies & proud
> That we would never lie our way to war[55]

54 Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 129.

55 *Girly Man*, 180.

Perhaps with this passage the Cretan liar has come full circle. Through absolute directness, the poet-as-sophist makes public a counter-faith in compromise. The self-professed liar is hardly as dangerous as the liar who never comes clean, so to speak. Specifically addressed to his son, Bernstein's poem is hardly ambiguous in connecting masculine self-representation to "the war on terror." Like much of Bernstein's verse, from the "Artifice of Absorption" to "A Defence of Poetry," *Girly Man* is self-consciously essayistic, as if to reinforce Adorno's claim that "the essay salvages a moment of sophistry."[56] This is a poetry that forces us to rethink didacticism and experimentalism, irony and sincerity, individual and community. In the "Athenaeum Fragments," Friedrich Schlegel poses the question: "The poetry of one writer is termed philosophical, of another philological, of a third rhetorical, etc. But what then is poetical poetry?"[57] Bernstein's poetry, I want to suggest, is rhetorical—but it is also philological in its concern with literary history, as well as philosophical in its concern with language and ethics—not to mention poetical, in that Bernstein continually returns to poetry as his central medium, as an unapologetic defender of its role within the larger intellectual culture.

Language writing in general, I am arguing, should be situated within the crowded and constantly shifting geography of post-1960s American cultural politics. One recent critic of Language writing, Oren Izenberg, has suggested that the Language movement has little or no collective coherency aside from its opposition to mainstream poetry. Izenberg pays particular attention to Bernstein's notion of "uncommunity":

> Bernstein's resolution on a negation—an "uncommunity"—is the result not of a rich anthropology but of a theoretical dead end. If there is one thing about which the Language poets seem certain, it is that a meeting of poets, whether at the pastoral First International Summer School or the subterranean Composers Union, must entail the formation of groups organized on some other principle, but what that principle is they cannot say. The poetic effort to construct a nonparodic version of collectivity in the wake of the fall of historical communism--one that

56 Theodor Adorno, "The Essay as Form" in *Notes to Literature, vol. 1*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 1.

57 Friedrich Schlegel, "Athenaeum Fragments" in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 243.

> would allow full autonomy not only for the poem but for the poet, not only for the poet but for the person--that effort is relegated to fantasy by an inability to imagine that poetry could offer anything other than another set of conventions that come to look oppressive as soon as they are understood to be conventions. Thus, despite their great pains to manifest themselves as engaged in a group enterprise, despite the manifest similarity of their texts, Language poets are theory-bound to represent themselves as a group that is not just pluralist but internally differentiated almost to the point of nonexistence. Almost, that is, but not quite. For there is at present no claim more characteristic of the uncommunity of Language writing than the claim that Language writing cannot be characterized.[58]

Although I think Izenberg is right that Language writing has difficulty characterizing itself as a cohesive community, I think he draws an excessively literal conclusion from this difficulty, and I would take exception to several of his formulations. It is true that Language writing has always encompassed a variety of poetic styles and aesthetic philosophies, and that, if anything, the group was mostly united by its opposition to prevailing poetic modes, as well as by its suspicion of the influence of late capitalism on language. That Language writers as a community may have problems articulating a cohesive theoretical platform beyond these shared concerns can be considered an ongoing problem. I would maintain, however, that Izenberg misunderstands what Bernstein means by "uncommunity," and that Bernstein does not mean for Language writers to be understood as resistant to being identified as a community. An uncommunity is an inherently undefinable, ironic term—it is neither a formal grouping, nor an anti-grouping. In its original context, it is clear that Bernstein does not mean for us to take the notion of uncommunity literally. As far as I can tell, Bernstein first uses the term in a 1996 essay titled "Community and the Individual Talent," which is an account of his involvement with the SUNY Buffalo Poetics List. Bernstein describes the Buffalo online discussion group (or listserv) as an uncommunity, and suggests "my hope for electronic communication is that it engenders not virtual communities, but rather virtual uncommunities."[59]

58 Oren Izenberg, "Language Poetry and Collective Life." *Critical Inquiry* 30.1 (Fall 2003): 132-159.

59 Charles Bernstein, "Community and the Individual Talent." *Diacritics* 26.3/4, (Fall-Winter 1996): 176–195. Accessed: http://ezproxy.bgc.bard.edu:2053/journals/diacritics/v026/26.3-4bernstein01.html

Bernstein begins his essay by emphasizing the tentative, performative context of online discussion groups:

> I had a number of thoughts, over these past weeks of posts, about community, but I've misplaced them.
>
> Every time I hear the words literary community I reach for my bivalent autocad simulation card emulator.
>
> Poetry is (or can be) an aversion of community in pursuit of new constellations of relationship.
>
> In other words, community is as much what I am trying to get away from–reform–as form.[60]

Rather than reading the uncommunity—or the ironic community—as a "theoretical dead end," I would submit that pluralism of voices and pluralism of styles within Language writing is part of the theoretical point. To read a plurality of voices as constituting the project of Language writing suggests an open-endedness rather than a "theoretical dead end." To read Bernstein too literally is to fall into a trap of expecting an absolute coherency from a community of diverse interests. Izenberg suggests that the goal of Language writing is "to construct a nonparodic version of collectivity in the wake of the fall of historical communism—one that would allow full autonomy not only for the poem but for the poet, not only for the poet but for the person."[61] This, it seems to me, underestimates the theoretical sophistication of the Language poets (few, if any, of whom put much faith in Soviet communism, for instance). Or rather, perhaps Izenberg's formulation underestimates the *sophistical-ness* of Language poetry. It is not that there are no solutions, but that there are no easy solutions; it is not that there is no literary form, but that literary forms must be continually re-formed; it is not that there is no autonomy, but that there is no "full autonomy"; it is not that there is no possibility of sincere communication, but that there is no genuine communication without community.

60 Ibid., n.p.

61 Izenberg, n.p.

In other words, if someone proclaims themselves a sophist, it is possible to believe them—but not without context and not without irony.

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RAY CRAIG

Poem for Charles