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Thesis title: **“Is all Greek, grief to me” Ancient Greek sophistry and the poetics of
Charles Bernstein**

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**“Is all Greek, grief to me”: Ancient Greek sophistry and the poetics of Charles
Bernstein**

Abstract: This thesis reads the poetry and poetics of Charles Bernstein in relation to his interest in sophistry and sophistic. Taking his 1987 volume *The Sophist* as a central text, the influence of a sense of sophistic is developed across his wider range of published works. This involves identifying some of the many different interpretations of the sophists throughout the history of philosophy, from the early dismissals by Plato and Aristotle to the more recent reappraisals of their works. A secondary aspect of the thesis is in examining the renewal of interest in the Ancient Greek sophists and suggesting some of the affinities between contemporary literary theory and poetics and the fragments of the works of the major sophists (primarily Protagoras and Gorgias). Finally, I suggest that *The Sophist* itself is a valuable and contemporaneous re-examination of sophistic ideas, that in fact goes further than those by academics from within philosophy and rhetoric by virtue of employing the stylistic innovations and linguistic experimentation that was so central to the sophistic approach.

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0. I. Introduction – The Critical Situation

Over the course of the last forty years, Charles Bernstein has emerged as one of the most talked about and talkative of language poets. His work both critical and creative has become central to the reception of language poetry and his wide and varied activities as a facilitator, organizer and editor have ensured the proliferation of language poetry and other experimental strands in contemporary poetry culture. While there is no critical monograph focusing on his work alone, discussions of his work have featured prominently in almost all the major academic publications dealing with the language poets. The field of scholarship surrounding his work has steadily grown, and includes responses by major critics such as Charles Altieri, Marjorie Perloff, Jerome McGann and Gerald Bruns. In addition, his work has generated significant attention from writers both creative and critical, including work by: Jeffrey Nealon, Nerys Williams, Maria Damon, Vernon Shetley, Hank Lazer, Linda Reinfeld, Benjamin Friedlander, Robert Sheppard, Edwin Morgan, Paul Auster, John Shoptaw, Bob Perelman, Pierre Joris, Chris Goode, Timothy Yu, Peter Middleton, Romana Huk and Joel Bettridge. Naturally, each of these critics has framed Bernstein's work differently, a necessary condition of critical appraisal but also an indication of the variety and multiplicity built into Bernstein's output.

In Marjorie Perloff's groundbreaking 1985 study *Dance of the Intellect*, she presented a Bernstein who willfully flirted with "unintelligibility" or what she had previously called "the poetics of indeterminacy" (1981):

Charles Bernstein takes this sort of wordplay a step further, almost to the point of unintelligibility. In "The Sheds of Our Webs", neologisms abound: "a lacrity", "sumpter", ("marshy" or "low-lying" on the model of "sump"?),

“plentitude”. More important; grammatical position is frequently ambiguous: is “sheds” a noun or a gerund (“sheddings”)? “Abandon skirts” a noun followed by its direct object or a subject-verb clause? “Tender” a verb or adjective of noun? There is no way to be sure, especially since so many of the words in ambiguous syntactic positions are homonyms. (1985, 217).

This syntactic and semantic ambiguity results, in Perloff’s memorable phrase, in a poetry that looks as if: “Swinburne or Crane have been put through the Cuisinart: what finds its way into the bowl looks at first sight like so many chopped and hence unrecognizable vegetables” (218). Perloff’s accounting of Bernstein’s poetry pays particular attention to what Linda Reinfeld has called “the very specific sensual qualities of the language within which it takes place” (6). The phrase of Perloff’s title, “dance of the intellect”, draws particular attention to this sense of an intellectual game, discourse or tryst in which a saturation of textuality results in an open form of poetry that is accommodating of difference and impurity. Furthermore, the organizational structuring of Perloff’s book locates her chapter dealing with language poetry ‘L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties’ within (and as the most recent iteration of) a continuation of American poetics that follows on from the Modernist projects of Pound, Joyce, Beckett and Stevens, through Cage, Oppen and Williams in negotiating what she calls “the impasse of the lyric” (180).

Another early inroad into language poetry criticism was conducted by the renowned critic Jerome McGann, whose work on language poetry is particularly notable for its ability to synthesize the relevance of contemporary experimental poetics with that of writers from the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries. In *Social Values and Poetic Acts* (1987), McGann discusses Bernstein’s poetics as fundamentally “a practice of discourse rather than a scene of representations” (34).

That is to say that rather than attempting to accurately and clearly represent a lyric experience or feeling in as concise a fashion as possible, language poetry “carries out its discourse” (34) because it “imagines and executes its work in a space that is self-consciously social and political” (34). Language poetry situates itself therefore within the contested arena of how language can be employed in such a way that resists or critiques dominant political and social structures. Bernstein’s poems enact a performance in which, for McGann, “relationships and forms of order can be had only if they are actively made by the reader” and where “these relationships and forms of order are multiple and that they shift from reader to reader and from reading to reading” (211). In this way, Bernstein’s poetry can be considered to enact a form of textual participation for the reader that acknowledges and embraces multiplicity and indeterminacy while avoiding a tyrannous subjectivity or finality. As such, Reinfeld has noted, McGann’s writing extended Perloff’s attention to the charged, language-centered, textual thickness of language poetry into “a sense of poetry as ideological critique” (6).

In Reinfeld’s own volume, published in 1992 at a time when language poetry’s status within both popular and critical circles was considerably more secure, she stresses language poetry as a form of “writing as rescue” (1) in myriad forms. She sees language poetry originating in part as “an impulse to save American poetry from its own insularity – and the potentially overwhelming theoretical discourse of Continental theory as well” (150). Bernstein- one of three poets who are studied in depth in Reinfeld’s volume, the other two being Susan Howe and Michael Palmer- is central to this project as a writer within whose work continental and American influences are set into “issues of conflict and resistance directly” (9). She “reads Bernstein against Derrida” (9), riffing on Bernstein’s professional life as a “freelance

editor for technical journals for doctors and pharmacists” (50) (prior to gaining an academic appointment) and Derrida’s ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’. Her essay functions as a way of bringing into focus the ways in which “it appears to be a matter of principle for Bernstein not to follow Derrida” (51). Specifically, she writes that “Bernstein is personally committed to maintaining the possibility of a reasonable, politically enlightened discourse, a project he considers better served by Stanley Cavell’s *The Claim of Reason* than Derridean disclaimers and dissemination” (57). Nevertheless, Reinfeld suggests, the writings of Derrida are relevant as an unspoken counterpoint to many of Bernstein’s texts and “there is no disputing that Derrida’s text can serve to illuminate the unique space occupied by the activity... that certainly invites an approach that is not innocent of Derridean theory or deconstructive modes of reading... Like Derrida, he never hesitates to play with poison” (58). Indeed, drawing attention to the ways in which language deconstructs itself and can be deconstructed in the process of reading does, as Reinfeld suggests, have potency to both disorient and re-address attitudes to language and the literary in a way that can encourage a positive, politically and socially aware culture: “in a complacent society, such writerly activity has medicinal value” (59).

If, then, “poison” is the Derridean flipside of “remedy”, both contained within the word “pharmakon”, then a language-oriented flipside of Reinfeld’s ‘rescue’ might be the near homophonic ‘askew’. As she writes: “it makes sense to read Bernstein the way he writes, with eccentricity, taking literally his invitation to make the most of accidental gaps and contradictions” (59). Reinfeld’s book is an important influence upon this thesis, because although she doesn’t explicitly address Bernstein as a writer for whom sophistry or sophistic is a mode of writing and reading to be taken seriously (short of a nod towards the title of his 1987 collection *The Sophist* –“figures

who anticipate Derrida's anti-platonic bias" (80) -, nevertheless, her location of Bernstein's work within the context of Derrida's essay 'Plato's Pharmacy' does indirectly establish the link and posit the issues at stake. In addition, she does characterize those qualities that make Bernstein sophistic, namely a "philosophical disposition- also a disposition toward equivocation and verbal indirection" (80). For it is in 'Plato's Pharmacy' that Derrida addresses some of the most potent qualities of the sophist for a contemporary poetics. For example, Derrida draws attention to the non-totalizing and anti-universalizing power of the sophists' relativity and relates this specifically to the dynamics of writing as act: "the author of the written speech is already entrenched in the posture of the sophist: the man of non-presence and non-truth. The incompatibility between the *written* and the *true* is clearly announced" (73). Bernstein's poetry could equally be considered to announce this "incompatibility" and find its energy and its interest in multiplicities of meanings rather than singularity of truth. Similarly, 'Plato's Pharmacy' also introduces the questions of semblance, imitation and mimesis, which will also become central to a sophistic reading of Bernstein's work:

He who writes with the alphabet no longer even imitates. No doubt because he also imitates perfectly. He has a better chance of reproducing the voice because phonetic writing decomposes it better and transforms it into abstract spatial elements. This *de-composition* of the voice is here what both best conserves it and what best corrupts it (Derrida, 139).

This "de-composition of the voice" is a central tenet of language poetry, as is writing in a way that acknowledges the artifice of all writing in a way that rejects straightforward imitative writing as a possibility. Language poetry is therefore "writing with the alphabet", an activity that has been visually and conceptually borne

out perhaps most performatively by the Canadian poet Steve McCaffery, who “is reported to have covered himself in glue and then rolled about on a floor covered with Alpha-Bits so as to create, literally, a writing of the body” (Reinfeld, 52).

More recently, in a study of language poetry published in 2007, the critic Nerys Williams has emphasized not the rejection of the lyric (as some earlier critics had described) but rather a “conceptual mapping of error as a means of opening up the social sphere of the lyric” (27). She suggests that Bernstein’s work employs “typographical mistakes and solecisms” to “suggest that the deformation of “prescribed rules of grammar & spelling”, opens the text to language as a shared commonality. Indeed, Bernstein proposes polemically that “bad grammar” can speak more truthfully than correct grammar” (27). By situating “error” as fundamental to his poetry and poetics, Williams writes that “for Bernstein, error is strongly linked to a political gesture, providing the refutation of an authoritarian rhetoric through humour” (29). Williams’ writings on error become particularly relevant to this thesis during Chapter 5, which focuses on the role of humour and comic performance in Bernstein’s poetry. The political efficacy of such a gesture is generated by the problematisation of a lyric subject position to the extent that it draws attention to the ways in which our subjecthoods are interdependent and shared through the social and cultural links that communities share. Rather than stressing the individualized insight of a poet distanced from society, Bernstein’s poetry engages the reader in the formation of multiple and indeterminate poetic selves, voices and networks:

Bernstein’s ideolectical or erring approach to the lyric is premised on an attempt to reconfigure an understanding of subjectivity as a complex of social relationships. He asserts that the process of reading his poetry activates a mutually dependent engagement: “I hope the reader does feel implicated

because I want to show that I as a social construction, a product of language and not a pre-existing entity outside it; that I is first a we. We're implicated in each other from the first (Williams, 69).

The social dimension of language was also at the heart of the critic George Hartley's 1989 volume *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* in which he traces the contextual contests surrounding the value of experimental writing as ideology critique. He summarizes Bernstein's project as follows:

Bernstein writes that there is "no natural writing style". What looks natural about a given poem is actually the result of a number of procedures which the author may be more or less conscious of when composing. Those procedures and assumptions are in fact social constructions which have become conventions. Thus most language poets attempt to remind us of the socially contrived basis of any writing (xiii).

Hartley's interpretation of the socially based textual experiments of the language poets puts the emphasis on both the strategies they employ to dispel the illusion of "natural" speech or writing patterns and instead increase an awareness that no utterance is ever other than "socially contrived" through an exploration of non-normative writing strategies. While framed in this way, the project seems antagonistic and negative, there is a positive side to this project in the sense that if a complacent approach to language and assumptions about "natural speech" foster a politically disengaged and conservative populous, then conversely, increasing awareness of shared social explorations in non-normative and experimental modes will foster a more open, enfranchised and dynamic engagement with politics and language.

Hartley's text is particularly useful for understanding why language poetry was such a

polarizing force when it first emerged, an aspect of its potency that is easy to forget now that its place within literary history seems secure. Hartley describes and discusses in detail the objections to language poetry expressed by the influential Marxist critic Fredric Jameson to give a sense of the contested ground that language poetry occupied. Jameson's primary concern, as summarized by Hartley, is that "such poetry, in that it resembles a schizophrenic language as Lacan has described it, contributes to – rather than challenges – the reification of late capitalist society" (xiv). To quote from Jameson's text itself, he remarks that "when the links of the signifying chain snap, then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers" (Jameson, 26).

The issue at stake is of crucial importance to the poetry of language poets and to Bernstein's work in particular. Bernstein, of all the language poets, is perhaps the one who has made most room in his work for excursions away from disjunctive modes (modes where the "signifying chain" could be perceived to have "snapped") into, I would argue, no less experimental but certainly less able to be characterized as "schizophrenic" or fragmentary modes. Bernstein's objection to a characterization such as Jameson's would certainly be that his perception of a "snap; or severance in 'the signifying chain' is in fact its re-energizing. As he writes in the essay 'Semblance': 'not "death" of the referent – but a recharged use of the multivalent referential vectors that any word has" (1984, 115). One issue with Jameson's remarks is that they fail to see a difference between employing disjunction, disruption or fragmentation at the level of a poem's structure or organization, and speaking in such a state as a result of extreme trauma in the brain. As Hartley remarks, Jameson can be accused of confusing "poetic language with schizophrenic speech" (42). Poetic language that frequently employs fragmentation and disjunction does so to

problematize the sense of a natural and normative language in order to suggest alternative societal structures and to encourage the reader's participation in realizing and discovering those structures at the level of the text. As Perelman himself remarks, whose poem 'China' bore the brunt of Jameson's critical analysis, his own experience of reading language poems is not that of schizophrenia or fragmentation. Rather, taking the work of Ron Silliman as an example, he remarks that, "far from being fragments, his sentences derive from a coherent, wide-ranging political analysis. Contrary to Jameson's description of the New Sentence, this writing seems to me self-critical, ambitiously contextualized, and narrative in a number of ways" (67). This issue becomes central to chapter 4 where I examine some of the language techniques and devices employed in Bernstein's *The Sophist*. In particular, his sense of 'Dysrhythmism' as a mode of writing becomes important, putting as it does the emphasis not on disjunction or fragmentation but on the combination and seaming of elements together to form what he terms an "overall weave" (2001, 391). By focusing on the ways language poems are or can be stitched together or stitched up, Bernstein negates Jameson's sense of fragmented schizophrenia and replaces it with a poetics of seams, of the bridges, fastenings and seams between language units.

The field of scholarly and critical writing surrounding Bernstein's work has recently been added to by the publication of *The Salt Companion to Charles Bernstein*, published in 2013, which provides a range of critical perspectives on Bernstein's poetic output up to the date of publication. As such, *The Salt Companion to Charles Bernstein* is the most recent and significant development in Bernstein criticism, the book including invaluable essays focusing on a very wide range of his poetic output. As with many similar publications from Salt, the book includes appraisals, tributes, essays and poems from fellow poets as well as academics, which

is useful in considering in what ways Bernstein's work is considered influential or esteemed by fellow practitioners engaged in their own poetic investigations and experiments. The selection of included authors is international and features contributions both poetic and critical from younger writers such as Lars Palm, Kirsten Gallagher and Tim Peterson alongside British poets such as Allen Fisher and Maggie O'Sullivan and critics within and also outside the parameters of what might be considered the field of experimental poetry scholarship such as Steven Salmoni, Thomas Fink and Kimberley Lamm. The critical directions in which the book stretches Bernstein's poetry are therefore genuinely expansive. Of particular relevance to my research are two essays published in this collection: 'Taking on the Official Voice: Charles Bernstein's Poetic Sophistry and Post-Process Writing Pedagogy' by Megan Swihart Jewell and 'Beyond the Valley of the Sophist: Charles Bernstein, Irony and Solidarity' by Paul Stephens. As their titles suggest, these essays take their cue from the title of Bernstein's 1987 collection *The Sophist* and consider his work in relation to the figure of 'the sophist'. Specifically, Jewell discusses Bernstein's pedagogical style in relation to sophistry and claims that Bernstein "actively engaged issues of co-option through a characteristic sophistic ventriloquism, or direct rhetorical enactment" (115). The thrust of Jewell's argument is that Bernstein's work is sophistical in its approach to and investment in rhetoric. While they assert the link between Bernstein's poetry and sophistry and thus initiate the discourse surrounding this aspect of Bernstein's work, neither of these essays actually considers Bernstein's writings in relation to the writings of specific thinkers associated with the group of sophists of the 5th Century BC, the most well known of which include Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus and Antiphon. 'The sophist', then, is merely a figure set up (as it was by Plato) in which the particulars of sophists are

made irrelevant in favour of a version of them that (however positively it may be read in light of postmodernity) remains essentially the same as the conception that has seen the category ‘sophist’ maligned for centuries. Nor does either essay in any detail consider the relation of Bernstein’s text to that of the same title, Plato’s dialogue *The Sophist* or the wealth of critical and philosophical work that the dialogue has engendered from philosophers such as Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze and Lyotard among others. Finally, neither of these essays (nor any other that I am aware of) consider Bernstein’s book *The Sophist* in itself (and in conjunction with his critical writings) as a contribution to the growing movement within certain fields of academia (the discipline of Rhetoric Studies is where this is most visible) to re-evaluate and reassess the contributions of the sophists and of sophistic as a valid theoretical and critical mode. These three aims are central to this thesis: to consider Bernstein’s poetics in relation to the surviving fragments of the sophists; to discuss Bernstein’s text as a response to Plato’s *The Sophist* (and its surrounding field); and finally to establish Bernstein’s *The Sophist* as a contribution to the emergent field of contemporary re-evaluations of the sophists.

However, many of the other contributions to *The Salt Companion to Charles Bernstein* also raise issues that are of interest to a sophistic reading of Bernstein’s poetics. Poet Caroline Bergvall stresses Bernstein’s work as constitutive of a “connection between written and spoken performance so tenuous as to be nearly reversed. Or rather where the performance of speaking assists the writing and where the politics of engagement take place at the point of the delivery” (9). This aspect of Bernstein’s poetics raises itself at a number of points in this thesis: in most depth in Chapter 5 where Bernstein’s performance strategies are considered in relation to those of the sophist Gorgias, though also in Chapter 2 in which Bernstein’s work is

considered as ‘talkative’ in relation both to the oral performances of ancient sophists and the conversational philosophizing of Rogers Albritton. The critic Jason Lagapa advances a sense of Bernstein’s “grammar of pragmatism: a pragmatic politics and poetics in whose foundation is an ever more keen attention to the operations and workings of language and grammar... Bernstein’s grammar of pragmatism has its roots in the American pragmatist philosophical tradition of William James and Ralph Waldo Emerson” (179). This thesis posits roots for just such a relativist and language-centered approach to truth that stretch further back than pragmatists or transcendentalists to the sophists of Ancient Greece. Kirsten Gallagher’s fantastically indulgent account of being taught by Bernstein in the poetics program at SUNY Buffalo is also instructive in giving a sense of Bernstein as pedagogue, an aspect of Bernstein’s multiple roles that is decidedly sophistic in nature. The sophists were, after all, “the first professional teachers” (Schiappa, 4). Thomas Fink, meanwhile, narrows his focus onto a recurrent form within Bernstein’s oeuvre, that of the catalogue or list poem. Fink writes that this form allows Bernstein to explore “the complex interactions of differing ideologies so that expedient simplifications do not induce readers to ignore the complexities of political issues” (278). Bernstein’s lists are complex and often seem to resist their own sense of cohesion as a list. They also frequently engage gender and racial stereotypes in a way that complicates a sense of the cultural and social significance of their referential politics (that enacts the violence and offence inherent in certain utterances and interrogates the significance of this): “A black man waiting at a bus stop/ A white woman sitting on a stool/ A Fillipino eating a potato/ A Mexican boy putting on shoes/ A Hindu hiding in igloo” (2008, 3). The repetitive rhetorical structuring of these lines from ‘In Particular’ is fundamental to their success as an investigation into power relations within language. This kind of

poetic activity, drawing attention to the political and social assumptions that are at the heart of our language use, our uses of rhetoric, is, this thesis suggests, a sophistic project in which understanding the uses and abuses of rhetoric is of paramount importance to conceiving of the political parameters under which society consents to live.

0. II. Poet-Critic and Sophist

Bernstein has expanded his activities far beyond those usually associated with a poet, taking on myriad roles as a public intellectual: teacher, critic, curator, conference and lecture series co-ordinator, frequent collaborator, actor, radio show host, film-maker, librettist, professor, editor, publisher and many more. Bernstein's career has so embraced variety and resisted singular characterization that it seems no surprise that in addition to his over forty volumes of poetry and prose, he has appeared in advertisements for *The Yellow Pages*, the Hollywood film *Finding Forrester*, a collaboration with the artist Richard Tuttle, while also lecturing on Louis Zukofsky in Seoul, contemporary Italian poetry in New York and directing experimental theatre productions of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*, among other plays. In translated form, Bernstein's poetry has been published in magazines and/or full length publications around the world, in Germany, Italy, China, France, Iceland, Poland, Finland and Brazil, to name only a few. Across all these activities, one thing constantly remains, even amid his explorations of multiple perspectives, personalities and ways of seeing: his commitment to and exploration of "poetic thinking as an activated potential for all people" (1992, 225). When a figure so embraces diversity and multiplicity in his approach, the question naturally arises as to what to call this figure. One answer might be to expand the word 'poet' in our culture, to create a public role for poets and to reconfigure the way poets are perceived. Bernstein's poetry continually challenges conventional assumptions about what role a poet takes in society and he has repeatedly suggested ways in which the poet has potential to be taken seriously as having an impactful relationship to public and social constitutions. This isn't to

suggest an ‘official’ role for the poet such as ‘Poet Laureate’. After all, Bernstein has frequently railed against what he calls “Official Verse Culture” (2011, 38) and he has also remarked that “the role of the poet in society is to/ roll, i.e. /not get stuck, /don’t worry about the bumps” (2010, 189). The poet’s function, then, is not to be officialised into a pseudo-political position. Rather, it is to posit a role for the poet as unofficial, as the underside and inverse of the ‘statesperson’, who can nevertheless impact upon the culture in which they find themselves through “exercising the right to reconvene” (1992, 225) and interrogating the structures and systems (both political and linguistic) under and through which we live. This is the “poet-critic” from Bernstein’s influential essay ‘Revenge of the Poet-Critic’, a figure who remarks:

Do beware the role of public intellectual, my friend, for when *The New York Times* starts talking about either the death or the rebirth of the public intellectual, it can only remind us that intellectuality as a form of linguistically investigative activity has been banned for a long time from its pages and that public intellectuals unwilling to clip their tongues the better to induce in readers thinking-deficit disorder have not gone away, they have been barred from this and other standard bearers of the culture (2010, 6).

One model for this expanded sense of poet-critic has been suggested by the title of Bernstein’s seminal collection *The Sophist*. Above all, the version of the sophist this thesis is concerned with aligning Bernstein alongside is a thinker engaged in and standing for “intellectuality as a form of linguistically investigative activity” who “has been barred from... standard bearers of the culture” ever since the dismissal and eradication of their contribution to philosophy by Plato, Aristotle and most of the subsequent history of Western philosophy. However, in suggesting “the sophists” as a

useful model for thinking about Bernstein's poetics (and more widely about language-oriented, critical and politically engaged writing), there is an intended awareness that the idea of "the sophists" that is being made use of is, as Edward Schiappa has written, a "mirage" (1991, 5). While it is possible to engage with the ideas of the sophists from fragments of their extant writings (in particular Gorgias and Protagoras), the fragmented nature of this evidence also leads to extensive use of third party materials, a practice that makes "the sophists", as Victor Vitanza has remarked "three times removed" (1997, 29). The sophists are themselves an illusion and a construction created in part by detractors as far back as Plato and Aristotle who attempted to define their own activities as philosophers against the, as they saw it, chimerical, dangerous and inauthentic teachings of the sophists. Nevertheless, it is in part for this reason that aligning Bernstein with the sophists appears both productive and appropriate. Bernstein is one in a long line of language-oriented thinkers whose works have embodied ideas of "the sophists" in challenging standard academic practice and in linking poetry, politics and philosophy in genre-exceeding works. As Bernstein has himself remarked:

If, as a culture, as a society, we find no consensus on a single tradition that marks our heritage and discloses our alignments and mis-alignments, then it is up to each of us- bricoleurs- to make our own; not, however, in our own name, but in the name of whatever *socius* for which we wish to stand (2001, 169).

The sophists form a critical part of this bricolaged "socius" that constitutes one version of the contextual traditions in which Bernstein's poetry can be understood. Reading Bernstein as a contemporary "sophist" reads his work as part of a multitudinous tradition of language-oriented "poet-critics" who have challenged, parodied and transgressed uni-vocal and universal logic as the only modes for

thinking. In summary, then, the argument advanced in this thesis is two-fold: firstly, that the sophists of Ancient Greece, particularly figures such as Protagoras, Gorgias and Antiphon, offer useful windows through which to read Bernstein's poetry and poetics in line with the radically democratic and skeptical approach that they adopted in the 5th Century BC; secondly, that Bernstein's writings (both poetic and critical) amount to a significant contribution to the recent development in academia towards renewed interest in (and respect for) the fragmentary, paradoxical and at times brash and baffling work of the sophists.

The first section of Chapter 1 offers a critical commentary on these developments in academic discussions of the sophists, highlighting their renaissance as thinkers to be taken seriously, offering a significant critical 'other' to the standard Western philosophy canon. Taking a broadly chronological approach, this chapter is designed to give the theoretical backdrop to the major contributions to one of the most startling turnarounds in the humanities, the re-assessment and rehabilitation of the sophists. Where relevant, this chapter pinpoints specific areas of interest to contemporary poetics and to Bernstein's poetry in particular. However, in the main, the focus of the chapter is on painting a sense on how 'the sophists' have been and continue to be seen by a wide range of critics from various disciplines. By no means is this chapter intended to give a complete account, or particularly to synthesise the different approaches taken in the different and divergent considerations given to sophistry and sophistic. Rather, this divergence within the sense of who and what the sophists are is itself part of the potency of reading Bernstein's work in a contested field where critical questions regarding language, community and identity are up for grabs. The sophist is contest, is disagreement, agon and ambiguity. This section is intended to give a flavor of that rather than diminish it through neatly synthesizing a

singular version of sophistry. The second half of this chapter draws on the first to identify three areas of sophistic thought that are of particular relevance to a study of Bernstein's poetry. These are: pedagogy, professionalism and semblance. Three touchstones that powerfully link Bernstein's poetics to that of the sophists, these concepts are unpacked in relation to Bernstein's work and illustrated with reference to his pedagogical approaches (including significant analysis of his syllabi at both Buffalo and the University of Penn), poems and critical writings.

Chapter 2 takes a fourth feature of sophistic, an investment in the act of talking, and suggests a poetics of conversation that is relevant to both the works of Bernstein and David Antin, with whom Bernstein has collaborated. As well as briefly considering the influence of Stanley Cavell on Bernstein's poetics, which has been fairly widely attended to by critics, this chapter also focuses on the influence of another of Bernstein's professors at Harvard, the philosopher Rogers Albritton whose work has received little attention in relation to Bernstein's writing practice precisely because Albritton was invested in talking rather than writing as a philosophical *modus operandi*. Given the centrality to sophistry of the act of public speaking and the agonistic conversations and debates of the agora, a poetics of 'talking' is sophistic in nature and practice.

Following on from these discussions, Chapter 3 looks at one specific example of how Bernstein's activities as a poet and editor have emphasized and engendered a poetics of conversation and discourse of the sort familiar within the sophistic context of the agora. *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, the magazine edited by Bernstein and Andrews between 1978 and 1981 is examined in this chapter as an exemplar of a discourse-oriented and conversational multi-authored text in which individual contributions are placed into conversation with each other by the editors. The focus

on this chapter is not just the magazine as an instance of productive discourse and an opportunity for the proliferation of ongoing conversation about each others poems and poetics; rather, it also considers *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* as a performance of the ways in which the writers associated with divergent geographical locations of language poetry came to define themselves both locally and across states and nations as a community and otherwise. Key to this is process is the conviction on both Bernstein and Andrews parts to avoid a sense of ‘groupism’ and the narrowness of aligning themselves as a narrow poetic movement or faction. Therefore, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* consistently expanded and left open the sense of its community-orientation and was purposively engaged in an act of enlarging a notion of relevance and audience for poets associated with the journal. Section 2 of this chapter contextualizes the theoretical underpinnings of social and communal poetic practices through Bernstein’s essays ‘Thought’s Measure’ and ‘Artifice of Absorption’, in which he considers the ways in which linguistic structurings can reflect and create social and political structures. The word “measure” itself becomes important within these considerations because if it is read sophisticatedly the word “measure” cannot but resonate with Protagoras’s famous “man measure” fragment in which he states “man is the measure of all things”. Within this chapter, then, is an in depth discussion of this fragment and the various interpretations to which it has been subjected and their relevancies to Bernstein’s essay ‘Thought’s Measure’ and his wider poetic concerns.

Chapter 4 examines in detail and through a number of close readings of poems within the book, Bernstein’s seminal 1987 volume *The Sophist*. Given the nature of this study, this text is of particular relevance to understanding Bernstein’s relation to sophists and sophistry. The intention within this portion of the study is to situate

Bernstein's text in relation to those other reassessments of sophistry that were written around the 1980s and 1990s, a field to which I suggest Bernstein's *The Sophist* also belongs. The focus of this section is on the rhetorical devices that Bernstein employs and how these create a poetics of sophistic alertness to the ways in which political and social systems are constructed and maintained through language and rhetoric.

Chapter 5 looks in more detail at two of Bernstein's more recent publications, *With Strings* and *Girly Man*. These texts continue Bernstein's engagement with sophistic ideas and poetic postures and refine and further explore sophistics, particularly in relation to humour. A number of critics have noted of these later publications that they represent a shift in Bernstein's mode from his early radical textual and linguistic experiments to his later slapstick and parodic incursions into poems and performances that at times read more like stand-up comedy than they do innovative poetics. This chapter puts forward an argument that there is a sophistic continuation between both the earlier works and these later works. I also mean to suggest that issues relating to sophistry and rhetoric have become more central to Bernstein's writing in recent years, particularly in publications such as *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (1999), *Girly Man* (2006), *Attack of the Difficult Poems: Essays and Inventions* (2011) and *Recalculating* (2013). In the introduction to *The Salt Companion to Charles Bernstein*, William Allegrezza noted that Bernstein's work has come to rely more on "humour and accessibility" (2) than his previous work. An aim of this study is to demonstrate that this shift relates to an increasing importance of different rhetorical registers within his work, including but not limited to an "accessibility" that in fact reveals itself to be anything but 'simple'. Furthermore, reading these books sophistically also provides a context through which to combine an examination of both comedy and performance which have increasingly seemed

central to Bernstein's poetic practices. The figure of Gorgias becomes central to this consideration, for it is Gorgias of all the sophists who most embodies a sense of a parodic and comic poet and artist as well as a quixotic linguist experimentalist.

In focusing on the work of Charles Bernstein in contexts of previously little-explored territories such as the philosophical projects of the sophists and Rogers Albritton, this thesis is intended to explore theoretical contexts for Bernstein's work, outside of those traditionally associated with language poetry. This isn't to deny the importance of the collective projects of language poetry, nor to deny the power of language poetry's breach with the various incarnations of what Bernstein calls "Official Verse Culture". Rather, it is to acknowledge Reinfeld's remark that "language poetry has no future. That is to say, although contemporary experimental writing continues to engage an increasingly diverse community of readers and writers, it cannot be tracked down as a form apart from time; it inhabits its tenses actively, politically, and without respect for definition, property rights, or borderline disputes... Their poetics cannot be understood as derived from a shared theoretical base" (148). Language poetry, she suggests, is a concept that was useful at one time for critics to identify writers associated with certain characteristics that emerged in American poetry in the 1970s and 1980s. However, even in the early Nineties when Reinfeld was writing she felt the category losing some of its value because "it has become a commonplace to say all poets are language poets" (149). Indeed, Reinfeld is not the only writer to have taken issue with the continuation of using a single term to characterize the procedures of a diverse group of writers and in particular there has been discord over what specific term to use, with "Language poetry", "language writing", "langpo", "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing", "language-centered writing" and "language oriented writing" all possibilities alongside many more variations

besides. As Bob Perelman has written, “while language writing has, by the mid nineties become a recognized literary historical term, there was never any self-consciously organized group known as the language writers or poets- not even a fixed name” (1996, 12). By moving away from the sole or predominant context of the writings of other writers who have generally been considered a part of the groupings of language poets, this study aims to pay heed to the fact that while there hasn’t been such a thing as a magazine exclusively of “language poetry” for twenty five years or so, many of the writers associated with the movement have continued to write and publish and that their work has in some senses drifted away from the initial shared interests that united them. At the very least, these shared interests have developed in different ways for many of the writers associated with the tendency and so it has become more relevant to look at these specifics and differences than at characterizing the moment of language poetry as it played out in the 70s and 80s. This strategy is also in part intended to avoid the all-too-often made claim that the theoretical writings of language poets are more important than their poems themselves. In the case of the language poets, this is an illogical viewpoint that doesn’t hold up to scrutiny, either in relation to the theoretical texts or to poetic texts by the language writers. The viewpoint that the poems in some way do not ‘measure up’ to the interest of the theoretical writings, results in an attempt to normalize and diminish the strangenesses of the poems, to remove them from view and focus instead on the theoretical writings, which have in at least some cases taken an expository and familiar model of delivery. By doing so, it has been easy to neglect the poems themselves. However, as this study aims to demonstrate, this dichotomy between theoretical writing on the one hand and poetic writing on the other is dissolved and problematized, particularly in the work of Bernstein, where the theoretical work is part of the creative project and

indistinguishable from it. As Bernstein has written: “claims for poetry, even of the most theoretical or untenable or theatrical kinds, have the same status as any other type of poetic utterance. Claims have a *kind of* beauty and certainly *kind in* tropicality, whether they are modest or exaggerated or overly enthusiastic or erroneous. I hear claims as engaging, moving sometimes, disturbing. To separate claims from poetry, even claims made “outside” the poem, to say, “well that to me seems peripheral” is foreign to my conception of poetry” (1992, 156). For Bernstein, the theoretical claims made for a poem’s efficacy are essential and integral to a poem’s effect and should not be marginalized or set aside as irrelevant. This thesis therefore frequently engages with Bernstein’s own “claims” for poetry and relates these claims to the sorts of claims that were made by and have subsequently been made about the sophists.

However, while in some senses this thesis is intended to move away from the immediate context of fellow language poets or the initial characterisations of their early theoretical concerns and instead broaden out into an appraisal of Bernstein’s work that takes more of the depth of his own individual theorizing into account, there is one sense in which the context of language poetry’s emergence and reception is relevant to the affinity between Bernstein’s poetry and the activities of the sophists in Ancient Greece. I want to suggest that at a time when language poetry was experiencing a hostile reception by mainstream academia (in a way that is decidedly not the case today), the sophists – themselves vilified in academic history - offered Bernstein an attractive and compelling analogy for his felt (and perhaps consciously devised) marginalization. To use Brian McComiskey’s phrase referring to some of the contemporary interest in sophists, they offered “a friend in the fray” (5) as linguistic experimentalists whose work was ignored or maligned precisely for this reason. There is an irony to this study, however. The analogy is not entirely comfortable and the

objections to language poets from critics as diverse as Charles Altieri and Fredric Jameson do not map conveniently on to the objections Plato raises of the sophists. Nevertheless, it would be possible to reduce in both cases the objection down to a single simplification: the use of non-normative language practices coupled with a resistance to dominant societal modes of expression. In terms of date of publication, Bernstein's *The Sophist* (1987) is one of the earliest texts to interrogate and challenge traditional readings of the sophists by casting them within the context of his own cutting edge experiments with language. However, in spite of this, *The Sophist* has been entirely ignored as a contribution to these debates by those writers who have reassessed the sophists' contribution from fields such as philosophy and rhetoric, demonstrating that while contemporary assessments of the sophists may have become a burgeoning academic field of enquiry, the radical language interventions and the alignment of philosophy with poetry for which they stood, remain outside the conventional academic field of vision. However, I have been wary not to assert that either Bernstein's poetry or his essays – be they literary criticism, philosophy, educational, or in almost every case, a hybrid of these and other forms – constitute an attempt to reposition the Sophists in a philosophical lineage other than a highly personalized and conceptual one. This would be a misrepresentation both of the substance and the effect of his writings. However, I do hope to demonstrate that debates surrounding the Greek Sophists inform Bernstein's poetry and that the sophists open up something of what Bernstein's poetry offers in terms of ideology critique, and a destabilizing, decentralizing force.

Chapter 1

1. I. The Charge of Sophistry

The great accomplishment of the Sophists was to adopt an experimental method toward language that allowed them to channel the logical power of abstract thought through novel poetic forms and to generate the possibility for political action capable of bringing forth reward and fulfillment in the shared life of the polis. (Crick, 41)

Nathan Crick's radical reading of the sophists in his essay 'The Sophistical Attitude and the Invention of Rhetoric' positions them as language users on the cutting edge of linguistic innovation, using language in new and experimental ways to expand thought and to increase participation and political awareness in the growing democracy of Greece in the fifth century B.C. He makes the explicit connection between what he sees as their linguistic experimentation and the potential they open up for "political action". His reading suggests that the "novel poetic forms" and capacity for "abstract thought" employed by the sophists were allied with their influence on the novel political form of Greece's burgeoning democracy in the period. This reading of the sophists is attractive and seductive, reckoning them as aesthetically adventurous and politically radical experimentalists. Similarly, the literary critic Scott Pound has framed the sophists as purveyors of radical wordplay, contrasting their reckless and exciting prosodic style with the clarity of the scholar:

Unlike the sophist who traffics in ludic utterances that mobilize the inherent play of language to bend the meaning of words and turn them against themselves and their users, the scholar is a straight shooter, brandishing only lucid prose in disinterested analyses cleansed of the play that riddles discourse. (Pound, 180)

Both Pound and Crick paint an image of the sophist as a dynamic and subversive force (note Pound's use of the word "mobilize", Crick's word "action"), whose potency lies in their innovative language use. This is the "charge of sophistry", its power and attraction. However, there is another side of the coin, "the charge of sophistry" as accusation and condemnation. These recent assessments and re-framings of the achievements of the group of fifth century B.C. thinkers known as "the sophists" are at odds with the traditional position they have occupied throughout the history of philosophy. These re-evaluations have been made possible due to one of the most radical turnarounds of reputation in the history of scholarship, a rejuvenation of interest that began in the nineteenth century but which has gathered pace significantly in the last few decades. Prior to this process, no group of thinkers was more in need of resuscitation and re-evaluation, more maligned and ignored, than the sophists. As Susan Jarratt writes in her book *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured*: "the first sophists had been buried under two millennia of neglect, an outcome of the passionate condemnation they provoked from two of their contemporaries who have fared better in the histories, Plato and Aristotle" (1). The question therefore arises in any study that posits the sophists as a useful paradigm on contemporary artistic or philosophical practices: which version of "the sophists" are you dealing with? Is it the radical and innovative language user who offers an alternative approach to the

philosophical approaches of Plato, Aristotle and the dominant trend of academics ever since? Or is it the shady non-philosophers who took advantage of wealthy individuals in pedaling their imitative practices without real wisdom (as characterized by Plato in *The Sophist*)? The inherent difficulty of the act of defining the sophist has characterized it from Plato onwards throughout histories of sophistry and sophistic. In detailing some of the different versions of the sophists, this chapter introduces what is at stake in any contemporary appropriation of their works within critical writing, where, ultimately, the category ‘sophist’ remains indefinable, degraded and dangerous and where the subversive capacity of the sophist as an alternative to the philosopher is not diminished or watered down. As Pound puts it even more strongly, discussions of the sophist draw on a centuries-old binary opposition of scholar and sophist that has only recently imploded:

In the relatively tame mythology of the scholarly world the only real villain, besides our archenemy the plagiarist, is the sophist. It is the sophist, the myth tells us, who muddies the clear waters of thought with dissembling arguments and specious wordplay, who engages in eristic argumentation (argument for the sake of argument), and who sets out to hide a lack of substance with an excess of style. (179)

Pound identifies the “specious wordplay” and “eristic argumentation” of the sophists as the key factors in their alienation from the traditions of philosophy. His suggestion is clearly that the sophists have been ignored and maligned in part because of the mode or style in which they practiced philosophy. Steven Mailloux, in the introduction to his edited volume *Rhetoric, Sophistry, Pragmatism* (1995), describes a similar situation. However, he takes these factors and adds the related charge of “relativism”, i.e. the belief that there is no externally verifiable truth and that the best

that can be achieved is an opinion or point of view. In addition, he notes one of the charges that has dogged ‘the sophists’ for centuries, that they were “unscrupulous traders” and “merceneries” who became very wealthy indeed through fraudulent teachings:

Since Plato, the Older Sophists have often been condemned as relativists and subjectivists, unscrupulous traders in opinion rather than knowledge, rhetorical mercenaries who taught their clients to disregard objective truth in making the weaker case appear to be the stronger (Mailloux, 1).

This view of the sophist as the unethical and destructive inverse of the philosopher has been the dominant position in writings about the sophists since Plato. They have usually been seen as disingenuous teachers of technique rather than advancers of serious philosophical ideas or methods, and the word “sophist” retains this pejorative sense in its most frequent uses today. However, as John Dillon and Tania Gergel note in their introduction to their volume of translations *The Greek Sophists*, the word itself was not initially used in a derogatory sense:

The word ‘sophists’, which seems first to gain currency early in the fifth century, means originally, with a favourable or at least neutral connotation, something like ‘expert’ or ‘pundit’, one who is ‘wise’ (sophos) in a particular art or craft (x).

According to many contemporary assessments of Plato’s *Sophist*, the derogation of the term ‘sophist’ is at least in part attributable to Plato’s account in his dialogues. In Plato’s dialogue *Sophist* (and in other related dialogues such as *Gorgias*, *Meno* and *Protagoras*), the sophist is portrayed as an unethical, fraudulent and destructive teacher who takes advantage of the ambitions of wealthy young men for his own financial gain. The fullest picture of these objections to the sophists is located in the

Sophist. The dialogue follows the Socratic method of ‘collection and division’ whereby the interlocutors take a concept and narrow its meaning down until they are satisfied that they have pinned down a water tight definition. In this dialogue, the specimen before Thaletus and the character of ‘the visitor’ is ‘the sophist’ and they attempt to contrast and distinguish the sophist in relation to two other categories of citizen: statesman and philosopher. The following excerpts detail what emerges from their attempts to define the sophist:

It’s the hunting of rich, prominent young men. And according to the way our account has worked out, it’s what should be called the expertise of the sophist. (243)

The Sophist runs off into the darkness of that *which is not*, which he’s had practice dealing with, and he is hard to see because the place is so dark. (276)

The sophist isn’t one of the people who know but the people who imitate (292)

We can’t call him wise, since we took him not to know anything. But since he imitates the wise man, he’ll have a name derived from the wise man’s name.

And now at last I see that we have to call him the person who is really and truly a sophist. (Plato, 292)

There is perhaps a central irony to Plato’s text in that ‘the visitor’ and ‘Thaletus’ are overwhelmingly demonstrated to be ‘hunting’ the sophist while criticizing him for doing the same. Their project is to pin down exactly what the sophist is and thereby define the “philosopher” in opposition to it. The language used in the dialogue is oriented towards hunting and there is also a kind of ecstatic glee on the part of Thaletus when he reaches a definition that ‘the visitor’ is satisfied with (in spite of the resistance that the sophist puts up to being so defined): “So, you see how true it is

that the beast is complex and can't be caught with one hand, as they say" (246). In addition, the dialogue becomes increasingly complex when the two speakers attempt to distinguish the sophist from the philosopher, something that they have significant difficulty doing. The reason given for this is that the sophist resembles or imitates the philosopher but that this is merely a semblance and that the sophist is in fact counterfeit goods, as it were, using some of the methods of wisdom (such as argument and debate) while leading their pupils away from true knowledge. Both of these features of the dialogue suggest that the sophist and the philosopher were in fact very closely aligned in Ancient Greece and that the clear division between them is at least in part a product of Plato's dialogues, rather than a widely accepted distinction that is merely reflected through Plato's fiction. In Heidegger's lengthy analysis of *Plato's Sophist*, he remarks:

Initially this accomplishes nothing else than what the natural public conception already has at its disposal: the sophists, the philosophers and the statesmen are all muddled together, and no-one is capable of distinguishing them. Now this appearance is made still more explicit and sharper, such that when the sophist and the philosopher are brought so close to each other, whatever might be there to distinguish them will distinguish them in a *fundamental way* (263).

According to this reading, Plato acknowledges the closeness of philosopher and sophist in his public's imagination, deliberately brings the two categories closer together initially before positing the key differences that divide them. Similarly, Edward Schiappa has commented that Plato engaged in a process of "dissociation", quoting Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca: "Dissociation is a rhetorical strategy by which an advocate attempts to break up a previously unified idea into two

concepts: one which will be positively valued by the target audience and one which will be negatively valued” (6).

The features that mark out the sophist according to Plato’s dialogue are: the sophist is unscrupulous about ethical right and wrong, exploitative for financial gain, feigns knowledge when in fact he has none and uses words to produce imitative copies of knowledge. He is expert in contests of words, and in arguing for the sake of arguing (eristike). He is less worthy than “the philosopher”, who is associated with true knowledge and wisdom rather than fraudulent imitation. The main criticisms of the sophist in Plato’s dialogue will be considered in more detail in the next section, in conjunction with how these same issues play out in the context of Charles Bernstein’s poetry. These are: 1) commerce, 2) teaching and 3) artifice and semblance. However, for the remainder of this section, I continue to consider the reception history of sophistry and some recent attempts to reformulate the sophists within contemporary concerns. By defining the sophist negatively in these ways, Plato helped to change the meaning of the term ‘sophist’ from a neutral expression that could be used both positively and negatively to an almost exclusively negative term, as Bruce McComiskey has noted in his important study *Gorgias and the New Sophistic Rhetoric* by drawing on the writings of the seventh century B.C. rhetorician Aristides to demonstrate an extremely wide usage of the term ‘sophist’ in texts prior to Plato:

Before Plato, it was good to be called a sophist, but after Plato it was a source of shame... We must understand that Plato’s descriptions of the sophists are deceptively specific, limiting the usage of the term to those traveling teachers with whom he would quarrel, and also inaccurately ascribing to each sophist character certain qualities and doctrines that the extant texts do not support.

(3)

Plato's assessment of the sophists was repeated by Aristotle. As Scott Schreiber has written in his book *Aristotle and False Reasoning: Language and the World in the Sophistical Refutations*, for Aristotle "the sophist trades on people's inability to distinguish the true from the false, the real from the merely apparent" (3). He therefore attempts to offer a way for individuals to address and recognize false reasoning when they encounter it from sophists. However, there is another element of Aristotle's project which suggests that sophists and philosophers were closely related categories from his perspective too. Schreiber remarks that Aristotle was attempting to answer the question: "How then does one learn to recognize these false appearances whether they are intended by another or accidentally arise in one's own study" (2). This suggests that sophistry was something that philosophers were cautious to guard against in their own thinking processes and that there were therefore significant resemblances between the two categories. The assessments of Plato and Aristotle of the sophists must, therefore, be treated for what they are, a deliberate attempt to position their own ideas and methods as superior to those of rival thinkers.

Plato and Aristotle's opinion of the sophists remained widespread and definitive until the nineteenth century, when, in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1805-06), Hegel drew attention to their place within the philosophical canon. He began by reclaiming the word itself from its negative connotations:

Sophistry is a term of ill repute. By these expressions we understand that some definition or other is arbitrarily refuted or undermined on grounds that are false or else that something that is not in itself right is made plausible or proved upon false grounds. We have to set this bad sense of the term aside and put it out of our minds; we must treat the position of the sophists in Greece more precisely than that. (111)

Hegel even went so far as to situate the sophists as intellectual forbears to modern discourse, claiming in particular that their awareness of both sides of an argument situates them as more alike modern philosophers than Socrates and Plato: “the standpoint of the sophists is our standpoint too, and their mode of cognition or thinking is what we call argumentation – the advancing of reasons for and against something” (119). Hegel’s re-insertion of the sophists into the philosophical narrative, however, has subsequently been criticised for reinforcing the mis-apprehensions of their thinking that had begun with Plato. For example, John Poulakos has contested that Hegel “sought to confer upon them the high status traditionally enjoyed by philosophers but, at the same time, brought their rhetoric under the control of philosophy, thus rendering it impotent and ineffective” (Poulakos, 2008, 161). His main contention is that Hegel emphasizes the philosophical qualities of the sophists’ thought in spite of their rhetorical achievements and thereby misses what he conceives of as the really valuable aspect of their writing. Poulakos quotes a number of examples where he believes that Hegel misconstrues the sophists into speculative philosophers rather than experimental rhetoricians, including this example, concerning the sophist Protagoras: "Protagoras was not, like other Sophists, merely a teacher of culture, but likewise a deep and solid thinker, a philosopher who reflected on fundamental determinations of an altogether universal kind" (Poulakos, 2008, 163). Rather than a philosopher of “an altogether universal kind”, Poulakos sees the sophists as radically opposed to universalizing and committed to argumentation and linguistic virtuosity as a method of thinking and reasoning. He sees Hegel’s rehabilitation as potentially even more suffocating to the sophists’ thought than Plato’s criticism of them:

[T]heir rhetoric loses its capacity to commit symbolic violence by engaging in paradox, indulging in excesses, or turning any argument on its head.

Moreover, the Sophists are taken out of the public life of the culture that invited, encouraged and criticized them and are put in seclusion, where they can contemplate and advance the cause of philosophical speculation. In short, Hegel's sophists have been rehabilitated at philosophy's reformatory and have joined the philosopher in pursuing the knowledge of "the truth." But if they had their way, they would counter Hegel's attempt to "normalize" them by showing with abundant ease that "the truth" does not exist; or that even if it does, it is unknowable; or that even if it is knowable, it is incommunicable (Poulakos, 168).

In spite of the reservations about Hegel's rehabilitation of the sophists, there can be no doubting that his lectures sparked a significant revival of interest in the sophists that was facilitated by George Grote's favourable reassessment in *A History of Greece from the Earliest Period to the Close of the Generation Contemporary with Alexander the Great* (1846-56). In turn, the radical expansion of interest in the sophists in major works such as W. K. C. Guthrie's *The Sophists* (1973) and G. B. Kerford's *The Sophistic Movement* (1981) can be attributed to the landmark reinterpretation by Grote, as has been asserted in texts such as Arnaldo Momigliano's *George Grote and the Study of Greek History* (1952). The result of these positive reassessments is that the sophists have in the last few decades been the subject of many essays and studies across multiple disciplines that have re-claimed the sophists. As Karen Whedbee has remarked, the sophists have been "transformed from the villains to the heroes of the ancient world" (Whedbee, 604).

Of particular interest in relation to the poetry of Charles Bernstein and Language poetry in general is an essay by Michael Gagarin that was published in the pages of the journal *Rhetorica* in 2001. In ‘Did the Sophists Aim to Persuade?’, Gagarin studies extant texts by Gorgias in particular to challenge the prevailing notion that the primary aim of sophists was to teach the art of persuasion. In both traditional and revisionist histories of the sophists, this preconception about their work has remained tenacious and has been central to the understanding of their contribution to philosophy. As Gagarin notes, “explicitly or implicitly most scholars agree that for the Sophists, to speak well meant to speak persuasively and to teach rhetoric was to teach the art of persuasion” (277). However, Gagarin offers a radically different perspective, a perspective that focuses much more on sophists as experimental linguists, whose chief goal was to raise questions about language use and its link to critical reasoning through virtuoso language performances:

My argument is not that persuasion was never a goal of a sophistic *logos*, but that in most cases persuasion is in the background and is less important than several other objectives, such as the serious exploration of issues and forms of argument, the display of ingenuity in thought, argument and style of expression, and the desire to dazzle, shock and please. (Gagarin, 289)

He achieves this conclusion through a reading of Gorgias’s poem *Encomium to Helen*, which is one of the central texts (alongside accounts in Plato and Aristotle) used to justify the weight put on persuasion as a central teaching of the sophists. While the neutrality of both Plato and Aristotle towards the sophists has been radically called into question, both revisionists and traditionalists alike tend to take Gorgias’s own words about *logos* in this text as evidence of the importance of the art of persuasion in his teachings and in his thought. Interpreting this text in particular is crucial to

Gagarin's study because it is "the only sophistic discussion of *logos* that survives" (276). Indeed, within the *Encomium to Helen*, Gorgias forcefully asserts the power of *logos* to persuade, for example in the following two passages:

12) What is there to prevent the assertion that Helen, too, when still young, was carried off by a speech just as if constrained by force? Her mind was swept away by persuasion and persuasion has the same power as necessity, although it may bring shame; for speech, by persuading the soul that it persuaded, constrained her both to obey what was said and approve what was done. The persuader, as user of force, did wrong; the persuaded, forced by speech, is unreasonably blamed. (Gorgias, in Murphy, 265)

14) The power of speech has the same effect on the condition of the soul as the application of drugs to the state of bodies; for just as different drugs dispel different fluids from the body, and some bring an end to disease while others end life, so also some speeches cause pain, some pleasure, some fear; some instill courage, some bewitch the soul with a kind of evil persuasion. (Gorgias, in Murphy, 265)

Gagarin's argument, though, is that Gorgias shouldn't be taken at face value in these utterances, because his poem is above all an intellectual exercise whereby he is attempting the seemingly insurmountable challenge of using his own virtuoso reasoning to absolve Helen of all guilt for the Trojan War. It suits his present purposes in the poem/speech to claim that *logos* can be used like witchcraft or a drug to persuade someone to behave both against their will and in suspension of their better judgment. Furthermore, Gagarin argues that this virtuosity, this exercise in open and experimental thinking is more central to Gorgias's concerns in the poem than the art

of persuasion itself. He writes: “not only are audiences not persuaded by Gorgias’s logos, but far from trying to persuade, he seems to go out of his way not to make his logos persuasive.” (281) By “going out of his way” to make the challenge of defending Helen’s honour more difficult than it need have been (by largely ignoring traditional defences such as the Gods compelling her, Helen being forced by the Trojans or even that she didn’t travel to Troy at all), Gorgias is providing himself with the almighty challenge of “making the weaker case appear to be the stronger”. He isn’t concerned with persuading his audience but with enthralling them in his exercise in reason and language. By putting the focus on the power of *logos* to persuade Helen, Gorgias in fact draws attention to the power of all language to condition and construct modes of thinking. An audience of *Encomium to Helen* would more likely leave with a greater appreciation and awareness of language’s constitutive qualities than they would having been persuaded to adopt any altered perception about Helen’s guilt or otherwise.

The conviction that the sophists were not essentially teaching the ‘art of persuasion’ is a cornerstone, too, of Michelle Ballif’s study *Seduction, Sophistry and the Woman with the Rhetorical Figure* in which she reclaims and feminizes a lineage from Gorgias through Nietzsche to Baudrillard. In this text, she contrasts “sophistic rhetoric” with “philosophic rhetoric” and claims that the critical difference between the two positions is the sophist’s lack of interest in logical argument and skepticism about the notion of ‘truth’:

Thus, philosophic rhetoric frames rhetoric as a logical appeal; people are persuaded (or should be persuaded) to believe that which is logically demonstrated to be true or probably true. Sophistic rhetoric, contrariwise, presumes that there is something about rhetoric that is seductive, even

deceptive, and that language resists logic, that it desires to trope – to turn and to turn and to turn – until it gets dizzy and, in the words of Paul de Man, “radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration” (*Allegories of Reading*, 10) (5).

Like Gagarin, Pound and Poulakos, Ballif specifically stresses a form of radical and experimental wordplay as their strength as thinkers. The suggestion is that while the sophists may have demonstrated the ability to ‘argue persuasively’ on any side of an argument, the real lesson of their teachings isn’t ‘how to argue persuasively’ but ‘how to recognize that language constitutes and conditions our responses’. Within a newly burgeoning democracy where citizens are able to participate in the political processes for the first time, this is an extremely important lesson to be taught. To use Mailloux’s phrase, they reveal “the social situatedness of the truth-establishing process” (Mailloux, 11) by demonstrating that “truth” verifiable by the gods is out of our reach. By freeing the lessons of the sophists from the conviction of an over-arching concern with teaching the “art of persuasion”, i.e. teaching citizens to succeed in politics by convincing through debates and speeches, their subversive power as critical thinkers and linguistic performers is opened up. However, exactly what this power is and how it opens up political possibilities requires further unpacking. The relation of the sophists to democratic ideals is historically based in the emergence of increasingly democratic political processes in fifth century B.C. Athens.

In the chapter ‘The sophists as a social phenomenon’ of his *The Sophistic Movement*, G.B. Kerford situates the teachings of the sophists within the wider political situation of Athens during the fifth century B.C. He writes that Athens was in the early stages of having transitioned to a state ruled by democratic principles:

These two principles are: (1) that power should be with the people as a whole and not with a small section of the citizen body, and (2) that high offices carrying the right to advise and act for the people should be entrusted to those best fitted and most able to carry out these functions (16).

These principles (fundamental principles likewise of democratic theory today) were innovative and were pioneered in the Athens of the 5th century BC. As Cynthia Farrar has written, “democracy was cobbled together, thousands of years ago, by the Athenians” (1). One of the keys to understanding what makes Athenian democracy of this period unique, Farrar contends, is the interconnectivity between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’, or what may be termed ‘logos’ and ‘praxis’. Appreciating this link between words or theory and their practical implications is essential to understand the potency of experimental sophist performance. However, it is a potency that can offer citizens of contemporary democracies opportunities to engage with in a far more participatory and critical mode. As she writes:

From where we stand, in a modern, western, liberal, capitalist culture, it is difficult to apprehend the possibility of uniting reflective social understanding and rootedness in concrete social practices in a political life. We understand both democracy and political theory in abstract terms, and both are remote from the lives we lead (3).

However, this was resolutely not the case for the sophists, where their language uses were intricately tied together with the burgeoning democratic system of their state. In his study *Pragmatism, Democracy and the Necessity of Rhetoric* (2007), Robert Danisch situates both pragmatism and rhetoric within democratic politics, both in the context of the United States of America and Ancient Greece. He asserts that the

sophists contributed to an emergent democracy where citizens were aware of how language use constructs society:

In the light of Protagoras's and Gorgias's positions, it is clear that the democratic city state was supported by assumptions about language. Specifically, the sophists consistently pointed to the power of language to influence political and legal decisions - thus indicating that all people are capable of and subject to persuasive speech acts (9).

The key positions of Protagoras and Gorgias that Danisch refers to are Protagoras's famous "man measure doctrine", i.e. that "man is the measure of all things" and Gorgias's interpretation of language as a medium through which communities create the 'truths' that are most acceptable to them by a process of rhetorical contests and language games. Language is, therefore, conceived of as the fundamental glue through which communities govern themselves. It is through language that communities are able to conceive of notions such as justice and ethics, rather than through a received morality from the gods. Danisch quotes Scott Consigny's remark that "Gorgias construes language as an array of maneuvers or tropes that people use in various socially sanctioned agons or games." Rather than simply paid instructors in how to succeed in politics as they have traditionally been seen, this interpretation of the sophists' teachings transforms them into philosophers of language, pointing to the role language plays in our political structures, and particularly the human susceptibility to persuasion and 'smooth-talking'. For example, in *The Sophists*, Guthrie attributes to Gorgias the viewpoint that "persuasion allied to words can mould men's minds as it wishes" (51). While the double meaning of "mould" is due to the translation rather than an intentional paranomasia from

Gorgias, it is pertinent because language use not only has the power to persuade or incite, it also has the power to dull, deceive and cover over; to make complacent. The sophists made citizens aware of this dual power of language to construct (and maintain) our realities; to influence and effect politics. As Cynthia Farrar has written, understood in terms of sophistic language experiments with a dynamic social and political agenda, Protagoras was “the first democratic political theorist in the history of the world” (77).

Given that the sophists were associated with relativist views and also have been portrayed as in favour of a philosophy being conducted in the agon through debate about real issues facing citizens of the day, it is perhaps no surprise that the school of thought for whom the sophists held most appeal in the recent historical past were those philosophers associated with pragmatism. Mailloux quotes pragmatist philosopher James H. Tufts’ entry in the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (1902) where under pre-Socratic Philosophy, the sophists are represented in a positive light:

[The Sophists] represent a shifting of the centre of interest and study from the cosmos to man, and an emergence of science from closed schools or societies into public discussion. The growing democracy made knowledge claims valuable to the citizen as well as to the scholar. Teachers of every subject, and especially teachers of rhetoric, found eager hearers. The study of the art of persuasion, especially upon political themes, led naturally to the study of politics. (Mailloux, 6)

On this subject, the French philosopher Barbara Cassin has been particularly influential. While much of her work remains untranslated into English, her essay ‘Who’s Afraid of the Sophists? Against Ethical Correctness’ was published in the

journal *Hypatia* in 2000. In this essay, Cassin borrows a definition of ‘sophistic’ from Andre Lalande, which she calls “as magisterial as it is mysterious... ‘a philosophy of verbal reasoning, lacking any solidity or seriousness’” (Cassin, 105). She goes further to claim that this “possible modality of non-philosophy” (105) offers a “new delimitation of the entity called “philosophy” in relation to the other entities it constructs (sophistics as rhetoric, and then as literature)” (104). By the phrase “a new delimitation of the entity called “philosophy””, Cassin appears to mean a widening of the field of philosophy to include non-traditional modes of enquiry and exposition, including in the fields of literary criticism, literature and rhetoric. The crucial aspect of Cassin’s argument here is that she agrees with Poulakos’s contention that a more radical and powerful interpretation of the sophists lies not in rehabilitating them within the received canon of philosophy and restoring them to a respectable position within philosophical discourse but by revealing and prioritizing the radicalism of their practice and the challenges it has presented to Plato and to philosophy ever since. Cassin’s interpretation of the sophists therefore offers an interesting counterpoint to Charles Bernstein’s mode of speaking, writing, poeticizing and philosophizing. Bernstein’s work poses a similar challenge today as the sophists have posed for millennia and while the sophists may now be enjoying significant respectability within the discipline of philosophy in spite of their non-philosophical linguistic experimentation, the same is not true of Bernstein’s arguably equivalent experiments today, which continue to be seen as primarily literary rather than philosophical works.

Cassin’s argument centres around Gorgias’s treatise ‘On Not-Being, or On Nature’, where Gorgias claims that “nothing exists, then if anything does exist, it is unknowable, and finally, if it is knowable, it cannot be revealed to others.” (Dillon, Gergel, 69). The first thing to note about this text is that it has widely been considered

either a parody of Parmenides or a “jeu d’esprit” (Blondell, 176). However, in spite of or because of the irreverence of his rhetoric, Gorgias is able to advance his provocative argument, in which ‘being’ is revealed as an effect of speech rather than a verifiable condition. Cassin takes up Gorgias’s argument and moves it even further to attribute a conception of existence to the sophists that is not only an effect of speech but actually constructed through the language we use:

That being is a speech effect now takes on a twofold meaning: we are not simply faced with a critique of ontology—your purported being is nothing but an effect of the way you speak—but with a claim which is characteristic of “logology,” to use a term of Novalis (1997, 56) and also of Dubuffet (1970, 115). What matters from now on is not a being which would supposedly be already there, but the being produced by the discourse. One must assess the magnitude of the shift in landscape, from the primal scene onwards. The safest identity principle is no longer formulated as “Being is” or “The entity is” but, to quote from Aristotle’s “On Melissus, Xenophanes and Gorgias”: “he who speaks, speaks” (1984c, 980b 4). The presence of Being, the immediacy of Nature and the evidence of a speech which aims to express them adequately all vanish at the same time; the physics discovered by speech makes way for the politics created by discourse. Indeed, it is here, thanks to the sophists, that we reach the dimension of the political as agora for an agon: the city as the continuous creation of language. (Cassin, 108)

In this passage, Cassin posits a link between sophistic awareness of the speech-constructed self and the place of the individual within community politics, with language as the agora (assembly) or locus of political advancement and thought through agon (debate). However, she styles her agora as a realm of boundary-pushing

linguistic and rhetorical experiments rather than simply a chamber of debate with reason as its governing principle, where viewpoints will either win or lose based on majority rule. The element of ‘performance’ is critical within Cassin’s and other commentators conception of the sophists. Susan Jarratt has commented that, “the first linguistic theorists, the sophists were performers as well, following in the traditions of oral poetry” (Jarratt, xx).

Similarly, Cassin describes the locus of sophistic politics in terms of a performance:

The entire rhetoric of the sophists is thus a vast performance which, time after time, by means of praise and counsel, produces the consensus required for the social bond. This consensus is minimal, even minimalist, because far from requiring a uniform unity, the sophistic consensus does not even require that everyone think the same thing (*homonoia*), but only that everyone speaks (*homologia*) and lends their ear (*homophonia*) (109).

The situation Cassin sketches is of a linguistically-aware, talkative culture in which politics is reached and defined not through agreement as much as through disagreement, through a multitude of different language-performances and perspectives. She enacts the specifics of such an approach within the rhetoric of her text itself, through the subtle language game of comparing “*homonoia*”, “*homologia*” and “*homophonia*”. The significance of these three concepts is vital to her advancement of sophistic in that the interlinked activities of “talking” and “listening” are contrasted to the combined activity “thinking”, which exceeds but is constituted by the primary activities of language use (talking and listening), activities which are never passive in form but always active. Rather than the sense of “talking” being the method through which “thinking” is communicated, talking and listening as language

games are the process of thought, indistinguishable from thought. As such, thought is constantly in flux and being modified and multiplied. This itself manifests a politics of flux, possibility and multiplicity. Cassin contrasts this political language-centric form of philosophizing (which she coins “philosophisticizing”, incorporating “sophistics”) with the traditional narrative of philosophy, commenting: “in the philosophizing Greece of aletheia, the invention of the city is non-political, because the political qua political is in no way political; rather, it is always subordinate to Being, the True, and the Good. But in a philosophisticizing Greek, where the ontological immediately reverts to, backtracks towards the logological, the logos enables us to grasp the very immanence of the political, in its condition of possibility” (109).

Cassin’s term “immanence” clearly references the writings of Gilles Deleuze, and in particular the sense of the immanent as something that is grounded, inhabitable and inescapable. The political therefore is the constant condition of existence through which all language use is constantly based, as a performance of the political. Writing in response to (and not in agreement with) Cassin, Alain Badiou has equally stressed the importance within her conception of sophistics of performance as constitutive of the political: “Barbara Cassin links sophistics to a consensual multiplicity of discursive games, which creates worlds” (317). For Cassin, language performance encompasses the activities of both reading/listening and talking as critical to how the world is interpreted and negotiated politically. One thing is clear. The sophists were language users and performers of whose work it was at all times necessary to interpret. They used language and logic in such a way as to encourage the art of interpretation and their main activity could be considered the fostering of the interpretative art. By doing so, they encouraged skepticism over prevailing cultural

dominance and radical re-thinking of language uses. Frank Lentricchia has written (in an essay on the pragmatist philosopher Josiah Royce) that “interpretation, a community-making act, the essential activity of human association is repeatedly repressed in the history of the philosophy” (41). This is a process that begins with the writing out of the sophists from philosophical history, figures who stood for using language in a way that demanded it be interpreted and wasn’t taken at face value. It is this interpretation of the sophists that displays affinities with the projects of Language poets and it is this radicalized version of sophism that is of interest to a reading of Bernstein’s *The Sophist* and his wider poetic output.

1. II. Pedagogy, Public Policy and Semblance

This section looks at three recurrent themes in writings about the sophists and considers their individual inflections and importance within Bernstein's own practice. The aim is not only to establish a link between Bernstein's concerns and that of the sophists but to suggest that these aspects of their thought are integral to a "sophistic" conception of literature and philosophy as it plays out in language poetry.

a. Pedagogy

Not all academics (and certainly not all poets), take pedagogy seriously. However, throughout his writings on academia and above all in his teaching procedures and courses themselves, Bernstein has demonstrated a commitment and exploration of teaching methods and of education more broadly conceived. Bernstein's syllabi at SUNY Buffalo and UPenn demonstrate both his sense of what teaching is and his understanding of what contemporary poetry and poetics can teach. For example, his course on 'Prose and its Malcontents', delivered in 1999 at SUNY Buffalo, takes a characteristically slanted view of prose theory, claiming that "Prose: it is more than just another word for poetry". This statement says at least one crucial thing about Bernstein's pedagogical approach. It prioritizes poetry and poetics as a way of looking at language use in everyday life. Subverting normative assumptions about the primacy or normalcy of prose in everyday communication, this statement suggests that all prose can or ought to be viewed poetically, with the same distancing procedures one adopts when analyzing a poem. Bernstein's pedagogical claims for poetry stretch far beyond merely creating legions of vaguely homogenous but

technically proficient poets and creative writers (which the boom in creative writing degrees might be considered to have done). Bernstein instead believes in the pedagogical importance of “poetic thinking as an activated potential for all people” (1992, 225), which comes from looking at all language use poetically, analyzing its syntax, grammar and semantics meaningfully for what they say about the specific iteration in question and the assumptions that underlie its composition. The syllabus therefore traverses a wide range of contemporary prose, both critical and creative that has, in one way or another, poeticized prose. Central to the course, therefore, are the writings of many of the language poets. However, equally important within the course are authors who had a significant influence on language poets, such as Victor Shklovsky, Gertrude Stein, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan among many others. The essay by Creeley studied, ‘Was that a Real Poem or Did You Just Make it up Yourself?’ is particularly relevant to the significance Bernstein attaches to the study of poetry within pedagogy. The essay is written in a colloquial style, and recalls the writings of David Antin in its seemingly tangential organization and structure. Creeley, like Antin, makes use of anecdotes as an energizing force within his essay and by doing so the essay covers a wide range of topics, circling around a topic that can’t quite be grasped. For example, towards the end of the essay, Creeley writes of:

The phenomenon of another friend and student at Black Mountain in the middle fifties, who in truth could perceive no demonstrable difference between a cluster of words called *poem* and a cluster of words called *prose* . She felt the typographical form of the poem was all that apparently defined it—and that of course was a very arbitrary gimmick, to her mind. I tried everything, "Mary had a little lamb," tum te tum, clapped my hands with the beat, pulled out the vowels à la Yeats, probably even sang. Still it stayed flat

and arbitrary. She felt the beat and texture of the sound was imposed by will of the reader and was not initial in the words themselves. All the usual critical terms were of course useless, far too abstract. Finally I truly despaired of gaining more than her sympathy and patience. Then one day, we were reading Edward Marshall's "Leave the Word Alone," and for some immaculate and utterly unanticipated "reason" she *got* it, she heard all the play of rhythms and sounds bringing that extraordinary statement of primary humanness into such a density of feeling and song...

...As a poet, at this moment—half listening as I am to the House Judiciary Committee's deliberations—I am angered, contemptuous, impatient, and possibly even cynical concerning the situation of our lives in this 'national' place. Language has, publicly, become such an instrument of coercion, persuasion, and deceit. The power thus collected is ugly beyond description—it is truly *evil*. And it will not go away (577).

The anecdote of the student encapsulates successful pedagogy at work: patience, anti-didacticism, good humour and experiment. Creeley allows the student to (eventually) hear the rhythms of poetry for herself rather than just stating that they are there and moving on. This anecdote also relates to the one that gives the essay its title, in which after a poetry reading a student asked of a visiting poet “was that a real poem or did you just make it up yourself?” This question reveals a sense that a poem is a mark of validation rather than anything intrinsic within it. Unlike the student who won't accept something as a poem as opposed to prose until she hears it herself, this student believes something is a poem if it is widely held to be a poem, not because of any intrinsic formal attribute that would allow one to recognize it as such. These two views are presented together by Creeley without any particular comment or remark on

them. However, both of them are possible approaches to poetry and they fundamentally question in their own ways what it is that distinguishes something as poetry from prose. Particularly in the widened field of poetic production today, this can be a distinction that is extremely hard to define and may in fact be considered redundant. However, the sense in Creeley's essay is that by their questioning, by their engagement with the parameters of how to define a poem (however naïve their questions might seem when presented anecdotally) these students have reached upon a crux of the study of poetry: why isn't it prose? Their questioning of the issue is equally if not more valid than the definition, quoted (with "horror") earlier in the essay by Creeley, from *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (1935): "elevated expression of elevated thought or feeling, esp. in metrical form" (575). The unconvinced suspicion of the students is infinitely more helpful than the narrowness of this 30's definition, which is all the more remarkable placed within the context of the developments in Modernist poetry that immediately preceded it.

Also important is the tangential link that Creeley builds between this episode and the conclusion of the essay, in which he shares his own suspicion and despair about the uses of language in everyday political life. The coming-to experienced by the student over the rhythms of poetry is juxtaposed to a similar though more sinister coming-to experienced by Creeley over the prose usages of the "House Judiciary Committee's deliberations", which in 1974 when this essay was composed refers to the Watergate scandal. By questioning what poetry is, the students in Creeley's anecdotes are also questioning what prose is and may be becoming more aware of the ways in which language is used to manipulate and control our everyday political selves, in the sorts of ways that Creeley describes: "an instrument of coercion, persuasion and deceit". While not overtly stated as such, poetry in Creeley's essay

becomes indefinable except as a way of looking at the world with both skepticism and wonder in the ways that both the students in his anecdotes do. As such, poetry as pedagogy in Creeley's essay becomes akin to the sophistic project of drawing awareness to the ways in which language is used to persuade, as discussed in detail in relation to the work of Gorgias in Chapter 5.

Bernstein's syllabus situates this essay by Creeley alongside a wide range of works by other authors, such as Oscar Wilde's *Critic as Artist* and Gertrude Stein's *Composition as Explanation*. The context of reframing the essay within his own course means that Creeley's own prosodic strategies (like those of Stein and Wilde) are opened up to analysis, observation and critique. The radically divergent approaches to "prose" employed by each writer crystallises the sense that prose as a concept is as artificial and indefinable as 'poetry'. The following is from the course introduction to 'Close Encounters of the Poetic Kind', a course that Bernstein taught in 1991:

Course requirements are flexible and interactive, aiming to catalyze the readings and discussions in the context of a "workshop", ie working, relation to the reading. By "reading workshop" I mean I want to explore the ways in which poems may or can be read, interpreted, performed, engaged with: the seminar is directed toward sampling (or inventorying) a variety of poetic textures and investigating ways of locating or recognizing these textures (atmospheres, shapes, valences, forms, structures, prosodies . . .). For each seminar, please write a short response to that week's assignments in the form of imitations, parodies, excursus, recitations, performances, appropriations, as well as critical, textural or theoretical comments. The "Reading Through" list that begins the "Experiments" provide some alternative modes of poetic

"response". You're encouraged to experiment with a variety of poetic forms suggested by the readings and discussions.

What is most evident from this excerpt is the emphasis that Bernstein as pedagogue puts on the two tenets of responsiveness and experiment. His students are constantly encouraged, above all, to create works in response to other works “in the form of imitations, parodies, excursions, recitations, performances, appropriations, as well as critical, textural or theoretical comments”. The act of engaging creatively with texts is therefore prioritized above (or at least emphasized ahead of as a counter to the prevailing teaching methods of most university courses) the straightforwardly critical and theoretical demonstration of discursive comprehension. Students are encouraged to produce their own works that join in the conversation alongside the works of the writers being studied rather than just reflecting on them. Learning (and even more fundamentally) reading are seen as creative acts. Even the name of the reading list suggests this: “Reading Through list” rather than simply “Reading list”. Bernstein has theorized this method of teaching in the essay ‘Creative Wreading and Aesthetic Judgment’, which was first published in the volume of essays *Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary*, edited by the poets Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr, suggesting the growing interest in the pedagogy of poetry and poetry as a form or method of pedagogy. The essay begins:

I am a professor of poetry. I take that term quite literally. I profess poetry in a society, and often in a classroom, where poetry is often at best a half-forgotten thing, something confined to the peripheries of cultural imagination, a once grand enterprise perhaps, but today eclipsed by more compelling media (2011).

Bernstein’s understanding of teaching, then, is related to a ‘literal’ interpretation of

the phrase “professor” of poetry, drawing on the connotations of the verb ‘profess’, which include that of publicly declaring something with a view to acting on it.

Bernstein is committed to actively promoting and professing poetry as not only an art form or genre but as a way of experiencing and looking at the world. As such, his understanding of poetry is akin to that of the sophists, whose teachings were holistic and pragmatically oriented, designed to equip one for a way of thinking about society and the world. The specific tool, if it were to be packaged as a roll-out educational programme, is “creative wreading”. “Creative wreading”, as Bernstein writes, is his version of the more familiar ‘creative writing’ courses. In Bernstein’s version, rather than workshop students’ own poetry to refine them, Bernstein encourages innovation, exploration and experimentation coupled with the exposure to as wide a range of historical and contemporary writing as possible. The students then perform ‘experiments’ based on their readings of these texts: “a set of deformations, transformations and imitations that involve doing things with poems rather than analyzing them... These experiments are designed to provide interactive engagement with the assigned reading. I also ask that for each experiment, the student provide a short commentary on the process, the results, the relation to the original and an assessment of the value of the experiment” (55). As such, the emphasis of his course is on empowering the students to engage with the forms of the poems presented as part of the course. Rather than elevating them as artifacts beyond the student’s reach, Bernstein encourages the students to see the course materials as forms to be re-drawn and experimented with. It is possible to see the political implications of such a practice, if poetic structures are taken to be a metaphor for societal and cultural structures. Students, by engaging with poetic structures and being encouraged to experiment formally (while constantly developing reflective, responsive and

evaluative skills). One critical aspect of this process is the acceptance of “nonunderstanding” (47) and the different responses, interpretations and reaction of students. In order to foster just such differences of opinion, Bernstein’s teaching strategies involve the generation of a culture of “disagreement”:

In the Wreading Workshop, disagreement is encouraged as a way of generating exchange rather than as an obstacle that needs to be overcome.

Disagreement is not a means to a consensus (or the imposed consensus of the professor’s judgment): dissensus is the goal of the Wreading Workshop. I always try to give extended attention to the negative reactions that students have to a poem or set of poems. (46)

The acceptance of “dissensus” when it comes to poetry might seem a far-cry from the acceptance of “dissensus” as a wider cultural principle. However, one significance of advocating these sets of educational procedures for a wider sense of political and aesthetic judgments is that, just as Bernstein writes that “new poems often challenge prior definitions or understandings of poetry” (2011, 43), so too can this be extended into a wider understanding of social and political “definitions and understandings”.

The poem, by Bernstein’s reckoning, becomes a site of constant revision and “reintroduction” (43), encouraging a way of looking at the world that prioritizes a lack of complacency and closure in favour of change and multiplicity. This extends beyond the definition of a poem. The critic Megan Swihart Jewell has stressed that Bernstein regards “the value of teaching modern and contemporary poetics for its particular ability to empower readers to negotiate within cultural discourses” (117). In this regard, the extension of Bernstein’s pedagogical professing of poetry into a wider sense of negotiating social interaction (rather than instilling any one sense of society) owes something to his own Deweyan education (it was John Dewey after all who

criticized many views of education where “the underlying philosophy is that it is the function of education to transmit and reproduce existing institutions – only making them more efficient. This philosophy we deny” (79.) Indeed, Dewey’s sense of philosophy, democracy and education as fundamentally linked activities can be identified within Bernstein’s own sense of poetry as a mode of thinking. As John Stuhr has compellingly argued, for Dewey “all genuine philosophy is philosophy of education” (10). This remark suggests that fundamentally education (conceived broadly as the development of humans - at all stages of development and learning) must be essential to the activity of philosophy, which would be conceived of as an activity devoted to conceiving of new ideas that are useful to the development and greater freedom of individuals within societies and societies as a whole. However, even more than this, Bernstein’s attitude to education can be seen to be in line with a sophisticated attitude to the world. As Susan Jarratt has written, the sophists provided “the very first education for empowerment” (98), equipping their students with empowering skills that enabled them to more effectively negotiate social structures. This marked a significant shift and its most important aspect is in the way it positions the individual in relation to society as a fundamental component and player in the life of the society, “raising people’s consciousness of their attributes as social creatures” (Jarratt, 99). Because of this, Jarratt believes an understanding of sophistic education is relevant to orienting contemporary educational practices more towards the political and social empowerment of the individual: “Despite differences between fifth century Greek democracy and our own, understanding the political orientation of sophistic education is instructive for those seeking an education more responsive to contemporary political possibilities” (Jarratt, 99). The sophistic method of teaching took as its basis language and rhetoric, but also, through that, the process of engaging

with society publicly through public speaking and logical argumentation. However, poetry had its place in a sophistic education. Indeed, William M.A. Grimaldi has written that the sophist Protagoras's own study of poetry both led him personally and constituted the avenue through which he led his students to consider "the structure and structuring character of language" (32). The next section leads on from Bernstein's pedagogical strategies into how the values promoted and developed by poetry and poetics (dissensus, difference, unknowability) lead onto forging a link between "poetry and public policy", as he subtitled an edited collection published in 1999.

b. Poetry and Public Policy

Throughout his critical writings, Bernstein makes claims for poetry as a space where the limits of language can be tested and transgressed. His descriptions of the space he claims for poetry bear a striking resemblance to the descriptions of the experimental language zone occupied by the sophists from their contemporary champions, discussed in Chapter 1. The crucial affinity is in the relation of linguistic experimentation, what Scott Pound called "mobiliz[ing] the inherent play of language" to manifesting political potential, which is a central tenet of the claims language poets and Charles Bernstein in particular have made of their writings. One of the most clearly-stated essays on this subject that Bernstein has written is his 'Comedy and the Poetics of Political Form'. In this essay, he contends:

When a poem enters the world it enters into a political, in the sense of ideological and historical, space. By refusing the criteria of efficacy for determining the political value of the poem, we confer political value on the

odd, eccentric, different, opaque, maladjusted – the nonconforming. We also insist that politics demands complex thinking and that poetry is an arena for such thinking: a place to explore the constitution of meaning, of groups, of nations, - of value. The politics of poetry of which I speak is open ended, the results of its interrogations are not assumed but discovered in the process and open to reformulations (1999, 4).

This conception of a poem entering into a “political space” suggests that every poem, however ‘non-political’ its subject matter or content, operates politically through its formal dynamics. This sense of the political dimension of a poem owes much to a reading of Frankfurt School aesthetics. In particular, the influence of Herbert Marcuse’s influential remark that art “opens the established reality to another dimension, that of possible liberation” (1972, 87) and Theodor Adorno’s contention that “art has turned against the status quo and what merely exists” (2004, 3) suggests the ways in which art can open up alternative ways of conceiving of society.

Bernstein writes that his conception of “political value” is in the “nonconforming” aspects of poetic form. The suggestion being made is that by exploring and realizing unconventional forms, poetry is able to suggest alternative political structures. The significance of Adorno’s writings on aesthetics for this argument are critical, as it was Adorno who inscribed the primacy of formal consideration into a sense of how a work of art can not merely reflect the social conditions of its creation but transcend them and critique them. As Jennifer McMahon has written, Adorno “located the source of art’s critical function in its aesthetic form” (161). When Bernstein writes that he is “refusing the criteria of efficacy when considering the political value of a poem”, he is following Adorno’s lead in stating that an artwork’s form can communicate politically in ways that go beyond a direct or sustained argument communicated by

the work's content itself, "even though discursive judgment is unable to define it" (2004, 174). Indeed, Bernstein quotes Adorno within the essay, the remark that "truth is the antithesis of existing society" (226), which Bernstein interprets as suggesting "the authority of our conventions is bogus, that only by negating the positive values that legitimate existing societies we can find truth" (226). Bernstein's interpretation of Adorno's remark here allows him to suggest that the "negating" aspect of language poetry's non-acceptance of conventional grammar is precisely what allows it to explore grammatical (and by extension societal) systems with greater 'truth'. In this interpretation, he is drawing on the sense in which a work of art can resist assimilation into the dominant values of a culture and instead, through its form, posit alternative organizational principles or possibilities. As Bernstein writes: "the political power of poetry is not measured in numbers; it instructs us to count differently" (226). For Adorno, as David Held has written, "social criticism flows from a work's form – not its content... Adorno's emphasis on form should not be mistaken for a simple insistence on the primary of style or technique. Rather, form refers to the whole 'internal' organization of art – to the capacity for art to restructure conventional patterns of meaning" (1980, 83). This point leads on to the second part of Bernstein's argument for the politics of poetic form, that "politics demands complex thinking" and that poetry and poetics can provide "an arena" for the sorts of thinking (notably about "the constitution of meaning") that it requires. Bernstein's progression from "constitution of meaning" to "of groups, of nations - of value" (incidentally employing the overt sophistic rhetorical device of a progressive tetracolon) mimics exactly the suggestion that is being made about aesthetic form, that it does indeed extend to a consideration of formal properties of political and social constitution. Exactly how this progression occurs, however, might be

considered to be rather remote in a society where the actual gap between artistic use of language and the practice of politics are so diligently kept apart. As Bernstein himself acknowledges, “I know it is almost a joke to speak of poetry and national affairs” (225). However, in Ancient Greece, the distance between artistic use of language and the political life of the state was not so clearly delimited as it is today: both of these seemingly disparate elements can be seen to converge in the artistic language practices of the sophists.

Adorno’s understanding of how art “embod[ies] the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure” (Held, 1980, 84) in itself is a sophistic position vis-à-vis the critical function of experimental language use. John Poulakos has written of sophistic rhetorical performances that “the only message that can be said to have overshadowed all others... was the message that language could not be delivered from its fundamental ambiguity. Thus, to engage in rhetoric, too, was to admit, if only implicitly, an otherness to one’s own discourse” (43). Sophistic rhetoric can therefore be seen as a sort of language-art that ‘embodies contradictions in its innermost structure’, by emphasizing above all “ambiguity” in language. By denying a sense of natural or plain speech and instead emphasizing technique, style and artifice, sophists brought about a sense of formal possibility and manifested an implicit sense of “otherness”. This is because the language forms they used pointed outwards away from a mere expression of their views and instead towards the very materiality of language and its resultant ambiguity and paradox. Furthermore, this same impulse can be detected in Bernstein’s claims that language poetry “confer[s] political value on the odd, eccentric, different, opaque, maladjusted – the nonconforming”. This is an insight that can be traced to a sophistic lineage. In his assessment of the significance of *Prodicus the Sophist*, Robert Mayhew asserts that

“the gulf between reason and reality (or language and reality) represents or is an expression of the inability of the human mind to fully grasp and articulate the facts of reality” (xxv). However, the writings of Prodicus, Gorgias and other sophists in fact demonstrate an awareness not only that there is a “gulf between language and reality” but that language is also constitutive of “reality”, an essential part of how “reality” is experienced. Prodicus’s writings are very different to those of Gorgias. Rather than the parodic, energetic language performances of Gorgian irony (discussed in chapter 5), Prodicus’s texts reveal him to be almost comically serious and pedantic. With a passion for etymology, he attempted to reform language use so that every word had only one meaning and one clearly defined connotation. He took this strategy to its limits, as Mayhew details:

The basic meaning of **δεινός** is ‘terrible’ though it can also mean ‘clever.’ In Plato’s *Protagoras*, Socrates reports that, concerning “terrible”, Prodicus chastises him for *Protagoras* as a “terribly wise man”, asking whether I am not ashamed to call good things terrible. Prodicus complains that a word should not contain two contradictory connotations (xvi).

Prodicus’s objections to this and other usages point towards an attitudinal awareness of the complexities of language, which is performed through his militant linguistic analysis. Prodicus’s work, while seeming to point towards a desire to fix and secure language in fact dramatizes an incredibly active, fluid and shifting language that is anything but fixed. For example, as Mayhew writes, he had a highly personalized approach to using words, the most famous example concerns the word ‘phlegm’, which Prodicus interpreted entirely differently to “everyone” (xvi) else, advocating the replacement of the conventional notion of “phlegm” with mucus. Prodicus’s incursions into linguistic analysis were part of his wider philosophical approach. He

was “an atheist” (xvii), and his interest in linguistic analysis undoubtedly reflects his belief that language is a man-made construct that is continually reconstructed based on the convenience and attitudes of the societies that use it, rather than a gift from the gods that must be preserved. Prodicus’s atheism also manifested itself in writings about “the origin of beliefs in the gods” (xvii). As such, Prodicus demonstrated a keen awareness of the ways in which societies adopt systems of belief and structures of governance based them. Taken together, the fragments on these subjects suggest a radical philosophical approach that took into account language’s structuring capacity and the ways in which language is used to create belief systems and to justify governmental structures.

The crucial difference between this sophistic attitude and Bernstein’s similar one today is perhaps in the way that society viewed sophistic performances as relevant to the political life of society, in a way that our contemporary society by no means does always consider art, and in particular poetry. As Pouloukos writes, “insofar as the sophists turned rhetoric into a spectacular enterprise, they can be said to have relied on- indeed, imitated- aspects of the dramatic tradition they had encountered. But insofar as they expanded the spectacular from the theater to the courtroom, the Assembly or other places of public gathering, they can be said to have theatricalized rhetorical discourse, giving it a new face. Thus, by combining two heterogenous elements, spectacles and discourse, the sophists in effect created a new amalgam” (43). It is in this “amalgam” of “assembly” and “theater” and “spectacles and discourse” that the sophists’ experimentations with language achieve their specifically political content. Within their works, the distinction between aesthetics, philosophy and politics is fundamentally more blurred, a fact that is illustrated by Plato’s pre-occupation in *The Sophist* and elsewhere of distinguishing and categorising the

statesman from the sophist and the philosopher. It is this same confluence of and “amalgam” of artifice and politics that Bernstein appears to be envisioning when he writes of the progression from questions concerning complex thinking of “the constitution of meaning, of groups, of nations – of value”. This impulse to amalgamate the exploration of aesthetic forms with the exploration of social and political forms can also be located within Bernstein’s position of “insisting that stylistic innovations be recognized not only as aesthetic conventions but also as alternative social formations” (227).

If the link between “poetry and public policy” is self confessedly “almost a joke”, the task of suggesting what the “alternative social formations” might amount to could be considered a banana skin. However, if Bernstein is nevertheless willing to engage in a serious and committed exploration with poetry as a potential agency of public policy and politics, it is only by considering the specific values that Bernstein’s poetry promotes in the context of contemporary politics that any sense of how Bernstein’s poetics can be considered, as they are often claimed to be, of political importance. It is arguably in the reluctance of critics to consider specifically literary works in relation to those of contemporary policy analysts and political theorists that results in the dramatic felt difference between poetry and politics (almost in spite of the increased claims made for writing in political forms). The distance between the values promoted in Bernstein’s poetics (difference, instability, multiplicity etc) may seem, and in many ways are, very far from the political structures we are familiar with in contemporary democracies. However by analyzing those formal organization principles and values that Bernstein’s poetry presents and analyzing them in relation to those of political theorists, it is possible to posit just how Bernstein’s work might be considered to manifest political values. Indeed, it also brings Bernstein’s poetics

into closer approximation to the political value associated with sophisticated performances in Ancient Athens. Perhaps the most apparent of the values expressed in Bernstein's poetry is that of 'difference', of plurality and multiplicity. As readings throughout this thesis are intended to show, at a fundamental level his poetry enacts a dramatic sense of linguistic experimentation and difference that amounts to a celebration of the irreconcilability of differences. In this aspect, the values expressed by his poetics might be considered to resemble those found in the work of the political theorist and sociologist David Held, whose works on Adorno describe a method that embodies "contradiction" (1984, 84). Held's political proposition of 'cosmopolitanism' provides just such a framework or model through which to view Bernstein's poetics of public policy. Indeed, by reading Bernstein's poetics within the framework of Held's analysis of contemporary geopolitics, it is possible to see what makes them so immediately relevant and potentially useful. The model of 'cosmopolitanism' that Held advances is one in which he with great clarity lays out how societies could equip themselves more effectively to act collaboratively and collectively, while also enshrining maximum difference and non-homogeneity. The aesthetic values which Bernstein's work promotes are remarkably in-tune with those that Held suggests in his work are necessary for the development of a 'cosmopolitan' global society. Of course, Held's 'cosmopolitan' approach is just one perspective on how these values of plurality and difference could be developed into organizational political principles. However, it is worth considering the affinities between Bernstein's poetics and Held's politics as an example of the sort of political system that the values presented in Bernstein's poetics might be considered to promote. Held has written of 'cosmopolitanism' that it is: "the triumph of difference". This is a phrase that (in spite of its inherent triumphalism- Bernstein would most likely use an

alternative phrase such as the ‘proliferation of difference’) could equally apply to Bernstein’s poetics. At a formal level, an aesthetics of multiplicity is fundamentally written into what Held, writing of Adorno’s aesthetic theory, called “the whole internal organisation” of Bernstein’s art. The brief reading of a section of ‘Searchless Warrant’ that follows is intended to demonstrate this aspect of Bernstein’s formal strategies without necessarily pre-empting it. It is indebted in the tools used in the analysis to the groundbreaking 1978 work *Poetic Artifice* by the poet Veronica Forrest-Thomson, of whom Bernstein has written in his poem-essay ‘Artifice of Absorption’. Forrest-Thomson’s book proceeds by analyzing what she calls the “non-semantic levels” of a poem’s artifice. However, following Bernstein’s lead in ‘Artifice of Absorption’, where he states that “I would say that such elements as line breaks, acoustic patterns, syntax etc *are* meaningful” (1992, 12), this reading of ‘Searchless Warrant’ focuses not on the poem’s thematic content so much as the semantic implications of its formal organization, what Bernstein calls “the extra-lexical” (1999, 299) but nevertheless meaningful architecture of the poem.

Germinal detonation inculcates missing resemblance
not otherwise pared, or, wishing you’d said, sank
curtly, brusque insolence narrowing on dated theatrics,
brutalized homilies to regulated mists. The parson
takes the moment to wish for a speedy return in a gabardine
suit. Drips decorate the porcelain, view
is emblazoned on polished pretense, insular
monuments. A restive restraint corrals
the aroma; reception areas are cordoned

off in other words liquid laminated. Restraint
takes a breather, ripping through halls of necrotic
prostration, autochthonous
titillation (1987, 110)

These opening lines of ‘Searchless Warrant’ immediately situate the reader in a poetics of, as the line puts it, “germinal detonation”. This phrase both enacts and describes what this poem dramatizes: the proliferation of multiple interpretative possibilities. “Germinal detonation” refers to a sense of explosive development, with things multiplying and germinating exponentially and this phrase enacts just such a process. Is “germinal detonation” germ warfare? Or does it refer to Emile Zola’s masterpiece ‘Germinal’? Its capitalized position at the start of the line suggests it could, and indeed, the tendency of Zola’s novels to build towards an explosive, possibly revolutionary conclusion could also make “Germinal detonation” a literary advice and a social commentary of the sort employed by the great ‘naturalist’ writer. “Detonation” recalls its anagram “denotation”, writing the phrase “germinal denotation” into the text. “Germinal denotation” could be taken as a cue for a reading practice that acknowledges the text’s capacity to “germinate”, i.e. spread multiple meanings across multiple planes. Indeed, it is part of the poem’s strategy that this process is enacted in a way that draws attention to itself. The phrase “germinal detonation” has stopped the reading in its tracks, (‘arresting’ the attention if we adopt the metaphor established in Bernstein’s title). However, the complete line reads “Germinal detonation inculcates missing resemblance”. The phrase “inculcates missing resemblance” seems to describe exactly what the preceding reading has done when it replaced “detonation” with its “missing resemblance” “denotation”. Or

indeed, more generally, when it translated “germinal detonation” into ‘chemical bomb’ or ‘germ warfare’. At the level of sound, the line transitions from the edgy abundance of “t”, “d” and “c” sounds, to the softer “s”s of “missing resemblance”, which also carry over into the next line in words such as “otherwise” “wishing” “said” and “sank”. However, the third line marks the return of “t” “c” and “d” consonants in the words “curtly” “dated” and “theatrics”. The effect is one of spreading, the “s” sounds spreading across the first and second lines but not eliminating the “t”, “c” and “d” sounds of the first line. This sense of ‘spreading’ or ‘multiplicity’ can also be traced to a technique of grouping of words by their sound. For example, in line three the word “brusque” anticipates the word “brutalized” through the repetition of “bru”. Other possible groups in this section would be “said, sank”, “porcelain/polished”, “porcelain/ pretense”, “restive restraint”, “insular/ inculcates/ insolence”, “drips/ ripping”, “liquid laminated”, “monuments/ moment”, “gabardine/ germinal”, “cordoned/ corrals”, “reception/ regulated/ return”. These groups are generated through sound patterning. Another, different set could also be arrived at through semantic grouping of similar or connected ideas: “emblazoned/ monuments/ homilies/ decorate/ parson/ theatrics/ halls/ gabardine/ prostration/ pretense/” all suggest commemoration and ceremony; “drips/ liquid/ aroma/ sank/ mists” all suggest various degrees of liquidity; meanwhile, the group “pared/ brusque/ brutalized/ ripping/ restraint/ corrals” suggest various degrees of violence, control or force. One of the consequences of these semantic and sonic groups is that it increases the referential capacity of the poem. The ear and the eye become tuned up to looking for similar sounds and visual representations and the mind sees synonyms and other semantic links that aren’t there. The capacity of words to refer to other words is greatly increased by this process, creating a layered multiplicity of reference. The

most immediately apparent example of this is the one already discussed, “denotation” as a word referred to within the word “detonation”, but there are many other examples: “pared” could refer to its homophone “paired”, especially given the ‘grouping process’ just described. Given the appearance of “prostration” a few lines down, the phrase “sank curtly” seems to refer to the word “curtsey”, a feature that is endorsed by the semantic link with “sank” and the phonic link with “curtly”. There is another group of words, too. A group of words from specialized or esoteric vocabularies: “necrotic” and “autochthonous” are the two clearest examples from this section of the poem. Requiring looking up in a dictionary, these words increase the sensation of multi-referentiality by encouraging the reader to translate the words prior to looking them up, to focus on component parts of the word to try and work it out. “Necrotic” in fact refers to a dead cell within live tissue and “autochthonous” is used to refer to something as originating where found, such as of a blood clot. As a metaphor within Bernstein’s poem, it could be taken to be a description of the word itself, its consonant-heavy pile-up of “chth” providing a ‘clot’ at the phonic level.

Taken together these aspects of Bernstein’s poem create an overall effect that is one of language’s multiplicity, an increased and germinating referentiality that spreads across both the meaning and the sound of words. Indeed, the presence in the poem of the phrase “in other words”, further suggests this sense of language’s multiplicity of reference. However, the effect is not one of semantic free-play where ‘anything goes’. Rather than this, the poem constantly addresses the kinds of systems that are used to read poems and to interpret meaning from language. There is a constant sense of interrogating regulation and systematization, which can be seen from the group of words relating to both ‘ceremony’ and ‘restraint’. These two ideas of multiplicity and difference on the one hand and regulation and system on the other

creates the poem's most compelling dynamic and is not settled within the text: "a restive restraint corrals" and "restraint takes a breather". This dynamic is one of the ways in which the text "embodies contradictions", a feature of the poem that is also detectable in the frequent employment of paradox "restive restraint", "regulated mist", "corrals the aroma", "liquid laminated" etc. The image group related to liquid also provides a possible handle on what sort of poem 'Searchless Warrant' is. The frequency of 'liquidity' metaphors gives the poem a sense of saturation. This mirrors that of the saturation of referentiality just described. Indeed, so 'saturated' is the poem in liquidity metaphors and in referentiality, that it recalls Bernstein's own metaphor for a poem in 'Artifice of Absorption', that of "a spongy surface" that can absorb differences and multiplicity and retain its essential shape. By forming a poetic surface saturated with multiple meanings and interpretations across different planes, Bernstein's poetics is able to absorb each instance of the reading and interpretation process without fully realizing itself in totality.

c. Semblance and Simulacrum

Bernstein's essay 'Semblance' was first published in a symposium on 'Death of the Referent?' for the British magazine *Reality Studios*, run by the poet and publisher Ken Edwards. This initial publication is important, because it emphasizes that Bernstein's essay is a response to a notion that had been used to describe the language experiments of the language writers, namely that their work explored an abstracted language in which the relation of words to their referents was severed. However, rather than "death of the referent", Bernstein's essay advances a case for "a recharged use of the multivalent referential vectors that any word has" (1986, 34). Bernstein

replaces the sense of the bridge between word and referent being severed with a notion of the fabric of the bridges (and tunnels, webs etc) between words and their multiple referents being more comprehensively understood and explored. In the essay, Bernstein explores how language writing explores “ways of releasing the energy inherent in the referential dimension of language” (35). He opposes the techniques of language writing with those of more “standard” forms of writing as follows:

Sentences that follow standard grammatical patterns allow the accumulating references to enthrall the reader by diminishing diversions from a constructed representations. In this way, each work’s references work in harmony by reinforcing a spatiotemporal order by conventionalized by the bulk of writing practice that creates ‘the standard’ (36).

Bernstein’s conception of standard language use, then, is one of diminishing returns whereby the act of reading and understanding is an automatic process of reducing the possible referents down to their minimum in order to understand the specific things being represented within the text. However, contrasted with this, language writing generates multiple possible referents on an ongoing basis, multiplying the referential possibilities for words, sentences and other sense units through increasing the possibilities both grammatically and sequentially. The example Bernstein uses to illustrate the difference is from the writing of Barrett Watten, where the accumulation of grammatically standard sentences placed side by side results in “a perceptual vividness... [which is] intensified for each sentence... [because of] the abruptness of the cuts”: “Words elect us. The lamp sits atop the table in the study. The tower is burnt orange...” (37). This example, chosen by Bernstein, illustrates the referential possibilities that Watten’s juxtaposed sentences incorporates. For example, “the tower is burnt orange” can clearly refer to “the lamp... atop the table” but needn’t in the

context just refer to this; it could also refer to an entirely other tower, a tower of Babel perhaps, indicated by the reference to “burnt orange”, the colour of the middle portion of the tower in Peter Brueghel’s *The Tower of Babel* painting. Bernstein’s essay suggests that this sort of multiplicity of meaning and uncertainty of referent is constantly inherent in all language use but that it is obscured by our lack of awareness to the conventions that operate in most standard texts. Bernstein’s essay is a work of poetics, i.e. concerned with the composition and constitution of literary texts. However, as with many of Bernstein’s texts, its relevance spills over into literary theory and also philosophy.

Given that its principal subject is the referents of words as used within literary texts, the title of Bernstein’s essay, ‘Semblance’, clearly locates its theoretical underpinnings in relation to the works of postmodern philosophers and theorists of the “simulacrum”. In particular, the work of Baudrillard seems relevant, in whose writings (and in particular in *Simulacra and Simulation*) is diagnosed the hyperreality of the referent, whereby the ‘reality’ referred to by signs is both a product of them and consumed by them, dissolving and disrupting the sense of a stable relationship between word (or image) and referent. In contemporary business practices, media culture and public life, Baudrillard writes, “there is no greater referent or deeper finality than this ‘simulacral’ business” (1994, 126). The relevance of Baudrillard’s text to Bernstein’s conception of writing in such a way as to suggest as much of a multitude of referents as possible in as open and multi-structured a way as possible is that by doing so he is drawing attention to language as not referring straightforwardly to its signified (reality). Rather than this, language is conceived of as a network of possible referents which in fact constitute reality rather than point to it: i.e. language (and reality) are caught together as “semblance”. Indeed, in *Content’s Dream*

Bernstein has suggested that his language experiments and discursive escapism build on the work of Baudrillard, extending his work into the poetics and composition of texts themselves. He writes: “Baudrillard’s writing practice, however, mirrors the very code he wishes to be set loose from, without self-reflection on this fact” (198). Bernstein’s work, then, incorporates Baudrillard’s reflections on the “monopoly of the code” (198) but extends an awareness of this into the actual fabric of writing itself by constantly problematizing the prevailing code of discursiveness, rationality and clarity. Writing in the way suggested in ‘Semblance’ demonstrates an awareness that the unproblematic acceptance of word referring simply to referent is an acceptance of the prevailing structures through which the world is experienced. In contrast to this, Bernstein suggests a way of writing in which “textures, vocabularies, discourses, constructivist modes of radically different character are not integrated into a field as part of a pre-determined planar architecture; the gaps and jumps compose a space within shifting parameters, types and styles of discourse constantly crisscrossing, interacting, creating new gels” (39). The words he employs here emphasize his point: “gels” belonging to the language of the stage; architecture clearly suggesting material and structurality and “textures” and even “gap” referring both to clothing and textuality. Bernstein is emphasizing the fabric of words, their non-naturalness and their multiplicity.

His title ‘Semblance’ itself enacts the essay within an ancient and enduring conversation about language, simulacrum and reality. Perhaps the most direct reference within Bernstein’s word choice of ‘semblance’ is to Plato’s *The Sophist*. *The Sophist* has been described by a number of critics as central to the philosophical process of investigating ‘simulacrum’ and ‘semblance’. Drawing on the work of Jean Luc Nancy, Max Statkiewicz has written extensively about the problematic

‘semblances’ within Plato’s text *The Sophist*. This makes itself felt at the level of the text itself:

How to tell the sophist from *The Sophist*? Plato scholars acknowledge that there is no formal way to distinguish the two cases: neither capitalization nor italics are available in Greek manuscripts, and there are no other formal marks that would allow us to tell the difference between the man and the text” (102).

Within the formal dynamics of *The Sophist*, then, is concealed a central ambiguity about reference, a problematic dual possibility of meaning. Given that Plato’s *The Sophist* is so concerned with divining the definition of ‘the sophist’ and in distinguishing it from his own activities as a philosopher, this ambiguity of referent is highly operative in undermining the certainties of definition that are supposed to be reached by the end of the dialogue. As Statkiewicz writes, this draws “Plato’s text into the mimetic play of the sophist” (103). At a purely formal level, then, *The Sophist* performs the sort of ‘sembling’ and dissembling play that Bernstein advocates within ‘Semblance’. The context of the subject of the dialogue makes this ambiguity of referent even more potent and performative. The interlocutors in Plato’s dialogue are clear about their task: to define the sophist and distinguish it from the philosopher and the statesman. The sophist, it is suggested, is simply a “semblance” of the philosopher. The Eleatic Stranger is attempting to clarify the essence of the philosopher in order to distinguish it from that which it is not (but that might appear to be similar.)

Deleuze, in particular, has developed a reading of *The Sophist* that regards it as pivotal within Platonism in reaching an endpoint or collapse of the system of essences as opposed to semblances:

It may be that the end of the *Sophist* contains the most extraordinary adventure of Platonism: as a consequence of searching for the simulacrum and leaning over its abyss, Plato discovers, in the flash of an instant, that the simulacrum is not only a false copy but that it places in question the very notations of copy and model. The final definition of the sophist leads us to the point where we can no longer distinguish him from Socrates himself – the ironist working in private by means of brief arguments. Was it not necessary to push irony to that extreme? (2004, 294).

The critic Paul Patton has summed up Deleuze's reading of Plato's *Sophist* as follows:

Deleuze's deconstructive reading of Platonism argues that it offers both the elements of a representational conception of the world, albeit in the meager resources of the theory of Forms, and the means to overturn that conception. To the extent that simulacra are defined by their power successfully to imitate the appearances of things, their existence threatens to undermine the very possibility of distinguishing between real things and mere illusions. Deleuze suggests that this is what occurs at the end of the *Sophist* where the Eleatic Stranger offers a definition of the sophist such that he can no longer be distinguished from Socrates himself (34).

Deleuze's reading of *The Sophist*, then, is as a text that paves the way for postmodern critiques of Platonism right at the heart of the Platonic project itself. *The Sophist* is the text that ruptures the stable relationship between the simulacrum and reality, between the poetic, mimetic way of interpreting the world and the philosophical method. The distinction between the two vanishes along with the distinction between sophist and philosopher, between semblance and reality. The world is understood as simulacrum, as a hyperreal web of referents. Indeed, Bernstein's text *The Sophist* re-enacts the

same ambiguity of referent as Plato's text: is his title referring to Plato's *The Sophist* or to the figure of 'the sophist', merely capitalized for the benefit of titular conventions? By locating his text *The Sophist*, his essay 'Semblance' and by extension his wider poetics in relation to this critical moment in philosophy when the Platonic project anticipates its own overthrowing, Bernstein provocatively channels his poetic project into an ancient and postmodern thought-debate concerning representation and reality.

Chapter 2. I. Bernstein Reading Cavell (and Talking to Albritton?)

"I HATE SPEECH" - Robert Grenier

Robert Grenier's remark, with which he inaugurated the first issue of the little magazine 'This' in 1971, co-edited with Barrett Watten, is a categorically dissembling statement. It reads as an impassioned rail against assumptions about the natural place of 'speech' in poetry while undoing its own logic by being itself a speech-act, a fact which is highlighted by the capitalization and the emphatic colloquialism of the expression "HATE". This utterance has become one of the most influential (and succinct) statements of intent by any writer associated with language poetry and has attracted significant critical attention. Bob Perelman has described this statement as "an important literary gesture" (1996, 40) and Ron Silliman declared it as signalling "a breach – and a new moment in American writing" (1986, xvii), whereas Marjorie Perloff has called it a "manifesto" (2004, 129). The statement's power and impact comes from its ambiguity and multiplicity. It implies a move away from poetry that privileges the speaking voice and the personal subjective position; however, on the other hand, it also cautions against the logic that the subject can necessarily be avoided in a universalizing and totalizing way by being itself a speech act. Another aspect of this statement is that it might suggest an opposition between "speech" and "conversation" or "discussion", where "speech" would refer to a univocal delivery from speaker to hearer and "conversation" would acknowledge multiple perspectives and demonstrate an awareness of the cultural and social implications of every speech act, while also implying reader engagement and reader-response. This interpretation of "I HATE SPEECH" makes it not just a negation of what has been described as

‘workshop poetry’, in Marjorie Perloff’s words “dominated by a regressively romantic concept of the poet as a man speaking to men (or a woman speaking to women – the principle is the same), by the notion that poetry is emotion recollected in tranquility, the poet speaking for all of us - only more sensitively, perceptively, expertly” (1998, 182). Rather than this simply negative and oppositional stance, reading “I HATE SPEECH” against itself as a positive statement transforms it into a suggestive endorsement of a poetic practice rooted in “conversation” and “discussion”.

The language poets have been nothing if not engaged in “conversation”. Their pre-occupation with poetics alongside poetry is just one aspect of this talkativeness. In countless interviews, talks, reading series, reviews, books of criticism, essays, radio shows, email list-servs, conference panels, blogs, online databases, publishing houses, little magazines, academic forums, and many other media, the language poets have stretched and explored the ways in which literary movements and communities can converse and engage with both writers of their own geographic particular and writers from all over the world. As Bob Perelman has put it, a number of language poets have attempted “to redraw or undo generic boundaries between poetry and criticism” (11). For language poets, the act of writing poetry has become a critical act that demands the same attentiveness and explorations of literary histories and conventions as the act of criticism; conversely, in their critical and theoretical writings, language poets have been at the forefront of expanding the parameters of critical writing in innovative and experimental ways. Furthermore, collaboration, the act of putting the work of two poets in conversation with one another or two art forms in conversation with one another, has been a bedrock of language poetry and a mainstay of the way in which language poets have influenced their own reception history. Engendering theoretical

and critical discussions surrounding their work themselves, they have pre-empted and initiated a critical culture surrounding not just their own poetry but that of other recent experimental movements and tendencies, such as New Narrative writing, vispo, Flarf, Conceptual Poetry etc. This conversational culture has resulted in the publication of books of theory and criticism from many of the major language poets: Bob Perelman's *The Marginalisation of Poetry*, Ron Silliman's *The New Sentence*, Barrett Watten's *The Constructivist Moment*, Lyn Hejinian's *The Language of Inquiry*, a number of volumes by Rachel Blau Du Plessis and Bruce Andrews' *Paradise and Method*, to name just a few influential volumes. Bernstein's four volumes of essays have been a major part of this wealth of critical engagement on the part of language poets, as well as his edited collection *The Politics of Poetic Form*. Indeed, Bernstein has continued to play a critical role in continuing and expanding these dialogues across a diverse range of programs and initiatives, including the Poetics List Serv, the Poetics Program at SUNY Buffalo, the Electronic Poetry Center, the PennSound Archive, his Close Listening reading series, his LineBreak radio show, his syllabi on experimental poetry and poetics at SUNY Buffalo and University of Pennsylvania and many other projects besides. His involvement in PennSound and the Poetics ListServ are perhaps worthy of particular note because of their focus on presenting interviews and initiating conversations respectively. The Poetics ListServ is at its best (and conceptually) a forum for discussion of all aspects of poetry, poetics (fields that spread out into much wider discussions of culture and politics). Through these projects and others, Bernstein has brought into conversation experimental poetry and poetics from around the world.

In his essay 'Language Poetry and Collective Life', Oren Izenberg has stressed the ways in which language poets fostered a literary community and

collective conversation: “Language poetry has, since its inception in 1971, devoted a significant portion of its energies to the construction of an ‘alternative’ literary culture, founding little magazines such as *This*, *Hills*, *o-blek*, *Temblor*, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, *Poetics Journal* and *Aerial*, small presses such as *Roof*, *Potes and Poets*, *O Books*, *The Figures*, *Tuumba*, and *Sun and Moon*, and an endless number of mimeos, broadsheets, newsletters, reading series, collaborations, and, of course, conferences” (144). Given this development of the cultural mechanisms for the publication and dissemination of poetry, Izenberg remarks that language poets have created more than just an avant garde literary movement and that they have self-consciously fostered a sense of themselves as “the kind of thing anthropologists would be interested in” (144), i.e. a ‘culture’ as well as a literary movement. Izenberg locates this impulse within Bernstein’s oft-employed phrase “official verse culture”, which he regards as “conceptually conflating “verse” and “culture”” (145). In developing his analysis of language poetry as a social movement as much (he in fact argues that it is more) than a literary one, Izenberg prioritises their conversational modes, arguing that:

It is just such an anthropological motive that underwrites Language poetry’s peculiar forms of self-presentation and preservation – its tendency to publish not just its poems but its conversations about poems, and not just those conversations, but jokes amidst those conversations, laughter at the jokes, stumbles, interruptions, and silences – as though on behalf of some future civilization studying its own past (145).

Izenberg’s analyses of the impulses behind language poetry’s processes of self-documenting the ‘conversation’ surrounding its production, which begin interestingly, ultimately leads to his shutting off a reading of the poetry itself, stating that language

poetry displays “what I take to be an objective and, indeed, deliberated feature of the work: the overall thinness or insubstantiality of the poems language poets have made” (140). This aesthetic judgement leads him to state that “the rising tally of similarities and texts places impossible demands on our capacity and will to attend to the manifest differences between one poem and another, to articulate the fine distinctions of tone or affect; until the effort to immerse oneself in Language poetry produces the sensation that language as Language poetry imagines and manifests it has neither affect nor tone, and that language as language poetry imagines and manifests it demands neither articulation nor, precisely, attention” (142). The argument being advanced is that the poems are secondary to the conscious effort to create an “alternative” social or culture, and that language poetry’s value is not in the poems themselves, which are characterized as displaying homogeneity to the point of exhaustion, but in the movement’s iteration of social structure. Furthermore, Izenberg claims that it is precisely the lack of nuance and variety in the poems of language poetry that allows it to have any claim for the social:

Language poets are Language poets in just this sense – they intend their poems not as sentences representing propositions, but as exemplifications of the species-specific creative competence to freely produce and to recognize new sentences as sentences in language (162).

According to Izenberg, it is therefore in, as he sees it, language poetry’s lack of tonal differentiation and seemingly endless capacity for multiplicity and production of sentences (rather than any attention to what those sentences might mean or how they might mean) that language poetry most fully performs the capacity for societies to sociate themselves in relation to language. The syntactical experiments of language poets then come to be important only in as much as it creates new opportunities for

sentences to be recognized as such by the communities into which they enter. In this characterization, language poetry is represented as “an endlessly productive faculty generating a potentially endless array of “New Sentences”, and not for use or instruction but as bare proof of its existence and tokens of its nature” (162). Intriguing as Izenberg’s thesis is, it winds up portraying language poetry as a monotonous and monolithic collective machine producing language purely to demonstrate that it exists and is a viable society. At first there seems a certain plausibility to his conception to the extent that language poetry does iterate a sense of a society’s creativity and productivity through creating and exploring new forms of grammar and syntactical arrangements. Nevertheless, the characterization of language poetry as devoid of tonal variety or variety of any kind seems a misreading of language poetry and of poetic culture as a whole. Poets associated with language poetry have produced some of the most various poetic writing of the last forty years. I would argue that language poetry is considerably more multiplicitous in tone, style, affect, structure, organizational principles, vocabulary, content, subject matter, theoretical underpinnings, sound patternings and any other measurements that are used to delineate different kinds of poetry from other kinds of poetry than any other movement in literature. The zaum poetry of P. Inman and David Melnick, the ongoing lyrical “Readings” project of Beverley Dahlen, the slap-stick poetics of some of Bernstein’s work, the mega-scale works of Ron Silliman, the minimalist lyrics of Rae Armantrout, the outlandish performance-oriented work of Bruce Andrews, the historical layerings of Susan Howe. The list could go on and on. The work of none of these writers is alike, and certainly their works are distinctly more various in tone, affect and style than a similar selection of poets writing in more traditional modes, whose poems would display considerably more coherent approach to style, structure and affect. It seems as though

Izenberg mistakes this very multiplicity and variety in language poetry for its opposite; the works of language poets are too various, too different, too unlike other works, that for Izenberg this means he loses the capacity to pay attention to those differences. Language poetry, in its employment of wildly divergent and multiplicitous experimental modes, demands more from the reader than some more conventionally-oriented works. However, this is not in itself justification for claiming that those differences are not there or that they don't matter and that what matters is in fact language poetry's iteration of the socious through the simple fact of its production of sentences. The poetry of language poetry is as vital a part of its interest as a literary phenomenon and furthermore the poems and writings themselves need not be subsumed under a larger mega-project with the sole posited aim of articulating its existence through the production of language. This conception of language poetry subsumes the poetry under the word language in order to avoid paying heed to the differences and difficulties, the varieties and idiosyncracies of individual language poems.

Izenberg's characterization of language poetry as a flat, indistinguishable mass has also been suggested by critics such as Michel Delville, who describes "a reluctance to go beyond an emphasis placed strictly on the syntactic and semantic aspects of linguistic production" (238) and Albert Gelpi, who has remarked that language poetry's "immediate consequence is to paralyze the capacity of language for change and effecting change and to reduce the range of reference and resonance to mere spread of surface", even though he admits that some writers associated with language poetry have produced work that "denies this deadening premise" (538). The issue with these characterisations of language poetry is that they simply do not hold up to a reading of much of the poetry itself. "An emphasis placed strictly on the

syntactic and semantic aspects of linguistic production” needn’t flatten any possible meaningful reading of the poem. Rather, the conscious explorations of language at the level of language can in fact result in poems that have increased capacity for multiple meanings across multiple planes. However, in spite of these issues, Izenberg’s argument is a compelling one and one that if it were modified in such a way as to incorporate the poetry itself can articulate what it is that makes language poetry a social project as well as a literary one. In order to do this, it is useful to return to where Izenberg’s argument commences, the moment when he characterizes language poetry as putting an emphasis on “its tendency to publish not just its poems but conversations about poems.” The importance of ‘conversation’ to language poetry seems entirely obliterated and silenced in Izenberg’s later description of a kind of collective factory producing sentences that aren’t really meant to be read. However, by replacing conversation at the centre of a description of language poetry, and seeing both the poems and the critical work as part of that conversation a much less totalizing and monolithic picture emerges. Izenberg’s version fails to take into account the ways in which language poets respond to and read each others work and the ways in which language poems themselves have generated reading activity in such a way as not to inhibit “attention” in the way he describes but that in fact demand it. In this picture, language poems become fundamental to the project as expressions of difference (and not enveloped under a homogenous “thinness”) whose principal value is in the conversational explorations they generate when attested to with care and attention in their own right. It is a picture where ‘conversational activity’ can be taken to be of fundamental importance to the process of reading language poetry and to the social activities of language poetry more generally.

In reference to Bernstein's poetics, this activity began with *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, the innovative magazine of poetics and criticism which he co-edited with Bruce Andrews from 1978 - 1981. An extended discussion of the journal forms the basis of the first section of chapter 3. However, another early instance of Bernstein and Andrews fostering and engaging in conversation was also engendered by the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Distribution Service*, details of which have been made available online through the Eclipse Project (itself an extension of the sort of dialogic impulse that fuelled the communities of writers associated with language poetry). A distribution list and premises-less library of out of print titles by experimental and progressive poets, it was designed to enable sharing of titles among the members of the service (with the cost of photocopying and postage). As the header to one of the lists remarks: "Even when published, writing we wish to read often goes out of print with dismaying rapidity – closing off a dialogue. Out-of-print and unpublished works may still circulate among a small circle of friends. Here, we hope to sustain that dialogue and expand that circle." Works were available either in their original published format or as photocopies, and the service was operated by Bernstein, Silliman and Andrews. As the critic Ann Vickery has noted, the service was conceived to "strengthen affinities of interest" (28) across the coastal divide between East and West Coast language poets. According to the Eclipse Project, it was a "short-lived" initiative, however, it nevertheless demonstrates the innovative ways in which language poets went about ensuring their works were 'talking to' as a large a circle of interested parties as possible and that those in the ever-expanding "circle" were able to participate, respond and 'talk back'. In suggesting 'talk' and 'conversation' as paradigms for certain strands of poetics in both Bernstein's oeuvre and language poetics more generally, the guiding principle is that these modes offer a

way of thinking about writing that the printed page and publication process had moved beyond or excluded and that the innovative and extensive publication (by which word I mean the full extent of their dissemination mechanisms printed and otherwise) processes employed by the language poets were able to re-engage.

Perelman has written:

Talk is the most mixed of media: social, bodily, clichéd, spontaneous, conflictual, identificatory. But the tone and rhythm of culturally perspicacious speech make for an effective token of the possibility of individual agency, however local, within the densely conflicted institutional grids of the contemporary socialscape. Print and the hierarchies of publishing and circulation are territories where social contentions are as densely coded as anywhere: the evanescent charms of talk are difficult to discern in printed speech (1998, 200).

“Talk” as opposed to “printed speech”, therefore, offers something that is more overtly “social”, “conflictual” and “identificatory”. It offers a mode of engagement that lays itself bare as a way of interacting with societal and political pressures, something that gets obscured by the “social contentions” of the publishing marketplace. “Talk” is always something in motion and evolving, whereas the conventional understanding of the printed page would see it as something finalized and defined. The language poets brought these aspects of the aesthetics of “talk” onto the printed page through their rejection of the concept of the poem as emanating from a single unified perspective, their experiments with multiple points of view and multiple authorship, their insistence on reader-interaction and response to the text and their tendency towards poems that resist finality, unity and totality of perception and

understanding. Bernstein's poetry is "conversational" in the sense of it being engaged in the responsive and contextual activity of talking.

Chapter 2. II. “Can we talk?” (Bernstein, 2010, 187)

“Can we talk?” This simple and familiar phrase is a way of inviting confidence and intimacy and a way of “getting down to business”, of sorting things out. It’s a mode of thinking, in a way, and possibly of starting afresh, as so often in contemporary usage, where the phrase “can we talk?” pre-empts a change in relationship or a change at work. It signifies a start of a conversation, an addressing of things and suggested program of communication, of moving forward. Speaking of his time at Harvard University in an autobiographical interview with the poet and scholar Loss Pequeno Glazier, Bernstein has singled out two philosophers who he believes were of particular influence on his thinking:

Two philosophers, Stanley Cavell and Rogers Albritton, were particularly important for me at Harvard. The first year I was there they split one of those grand tours of Western thought, Albritton from the pre-Socratics to the Middle Ages, and Cavell from the Enlightenment on. Each brought his own quirky, thought-filled style to the occasion (Bernstein, 2010, 42).

The influence of the philosopher Stanley Cavell on Bernstein’s poetry has been discussed in a number of publications, both by Bernstein himself and by a number of critics. These works include Ursula Göricke’s dissertation ‘Poetry as Epistemological Enquiry: Reading Bernstein, Reading Cavell, Reading Wittgenstein’ (2003), which takes its cue from Bernstein’s essay ‘Reading Cavell, Reading Wittgenstein’, building on the importance attached to Cavell’s conception of “reading” in Bernstein’s essay to develop a sense of his poetry as a form of “epistemological enquiry”(15) through reading. Göricke’s essay convincingly extends Cavell’s idea of “redemptive reading” (16) to describe Bernstein’s poetics of collapsing the distinction between reader and

author and requiring the reading of texts to involve a reading by the reader of themselves as well as the language of the text itself. Her argument is that a reading that

is willing to pay respect to each and every word and in this way to become receptive to the environments of words, to the fields of their everyday use, as well as the semantic interconnections between words and on a more complex level the interconnections between themes... amounts to a grammatical and epistemological enquiry (215).

Receptivity is a crucial element of her argument and it involves the reader approaching texts with what she calls an “active passivity” (215), i.e. the ability to put aside existing viewpoints or demands (for meaning or form) and respond instead to the dynamics of the words themselves in order to learn about the dynamics of the world and society. As the critic Gerald Bruns has also remarked, for Cavell, “there is no reading that is not also a being-read” (1999, 196).

This chapter intends to further investigate Cavell’s influence on Bernstein in light of the preceding discussion of sophistry. In particular, I want to demonstrate that the act of “talking”, so central to the practice of the sophists, is an alternative and useful avenue through which to understand what Bernstein’s poetry does, as opposed to (and aligned with) “reading”. By doing so, the suggestion is that Bernstein’s poetry might be considered to enact a “conversation” and “discourse”. In this version of Bernstein’s “talkative” poetics, the second influential figure mentioned by Bernstein from his Harvard days emerges into view: Rogers Albritton. Olaf Hansen has remarked of Cavell’s philosophical position that he always sets out from a position of questioning rather than answering, from a position of “unexplored territory”:

Cavell came into this world the way the pre-Socratic philosophers came into theirs. For the early Greeks, the cosmos was an unexplored territory, just as the New World, America, was for Cavell... For both Cavell and the early Greeks, questions inevitably arose concerning the relationship between language and nature, mankind and the self, and finally between the environment and society. (Hansen, Olaf, 12)

That Hansen locates this philosophical starting point for Cavell with reference to the Ancient Greeks is of importance. The link between America and Ancient Greece is suggested and this might be particularly manifest in the philosophical approach to emergent democracy, where politics and philosophy are viewed as intertwined, and where ideas concerning how we arrange and organise ourselves remain as open questions and very much the domain of the philosopher. The affinity between Cavell's philosophy and that of the sophists is most apparent in the question of *how* he philosophises than exactly *what* his books and essays take as their subjects. It is precisely in aspects of pre-Socratic philosophical mode and style that Hansen sees the kinship displayed most clearly: "Cavell offers moments of silent reflection and poetic admiration for both, the fragment and the paradox that we recognize from pre-Socratic philosophy" (14). Hansen's suggestion is that the importance in Cavell's work of style and of wordplay displays affinities with that of the pre-Socratics, and of the sophists. Cavell is a philosopher who places an enormous weight on both aspects of his own style (the 256 word first sentence of *The Claim of Reason* is the most well-known example) and that of the writers, artists and films the interrogation and interpretation of which forms the basis of his philosophical project. This 'poetic' aspect of Cavell's philosophical approach has been noted by Bernstein himself, in an early essay on Cavell and Wittgenstein:

[Stanley Cavell's] conception of philosophy shares with poetry the project of increasing an awareness of conditions- of where we are agreed, of what we have convened on; of the structures and grammars we live in; of how the syntaxes and grammars we create in turn create the world. To tell how it is with us, to reveal our attuning (which is often hidden) (Bernstein, 1986, 168).

Bernstein stresses the openness at the heart of Cavell's philosophical mode, where the task is to "increase an awareness... of how the syntaxes and grammars we create in turn create the world". This formulation of Cavell's philosophy puts language at the heart of his activity. If language use "in turn creates the world" then the mode of philosophizing becomes central to the practice of philosophy. Indeed, Bernstein's use of the word "tell" here suggests that orality and 'talking' are operative within his conception of Cavell's "conception of philosophy". However, it isn't until his later essay 'Our Americas: New Worlds Still in Progress', published in *Attack of the Difficult Poems* (2011) that this engagement with Cavell as a philosopher for whom philosophy is a "talk" really crystallises:

The project of America - of the Americas - is a process not yet complete, a process that shall never be finished.

For when it's finished, it's over.

Our Americas is still in progress: as a talk, an experiment, an essay. Then again, perhaps our Americas is a formal procedure, a hypothesis or conditional, requiring aesthetic intervention, seat-of-the-pants ingenuity, and otherworldly reinvention. And this is why, it could just be, that we see the possibilities of our Americas most acutely in poetry: our poetics viewed under the sign of our exchange (2011, 72).

The conception of “our Americas” as “still in progress” and “a talk” clearly suggests the sense of an ongoing and unfinished project in which writers, thinkers and speakers of all kinds, are continually engaged in a process of renewal, defining and re-defining. In this essay, Bernstein is clearly referencing Cavell’s book-length essay *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, which itself draws on Emerson’s phrase from the essay ‘Experience’ (2009, 320). As such, Bernstein is already situating his essay within a philosophical conversation in which Bernstein’s reading of Cavell, Cavell’s text, Cavell’s reading of Emerson and Emerson’s own writings and engagements with earlier texts form the key contexts. He is thus enacting a very Cavellian sense of philosophy as a conversation with the work of others, where receptivity and attention are the most important tools of the philosopher (and the poet). The key aspect of responsiveness as a philosophical tool is that it results in an ever shifting contextual interpretative framework through which to view the activities of philosophy and literature, where rather than new works replacing older works with their innovations, new works are instead understood as responding to, interpreting and conversing with older works in an ongoing and continuous conversation. Bernstein writes:

My discussion of moral perfectionism, indebted to Stanley Cavell, would no doubt lead to a declaration of interdependence: that the poetics of the Americas cannot be complete, for if we ever arrive at its end, we will have destroyed its promise to be ongoing, regenerating, self-cannibalizing.

(Bernstein, 2011, 66)

Just as in Ancient Greece, the political and literary potency of the sophists was in crucial ways “performative”, so too is the element of performance critical to the project and process of articulating and challenging “Americas” for Bernstein. The mode of philosophizing is critical rather than accidental to the project. Just as the

sophists would never rest on an argument's conclusion but would perform a virtuoso series of logical acrobatics to attempt to prove its opposite, Bernstein appears to envisage a poetics of the Americas as a constantly shifting, and always-in-motion process of revision rather than realization. He writes: "Our Americas is a performance" (67).

If Cavell can be considered to have discovered a way of integrating the open-ended, 'conversational', indefinite and ongoing project of "this new yet unapproachable America" into the performative aspects of his texts in their continual engagements with other texts and films, then Rogers Albritton can be considered the modern philosopher for whom the performative aspects of "conversation" as a philosophical mode all but prevented him from publishing at all. In spite of only publishing a handful of academic papers in his lifetime, Albritton was widely regarded as one of the greatest philosophers of his age, including by P.F. Strawson, Hilary Putnam and many other renowned philosophers (Woo). He was able to achieve this renown against the reigning character of academic philosophy by making orality the mode through which he philosophized rather than textual publication. Albritton features heavily in Cavell's recent book of autobiography/ memoirs, one of the most important influences and closest friends in his career. Cavell has suggested that conversation was Albritton's way of disseminating his ideas and that it stemmed from a profound commitment to the act of philosophy itself. Indeed, Albritton's reluctance to publish stemmed from a feeling that nothing was ever finished enough to commit to the printed page. As Cavell has written:

"At the two-day event in March 2003 memorializing Rogers's death some months earlier, following the sequence of scheduled addresses and symposia various of us participated in, when others were invited to contribute informal

reminiscences, so many marathon conversations with Rogers were reported that one might well conceive of his conversation as having become, whatever else, and along with his classroom lectures, his form of publication” (2010, 394).

Termed “the Socrates of our age” (DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism*, vi) by his former student the philosopher Keith De Rose, Albritton’s conversations were legendary, often lasting up to 11 hours. During these conversations, (and by all accounts they were conversations in the truest sense, not lectures) he would question and explore problems until he’d generated still more. Writing in Albritton’s LA Times obituary, Elaine Woo quotes a remark from the philosopher Thomas Nagel, who worked as a teaching assistant under Albritton: “He lectured as if he were struggling throughout the hour to figure out what he was going to say...This was a dramatic performance, but it had the form of extemporary philosophical creation” (Woo). Stuart Wolpert has noted a similar philosophical style in his own obituary of Albritton, published on the UCLA website: “In the classroom, Albritton was known for actually doing philosophy in real time, grappling right in front of his students with philosophical debates that have resisted solutions for many centuries.” Albritton’s mode, then, was one that above all performatively demonstrated the difficulties of philosophy and the struggles and challenges of thinking seriously and committedly about a topic. This same sense of “struggling... to figure out what he was going to say” can be seen from his few published texts. Albritton’s mode was conversation, where it is acceptable to correct, revise, turn around and, above all perhaps, practice a very serious sort of philosophical play. Albritton’s existing publications have not only the charm and everyday tone of a great conversationalist but the rhythms of prosody

too; for example, these excerpts from ‘On a Form of Skeptical Argument From Possibility’, a lecture on skepticism:

I have been intermittently obsessed for years with a certain form of skeptical argument “from possibility,” as I will say. The idea of it is ancient and familiar. It’s that “anything’s possible,” as we say, so “you never know,” as we also say. Anything’s possible, so you never know. More expansively: you can always or practically always be wrong; but if you know, you can’t be wrong; so, you never or practically never know. That’s it, really, wrapped up in old newspaper and string. You may wonder what this package could contain that wasn’t rightly thrown out long ago. J.L. Austin dealt with it in 1946, for example, in a section of “Other Minds” headed “If I know I can’t be wrong,” and one might suppose that he had gotten rid of it forever. But you will gather that I don’t think he did, brilliant as that essay was and is (2011, 1).

Austin would resist this suggestion, it seems; but I don’t see that he gives any *reason* to resist it, or explains how exactly it is to be resisted. It would no doubt be ridiculous to think that the *whole* use of “I know” is more or less loose, as if we *never* meant it quite seriously and it were in effect everywhere elliptical for “I know well enough” or “I know for all practical purposes.” That, I suppose, would be an incoherent idea; and the alternative idea that we mean it strictly, often enough, but are everywhere *wrong* that we know, by the argument from possibility or some other, is fantastic, or we wouldn’t be having this conference. But how awful *is* the awful truth that we are fallible human beings? Are we so fallible that perhaps we’re gartersnakes and *not* human beings, if we only knew it? Or perhaps we’re human beings, all right,

but human beings *are* gartersnakes. Is that in the cards? Austin writes as if it were. (“It is naturally always possible (‘humanly’ possible) that I may be mistaken”.) “We are fallible human beings, unless we’re gartersnakes,” as one might say with a little smile, “but of course I don’t mean to excite you. Did I excite you? I do apologize. I only meant ‘unless we’re gartersnakes’ as one might say ‘D.V.’”(2011, 6).

Something is going wrong there, surely. Is it yesterday’s news that we may be gartersnakes? I would have thought not. On the contrary, it seems a demented idea. What if it is, and lots of other such ideas are, and in fact we are *not* practically always liable to be mistaken? (2011, 6)

I quote extensively from this lecture, not so much because of the specifics of the ideas expressed (though of course his engagement with skepticism is of relevance to his formal questioning of how and in what way we can ever know something sufficiently to put it down on paper) but because of the performative dynamics of the lecture itself, the sense of conversation and talking that pervade its construction. Albritton’s text is a conversation, in important ways. First of all, it is rooted fundamentally in the practice of talking. The first quotation above repeatedly says “as we say” and “as we also say” in an almost comic grounding of his essay in the everyday conversational language in which we talk about problems as we experience them. By doing so, he eschews jargon or an illusion of precision in favour of the shifting senses of words as we experience them in the language. Secondly, he appears to imagine an interlocutor who is set up in the essay as someone to engage with conversationally. In the case of this essay, this conversational interlocutor varies from his reading of J.L. Austin to an imaginary generalized character of “the skeptic”, with

whom he debates and argues. He even engages himself in question and answer philosophy, for example: “What’s wrong with the argument, then, that couldn’t be cleaned up if we had the time? It’s the possibilities, I think.” (10) However, he also permits himself contingency at almost every step of his argument, going back over things, altering and subtly re-conceptualising his points from different places of view throughout. This isn’t because he is a skeptic. For Albritton, skepticism is an easy way out, a rejection of complexity, just as most of the reasons against skepticism are. Rather, Albritton is engaged in a conversation with, what Ursula Göricke, quoting Cavell calls, “the truths and wrongs of skepticism” (6). The value of his practice of philosophy isn’t so much in the definitive answers it reaches, rather it is in the demonstration of and the awareness to difficulty. Albritton is committed to the idea that philosophy is difficult (an idea that is reflected perhaps in Bernstein’s recent collection of essays *Attack of the Difficult Poems*) and that there is value in acknowledging and struggling with these difficulties, even if a conclusion doesn’t present itself. This fact makes his texts ‘difficult’ in every sense of the word, both in the trains of thought he follows and in the seriousness of the ideas he is grappling with. It is as though he doesn’t expect to reach a conclusion but rather to reveal the problems of solving philosophical problems. As Albritton himself remarks in the lecture, “thinking practically anything is risky, and thinking you know it is riskier; life is risk, and *nevertheless* we know a lot” (2011, 5)

In a sense it might be a perverse task, to posit an affinity between Bernstein’s poetry, the work of the sophists and Albritton’s philosophizing. Having published so little, an instinctive reaction would be to assume there is very little to go on. And yet, Albritton’s mode of philosophizing seems entirely “in tune” both with Bernstein’s “stuttering” (2011, 179) poems and the sophists’ fragmentary and performative

expressions of philosophical ideas over and above written work. W K Guthrie has written of the sophists that in part their exclusion from philosophy was down to the lack of surviving texts. While some authors have attributed this to the followers of Plato and Aristotle destroying them (or at least not showing any interest in preserving them), Guthrie instead believes that it is attributable to their own preference for conversation rather than the written word. “They were rather teachers, lecturers and public speakers, whose aim was to influence their own age rather than to be read by posterity” (53). In this way, I would argue, Albritton’s mode of philosophizing is akin to the mode of the sophists, as interpreted in the preceding chapter, and his contribution to philosophy is also somewhat equivalent, in that Albritton’s mode of engagement with language constantly performing an awareness of the way ordinary language use impacts upon our perception of reality. Indeed, the task of studying the thought of Albritton is not dissimilar to that faced when studying the sophists. Primary source materials are scarce and you have to rely on second hand reports from former students and colleagues. You therefore have to engage in an active process of “construction” when you interpret both the thought of the sophists and Albritton, as well as an acceptance of lacunae. You are obliged to form a conversation with and between the fragments of his texts, enacting a debate and dialogue between them rather than holding his ideas up as a canonical (and unchanging) artifact to be manoeuvred around, as is sometimes felt to be the case with the published works of some philosophers. The poet Michael Palmer has written of Wittgenstein that his “entire body of work is built on an anxiety about the fragility of signification” (1985, 253). In the case of Albritton, the anxiety is about the fragility (the palpable sense of impossibility) of what we can know and what we can say we know.

A counterpart or analogue from contemporary poetics to this practice would be the poet David Antin, with whom Bernstein published *A Conversation with David Antin*. Antin is the experimental poet who has most exploited the rhythms of talk within his work. Having written both ‘deep image’, disjunctive, collaged minimalist poems and even sky-writing poems earlier in his career, Antin’s recent work has almost exclusively consisted of semi-improvised talk pieces delivered as one-off performances and then transcribed later. In his essay/ talk poem ‘radical coherency’ from the book *Radical Coherency*, Antin talks about why he stopped writing collage poems and moved instead towards talk pieces. The piece moves through a number of avenues and apparent digressions concerning his professional and personal life, circling back to the central questions that he is addressing in the piece. This is one of the central effects achieved by Antin’s writing, the ability to follow the paths of the mind towards surprising results through the medium of “talk”, as the following passage attests:

it occurs to me that there are ways that the mind organizes things that are rather startling that are more surprising than what you can do mechanically that are more surprising than what i can do by planning to sit down and cut the pieces up or surprise myself by shaking them up in a hat or getting a machine to shake them in its hat for me and i like shaking things in hats hat no matter whose hat but you don’t normally come up with things that are quite so surprising when you do that or at least i haven’t for a long time (237)

Talking, for Antin, is a process of revealing nuances and subtleties, of taking the mind to unexpected places. In this sense, talking is a receptive process in the same way that Goricke’s conception of Cavellian “redemptive reading” is, in that through “talking” neither the speaker nor the listener knows where the path of the talk will open out to.

“Talking” is a process through which the “talker” is able to reveal things about thought and language processes. “Talking”, for Antin, is a mode of thinking in which the routes followed are categorically undecided. Marjorie Perloff has commented of this “talking” aspect of Antin’s practice

He himself has insisted on his commitment to “talking” rather than writing, as for example, in the headnote to “what am i doing here?” (1973), where he declares “if robert lowell is a poet i dont want to be a poet if robert frost was a poet i dont want to be a poet if socrates is a poet ill consider it”. Socrates, in this scheme of things, because, in Antin’s view, his is a form of “talk” that epitomizes “the thinking capacity of language” and hence “poetry as inventive thinking (Perloff, 2001, 125).

Antin’s self-identity with Socrates is rooted in the formal method of the dialogues, which, in their investment in the act of talking, are essentially sophistic acts. *A Conversation with David Antin* is a book-length transcript of a highly detailed conversation between Antin and Bernstein. The focus is on Antin’s practice of talking and performance, however, both Bernstein and Antin are clearly engaged in the book in an enactment of the power of conversation and of talking. The medium they chose, however, was not recorded talk but email, which, as they explain “offers some of the immediacy of talking together with the elaboration possibilities of writing” (back cover). The conversation is conducted as very much participative on both parts, each interlocutor interrogating the ideas of both the interlocutor and themselves. Each is demonstrably aware that they are engaging both with each other and more widely (anticipating the publication of their conversation in book form). What is particularly notable about the conversation is that while neither participant is reluctant to state their interpretations strongly and disagree with the other, equally, the modification of

interpretations and perspectives is palpable at a number of moments within the text. The conversation is characterized by fluidity and movement, with shifts back and forth to earlier topics or onwards to un-anticipated directions. Ideas in the conversation never seem fixed, with either player constantly modifying the ideas expressed by the other. The overall rhythm of their conversation is of discovery, alertness and emergent ideas. For example, following an analytical close reading by Bernstein of Antin's early poem 'Poem in a Minor Key', Antin then discovers another very early poem 'passengers', which was published (as 'Passengers') in *The New Yorker*. Given the parameters of their exchange, it is useful to look at the seams of their dialogue in particular, the junctions between question and answer, between answer and response. Early on in the exchange, discussing his early reading, Antin remarks, "the Greeks, the Agora, Pericles' philosophical court, Anaxagoras, Socrates and Alcibiades and the image of the Parthenon and Phidias's gold and ivory statue of Athena, that's what got me. On the strength of that book, I snuck into the adult section of the local library to read the poems of Pindar. But they were disappointing."

Bernstein responds: "I often get a sense of poetry being disappointing to you, that the failure of poetry to do something it could be doing or doing better was a kind of inspiration for writing poetry (well you know that's my current theory, speaking of theories, and I do see you as a particularly good model for it)" (13). Bernstein responds essentially to one word in Antin's previous answer, the word "disappointing", which is essentially a tangent to what Antin was talking about, his interest in the socratic and sophistic phenomenon of the agora in Ancient Greece. The conversation veers off briefly towards Bernstein's theory of "disappointment" with poetry as an inspiration for poetry before picking up the strand suggested by Bernstein's phrase "inspiration for poetry" to discuss how Antin first began writing

poetry. However, later on in their conversation, Antin picks up the cue he set up earlier on in the dialogue and returns to the theme of socratic and sophistic talking as a form of conversational performance in which the participants and performers were entertaining their audiences as well as delivering philosophical propositions: “the sophists’ paradoxical talk pieces and their public debates were ‘entertainment’ in 5th Century Greece. And in that world, Socrates was an ‘entertainer’. Lysias or Gorgias were also entertainments” (47). This mention of the sophists is thirty four pages after their first mention at the start of the dialogue, but it is nevertheless the fruition of a seed that was planted previously. In this way, the structure of their extended conversation allows a much freer and unpredictable movement through ideas than straightforward expository prose would usually allow. There is certainly a logic to the way the conversation develops, however, it is an associative and cumulative logic rather than a narrative or discursive structure and as such it allows room for tangents, diversions, questions that remain unanswered and conversational avenues that don’t get pursued. As Emerson puts it in ‘Circles’: “Conversation is a game of circles” (256).

The philosopher Adriaan Theodor Peperzak has written extensively on the practice of philosophy as a conversation. Antin and Bernstein’s conversation typifies many of the aspects of dialogue with which Peperzak characterizes conversation as a mode of philosophy: “From the perspective of speaking, each statement is addressed to a potential listener. As such, it invites the addressee to take up what is said as a suggestion for agreement, disagreement or amendment. Saying something to someone urges the reader to answer the speaker with a reply” (3). Conceiving of ‘conversation’ as a critical mode for understanding literature and philosophy, then, puts the impetus onto the responder to respond, making reading a responsive and conversational act,

rather than a passive and accepting one. As in Goricke's characterization of "redemptive reading", the conversational model for the relationship between reader and writer suggests a fluidity and open-endedness inherent in the act. No text is regarded as final or total, every text (a conversational utterance) is to be responded to and is dependent on context. This is an aspect of conversation that the conversation-analyst John Heritage has stressed when he has described conversation as "doubly contextual, in that the action is both context-shaped and context-renewing" (22). By "context-shaped", Heritage seems to mean that conversations are dependent on their context, and that the structure of conversations stresses the importance of context by being a specific response to specific circumstances in a particular space and time. By its very nature an utterance in a conversation stresses its relation to those other contextual utterances surrounding it: "the term 'context' here is used to refer both to the immediately local preceding activity in which an utterance occurs and also to the larger environment of activity in which that configuration analysably occurs" (22). Similarly, conversation is seen as "context-renewing" because again, every utterance within a conversation also forms the context for further utterances in that conversation, i.e. for "it will inevitably contribute to the contextual framework in terms of which the next action will be understood... Moreover, each current action will function to renew (i.e. maintain, adjust or alter) any broader or more generally prevailing sense of context" (22). Heritage's assessment of the importance of context within conversation has important implications for considering Bernstein's poetry as importantly "conversational". Rather than perceiving the poem as a product issuing forth from one person in a moment of inspiration or genius, the poem is seen as both a network of contexts in itself and an utterance in a much wider network of contexts. The critical thing about this conversational conception of the poem is it acknowledges

the inevitable political efficacy of a poem as an utterance that performs a “function to renew (i.e. maintain, adjust or alter) any broader or more prevailing sense of context”. As such, with the responsibility of providing the context in which all subsequent utterances are in response to, a poem that doesn’t by its utterance “adjust or alter” its context is a conservative poem that “maintains” the context from which it emerged, whereas a poem that disrupts or reassesses that context through its form or techniques, makes an adjustment or alteration to that context. The sense of context, then, is as something continually in flux, a responsive tissue that alters according to each utterance (which itself is in response to the context of its own emergence). As Peperzak puts it within a philosophical framework:

The realm of philosophy can then no longer be seen as a pantheon of heroic but isolated individuals or monological systems, which together (as a library) would form the history of philosophy. If philosophers are necessarily connected by addressing and being addressed, the philosophical tradition is an eventful and ever shifting history of awakening, suggestion, seduction, interruption, responding, struggling, educating and learning among friends, colleagues, strangers and enemies (2).

Given this sense of the “conversation”, it is useful too, to consider the importance Cavell attaches to the sense of “conversion” in his essay ‘Philosophy as Education’ (2012, 212). The word “conversion” literally a part of the word “conversation”, requiring only the elision of the “at”. Cavell’s sense of “conversion” is as “rebirth” and “transformation” (212), drawing on Luther’s writings about Baptism, suggesting the potential of conversation as a transformative mode where ideas are not set down in the relative commitment of print. A conversational understanding of even printed

communication then sees the same openness and potential for transformation of thought in the ‘conversations’ of texts.

This conception of a ‘contextual’ and ‘conversational’ model for conceiving of poetry and literature is evident in many of Bernstein’s own theoretical writings. However, Bernstein’s poetry also enacts this performance of “talking” and of “conversation” at the level of form. A number of critics have noted that Bernstein makes use of different “voices” within his poetry. For example, Göricke has described “a multitude of voices, moods and tones in the work” (181). An example of these voices is the poem ‘echo off (use other entrance)’ from *With Strings* (2001):

Are we there yet? *Everything*
must go, is gone. Slowly the rips
fade from memory, foment
anagrammatic tirades, saturate
pensive perambulation (percussive
reticence). My aim to
loop corners and franchise
agency – for exactly as long as
it takes to blow the candles
out inside all those
headgear.

Have you heard the one about the stalled
Kaftan and the bumbling pulverizer?
The Bronx crane operator and the Lisbon

tailor? The foldaway recliner and the nylon

railings? Perhaps the crease is semi-

permanent. (53)

Beginning in a state of both uncertainty (with a question) and in a state of approaching (i.e. not “there yet” but possibly nearly there), this poem invites the reader to immediately participate in the poem’s “we”, to become a part of the poem’s conversation. However, there is also a sense in which the conversation occurs between syntactical elements of the poem, where each sense unit modifies the context in which the sense units surrounding it are read and establishes a conversational relation between each line or syntactical unit. For example, the question “Have you heard the one about the stalled Kaftan and the bumbling pulveriser?” seems to draw on a formal tradition and history of one-liner jokes but removes its natural conclusion (the punchline). The expected context of the line is therefore removed and replaced with another number of set-ups without the punchlines: “The Bronx crane operator and the Lisbon tailor? The foldaway recliner and the nylon railings?” The reader is therefore put into the position of having to ascertain in what ways each of these one-liners could be conceived of as connecting (however obliquely) to the other two, or is left to consider the formal dynamics of the joke itself, the casual assumptions they make about ethnicity and locality “the Bronx crane operator” and “the Lisbon tailor”, for example, which operate like stereotypical characterisations without the recognizable stereotype. The ‘punchline’ to all three jokes could be read to be the following line: “Perhaps the crease is semi-permanent”, where crease refers to the ridge created by folding or wrinkling as in the crease of a trouser leg as well as the sense of crease as in cricket: a demarcated area of play. “Crease” could therefore be appropriate to the “stalled Kaftan”, an item of clothing that would not usually have a

crease but might have in its “stalled” state. Similarly, the act of “creasing” has a relevance to the “foldaway recliner” and the “nylon railings”, which probably refer to railings where nylon is hung, rather than railings made out of nylon. The word “nylon” is also a “crease” of the words “New York” and “London”. Naturally, a “Lisbon tailor” would know how to produce a “semi permanent” crease. A “Bronx crane operator” might be concerned with in-“crease” in terms of construction of buildings in one of New York’s most densely populated areas, meanwhile a “bumbling pulverizer” is presumably in the business of de-“crease” (though, of course, that depends what replaces whatever has been “pulverised”). In this way, the poem’s seemingly discrete semantic units form a conversation with each other, which, through a process of conversational close reading which analyses the lines against their contexts results in a sense of the poem as constantly “context-shaped” and “context-renewing”.

The metaphor of the “crease” in the above section also extends to the formal construction of the poem itself, which could be considered to “crease” or “fold” together distinct semantic items to be understood in dynamic and conjunction with other pieces of language. It is an idea that Bernstein has returned to a number of times in his poetry, most recently in the poem ‘Fold’ from *Recalculating* in which distinct sentences are ‘folded’ in such a way as to repeat the word in the verb position in the noun position: “I delay my delay, I hurt my hurt, I pain my pain, I word my word. I shock my shock, I risk my risk, I language my language, I act my act, I ache my ache, I stoke my stoke, I stash my stash, I turn my turn, I waste my waste, I fold my fold, I tether my tether, I weather my weather” (40). The technique of repetition of words in this way emphasizes the multiplicity inherent in all language. In fact, the terminology ‘repetition’ here is misguided. The words are not in fact repeated at all; on the

contrary what is revealed is how the words used can change and amend in meaning through their re-appearance in the phrase. Bernstein here is enacting what Gertrude Stein wrote in 'Portraits and Repetition' about her own use of repeated phrases in her portraits, i.e. that "there was no repetition. In a cinema picture no two pictures are exactly alike one is just that much different from the one before and so in those early portraits I am sure you will realize when I read them to you also as there was in *The Making of Americans* no repetition" (1985, 177). Given that the words alter subtly depending on their context even within the same phrase, the reader is necessarily put in a position of interpreting how the first usage of "hurt" alters from the second instance in the phrase "I hurt my hurt". The first "hurt" reads like a verb and the second like a noun which are both in this instance familiar usages of the word hurt. The unfamiliarity comes because of their proximity. You could conceivably "hurt" your "hurt" by causing more pain when already in pain, or you could perhaps "hurt" your "hurt" by performing a double negative and therefore "heal" your "hurt" which is in effect eradicating it and therefore possibly "hurting" it. This example (and the one it precedes: "I pain my pain") brings to mind Wittgenstein's dissection of the language game involving "pain", i.e. his assertion that the word 'pain' is linked only to the physical manifestations of pain ("pain behaviour" (2010, 11)), that there is no direct link between the word 'pain' and pain itself. Bernstein therefore situates his 'folded' language game in a classic Wittgensteinian language problem. As such, the reader is left to consider ever deeper what exactly could be meant by "I hurt my hurt" or "I pain my pain" if "hurt" and "pain" refer rather to the manifestations of "pain" and "hurt" rather than the 'pain' and 'hurt' themselves. Language in the poem then becomes represented as something extendable and malleable that can be folded back and over on itself and still have the capacity for semantic multiplicity. Indeed,

Bernstein's poem could be taken even further- "I hurt my hurt's hurt" or even "I hurt my hurt's hurt hurt". This linguistic game specifically calls to mind Deleuze's writings on "the fold", which have received their fullest elucidation in the book *The Fold* on the thought of Leibniz but which recur at various times throughout his writings. Deleuze's conception of "the fold" is both structural and subjective in nature (and is in fact the crease that reveals the interdependence of these two categories.) In an analysis of Baroque architecture that forms the first portion of the book, Deleuze writes that "the Baroque refers not to an essence but to an operative function, to a trait. It endlessly produces folds"(1). He then goes on to elucidate, as Graham Livesey has remarked, how in architecture, "the deployment of folded surfaces can create intricate topographical and spatial effects and affects; this means that a single gesture can achieve great complexity" (109). Bernstein makes use of a similar gesture in both 'Fold' and 'echo off/ use other entrance', whereby the formal dynamic of the fold and crease opens the poem up to a multitude of reading directions whereby the poem increases its capacity to generate meanings that literally "echo off" each other. As Livesey further comments, Deleuze's concept of the fold enables a structure (both textual and architectural) to include multiplicity, in the manner of "the folding of ingredients together" (110), as in cooking. This literary effect whereby multiple elements are folded together is widely employed in Bernstein's work and is relevant to his poem 'Dysrhythm', which is discussed in detail in chapter 4. For the purposes of this chapter though it is clear that the fold increases the conversational aspects of the poems, their capacity for multiple elements to converse with each other within the creases, folds and overlaps of the poem's structure.

“My aim/ to loop corners and franchise/ agency” is an effective description for Bernstein’s language in both of these poems, which might be considered to “franchise agency” through the responsibility they put on the reader to interpret, create and respond to the poem’s language. For example, a phrase such as “pensive perambulation” draws attention to itself as much as language construction as it does a semantic unit. At the semantic level, though, it describes a state of linguistic and thought agility or exercise as well as an open and receptive consciousness. The word “perambulation” suggests a walk with no set purpose rather than a straight forward journey from A to B. When combined with “percussive reticence”, the poem employs both active and passive descriptions to characterize the state that the poem attempts to create. This state is related to what Stephen Mulhall, writing in relation to Cavell and Heidegger, calls “active passivity”, the ideal state for “thinking as thinking” (313), a state of which conversation is one method. Conversation relies on “blowing the candles out”, i.e. giving oneself up to a resistance of foregone conclusions and allowing the mind to be, to borrow Antin’s term, “surprising”. The phrase “anagrammatic tirades” can be seen to enact its own imperative, when it is recognized that an anagram of “tirade” is “read it”, where ‘reading’ is a form of activity that requires both active engagement and passive attention. Throughout the poem, the sort of shift between the register in the first stanza and the second stanza is frequent, with irregular slips and alterations occurring at the level of structure and perspective. There is, in a sense, a conversation established between each section of the poem within the poem itself. There is no immediately apparent connection between the first stanza and the second, however, their proximity within the poem encourages the reader to place them in dialogue with each other. “Bumbling pulveriser” has a sound and visual relationship with “pensive perambulation” (built up through the repetition of sounds:

“b” “p”, “um” and “ul”), though the semantic meaning and the mood of the two phrases is oppositional. Rather than the thoughtful philosophizing encouraged by the phrase “pensive perambulation”, “bumbling pulveriser” suggests a half-comprehending violence and annihilation.

The poem ‘Questionnaire’ (2006, 67) also enacts a form of conversation within its form, by presenting 14 pairs of propositions, from which the reader is invited to circle the proposition from each pair which more exactly matches with their point of view. The first three pairs are below:

DIRECTIONS: For each pair of sentences, circle the letter, a or b, that best expresses your viewpoint. Make a selection from each pair. Do not omit any items.

1. a) The body and the material things of the world are the key to any knowledge we can possess.
b) Knowledge is only possible by means of the mind or psyche.
2. a) My life is largely controlled by luck and chance.
b) I can determine the basic course of my life.
3. a) Nature is indifferent to human needs.
b) Nature has some purpose, even if obscure. (2008, 67)

While this poem may seem simplistically parodic, reducing difficult epistemological and phenomenological questions to multiple choice, by using the rhetorical device of opposing pairs, Bernstein in fact encourages the reader to address their viewpoints. The lack of authorial intrusion in setting up the pairs is noticeable, and the fairness of the comparisons is too. The reader is not goaded into favouring one sentence over another, rather to address and consider their personal viewpoints. While the set-up is that of market-research, it’s difficult to imagine what sort of product would require

this research to be done. For what kind of body would this sort of knowledge be useful? Rather, Bernstein's 'Questionnaire' seems as though its greatest relevance would be as a political survey or even a referendum (!), in a form of state or government where what citizens believed about questions such as these formed the basis of decisions of public policy. In this sort of state, it might be difficult to distinguish between the categories "philosopher", "statesman", "poet" and "philosopher". It's notable that the final pair of propositions is: "a) Art is at heart political because it can change our perceptions of reality./ b) Art is at heart not political because it can change only consciousness and not events." (67) It is important to the effect of Bernstein's poem that both of these propositions are valid. Neither one necessarily wins out over the other. Convincing arguments could be developed for either side and in fact they are both in some ways saying the same thing, i.e., that "art effects consciousness". The difference between them is whether or not you believe that the effecting of consciousness in turn has any import on our political perception of reality. The tautness of the two propositions, however, is critical to the unresolvability at the heart of the poem. It doesn't offer a neat set of categories for the reader to define themselves but rather encourages thoughtful self-reading and analysis, through the conversational and rhetorical medium of questions and answers.

One answer to the set of oppositions concerning whether or not "art" can be conceived of as "at heart political" can be found in Barbara Cassin's essay 'Sophistics, Rhetorics and Performance, Or How to Really Do Things With Words' (2009). In this essay, Cassin suggests that language has what she calls a "world-effect" (349), by which she means the ability "to transform or create the world" (349). She locates this power in a discussion of Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen* and suggests that by arguing for Helen's innocence in the piece, Gorgias engendered a world in

which perception of Helen was fundamentally changed, not necessarily because people were persuaded of her innocence but because her innocence was now “thinkable”. Her model for thinking of the speech in this way is “epideixis”, the rhetorical oratorical style of engaging in a ‘praise and blame’ speech in order to demonstrate the prowess of the speaker:

The model for the sophist performance is epideixis, in the rhetorical sense of the term, and the model for rhetorical epideixis is the *Encomium of Helen*. It is an epideictic performance that produces not only persuasion but a “world effect”: we are now in a world in which the innocence of Helen— from Euripides to Offenbach and Hoffmannsthal—is thinkable and even plausible. (350)

In this way, Cassin’s conception of Gorgias’ performance recalls Heritage’s remarks concerning the “context-renewing” nature of all utterances within a conversation. By making an epideictic speech concerning Helen’s innocence, Gorgias has altered the context (the ‘conversation’) in which this issue will be understood. Given language’s transformative potential, Cassin asks:

It is a question of a politics of responsibility with regard to the words that one employs: what world do we contribute to producing by speaking as we speak, and how is language articulated with our speech acts? (360).

It is precisely this power of language to effect reality that Bernstein seems to suggest through the title to his volume *Republics of Reality* (2000). Alongside using language to open up possibilities for new forms of social and grammatical organization, Bernstein also shines a searchlight on the ways that language is currently used within our society and how this might be contributing to elements of our social and political structures. As Bernstein puts it in *Recalculating*: “All poetics is political/ All poetry is

politics/ All politics is poetics” (9). The power of this statement is in its rhetorical structure, using a tricolon structure of three statements, each an isocolon that opposes two words and which thread together three inter-related words: “politics”, “poetics” and “poetry”. The statement, by using the language of definition “All... is...”, encourages the reader to question what “politics”, “poetry” and “poetics” are and how the three statements follow one from the other. By doing so, Bernstein enacts his own ‘conversational’ structure, which is that the arrangements of “truths”, however boldly stated, need to be questioned, interrogated, interpreted constructively, with attention paid to the political and structures they embody. “Poetics is political” because it concerns a study of language and linguistic structures, which in Bernstein’s view constitutes the basis of our social and political organization. However, in the next statement “all poetry is politics”, Bernstein has subtly shifted the goalposts. No longer are we dealing with the words “poetics” and “political” but “poetry” and “politics”. The statement that “all poetry is politics” might seem to follow seamlessly on from its predecessor but it is a startling one. In what way are poems written by teenagers in their bedrooms politics? In what way is love poetry politics? How can poetry of nature-appreciation be conceived of as politics? One interpretation of this statement would be that “yes”, these examples of seemingly apolitical poetry are “politics” because the language they use and the forms they choose endorse (or even enforce) aspects of how our society is structured. However, another aspect of these statements is that they enact suspicion over precisely such totalizing statements as themselves and that is precisely in engendering awareness of and taking seriously the totalizing aspects of language and rhetoric that “all poetry is poetics”.

In a very different way, conversation (or at least “talking”) is central to Bernstein’s libretto ‘Blind Witness News’, for the opera written by Ben Yarmolinsky

and first produced at American Opera Projects' Blue Door Studio. In this libretto, Bernstein powerfully reconstructs and parodies the hysterical (in every sense of that word) speech rhythms and formal organization of an evening news program. However, the conversation in question in this libretto is an anti-conversation where the sort of receptivity necessary for positive or productive discourse of the sort described above is paralyzed and cut off through endless repetitions and over-simplification. The characters Jack James (anchor), Jill Johns (anchor), Jane Jones (weather) and John Jacks (sports) are instantly recognizable as pastiches of television presenters and reporters. Their names themselves display an alphabetic logger-jam: an inability to get beyond the letter "J". Their speech style is characterized by bald statements that don't in fact say anything. For example, the broadcast begins:

Jack & Jill: This is the Blind Witness News
with the Blind Witness News Team (15)

The phrase "blind witness" is from a "made for TV" thriller starring Dallas's Victoria Principal that aired in 1989. In the show, Principal plays a woman who is stuck in her home with her husband's killers. She spends a significant amount of time during the film with tape gagging her, preventing her from articulating anything of sense. So, too, the characters in 'Blind Witness News' are trapped and gagged by infantilizing their audience and stunting any significant discourse. The presenters end up babbling their names in the manner of a child in a (presumed) attempt to have their name stick in the audience's mind:

I'm Jack Jack Jack Jack Jack Jack Jack Jack Jack Jones (15)

When it comes to reporting the news, it's a message of blinkered hatred that the presenters manage to get across:

Tonight's top story is war

Holy war in the North

Holy war in the East

Holy war in the West

Victory, victory soon to be ours (16)

There's a surreal sense of panic in one of the hand-over segments, when the anchors are trying to steer the show towards the scheduled sports broadcast:

Sports is getting squeezed, Jane!

Sports is getting squeezed!

Getting squeezed, Jane!

Sports is getting squeezed! (32)

This form of repetition, turning the wording of the same phrase over on itself, is not on the face of it dissimilar to that undertaken by Albritton in his works or Antin in his. However, the significant difference is that where as Albritton and Antin are thinking through language, turning phrases around on themselves to reveal things about what they mean, the speakers in 'Blind Witness News' are thoughtlessly employing numbing and desensitizing repetition to prevent thought or analysis. Rather than a conversation, 'Blind Witness News' reads more like a boxing match, with the presenters each trying to land their punch on the audience, reflected in the sports cast: "Nick hits Dick/ Dick throws fit". It's a highly charged and surreal text and it draws the audience's attention to the bizarre within even the most banal forms of language use and phraseology. In Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading*, he famously formulated literature as "news that stays news". In 'Blind Witness News', Bernstein manages to create "news that stays news" out of the format of news reportage on television. 'Blind Witness News' is a parody of the sort of conversation that, as Heritage characterized it, merely "maintains" or endorses its context without modifying or

altering the context in which it is 'aired'. The sort of news show parodied by Bernstein is the kind that actually shuts off conversation in spite of making use of the apparatus of "conversation", i.e. "talk".

Chapter 3. I. *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* as agora

If ‘Blind Witness News’ is an example of an anti-conversation and discourse at its lowest and least receptive, then *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Magazine, the publication of writings about language-centered writing edited by Bernstein and Bruce Andrews between 1978 and 1981, might be considered an example of conversation between interested individuals where real exchange and experimentation were possible. As George Hartley has noted, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine “served as a forum for poets involved with so-called language writing” (4). Bernstein has echoed Hartley’s sentiments, writing of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* that it “was a site of conversation about a set of marked issues, a place to air differences but not necessarily to settle them” (2012, 282). As these two characterizations suggest, its principal purpose, this chapter argues, was as a testing ground and arena in which ideas concerning above all language and politics could be tried out, argued with, revised and reconfigured. For the purposes of this thesis, I read *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* as performing the same function for late Twentieth Century American poets as the agora did for 5th Century BC sophists: a permissive, antagonistic space for serious experimentation with language and logic, where the participants believed that what they were doing had political significance. However, just as the sphere of the agora both resisted and engendered community factionalism and politics among its intellectuals, so too did language poetry’s most vibrant forums become the frontline of increasing “groupism” (Vickery) and controversy. How does a loose-knit group of experimental and politically engaged writers with considerably skill at exchanging their ideas and ‘going public’ with their work resist becoming both exclusive and defensive in its group mentality. This aversion to the potential for “groupism” among language

writers is something that Bernstein has stressed in ‘The Expanded Field of $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ ’, where he writes that, “the description is part of the problematic, and it remains an open question whether this constellation of activity was a movement or a school, aesthetic tendency or convenient label, and whether the names for the phenomena were insulting labels or a standard for group solidarity” (2012, 281). This chapter reads some of these concerns and tensions across a number of issues of $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$, against and alongside the doubts and concerns over community politics expressed by Bernstein in his essay ‘The Conspiracy of Us’.

As Cynthia Farrar has noted, of fundamental importance in the emergence of democracy in sixth and fifth century B.C. Athens was the awareness of the active political nature of the individual:

political developments at Athens loosened and eventually broke the grip of the traditional hierarchy that had mediated the relationship between social interaction and the order sanctioned by the gods. These developments prompted the Athenians to conceive of themselves in specifically political terms, rather than in the social and economic relations constitutive of social order” (21).

Key to these changes taking place was the role of language and specifically the awareness of language as something human about which the grammars and rules governing them could be discerned and decided upon by humans, rather than received, gifted and governed from divinities. Sophistic explorations of language were more than just a means of equipping ambitious individuals with the ability to speak persuasively in order to further their careers. Rather than this, attention to language and its structures was pivotal in sustaining the identity of individuals as fundamentally political. As Martin Ostwald has written, “democracy thrives, or is

supposed to thrive, on discussion and of that there was plenty in fifth century Athens” (245). Most noisy of all? The sophists; particularly when it came to questions of language theory and linguistics, with sophists including Protagoras, Antiphon, Gorgias and Prodicus all displaying extensive interest in questions of semantics and linguistic structures (Grimaldi, 33). As Susan Jarratt has noted, this investment in discourse and discourse practices was in itself a feature of the sophists work that set them apart from other thinkers as particularly grounded within the public sphere and the democracy. This is perhaps the feature of the sophists that most distinguishes them from other teachers of the period, including Socrates:

Because they engaged in a range of public discourse activities including teaching, both shaping and advancing a political agenda through their talk, the sophists could be termed the first public intellectuals in a democracy (99).

The fledgling democracy of Athens expressed its democracy in perhaps its most fundamental way through an investment in and exercise of human interrogation of and wrestling with language. The skills that the sophists demonstrated, taught and performed, skills that were social, poetic, linguistic and political, were therefore fundamental to encouraging and enabling political participation for citizens, but more than that they were crucial to the realization on the individual’s part as being fundamentally politically in nature. Jarratt quotes Eric Havelock from his study

Liberal Temper in Greek Politics:

Discourse as technique and political judgment as an operation of psyche go hand in hand. Each reflects our social conditioning and also helps to create it. Political judgment indeed, is hardly distinguishable from communication (102).

Building a sense of “political judgment” and awareness, therefore, is regarded by both Havelock and Jarratt as concurrent with exploring, expanding, aestheticizing the ways in which communication is structured in society.

Describing a similar process and suggesting a similar sentiment, Bernstein has stressed the importance that he attaches to notions of how communities assert their values through language:

I do not think that all conventions are pernicious or that all authority is corrupt. But I do think it is essential to trace how some uses of convention and authority can hide the fact that both are historical constructions rather than sovereign principles. For convention and authority can, and ought, serve at the will of the Polis and not by the divine right of kings or the economic might of Capital. In this sense, I would speak of a phallocratic voice of truth and sincerity as one that hides its partiality by insisting on its centrality, objectivity, or neutrality – its claim to mainstream values; a voice that opts for expedience at the expense of depth, narrative continuity at the expense of detail, persuasion at the expense of conviction. This is a constantly self-proclaimed public voice, implicitly if not explicitly deriding the inarticulations, stutterings, inaudibilities, eccentricities, and linguistic deviance of specifically marked special-interest groups (1992, 223).

The language Bernstein uses in this passage intimates that he sees the use of language as of pivotal importance in ensuring society operates at “the will of the polis”. He objects to the “self proclaimed public voice” in favour of an unconventional, multitudinous array of linguistic aberrations and aversions. Perelman has utilized political metaphors even further to suggest how Bernstein envisages the relation of poetics to state politics:

In *A Poetics*, Bernstein does not write simply as an ambassador for the formerly marginalized language movement but aims for more utopian conjunctions made possible through writing: he envisions a loosely confederated republic whose politics would be informed by a non-centralised, non-hierarchical poetry (although, to reiterate, Bernstein’s sense of “poetry” is opposed to its usage in creative writing contexts, where implications of craft and sensibility reign)” (80).

An example of Bernstein’s own poetry where this sense of interrogating the socializing structures of language by which communities construct themselves is the first poem from his first published book, 1975’s *ASYLUMS*. The first poem, entitled ‘Asylum’, explores aspects of the language of a source text, Erving Goffman’s influential book *Asylums*. By drawing on this text, which analytically deals with institutions such as asylums and prisons, Bernstein questions the sorts of language we use to close off and delineate the sorts of societies we choose to live in (or are relegated or assigned to by others). The text itself, Bernstein has written, “focuses on the beginning and ends of the sentences in Goffman’s text”¹. This results in an extremely jagged and rough textual surface in which the poem frequently cuts or moves from different sense units and phrases onto others. In some cases, the varying registers and word groups of each sentence from which the words are taken from Goffman’s text are clearly audible and visible, in other cases, they are much harder to discern:

rooms, suites of rooms, buildings, plants
in line. Their encompassing or total
character

¹ ‘An Interview with Charles Bernstein’, Poetry Foundation, 2010

intercourse with the outside and to departure
such as locked doors, high walls, barbed
wire, cliffs, water, forests, moors
conflicts, discrediting, failures
of assimilation. If cultural change
the outside. Thus, if the inmates stay
victory. They create and sustain
a particular kind of tension
dangers to it, with the welfare
jails, penitentiaries, P.O.W.
camps, concentration camps
some worklike task and justifying themselves
army barracks, ships, boarding schools, work
camps, colonial compounds, large mansions (2)

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E is perhaps the place in Bernstein's work where this sense of a multitudinous and poly-voiced poetic republic is realized most fully, its flag (if such a state would have a flag), the awkward and unprounceable title of the journal itself, in which the letters are stitched or woven together across the equal signs between each letter. As Perelman has also pointed out in reference to the name of the journal, it is an expansive and consciously disruptive gesture that above all removes itself from normative language uses and structures: "in language, there is no word *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*" (80). By doing so, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* opens itself up onto the possibility of alternative sets of grammars and syntactical arrangements both political and linguistic. This ambition is written into the title of the journal and

pervades the idiosyncratic agglomeration of works that were published in its 13 issue run. One of the most notable features of language writing was its capacity for community-formation and the strength of its self-sufficiency in terms of publishing and promoting its poets. In his pioneering sociocultural reading of the contemporary American poetry publishing culture, *Poetic Culture*, the critic Christopher Beach has noted the strength of the language poets' "network of alternative presses and journals" which have helped to establish and sustain "an experimentalist subculture... increasingly dominant in terms of academic critical reception" (174). As Beach explains, the 'success' of language poetry as a phenomenon is in large part down to the community activities that were engaged in during the movement's genesis: "the most visible alternative to the academic mainstream over the past two decades has clearly been Language poetry, the only context for American poetic writing of the last thirty years that has constituted both a viable movement and a recognizable community" (180). *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* played a fundamental role in this process, so much so that the journal's title has been known to become synonymous with the poetics of the poets associated with the group itself. However, it is important to remember that there were innovative, successful and exciting journals and presses published by many of the writers associated with the group. Bernstein and Andrews' *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* was one crucial part of a wide range of publishing activities that ensured work that could be considered within the context of language poetry was able to be read and written by an increasingly large number of people across the United States and very quickly in Canada, Britain, Australia, Russia and elsewhere too. As Vickery has noted, it was hoped by Bernstein that *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* would also reach across generic divisions, including writers and artists from other spheres and scenes: "Bernstein hoped that *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* would include

work that did not usually appear in a “poetry” context, such as art, music composition, performance art, philosophy or sociology” (29). As Vickery suggests, this urge to expand and cross-pollinate the language writing community was in part at least in reaction to fears that Bernstein had over the isolation and narrowing of divisive poetic groups. There was a sense in which language writing constantly had to resist and diminish the sense of dogmatism that was continually attached to it by commentaries from opponents of it. As Bernstein remarks, “language-centered writing was not intended to replace all other forms of writing but rather to open up new spaces for poetry and to combat the dogma that the only goal of writing is to produce transparent, conventionally representational works or I-centered lyric utterances—direct expressions of an author’s feelings (as if unmediated by language)” (2012, 287).

The writing in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* was (and remains) unusual and challenging for a number of reasons. Most notable is the approach to poetics and criticism employed by the journal’s contributors. This varies dramatically from contributor to contributor but there is a distinct sense that writing through texts and revealing aspects of their language is prioritized above clarity of exposition or explanation. As Bernstein again remarks, the journal favoured “discursive writing where the compositional imperatives of poem-making were manifest” (284). This isn’t to say that there aren’t pieces that display very precise and clear analysis, but there are also pieces in which the writing displays opposing traits such as confusion, fragmentation, discontinuity and very personal responses that are aversive to academic traditions. The second feature of the writing in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* that is unusual is the brevity of many of the contributions. Especially early in the journal’s life, rather than long and detailed essays, the pieces presented in

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E tend to be under 2 pages in length. This has a number of implications: visually, it means that each page of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* usually features the end of one piece and the beginning of another. Work is not ordered in a conventional arrangement whereby one author is presented per page. This means that the reading experience of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* is one in which you are constantly aware of the piece's situational proximity to other pieces in the journal, i.e., you cannot escape the contextual conversations and overlaps that each mini-essay has with the others around it. The shortness of each piece also means that the sense of a totalizing and 'complete' response to any topic is staved off in favour of a sense of cutting from one topic to another quickly. In this way, the reader is encouraged to make connections between the multiple mini-essays included in each issue rather than to focus on a singular understanding of any one piece. Finally, the miniature-essay form also adds to the sense of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* as a newsletter rather than a journal, where short essays and articles are presented as objects to be followed up on rather than digested or consumed. This adds to the sense of the journal as a forum by stressing its contemporaneity: it is a newsletter and as such acknowledges the always-changing climate and context in which it is read. Like a forum, it is an arena in which the style of the journal and the poetics of its contributors are always changing, shifting, contested and contestable.

As mentioned, one of the aspects of the editorial stance adopted by Bernstein and Andrews in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* that gives it the sense of forum and agora is in the dynamic conversations and reverberations that occur throughout each issue, where the (often very short) texts relate to each other in unusual and surprising ways. Issue 2, for example, begins with an excerpt from Roland Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero* in which he writes:

Each poetic word is thus an unexpected object, a Pandora's box from which fly out all the potentialities of language; it is therefore produced and consumed with a peculiar curiosity, a kind of sacred relish... 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 (2).

By initiating the second issue of the journal with this excerpt, Bernstein and Andrews clearly situate the contents of the journal under the sign of Barthes' sense of contemporary poetics as removed from authorial "foresight or stability of intention" and instead concerned with the "dense shadow of reflexes from all sources which are associated with [the words]" (1). They are also invoking the spirit of Barthes's seminal text and its fundamental questioning of whether it is possible to write politically: *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* can be seen as a continuous rephrasing of that same question. The organization of the journal itself demands to be read in similar fashion, reflexively across the resonances that each essay, review and reflection generates among the others. For example, Barthes' vision of an author-effacing poetry is interestingly re-cast in the immediately following piece in which Bob Perelman writes obliquely about the work of the poet Barrett Watten. The piece is titled 'Perelman on Watten', although rather than writing "on" the poetry of Watten, Perelman in fact writes "in" Watten's texts, selectively using language sourced from Watten's own text to engage with his work, as a note following the piece explains: "The words in this piece are mostly from Barrett Watten's work. The excerpts are often accurate. Many of the rest come from Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, chapters 12 & 13, which distinguish imagination and fancy" (4). The logic of this

piece seems to embody that expressed by Barthes' preceding excerpt. Perelman detaches the "words" from their initial context from Watten's text and appropriates them within a new context in which they are able to provide a commentary or outside perspective on their prior usage. He also places them alongside the context of Coleridge's language in *Biographia Literaria*, thus enacting a cross-cultural reading of committed political poetics. It is interesting that Perelman should first state "the words in this piece are mostly from Barrett Watten's work" and then qualify this by remarking that "the excerpts are often accurate." The suggestion initially is that the "words" rather than "sentences" are from Watten's work, i.e. that Perelman has used a restricted vocabulary based on words that are found in Watten's work in order, presumably, to analyse his work based on the sorts of words that he uses. However, the qualification that "the excerpts are often accurate" suggests that in many cases, Perelman is taking larger excerpts from Watten's work and recasting them in a new construction surrounded by different words and their meanings. In both situations, Perelman's piece provides an enactment of what happens when, as Barthes suggests, "the poetic word is an act without an immediate past", i.e. it refers not just to its immediate usage by an author but to all its usages across contexts both written and yet to be written. Perelman's text is an example of writing across the text in this way. However, by no means were the contributors to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* always in agreement with one another. In fact, Bernstein and Andrews included contributions from writers who were disparaging about *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and individual pieces within it. A few pages after Perelman's Barthesian exercise in criticism, a letter to the editor is included from the poet John Taggart. In it, he responds to the first issue and criticizes the approach taken by many of the reviewers and critics for not giving a clear enough account of many of the books featured in the issue:

Many of the reviewers seem to feel an obligation to turn the review into a performance as near an “original work” as possible... I find it nearly criminal to so grandstand that a reader can have little or no conception of what the work is like (15).

Taggart’s reaction is a useful one to consider and I do not believe that Bernstein and Andrews included it merely to set up Taggart as a fall guy for those who are ‘against’ *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. At least part of the purpose of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* was to generate awareness, information and interest in the small press publications that were featured in its pages. To the extent that the variety of critical approaches made this difficult, the efficacy of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* as a critical forum and newsletter for contemporary poetry and poetics was diminished. However, the response to Taggart’s objection is that, for Bernstein and Andrews the dichotomy set up by Taggart between “original work” and review or commentary doesn’t hold up. No creative work is “an original work” in the sense of being entirely itself, isolated from the contextual and intertextual conditions in which it is both made and read. Equally, a review cannot avoid being (in this same sense) a “performance” in its own right, even if that performance is one of clarity and effacement in front of the work of art being described. This, the suggestion of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* is, is equally a critical “performance”, only it hides or attempts to hide that fact. As Bernstein has stated, the editorial values expressed in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* were “an equal commitment to exchange value as to the value of individual works” (2012, 282). This suggests that the responses, riffs, variations and performances that a text engendered were equally prioritized within the journal as the original works being described, making Taggart’s objection to the journal’s featuring of reviews and essays that amounted to performances in and of themselves essentially an objection to the values

of the journal itself. However, his own response is included in the journal as an expression of its fostering of debate, of differing viewpoints, of intelligent analysis, variety and critique. Further on in Taggart's critique of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, he writes "there may be a place for Barthes' choreography du text (which I doubt) but surely it comes well after the basic identity of the text has been established" (16). By placing Taggart's critique of the Barthesian model for criticism alongside Perelman's example of an essay clearly influenced by it and the excerpt from *Writing Degree Zero*, Andrews and Bernstein create their own "choreography" within the 'text' of the journal whereby it is elastic and expansive enough to include differing, contradictory viewpoints. The invitation in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* is to read it across all its vectors and from all angles – almost as a large, serial, disjunctive text co-authored by all its contributors rather than as a collection of distinct essays by individual authors, a feature of the journal that is emphasized in the reading by the practice of putting the contributor name after each piece only, rather than at the beginning or in a contents page. This means that when the reader comes to an individual piece, they have usually begun reading before they necessarily realize who the author of each piece is, a sense of authorial identity being less important than the collective engagement that the journal enacted.

In other works in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, the sense of a forum is emphasized by features within single works. For example, Bernstein's own essay 'Semblance' from issue 13, subsequently reprinted in *Content's Dream*, features a footnote and a detailed description and response to an objection made by the language poet Alan Davies:

Alan Davies has objected that language and experience are separate realms and that the separation should be maximized, in this way questioning the value

of using language to make experience palpable. – But I don't mean “experience” in the sense of a picture/ image/ representation that is calling back to an already constituted experience. Rather, language itself constitutes experience at every moment (in language and otherwise) (11).

As this passage demonstrates, $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ represented a live field of enquiry where poetics were being explored, refined and constantly nuanced and redefined rather than expounded in completed form. Bernstein modifies his usage of the word “experience” in relation to Alan Davies' objection. In short, the magazine provided its contributors and readers with a forum-like space for thinking about language, poetics and politics. Other aspects of the magazine that strengthened its sense as a forum included Bernstein's aim that “guest editors would be called in to run special feature topics such as sexuality, politics and collaboration, as well as a forum on language writing and women” (Vickery, 29).

In spite of the journal's successes in helping to foster and engage the communities of language writers across both East and West coasts, one of the founding principles of $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ was in fact to get beyond the narrowness of particular groups and scenes, as Bernstein and Andrews stressed in the introduction to *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* in 1984:

Focusing on the range of poetic exploration, and on related political and aesthetic concerns, we have tried to open things up beyond correspondence and conversation: to break down some unnecessary self-encapsulation of writers (person from person & scene from scene), and to develop more fully the latticework of those involved in aesthetically related activity” (ix).

In part, then, $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ was aimed at making public some of the “correspondence and conversation” that was occurring between language writers and

had been for a number of years prior to the founding of the journal.

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E was a forum in which to extend this conversation further than the narrowness of the group itself. The first issue was distributed free to 200 individuals who the editor felt might be interested in the contents of the journal, a gesture that can clearly be read as extending the audience for the sort of poetics associated with the magazine beyond those writers who were already aware of it.

Chapter 3. II. ‘Thought’s Measure’ and ‘The Artifice of Absorption’ – Bernstein, Protagoras and Stein

Originally published in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E v. 4* in 1981, Bernstein’s essay ‘Thought’s Measure’ has been described by the critic Loss Pequeno Glazier as “a consummate philosophical essay” (Bernstein, 1999, 241) and is a useful example of how Bernstein expands the form of an essay essentially about the practice of writing poetry to be about the stance individuals and communities take to the structures and orders of the world. The essay begins with a number of staccato propositions about language and its relation to the world and to the act of thinking.

Language is the material of both thinking and writing. We think and write in language, which sets up an intrinsic connection between the two.

Just as language is not something that is separable from the world, but rather is the means by which the world is constituted, so thinking cannot be said to ‘accompany’ the experiencing of the world in that it informs that experiencing. It is through language that we experience the world, indeed it is through language that meaning comes into the world and into being. As persons, we are born into language and world: they exist before us and after us. Our learning language is learning the terms by which a world gets seen.”

(Content’s Dream, 62).

This passage makes clear that Bernstein sees language as the material through which we are able to both know and experience the world. Taking this premise, Bernstein develops an argument for poetry that lays bare its own ordering and structural principles as a means of drawing attention to the ways that the world is also structured and ordered through language. Rather than making use of received and traditional

poetic structures, according to Bernstein poets should aim to create new ordering principles and structures that draw attention to themselves as constructs. By doing so, Bernstein collapses the division between form and content in writing. Rather than a “shell” in which content is placed, the form of a poem (its language, its order and structure) is indistinguishable from its content, becoming the central issue at stake for the poet. The critic and poet Hank Lazer has acknowledged this elision of form and content in a discussion of this essay:

Bernstein’s argument in ‘Thought’s Measure’ deepens the relationship between form and content, making content a product of form and the concept of a separate entity called “content” merely a “dream”. Thus, new ways of writing become crucial to Bernstein precisely because “various shapes and modes and syntaxes create not alternate paraphrases of the same things but different entities entirely (Lazer, 29).

As Lazer notes, the indistinctness of form and content in Bernstein’s poetics makes novelty a key component of his understanding of writing. There is a positive value to “new ways of writing”, i.e. writing that tests and transgresses the limits of what is understood by “poetry”, writing that seems ‘strange’, ‘challenging’ and ‘new’. Indeed, the wide usage of the term “innovative poetry” or “innovative writing” in contemporary usage to refer to ambitious writing suggests that novelty has come to be prized above all other values in assessments of poetics. However, while there is a suggestion that novelty as itself has a value in writing as it draws attention to the way language structures work in society as a whole, Bernstein’s language in ‘Thought’s Measure’, suggests that novelty is not necessarily the principal value of progressive writing. Novelty itself is, of course, a concept that comes loaded with social value with its overtones of “market innovations” capturing the commercial marketplace.

Rather than privileging “novelty” above all else, which might be seen merely as mimicking the capitalist triumph of market innovation, Bernstein inserts another crucial concept into his constructivist poetics: “responsibility”:

If, in poetry, we wish to take responsibility for the work, the text, then we must intend the order, take the order as a crucial part of what we are doing. The idea of order suggests sequence but I also want it to suggest the mode/ shape/ form/ structure in which the ordering occurs. The question also arises as to what is the unit of ordering – phoneme, morpheme, word, phrase, sentence, etc. (Syntax is the ordering of strings of words.) What, then, is the measure, measure being the unit of ordering? The measure being something we discover in writing poetry not something we assume... I am putting forward a poetry that does not assume a measure but finds it, articulates it. In this context, a value in constructive work is that it lays the measure bare to the ear and eye, so that we can hear and see the structuring and how it creates (conditions) meaning by its structuring. So actively displays how meaning in the world comes to be (*Content's Dream*, 75).

According to Bernstein's argument, there is an onus on the poet to take responsibility for the structuring principles of the poem, to demonstrate the ways in which these structuring principles (the poem's “measure”) enact and construct meaning. This is at once an aesthetic and an ethical responsibility. Aesthetically, where a poet focuses on an illusion of “content” and takes “form” for granted, a poem will necessarily miss out on ways of generating meaning. However, this is also an ethical point, signaled by the ethical overtones of the word “responsibility”. For Bernstein, when a poem actively manifests the ways in which its ordering principles create meaning, it by extension also actively draws attention to the ways that

“meanings come to be in the world”. This leap from an aesthetic point about the ways in which poetry can be written to an ethical and political point about how poetry can challenge, question and reveal the way language structures constitute the world is one of the central premises of the revolution that language poetry engendered. It is precisely this facet of language poetry that has been described by the scholar Ming-Qia Ma as representing an inquiry into “method”, where method is similarly understood as the processes and structures through which we know the world: “the diverse experiments in postmodern literature and in American avant garde poetry in particular, variously described as formal, stylistic and generic, can be read as... a critical inquiry into method itself” (6). The forms language takes, the ways it creates meaning, become the content and the subject of the poem. In Bernstein’s writings, the ethical imperative of poetry that creates rather than inhabits forms through an investigation into the structural constitution of societies has its origins both in constructivist art practices (he writes that “construction is assumed to be an integral part of visual work... Yet, just as fundamentally, construction is at the heart of writing”(75)) and in his reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s concept of the ‘social contract’. Bernstein sees experimental poetic forms as a way of testing the limits of our language and therefore our social contract with our governmental structures. As he writes in ‘Comedy and the Poetics of Political Form’:

Don’t get me wrong: I know it is almost a joke to speak of poetry and national affairs. Yet, in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau writes that since our conventions are provisional, the public may choose to reconvene in order to withdraw authority from those conventions that no longer serve our purposes. Poetry is one of the few areas where the right of reconvening is exercised (*A Poetics*, 225).

The sense in this passage is of poetry as a space where language's constitutive processes are up for grabs and un-pinned-down, a public and social space where language performances authenticate and interrogate the political and linguistic conditions that we give our collective consent to. Bernstein's interpretation of Rousseau is critical here, and in particular in the emphasis that Rousseau puts on democracy as participatory both in an individual's private and public contributions. For Rousseau, private freedoms are essential alongside public and social obligations: "Where shall we find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and the property of each associate, and by which every person, while uniting himself with all, shall obey only himself and remain as free as before?" (14). This articulation of the tension between both the freedom for private thoughts and public participation is reflected on by Bernstein in 'Thought's Measure', where he considers "private" and "public" as two essential elements of the act of writing poetry: "To speak intimately, is to speak as one will, not as one should. Confusion, contradiction, obsessiveness, associative reasoning, etc., are given free(er) play. A semblance of coherence – or strength, or control- drops away" (80).

Bernstein's interest in the private is counterintuitive. A central tenet of his poetics is that poetry (and all language use) is social and public, has a constitutive impact on the society in which we live. In light of this, it might seem perverse or contradictory that Bernstein should also remark that "writing is in some senses the exploration and revelation of that which is private" (78). However, what is at stake here is not a notion of poetry as simply "private expression made public", which might be considered the impetus of the dominant Confessional modes in poetry that the language poets were reacting against in the late 1970s. Rather than this, Bernstein sees the exploration of one's private relation to thought and language as an investigation into one's relation

to the world that is constituted through that language. Taking responsibility for one's language (which is both a private and public act) enables one to avoid merely repeating dominant social modes. Confessional poetry, therefore, ceased to resemble the private when it became "a literary device to give the semblance of intimacy and authenticity" (80). In other words, when its modes of address became sanctioned as an accepted poetic norm. It is this aspect of confessional poetry that Ron Silliman has objected to as "the poem as confession of lived personal experience, the (mostly) free verse presentations of sincerity and authenticity that for several decades has been the staple of creative writings in the United States" (in Perloff, 2004, 133). In contrast to this, the private language explorations that Bernstein endorses are rooted in "obscurity" and "difficulty": "the private can also seem to be the incommunicable" (80). The intimation seems to be that by acknowledging the obscure, confused and contradictory nature of private thought processes and language uses, the poet becomes aware of the illusory and contingent clarity and cohesion of language which is used to establish and maintain our social structures:

The intense experience of separation that is a part of a continuing power of privacy in writing can make tangible what otherwise seemed invisible: the world made strange so that we can see it, as in a dream of the familiar becoming foreign... It is measure that we have seen, that language is measure... A privacy in which the self itself disappears and leaves us the world (81).

A poem's "measure", therefore, is explicitly linked by Bernstein to the notion of democratic policy making and the way we choose to assent to governmental systems. As such, the reconstruction and investigation of poetic form that Bernstein posits as a politically efficacious space for experimental writing bears analogy to the similar

process of philosophical and conceptual reconstruction that the pragmatist critic James Campbell has described in relation to the works of John Dewey. As Campbell writes: “Under Dewey’s method of social reconstruction, the philosopher, as an expert of a certain sort, has a special role to play through the evaluation of the concepts and ideas that enter into social discourse” (52). The suggestion is that the philosopher is able to influence the sorts of concepts and ideas that become accepted and debated by a society through evaluating, devising and revising them. This is not dissimilar to a Platonic appraisal of the social value of pure theory or pure philosophizing, with the crucial difference that Dewey would reject a notion of “pure philosophy” in favour of his pragmatist approach to philosophical questions. Poetry in the sense that Bernstein conceives of it, is less concerned with what Campbell calls the “evaluation of concepts” than with “measure”, i.e. the tools through which we evaluate, formulate and communicate. That is to say: language. In this, Bernstein’s usage of the word “measure” relates to both the metre and to the modes of measurement. The “measure” of a poem is a manifestation of the constitutive relationship between language and society, how society is “measured” and what is held to be true for that society. The critic Jerome McGann has interpreted Bernstein’s use of the word “measure” in its rhetorical and poetic sense (as rhythm, meter and other linguistic measurements), claiming that because thought is bound up entirely in language and cannot be considered except in language, the structures of thought are also the structures of language:

If, however, truth is seen as a function of language – of thought as act – then the “measure of thought” becomes rhetorical and stylistic: “measure” in the poetical sense of the word. Charles Bernstein’s important essay ‘Thought’s

Measure' argues such a view of thought and explores some of its implications for the practice of writing. (McGann, 1993, 142)

In positing “truth as a function of language”, McGann proposes a pragmatic apprehension of relative truth that recognizes the importance of rhetoric (of language) in the ways truths are established by communities. Elsewhere, McGann has characterized Bernstein’s position as “an inheritor of the Saussurean legacy that sees “reality” as a function of the language(s) by which we speak of it” (2010, 103) and “the Blakean belief that for human beings the world – including the natural world – is human, that is, is the precious responsibility of human beings” (104). These remarks are quoted from McGann’s experimental essay ‘Private Enigmas and Critical Functions’, which rather than proceeding in an expository and academic manner, instead enacts a conversation between three pseudonymous interlocutors (Anne Mack, J.J. Rome and George Mannejc). This form allows McGann to articulate conflicting and divergent interpretations of the value of Bernstein’s poetic strategies, as well as enacting the drama of private thoughts and public address that his title alludes to. As such, he mimics the process through which for Bernstein the world is constituted: through debate, criticism, private language uses and above all engagement with texts and language. McGann situates this attitude to truth, reality and language in reference to the semiotics of Saussure and the Romanticism of Blake. He sees the profound sense of “responsibility” for the ways language use creates the world within Blake and the attitude that languages consist of “collective products of social interaction, essential instruments through which human beings constitute and articulate their world” (Harris, ix) within Saussure. However, an earlier progenitor would be the sophists, and in particular Protagoras, who famously articulated a relativist, rhetoricist and humanist position in the fragment of his work *Truth*: “Man is the measure of all

things - of the things that are, that they are; of the things that are not, that they are not" (Waterfield, 211).

3. III. Protagorean Measurements

Few words are more loaded with sophistic inflection than the word that Bernstein chooses to denote the forms, structures and constructions of language that poetry foregrounds: “measure”. In particular, Protagoras’s man-measure doctrine (quoted above) is both controversial and contested, its implications (if any) to the development of philosophy obscured by opposing interpretations of its value. As Edward Schiappa has remarked, “of extant fragments, perhaps none is as important and difficult to interpret and understand as Protagoras’ human-measure fragment” (117). In this section, the resonances of the term within the thought of the Ancient Greek sophist Protagoras are unpacked, alongside some contemporary readings of the term’s agency from contemporary commentators Ugo Zilioli, Cynthia Farrar and Edward Schiappa. In light of these discussions, I read the man – measure doctrine as an early example of what Bernstein would consider “a difficult poem”, one that has enacted the generation of “a legacy of multiple and contradictory interpretations” (Schiappa, 117) through its complex semantic, aural and rhetorical structures. In the section that follows this one, these readings are reintegrated alongside a close reading of Bernstein’s poem ‘Sentences’ from his book *Parsing*.

The difficulty of interpreting the Man-Measure doctrine stems both from the inherent ambiguities within the language employed by Protagoras and from the lack of surviving context surrounding its use. While most critics accept the utterance was the beginning of a work entitled *Truth*, whether or not this work built on the premise of the fragment or developed it is unknown. However, Edward Schiappa has noted of the Greek word “*metron*” (“measure”) that “in addition to the obvious literal sense of assessing quality, “measure”, can also refer to appropriate proportion or ordering...

Hence, Protagoras's claim that humans are the measure of all things is provocative. The statement challenges its hearers to consider the ways in which humans are "measures" (119). Given this ambiguity (where "ordering" can be interpreted in the sense that Bernstein uses it in 'Thought's Measure', as "structure"), Protagoras's fragment suggests that humans are both constitutive of reality and responsible for "measuring" its social truths. This interpretation also suggests the poetic reading of the word "measure" or "metre" as a literal "ordering" or "grammar" of the poem. Schiappa also identifies a usage of the word "metron" to refer to "the regulation of opposites" (119) in the work of Heraclitus. This interpretation of the word is particularly interesting in relation to Man-Measure as it enacts an opposing structure of its own between the two key words. Man-Measure can be seen to create and then dismantle an opposition between "Man" and "Measure" that is reflected in this semantic interpretation of the word as "the regulation of opposites". According to such a reading, man and ordering principles become interdependent, with man a product of measurements, language and ordering systems as well as a generator of such systems.² A process of understanding and meaning-generation, therefore, is conducted through contradictions and oppositions, through proto-dialectics. It is this aspect of the word "measure" that has been stressed by the French philosopher Clemence Ramnoux, who puts the case forward that:

Protagoras takes as his goal to show men how to master a game that is beyond him, to know this world which is in perpetual contradiction. This mastery consists in "playing with" contradictions in order that we can draw out the best possible part on all occasions (Ziebertz, 88).

² This reading has affinities with Tom Cohen's interpretation of the phrase, a discussion of which ends this section.

A further interpretation of the phrase is identified by Schiappa through a paraphrase by Hermias, whereby “measure” equates to the word “limit”. By this interpretation, Protagoras’s doctrine is radically agnostic and, in a sense, pragmatist: if “humans are the measure of all things”, they cannot know objective truth, only contingent truth as verified and endorsed through processes of socialization. What humans are able to perceive (by whatever means) is the limit of what we can know. If language, then, is the process by which we are able to think and conceive, and “measure” is interpreted as “limit”, then “man is the measure of all things” could be seen as a companion statement to Wittgenstein’s “the limits of my language are the limits of my world” from the *Tractatus* (2007, 88). Indeed, it is this radical doctrine that attracted Ferdinand Schiller, who, as Steven Mailloux has demonstrated, posited Protagoras at the centre of his emerging pragmatism:

According to Schiller, Protagoras intended both the subjective interpretation of the dictum – individual men are the measure of all things – and the objective interpretation – mankind in general is the measure. Furthermore, the double meaning itself points up the epistemological problem of how to get from one aspect to the other, from the subjective perceptions and assertions of one man to the objective truth, in some sense ‘common’ to all mankind (29).

Schiappa has also demonstrated how as a linguistic construct, the Man-Measure doctrine has aural complexities as well as semantic difficulties, and he suggests that it is at least in part constructed based on aesthetic considerations alongside philosophic ones. He claims that the appearance of the word “estin or einai” (meaning “to be” or “is”) can be explained as “an acoustical enhancement of the statement” (119). This aspect of the phrase as an arrangement of sounds as well as a statement of views helps to open it up to multiple readings and interpretations. As an arrangement of words

based on sound patterning as well as semantic communication, Protagoras's man-measure doctrine can be read as a poem, that is, as a work where the text's artifice is as important as its content. It is this reading of the phrase that suggests a reading of metron that acknowledges its subsequent usage in poetry as "meter". As Gregory Nagy has remarked, "metron" is much wider than simply referring to "rhythm", it can refer to a poeticized way of speaking: "meter was a "measure" in the sense that it gave "measure" to language to create a special language that was differentiated from whatever was understood to be everyday language" (370). The word "metron" in Protagoras's fragment can therefore be interpreted as a signal that the words are to be interpreted poetically and interpreted aesthetically as much as a statement of objective truth or fact.

Perhaps the most provocative recent reading of Man-Measure is contained within Tom Cohen's *Anti-Mimesis From Plato to Hitchcock*. Cohen rejects a humanist reading of the dictum and offers an alternative post-humanist interpretation, reversing the emphasis from "man" to "measure". He begins by establishing a link between "measure" and the act of reading, through analyzing the association Plato sets up between Protagoras and reading in the *Thaetetus* and also in the relation that is set up between Protagoras and aesthetics through Plato's employment of the term "kallista", or "the most beautiful" (73). From there, he enacts a volte-face argument that opens the man-measure fragment up to a radical new possibility:

We might try to reread the text by reversing the predication of Protagoras' dictum to read not that "Man" is the center, (individually or collectively), the measure of all things as such, but that Man – an empty term, a linguistic subject position or place-holder momentarily without definition – "is," or is supplanted, disarticulated, or situated by an activity that encompasses (and

produces) “him” reflexively, one which at base can be called measuring. Such measuring resituates the human against something that is perceptually exterior to and before it, as itself a forgetful if semiotic figure and effect that is retro-projected as a site. Moreover, the *metron* also strips the human of face momentarily, requires it haltingly or failingly put that on, perpetually, yet again, in the act of language (74).

Cohen’s essay raises a number of affinities of the term “measure” with a reading of Bernstein’s use of the term in ‘Thought’s Measure’. Not least among these is the primacy that he gives towards language and materiality rather than subjectivism and humanism. The suggestion from Cohen’s reading is that Protagoras’s dictum can be taken to express conditionality of humans through language, that rather than a “measure of all things”, man is produced, sustained and conditioned by the structures and constructions through which we interact, communicate and make meaning. A similar observation can be found in the writings of Cornelia Wells, who writes of “language’s us” rather than “our language” (282). Cohen goes further than to situate this interpretation of Protagoras’s text as purely linguistic, suggesting that in Plato’s *Thaetetus* the moment at which perception awakes is a knock on the door, thus establishing his materialist reading in the “prenominal, prefigural or even preletteral” (74). However, the value of Cohen’s text to a reading of Bernstein’s use of the term “measure” is primarily in the focus that he attributes to linguistic structures, and the focus he draws away from the subject position: “the renowned but often banally translated “Man is the measure...” could be more interestingly tracked, perhaps, if we did not assume “Man” as the given narcissistic subject, but reflected “him” back into the parameters of measure itself” (103). One of the compelling aspects of Cohen’s reading is that the fragment itself has done so much to perform his argument. A short

text (reduced often to just two words: *anthropos metron*), Protagoras's text has enacted hugely conflicting and competing readings and interpretations. Its form itself rejects singular meaning and intention, denying absolute truth by its obscurity and obliquity. It foregrounds grammar through the complex and reflective relation set up between "man" and "measure" and it expresses the contingency and interdependence of humans and linguistic structures. It also expresses the tension between individual and community that was discussed in the last section in reference to Bernstein's 'Thought's Measure'. Above all, though, Man - Measure is a text that foregrounds itself as a text and foregrounds the act of "measuring" and reading.

The philosopher Ugo Zilioli has made a compelling case for understanding Protagoras's Man – Measure doctrine in a similar way, as an oblique text that performs its own difficulties. He argues that Protagoras is philosophizing within the gnomic style, i.e. making use of allusion, suggestion and abstraction rather than "a clear analytic statement"(115). By positing this stylistic choice, Zilioli claims that Plato's criticism of the doctrine as inconsistent are misplaced. In the *Thaetetus*, Plato has Socrates 'reveal' Protagoras's doctrine as self-refuting and inconsistent by claiming that if Protagoras defines what is true by what is true for individuals being true for those individuals, then the viewpoint that the Man-Measure doctrine is false would have to be regarded as valid by Protagoras. For Zilioli, it is because of Protagoras's style that Plato's objections to the Man – Measure doctrine fall down:

Protagoras' maxim neither openly says what relativism is nor hides what it is; rather, it gives hints at it. If, by following a codified pattern in Presocratic philosophy, Protagoras adopted such an indirect style in formulating his relativism, one could not accuse him of being inconsistent, since Protagoras'

enunciation of his relativistic views cannot be read in a relative or objective way but in an oblique one (115).

According to Zilioli, the gnomic style adopted by Protagoras itself vacates itself from being held to be objectively true or false and therefore escapes the logic of Plato's self-refutation or inconsistency argument. This argument has also been advanced by Harold Brown, who has claimed that Plato's objection "has no force against any consistent relativism, even the extreme relativism of Protagoras. Its apparent cogency derives from a tacit acceptance of the absolutist assumption that we are justified in making a knowledge claim only if it is based on an unquestionable foundation" (Phillips, 29). Therefore, rather than make an explicit claim that can be displaced by an argument that it is inconsistent or self refuting, instead, Protagoras's utterance can be seen as prioritizing a process of reading, interpretation and "measuring" that draws attention to the ways in which meaning is made (through language, meaning-generative and interpretative practices). Correspondingly, Zilioli claims that Protagoras is more concerned with "showing" than "saying" in his method of philosophical discourse. He relates this aspect of Protagoras' philosophical style specifically to the manner of philosophizing engaged in the work of Wittgenstein, and in particular to Wittgenstein's famous "ladder" analogy:

The distinction between 'say' and 'show' has been drawn by Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The *Tractatus* is composed by a series of sentences, each one numbered following the pattern of those possible logical implications one can establish between them. Strictly speaking, Wittgenstein does not argue for the logical plausibility of his sentences; this work is left to the intelligence of the reader, who is invited to establish logical connections

between the sentences. Once he has done that, the reader is invited “to throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it” (117)

Zilioli sees Protagoras’s utterance as making use of a parallel technique that rather than providing answers, it provokes interpretative processes. The dichotomy he posits between “saying and showing” in Protagoras and Wittgenstein’s philosophical methods is analogous to the distinction that McGann establishes with reference to Bernstein’s poetry between poetry that “represents meaning” and poetry that “enacts meaning” (123). McGann sees Bernstein’s poetry as enacting processes of meaning through creating linguistic constructs that can be read in many different ways. In these constructs, “what comes of such a text depends upon how the reader reconstructs the linguistic relationships: because choices will and indeed must be made if even the simplest act of reading is to be attempted” (120). His poetry, therefore, is not a vehicle for communicating ideas but an enactment of the conditions whereby ideas and meanings can be generated, as McGann writes:

Bernstein’s is a philosophical poetry not because it is a “poetry of ideas” but because it is a “poetry of thought and thinking.” One might abstract from the work an “idea” about knowledge as a process of knowing – as opposed to a set of knowns, whether factual or ideological. But the writing would mean to make it clear that such a view is itself another way of knowing the writing.
(111)

Bernstein’s poetry enacts an engagement with language at its limits, and dramatizes the ways in which linguistic systems and structures construct our realities. He does so through the “measure” of his texts rather than through the ‘ideas’ they contain. In part because of the fragmentary nature of their surviving texts and the unreliability of some third party accounts, the sophists have similarly been treated by

some scholars as important largely due to the ways in which they philosophized rather than the ideological content of their philosophizing as such. Under such a reading, Plato's description of the sophist as "the art of contradiction-making, descended from an insincere form of conceited mimicry, of the semblance-making breed, derived from image-making, distinguished as a portion, not divine but human, of production, that presents a shadow play of words – such are the blood and lineage which can, with perfect truth, be assigned to the authentic sophist" (Schiappa, 5) identifies (albeit pejoratively) the crucial aspects of style and substance that make sophistry as a philosophical mode so radical and subversive. These 'qualities' – contradictoriness, humanism, linguistic experimentation and with no claim to absolute truth – are remarkably similar to those qualities that Bernstein's poetry positively embodies. Just as this "shadow-play of words" doesn't necessarily involve a retreat into subjectivism but can in fact open up the methods of interpretation, reading and debate on which commonality is founded, so too for Bernstein:

The investigation or revelation of meanings, relying only on one's own private convictions and insistences, one's ear and the measure one finds with it, is not an isolating activity but its opposite – the exploration of the human common ground (1986, 81).

3. IV. 'The Artifice of Absorption'

The materiality of language, its syntax, grammar and artifice become crucial within Bernstein's poetics because they present an opportunity to explore the ways in which humans are measured by and measure the social and lexical structures under which they live. Added to this, language is the socially conditioned site where what feels to an individual like private thoughts and perceptions become situated in a public sphere. This impulse within Bernstein's writing has been present since the advent of his career, including his masters dissertation, which he wrote on Wittgenstein and Gertrude Stein. The light hearted subtitle for the piece was "The Three Steins"- including his own name alongside those of his two subjects. While this is in one sense a quip, like most of Bernstein's humour, it is also active and purposeful. Not merely signaling his own investment as a writer in the grammarian tendency that he sees in the works of Stein and Wittgenstein, by doing so Bernstein also suggests the importance of the personal within their work. An amended version of a section of this dissertation was published in the anthology *Gertrude Stein Advanced*, entitled 'Inventing Wordness: Gertrude Stein's Philosophical Investigations', in which Bernstein puts forward a case that Stein's work can be considered as "declaring, or dramatizing, the struggle between the public and the private: "official" morality versus the personal imperatives of justice, "private" experiences versus rigidly academic forms of expression" (57). He sees this as an advancement of a dialectic of "inner and outer" within the Nineteenth Century novel, but whereas the struggle was located within the microcosm of the family in previous fiction, Stein's contribution is "the internalization of this dialectic into the prose composition itself" (58). Bernstein argues that Stein's use of strange and non-normative grammar enacts this drama of

interiority and exteriority by suggesting (though not, Bernstein argues, adhering to) the notion of a “cryptic” or “private language” made up of a set of symbols:

It is as if the words stand for something else – are the embodiment of something that really exists on another level. Thus the words are seen as outer trappings (signs) that refer to and are separate from the real inner meaning. It is just this disjunction of inner and outer (similar to the disjunction of pain and pain-behaviour) that I want to refute by saying that the words refer only to themselves and that the meaning is internal to the prose. For if the unsayable “inner” meaning is only being translated into the “outer” language it would be as if we already had a language full blown prior to learning the one we speak: as if we had a form of life before we could speak and so were translating our pre-existing concepts into the public language. That would perhaps be an explanation of a private language but it would not account for the fact that learning a language is learning those concepts – that the limits of our language are the limits of our world (59).

This concern with testing the limits of language as the site of a dialectic between public and private is evident in Bernstein’s early book *Parsing* (1976), in which the focus is on the process of reading. In linguistics and computer science, parsing is the process by which texts and systems are understood through an analysis of the grammatical dynamics within them. This can refer to either a computer programme that parses texts or the human process of engaging with texts through their grammars. By suggesting “parsing” as a model of reading, then, Bernstein is prioritizing the meaning-generative properties of grammar and syntactical relationships, and in particular the relations of individual syntactical components with other syntactical

components and with the structure of the text itself. It is in this sense that *Parsing* can be regarded as enacting a performance of the relation of private individuals to public life, of private thoughts to society and community. The first poem, ‘Sentences’, consists of a 26 page catalogue of sentences, almost all beginning with the words “I”, “you”, “it”, “she” and “he”. There is a great deal of variety in the clausal structures of the sentences, from simple one clause sentences, “I think a lot” (3), to more complex sentences with modifiers: “You try to escape the fact of its absence, of its flight, of its no longer being there” (7); to multi-clause sentences: “I cannot tell you but you feel it” (25), “He was dying and he called for me” (13). There are also a number of sentences that purport to be sentences but that flaunt one or more aspects that we might assume constitutes a sentence: “The touch” (3); “you say to yourself is it me is it my fault is it something I’m mistaking or getting wrong or failing to see” (17); “you design patterns to get it all down, you stay up all night trying to figure out the puzzles you’ve created for yourself, you can’t understand why so few care, you forget about what you were thinking and can’t remember”(17). *Parsing* forces the reader to consider what a sentence is. For example, “The touch.”, would not normally be considered a sentence. It lacks a verb, even an implied or absent verb present in sentences such as “the more, the merrier”. However, within the context of its surrounding sentences it does communicate (albeit ambiguously) possible interpretations of its meaning as a sentence: “It sort of comes to you. I never look at it. The touch. My hands fit. It’s the feel. I just look at them.” (3)

In this example, the contextual sentences help to create possibilities for what the absent but suggested verb might be, such as: “The touch surprises”, “The touch feels natural”, “The touch is difficult to describe”. Alternatively, it might be tempting to read “The touch” as essentially a parallel sentence to the subsequent “It’s the feel”

and postulate it as “It’s the touch.” “The touch” in this context isn’t translatable as any one of those possibilities (any one would be pure presumption), but all and more are contained within and suggested by the sentence. Bernstein dramatizes the way that sentences come to make meaning as a process of them drawing on the context of surrounding sentences and also on the previous texts and experiences of the reader. The sentence “The touch” provokes the reader to consider times when they may have uttered such an incomplete sentence, out of, for example, the sensation that the experience of the sensation of touch was incommunicable. As such, this sentence enters not only a process of socialization with the sentences that surround it in the text but the sentences of other texts and of the textual exchanges that our lives consist of. In isolation, it is an example of a sentence at its most ambiguous, idle and resistant, without the usual marker and agency of a verb. However, in its context, this sentence is anything but isolating. On the contrary, because of its ambiguity it opens itself up to the reader’s cognition and invites a personal investment on the part of the reader into the meaning, more so than the more transparent and immediately assimilable sentences that encompass it. It is because of the opacity of this sentence that it resonates. There is an irony to this sentence’s incompleteness too. We are taught in schools that every sentence requires a verb, and by that rule, this would not be sentence. However, while it can be read as a sentence that lacks a verb, it could also be read as a sentence that lacks a subject, so that the missing element is in fact “The [something’s] touch”, where “touch” is a verb not a noun. By this reading, “The touch”, might more readily pass the ‘rule’ of having a verb and therefore being a sentence, but it is distinctly less open to meaningful interpretation by the reader. In this way, Bernstein’s ‘Sentences’, probes and questions some of our beliefs about what constitutes a sentence. In the lecture ‘Poetry and Grammar’, Stein famously

remarked that “Sentences are not emotional but paragraphs are” (1931, xx) The emotional content of text is not contained within the unit of sentence, rather it is in that sentence’s relation to other sentences that emotion is able to register. As a sentence, “The touch” does not give itself up to an emotional response from the reader, however, when combined with (and *measured against*) the other sentences surrounding it, it begins to register itself as a unit that triggers an emotional response. However, the emotional content is not in the sentences’ integration into a whole but rather in their situation within the context of other sentences. As Jean-Francois Lyotard has extrapolated of this passage: “the feeling or the sentiment is the linkage, the passage” (67). The sentence is a unit, and as such it has nothing to be measured with or against in order to create “emotion”. However, when placed alongside other sentences, a sentence becomes measurable and the possibility of emotional content. The importance of the act of measuring to this process of realizing emotion in writing through the combination of sentences or units has been emphasized by the critic Don Byrd when he sums up Stein’s pronouncement in equation form, like so: “sentence A is not emotional and sentence B is not emotional but the paragraph composed of sentence A plus sentence B *is* emotional” (207).

Bernstein’s investigation into sentences ought to be considered alongside one of the most well-known pieces of language poetics, Ron Silliman’s *The New Sentence*. In this text, Silliman traces a genealogy of the definitions of a sentence, including that of the OED of a sentence as “such a portion of a composition or utterance as extends from one full stop to another” (64). As seemingly loose and indefinite as this definition is, there are a number of sentences within Bernstein’s poem that challenge even this idea of what a sentence is. The following sentence appears in the text without any full-stop or capitalization:

you design patterns to get it all down, you stay up all night trying to figure out the puzzles you've created for yourself, you can't understand why so few care, you forget about what you were thinking and can't remember (17).

In spite of this, in a work entitled 'Sentences', this unit of prose demands to be seen as a sentence, the commas separating its clauses emphasizing that these are individual units within a larger unit, a sentence. This sentence might be considered to be an attempt to write an emotional sentence, a sentence with "the balance of a paragraph" as Stein remarks (131). The clauses separated by commas in this sentence perform the dynamic of a paragraph in that they string sense units together that could stand alone as separate sentences. It is therefore possible to interpret this sentence as having meaningful emotional content on a number of levels. The relation of the words "down" and "up" in the first two clauses creates a sense of balance and rhythm, as does the juxtaposition of "forget" and "remember". The reader's attention is also drawn to the two words "puzzle" and "pattern", which are connected by their alliterative "p". They encourage the reader to conceive of the sentence as a "puzzle" rather than a fixed "pattern", and a "puzzle" enables the reader to move the pieces around like a jigsaw. For example, rather than the commas necessarily determining the units of sense, it is possible to consider other alternatives for sense units such as: "to get it all down, you stay up all night" and "trying to figure out the puzzles you've created for yourself, you can't understand why so few care". Bernstein's exploration of sentences is an exploration of the unit of writing at which language enters into relations with other units of meaning. Silliman describes this as "it is at the unit of the sentence that the use value and exchange value of any statement unfold into view" (78), that is to say when language becomes a public and social entity that forms relationships with and measures itself alongside those similar units of language in

which it is placed in context. Silliman writes in 'The New Sentence' that, "the new sentence is a decidedly contextual object. Its effects occur as much between as within sentences. Thus it reveals that the blank space between words or sentences is much more than the 27th letter of the alphabet. It is beginning to explore and articulate just what those hidden capacities might be" (92). Or as one of Bernstein's sentences from 'Sentences' puts it: "I want by now to get some clear idea where we are in respect to each other." (6)

The tension between private and public, between interiority and exteriority, is played out at the level of the sentence because sentences have their own internal grammar and syntactical logic at the same time as reaching out, suggesting and becoming part of the logic and grammar of other sentences in their vicinity and paragraphs as a whole. Language poet Bob Perelman has remarked of these kinds of sentences: "parataxis is crucial: the autonomous meaning of the sentence is heightened, questioned and changed by degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences" (61). In 'Sentences', this question of separation and connection becomes lodged as a psychological struggle in which voices attempt to articulate things about both themselves and their relation to others through language: "You can't take pride anymore./ You remember when a guy could point to a house he built./"; "You just get used to it." (5). The use of pronouns in these sentences enacts a struggle to connect to others and the sensation of a gulf or disconnect between the self and an other. Whereas "You can't take pride anymore" might be considered to refer to a 2nd person individual exterior to the voice, "You remember when a guy could point to a house he built", seems rather to refer to a more general "you" that is disengaged from a specific other person and states more about the individual speaking than any one external to him/her. The "you" of 'Sentences' is

almost always of the later sort, saying much more about the speaking subject than about a 2nd person subject. The difficulties of speaking in a way that communicates things about anyone other than the self is constantly asserted in these sentences where the second person dissolves into the first. The word “guy” in this sentence suggest that these difficulties are in part conditioned by social structures in which building a house would be the province of a “guy”, where “guy” is both a man and an emptied out non-person, as in a “guy fawkes”.

In his poem-essay ‘Artifice of Absorption’ from *A Poetics*, Bernstein focuses on the ways in which texts both resist and invite “absorption” and on the question of “absorption” and its implications for identity politics:

It’s as if the very desire not
to be absorbed creates a new threat
of absorption – down to the individual divided
against itself – its non-social “identity”
at odds with its social selves (20)

Bernstein posits “the dynamic of absorption” as “central to all reading and writing” (23). His argument is that poems on the one hand can be considered as “a spongy substance, absorbing vocabulary, syntax & reference... A poem can absorb contradictory logics, multiple tonalities, polyrhythms” (22). However, on the other hand, a poem can resist absorption into dominant cultural exchange practices by foregrounding its artifice and displaying anti-absorptive formal effects and techniques. Part of the paradoxical effect of using these techniques, Bernstein argues is that they disrupt a sense of the poem as a completed object on which the reader is looking on from outside and rather create a sense of the reader being in “a deeper absorption in the poem”: “impermeable textual elements may actually contribute

toward absorptive effects” (29). The terms Bernstein uses, “impermeability”, “antiabsorption” and “absorption” suggest a dichotomy, however, in the senses that Bernstein employs them, they are not a dichotomy but rather fluid and interrelated categories that take place in the act of reading. A realist novel, or a confessional poem might be considered to be absorptive in that there is an attempt to absorb the reader in its representation of a narrative on the one hand or the poet’s internal thoughts on the other. The sensation might be that the reader is “inside” the poet’s mind or “inside” the narrative. However, the reader’s absorption in these texts might be limited by their lack of agency within the texts. Once absorbed within these texts through the transparency of their language-uses, there is nothing for them to do but accept that language and let it wash over them. On the other hand, a text that uses anti-absorptive tactics and techniques to disrupt the sense of linguistic transparency may in fact result in a “deeper absorption” because the reader becomes a part of the poem’s meaning-generative capabilities and is therefore within the poem as an active agent rather than merely looking on from outside as an observer. Bernstein’s tactic of laying his essay ‘The Artifice of Absorption’ as poetry, making use of the disruptive and anti-absorptive techniques of linebreaks can be read in this way as an attempt to resist the absorptive elements of traditional academic prose (the sense of following a monological argument) and instead enact a deeper absorption within his essay which involves itself as a poem within the issues it deals with. Poetries that achieve this balance of impermeability and absorption are often by their nature what Marjorie Perloff has called “difficult poetries, difficult at least if one’s norm is the “direct speech, direct feeling” model” (*Radical Artifice*, 45). It is by their difficulty that they require an active absorption on the part of the reader, this absorption is not automatic. Bernstein’s conception of the absorptive as a central category to his poetics endorses

an idea of his writing as engaged in a performance of the dialectic of public/ private and interior and exterior. Through the foregrounding of a poem's artifice and "measure", the reader is continually confronted by the dilemma of where to stand in relation to the poem and how much of themselves to allow to be absorbed into the poem. This is explicitly stated towards the poem-essay's conclusion when Bernstein states "absorption & its many con-/verses, re-/ verses, is at heart a measure/ of the relationship between/ a reader &/ a work" (88). Bernstein also makes the connection between adopting such a "measuring" and "active" stance to poetry and adopting such a stance to the social constructs with which one interacts vis-à-vis the world, such as the absorption of "mass entertainment,/ from bestsellers to TV to "common voice" poetry" (55). The effect here is similar to that which Tom Cohen observes within "man is the measure". Rather than repeating narratives of the subjective position within the world which are so often the subject of narratives and "common voice poetry", through anti-absorptive strategies, the reader's attention is drawn away from "man" and onto "measure", where measure stands for rhetorical strategies, narrative modes, social constructs and the act of resisting their absorption.

Chapter 4. The Sophistics of *The Sophist*

The philosophical activities of the sophists are entirely bound up with their contributions to the field of rhetoric. The critic Christopher Lyle Johnstone has noted that a cornerstone of sophistry is

Fundamentally a combination of political excellence (*politike arete*) and skill in the art of speech/ argument/ reasoning (*logon techne*). What is disclosed in certain sophistical teachings is a distinctive form of consciousness, a way of being in the world that embraces chance, circumstance, instability and particularity (2006, 282).

In sophistics, then, a sense of politics is intertwined with rhetoric. There are at least two ways to understand this: the first would be that the sophists taught the art of persuasion, a rhetorical tool that would have been extremely useful to aspiring politicians (and would still today). The second argument (the one that is being made in this thesis and which Johnstone appears to be making in the way he characterizes the sophistic “way of being in the world”) would be that the sophists taught an awareness to and exploration of all uses of rhetoric in all language uses, including those of politics. The expansive and instructive explorations of language use that the sophists developed, including incursions into syntax, grammar, correct use of vocabulary etc was a way of placing language at the centre of the way the world is constructed, experienced and governed. There is a sophistic link between consciousness (how the world is experienced by humans) and language. For example, Johnstone writes of a sophistic interest in “the potential psychological impact of how words sound” (282) and “the way the psyche responds aesthetically to the sounds of words” (282). Once language (and in a wider sense, aesthetics) is placed as

fundamental to consciousness in this way, language also occupies a position at the centre of politics and the way political systems develop. Gyromas W. Newman has written of the influence of sophisticated rhetoric on contemporary American political speeches. He has analysed speeches by Johnson, Reagan and Nixon for those elements that appear to him to have a basis in sophistic rhetoric (2009). However, according to the interpretation of sophistics advanced in this thesis, sophistic rhetorical teachings were more about the employment of rhetorical devices for their own sake, not to persuade but to encourage awareness of language's inherent capacity to persuade. If, as Newman persuasively argues, rhetorical persuasive tactics are alive and well within contemporary political speech making, then sophistic explorations of language in such a way that explores the fundamentals of the ways language impacts upon our conscious and thereby constructs our political systems become critical in encouraging a more democratic and open political engagement from publics.

Bernstein's book *The Sophist* enacts this process through what Henry Sussman has called a "multifaceted exploration and dramatization of distinct poetic modes" that investigates "different aspects of linguistic ambiguity, flow, syntax, and semantic slippage" (2005, 52). As such, Bernstein's rhetoricized and sophisticated poetics emerges as not only one that reveals and critiques the ways in which language is used to construct politics but also one that communicates, occupies and creates "a way of being in the world that embraces chance, circumstance, instability and particularity".

Bernstein's rhetorical devices are not always directly classical ones. Indeed, it would be somewhat unsophistic of him if they were. The sophists were highly inventive and experimental language users, and Bernstein follows suit in not just employing new prosodic and rhetorical devices within his text but by naming and framing them as such, too. Within *The Sophist*, then, he coins his own techniques,

such as ‘Dysraphism’, which in a note that accompanies the poem of the same name he describes in the following way:

Dysraphism is a word used by specialists in congenital disease to mean a dysfunctional fusion of embryonic parts – a birth defect. Actually, the word is not in Dorland’s, the standard US medical dictionary; but I found it “in use” by a Toronto physician, so it may be a commoner British medical usage or just something he came up with. Raph literally means “seam” so dysraphism is mis-seaming- a prosodic device! But it has the punch of being the same root as rhapsody (raph) – or in Skeat’s – “one who strings (lit. stitches) songs together, a reciter of epic poetry”, cf. “ode” etc. In any case, to be simple, Dorland’s does define “dysraphia” (if not dysraphism) as “incomplete closure of the primary neural tube; status dysraphicus”; this is just below “dysprosody” [sic]: “disturbance of stress, pitch, and rhythm of speech (44).

“Dysraphism”, therefore, is a rhetorical device that combines a number of separate elements: “mis-seaming” as a way of organizing disparate elements in a poem paratactically or disjunctively; the sense of the poem as “stitched” together (with suggestions of bricolage and collage aesthetics); finally, “dysprosody” as a “disturbed” textual surface of the poem. Bernstein’s concept of “dysraphism” runs counter to conceptions of recent poetry that have stressed “unprecedented fragmentation” (Gioia, 9). Rather than fragmentation or breaking apart, the emphasis is placed on the ways that language units are combined together. Elsewhere, Bernstein has written that he is “interested not so much in disconnected bits... but how these bits form an overall weave, so that it’s a kind of spell-creating but where the spell is continually exposed or surfaced” (*Content’s Dream*, 391). This is an essential

distinction and one that is borne out in the poem itself, where clausal connections and the movement between sense units is more pronounced than any sense of disjunction.

In the poem 'The Truth in Pudding' from his most recent book of poems, *Recalaculating*, Bernstein formulates this priority as: "three types of fragmentation, or three aspects of any fragment: disjunction, ellipsis, constellation" (7). Fragmentation for its own sake is not the emphasis, it is rather the 'ellipsis' of one thing into another, the juxtaposition or 'disjunction' of fragmentary parts and the 'constellation' of multiple parts. These structural organizational principles are pivotal within the movements *Dysgraphism* takes as a poem and the ways in which it can be read productively in a way that moves beyond a sense of its fragmentation. While the text resists totalized unity of immediate semantic perception, at the level of grammar and sound, the poem is remarkable for its albeit strange and at times overwrought sense of structure, of conjoinedness, which itself has semantic implications:

Did a wind come just as you got up or were
you protecting me from it? I felt the abridgment
of imperatives, the wave of detours, the sabre-
rattling of inversion. *All lit up and no
place to go.* Blinded by avenue and filled with
adjacency. Arch or arched at. So there becomes bottles,
hushed conductors, illustrated proclivities for puffed-
up benchmarks. Morose or comatose. "Life is what
you find, existence is what you repudiate." A good example
of this is "Dad pins puck.' Sometimes something
sunders: in most cases this is no more than a hall. (44)

Even in this short section from the start of ‘Dysraphism’, there is a semantic cluster of words related to connectivity, such as “abridgment”, “adjacency”, “conductors”, “avenue”, “becomes”, “wave”, “arch” and “hall”. The phrase “sometimes something sunders”, suggests breaking or fragmentation, but the following clause reverses this by asserting “in most cases, this is no more than a hall”, i.e. something that connects two or more things. Indeed, the use of alliteration within this phrase acts against its semantic assertion of fragmentation by creating a noticeable sonic structure that rather than suggesting a breaking apart in fact holds the words together like glue. This short section reads as if it is an experimental exercise or master-class in forming conjunctions, in linking from one clause or sentence to the next through grammatical arrangement. The first sentence poses a question, two clauses balanced around the word “or”. This question establishes a link to the next sentence, which one might assume will answer the question posed but doesn’t, instead suggesting that the poem will be “a wave of detours”. The three clauses that make up the second sentence are linked by commas, creating a more pronounced break between each idea expressed and those adjacent to it. The next sentence involves a posited but absent subject, linking it to the previous sentence in the reader’s attempt to go back to figure out who the subject is who is “blinded by avenues and filled with adjacency.” Similarly, the sentence “So there becomes bottles...” uses the word “so” to tie that sentence to the previous ones by way of suggesting the continuation of a line of thought. Likewise, the colon used in “Sometimes something sunders: usually this is no more than a hall”, suggests a link between the two clauses, though the semantic link between the two remains open and uncertain (as a doorway on to a hall, perhaps). Overtly laying bare the ways in which his units of text are conjoined together, Bernstein at once stresses “the overall weave” and “exposes the spell”. He also enacts what Jonathan Levin

calls the “poetics of transition” (1999). Specifically, in his study of that title, Levin analyses Stein’s prose as dramatizing “the movement of words” (145): “though her style would develop in different directions, it is marked throughout by an effort to create a composition of words abstract in design and resistant to the illusions and clichés of narrative and lyrical conventions” (164). As such, Levin argues, “every moment, for Stein, is the site of a new transition; every word, every time it is spoken, is the agent of that transition” (164). Transition as both an aesthetic quality and a technique of writing is a way of “resisting the repose that would put an end to the continuous movement of perception” (152). For Bernstein, too, his work constantly inhabits transitional moments (syntactical moments) across words and phrases, phrases and sentences, sentences and lines, lines and poems, poems and sequences, sequences and books. Indeed, his usual practice of publishing pamphlets and collating them into book forms later can be seen as a furtherance of this interest in the transitions between things. This is in part what gives his work its anomalous, enigmatic qualities and may also be a reason why, of all the language poets, his poetry seems to have altered and shifted away from the poetry he first began writing in the 1970s. However, it isn’t that Bernstein has transitioned away from that early work, but rather that his poetics throughout his career has been marked by transition. Transition can be seen to haunt the first poem in his first book, too, with its memorable lines “rooms, suites of rooms, buildings, plants” (1) indicating the cumulative transition of perceiving a group of rooms and then multiple groups of rooms. The “suites” transition into “buildings” and the “buildings” transition into “plants”, where “plants” is interpreted both as an industrial complex and as an organic growth. This poem, as with ‘Dysrhythmism’ is constantly foregrounding the moment of transition from one percept to the next, a facet that is altogether more startling when it

is taken into account that the work is formally a 'deletive' text, i.e. a deletion of the source text of Erving Goffman's *Asylums*. In Bernstein's work, as in Stein's, a transitional attitude or "way of being in the world" is manifest syntactically, in the syntactical orderings of language and the unusual and enigmatic phrasings in his poetry. As such, his writing stages what Levin has called in reference to the writings of William James (and their influences on Stein), a process of "emphasizing those aspects of language that exceed conceptual meaning: conjunctions and prepositions, adverbial phrases, inflections of voice indicating finely nuanced shades of meaning" (154).

A poetics that foregrounds these transitional aspects of language is one of percept rather than concept, which isn't to say that these aspects of language when integrated into a poetics do not have semantic capacity. Rather, as Levin's phrase "exceed conceptual meaning" suggests, these aspects of language exceed and resist a totality or summary of meaningful content and instead result in plural, potential, multiplicitous and uncertain or unstable meaning. The critic Susan Jarrett has written illuminatingly of the role (at once problematic and integral) of the sophists in the shift or transition from "mythos" to "logos" that occurred in Ancient Greece and which engendered the Greek Enlightenment and the advent of democratic culture. In *Rereading the Sophists*, she describes how traditional readings of this period suggest that this shift from a mythic culture to a logical one occurs concurrently with a shift from an oral culture to a literate one (31). However, Jarrett proposes an alternative interpretation that foregrounds the role of rhetoric (and in particular the radical rhetoric of the sophists) into this change in attitudes in Ancient Greece. Her reading fundamentally complicates the idea of a "unidirectional historical flow from *mythos* to *logos*" (32). Drawing on the writings of Eric Havelock in particular, Jarrett sketches

the traditional reading of mythic culture, where “audiences totally identified with the tale, lulled into a semi-hypnotic state by the meter of the verse” (31). According to a traditional reading, epic poetry enforced “an uncritical acceptance of tradition” (42). This assumption is one that Jarrett interrogates, putting the case forward that the “paratactic” structuring of epic poetry did in fact demand critical attention and awareness to tensions and crises within constitutions, however, her most radical move is to insert a troubling third category within the oral/ literate and *mythos/ logos* divides: *nomos*. Her concept of *nomos* emphasizes a human agency in validating, influencing and naming collective norms or customs, whereby these norms and customs become the province of the human rather than a given from nature or the Gods. This is an ultimately more open and democratic way of approaching systems than that of both *mythos* and *logos*. And it is one that suggests that the transitional is more than a stage between *mythos* and *logos* but a condition or mode of experience and of communication. For example, she writes that if:

logos in its ultimately Platonic form signifies a necessary system of discourse allowing access to certain Truth, then *nomos* stands in opposition as the possibility for reformulating human “truths” in historically and geographically specific contexts (42).

This formulation of *nomos* attributes it a pragmatic and contingent conception of multiple “truths” and equips its communities with the wherewithal to determine structures and “truths” through their own processes rather than through recourse to a hard and fast logical “Truth.” The way that *nomos* is able to communicate its contingency is through the medium it uses to actualize customs within communities, which Jarrett posits as rhetoric, i.e. the conscious, aware and deliberate use of language. Within this framework, the sophists become critical and highly influential

to the development of democratic procedures. The result of the relativist and multiple “truths” of *nomos* and the sophists is not necessarily a breakdown or anarchy, but rather a greater understanding of “the overall weaves” and an openness and awareness of the “spells” used to uphold it. What makes Jarrett’s study particularly relevant to a reading of ‘Dysrhythmism’ is that she locates it with reference to the forms and structures of epic poetry within mythic culture. She describes how “Links between parts of the story are paratactic , i.e., loosely associative based on temporal sequence without strong emphasis on causal relations between events” (33). However, patterning within the structures began to be based on “sensual pleasure” (33) due to the element of performance integral to the practice of epic poetry in the period. The sophists, therefore, integrated an already established interest in the sounds and constructions of sentences from epic poetry into their compositions in a way that drew attention to linguistic constructions as constitutive of the *nomos* or customs through which society is orchestrated. They used the logical procedures of “*logos*”, such as seemingly coherent logical arguments, but they did so in a way that prioritized awareness of them as language-constructions designed to persuade and of the importance of language in establishing so-called logical “Truth”. The stitched and woven together language units that make up ‘Dysrhythmism’ display a similar pleasure (or at the very least attentiveness to) the sounds of words, and this sonic patterning varies in effect from lulling the reader with the sorts of sentences used in logical argument, “We need/ to mention that this is one/ that applies to all eyes and that its application is only on the/ most basic/ and rudimentary level” (45), to jolting them upright with the tacky dazzle of “nowhere to go but pianissimo” (44).

Another rhetorical device employed within this section of ‘Dysrhythmism’ is homeoteleuton, which, as Untersteiner has noted, is a sophistic device that has been

attributed to Gorgias's invention (200). Homeoteleuton is the repetition of sounds at the end of words. A particularly clear example occurs in this section of 'Dysraphism' in the sentence "Morose or comatose." The effect of the homeoteleuton in this arrangement, balanced around an antithetical "or", focuses attention on the distinctions between the two words, which are similar in both sense and sound. Semantically, while "morose" refers to a state of sullenness or ill-temper, i.e. a voluntarily difficult or aversive mood, "comatose" refers to an unwilling state of torpor and unconsciousness. The crucial difference between the two states is that one suggests consciousness and even agency, the other suggests stasis and paralysis. When the end of words is similar, though, the ear tunes more readily into the differences at the start of words, in this case "mor" and "coma", which, in their near-neighbour sounds "more" and "comma" stress linkage and connectivity. A related, though inverse antithetical structure is present in "Arch or arched at", in which multiple meanings of the root "arch" are contrasted with each other. "Arch" is a term for a raised structure that connects (and most commonly supports) two points. The "arch" of the sentence in question, therefore, is the word "or". However, "arch" is also a term for pre-eminence or felt pre-eminence, such as in "archbishop" or even "archmodernist". This meaning is related to that of patronizing or condescending, where pre-eminence is perhaps felt too much. The phrase "arched at" might refer to the motion of an animal, especially a cat, which arches its back to seem larger when it feels intimidated or threatened. Arching, therefore, can be defence as well as a connect, a signal to keep your distance as well as a support mechanism. Somewhere within this arrangement is also the ghost of a concept: anarchism, the avoidance of being "arched at". The particular brand of anarchy proposed in 'dysraphism' is a syntactical and linguistic anarchy, where logical procedures are disturbed and

disrupted in order to unleash multiple possibilities for meaning and reference. “Arch or arched at” appears to set up two contrasting or opposing ideas, and yet the opposition he establishes is curious and aslant. “Arch or arched at” isn’t an opposition of two contrasting terms but a modifying intervention that opens up the difficulties inherent in interpreting the words.

Paradox is central to Bernstein’s rhetorical arsenal in ‘Dysrhythmism’. Many phrases and conjunctions appear contradictory or paradoxical at first reading. A good example is found in the phrase “filled with adjacency.” It is not immediately obvious how something might be “filled” with the quality of being “next to” or “beside” something, the two words suggesting both inside and outside of something at the same time. However, in music, the term “adjacent” is the word for the link between two notes in a scale, the almost imperceptible interval between two connecting parts of a musical progression. By inserting this sense of “adjacent” into the phrase, it more readily becomes apparent how one could be “filled with adjacency” as one is “filled with anticipation”. Similarly, in the mock-aphorism “Life is what you find, existence is what you repudiate”, the distinction that is being made between “life” and “existence” is confusing. How can one’s “life” be defined as “found” in contrast to one’s “existence” as a rejection or “repudiation”? How can “existence” be what one denies the truth or validity of. The first difficulty is in discerning the distinction between “life” and “existence”. Life would seem to refer to a quality of humans, animals and plants, i.e. living beings, where as “existence” can refer to any object, concept or idea. From this basis, then, “life” is “found” as it is what we know and all we can know, where as “existence” is the term used to describe things that are man-made, that are not, therefore, “found” in the way that natural things are. Constructed things, such as concepts, ideas, language etc are necessarily involve the act of

“repudiating” because they do not have the validity of being “alive” or “natural”. However, the proposition that “existence is what you repudiate” suggests that as a fundamental part of our existence we constantly validate or repudiate structures and value systems by the very act of being, of existing. The rhetorical unit used as an exemplar of this point, “Dad pins puck”, hardly seems to clarify matters, except as a combination of words based more on their sonic patterning, three monosyllabic words, one of which is a palindrome and the other two alliterative, than their semantic sense. It could be read as a radical and irreverent reimagining of a fundament such as “God is good”, with its patriarchal assumptions exposed through the use of the word “Dad”. In this reading, the word “puck” would refer equally to a ‘hockey puck’ as it would to ‘Puck’, the character from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* who is able to unsettle normative assumptions through his baffling and confusing language uses, outlandish behaviour and slapstick humour. From a poet who has published a book called “Little Orphan Anagram”, it is worth heeding the possible rearrangements of letters within any line. In this case, the presence of “spin” and “puns” gives a clue as to how ‘Puck’ (or the poet as ‘Puck’) can reverse, undermine and denormalize the patriarchal assumptions underlying “Dad” (into ‘DADA’?).

The overall effect of this highly rhetoricised poetic surface is to focus attention on the way that the poem is “stitched” or “mis-seamed” together. The emphasis is on an analysis and exploration of the connections between textual units (and, importantly, on the gaps between things, the degree of continuity). Untersteiner quotes Jules Marouzeau as remarking of Gorgias that:

Exact correspondence between the knowledge possessed by the speaker and that of the hearer does not necessarily exist and is even rare; speech does not mean strictly the same thing for both of them, because they differ in their

mentality, their culture, their grasp of the language: a new element of uncertainty and approximation... Words produce on us impressions which are more numerous in proportion to the number of pieces of knowledge, feelings, memories we carry in our minds (195).

This theory of language and its relation to knowledge bears remarkable similarities to that expressed by Bernstein when he positions himself as against a “conduit theory of communication (me > you)” (78). Rather than understanding things in this simple model whereby communication is a direct transference of ideas from ‘speaker’ to ‘spoken to’, the act of reading and language use becomes a way of placing things “adjacent” to other things and placing yourself “adjacent” to the language used, i.e. within the discourse itself. Understanding how things are “adjacent” to one another is the way that one is able to understand how structures (linguistic and political) constitute us. In a discussion of Bernstein’s position on this point in *Dance of the Intellect*, Perloff quotes Bernstein as follows:

The distortion is to imagine that knowledge has an object, outside of the language of which it is a part – that words refer to “transcendental signifieds” rather than being a part of a language which itself produces meaning in terms of its grammar, its conventions, its “agreements in judgement”. Learning a language is not learning the names of things outside language, as if it were simply a matter of matching up “signifiers with signifieds”, as if signifieds already existed and we were just learning new names for them. (219)

Her conclusion is that language poets, including Bernstein, take “poetic discourse to be, not the poetic expression in words of an individual speaking subject, but the creation of that subject by the particular set of discourses (cultural, social, historical) in which he or she functions” (219). Furthermore, poetic discourse is an exploration

of the ways in which the structures and organisations of language effect the ways in which the subject is positioned in relation to, i.e. (“adjacent” to) these discourses. As Perloff has more recently put it:

Here, in a nutshell, is the animating principle of the movement: poetic language is not a window, to be seen through, a transparent glass pointing to something outside it but a system of signs with its own semiological ‘interconnectedness’. To put it another way: ‘Language is material and primary and what’s experienced is the tension and relationship of letters and letteristic clusters, simultaneously struggling towards yet refusing to become significations’ (158).

As both of Perloff’s formulations suggest (the second drawn from the writings of Steve McCaffery), the language poets see language as something that is experienced as part of the discourse, which entails a certain adjacency to linguistic units and language usages. Hank Lazer has identified a practice within the grammar of Bernstein’s poems of “besidedness” that locates this process of adjacency at the level of the text’s composition. He writes that this “besidedness” “is manifest in alternative or multiple phrasings” (129), i.e. usages of words that point towards other alternatives outside of themselves. An example from ‘Dysraphism’ would be “All lit up with no place to go”, where “all lit up” points towards the alternative “all dressed up” outside of itself, hence setting up an alternative possibility “beside itself”. The term “besidedness” is an important one and it acknowledges the multiplicity of phrasing and meaning that Bernstein is able to weave into his poems. It suggests a way out of logical single-mindedness in the colloquial “beside yourself” for being “out of your mind”. The example that Lazer gives is from the book *Dark City*:

(I

pride myself on my pleonastic a[r]mour.)

{ardour}

(Besides)

Love may come and love may

go

but uncertainty is here forever

{profit?}

Lazer suggests that Bernstein is able to integrate multiple ways of meaning into the poem through utilizing the semantic multiplicities of alternate versions and mis-hearings of words “amour”/ “armour”/ “ardour”, for example. Brian McHale has acknowledged Lazer’s understanding of this technique (283) and detects it at work in a line from the poem ‘Hitch World’, in *The Sophist*: “is Greek, grief to me” (53), which plays on the phrase “it’s all Greek to me” and also the mis-heard word, related by sound, “grief”. The richness of this particular mis-hearing is that it conflates both sonic and semantic resonances, calling to mind “Greek tragedy” in the dynamic he establishes between “Greek” and “grief”. Similarly, in the poem ‘Foreign Body Sensation’, Bernstein writes of “toys/ to hunger for/ a hankering, systematic/ seals of aquamarine,/ sleds portrayed (weighlayed)/ against whose barn?” (104). In this modified version of the “besidedness” device, the words are connected not simply by their similarity in look or sound but by a very loose sense of half rhyme. In creating a linguistic and sonic universe for the poem in which “portrayed” is able to trigger the

word “weighlayed”, Bernstein radically increases the sense of constant play between the sound of words and their connections to other words through related sounds. This device of increasing the referential capacity of his compositions (through an attentiveness to the sonic possibilities of every word) is central to the ways in which Bernstein is able to critique a sense of language as a direct communication between two individuals and rather explore language’s multiple ways of making meaning and iterating societal structures through a thick and highly referential linguistic surface:

Not ‘death’ of the referent – rather a recharged use of the multivalent referential vectors that any word has, how words in combination tone and modify the associations made for each of them, how ‘reference’ is not then a one-on-one relation to an object (Content’s Dream, 115)

What is created is a sense of a taut linguistic surface crackling with referential possibilities and multiplicities of meaning. As one poem from *The Sophist* is titled, Bernstein’s rhetorical devices achieve a “surface reflectance” in which the reader’s “job, right at this moment, is to get busy with your mental pictures” (161).

Combinations of words, then, that are generated not as “an expression in words of the individual speaking subject” become integral to Bernstein’s poetics. The poem “I and the” from *The Sophist* is, as an endnote of the poem explains, a compilation of the most frequent words used “in psychoanalytic sessions involving 29 generally middle class speakers averaging in age in the late twenties. These speakers, 21 of whom were men, used a total of 17,871 different words in the session. In the poem, frequency is presented in descending order.” (80) The data Bernstein employs in the poem is from research conducted by Hartvig Dahl. Because it uses found language in the poem, the focus of the reader is automatically skewed towards issues of structure, arrangement, process and order. By removing authorial intent or expression as to the specific words

that form the poem, Bernstein increases the attention given to other factors of its composition.

The critic Ellen Zweig, writing of the poet Jackson Mac Low, has suggested that found text and chance operations enable the poet to “get rid of the ego” (81) or suppress the lyric perspective. In the case of “I and the”, one of these features is the tri-colon structure whereby each line of the poem consists of three words and each stanza consists of three lines. In the titular first line, “I and the”, this structure focuses attention on the relation of the individual and subjective voice “I”, the connective, clausal and relational “and” and the objective “the”. The psychological condition of “besidedness” is summed up succinctly in this line: “I and the”. The poem therefore establishes itself within a traditional binary of the self and the other, i.e. the external world. The following two lines of the first stanza continue this relational exploration of the individual and others: “to that you/ it of a”. However, the structure of the poem in fact undoes this binary of self and other through its explorations of what the frequency of words we say under certain conditions say about us collectively, rather than simply individually. The intertwined nature and mutual collective investment in social modes and community forms is stressed by the poet Robin Blaser when he remarks, “the marvel of our delicate, pronominal I needs also to be honored. It stands or sleeps alongside things, in fact alongside the whole world of its garnering.” The “I”, as Bernstein has written “is first a we” (Williams, 69).

Chapter 5. I. Sophistic Parody, Performance and Linguistic Acrobatics in *With Strings and Girly Man*

“One must destroy one’s adversaries’ seriousness with laughter and their laughter with seriousness” (Gorgias, in Spariosu, 93).

“the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast’s struggle” (Walt Whitman, xix)

In a career that has seen Bernstein collaborate with many fellow poets, artists and musicians, perhaps his most on-going collaboration has been with the artist Susan Bee, his wife. Alongside collaborative book art projects such as *Little Orphan Anagram* and *Log Rhythms*, Bee has also frequently designed the covers for many of Bernstein’s books. Sharing a deep-rooted sense of humour and absurdity with Bernstein, her images are independent illuminations and companions to Bernstein’s poetry rather than illustrations. The painting that adorns the cover of the Sun and Moon Press edition of *The Sophist* is a case in point. Entitled ‘Do Gentlemen Snore?’, the cover painting shows an enlarged and intimidating bloke in top hat and tails unceremoniously expelling a much smaller figure from a red room. Dressed in what looks to be a Greek chiton (tunic), the smaller bearded figure looks to be defiantly protesting his innocence with one outstretched open palm, while he also looks to have something ‘up his sleeve’, with the other hand tucked into his tunic. My reading of this image interprets the larger figure as ‘official verse culture’ or ‘the academy’, while the other figure is a symbol of the subversive, the poet, the sophist. While the might of the suited individual isn’t in question, the sleight of hand and cunning glint

of the smaller figure points towards a possible strategy for defense. The red room brings to mind H.G. Wells's famous ghost story 'Red Room' (1894). In the story, the narrator attempts to spend a night in a room that is known to be haunted. However, when the candles he has brought with him to illuminate the room gradually extinguish themselves, he grows more and more alarmed. There then ensues a frenzied and ultimately failed 'game' of relighting the candles and out-witting the perceived ghost that verges on the comic. Exhausted, the narrator falls over and knocks into furniture causing him to fall unconscious. The conclusion of the story involves the recovering narrator recognizing that the room was haunted not by a ghost but by fear instead. Two elements of this story tie it to Bee's painting. One is the title she gives the work, "Do Gentlemen Snore?", which refers to a silent horror film made by Hal Roach studio in 1928 with a plot that is equal parts comic and horrific. The second is the dialectic that is set up between seriousness and play, which is one of the most significant energizing forces in Bernstein's poetry and was also a live issue for the sophists in Ancient Greece.

In Chapter 4, I focused on how, in *The Sophist*, Bernstein follows Gorgias's lead in creating an intensely varied and dramatic linguistic texture through the use of rhetorical devices. I showed how, by doing so, his work can be seen as a language performance that explores, as Untersteiner wrote of Gorgias: "the irreducibility of antitheses" (194). In this chapter, I explore some other aspects of Bernstein's style that also correspond to crucial impulses within sophistic rhetoric: parody, humour and performance. That the element of performance was critical to how the sophists' work was seen in Ancient Greece (and, how they saw themselves) can be seen from looking at some of Plato's dialogues concerning the sophists. In *Gorgias*, Plato connects sophistry to poetry and to theatre when he has Socrates remark that "poetry is a kind

of popular harangue... or don't you think that poets practice oratory in the theatres?... a popular oratory of a kind that is addressed to men, women and children" (847).

Similarly, as the critic Scott Consigny has observed:

When Aristotle discusses Gorgias in the *Rhetoric*, it is primarily in respect to his 'poetic' style... Aristotle also follows Plato in characterizing Gorgias's performances as "theatrical", classifying them as epideictic displays or spectacles designed primarily to entertain audiences at festivals (151).

This understanding of the importance of theatricality to Gorgias's style can be evidenced with reference to his *Encomium of Helen*, in which he concludes that he has been concerned as much with pleasure as with the seriousness of the debate: "I wished to write the speech as an encomium of Helen and an amusement for myself." However, while theatrical and poetic elements to Gorgias's style were widely remarked on by Ancient commentators, the importance of these within his philosophical thinking has been left to contemporary analysts.

Consigny has put forward a convincing case for the importance of performance in Gorgias's rhetorical and stylistic practice. His argument is that Gorgias's mode of philosophizing begins by using existing forms (the genres of epideictic oratory and encomium, for example) and parodying them to the point where the 'constructedness' of all discourse becomes apparent:

I suggest that in his manner of speaking and writing, Gorgias adapts to the protocols of existing genres, but that he playfully differentiates his own work from those conventions through parody, overtly artificial figuration and theatricality. In so doing, he draws attention to the conventions of the genres in which he is writing and hence to the rhetoricity, situatedness and artificiality of all texts (150).

Consigny's study is important in the weight it puts behind the inter-reliance of Gorgias's style of performance and what he calls his "substantive thought" (152). While critics going back to Plato have remarked upon Gorgias's distinctive style, and (fewer) on his philosophical contributions, very few indeed have ever posited a link between the style of his philosophizing and the content of his philosophy itself. In the same manner that critics have suggested a correlation between Plato's dialogue form and the content of his philosophical work, Consigny suggests that the theatrical and poetic elements that were fundamental to Gorgias's method were also constitutive of philosophical meaning and integral to his philosophical contribution. At the risk of being considered non-serious, linguistic playfulness and performance was at the heart of Gorgias's philosophical project. I intend to argue that in Bernstein's critical writings a similar process occurs. Furthermore, I suggest that one significant development in Bernstein's poetry since 1999, his books since *My Way* (1999) and *With Strings* (2001), is the centrality of this stylistic mode in both the poetic and critical texts, the increasing mergence of these generic strands within his work. Consigny identifies three important elements to Gorgias's style: parody, artificial figuration and theatricality, and in the sections that follow these three stylistic features will be dealt with individually in relation to Bernstein's style.

Parody can be considered essentially sophistic. As an art form that has its basis in imitation, parody takes the form of 'appearances', of 'semblance', which is one of the defining characteristics identifying the sophist in Plato's dialogue (292). It is therefore no surprise that parody should be an appropriate art form for Gorgias the sophist and an unacceptable one for true philosophy, as Mihai Spariosu has remarked:

Because for Socrates the mimetic poet deals in appearances par excellence and therefore cannot have any claim to real knowledge, he must naturally be

replaced by the philosopher-king as a moral and political leader in the ideal republic (154).

By this Socratic characterization of sophistic parody, imitative forms are contrasted with real knowledge. It might be assumed that mimesis is closer to deception than truth. However, the potential power of imitation, of parodic forms, is precisely in its ability to, as Consigny has remarked, “undeceive” (169). It is paradoxical and counter-intuitive, but parody and imitation is a possible mode of expression that is less deceptive than apparent clarity because it lays bare its own construction and mocks its own rhetorical strategies. As Bernstein remarks, in *My Way*: “sincerity is closest to deception” (187). Parody, by exposing the rhetoricity and artificiality of modes of discourse, is able to make the reader or listener aware that all discourse is conditioned by rhetoric and all truths are situated in their social constructions:

Gorgias engages in this practice of undeceiving his audience in each of his texts, drawing attention to the ways in which every persuasive text conceals its rhetoricity, displaying the ways in which rhetors present themselves as “speaking the truth as it really is” and thereby unmasking the deceptive tactics that partisan rhetors use to manufacture ostensibly impartial truths. He uses parody, paratropic figuration and histrionics in his epideictic performances to disabuse the audience that any account of things, including his own, is an objective representation or mirror of “things as they really are.”... Stated another way, Gorgias’s performances display, or show, as well as tell his audience about the situated and fabricative dimensions of logos (169).

One of the most famous examples of sophistic parody is Gorgias’s ‘Treatise on Non-Being’. As Guthrie remarks, “A great deal of ink has been spilt over the question whether this was intended as a joke or parody, or as a serious contribution to

philosophy, but it is a mistake to think that parody is incompatible with serious intention. Gorgias' purpose was negative, but none the less serious" (194).

Bernstein's essay 'Against National Poetry Month As Such' ought to be understood in terms similar to these, as a serious as well as playful parody of epideictic oratory, a form of 'praise and blame' oration in which values relevant to the community are put forth. It's also a parody of a political manifesto, in which how poetry is positioned within the community is a critical question. He chooses a target "National Poetry Month", which was in many quarters hitherto untouchable as an example of a creditable attempt to raise the profile of poetry and increase readership for poetry in the United States. He then produces a highly convincing and rhetorically dexterous assault on, not only the current state of "National Poetry Month", but also on the whole concept and fundamental principles of such an endeavor, i.e. that poets should want more readers and greater popularity for poetry. It is no accident that this speech is initiated in a reimagined agora:

April is the cruelest month for poetry.

As part of the Spring ritual of National Poetry Month, poets are symbolically dragged into the public square in order to be humiliated with the claim that their product has not achieved sufficient market penetration and needs to be revived by the Artificial Resuscitation Foundation (ARF) lest the art form collapse from its own incompetence and irrelevance, and as a result of the general disinterest among the broad masses of the American People (2011, 27)

Bernstein situates his oratory in an imaginary "public square" or agora because he is passionate about a public community life where debates concerning poetry are debates concerning what kind of community we want to be. It is also part of his method of ambiguous parody, utilizing the format of public rhetoric in order to

present an argument that locates the potency of poetry in its aversion to the mainstream. His parody begins with the mis-quotation of Eliot, “April is the cruelest month for poetry.” This nods to the sort of aphoristic, pleasantly benign extraction in which National Poetry Month might indulge, taking a line from a poem out of its context and ignoring its difficulty. However, of course, Bernstein’s employment of Eliot’s words is laced with rhetorical venom, setting up National Poetry Month as a sitting duck, teed up for him by an icon of Modernist literature. The essay follows a classical rhetorical structure. This early portion of the essay is the opportunity for Bernstein to put forward his version of the “thesis”, i.e. what he sees Nation Poetry Month as. When it comes to his antithesis, Bernstein’s argument continues in Gorgian style, turning widely held truths decisively on their heads:

The path taken by the Academy’s National Poetry Month, and by such foundations as the Lannan and Lila Wallace - Reader’s Digest, has been misguided because these organizations have decided to promote not poetry but the idea of poetry, and the idea of poetry too often has meant almost no poetry at all. Time and time again, we hear the official spokespersons tell us they want to support projects that give speedy and efficient access to poetry and that the biggest obstacle to this access is, indeed, poetry, which may not provide the kind of easy reading required by such mandates (29).

In this passage, Bernstein employs numerous rhetorical strategies in order to disarm and persuade his audience. He parodies rhetorical usage of what might be considered by the organisers of National Poetry Month “poetical” language, i.e. the “time and time again” expression, and the metaphor of a “path”, meanwhile combining this with the vocabulary of marketing and commerce “swift and efficient access”. The rhetorical turns centre around the definition of the word “poetry”, which undergoes

considerable scrutiny in this passage and in the essay as a whole. The rhetorical device of chiasmus, the combination of two clauses in a reversal structure, is employed. In this example, the key concepts around which this double chiasmus pivots are “poetry” and “the idea of poetry”: “these organizations have decided to promote not poetry but the idea of poetry, and the idea of poetry too often has meant almost no poetry at all.” By involving “the idea of poetry” in this chiasmatic drama, the reader is encouraged to consider what poetry is and how it can matter. Similarly, ambiguity over what poetry is is at the heart of the following sentence, which employs paradox to underline the distance between the concept of poetry that Bernstein is attacking, that of “easy reading” and the concept of poetry he is endorsing, where difficulty is the chief value of poetry. This sentence expresses that “poetry” is the greatest obstacle to the “swift and efficient access to poetry”. The paradoxical notion of how poetry can be the greatest obstacle to itself is typical of sophistic rhetorical wordplay, and has the effect of making plain the two opposing interpretations of what poetry can be. However, it expresses a parallel notion: that the greatest ‘encouragement’ to poetry would be by removing poetry.

Following his thesis and antithesis, the logic of his piece of rhetoric demands a synthesis. Bernstein delivers with characteristic parodic skill. Rather than a “National Poetry Month”, Bernstein proposes an “International Anti-Poetry Month” (itself an inverse of parody and mimesis, the sophistic alternative to the legitimized version), and goes on to detail what this would entail, some of which include:

Poetry readings would be removed from radio and TV (just as they are for the rest of the year) (30).

All verse in public places will be covered over – from the Statue of Liberty to the friezes on many of our public places (30)

Cats will be closed for the month (30)

Children will have to stop playing all slapping and counting and singing games and stick to board games and football (30)

Comic and overblown, this parody synthesis may be, but Bernstein's proposed Anti-Poetry Month as a concept would reveal more about the functions poetry can and could play in our society (as well as its contemporary status) than National Poetry Month does, which instead proves Bernstein's maxim that, "the more you dilute art, the more you increase access. But access to what?" (29). While clearly playful and comic, Bernstein's Anti-Poetry Month is an ingenious rhetorical tactic that points towards an understanding of poetry that recognizes that to create meaningful "poetry that matters" and increase readers of "poetry that matters", it is essential to regularly clear the boards of preconceptions of what poetry is. Rather than wheeling out light verse that conforms to a diagnosis of what poetry is, his Anti-Poetry Month would be a kind of conceptual detox that would enable revitalization as a constant conceptual possibility for poetry: "Poetry is very much alive when it finds ways of doing things in a media saturated environment that only poetry can do, but very much dead when it just retreads the same old same old." (30)

This impressive piece of rhetoric is both a skillful and persuasive argument against the retrograde and conservative values of National Poetry Month and also an intensive rhetorical performance in which oratorical devices are employed in order that the concept of "poetry" itself is able to somehow unshackle them and point towards new and innovative uses for the term. Straining under the weight of these rhetorical devices and what amount to essentially marketing debates, Bernstein enacts the escape of "poetry that matters". A crucial element of both Gorgias's and Bernstein's parodic oratorical style, however, is that they do not dissolve merely into

the ridiculous. Bernstein does not allow his argument to dissolve into the parody. His version of an Anti Poetry Month is both conceivable and conceivably conducive to positive developments within poetry. His arguments “against National Poetry Month as such” do stand on their own well-reasoned and expertly rhetoricised feet. However, his parodic mode of discourse at the same time prevents his version of poetry from situating itself as a dominant replacement for that of the Academy of American Poets. Bernstein’s parodic argument doesn’t propose a new “official verse culture”, it insists on the importance of unofficial verse cultures.

A parodic style is also evident in the poem ‘poem’ from *With Strings*. A parody of a poet offering explanations to a poem prior to reading it at a poetry reading, this poem parodies the idea that a poem is reducible to brief remarks explaining the resonances of the work. The remarkably bland explanations appear to add little to an understanding of the hypothetical poem in question, and the self-centeredness of the imagined poet seems to think very little of the listeners’ intelligence, explaining what a “dog” is and what the “seasons” refer to:

Just a few things first
let’s see
a dog- well for those of you not
from here – a rather common domestic
pet, four legs, tail.
I should say
the seasons in the poem refer
to the seasons in the northeast
so that fall refers to the leaves
falling and winter is cold and usually

gray- often I will use the seasons

in a metaphoric way,

as you will see (26).

One of the most interesting aspects of this work, of course, is the invitation it proffers to the reader to write the imaginary poem for themselves. With just a few bare facts concerning a number of images used within the poem and some stylistic aspects, the reader is forced to “construct” a reading of the poem for themselves. As such, Bernstein’s parody in fact imitates a constructive reading practice itself, and requires of the reader the sort of active reading practice that language poetics demand and which Walt Whitman was encouraging when he suggested that the reader was required to perform “a gymnast’s struggle”. Indeed, another effect of this poem is that it encourages the reader to think about what it would be like to require an explanation of what a “dog” refers to in a poem. The inadequacy of the description (another tricolon- “pet, four legs, tail”) encourages the reader to recognize that when we use words their meanings are conditioned by social circumstances. Someone from a country where dogs are infrequently domesticated and most often stray may not in fact realize that dogs are domesticated and may certainly not understand the emotional resonances of dogs for their owners in the USA. However, that doesn’t make the idea that you can explain away the meaning of a poem in a number of short explanations any less absurd. Indeed the imagined poet in question appears to make banal any depth or interest the images may have: “And when/ near the end/ I mention a green/ chaise lounge, this is a couch/ upon which I often sit” (27). The bathetic denouement of the poem reduces what might be imagined to be a psychoanalyst’s chaise longue into a mere “couch/upon which I often sit”. Parody in this poem is not simply a way of poking fun at a poet’s over-eagerness to offer preparatory

explanations for their poem but also a performance of an active reading method and the un-explainability of poems as such.

Bernstein's interest in a poem's ability to transcend any explanation that might be offered for it is also evident in the poem 'johnny cake hollow', also from *With Strings*. The language in this poem is unrecognizable and difficult to make sense of (rather than nonsense text): "Xo quwollen swacked unt myrry flooped/ Sardone to fligrunt's swirm, ort" (27) This poem demands both an active and passive response from the reader. On the one hand, the reader has to acknowledge their passivity in the face of a poem that so foregrounds its lack of access, its hostility towards being totalized into a unified interpretation. On the other hand, in order to read the poem meaningfully (which is possible) the reader is required to actively attempt a location of meaning in the sounds of the words. Paradoxically, this active process of construction of meaning takes place in part as a passive submission to the poem's sounds. In my own experience of this poem, the most meaningful reading experience came when I asked someone to read it aloud to me and I was then able to tune in to the sound of the poem and create meaning in the rhythms and cadences of the word 'strings'. However, another level of meaning can be approached by reading the poem visually and looking out for words and phrases with visual correlation to words we recognize from our own languages. "unt", for example is a phoneticization of the German word for "and", while "swirm" can be construed as a verb contraction of swim and squirm (which I'm imagining is loaded with embarrassment and particularly useful when describing teenagers in swimming classes at school). Similar readings can be built from words such as "Chyllrophane", "flooped" and more. Once begun, it is an intoxicating process, requiring of the reader an acrobat's virtuosity in generating multiplicities of meanings. "Flooped" could be a combination of being

tired (colloquial American “pooped”) and having the “flu”, but in the context of the line, where “myrry” seems like a qualifier such as “very” and “swacked” seems like an active “swipe” or “whack”, I rather read “flooped” as somewhere between “flew” and “dropped”. While this poem is ostensibly a sort of made-up language of sounds, it is rather a collection of sounds through which the reader is invited to construct or perform a meaning. Of course, even within this reading process, I’m constantly made to be aware that my definition of each word and phrase is simply that, a best guess based on the contingencies of words, sounds and semantic networks I have at my disposal. While this is the condition of reading any poetry, by foregrounding it within the reading method demanded by the poem, Bernstein enacts a performance of active reading methods. Parody (or more broadly ‘imitation’) is key to the poem’s effect. It can be seen as a parody of a poem, following the form of a poem (using linebreaks, for example, starting each line with a capital letter) but removing one crucial aspect that might be expected of a poem (for it to be written in a language that someone might ‘understand’). This is how I read the title “johnny cake hollow”, as something that looks like a “johnny cake”, i.e. a cornbread cake, but that is hollowed out inside and is instead a shell for the reader put in their own performance of the text. However, this acting of reading is both socially and politically conditioned. This is suggested by the title, since “johnny cake” is a word with a contested social history and etymology, having its origins in Britain of the seventeenth century (journey cake) and becoming a word mainly used by the African American community in the South. In performing a reading of the poem, the reader becomes aware of the social and political conditions through which they read every text.

Bernstein’s ‘Recantorium (A Bachelor Machine, after Kafka and Duchamp)’ (2011, 271) employs rhetorical parody in an assault on accessibility as a dominant

aesthetic value basis. Just as with ‘Against National Poetry As Such’, ‘Recantorium’ situates itself in the public-debate chamber of an agora from the outset. The difference in this poem is that Bernstein plays the figure of ‘the accused’ or ‘the condemned’, enforced into ‘recanting’ and renouncing all his former sins against “Accessible Poets” (271). The essay/speech begins:

I, Charles, son of the late Joseph Herman, later known as Herman Joseph, and Shirley K., later known as Sherry, New Yorker, aged fifty-eight years, arraigned personally before this Esteemed Body, and kneeling before you, Most Eminent and Reverend Readers, Inquisitors-General against heretical depravity throughout the entire Poetry Commonwealth, having before my eyes and touching with my hands, the Books of Accessible Poets, swear that I have always believed, do believe, and by your help will in the future believe, all that is held, preached, taught and expressed by the Books of Accessible Poets (271).

Theatre is at the heart of the effect of this essay, which is, when spoken, a thirty five minute oratorical performance displaying in abundance what Consigny calls referring to Gorgias, “histrionics” (169). Parodying the form of a renunciation speech, Bernstein engages in a tour de force of irony and double speech, setting up a heightened and dramatic “straw man” (the Poetry Commonwealth) and ironically recanting his beliefs while simultaneously asserting them. Rhetorical devices utilized in the piece include the tricolon, which is employed throughout as both a rhythmic feature and a repetitive echo. For example, “I was wrong, I apologise, I recant” (272), repeated (with variations) at the start of every paragraph (that’s over thirty times), is reminiscent of the famous “veni, vidi, vici” conjunction. However, rather than a statement of pride, Bernstein turns Caesar’s utterance into an ironic announcement of

renunciation. This tricolon is echoed by another in each paragraph: “I abjure, curse and detest the aforesaid error and aversion” (276). The variations of the phrase become ever more excessive and elaborate, while maintaining a riff on the tricolon structure: “I am with regret filled and by errors o’erwhelmed, having chosen the broken path over the righteous, the warped over the erect. I cant and recant” (277). Details of Bernstein’s own career are laid out before the feet of the agora, recanting what feels like almost anything that Bernstein has ever been criticized for. Therefore, he recants not only those aspects of his poetic career that mainstream or conservative poets might find difficult to stomach (“I altogether abandon the false notion that form in poetry is political and social”) but also those with which he has been criticized by figures on the avant-garde (“Academic employment is the mark of a compromised poet who has sold out. Radical poets prove their authenticity through poverty”) (276-277).

The effect of this masturbatory rhetorical excess is a certain redundancy, an alienation strategy and a defence mechanism, which makes this work as challenging and difficult to cope with as it is amusing and exhausting. This is indicated by the term “Bachelor Machine”, with which Bernstein titles his essay. A Bachelor Machine, or “machine célibataire” (Tajiri, 196) is a term coined by Marcel Duchamp for an inoperative mechanism that either destroys itself, or does not lead to its conclusion. As Yoshiki Tajiri remarks, “all bachelor machines are ultimately dysfunctional” (196). A Bachelor Machine is therefore a construction that does not consummate its own internal logic, that fails on its own terms and avoids conclusiveness. As an analogue for Bernstein’s ‘Recantorium’, then, the bachelor machine implies that Bernstein’s parody is intended neither as a genuine rescinding of the values expressed nor as an assertion of their contrary. Rather than reach a conclusion or put forward an

argument, his parodic text makes use of imitative and parodic forms to raise questions and encourage consideration of poetics and poetry's value. The self-indulgence of the piece, its irritating repetitions and ingratiating obsequies is a concerted strategy to undermine certainty. Above all, if it achieves anything at all, his "Bachelor Machine", could be considered to "undeceive" in the same way as Consigny sees Gorgias's work as anti-deceptive. By enacting a histrionic and parodic performance, Bernstein draws attention to the way "official verse culture" and culture in general is officiated and constructed through rhetoric. In this, too, his practice can be considered related to that of Gorgias:

In so far as he underscores and thereby draws attention to his own rhetorical maneuvers, Gorgias does not present his own writing as free of rhetorical conventions. In this respect, he may be said to be engaging in self-parody as well as parody of other texts. For while parody tends to be other-directed, drawing attention to the artificial conventions of existing genres, styles and authors, self parody draws attention to its own situatedness and artificiality. Insofar as they are self-parodic as well as parodic, Gorgias's texts thus mock themselves as well as other texts, and in this respect, they are highly self-conscious, self-aware, and self-critical (Consigny, 176).

In similar fashion, 'Recantorium' is the crux of self-critique in Bernstein's critical works, a mechanical apologia gone berserk to the point of utter absurdity and redundancy that nevertheless encourages the listener/reader to consider what it means to write and read poetically. Rather than inviting the reader to be convinced by either his recantations or their ironic counter-assertions, Bernstein encourages the reader to become aware of the way our cultures are constructed through an extravagant comedic conceit. Distrusting the ironies and double speech of Bernstein leads to a

general awareness of rhetorical construction in all discourse. As an essentially imitative art form, parody is the ideal mode through which to achieve this. As he puts it in *My Way*: “If you are not going to distrust the comic, then what are you going to distrust” (187). While this quip might seem at first rebarbative and flippant, it in fact suggests what both Gorgias and Bernstein foreground in their works: a crucial dialectic of trust and distrust. In *On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy*, Bruns quotes Cavell’s emphasis of “fraudulence and trust as essential to the experience of art” (42). Cavell’s point seems to be that a work’s authenticity as an artwork is constantly at stake. On the one hand, an artwork shouldn’t be accepted entirely on its own terms and the critic or viewer is required to take a skeptical or distrustful attitude to the possibility that it may in some way be ‘fraudulent’; on the other hand, the viewer of an artwork is required to become a “participant” in the work in order to possibly apprehend whether or not it is fraudulent or genuine. In order to achieve this, the viewer must become, in Bruns’ phrase, a “hostage” (42) to the work: “taking [the work] upon ourselves, without being able (try as we might) to justify our action on the basis of concepts or criteria” (42). Bernstein has repeatedly guarded against a sense of his work being considered “ironic”. He has written:

If I
prefer to speak of the comic rather than
the ironic it’s because the nature of literary
irony can be taken (Kierkegaard didn’t)
as an especially, even uniquely, context-
dependent form of discourse, as if
there was some other discourse that was
context-interdependent – the words just meaning

what they say no interpretation (interruption)

necessary (2010, 286)

Bernstein's reluctance to acknowledge irony as a technique at work in his poetry comes from the sense that it is too narrow a definition, that irony refers to a mode of double speaking in a specific context where a figure is able to say something other than what they actually say. For Bernstein, everything is ironic in the sense that nothing ought ever to be taken at face value and that there is no way of speaking that is not dependent on the context to be interpreted. Bernstein's aversion to "irony" is also evident in the conversation 'Characterisation', which is included in the book *Content's Dream*. In the book, Bernstein objects to the term "ironic" for his project and has his point endorsed and explained by the poet Robert Grenier: "I think it isn't ironic because irony presumes some sort of point of view from which some measure of restraint can be applied to such statement by arbitrating in such a way that it seems to be something that it's not" (460). Grenier's point objects not just to the sense that irony implies it is possible to simply say something that you mean, but also raises a question over how and from what perspective would it ever be ascertainable when something was meant and when it wasn't. In part, Bernstein's suspicion of irony is due to the position it has within some quarters of postmodern cultural theory, and in particular the description of "blank irony" employed by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson regards irony as reactionary in its current form, which he regards as lacking "any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some linguistic normality exists" (50). Jameson's characterization of "blank irony" in fact captures Bernstein's own sense of the difficulty of the category of irony. However, whereas Jameson sees this form of writing as essentially reactionary by reinforcing the social

order without any power to stabilize or effectively reconstitute it, Bernstein's poetry instead performs a multitude of voices, mimicries, parodies, pastiches and unsyntacticalities in order to focus attention on the critical discourse of skeptical distrust in which alternative modes of communication can be opened up. For Jameson, pervasive irony has lost its ability to refer to the truth and therefore loops back to a reconstitution of society. For Bernstein, by suggesting that there is a position that would enable a way of speaking the truth which irony is only masking, irony is not adequate to express the constantly contextual and social implications of language use. The poet Rae Armantrout has written of Bernstein's poem 'Sentences My Father Used' from *The Sophist* that it uses irony in order to "represent the way our speech can turn against us, causing us to incorporate oppressive ideologies" (54). As such, Armantrout's reading suggests that Bernstein's poem is able through its employment and investigation of un-meant statements to critique and draw attention to the ways in which our language use can endorse the politics and society we validate.

Jameson's argument about irony appears to suggest that the pervasiveness of a kind of "blank irony" is a condition diagnosed under postmodernity. He repeatedly refers approvingly to the ironic capabilities of the eighteenth century. However, by doing so he fails to take in to consideration the full extent of the multiplicitous and parodic tradition, a tradition that includes Gorgias and the sophists. Gorgias was repeatedly condemned during his life as a confidence trickster; memorably (along with other sophists) in Plato's *Sophist*, but also in a number of other ancient sources. Consigny reads this not as evidence that Gorgias was in fact a confidence trickster but as evidence that he deliberately acted the part of a confidence trickster, in order to engender a performative dialectic of trust and distrust similar to that which is

represented by the imitative form of parody itself: “a persistent trait of the characters he creates is that of a bold self-confidence concerning his own knowledge, a person who is able to speak persuasively and authoritatively on any subject whatsoever” (191). This boastful know-it-all character, termed the *alazon* is contrasted with the Socratic *eiron* (characterized by an initial ignorance but an ability to follow reason and logic towards knowledge), and the confrontation between these two characters is a central drama of Plato’s *Gorgias*. However, as Consigny argues, Gorgias’s “flamboyant braggadocio underscores his own presence as a distinct character”, alerting his audience to the no less performative style of Socrates and other eirons. His bold claims to argue persuasively on all sides of an argument on any topic at all are a performative demonstration of the situated and artificial quality inherent in the presentation of any argument, however meek and sincere the presentation style may appear. By inviting the reader or listener to distrust his claims, Gorgias invites the reader or listener to distrust all claims and adopt a skeptical awareness of the performativity of all knowledge presentations. This employment of a dialectic of trust and distrust is inherent within Bernstein’s use of parody, particularly in the ‘Recantorium’. While usually delivered ‘straight’ by Bernstein in readings, this merely heightens the absurdity of the imitative sincerity of a repentant sinner. One response to this long recantation is to simply beg the (rhetorical) question: “You can’t be serious??” That is, at least, in part, the point. The listener enduring this performance has the uncanny sensation that they are being taken for a ride. You find yourself asking, “Am I seriously meant to sit here and listen to half an hour’s worth of a series of overblown, hyperbolic and ironic statements as the successful poet and academic Charles Bernstein puts himself in the position of attacked, defeated and quite possibly tortured soul?” In my experience of seeing this work performed at the

University of Sussex in 2008, reactions to the work included irritation, disbelief and laughter. By eliciting this response, the 'Recantorium' achieves a similar performance of the drama of fraudulence and trust that Cavell considers central to the experience of art. In 'Comedy and the Poetics of Political Form', Bernstein refers to this conception of poet as confidence trickster:

Anything that departs from the sincere or serious enters into the comic, but the comic is anything but a unitary phenomenon, and the range of comic attitudes goes from the good-humoured 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. Our sincerity is always comic, always questionable, always open to mocking (*A Poetics*, 227)

However absurd 'Recantorium' might seem, the premise of an artist-sophist being held accountable and answerable for a mode of aversive poeticizing that is held to be unacceptable to the demands of an ideal republic is exactly the sort of condemnation that the sophists and poets received through their expulsion from Plato's republic.

This is essential to the success of the comedy of 'Recantorium'. The irony is at once sincere (Bernstein sincerely doesn't mean to renounce the things he says he does) and absurd- his own sincerity is mocked and exploded at the same time as he mocks and explodes the sincerity of sincere and normative discourse. As a text that foregrounds the performative aspects of its delivery, a crucial aspect of 'Recantorium' is in its performance, its "enactment" (Bernstein, *My Way*, 23). A theatrical text that relies as much on sound patterns, pacing and rhythm as it does on the semantic meaning of the essay's content, 'Recantorium' is electrifying when read aloud, with Bernstein

delivering his renunciation in the manner of a battling sophist under attack in an agora. This is an aspect of Bernstein's work that will be explored in more detail in the next section. However, as a conclusion to this section, it is worthwhile briefly to consider how reading or listening to parodic poetry of the sort described above encourages the reader or audience to be aware of their own performativity, the ways in which they too rhetorically perform roles as a daily procedure of persuasion and language use. In the important interventionist essay 'Some Problems about Agency in the Theories of Radical Poetics', critic Charles Altieri seemingly automatically is forced into an awareness and performance of his own rhetorical strategies when faced with the experiments of radical and innovative poetics. The essay begins with a description of his initial aims in the paper, to critique the ways in which "radical poetics may be too willing to let the working of language itself be the primary source of vision of agency" (208). However, Altieri goes on to describe how at a conference in Vancouver he was "forced" to reconsider his views because the "other papers were so terrifyingly good and the poetry readings so engaging" (208). Nevertheless, he continues:

My enforced newfound humility does not extend so far that I no longer feel strongly that my complaints are justified. But I no longer know how to assume a position from which to make the criticisms (except by the indirection here which I hope the reader will indulge), and I am convinced my own ways of valuing poetry are woefully inadequate for dealing with the most innovative contemporary writing. So I hope representing the basic argument of this paper, then commenting on it, will enable me to play the roles simultaneously of sacrificial victim and clever self abnegating pedagogue. It may take both roles to get clear on where theorizing about contemporary poetry has to go (208).

It is striking that an awareness of performativity immediately becomes central to Altieri's engagement with language poetry and that he willfully becomes involved in a kind of sophistic game of rhetoric and play. Also apparent is that Altieri positions himself as being forced to become aware of (if not change) his "own ways of valuing poetry". Central to both sophistic and language-centered ways of addressing the world is a constant re-evaluation and awareness of the values attached to processes and cultural procedures, where these are not taken for granted but instead doused with an enormous pinch of salt (creating friction). Even more striking is that Altieri's own language as the essay develops seems to suggest the roots for exactly this sort of poetic and parodic performance, of the kind that engenders ongoing processes of re-evaluation of value systems through experimental and innovative language use:

I have been led to these questions in part by my own anxieties about addressing an audience as *sophisticated* as the one at the conference, and in part by Charles Bernstein's persuasive arguments that the very dream of a universal audience for poetry, or of a universal addressee for the poet, no longer makes sense: our political arena is an *agonistic* and culturally diverse one in which the very effort to find universality tends to mask specific interests, and our psychologies seem to demand that we resist a commodified cultural order by taking on what Bernstein calls an "aversion to conformity" whose fullest realizations probably consist in the modes of singularity that our versing enables us to maintain (209).

The italics are mine, to emphasize the presence within Altieri's remarks of a sophistic backdrop, whereby the publics are encouraged to be awakened and alert to the nature

of persuasion within the “agonistic and culturally diverse” “political arena”. This could be considered the Gorgian parodic project transplanted to the parameters of late Twentieth Century western capitalist democratic culture. Consigny writes that: “As with parody, Gorgias uses his overtly artificial, paratropic tropes to disabuse his audience of the illusion that any views are objectively “true”... With his deliberately ‘thick’ or opaque style, he foregrounds his own situatedness: and in so doing he invites his audience to reflect on the arbitrary assumptions and biases in their own language” (183). Just so, for Altieri, radical poetics can “function in the larger cultural arena to foster a consciousness of the material and ideological density of language that should help resist certain kinds of subjection inherent in the media driven structures of late monopoly capitalism” (209).

5. II. The Performances of Poetry

In a number of different ways, Bernstein has shown an interest in the performances of poetry. He has editorially presided over reading series and poetry performances at The University of Buffalo and The University of Pennsylvania, and two poetry radio shows, *LINEbreak* and *Close Listening*. In addition, he has been instrumental in developing *PennSound*, an online resource of audio and visual material on the web. Furthermore, he has edited *Close Listening, Poetry and the Performed Word*, a collection of essays related to the performance of poetry. He has also written a number of works that consider the poetry performance as an active site for poetic inquiry. In ‘Thelonious Monk and the Performance of Poetry’, Bernstein writes:

(One advantage of hearing
work performed
is that it does
not allow opportunities to
reread or rehear; at least in my
work, it pretty much forces listeners
to get lost, to give up
any notion of following in detail, fore-
grounding tempo & sound,
association and & texture
[making the experience
more like hearing music or watching
a movie]. Of course, the ability to read in
detail

is just what gives the written
its primacy – much of what
is happening pros-
odically, thematically, & structurally can't
really be grasped in performance) (*My Way*, 20)

The counter-intuitiveness of this argument (he argues for the value of performance based on what is lost in hearing a poem rather than what is gained) resembles that of many sophistic *dissoi logoi* (or contradictory positions), where debates were argued from either side of an issue, resulting in curious twists and turns in logical paradox. However, Bernstein's point is a serious one. Since language poems are conceived of as open-ended and inconclusive entities in which responsive attention to sound and semantic irregularities is more important than a unity of apprehension, a form of transmission that encourages the listener to forego any notion of a totality of apprehension through the physical impossibility of "re-hearing" live performance has in itself a positive value. In a fundamental way, Bernstein's poetry and critical writings communicate that every reading or hearing of a poem is in itself a performance. As Bernstein has written, "the story of our everyday life – where troubling/ social acts are performed as if without/ premeditation or self conscious intent, it's/ the sort of acting that resembles puppetry" (*My Way*, 23). The alternative Bernstein sets up is between an awareness of performativity ("acting") and un-self-consciously acting under authorised normative models of behavior ("puppetry"). Of Gorgias's theatrical delivery of speeches, Consigny writes that he carefully constructed his performances to make it more obvious that "every utterance is inescapably perspectival and partisan, spoken by a limited, situated individual... The art of acting, which is the art of constructing a character, is pivotal to the act of

invention, for it delineates a rhetor's initial biases, commitments and ways of seeing and judging, each of which opens up some avenues of enquiry and closes down others." (190) Reported to have worn costumes to aid in the artificializing of his delivery, Gorgias was a renowned and successful performer of his works at festivals (151). Froma Zeitlin has related the artificiality of both poetic and sophistic performance to gender politics within Ancient Greece, stating that as with cooking and cosmetics, sophistic performances were considered to "traffic in deceptive appearances and pander to the appetites and gratification... a certain, effeminate roster of pleasures" (370). It is along these lines that I read the title of Bernstein's collection *Girly Man*. Rather than "manly" (370) in the Platonic ideal, Bernstein associates himself more with what Zeitlin refers to as "the ranks of male trickster figures who fall furthest from the ideal of manliness" (370) through an aesthetics of insincerity, imitation and play, what Bernstein calls, in 'Comedy and the Poetics of Political Form', "dialectical play, the insincerity of form" (*A Poetics*, 220). This is political because it underscores the artificiality of all modes of delivery, including so-called "natural speech". While Bernstein does not "act" his poems in the same way as Gorgias acted his speeches, he does pay close attention to the delivery of his poems and demonstrates an awareness that all performance modes for poems are constructed, whether they are dramatic or much more mundane:

many poets will make much
of the authenticity or naturalness of their reading
style – mumbling, stumb-
ling over words, fumbling through papers, virtual
inaudibility, sitting in a chair bent over page,
no discernible shape or rhythm in the pro-

jected sound of the work.
Yet this is just as much
a performance style as the most
declamatory reading: all readings
are performative, whether they appear
to deny the performative or flaunt
it (20)

Bernstein, like Gorgias, aims through the performance of his texts to disillusion the audience of the idea of a transparent, sincere voice through which to deliver ideas. This essay builds on a number of ideas from Bernstein's earlier essay collection, *Content's Dream*, and in particular the conversational essay 'On Theatricality'. In this essay, Bernstein sketches a number of ways in which he feels the reader of poetry can offer a performance of the work that is neither wholly dependent on a sense of the poet's personality "as a projected cohering force" nor what he calls the "shamanistic incantation of neoritualistic sound poetry" (200). One idea he suggests is that a poem's performance could be achieved through regarding the poem more as "scored speech" in which the poet attempts to "create rhythms in reading that are based on the compositional possibilities of the text and are not simply appropriated from speech" (201). As the critic Gerald Bruns has remarked:

Bernstein's work is, whatever else it is, a persistently comic investigation of the idea that there are more ways of putting words together than can be contained within the standard received model of a (unitary) speaking voice... what characterizes his poetry is not the disappearance of voice... but its wild, heterogeneous proliferation in forms of pastiche, parody and manic impersonation (21).

By detaching the performance of poetry from a notion of unified voice, Bernstein presents his work in a manner that acknowledges and foregrounds the performative decisions that are made in delivering poems. Just as Consigny reads similar concerns as being grounded in politics for Gorgias, so too does the “acknowledgment of the performative dimension/ of poems” amount to a “recognition of their political bearing in the world” (23) for Bernstein. This is because it is necessary to understand how our language uses and modes of utterance are socially conditioned before “ingrained habits might be changed or reshaped” (23).

Many of Bernstein’s poems enact the politics of poetic performance. The poem ‘Outrigger’, for example, begins in the arena of performance and theatricality: “There is some goggling and conversation coming from the box” (*The Sophist*, 29). Discourse in this line is not just linked explicitly to performance (“the box” is as much a stage as the stage itself), but also to privilege and economic circumstance. This is also the case in the short poem ‘Romance’, from *The Sophist*:

“I always assume performers are trying to make a cheap buck.”

Fra Angelico spoke in a subdued tone, so as not be heard by Savonarola. A troupe of acrobats was attempting to gather a crowd in the courtyard in front of the monastery and the saintly fresco maker was dispirited. “Just a few more days and I will be on holiday in Tuscany.” The holy man particularly looked forward to the goose, a specialty of the kitchens of the Baron de R with whom he spent each August (58).

This comic, anachronistic and impossible (if all too familiar) scene details an imaginary non-encounter between the painter Fra Angelico (1395- 1452) and the radical preacher Girolamo Savonarola (1452 - 1498) ahead of the painter’s visit to (presumably) the Baron de Rothschild, the first of which dynasty was not made Baron

by the Austrian Emperor until 1816. Savonarola was a preacher who attempted to rid Florence of corruption and provide fairness for the poor, while Fra Angelico was a hugely successful painter responsible for Renaissance masterpieces such as the Altarpiece for San Marco's under the patronage of Cosimo Di Medici. What is it about 'performance' that so dispirits the hypocritical Fra Angelico? What is it about art as performance and art as conditioned by economics and embroiled in the greasy world of business that upsets him? On the one hand Bernstein suggests it is simply snobbery, but on the other, Fra Angelico functions in the poem as a parody of the sort of artist who believes that art is sacred, refined and elevated and doesn't belong in the public square. As art historian Michael Baxandall has demonstrated in his study of the social history of fifteenth century Italian painting, Fra Angelico's art was just as compromised by its place within the performance of economic transactions as the acrobats he maligns. The only difference being the transaction of patronage that funds Fra Angelico's lifestyle takes place behind closed doors in Tuscan summer villas. The potency of the acrobatic troupe to irritate, therefore, lies precisely in their situation with "the courtyard", their openness about the transaction and their openness that they are acting performative roles conditioned by social circumstance.

Alongside debates surrounding the performance and sounding of poetry in public readings, Bernstein's work is also concerned with theatricality and performance more generally. This is particularly the case in regard to *With Strings*, a book whose title refers to at least three forms of performance: the strings of a musical instrument, the strings of a puppet or acrobat, and a histrionic imperative to sound the violins. However, this title also ironically refers to the act of "selling out", or of having one's art altered as it gains increasing popularity. The reference is to legendary jazz musician Charlie Parker's 1950 album *Charlie Parker with Strings*, released by

Mercury Records. The album was Parker's most commercially successful by far. However, as Jazz critic Carl Woideck has noted, it was controversial among some existing fans, who saw Parker as "selling out". Parker, however, saw things differently: "Parker loved American popular song and was proud of his recordings 'with strings': 'When I recorded with strings, some of my friends said, 'oh, Bird is getting commercial.' That wasn't it at all. I was looking for new ways of saying things musically. New sound combinations" (189). However, since Parker's release of 'with strings', that phrase has become shorthand for a more commercial record by an outsider musician. Given that *With Strings* was Bernstein's first book of poems from the mainstream University of Chicago Press, he is clearly preparing himself and ironically pre-empting the suggestion of commercialization. A key element of Parker's strings sessions was performance, as Dizzy Gillespie remarked: "we'd stress entertainment. Every time we went on a stage, it would be just like a show. We'd make people think that we like what we are doing." (Woideck, 190). Dizzy and Bird's legendary performances were acrobatic, dramatic and exhilarating; experimental, accessible and difficult all at once. By titling his book *With Strings*, Bernstein is envisaging a commitment to experimental language use that *does* create "new sound combinations." Bee's cover, entitled 'Penny Serenade' (1985), shows a man and a woman sitting on opposing high-rise window sills, reaching dangerously out towards each other over a chasm. Between them, a line of laundry that might at a pinch look like acrobats dancing from a tight rope, the t-shirts flopping elegantly over the line. In the next section, I consider the ways in which Bernstein conceives of the poem (and the poetry book) as an arena for linguistic acrobatics and sophistic gymnastics of the sort Consigny describes in reference to Gorgias as "artificial figuration" (167).

5. III. Linguistic Acrobatics

In *The Marginalization of Poetry*, language poet and critic Bob Perelman analyses the title of Bernstein's 1992 volume of essays and criticism *A Poetics*. He notes how in a frontispiece to the book the title is rendered equally spaced and uncapitalised as "apoetics". He goes on to read this as an instance of "nonhierarchical typography (no capitals, no word boundaries)" which constitutes "a small sample of the radically democratic poetry Bernstein is arguing for, a poetry not governable by a normative poetics, a poetry that would itself constitute an apoetics" (80). There's a further resonance to that rendering of Bernstein's title, though: the phonetic similarity to the word "acrobatics" which is a productive analogue for how a poem is conceived in Bernstein's work. In the final section of this chapter, I intend to look closely at how various notions concerning acrobatics perform within Bernstein's poetry and prose.

In sophistic rhetoric, *apostaseis* and *prosbolai* are words referring to the rhetorical devices of sudden breaks and transitional moves (Dillon, 45). In Bernstein's poetry and critical writings, these concepts are useful ones to bear in mind when addressing the rhetorical rhythms of his poems, which frequently progress using precisely this method of chasms and leaps. In 'Revenge of the Poet-Critic', Bernstein suggests this device when he conceives of a "modular essay" form:

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 becomes possible to recombine the paragraphs to get another version of the essay- since the "argument" is not dependent on the linear sequence" (1999, 7).

In a number of essays, not least 'Revenge of the Poet Critic' itself, Bernstein has produced exactly this sort of modular form of essay in which the reader is encouraged

to make leaps and maneuvers in order to read the text across multiple planes and trains of thought (trains that cross tracks and change platforms at the very last minute.) This modular form can be clearly related to the procedures that Dillon characterizes with the sophistic rhetorical terms “apostaseis and prosbolai”. Essays such as ‘Revenge of the Poet-Critic’ digress and morph from poem to prose, from topic to topic, circling around multiple essay topics and registers, resisting cohering into one logical or discursive essay. His opening paragraph engages seemingly multiple speakers in a kind of confused and confusing conversational dialogue: “Thank-you Senator Exxon the open spaces round here were scaring me, how many syllables can you fit on the head of a pin cushion? what’s that spell Mario? who are you calling a verse? That’s not what I meant y’all, not what I meant at all” (3). This raucous and exuberant, conversational and rapidly shifting, prose is not what one would expect from the opening to a critical essay. Eschewing the conventions of expository academic prose, Bernstein ignites the essay in the sorts of critical and creative uses of language that the essay itself advocates. The phrase “who are you calling a verse?” anticipates criticism of Bernstein’s essay that it isn’t a piece of criticism but a poem, meanwhile also playing on the sense of “a verse” as “averse”, what Stanley Cavell has termed, in reference to Emerson: “aversive thinking” (1990, 33). Indeed, Emerson and Cavell are perhaps two of the greatest influences in American criticism and philosophy for exactly the sort of generic cross-over of literary or poetic writing into criticism that Bernstein’s essay characterizes under the term “poet-critic”. It’s a term that would certainly fit Emerson and that could also be claimed suitable for Cavell. As Cavell remarks, Emerson’s style of philosophizing “can sound to philosophical ears” “generally impertinent” (33). This characterization could (multiplied many times over) be leveled at Bernstein’s dramatically swaying

postures adopted in ‘Revenge of the Poet-Critic’. Indeed, the same suggestion of impertinence, of not conducting philosophy in the proper manner, can be identified in Plato and Aristotle’s dismissal of the sophists, and in particular their criticisms of eristic as an irritatingly argumentative and duplicitous method (Schreiber, 2), and more generally of their style as “too poetic” (Consigny, 165). However, as Michael Gagarin has pointed out, the stylistic innovations of the sophists went hand in hand with their philosophical content: “conscious divergences from traditional prose style went hand in hand with the rejection of traditional beliefs. New ideas and new styles of writing are related features of the sophists’ achievements” (18). The same can be said of Emerson, Bernstein and, indeed, Cavell. About his own literary style and its relation to his philosophical ideas, Cavell has remarked:

It may help to say that while I may leave ideas in what may seem a more literary state, sometimes a more psychoanalytic state, than a philosopher might wish – that is, that a philosopher might prefer a further philosophical derivation of the ideas – I mean to leave everything I say, or have, I guess, ever said, as in a sense provisional, the sense that it is to be gone on from (33).

The hesitant qualifiers with which this sentence abounds, the reluctant postponement of completion of the idea being communicated is in itself an example of Cavell’s literary style, communicating syntactically through the multiplicity of clauses the ‘provisional’ light in which he sees his work. Similarly, the ‘a versive’ mode of prose writing in ‘Revenge of the Poet Critic’ also embodies certain values of Bernstein’s critical writing, presented through the style and construction of his text as much as through a traditional and direct reading of his essay. The rapid cuts between prose and verse, the dramatic fluctuations in register and tone, (“apostaseis and prosbolai”), all these elements combine to create a sense of multiplicity and

polyvocality: communicating multiple ideas at once and resisting a sense of totality or universality of meaning and understanding. The title of the essay, 'Revenge of the Poet-Critic', suggests possible forebears for precisely such a project: the sophists. Writing of Gorgias, Consigny goes even further, claiming that for the sophist "it is only if we are able to escape the chains of reason, smashing the transparent vial of prose, that we will be able to experience life in its truest intensity and "reality", becoming one with the irrational flux of Becoming" (154). In this reckoning, the resistance and aversion to the logical and univocal styles of prose is essential to enter a wilder and more transgressive sphere where a sense of 'transition', "flux" and "becoming" is prioritized over 'certainty' and 'truth'. This description of a state of "becoming" bears comparison to the concept of 'natality' that haunts the writings of the political theorist and philosopher Hannah Arendt. As Anne O'Byrne has noted, Arendt's own writing employs the fragment and the lacunae, to be bridged by a "tiger's leap" (78), in which "those tensions are precisely what keep the thought in motion, what keep it alive and keep us returning to it, not so much in search of *an* ontology or *a* political theory, but in order to keep our own thinking on all these topics moving and to constantly challenge any view that shows signs of congealing into dogma" (78). By doing so, Arendt's text enacts its own sense of 'natality', resisting finitude through her embrace of a fragmentary and elusive style. Arendt's concept of natality is one in which "political action, like all strictly political phenomena is bound up with human plurality, which is one of the fundamental conditions of human life insofar as it rests on the concept of natality, through which the human world is constantly invaded by strangers" (Kristeva, 25). This conception of a constant "becoming" or "natality" as a trace of "human plurality", the possibility inherent in the constant state of birth in which humans live, translates within Arendt's

prose into the styles that O’Byrne describes. The same sense of strangeness and of plurality can be detected in Bernstein’s own essay-style, where the significance of his diverse and creatively launched assaults on expository prose styles can be understood in relation to his remark that “you can’t fully critique the dominant culture if you are confined to the forms through which it reproduces itself” (4). The suggestion is that, like Gorgias, writing in non-normative and non-prosaic ways offers a way to step outside the conventions through which the “dominant culture” sees itself and sanctions, i.e. expository, measured discursive prose. Indeed, the sense of ‘natality’ or “becoming” within Bernstein’s own poetry is perhaps most clearly illustrated by his comic send-up of that most contemporary irritation, the electronic download:

Poem loading...

please wait (2013)

A poem is always “loading”, always in the process of becoming and never finished or exhausted. A poem is also “loading” in the sense of continually taking on further intertextualities and contexts, which are continually being loaded onto and into the poem at every instance of its encounter. By using the corporate language of computer software (a form of language use that has become so ingrained and familiar it is hardly noticed), Bernstein also highlights another aspect of Arendt’s sense of ‘natality’ that is relevant to his essay style. In Arendt’s writing, being born is equated with becoming public, moving into the public sphere, just as “loading” onto the internet might stand in for that sphere in today’s culture, where Twitter and other social media forums could be seen as arguably the equivalent space of an agora in today’s political climate, even if they are only rarely used as such. Bernstein’s writings engage a sense of the public sphere frequently, for example, in the way that in ‘Revenge of the Poet-Critic’, he addresses “Senator Exxon”, simultaneously

situating his essay with matters of global capitalist politics. By doing so, Bernstein's essay orients itself as more than a piece of writing about poetry, rather it inscribes a sense of poetic activity (and linguistic experimentation) as something that can be integral to a social and political engagement, a critical or "a verse" relation to political structures. This sense of linguistic experimentation as a form of being public and oriented towards being part of the public sphere, as a direct point of origin in sophistic, in the agora as the arena of innovative linguistic utterance. In this arena, as Gagarin had remarked, the most "extreme style" of linguistic experimentation belonged to Gorgias.

In his description of Gorgias's use of paratropes in his language performances, Consigny writes vividly about Gorgias's writing style in terms that foreground his value as an experimental writer of language-centered text:

Several of Gorgias's tropes are paratropic in respect to sound, such as alliteration, assonance, rhyme and repeated clauses in order to create echoes both in his own text and in other texts. Through the use of these figures, Gorgias constructs an elaborate system of sounds, syllables, words and clauses that echo among themselves; and in so doing, he shows how he is able to create new meanings from words themselves, whereby the figures generate a web of allusions and interactions between the words and sounds. In this manner, Gorgias creates new meanings by repetition, draws connections between words and ideas not previously noticed and shows that readers may create new meanings with every new reading (177).

While there is much in this description of Gorgias's writing practice that sets him up as a useful progenitor for language-centered writing, the focus of this section of my argument is going to be on what Consigny refers to as "words and clauses that echo

among themselves”, i.e. the ability of Bernstein’s text to use a charged surface of tropes and paratropes in a form that allows for the echoing acrobatics of play.

Similarly Consigny’s phrase “a web of allusions and interactions between the words and sounds” also stresses the importance within his work (and I argue Bernstein’s) of both sonic and semantic interpretative procedures when reading the work. Consigny further suggests that Gorgias’s employment of just these kinds of devices allows his texts/ performances to admit of multi-vocal and pluralistic possibilities. Rather than a single strand of argument or logic, Gorgias’s acrobatic textual procedures manifest multiple strands of interpretation, meaning and relative rather than verifiable truth:

Gorgias not only embraces the irrationalist, mythic worldview of the poets, but he iterates their antithetical speech, repudiating the notion that literal, unequivocal discourse affords an avenue to truth (156).

The figure of the acrobat is an important one in Bernstein’s poetry. It seems to stand for the elements of “risk” and “performance” that are critical to Bernstein’s aesthetics. One of the main criticisms of language poetry has been that it dissolves into a conservative and ethics-less fragmentation. Detractors of language writing, such as the critic Frederic Jameson, have criticized them in just these terms. As Jeffrey T. Nealon writes, “For Jameson, language poetry’s paratactic aesthetic of fragmentation cannot help but be reactionary because it simply mimics and thereby upholds the fragmentation and apathetic endlessness promoted by the bourgeois ideology of late capitalism” (147). However, the figure of the acrobat transcends the notion of mere “free play”. An acrobat has to be precise, exact and responsible at all times, even if the end result looks like “play”. In his study of language poetry, the critic David Arnold traces a line of origin to surrealist writing. Studying a passage from Breton, he alights on a sense of language as involving “acrobatic display,

language appears to be departing its subject and giving way to deferred action” (28). This phrasing suggests what it is about the agility and acrobatic that can be considered to form an analogy for writing that is at the experimental cutting edge. Arnold’s suggestion is that the acrobatic effaces “subject”, i.e. identity for a representation and exploration of what can physically be achieved in “action”. The image of the acrobat that is being suggested here by Arnold’s use of the word “action” is an acrobat of practice, in the sense that Peter Sloterdijk writes of “the practicing aspect of human existence” (2013, 16). In *The Art of Philosophy*, Sloterdijk advances a sense of the acrobat as an analogy for human existence where our actions on a daily basis are informed by “training” and “practice”: “in every performance of practicing, an action is carried out in such a way that its present execution co-conditions its later execution” (16). This is to state that a fundamental aspect of human existence is repetition and learnt actions through training that we are barely aware of. If this is so, then it is a linguistic process, as the basis through which our consciousness experiences the conditions of existence. As Sloterdijk remarks:

We could say that all life is acrobatics, though we perceive only the smallest part of our vital expressions as what they really are: the results of practice and elements of a *modus vivendi* that happens on the high wire of improbability (16).

Sloterdijk’s characterization is significant. If all life is “acrobatics”, then we achieve seemingly impossible and baffling feats, we advance our conceptions through “practice” and “training”. However, this training also becomes ‘routine’. The acrobat performs the same activity each evening until it becomes ‘natural’ and in a sense no longer, for the acrobat, “acrobatic”, though it retains this sense for the audience. This could be taken to be the situation vis-à-vis language use (and correlating in

democratic politics) in contemporary societies. Language use has become so practiced and so routine that it is no longer recognized as the acrobatic activity that it is: creating meaning and communicating with each other. Similarly, the acrobatic process of engaging with a democratic political system. Once that becomes routine and overly well-practiced, it becomes entrenched and complacent as a value system that potentially no longer represents the values of the society that sanctions it. Naturally, when an acrobat becomes complacent, they put themselves in danger and for an acrobat to be at his best they are required to be both well-practiced and alert. In '5 for MP', Bernstein writes "myriad acrobatic rusts", the word "rusts" suggesting just this tendency for acrobatics by rote becoming stale and falling apart. Poetry and poet-criticism of the sort that Bernstein advocates in 'Revenge of the Poet-Critic' therefore introduces alternate modes of language use and linguistic acrobatics to remind the reader that language and communication are acrobat's maneuvers that require attentiveness, not complacency. Thus, Bernstein's poetry manifests a multi-faceted and multi-perspectival surface over which the reader is asked to swing acrobatically, resisting what John Dewey called "habits" that "reduce themselves to routine ways of acting, or degenerate into ways of acting which are enslaved just in the degree in which intelligence is disconnected from them" (1976, 9:54)

One example of a textual surface that demands an acrobatic reading performance is Bernstein's poem 'with strings', produced for a collaboration with the post-minimalist artist Richard Tuttle for the exhibition *Poetry Plastique*, curated by Bernstein and Jay Sanders for Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York in 2001. The full text of the poem is quoted below:

with strings

asmall(orldarge)machinemadeofwords-wcw

cuspoftwispgrownoldtoplayamuckamuckmusicthedisaster
forIhavehoppedtoaccord&blemishminestorust
cursortobedbug
stillserveswhosandssameassavor
succorpunchonthebackballbingostiletto
survivororethosofneither&arrivedaroundangleofvocationaldependence
I'manangletoimpartattheFreshMeadowinterloopthatlets
frivolityfavorantecedentgush& uminate
forIhaveravagedwildburlap&serenadedthelostlancet
giveme agurglefromwhichtohurdle&Iwilltruckmycaresintoporesthatglare
noticingthebuckledinabilitytowardlabileincontinencerainmentaside hiccup
fondlethebundleyoubungle

This poem was presented in 3 dimensional form as a twisting copper tubing spiral sculpture rising from a terracotta pot base. The foam letters of the first line of the poem were threaded on to the copper tubing, and around each letter the entirety of the poem was also pasted. The terracotta pot that is the base of the poem/sculpture contained strips of paper with the lines of the poem on them. The piece enacts a dynamic of its component parts: each individual letter of the poem also contains the entire poem. As such, the poem performs the relation of the individual to community discussed in chapter 3, while also pointing towards a reading method that is at once caught between isolated details and abstracted totality. This presentation of the poem demands a reading that overtly criss-crosses the text, reading the poem “in the round”, by circumnavigating the sculpture and attempting to read the strips of paper within the

base. With the letters arranged in this physical and material presence, they invite a reading across all planes. While observing the physical sculpture, the letters intersect each other both vertically and horizontally. For example: the letter “I” is diagonally adjacent to the letter “s”, creating the word “is” and the later “m” is above the letters “as” to create the Spanish word “mas”, meaning “more”. A further interplay of the letters is in the shadows they cast on the gallery floor, which creates its own, secret poem made of words that are difficult to figure out. While heightened in the sculptural realization of the poem, this manner of active reading is manifest within the textual version of the poem itself. By running the words of the poem into each other without spaces, Bernstein asks for an active reading approach in the relatively easy task of deciphering the words within the long strings of the poem’s lines. However, this initial active engagement awakens curiosity and attentiveness, and once this is ignited, there are multiple mini-discoveries for the reader to make: for example, the word “uspo” (a contraction perhaps of a communal poetics) can be read from inside the phrase “cuspowisp”. This creative, dexterous method of reading is self-generating, with each discovery echoing of the other letters and words within the text to create still others. For example, by reading the word “uspo” in “cuspowisp”, the reader in turn releases the onomatopoeic neologism “fwisp” from the word that would logically follow “uspo”. The phrase “I’manangle” from the seventh line of the poem gestures towards the word “mangle”, especially in light of the creative reading methods established by the poem. However, an attentiveness to the image also suggests a human figure as an “angle”- a trapeze artist wobbling delicately at a seemingly impossible angle from the rope. Is this to be read as a metaphor for the poet’s tangential relation to the poem, a description of the acrobats’ literal acuteness to a high wire or a more general description for aversive strategies altogether? Or is it

a mistake- a clown's comedy act: should that be a desperate plea or crazed assertion-
"I'm an angel"?

'with strings' foregrounds the act of reading itself, of having a physical encounter with the text. It dramatizes the all-roundedness of texts and their resistance to totalized intelligibility. It demands heightened attention to all the ways in which texts make meaning and meaning can be made from texts. The critic Craig Dworkin has interpreted Bernstein's early sequence *Veil* (1987) in a similar way, stressing the demands the texts put on the reader for "physical decipherment" (54). This early sequence consists of overtyped poems, where the words obscure and intermingle with each other in numerous layers to form a wire mesh and weave of language. Dworkin characterizes these as having "an astonishing depth of texture and three dimensionality":

Indeed, the experience of reading is worth insisting on; whatever their initial impressions, the poems in *Veil* are surprising less for their illegibility than for their ultimate intelligibility. With patience and concentration, almost all the text can be deciphered, if only bit by bit, so that Bernstein's palimpsests do not so much prevent reading as redirect and discipline usual reading habits.

(53)

'with strings' puts similar demands on the reader, both when presented as a three dimensional sculpture and as a text on the page. In either case, the reader becomes embroiled in a circus of acrobatic procedures in order to produce a meaningful reading from the text. As Dworkin notes, both *Veils* and 'with strings' "redirect and discipline usual reading habits". As texts, they require an unusual approach on the part of the reader, they refocus attention and demand concentration in ways that are different to those normally brought to the reading process. As such, they are examples

of “practice” of the sort that Sloterdijk suggests we continually engage in in our lives. By awakening this renewed focus onto the way reading is conducted, Bernstein’s texts break the spell of dangerous complacency and instead encourage the reader to be aware of the acrobatics of reading involved in engaging with the text.

5. IV. “Canned laughter/ is white noise”³ – *Kairos* and *Kynicism* in Bernstein’s poetry and poetics

Bernstein is often referred to as a comedic poet. *The New Anthology of American Poetry* has described his texts as “frequently hilarious” (401). Brian Reed has noted Bernstein’s “debts to Groucho Marx, Allan Sherman and Lenny Bruce”. Jerome McGann has remarked that “Bernstein’s poetry turns out, as a result, a kind of comedy of errors, with the reader (we are many) playing the principal role(s). American traditions of screwball comedy – the Marx brothers, Laurel and Hardy – have had a deep influence on his work.” (111) The novelist Paul Auster has even gone so far as to remark that “at times, Charles Bernstein reminds me of a stand-up comic performing for the late night crowd at a Borscht Belt hotel, booked in for a two week run and never performing the same material twice” (34). These assessments are borne out in relation to Bernstein’s own critical writings and interviews, in which he has frequently cited influence from comedians, including those mentioned above, and the rhythms and poetics of comedy in general on his work. For example, as he puts it, his writing has its origins in “a synthesis of the three Marxes (Chico, Karl and Groucho) and the four Williamses (Raymond, William Carlos and Esther)” (228). The elision of comedy, politics, performance and poetics represented by these self-acclaimed forbears is useful in considering the different strands of Bernstein’s poetics of comedy and how they come together (and fall apart laughing). That Bernstein’s work has frequently been cited as such suggests that it is, in fact, comic. However, there are different kinds of laughter and it’s important to diagnose the ways in which Bernstein’s poetry does and doesn’t constitute comedy. By doing so the aim is to

³ Lyn Hejinian, *In the American Tree*, 50

assert the centrality of comedy to Bernstein's poetics, even when they aren't necessarily laugh-out-loud, to consider that the comic is as vital to Bernstein's thinking both when he is and when he isn't "hilarious". The critic Giles Gunn has remarked of Kenneth Burke (a writer whose own pragmatism bears an extensive debt to the sophists) that:

To deprive Burke of his jokes, his puns, his sly winks, to say nothing of his burlesques of the serious and his parodies of the banal, is to deprive him of much of the machinery that makes his thinking radically critical and his criticism radically social and political (1987, 80).

This section suggests that the same claim might equally be made for the poetry and poetics of Charles Bernstein.

Bernstein's writing isn't, generally, 'amusing', 'amuse' seeming at once both too restricted and too banal a word. After all, at times, Bernstein's poetry is not humorous at all; it is too baffling, frustrating and difficult to illicit a laugh, the onslaught of different registers and voices too much to digest or deal with. However, not to disagree with the *New Anthology of American Poetry*, his poems are "frequently hilarious" (401). The distinction between "hilarious" and "amusing" is analogous to that made by the critic Debra Diane Davis when she draws on a remark by Milan Kundera to assert that "a face [but also a text and/or a techne] contorted in laughter has never been considered beautiful or sublime... What we find appreciable is the stability of the knowing smile and/or the controlled chuckle" (2). There is a form of laughter that is allied to "stability" and there is a form of laughter that is a destabilizing force. 'Amusing' is the "controlled chuckle" and the "knowing smile" that re-inforce stability. 'Hilarious' is the out of control and excessive belly laugh- the laugh that upsets and that might even lead to tears. There is nothing "controlled"

about the humour in Bernstein’s “hilarious” and “histrionic” texts. The laughter of Bernstein’s poetry is generated precisely from the unexpected veers and directions that he is prepared to allow the poem to go in. The laughter can stem from discomfort and uncertainty and can certainly provoke the same reactions. Bernstein’s humour is in the excesses he admits to the poem, which results not so much in an expansion of the poetic field but a hacking up and hacking over of the surface. For example, in the following excerpt from *Recalculating*:

DEA%R FR-IEN%D,

I sa%w yo%r pixture on
wehb si;t; no.t su%re
whhc one & w-ant to
tal^k or mee.t ver-y so.on
I am old ma%n 57 year\$
ba%d tooth and sme.ll
ma.ke vr,ry hr.d t mee%t
people. I a,m wr\$iter
wr\$ite po%re%y

The rough, contorted surface of the poem, as though it has been jumbled in transmission enacts a dynamic of having to decipher or translate the poem. It isn’t difficult to do and yet the increased awareness to the text is itself something of a joke, mimicking and parodying the sort of language that wouldn’t even be received in the inbox, would go straight to the spam folder with any half decent filter program.

However, Bernstein’s poetics doesn’t have a spam filter, it admits all language uses,

the more bizarre and jumbled the better, the more interesting. Bernstein's humour is clearly at work in his insertion of a dollar sign in the word "wr\$iter" (!) and in his rendering of poetry as "po%re%y", suggesting poetry as a percentage game (never complete and always "porey", or in its more conventional version, porous). His poem also suggests that the room for effective communication is not controlled or governed by normative procedures of grammar and spelling. This e-poem barely follows any of the normative procedures of spelling, and yet it is fairly easy to create meanings from it, meanings which the interjections of inappropriate symbols and punctuation merely accentuate rather than destroy. The strangeness of the poem's surface in effect provides that slight alteration that encourage the reader to perform their acrobatics, the percentage signs perhaps mimicking gymnasts' hoops.

In the introduction to her book *Breaking up (at) Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter* Davis describes a bizarre catalogue of object classifications from Borges and remarks "the "shattering laughter" sparked in this "wonder filled" instant is not (only) the laughter that Aristotle attributes to Gorgias, the laughter that opposes meaninglessness to meaning (On Rhetoric 3.18). It's a laughter that shatters what Jacques Derrida calls the very "fabric of meaning" (*From Restricted* 259) through which the notion of meaninglessness becomes meaningful, through which meaninglessness comes to operate as the dirty underside (the negated) of meaning (or, in Gorgias's case, vice versa)" (2). This sort of laughter, part amazement and wonder, part absurdity and resistance, "exposes an/other way of seeing" and "exposes the excess flying around, that overflow for which any one system of thought will have been unable to account" (2). This potential of laughter to "expose an/other way of seeing", i.e. to open up another perspective or way of being in the world is critical to the way that comedy operates within Bernstein's poetics. A laugh in Bernstein's

poetry is frequently as a result of a bizarre and unexpected turn of phrase. For example:

The Laughter-in-language proliferates meaning rather than fixating it; it has the tendency to disrupt any *techne* and to seduce us as it tropes. To be spoken by a language contorted in laughter is to be spoken by a language on the loose, a schizoid language, capable of hailing into being only sssplintered subjectivities (19).

Davis roots her study of the rhetorical and philosophical role of laughter in the writings of Gorgias, and in particular the notion of “kairos”. “Kairos” is a disputed term and has been the focus of extensive study in recent years by scholars interested in sophistic rhetoric. Thomas Rickert has located the origin of the term in Philostratus’ account of Gorgias’ claim that he could speak knowledgeably and convincingly on any subject: “Entering a theater of Athenians, he recounts, Gorgias had the boldness to say ‘suggest a subject,’ and he was the first to proclaim himself willing to take this chance, showing apparently that he knew everything and would trust to the moment (*toi kairoi*) to speak on any subject” (90). According to Rickert, Plato’s reading of this is simply as “boastful” (90). However, there are other critics, such as Victor Vitanza, Bernard Miller and Mario Untersteiner, who have suggested that rather than a display of Gorgias’ control and faculties for impressively discoursing on any subject, rather, “kairos” is concerned with being ‘out of control’, of subjecting oneself to chance and fortuities within language (to the moment). As Rickert puts it, for these critics, Gorgian kairos is a way of “abandoning the subject/object dichotomy” (90) and that rather the “kairos of a situation is a moment placed not as something between a subject and an exterior situation but as mutually involved and evolving vectors of material and discursive force” (90). By this reading,

'kairos' is the acknowledgement of our lack of control over the words we use, an expression of the limits of language as something that can be manipulated by an individual and rather a conception of language as something that is shared, participatory and always changing dependent on "material and discursive force". By putting himself within a theater and claiming that he will talk on any subject, Gorgias's performance can be seen as an experimental language performance in which, his linguistic and logical capacities would be tested to their utmost: a kind of proto-version of *Just a Minute*. And just as the performers on the Radio 4 game find out, when your powers of eloquence and invention get tested and the human mind finds itself creating nonsense in order to keep talking, the result is very often humorous. For Davis, therefore, with its basis in a lack of control of language and logic, "kairos" describes a moment of comedy, i.e. a moment when rational discourse is interrupted and transgressed by the intrusion of something unexpected, anti-logical and absurd: "The kairotic moment names that instant when our meaning-making is, in a flash, exposed as an operation inscribed in, rather than opposed to, play" (27). An example of this sort of moment is represented within Davis's discussion of Gorgias and his 'Encomium of Helen'. In this text, Gorgias describes how Helen is faced with a breakdown in logic, i.e. an arbitrary decision of either going to Troy or not going to Troy and the logic of the situation doesn't enable her to choose an option that would save her. This is a kairotic moment because it is a moment when, as Davis notes, Helen loses control and ceases to become "the master of her destiny" and "the author of her/story" (27). Instead, an "extralogical force" comes into play. Within Gorgias's text, too, kairos is at work because through his elaborate defence of Helen, he exposes the art of persuasively logical discourse to ridicule, overturning the widely held 'truth' that Helen's actions in going to Troy are reprehensible. As John Pouloukos has written,

the *Encomium* “trusts to make the case for the importance of kairos by reopening a seemingly settled account and introducing new ways of reasoning, ways leading to the formation of new beliefs” (95). This observation is interesting because it suggests that the kairotic moment is borne of a situation of logical or linguistic stalemate, where then kairos offers a new way of seeing or formulating something. In the *Encomium*, Gorgias is playing with logic and playing with language, demonstrating their inter-reliance at the limits where it becomes impossible to distinguish enough between right and wrong to make any judgment on Helen’s culpability. It is precisely in this moment that Gorgias’s text achieves its comedy, its kairos- the moment when sense becomes indistinguishable from nonsense. As Davis makes clear, the distinction between logic and kairos is not as simple as it might at first seem, as logic itself is born from a kind of play. Kairos reveals itself to be the same as logic, only an inverse and mocking version that doesn’t purport to be more than a construction achieved through the play of generating meanings. This is what characterizes Gorgian anti-logic. “Kairotic laughter arises not so much from the (rational) realm of meaning-making but from the overriding (nonrational) realm of play, of excess, in which the phase of meaning-making is also situated.” (28) There is a paradox at the centre of this sentence. That the “realm of play” is both opposed to the “(rational) realm of meaning-making” and related to it through the interrelation of “meaning-making” and “play” is an example of the ways in which “kairotic laughter” is able to resist the norms of conventional exposition and logic. The power of kairos is in its ability to expose the “play” and the performances that define even our most logical or stable modes of discourse.

Bernstein has himself conducted a Gorgian Kairotic happening or performance, as he describes in a note to the poem ‘Talk to Me’: “On April 18, 1999,

I performed this improvised poem as part of Deb Singer's 'Impulsive Behaviour' series at the Whitney Museum's Philip Morris Space. Also on the bill that night were Edwin Torres and Bruce Andrews performing with Sally Silvers." By composing a poem 'live' in this way, Bernstein treats the poem as something like a jazz improvisation, riffing off the people in the room and the other performances of the evening. One interesting aspect of the poem is that it involves a kind of kairotic breakdown of non-knowledge, in which ordinary chronic time is disrupted or suspended: "What time is it now? What time is it NOW? What TIME is it NOW? WHAT time IS IT now?" (17) In the course of the poem, Bernstein makes it clear that his ordinary mode of writing poetry is not improvisational, that when he writes he is attentive to the structures and organisations of words in a way that pure improvisation can sometimes hide. However, what is ultimately more striking is that the poem itself reveals that that very idea of "improvisation" is an illusion, as whether working on the spot or in a much more planned fashion, the mind is constantly planning and arranging words. What is revealed in 'Talk to Me' is that the idea of "off the cuff" inspiration/ improvisation as something generated directly from the poet to the audience is a fallacy and that improvised poetry, as with all forms of writing and thinking, is a matter of responding, playing and re-arranging language. Therefore, the poem itself proceeds in an overtly constructed way using interlinked motifs: Bernstein in dialogue with a talking watch; the shuffling and varying repetition of a number of lines; a narrative of email-discussions with the Yugoslavian poet Dubravka Djuric; an irate instruction to "Go back stay back way back". These different threads are woven together in an overtly constructed and organized way, in spite of the poem's improvised form. For example, there is an anecdote about not being able to get the reverse clutch to work in a car that he drove with the poet and editor James Sherry

from Vienna to Belgrade: “We were in a parking space and yet couldn’t get out of there.” This anecdote clearly resonates with the echoing voice that intones “Go back” throughout the poem, as well as the discussion of Dubravka Djuric’s emailed questions about some lines of Robert Duncan. The poem is self-reflexive and aware of these ordering processes that are occurring even when utilizing the spontaneity of improvisation. Rather than approaching a use of “language” without structure, the improvised form in fact highlights the formal and structural processes that underpin all of our language uses:

- Now
those are
some of the elements
that might go
into a poem
but in a poem I’d
disperse and
reorganize them
in a way
that would not
have the same
kind of, kind
of rhythmic
structure
that I fall into
when improvising (18)

In his study of ‘nonknowledge’ and in particular in the lecture ‘Nonknowledge, Laughter and Tears’, Georges Bataille writes that:

The unknown character of the laughable would not be accidental, but essential. We would laugh, not for a reason that we would not happen to know, for lack of information or for want of sufficient penetration, but because the unknown makes us laugh.

In sum, it makes us laugh to pass very abruptly, all of a sudden, from a world in which each thing is well qualified, generally in a stable order, to a world in which our assurance is suddenly overthrown, in which we perceive that this assurance is deceptive, and where we believed that everything was strictly anticipated, an unforeseeable and upsetting element appeared unexpectedly from the unforeseeable, that reveals to us in sum a final truth: that superficial appearances conceal a perfect lack of response to our anticipation (135).

It seems unlikely that the truly “unknown” would even register enough on our radars to “make us laugh”. However, as the art critic Louis Kaplan has written, Bataille’s statement “takes us to the point where thinking can no longer venture and where a burst of laughter exceeds or ruptures it” (103). Rather than the “unknown”, it is really the recognition of what might be termed ‘the unknowability of what we think we know’ that triggers a laughter-response. As such, Bataille’s statement enacts its own paradox and confusion, leading the reader to just such a moment at the fringes of logical thought. For a sophist whose goal (as expressed by Michell Balliff) is to assert “that language resists logic” (5), then this sort of comedy that is profoundly the realm of “nonknowledge” and which sets itself up precisely as the inverse of Platonic Truth, is an extremely powerful mode for Gorgias to adopt. As Kaplan remarks, Bataille puts

forward a case for a philosophy of “laughter that exceeds or ruptures any totalizing claims” (103). One aspect of ‘Kairos’ that Eric Charles White has drawn attention to in his book *Kaironomia* also makes it particularly suitable as a way of thinking about language poetry, suggesting “the flow of” For these reasons, comedy has been an attractive mode for language poets, too, and Bernstein is by no means the only figure associated with language poetry to write in a way that might be termed comedic. The poet David Melnick’s *PCOET* is perhaps the purest expression of the poetic laughter of “nonknowledge”:

seta

colecc

pulse, i

canoe

it spear heieo

as Rea, cinct pp

pools we sly drosp

Geianto

(o sordea, o weedsea!) (33)

Melnick’s *PCOET* exists just on the cusp of non-knowledge and unpronounceability. Suggestively drawing to mind words and phrases with which we are familiar (“poet” in the title for instance, strangely modified by the bizarre insertion of the letter “c”), his language resists comprehension and triggers a slightly uneasy though also liberated laughter. When first confronted with this sort of text, the mind leaps towards those words that most closely resemble correctly spelled and familiar words, such as “spear”, “pools”, “sly”, and “canoe”, for example. However, very quickly, the proximity of these words and phrases to unfamiliar words such as “pulse”, “cinct pp”

liberates the reader from certainties about what even those words we are familiar with mean. By focusing attention on the sounds and structures of words and the relation of what we see on the page to the vocalization of those symbols, Melnick enacts a drama of signification, where the focus is on how words mean, rather than what specific words mean. Jerome McGann quotes the Canadian poet Steve McCaffery in a review from the *London Review of Books* as remarking of Melnick's work that "it seems less like writing than incisions into the very surface of signification" (6). By the end of PCOET, these short lyric-sized bites have been distilled even further into one-word poems akin to those of minimalist poets such as Aram Saroyan and Robert Lax. However, Melnick's one words are one non-words, such as "sofka" (83), "roubmt" (82) and "meom-a" (73). In these words, the focus is on the interplay of the letters within the words and how they resist or accommodate pronunciation. This interest in the sound of words and how we make meaning can also be seen in Melnick's text *Men in Aida*, a homophonic translation of Homer's *The Odyssey*. Melnick uses the Greek text to create a like-for-like sound translation of the poem from Greek to English. As our understanding of Greek soundings is limited, Melnick's text is fluid and surprising, suggesting radical new possibilities for meaning generation based on sound. Untied from "knowledge" and liberated by a creative response to the sounds of the language, Melnick's text veers outrageously towards the comic. The language poet Bob Perelman has described the resulting text as "a hyperbolic gay comedy" (24): "Horse fat. Eddie send ogre. Ron keep it at a moo, though. Bay dock yond pair a thin, a pole, a flow is boy oh the lass is"; "Ballet and a puree, neck you on guy on totem, may I?" In a discussion of Susan Howe's poem 'Pythagorean Silence', the critic Gregory Dale Adamson has described how her work constitutes "noise" and "chatter" (113) against the purely logical and rational ideal of clarity and concision

that was practiced by the Pythagoreans. By this definition, Melnick's raucous, innuendo-laden and luxuriant texts are decidedly 'noisy', i.e. poetry with much sound going on, soundings that exceed or prioritise themselves above a direct and immediate sense of communication. The rhythms of his poetry are that of a heightened and intensified "chatter", such as the excerpts quoted above, and the comedy value comes from the proximity of all the "chatter" to "noise", to unknowability. It is this sense of "noise" and "laughter" that are present in Hejiniian's line with which this chapter is titled "canned laughter/ is white noise". Laughter (esp. laughter related to artifice, i.e. "canned") is "noise", i.e. not easily reducible to a communication to be exchanged. The irreducibility of language-oriented texts such as *PCOET* and *Men in Aida* makes them essentially comic in and of themselves. As Lisa Trahair has noted in *The Comedy of Philosophy*: "Incomprehensibility is an essential feature of much comedy. To comprehend the comic, therefore, is to risk overlooking the structure of incomprehensibility that is crucial to its operation" (15). Similarly, Lucio Angelo Privitello has echoed and extended Bataille in describing "the non-knowledge of laughter, its inner experiment" (181). By this definition, linguistic "experiment" has itself the potential to provoke laughter because of its nearness to "non-knowledge" and pushing the boundaries of what we know as sense/ nonsense. This positioning of the poems on the cusp of laughable and infuriating non-knowledge is summed up by Melnick in a short note he wrote for the first issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*:

What can such poems do for you? You are a spider strangling in your own web, suffocated by meaning. You asked to be freed by these poems from the intolerable burden of trying to understand. The world of meaning: is it too large for you? Too small? It doesn't fit. Too bad. It's no contest. You keep on trying. So do I (13).

In the essay ‘Comedy and the Politics of Poetic Form’, Bernstein sets out what he sees as the political implications of writing in a way that explores what Davis calls the “laughter-in-language”:

Such poetic play does not open into a neat opposition of dry high irony and wet lyric expressiveness but, in contrast, collapses into a more destabilizing field of pathos, the ludicrous, schtick, sarcasm; a multidimensional textual field that is congenitally unable to maintain an evenness of surface tension or a flatness of affect, where linguistic shards of histrionic inappropriateness pierce the momentary calm of an obscure twist of phrase, before cantoring into the next available trope; less a shield than a probe (*A Poetics*, 220).

Comedy at the level of language, then, is a disruption to dominant modes of discourse and a means of opening up alternatives. Indeed, in his essay on teaching practices ‘Wreading, Writing, Wresponding’, Bernstein writes “laughter is the necessary yeast of good class conversation and opens up the possibility for listening and not just for hearing” (2011, 51). The same might be said for the position of laughter within his own poetics, it is something that opens up the potential for conversation and alternative modes of viewing and experiencing. It is a means of undermining and exposing conventions that we take to be true or that profess themselves to be true. It is a means of removing the warrant from a “phallographic voice of truth and sincerity” by revealing its register to be founded on “historical constructions rather than sovereign principles” (223). Bernstein’s phrase “histrionic inappropriateness” gives a clear idea of how he sees comedy as offering a way of “probing” the dominant modes of discourse. Suggesting excess, awkwardness and absurdity, it is through an ungainly, inelegant and wavering linguistic surface that the comic is able to reveal the fluidity

of all our mechanisms of thought, communication and government. Examples of “histrionic inappropriateness” abound in Bernstein’s poetry, in poems such as ‘Freud’s Butcher’ from the pamphlet ‘The Nude Formalism’, co-produced with Susan Bee:

Many folks are in a snit
They say the new poetry’s not a kick
They pout and pester from academic writing posts
About emotions turned into ghosts of ghosts

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 (14)

This poem, which was first published in *American Poetry Review*, uses the hackneyed rhythms and bad rhymes of doggerel verse combined with the “folksy” colloquialisms of strands of American poetry to create comic effect. As with the rhymes of writers such as William McGonagall, comic value comes from the inevitability of the plodding rhythm with the straining and struggling of the rhymes. Similarly to Melnick’s writing in this one respect, the words in ‘Freud’s Butcher’ appear to have been selected more on sound (their ability to rhyme and conform to the metre) than sense, hence the bizarre word-choice “abandon your mowers”. This is a process that Perloff has described as “syntactic slots are filled with words and phrases that fail to fit semantically but that are phonemically appropriate” (1990, 14). There is a comic element to this formal device in itself, the disjunction between semantic “nonsense” and sound-sense. Humour comes from the “mis-seaming” of ‘order’ and nonsense, of

following rules to absurd conclusions. However, this poem is also humorously “histrionic” and “inappropriate” in its self-reflexivity and conscious group formation (the references to language poets Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews and Steve McCaffery). An irony of the poem is that it takes what might be considered an emotional and antagonistic stance towards a differing poetic style, while also suggesting that the critics see this sort of poem as emotionless. The concluding two stanzas of ‘Freud’s Butcher’ continue to explore rules and order in a discussion of Sigmund Freud’s eating habits (which are revealed as being kosher). The final couplet reads: “Art and religion don’t always agree/ The one’s by the rule, the other sometimes free”.

Each page of ‘The Nude Formalism’ is designed individually with different typefaces and elaborate decorative borders and illustrations (by Bee). This lends the book multiple and evolving, ornate and excessive visual styles that marry with the similarly elaborate poetic diction of the poems: “Come with me and amble over the briars/ into the fog. It rests a flurry by the slide/ to make-b’lieve measure, harmless in the way/ a doormat lay, fifty more bestride” (20). This sort of poetic diction (fluctuating from mannered to colloquial, elaborately sounded to bathetically mundane) creates a highly comic poetic surface at the level of language itself, which plays out like a contortionist’s performance. The pamphlet begins with the mock-manifesto ‘Fragments from the Seventeenth Manifesto of Nude Formalism’, among the tenets of which are “Down with all authentic formulations of these theses! Down with Adolescent Sublime! Down with Abstract Confessionalism! Down with Empathic Symbolism! Down with Symbolic Empathism!” and “Use absolutely no word that contributes to the sense of a thing seen.” Parodying the manifesto form, as well as the movement in American verse known as The New Formalism (which

advocates a return to rhymed and metred verse), Bernstein's comic non-manifesto shares with that other classic of the genre, Frank O'Hara's 'Personism', an irreverence and highly individualized sense of poetry's tendency to take itself altogether too seriously at the same moment that it doesn't take itself seriously enough. The poet Christian Bök has written on the Poetry Foundation website of 'The Nude Formalism' that Bernstein "has lampooned this attitude in his chapbook, which presents a suite of formal poetry, written nonsensically, like doggerel misremembered in the act of its recitation. Bernstein sets out to "denude" these poems of any content in order to showcase the aesthetic potential of such forms, once they have freed themselves from any semantic necessity." Emptying the poems of identifiable semantic content (the poems remain semantically charged but in multiple and nonsensical ways), Bernstein enacts the "laughter of non-knowledge" by leaving the reader with extensively elaborate poetic diction that is 'saying', in the sense of directly communicating, nothing. 'The Nude Formalism' is a language-experiment akin to Gorgias's language performance where he states he can improvise speaking knowledgeably on any subject – language unleashed from normalized logic and coherence of content. The poet Caroline Bergvall has written that "at its very heart, Bernstein's poetry signals the idea of performance, in the sense of its constructedness, explicit artefactuality, and distantiation" (7). Her choice (and quite possibly coinage) of the word "distantiation" conveys this sense of language detached from coherence and clarity and instead to be regarded as a performance to be taken not at face value but with a level of distance through which it can be analyzed and interpreted actively.

The critic Irving Massey has also stressed the importance of comic performance in his reading of Bernstein's essay:

Bernstein is committed to poetry as performance: that is, as a form of theater. In his insistence on the political nature of poetry, performance poetry becomes, for him, political theater. Finally, if the most revolutionary poetry is a bathetic, comic or self-mocking poetry, for Bernstein, the crucial poetry of our time is comic political theater (146).

The form of “comic political theater” that Bernstein’s poetry might be considered to constitute is that of a Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*, in which the reader is ‘brought to’ with a jolt and forced by the strangenesses of his syntax and grammar to pay attention to the ordering principles at work. The connections between Bernstein’s writing and the concept of “alienation” that is a cornerstone of Brecht’s ‘epic theatre’ have been noted by critics such as Tim Peterson and Jerome McGann. Peterson relates Bernstein’s “anti-absorptive strategy... through which the reader is alternately drawn into and bounced out of the text being read” (21) to that of Brecht in his essay ‘Either you’re with us and against us’ and McGann has described the way in which Bernstein’s Brechtian critical writing style “breaks the spell of expository prose typography” (2006, 154). Reading a text such as ‘Freud’s Butcher’, Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt* can be recognized within the bizarre mock-doggerel language that Bernstein employs, language that distances itself from the sort of speech we use to communicate. Bernstein’s formal contortions are alienating, involving a refocused attention in order stay alert to possibilities for meaning. A crucial component of *verfremdungseffekt* is the establishment of a sense of familiarity and convention which is then disrupted. For example, in many of Brecht’s epic plays, such as *The Threepenny Opera*, where elements of the theatre that one might expect in a play, such as familial relationships, operatic conventions etc, are present but disrupted and made strange to encourage the audience to look again and reconsider what they think

they know about what at first seems familiar or conventional. In Bernstein's poetry (and in Gorgias's performances), the same process occurs. For example, in 'Freud's Butcher', the heightened language and slavishly attuned to rhyming scheme might appear the familiar stuff of poetry, and yet in Bernstein's hands they are so radically strange as to call into question the very tenets of not only the genre of poetry but language use itself. Drama scholar W. B. Worthen has written of language poets and Bernstein in particular in relation to the performance of poetry and the poetics of performance. Following a discussion of Bernstein's engagement with Brecht, he draws attention to the ways in which:

The poem's alienated embodiment on the page foregrounds the objectivity of language, its disassociation from a merely individual experience. This mise-en-page enforces the reader's alienated embodiment in the act of reading, a performance that similarly dislocates the comfortable assimilation of the poem into the lyric practice of subjection, the emotive or "melodramatic" identification with lyric "speech" (2005, 129).

This dislocation of Bernstein's poetry from what we expect from a poem is one of its most striking facets and arguably his poems still retain their capacity for alienation and surprise, even in the widened poetic sphere of today, where language poetry is increasingly at the heart of academic conceptions of contemporary poetry. Bernstein's poetry retains its ability to alienate because it does not easily assimilate itself even into a conventionally or simplistic understanding of what language poetry is.

Similarly, in Gorgias's performances he uses the language and process of logic that other philosophers and sophists of the time used but he uses them in a nihilistic and extreme way in order to bend and stretch the limits of what logic is perceived as capable of.

Fundamental to this effect is the denial, as Worthen suggests, of “lyric speech”, while also parodying multiple speech-styles within the work. This ventriloquism is central not only to Bernstein’s *verfremdungseffekt* but to his comedic poetics as a whole:

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 a conceit as the most formal legal brief for which my early education would seem to have prepared me. If my loops and short circuits, my love of elision, my Groucho Marxian refusal of irony, are an effort to explode the authority of those conventions I wish to discredit (disinherit), this constantly offers the 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 if it does not, indeed, persuade, if it enters into the world as self-justification or self-flagellation or aesthetic ornamentation rather than as interaction, conversation, provocation (for myself and others) (224).

Bernstein’s comic ventriloquist poetic performances are therefore able not only to dismantle or “disinherit” the logic of the self but to promote and encourage “provocation (for myself and others)”. The displacement of the self therefore is the provocation that unites in conversation and interaction the mutual producers of the work: the readers. Silliman has written of precisely this process in his afterword to the Bernstein-edited collection *Close Listening*. Silliman’s essay, entitled ‘Who speaks? The Self and Ventriloquism in the Poetry Reading’, explores ventriloquism as a condition of everyday language uses. His essay begins by focusing on “the trash containers in the cafeteria of a firm for which I used to work”, on which “appeared the words *THANK YOU*” (1998, 360). Silliman analyses the words, based around the

question posed by his title, which he appropriates from Roland Barthes: “Who speaks?” He comes to a number of different interpretations: that the words in fact mean “put garbage in here” rather than “thank you” and that therefore there it “extends a parallel logic” (360); secondly, Silliman contends that the words could be interpreted as “an anonymous architect expressing relief or even gratitude” (360); thirdly, he suggests they suppose a whole conversation “put garbage here”, “okay”, “thank you” of which only the final trace remains. In all of these interpretations of the words on the bin, Silliman still foregrounds the question of “who speaks” because it is something that we would never normally consider, being so accustomed to this kind of “absent but neutral subject” (361) in the language of commerce that we encounter on a daily basis. The words “thank you” in this context would involve the discrimination on the part of the perceiver to eliminate what they don’t mean (namely “thank you”- no-one is really being thanked only instructed where to put rubbish euphemistically), if we weren’t so accustomed and familiarized to the sign. However, as Silliman remarks paraphrasing Lacan “reference entails displacement” (360), even in an example such as this, where there is a certain incongruity and distance between what is being said and what is being indicated, i.e. the substitution of a phrase “thank-you” for the more unpleasant or off-putting “put garbage here”. Whatever social codes are written into this use of language, the thing that isn’t usually attended to is “who speaks?”, so normalized is the detached and passive ventriloquism of the utterance, standing in for the management or even wider for the code of common decency governing workplaces in capitalist democracies.

By utilizing a similar kind of ventriloquized utterance in his poetics, Bernstein makes both the alienating displacement and the question “who speaks?” central to the impact of his poems. A relevant example within the context of Silliman’s discussion

of the coded “trash can” is Bernstein’s poem from *Girly Man*, ‘Thank You for Saying Thank You’. The title encapsulates the sense of a monotonous language game of which the rules are excessive, self-defeating politeness. Another interpretation would be that it's a sarcastic aside targeted at someone impolite who didn't say “thank-you”. In any case, the poem initiates itself in the transactional language of polite communication. The poem begins:

This is a totally
accessible poem.

There is nothing
in this poem
that is in any
way difficult
to understand.

All the words
are simple &
to the point.

There are no new
concepts, no
theories, no
ideas to confuse
you. (2008, 7)

Bernstein ventriloquises the voice of “the poet” reassuring the reader about the straightforward content of his poem. However, his reassurances are far from convincing or reassuring, even as they appear to be borne out. Indeed, “all the words/ are simple &/ to the point”. However, there is a distinct question overhanging “who

speaks?” in the poem and why they would be so adamant to convince the reader that the poem is “totally accessible”. The poem is in fact highly resistant, only in unexpected ways. The language in the poem is not resistant to communication, as is the case with some language poems; as the last line of the poem puts it, it “says what it says” (9). What the poem is resistant to is not communication but to interpretation. It takes considerable effort to interpret almost anything about the language in a poem that is so flat and lacking in textual effects, ambiguity and other aspects of textual enigma that are familiar from modernist and postmodernist poetry. Bernstein’s poem offers the same resistance to interpretation as works of conceptual and “uncreative writing” do, placing the fact of the poem above any impulse to read or even interpret it. However, what this resistance to interpretation parodies is the assumptions that underlie all ‘communication’ no matter how “direct” and “accessible” it may seem. Without Silliman’s interpretative analysis of the “trash can”, it is unlikely any heed would be paid to such a seemingly obvious and direct sign indicating where the bin is in the cafeteria. Similarly, the tone and vocabulary of Bernstein’s poem ventriloquizes the sort of positive and reassuring speech of so many public or institutional utterances: “It’s all about/ communication” (7), “This poem appreciates/ & values you/ as a reader” (8). However, its directness is undercut by the linebreaks of the poem, constantly reminding one that the poem is an artifice and the voice (however natural) is too. In the course of the poem, its monotone delivers the critical blow against those who would advocate just such a “totally accessible” poetry: “a hundred/ readers would each/ read the poem/ in an identical/ manner & derive/ the same message/ from it” (8). Poetry that advocates direct communication and total accessibility of this sort, suggests Bernstein’s poem, is about control, is about homogeneity, predicting and manipulating the responses of individuals within a society to interpret things in the

same way and to behave in the same way. By ventriloquizing exactly this kind of “direct speech” Bernstein performs a Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt* that encourages the reader to question the assumptions that underlie questions of “naturalness” and “accessibility” when it comes to language. He does so, “in an effort to explode the authority of those conventions I wish to discredit (disinherit)”.

Conclusion: Contemporary Poetics and Sophistics

By tracing some of the confluences and influences of sophistic thought in the poetry and poetics of Charles Bernstein, this thesis has attempted to suggest one reading of his practice as a continuation and rejuvenation of sophistic ideas in the context of contemporary poetic culture. Within Bernstein's work, the key confluences with sophistic ideas are: an interest in linguistic experimentation; a sense of language as the primary means through which societies are ordered and structured; an antipathy to uses of language that purport to be "natural"; an interest in pedagogy and its potential impact in creating empowered democratic individuals aware of their position as part of a society. Part of what I have also intended to suggest in this thesis, though, is that a sense of sophistic ideas is a useful way to consider the emergence of language poetry and other language-oriented and politically-engaged poetics that are currently being written. By this understanding, Charles Bernstein and some other language poets become part of a sophistic lineage or trajectory that includes many other figures who have blended literary experimentation into philosophy and challenged the dominant mode of discursive logic that has dominated since Plato. The line would include disparate thinkers and writers as Nietzsche, Thoreau, Emerson, William James, Derrida, Cavell, Stanley Fish and many other writers for whom a sophistic approach to writing philosophy, one that prioritises linguistic experimentation, has been key. It's a list that would recalculate and formulate itself as the character of "sophist" retains its capacity to challenge and shock: for all the increased academic interest in sophistry, it remains a category to be avoided. And yet, even if a lineage of contemporary and historical sophists would dissemble and evade being categorized, nevertheless, the sense of sophistic ideas offers a way of understanding the convergence of poetics, politics and

philosophy, as it emerges in the work of both theorists and poets. As Barbara Cassin has written, sophistic is an alternative tradition that has never been lost:

What sophistic may, in its own way, help to bring to light in philosophy, politics, and literature is the loss and gain constituting such a discursive autonomy, in other words, constituting a logos that is an alternative to the Plato-Aristotelian logic that has always been ours (2003, 452).

The widening in scope of this project then would take in other contemporary sophists in poetics, both those writers associated with language poetry and outside it. A number of the writers discussed in passing in this thesis would be relevant to such a project. However, it would perhaps stop first to consider the ways in which Kenneth Goldsmith's conceptual poetry and uncreative writing projects engage radical language performance with the cultural logics of contemporary art and literature. It would see his performance series "Kenneth Goldsmith Sings...", in which he sings the works of twentieth century thinkers such as Wittgenstein, Adorno and Benjamin, as a sophistic enshrinement of artifice and art into theoretical works. These performances throw together the logic of contemporary pop performance and the logic of Twentieth Century theoretical discourse in a way that foregrounds language and artifice. A sophistic encounter with Goldsmith would perhaps also regard his rejection of originality as a valid aesthetic value (for example his statement that "My books are better thought about than read. They're insanely dull and unreadable; I mean, do you really want to sit down and read a year's worth of weather reports") as itself a characteristic sophistic maneuver akin to Gorgias's remark at the end of his 'Encomium for Helen' that his arguments have been a "paignon", a joke. Goldsmith's text is performatively alienating in the same way as Gorgias's performance. Simon Goldhill has written of Gorgias's celebrated speech that "whether you have been

persuaded by the argument that logos is an irresistible master or not, the twist at the end cocks a snoot at your response” (21). The reader who aims at appraising Goldsmith’s works is similarly tongue-tied. If you engage with them at a linguistic level, reading them as literary texts, then you are failing to break out of the traditional assumptions regarding how you interpret literary texts that Goldsmith is breaking out of. However, if you dismiss them as “unreadable” in the way that Goldsmith encourages you to, you are left with nothing much apart from a fact of a text having been written, and not very much to “think about”. Furthermore, Goldsmith’s texts are actually remarkably readable and employ (however haphazardly) literary and rhetorical techniques such as repetition and juxtaposition as well as all of those he borrows from his source texts such as television, radio and The New York Times. In the same way that Bernstein’s and Gorgias’s poetics point towards the rhetorical underpinnings of all institutions and media in society, Goldsmith’s work could be seen as a conceptual re-presentation of this very fact. He is the poet who most succinctly and conceptually interrogates dominant media through which we live our lives, as a recent project of “printing out the entire internet” testifies.

A sense of the sophistic could also be seen in poet Eileen Myles’s blending of poetics and politics when she ran as a write-in candidate for US President in 1992. As an encapsulation of the bringing together of poetics and public policy this symbolic act can be seen as a sophistic gesture. In spite of the smallness of the chance that Myles would have won the vote (a virtual impossibility), the fact of Myles standing opens up a possibility for poets to imagine their work as bound up with social and political facts. This act (and the texts Myles has written about it, such as *How to Run for President of the United States of America*) encourage poets to consider their role as a public one. Indeed, her own decision to run for president emerged from what

might be considered a sophistic backdrop. She has said that “in 1992, I was moved by the realization that candidates were not writing their own speeches and I knew I would want to do that” (e-flux.com). Her decision, then, is sophistic in that it comes from the awareness that politics is rhetoric, is ‘speech-writing’. The distance she senses between politicians and their language is a sense that if politics is primarily a language game, then those engaged in it should be those most adept at exploring language, most aware of its constructive powers. The sophists’ could be seen to be issuing the same suggestion throughout their politically-engaged speeches and language performances. Myles’s and Goldsmith’s gestures suggest a possibility of why the renewal of a sense of sophistic might be regarded as critical at this juncture: the perceived crisis in Western democratic processes. John Stuhr has summed up the democratic crisis as follows:

These deepening problems include terrorism, fanaticism, and absolutism; hunger and homelessness; debts and deficits; illiteracy and illness; intolerance, illegality and illiberalism; physical and psychic violence and scandal at both individual and institutional levels; environmental degradation and international conflict; apathy, resignation, contempt, and selfishness (45).

Stuhr’s point is that democracy is facing a barrage of ever-increasing problems and that it is proving itself in its current liberal form, not necessarily fully equipped to deal with them. Stuhr’s argument isn’t that this fact justifies throwing democracy out. On the contrary, he is fully behind it. However, his interpretation of the word democratic is drawn from Dewey and suggests that “the very idea of democracy, the meaning of democracy, must be continually explored afresh” (45). In a world-situation where democracy is widely held up as a sacred and untouchable given, Stuhr, as Dewey before him, demands that democracy be less hallowed and more

discovered, less taken for granted and more engaged with by all citizens in a thoughtful and intelligent way. For Stuhr, “these current problems are horrible reminders of the public and personal consequences of letting democracy “stand still” (46). In so doing, Stuhr is not only echoing Dewey. He is also enshrining the idea of an ever changing society that was memorably asserted by the pre-socratic philosopher Heraclitus, who asserted that ‘everything is in flux’ through the memorable metaphor of a river. According to Stuhr and continuing this Heraclitean metaphor, democracy in its current form would be a pond full of stagnating water in desperate need of flow. The sophists introduced the “flux” into Athenian democracy, recognizing that language and the process of the agora were fundamental to the democratic political life of the system, they took this as their medium and developed radical and unpredictable ways of exploring its implications. Their work was not so much a challenge to or critique of democracy but a constant critical incursion into its processes and presenting both novel stylistic forms and innovative logical arguments that ensured that Athenian democracy was “continually explored afresh”. However, we currently reside in a political climate where politicians are so detached from a sophistic awareness of language’s role in constituting society that they routinely farm out the writing of their speeches. Language poetry (which grew up in perhaps American democracy’s most desperate hour- the Watergate scandal), and in particular the work of Bernstein, is the literary movement that most fully performs the sophistic function. Language poets, like sophists, take language as the fundamental method and medium of political organization and therefore explore new linguistic structures in order to challenge and critique the dominant structures of contemporary society. Finally, it is in this sense that this thesis argues that Bernstein goes beyond those contemporaneous reappraisals of the sophists in his book *The Sophist*. The wealth of

publications within schools of thought such as philosophy and rhetoric have re-framed the sophists as having made an important contribution to contemporary Western philosophy. However, while those books attempt to reconstruct the ideas of the sophists, they fail to re-imagine and re-invent the linguistic innovation and experimentation that was at the heart of their project as a means of exploring the radical capacities of language as the medium of thought and communication. This task, however, is the domain of Bernstein and other poets. As he puts it, literary writing allows the “right to reconvene” on contemporary structures of society, such as the stagnant pond of democracy by placing the question of structure and artifice at its centre. It is in this sense that Bernstein’s *sophistics* presents a Heraclitean vision of contemporary social and political culture, or as he himself puts it, an exploration of “our Americas, new worlds still in progress.” (2011, 65)

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