

**“Too Philosophical for a Poet”:  
A Conversation with Charles Bernstein**

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**Andrew David King**

**ADK:** *I wanted to start by asking about the phenomenon of the book—as object and as commodity. In 2010, you spoke with Thom Donovan about the process and rationale behind putting together your selected poems, All the Whiskey in Heaven. Certain types of work (nonpoems; this is, of course, a tricky distinction) were excluded: the essays and libretti, for instance, whose presentations alongside poems in My Way unsettle more mainstream, big-publishing-house attitudes toward the compilation of written work. You said that the final product “has a very strong connection from beginning to end,” but that “it’s not in the way that the poems look, or the tone, or the style”: a connection, instead, in the “potentiating recombinations among parts,” which, at the same time, were linearly fused via your decision to exclude book titles from the text proper (making “a kind of text opera”—and there’s your libretto!) from the chronological selections, or, as the case may be, excerpts (Donovan 2010: n.p.). You recently released Recalculating, your first full-length volume of new poems in seven years, and so I wanted to*

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know if there was anything significantly different for you about the act of putting a collection together now, after curating *All the Whiskey in Heaven*—or, alternatively, if there’s anything significantly different about the project of assembling a “new” collection versus a selected poems. As Donovan pointed out in the interview, the concept of the “selected poems” is “obviously a genre at this particular cultural moment”—but so is the notion of the “new collection” as such. How do you confront, think about, and move through (or across, or over, or beneath) the presuppositions of these categories, which are so often market-driven and which I imagine exert many pressures—conscious and unconscious—on you as you work toward the completion of a particular project? What was it like to face these forces in the arena of another author’s work, such as Louis Zukofsky’s, when you edited his selected poems for the Library of America?

**CB:** My original manuscript for *All the Whiskey in Heaven* had about one-third more poetry than the published book. While the longer version is closer to my sense of the range of what I do, I thought the publisher, Jonathan Galassi, was right to keep this book to just over three hundred pages, forcing me to sculpt—from a large mass of writing—a new work that has its own logic (if you can call it that), one I found as I whittled away. The truth is in the materials, like they say, or the lie; it is much the same to me. I would enjoy doing another selected with entirely different works, including essays and libretti, though I don’t see that in the cards.

My other experience with selecteds was with translation: over the last years, I have been working with a number of poet/translators who have edited, for the most part, either collections of poems or essays. The exception is the two Nordic translations, which are more like *My Way: Speeches & Poems*. Because those editors/translators are so intimate with what I do, they made books the way I do. But then again these books had the practical value of being introductions.<sup>1</sup>

1. I am thinking of *Runouden puolustus. Esseit ja runoja kahdelta vuosituhannelta* (*A Defence of Poetry. Essays and Poems from Two Millennia*) [Finnish], trans. Leevi Lehto (Helsinki: Nihil Interit and Kirja kerrallaan, 2006) and *De svåra dikterna anfaller, eller Högtspel i tropi-kerna: Dikter, essäer, samtal i urval, översättning & montage* (*The Attack of the Difficult Poems: A Tropics of High Stakes*) [Swedish], trans. Anders Lundberg, Jonas (J) Magnusson, Jesper Olsson (Stockholm: OEI, 2008). And also: *Selected Poems*, trans. Nie Zhenzhao and Luo Lianggong, 1st ed. (Nanjing, China: Yilin Press, 2010); 2nd ed. (Wuhan, China: Central China Normal University Press, September 2011); *Angriff der Schwierigen Gedichte*, trans. Tobias Amslinger, Norbert Lange, Léonce W. Lupette, and Mathias Traxler (Wiesbaden, Germany: Lux Books, 2014); *Gedichte und*

For all my translated books I have asked the translators to make their own selections and I don't kibitz—well, not too much!—since what these poets want to translate seems to me the best possible choice, far better than any sense I might have of representativeness. Same thing for the translations: the main focus has gotta be on how the new poems being created work on their own terms, fidelity be damned. Anyway, fidelity to what? The words, the concept, the structure, the form, the style, or the exchange?

My most amazing experience of translation was when James Byrne handed me a copy of a selection of essays and interviews translated into Burmese by Zeyer Lynn, published a few years earlier. I loved the fact that I knew nothing of this book, loved the fact that the translated work spoke to a world I knew not at all. But, as the world turns, Zeyer Lynn is coming to New York next month. I am eager to meet him.<sup>2</sup>

In a funny way, I wanted *All the Whiskey in Heaven* to be as close to a generic poetry collection as possible; I didn't even come close. Let's just say it's a generic poetry collection in drag. And while I do think it's a good introduction to my work, that is because, if anything, is it misrepresentative.

But I can't say that I had market considerations in mind for that book any more than any for my others. I started with a long and intractable poem, "Asylum," which I think makes sense in terms of the inner logic of the book but not in terms of any easy idea of a market or an easy way to enter the book. But then I figure that is what the people who come to the book will want, or what I want for them. To put it crassly, capitalism is not necessarily about providing a familiar cultural product but also about market differentiation. Every thorn does not have a rose.

I am just so obsessed with creating the work, with compositing the book in a way that works for me, which means, to some degree, that pushes to the limits of which I can make sense.

You are probably right to think of the Zukofsky selected as a model for me, though that book was so extremely short. Still, I wanted to make it a sampler, which meant excerpting and also leaving out a couple of the best-known works in favor of the constellation.

I have been making books for almost forty years. During most of that time, I thought of the book as my basic unit of composition, though

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*Übersetzen*, trans. Versatorium and Peter Waterhouse (Vienna: Edition Korrespondenzen, 2013); and *Blanco Inmóvil*, trans. Enrique Winter (several editions, 2014).

2. Go to PennSound for a recording of our first meeting: [writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Burma.php](http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Burma.php) (accessed July 18, 2014).

now, perhaps as a result of *All the Whiskey in Heaven* and the translations, I see my books as provisional exhibitions: other constellations are implicit, but implicit because of, and in terms of, the specific makeup of each book. There was a longer gap between *Recalculating* and *Girly Man* than between any of my other full-length collections, and some works in the book go back well before *Girly Man*, so that made for new possibilities in terms of the scale and the way the narrative of the book unfolds and refolds and finally disappears.

**ADK:** *On the topic of publications, of publishing, let's talk about L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and its role in populating, shaping, and recording part of the community of poets working in avant-garde modes in the last forty years or so through today.*

*In a 1997 essay printed in Steve Evans and Jennifer Moxley's The Impercipient Lecture Series, Kate Lilley quotes Bob Perelman's point in The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History that though "language writing" had become a recognizable buzzword by the mid-nineties, "there was never any self-consciously organized group known as the language writers or poets—not even a fixed name" (Lilley 1997; Perelman 1996: 11–12). Lilley appeals to Perelman's idea of an "ad hoc" beginning of the movement, a group of individuals unified instead by "opposition to the prevailing institutions of American Poetry," not all that dissimilar from Steve Benson's description in In the American Tree of a group of writers who "markedly propose conscious value to what could otherwise be taken as impingements in a literature of autonomous display" (Benson 1986: 487). Keeping a Barthesian trepidation about naming and titling in mind—one that seems closely related to the concerns of many of the writers in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E—do you find these post hoc, historical characterizations accurate? What happens when a gathering of writers simultaneously working through the same concepts and questions begins to enter into a name, begins to gather under a banner? To what extent did L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E document a preexisting community as opposed to acting as an agent of that community's creation?*

*Last August [2012] you posted to Jacket2 a list of alternative titles for L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E that you and Bruce Andrews had come up with. They range from the fittingly esoteric and material—"S/s," "T. C. W.," "An"—to the comic—"Rasta," "Scum O' the Earth," "Just Another Poetry Magazine," "Ron Silliman's Interview"—to the dryly droll—"Wordness," "Present Tense," "Language Bound" (Bernstein 2012a). This, to me, evidences both anxiety*

*and humor at the task of naming: why L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, that moniker which, so to speak, stuck? Lyn Hejinian, commenting on her essay “If Written Is Writing” in The Language of Inquiry, says that you and Andrews, via the publication, “proposed that the theory need not be extrinsic to the poetry,” and therefore the fetter of a “normalized, expository style” could be discarded (Hejinian 2000: 25). Fittingly, the first issue in February 1978 begins with a piece by Larry Eigner, written in a Stein-esque prose, asking questions about language’s role and materiality; there are echoes of the same concerns that emerged in This in 1971—see Clark Coolidge’s poem from the inaugural issue, “MADE THOUGHT,” the first line of which reads “made thought which of it.”<sup>3</sup> Was there something mimetic about L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E that pushed you and Andrews to it as a title, and later—intentionally or not—as the calling card of your poetic community? And can I ask, facetiously, why it’s not =L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E=—beginning and ending with equals signs, inviting different conjunctions—as a professor here at Berkeley (Geoffrey G. O’Brien, speaking on Stein as a forerunner of the movement in his American Poetry class) rhetorically asked?*

**CB:** *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* pulled together different strands: it was a constellation created by an editorial vision (that is to say, decision), things Bruce and I felt needed to be connected, but were otherwise not, or not explicitly. Our choices were speculative and conceptual: not based on (or only on) an already existing template or community but one suggested by our virtual mappings of the field. We were adamant in not wanting the locus of our map to be people in one city or people we personally knew or even people who necessarily felt connected to one another. We saw connections and wanted to make them explicit. No doubt the fact that we were in New York, where there were few poets interested in our approach and even fewer outside poetry aware of what we were doing, made a virtue out of a necessity. We were not old friends (though some of us have surely become that), college classmates, or even a tight social circle—we were working in an environment where our approach was both novel and greeted with a fair amount of disinterest if not scorn, which is why what held us together was more an aversion to a set of commonly accepted poetic ploys than a set of stylistic dictates of our own. But I’d argue that aversion is defining in poetics and does carry with it a set of preferences and procedures, including a preference for heterogeneous forms and for the sort of apoetics I am articulating here.

3. The full set of issue archives is available at [Eclipse.org](http://Eclipse.org).

A number of poets were doing work we felt related—there was a marvelous collective spirit that, happily, pulled in many directions. There was the historical part: insisting on a set of precedents in American and European poetry. There was a philosophical part: looking into ways our poetics/aesthetic could be given a context—but I think more important, and often harder to see, we wanted to give a context for the philosophical, political, and aesthetic thinking that engaged us. Bruce and I were very conscious in giving a skeleton to the magazine in the form of our featured poets. And the lists of magazines and books, with addressees and prices, was a crucial feature in trying to establish lines of discussion. But this was a conversation, not a school; a movement, not a doctrine. We were mostly focused on enlisting people, and those interested in being part of the conversation we pretty much welcomed; we rejected almost nothing that was sent to us for the magazine, because the people who did send us things were self-selected and small in number.

Bruce and I are consummate collagists, and the issues are highly orchestrated. We would go to crazy lengths to excerpt things. I remember Eric Mottram telling me he was shocked to see his 150-page book on concrete poetry cut to 500 words—sampling the whole book by selecting discrete sentences. We did something similar with Richard Foreman—well, maybe it wasn't excerpted as radically as Mottram, but we picked some paragraphs of his from a theater program that we found relevant. Richard found the magazine in a bookstore and wrote us a note: he was delighted. We've been friends since. There was no preexisting connection between Foreman and what we were doing as poets: it just seemed to us fundamental, and once we put it in the magazine, well, then there was a connection.

We insisted on short pieces, no more than five hundred words. This was a way to involve more people and also to cut to the chase. Most of what needed to be said could be said at that length, so we thought—I was and remain wary of the padding that goes in typical expository prose, and indeed I have gone on at great length about that! The short pieces also allowed for greater participation for those who were poetics-shy, since writing poetics was not common (or was resisted) for many of the poets we wanted to contribute.

Ours was a “hard” editorial collaboration. Bruce and I had to both agree on anything we included in the magazine, any piece we solicited, any poet we featured, right down to every magazine or book listing or excerpt. This meant we had to justify to one another our choices and their relevance to our editorial approach. Our conception of what counted was not

that it conformed to some theory; I have always been against theory in this sense. But the work we included needed to contribute to the conversation we were organizing: our choices were self-consciously partial and focused, which means there were aesthetically convincing poems outside our frame. But equally important, we turned a cold shoulder to a range of “experimental” poetry that might have seemed relevant but that we did not like; we were averse to the narcotic of, on the one hand, inclusivity of all experimental or avant-garde work, and, on the other hand, of the preeminence of prior friendships or sceney clubbiness, both of which debunk aesthetic choice (as uncool, judgmental, bourgeois, exclusionary, controlling). The intense fallout from our approach is still visible, though there is often a conflation, by those unsympathetic, of theory-driven schoolishness and aesthetic judgment. Our selections were based primarily on our aesthetic preferences within the frame we created, which we then did our best to provide an account of, both to each other and in our poetics. Poems or poetics that might seem to belong to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E “in theory” might well fall short on aesthetic criteria, which remained primary, not just for us but for the editors of magazines and presses such as *Roof*, *Hills*, *This*, *Là Bas*, *Tumba*, and *Tattel's*. Which is not to say that I don't see errors in judgment, looking back; and indeed judgments complicated by friendship and alliances. Judgments are always interested, both invested and investments. I have some lines in “Foreign Body Sensation” on this:

*Judge*

less you not  
 be judged  
 & the world slip  
 by unknown  
 you to it  
 it to you.

(Bernstein [1987] 2004: 103)

Lyn is quite right to emphasize that we wanted the poetics to be just as formally engaged in its writing as the poetry we wrote. There is nothing more fundamental about the magazine than that and also nothing more rare in the other magazines of the time or after.

Why say something in prose when you can say it as easily in poetry (in poetics)?

On the equal signs: once we decided to use the name *language*, we came up against the fact that this was the title of the journal of the Linguis-

tics Society of America, as made famous for us all by Jack Spicer's *Language*. So we faced the practical problem of differentiating. The idea was to find a graphical difference, and Bruce and I decided on the equal signs, though I can't say why. It looked good. We asked Susan Bee to make a logo. The actual logo that appears atop the first issue was made by Susan in conjunction with her father, who was a graphic designer and also had the Compugraphic machine to generate the type. But he had to physically paste the letters and equal signs in because the machine couldn't get them close enough together.

**ADK:** *Last fall here at Berkeley, the English Department hosted a colloquium entitled Boundless Poetics, which brought together a parade of critics, poets, professors, critic-poet-professors, and so on, to discuss, descriptively and prescriptively, the enterprise of poetics. I wasn't able to make it to the colloquium, much to my disappointment, and later, when I asked Lyn Hejinian whether or not it had been recorded—sometimes the department records events, and I hoped I'd be able to experience it digitally—she said it hadn't been. She said the organizers had wanted the colloquium to be . . . well, she made this flitting motion with her hands as if scattering dust—ephemeral, I guess, or as eponymously boundless as its subject matter. Your discussion of poetics in terms of, as you say, wanting such (a) poetics to be “just as formally engaged in its writing as the poetry we wrote” brings to mind something a mentor of mine, Eric Falci, mentioned in a statement he prepared for that colloquium. To paraphrase and, doubtlessly, to oversimplify him (but with the hopes of distilling one crucial part of his message by doing so): just what is poetics? If it is “boundless,” so to speak (and this isn't, of course, an unquestionable tenet), can it be anything? And if it's not anything—if it's not a definite, determinate object we can direct our intentionality at, not something “out there” in the world—is it, can it be, a sort of Heraclitan flux, a movement, some sort of activity? Its presence, and its importance, is palpable, but when pressed to give an account of just what it is, I come up blank. The question of poetics is one you've taken up throughout your career; I see it also in “Writing and Method” from Content's Dream, where one might take your account of the traditional distinctions between philosophy and poetry as a corollary for an account of the distinctions between poetics and scholarship.*

*Setting aside the status of poetics and pedagogy in the university more generally—something I hope to return to later—I wanted to ask about your essay “The Practice of Poetics,” which appears in David Nicholls's*



Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literature (*published by the Modern Language Association*). The form of this essay is especially curious to me when considered in relation to the propositions that populate it; it has the patina, the poise, of traditional philosophical discourse, but it also, somehow, enacts just the sort of paratactic thinking it exonerates: “Paratactic writing, thinking by association, is no less cogent or persuasive than hypotactic exposition, with its demands that one thought be subordinated to the next” (Bernstein 2011: 75). The essay is “divided” (a loaded word in this context, to be sure) into eleven parts, each possessing its own distinctiveness but also possessed by the demands of the whole and its numbered progression. One remarkable thing about it is how it manages to tease out an overall sense of liminality from what looks, at first, like the brickwork of traditional syllogistic argumentation—a quiet but comic way of commenting even further on hypotactic exposition’s status as a preferred discourse. I can’t get away with failing to note the volleys of aphoristic assertion: “Scholarship requires poetics.” “Read globally, write locally.” “Poetics is a prerequisite for literary study.” “Poetry is a name we use to discount what we fear to acknowledge” (75, 77, 78). The last of these intrigues me most, and calls to mind another writer’s speculation (it’s buried in my unconscious—maybe it was you?) about Plato’s banishment of the poets from his ideal city: that any rejection of poetry on the grounds of its supposed lack of utility and even danger can’t help but, by this very refusal, designate poetry as a discourse in possession of some sort of autonomous power—something, in other words, formidable enough to ban or, as you said, to be feared.

Beginning a project like “The Practice of Poetics,” how do you manage what I imagine must be the various formal impetuses to write in expository as well as poetic modes? I suppose what I want to ask here is how the very questions you raise in such essays turn back on themselves, if they do, to influence or even obliterate a given instance of their formulation. I tried to get at what I thought to be a leading formal tension—that between parataxis and hypotaxis—in the essay, but I realize that other forces may have inclined you to write it how you did. Can we ever “get outside of form” enough to comment on it from the privileged position of some metadiscourse, or are we to be content (no pun!) with an understanding of form as inexorably present, or perhaps dialectically persistent, as I tried to outline above? To press this a bit, one might ask whether or not arguing that “Clarity in writing is a rhetorical effect, not a natural fact” frames itself, or must frame itself, in turn as another rhetorical effect (75). And given some

*sort of positive answer to the last question, one could go on to ask whether or not this reflexive self-framing—the implications of criticisms of normative discourse for those criticisms themselves, especially when they're so often structured in terms of that normative discourse—is actually problematic or not.*

**CB:** Poetics is always bound (and bounded), and what I am arguing for, in the MLA essay, is that poetics—the kind of poetics I want—distinguishes itself from other forms of philosophical and critical writing in its acknowledgment of its situatedness and its dress. This comes up elsewhere in *Attack of the Difficult Poems*, so that the essay reads quite differently in the context of that book than in the MLA volume. Specifically, citing a remark of Stanley Cavell, I contrast writing philosophy in a gorilla suit versus a business suit, so then I am proposing that guerrilla poetry be done in a gorilla suit. (I think by association, so it's hard for me to avoid that pun but also not to think of the ILGWU [International Ladies Garment Workers Union] slogan: “Nothing suits us like our union suits,” with the four senses of suits: fits, uniform, garment, and legal.) You could say that this desire to mark, or call into play, the boundaries of the discourse in which I am operating (often without a license, which is to say *with license*) is also a mark of my poetry. If I insist that my poems, as much as poetics, are rhetorical, it's not that I don't think other poetics or poems are. And by rhetorical I also have in mind more than to persuade. Charlie Altieri and I had a sustained discussion of our differences on this in an email exchange in 2012, because I felt his sense of rhetoric was insufficiently robust in a way that fatally undermined the position he was taking. Rhetoric to me is always imbued with sophistry, but a sophistry that lays bare its good faith. I think of Jerome McGann's formulation, “truth in the body of falsehood” (McGann 2007). For someone so apparently critical of lucid expository writing, my essays might seem an odd lot of lucidity and flights of fancy; but the truth is I am not averse to lucidity any more than to obscurity; neither is a *sine qua non*, if you'll pardon my Latin. In *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* days, I found the lack of reflection on critical terms and aesthetic values in poetry reviews demoralizing, but this lack of reflection was a mark not of expository clarity but of aesthetic normativity.

In a recent commentary on a short poem, “Why I Am Not a Buddhist,” I wrote, “My concern is more *What is false?* than *What is truth?* All true poetry comes from deep fear, immobility, timidity” (Bernstein 2015). So here I go again: using the “all true poetry is” right after undermining any such claims. It's not that I contradict myself or even that I want to have it both ways, though both of those are surely true, but that I want to create a

space where the enthusiasm of the latter claim is framed by prior acknowledgment (the way a prior arrest compromises your claim to innocence).

I am guilty but I didn't do it.

**ADK:** *Could you tell me more about the differences between you and Altieri when it comes to your respective accounts of rhetoric?*

*I'm trying to comb through what I can remember of the many references to rhetoric in the works of his I've read. In *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects*, he discusses what he sees as the attempt by modernist poets to pit what he describes as "the feelings" against "the emotions," given that any project to idealize the latter was arrested due to the emotions' long-term contamination by "centuries of rhetoric" and the socially imposed associations of classed behaviors and privileges with particular emotions (Altieri 2003: 50). And in *Enlarging the Temple*, to pull another example, he characterizes *New Criticism* as reconciling, via the promotion of irony, a cleavage in the prevailing Romantic attitude toward poetry and poetics between an understanding of the poem "as a rhetorical artifact" and the poem "as somehow containing experience within itself," where maybe what's meant in the latter case is that the poem's linguistic structure serves as a proxy or referent for something more properly understood as existing independently of it (Altieri 1979: 23). Your inversion of Wordsworth in *My Way*—your claim that poetry is "tranquility recollected in emotion," a return to a conception of poetry that respects its instigations of chaos as well as its productions of order—surfaces here, also (Bernstein 1999: 11). Keeping rhetoric in mind, how do you confront this fluctuation between the idea of the poem-as-referent-to-external/empirical-experience and the poem-as-independent-rhetorical-object? Is this schism (supposing we can hold on to it for a second) relevant at all to poetic praxis, or in need of refinement or abandonment? Does irony sufficiently fuse these two positions? Altieri goes on to say in *Enlarging the Temple* that the critic's task "is to recognize the falseness of the opposition between artifact and experience in terms more philosophically defensible than those proposed by the founders of *New Criticism*" (1979: 23). My guess would be that you'd agree with this, at the very least on the assertion of the opposition's falseness. But I was wondering if you think there might be a case to be made that rhetoric, seen here as a close cousin of poetry, fabricates a very particular type of experience, one both ontologically and phenomenologically different from the experiences about which poems that purport to describe things that happen "out in the world," as Altieri says "report" (23).*

**CB:** For those under the sway of romantic ideology (to use Jerome McGann's formulation), sincerity and rhetoric are at odds. (Romantic ideology elides the rhetoric of romantic poetry.) What this often means is that the rhetoric of sincerity and authenticity in contemporary poetry is naturalized and lays exclusive claim to the true expression of emotion. As a result, those most phobic to rhetoric become slaves to it. Like authenticity, emotion is a social and textual dynamic in a poem. That's why the "ideal" has an agonistic relation to rhetoric, going back to Heraclitus v. Plato. I remain on the side of the Angel Sophists. I lay claim to the fake expression of emotion, or anyway the messy or deformed or difficult-to-categorize or ambivalent. Perhaps better words would be affect or feelings or sensation. Resistance to the reification of emotion comes off to some emotionally dead readers as the absence of emotion. Emotional deadness is also emotion. The absence of emotion is the emotion of absence.

Anyway, such is the view from the formative years of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and *Content's Dream*, to which I think Charlie Altieri is largely sympathetic. I would characterize that moment in the 1970s as a turn away from proscribed (scenic) forms of expression of emotion to more polysemic and polymorphous realizations, no more powerfully achieved than in the work of Leslie Scalapino.

Coming of age in the 1960s, I learned so much about the gender of emotions through reading Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* and related works. I came to see that so much sanctified emotional expression was part of a system of regulation that appeared to be hardwired into the language but was not. The poetry and poetics, my social, or constructivist, formalism, followed. As Peter Middleton reminds me in an email, this approach connects to Altieri's description, in *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*, of "the deliberate foregrounding of the syntactic activity of a work of art (either noniconically or in conjunction with representational content)," so that "the formal properties take on extraformal content" (Altieri 1999: 56–57).

The essay Charlie and I were recently discussing is "What Theory Can Learn from New Directions in Contemporary American Poetry," which is a very generous response to my work but also raises some major problems that are worth addressing:

Bernstein can do a brilliant job of getting his audience to hear rhetorical gestures and to indicate the fault lines where these gestures are likely to come apart. What he cannot do consistently within his

poetics, although he often succeeds in his recent practice, is transpose the satirical deconstruction of rhetoric into a register that can take seriously not only the ideas in the rhetorical processes but the idea of what is at stake in the processes themselves. I will argue that only an explicit sense of purposive activity can fully engage the world in a way that addresses the density of our sense of the event-making poetic powers that have an impact on history, albeit usually local versions of history. We need an understanding of rhetoric that sponsors the poetic, without being absorbed into what remains, in Bernstein, the dominant logic of the aesthetic. (Altieri 2012: 71)

The problem is that Charlie's call for "recovering and transforming ideals of rhetoric" (70) undermines the full aesthetic and philosophical force of rhetoric unbound to such ideals, as I wrote to him in my initial email:<sup>4</sup>

There is a kind of historical amnesia at work if you want to claim a return to rhetoric in the face of my, anyway, hectoring insistence of poetry as rhetoric for as long as we have been in conversation. I'd have said, overall, that your own critical position had an insufficiently robust view of rhetoric; I'd say that especially now when you cry rhetoric but mean a kind of cancellation of rhetoric . . . but I don't have the need to deny that your view is also a version of rhetoric. . . . And that's the rub, because I see your championing of the poets you like, I'd say that suit your taste, actually undervalues their work, at least in the case of [Juliana] Spahr and [Lisa] Robertson.

And the poet is not Wordsworth's man speaking to other men, but the lonely exile from public language trying to redeem aspects of experience for the solitary reader by rendering a sense of the world in the form of an objective structure. (Altieri 2012: 69)

. . . let's just say, I don't feel alienated from public language nor think of the reader as solitary nor imagine poems as objective structures.

As Bernstein puts it, quoting Niklas Luhmann, poetry forms "a perceptual system distinct from a social system," just as visual art does—this from the poet who has gone furthest amongst his contemporaries in developing Wordsworth's

4. Charles Bernstein, email to Charles Altieri, May 25, 2012; in the email, Bernstein excerpted Altieri's essay and responded below.

ideal of a poet speaking to other people in a common language. (Altieri 2012: 69)

The quote is from Jed Rasula's piece in [Craig] Dworkin's anthology [*The Consequence of Innovation: 21st Century Poetics*], not mine!; I don't know Luhmann and don't agree with the statement: I can't imagine making perception distinct from the social, which I think is part of where we disagree. Also, not sure if in your view here I am closest to, or furthest from, Wordsworth's ideal.

But the more poetry becomes an internal system, the more difficult it becomes to specify how it might affect life beyond the poem, even though it seems to have more resources than sharpened attention to the material properties of words and images. . . . Because poets cannot trust discursive understanding and because the poem is primarily an object that establishes a play of imaginative energies, the primary modality of reception for the audience is not one of understanding an object held in common as a structure of meanings, but rather experiencing subjective intensities sparked by the object. . . . But I am bothered by the way such formulations subordinate the poet to the poem, meaning to experience, and the domain of historical being to sheer ontology or to states of immediate presentation that ignore the terms of interpersonal social and psychological relations. (Altieri 2012: 69–70)

Why not be as bothered, in your formulation, with the subordination of the poems to the poet [or experience to idealized meaning, ontology to the idea of history]? To me this is just dualism, at best, or sentimental humanism at worst. The relation in all such binaries is dialectical. You wish to have the poet dominate but usually when the rhetoric of the poet dominating is in play, it's a matter of ideology not persons, of fiat not fact. So I read this comment as a ceding of any real struggle for subjectivity or individual articulation.

Poetry is born "sheer" but everywhere in frames. "The formal properties take on extraformal content." Because of its unacknowledged absorption of romantic ideology, the idealization of one frame, that of "an object held in common as a structure of meanings," negates the deregulating power of rhetoric in poetry, which is, indeed, not "sheer" but a historical probe. The trump card of a "domain of historical being," as applied to the fundamentally

imaginative and symbolic spaces of poems, is historicism without a historical method. The rhetoric of cuing “historical being” in a poem has itself to be historicized; it is never sheer historical being. Indeed, the structure of meaning for one is a regulation of emotion for another. The commons is a site of incommensurability that calls for dialogue.

I ended my email with a parodic reversal, substituting Charlie’s name for mine in the passage of the essay that I quote at the beginning of this response, also reversing his key terms. I turned his words inside out not to articulate my view of his argument but rather to show how I hear that argument as circular, much in the way he hears mine:

What Altieri cannot do consistently within his critical thought is transpose the reification of rhetorical processes as an ultimate arbitrating value of what is held in common between poet and reader into a register that can move beyond his thematized self-seriousness as a form of aesthetic prophylaxis. The result is a failure to grapple with processes that underlie rhetoric, meaning, and expressivity, that is, what is not ideally, but in fact, held common. I will argue that only an explicit sense of the purposelessness of poetic activity can fully engage the social in a way that addresses the multiplicity of our senses of the world, so that poetry’s impact on history is not entirely subsumed within representations of it. We need an understanding of the aesthetic that sponsors rhetoric, without being absorbed into what remains, for Altieri, the dominant logic of idealization under the guise of imputed authorial activity.<sup>5</sup>

Charlie and I went on to have a rare and valuable exchange, opening onto common ground and deeper engagement with the issues at hand. This is what I said to him:

We share the sense that “rhetoric” as a term of art needs to be decoupled from *persuasion*. On poet/poem: I don’t see that the pre-

5. Bernstein email to Altieri, May 25, 2012. Contrast with Altieri’s original: “What he cannot do consistently within his poetics, although he often succeeds in his recent practice, is transpose the satirical deconstruction of rhetoric into a register that can take seriously not only the ideas in the rhetorical processes but the idea of what is at stake in the processes themselves. I will argue that only an explicit sense of purposive activity can fully engage the world in a way that addresses the density of our sense of the event-making poetic powers that have an impact on history, albeit usually local versions of history. We need an understanding of rhetoric that sponsors the poetic, without being absorbed into what remains, in Bernstein, the dominant logic of the aesthetic” (Altieri 2012: 71).

sentation of “self” in a poem does that much to actually put the reader in contact with a historical author: whatever the textual or stylistic features of a work, a historical method would need to read the work against the grain and in terms of its time, place, and through a grappling with the particulars of the author (e.g., context). I don’t think attending to the poem ever need divert us from attending to the poet; that is what makes poems powerful. However poems that wear their self-representations on their sleeves are often the most resistant to a robust—let me use that word again—reading of/for/through the author. So this is where I find your argument “circular” (to turn your criticism of me around). The author function can be read equally in Robert Hass and Bruce Andrews; the fact that Hass writes about himself does not aid in this reading but often hides it. Yes it creates a representation of the author in a virtually scenic way, but that is hardly really coming to terms with how selves are articulated in poems. It’s a conceit, man speaking to man; I use it myself, many the time. There is no escape from such conceits (rhetorics) but hiding the author in the guise of the self may often pay too high a price in relegating the author function (the actual person) to ideology. Maybe that’s the crux of our difference: I don’t see the kind of self-representations you seem to be advancing as in any way eliding ideology; it is an ideology that masks its ideological character.

What I think is more important here is what we may hold in common on these issues. The social also always poses “possible agreements”—I have no problem there. I also have no problem with your formulation, “how poems establish intelligence in their dealing with the world and with the history of dealing with the aspects of the world relevant to the poem.” Though again I’d say Andrews is more revealing on this score than Hass. I’d only add, reflexively perhaps, that structure is always in a dialectical relation to other extra-structural factors, and vice versa. Content is never more than an extension of structure, and the reverse. But then while I say *reverse*, there are often incommensurabilities among levels (so I take the “abilities” in that word to heart). That gets interesting. The move away from close reading often got drowned in the bathwater, even if we could never find the baby. So, to use my word of the week again, we need a robust close reading . . . an inherently multi-level process (forms not form). I also like this because it suggests a criterion for aesthetic judgment, an ability to value one work over another. A



historical method would insist on reading structure in context. The work may cast light on the socio-bio-historical contexts but those contexts do not determine the work. The writer's decisions are not limited to any particular style or mode of self-representation (or self-cancellation), though the decisions are articulated through choices over just such issues. The writer's decisions, that is, are necessarily multilevel, and individual works will cue a reader to the primacy of different frames (to use Erving Goffman lingo). One of the intelligences in a body of poetry is that it is able to reframe where the decision making is occurring. This way a—ohmygod!—robust sense of intentionality is needed (while we are often subjected to an abandonment of intentionality). The “purposelessness” of an artwork is meant to potentate the ability to read intentionality not in utilitarian terms but in aesthetic ones: a willing suspension of the utilitarian in pursuit of the aesthetic.<sup>6</sup>

**ADK:** *Because I'm interested in the relationship between aesthetics and history (and the aesthetics of history, and the history of aesthetics, and other inversions), your claim that “only an explicit sense of the purposelessness of poetic activity”—even if made in an illustrative attempt to bring out the circularity you find in Altieri's argument—“can fully engage the social in a way that addresses the multiplicity of our senses of the world, so that poetry's impact on history is not entirely subsumed within representations of it” strikes me. It seems a likely candidate for success as a theoretical alternative to what Altieri proposes. A related concern of mine came up a little earlier when I asked you whether or not it might be possible to “get outside” form, or ideology, and comment on it—to get some degree of distance that provides, at the same time, the necessary proximity. Your comments on this point, as well the insights volleyed between you and Altieri, are well-taken when they rest on a set of (as you say) dialectical relationships such as those between the poet and the poem, experience and meaning, ontology and history; in this sense, it's tough to see how a return to an idealized version of poetic rhetoric promises anything but a temporary suppression of these binaries for the sake of something like authorial assuredness. On the other hand, though, I wonder what you might say to the charge that because even the privileging of these dialectic relationships is itself a form of rhetoric it's no less exempt from ideology in the end—and that it, as*

6. Charles Bernstein, email to Charles Altieri, May 27, 2012.

*well as neoliberalism and the modes of self-representation you take Altieri to be advancing, must inevitably cede its claim to any particular transparency on questions of rhetoric and its relation to controversial ideologies. An even more skeptical critique might ask whether it's not the ideological indebtedness of any particular species of linguistic expression (in an atomic sense: corpses, poems, works, words, symbols of any sort, anything that hazards or pretends an almost irreducible coherence) that we ought to be concerned with but the medium—the genera, so to speak—from which these particulars descend: something larger, say, a given language, idiom, or soundscape. Even if this critique might be difficult to play out because of inevitable problems with classification (how exactly do we carve up the conceptual space to determine what's a species and what's a genus, and relative to what?), I don't want to give up on what it's getting at. This is an insidious skepticism, even cynicism, I'm toying with. And perhaps it becomes the sort of self-defeating relativism nobody wants. But I'd be interested in hearing whether or not you think it has anything to do with your reaction to Altieri. I recognize the possibility, of course, that an agreement with the criticism I've put forth here may nonetheless not alter the urgency or efficacy of attempts to debunk this renewed emphasis on "idealized meaning."*

*There's also the question of how these interpretational binaries play out not just in the space of the poem but in time—i.e., through the rise and fall of various critical apparatuses, ideological inclinations, political beliefs, institutional changes, and so on. Maybe the best we can hope for is a return to Altieri's notion of "recovering and transforming ideals of rhetoric," but a return that falters as soon as it steadies—a constant giving and taking of ground. I can see how this might be politically or pragmatically unacceptable, though.*

**CB:** My life is replete with inversions. I have something like (mild) dyslexia, where I go left when I ought to go right (well, that's a virtue, but not on the road) or call Joan Jane and Jane Jan. It's not a happy condition, but I can't imagine any other way to negotiate the world. It's hard for me to hear any expression without hearing the reverse, a variation, or pun. Substitution is not a literary device that I try out; it's integral to my perception: a verso occurs to me, unprompted, almost at the moment I recognize a recto. Into every life a little pain must fall, say; the minute I think of one, I think of the other. (Zukofsky's "See sun, and think shadow" [or is it the other way around?] [Zukofsky 2006: 21].) You know the way the brain flips the images we see upright? Mine flips everything around one more time, or maybe one and a half. When I make an argument, I see the hole in the

other side before I finish my first thought. My experience is *second thought*, *first thought*. I call what I do an echopoetics of translation, transformation, variance, hyperbole, parody, satire, and reversal. That would be the rhetoric of the purposivelessness, the sieve of purpose, that you say you like; just about Kantian, after all is said and undone. Why can't we all just . . . refract reflection. But no, I hate *mise en abymes* as much as the next bloke, and I wouldn't want to be stuck with one on a long train ride. Someone recently referred to me as polemical, but I'd say raucous is more like it. And while such excess has its lineage, from Blake and Poe to Tzara to Richard Foreman, John Zorn, Steve McCaffery, Tan Lin, Will Alexander, Maggie O'Sullivan, Susan Howe, Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, Henry Hills, Tom Raworth, Gil Scott-Heron, George Kuchar, Caroline Bergvall, Bruce Andrews, Amy Sillman, Kenneth Goldsmith, Harryette Mullen, Nick Cave (the artist), Robert Grenier, Ken Jacobs, Christian Bök, Tracie Morris, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge (perhaps we could call this a branch of neobaroque?). I see it so vividly in the work of Felix and Emma Bernstein and Susan Bee. I also realize what a distance it puts me from the button-down decorum that masquerades as serious poetry. I suppose this is very different than the aspiration to get outside anything (or get to a core)—form or history or ideology. I do respect the need we have, citizens!, to get next to our interest values and consider the good of the polis (not the police); but, unlike John Rawls or Richard Rorty, I think there's as much chance of that as for a rich man to get through the eye of a needle on a camel ride to Hades. In other words (it's always that): it's the best chance we got and I'm putting all my chips on it. As an artist, it's not my responsibility to be responsible but to foment response, to toque the showboat here and there, thither and yon, fort and da, so we can have the mental space to breathe, in the in-between. Fred Wah takes over that Johnny Mercer song, "Ac-Cen-Tchu-Ate the Positive" ("Don't mess with Mister In-Between"): but let's just say accentuate the accent (Wah 2009). Bob Dylan has a remark in his February 1966 *Playboy* interview: "As far as I'm concerned, I don't consider myself outside of anything. I just consider myself *not around*";<sup>7</sup> I loved that for its immediate social sense of turning the tables on insiders, but looking at it literarily it's always the issue that can't be overcome. Everybody's gotta be somewhere. . . . It's just that too often people confuse being somewhere with being everywhere; even God can't pull that off. I'm no relativist, but I am sick at heart. Let me see if I can find a way to tell you one more time.

7. For the Dylan interview, see <http://www.interferenza.com/bcs/interw/66-jan.htm>.

**ADK:** *Let's return to your exchange with Altieri. I feel the force of your response for several reasons, the first of them being that I'm inclined, like you, to doubt the success, if not the intentions, of a model that features a Frankensteined version of the straightforwardly Platonic idealization of self-representation in poetry that you and Altieri agree is untenable and in need of some sort of repair, if not wholesale replacement. But I can appreciate—and perhaps I'm being too charitable here—the intellectual and affective motivation that might undergird the project that Altieri proposes and which seems to likewise authorize his criticism of you, i.e., the attraction of a renewed and at least sufficiently (though of course this is part of what's in dispute) rigid strategy for representation that entails giving up the possibility of an ideology-free utopia of representation where something like the Law of Identity holds straightforwardly and infallibly.*

Ron Silliman relevantly observed in his 1988 essay "Poetry and the Politics of the Subject" that the purveyors of so-called "marginal" literatures tend to emphasize the reliability of some first-person position or voice (this is what, at least, I take it he means by "conventional"); the passage is worth quoting at length:

*Progressive poets who identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history—many white male heterosexuals, for example—are apt to challenge all that is supposedly "natural" about the formation of their own subjectivity. That their writing today is apt to call into question, if not actually explode, such conventions as narrative, persona and even reference can hardly be surprising. At the other end of the spectrum are poets who do not identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history, for they instead have been its objects. The narrative of history has led not to their self-actualization, but to their exclusion and domination. These writers and readers—women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the "marginal"—have a manifest political need to have their stories told. That their writing should often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to who is the subject of these conventions, illuminates the relationship between form and audience. (Silliman 1988: 61–68)*

Silliman qualifies this in other contexts. Harryette Mullen, in *The Cracks Between What We Are and What We Are Supposed to Be*, brings up his argument that many readers and critical institutions tend to suppose a dichotomy between poetry that stands in for the "codes of oppressed

peoples” as opposed to “purely aesthetic” undertakings, by which, he argues, the writings of unprivileged or underprivileged groups is automatically pegged as falling into the former category, a classification that produces just another restriction of agency for a group that, by that very classification, was supposed to have gained a space for agency (Mullen 2012: 12). One idea here seems to be that critical institutions inadvertently reiterate the inequalities inherent in the distribution of privilege by attempting to make privileges visible.

This passage bears some resemblance to Rae Armantrout’s response roughly ten years earlier to your question in the first issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* about a perceived lack of women in “language-oriented writing,” an absence she explained by saying that women need “to describe the conditions of their lives,” that this “entails representation,” that they feel “too much anger” to participate in modernism’s “analytical tendencies” (Armantrout 1978). What interests me in these approaches—besides, in Armantrout’s case, the contention that anger can act as a significant force in the determination, or self-determination, of voice—is the assumption or claim that there’s something “basic” about the voice-position which many of these groups have perceived themselves to be deprived of, and often have been deprived of. And it’s the same position which, in the hands of a more privileged and materially enabled population, becomes, on this view, a breeding ground for illusions about its supposed transparency, though it remains hardly much more than a dominant racial, sexual, social, political, etc., ideology in sheep’s clothing. I think back, here, to your essay “Stray Straws and Straw Men,” from a 1977 Open Letter symposium, where you write about “the natural look,” a constructed and structurally consistent aesthetic intent on masking the agency behind its construction so as to claim special access to an objective reality—another strategy familiar to Barthes, who dedicates a good portion of the work that would become *Mythologies* deriding similar pretensions to naturalness. There you assert, plausibly I think, that despite a multiplicity of naturally occurring aesthetic “modes,” there is no master “natural mode” (Bernstein 1985: 40–49).

Is it fair of me to ask what your position offers these parties—or, as an alternative, what it might say to Silliman’s attempt at a sociological explanation of why we see a preference for a “voice,” however much a rhetorical artifact, in certain groups, if we do? And about the pragmatic consequences of the approach you advocate: I’d suspect you have some confidence that it effectively undermines or elides, to use your words, the (or a) dominant ideology, but I’d be interested in hearing, in good faith, how you

*think this will work, and if there is ever a point where maybe we can return to some workable concept of self-representation that weds the democratic facets of your approach with an acknowledgment—if one is merited—of the utility of “voice” in certain social contexts, or of the author-function that Altieri emphasizes.*

**CB:** Will there be a time when all this flux of voicings disappears in favor of the “utility” of a “workably” solid, intelligible voice upon which we can rely on? I’m a pragmatist who relies on such provisional assurances. (After all, much of this discussion utilizes just such a voice.) But I also rely on a space for overturning such assurances. That is the (or anyway *a*) space of art. In my aesthetics, art is not a utility. If we close off that nonutilitarian realm, we create a fantasy of the end of history, but without actually ending history. So that’s a problem.

“Let’s just say that the aim is not to win but not to lose too bad” (Bernstein 2006: 11).

Forming in the wake of the civil rights movement, feminism, and the anti-Vietnam War movement, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, and my subsequent editorial work, endeavored to bring to the forefront a set of poets who had been, mostly anyway, excluded from the canon. Fundamental to these acts of reclamation was also to insist on the relevance of social, historical, and biographical contexts in reading form (not just subject matter), that is, the politics (and social identities) of poetic form.<sup>8</sup> This emphasis on social politics has been a red flag—antagonizing the powers that be / of the poetry blandisic. The classical example would be Gertrude Stein: was she excluded from the high modernist canon because she was a woman, a lesbian, a Jew, or because of her radical formal invention—or was the combination toxic for the blandisic (one or two of those things would be acceptable, but not all of them)? I’ve wanted to address these issues variously through consideration of, for example, Emily Dickinson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Mina Loy, Sterling Brown, Louis Zukofsky, Claude McKay, Lorine Neidecker, Melvin Tolson, Hannah Weiner, and Larry Eigner.<sup>9</sup>

My question to Rae Armantrout in 1978 was ironic, meant to dispel an illusion. (It didn’t.) As to Ron Silliman’s essay, Leslie Scalapino provided an immediate and persuasive rejoinder:

8. See Bernstein 1990.

9. See, especially, “Poetics of the Americas,” in Bernstein 1999 (113–37) and “Objectivist Blues: Scoring Speech in Second-Wave Modernist Poetry and Lyrics,” in Bernstein 2011 (131–57).

My response, briefly stated, was that people's conditions of suffering, an element of which is continual re-definition by a ruling group, people pressed even to the point of revolution, do not necessarily respond by creating conventional narratives as such definitions of reality that arise from within the ruling group's perspective and dictation. It is like saying the Russian Revolution was accomplished solely by aristocratic men because they had leisure time. One may respond to constraint of oppression by creating a language whose syntax/structure is (as such, does) its conception—thereby altering the ruling language.<sup>10</sup> (Scalapino 2011: 220–21)

Echoing Leslie, I don't accept the premise that adopting normalizing rhetoric gives voice to the otherwise voiceless; you could just as well say the opposite, that such normalization abrogates or ventriloquizes, which is to say silences, such voices by proving a prefabricated template for what counts as intelligible and legitimate. Audre Lorde, famously, put it this way: "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 1984: 111). Many writers who come "late" into official literary history do, indeed, challenge that template, but they are often *initially* marginalized in favor of writers who work in more conventionally legible forms. That, for me, is the lesson of radical political thinkers, from Mary Wollstonecraft to W. E. B. Du Bois, from Amiri Baraka to Shulamith Firestone. Who gets counted as "avant-garde" is subject to sanitization by both proponents and detractors. But the most radical transformations of American poetry are unthinkable without putting those previously unrecorded at the center.<sup>11</sup>

Blacks, Jews, queers, women, immigrants, the dispossessed (by circumstance or election), speakers of broken or brokered English, outsiders and sick-at-heart insiders, the mad (as hell or just plain), apostate WASPS and language bootleggers, workers and those out of work, irregulars and incorrigibles, the disagreeable and divisive, unfit and uncomfortable, betrayers and betrayed, misfit and marginal—the whole pataquerical crew—are the shock troupes of the avant-garde, an elite force specializing in uncon-

10. Scalapino's stinging original response to Silliman was called "What Person?" (1999) and is collected as "Disbelief" in Scalapino 2011 (220–21).

11. See Nielson 1988; 1997. See also the discussion of Kamau Brathwaite, Claudia Rankine, Harryette Mullen, M. NourbeSe Philip, Nathaniel Mackey, and N. H. Pritchard in Reed 2014.

ventional operations.<sup>12</sup> When it comes to the symbolic space of American poetry, projected identifications are as important as origins: *you can't judge a book by its biography*. Art is judged by outcomes not inputs, and that is intrinsically unfair because privilege is real and art can't change—by fiat or desire—the debilitating effect of inequalities (including access to the historical record). Mean people can create *mean* (in the sense of edgy) poetry, and a victim can write in the voice of the victimizer (sometimes better than the victimizer can). Woe be it, but the value of a poem is not commensurate with the social value of the person who created it.

Even so, those who have had a long run as the “subjects of history,” that is, the ones who have *subjected the rest of us to their history*, are both likely to cling to the truth of their rhetoric and unlikely to see their normalcy as perversity. And that is a big aesthetic disadvantage for them.

In other words, you can't use the minister's Bible to dismantle the minister's religion. In other words, use the minister's Bible to dismantle the minister's religion. In other words, there is more than one way to cook kale. In other words, voice is kind of ministry, mimicry, melody, memory . . . In other words, the broad masses ain't no woman.

I've written till, well, I was blue in the face (I think I must be purple by now) about the social history and aesthetic force of nonstandard approaches to voice, voicing, dialect, and accent, and how they are, in American poetry, specifically linked to a counterhegemonic resistance to assimilation.<sup>13</sup> It's often the *outs* who change the *ins* rather than the other way around. But that point is rhetorical because we are each in and out in so many different ways that you *can't never* give a full accounting; and there is plenty of room for invention, refinement, conformity, and iconoclasm coming from all sorts of people, often in unpredictable and unexpected ways. In this respect, anomaly *is* poetic destiny.

I came at this again in a recent piece on Gertrude Stein, discussing her suffragette opera, *The Mother of Us All*: “The problem Stein keeps

12. This riff is extended in Bernstein 2016 (293–344). See also Rothenberg and Bloomberg-Rissman 2015.

13. I discuss “mastering form” versus “deforming mastery” in “Poetics of the Americas” and the continuation on mashugana miscegenation in “Objectivist Blues.” Assimilation is necessarily a context-dependent figure. For some writing in a style deemed European, or white, is a kind of selling out of your identity, de-ethnicizing, passing. For others, standardized writing practices amount to the same. But neither mainstreaming nor innovating is tied to any one American identity, and both can be gloriously inauthentic or deliriously real.



coming back to in her last work is that, if the structures of power are not changed, then bringing women into power, getting the vote, doesn't change a thing. 'You have only got the name, you have not got the game,' says Jo the Loiterer, who cannot vote, even after women's suffrage, because he, like a nomadic play by Gertrude Stein, has no fixed address" (Bernstein 2016: 98–99).

The attraction to dominant (or standard) forms of discourse (including voice) is like the attraction to money: it seems to buy you a lot, seems to have the most rhetorical punch for the dollar. The problem is you may end up punching the wrong thing. And, then again, what's defined as innovation is so often a betrayal of the poetics of invention. If you focus on stylistic change, you can get hung up on intention, as opposed to what Kenneth Burke calls motivation. Fresh eyes (voices fresh and being fresh to history) are needed. If that freshness poses limitations, so does jadedness. The base limits (the given of our social and biological identities, the author function, as you call it) that each of us brings to the conversation are not chosen. We choose what to do about, or with, or without, them. They don't disappear. Look at it this way: those who never got a slice of the pie want it, while those who've had their fill think they own it. Still, some of the haves and some of the have-nots may say, *hey, the pie's not so good*, and maybe someone will make a better pie or maybe show us how we can dine on air— or on poetry or on virtue (to echo Baudelaire).

Such points require reiteration because one way "dominant discourse" stays dominant is by undermining all challenges to its exclusive authority.<sup>14</sup> Attacks on the "avant-garde" as racist or sexist—a charge that rightly could be made about all cultural sectors in the United States—imply either that aesthetically radical work should be held to a higher moral standard or that such work is morally worse than the mainstream, or both. The "avant-garde" *is* worse because it makes a hash of such standards.

Radical modernist and contemporary art is tainted by the cultural values of its times, and its dystopian geniuses are notorious for being as vile as, if not viler than, the times in which they lived. Radical art and poetry are not necessarily "nice" or "supportive" or models of ideal communities. Still, much depends upon who gets to determine the borders of the "avant-garde" (itself a detestable designation that I would never use in a strictly positive sense). At its most radical, poetry challenges and reforms those borders. Poets who are deeply committed to assimilation and intelligibility,

14. Forgive the personification: think of it as a cartoon image.

often for the loftiest of reasons, may want to be “avant-garde,” but they want it “clean”—they want to be part of it without being pulled into the mud by it. Because to get your wish and be “avant-garde” is to become the problem, not the solution; it is to become the accused and not the accuser.

In “Disfiguring Abstraction,” I recount my experience at two advisory meetings for the Museum of Modern Art’s “invention” of abstraction show (Bernstein 2013a and 2016). The canon put forward by the curator stripped modernist abstraction from its connection to decorative work (often by women) and to the art of Africa and other non-Western cultures. This beached and bleached view of abstraction was neither a reflection of the radical aesthetic practice a century ago nor of the inchoate views of the great artists that were presented in the show. The problem was the way MoMA claimed and framed this work. At one point, Hal Foster, who was vociferously defending the status quo, turned on me, saying he was tired of my attack on art history. For Foster, the history had already been written and the task of the museum was to retell that story. But the art tells another story—and that one’s still unfolding. To rethink and resituate works of art is not to attack art history; it is to refuse the authority of those who would claim sovereignty over it.

**ADK:** *McGann’s claim about rhetoric and sincerity being at odds reminds me of something another Jerome—Rothenberg—said in an interview with William Spanos in *Dialectical Anthropology* in 1986. Spanos asked about his interest in oral traditions, and Rothenberg responded by emphasizing the depth of many communities’ investments in what he called the “subterranean culture” of the “tribal-&-oral,” and by arguing that an oral tradition is itself created in the pursuit of “recovering” “the idea . . . per se” of the oral tradition—something more foundational than any localized, empirical oral phenomenon in particular (Rothenberg 1986: 211–12). And this in turn brings to mind a related, but somewhat narrower, comment William Corbett made about Rothenberg in *Erato* in 1987: “He is concerned to write a public poetry that will stand for more than just his experiences. What he has made is a poetry that relies upon the rhetorical power of the chant, the Whitmanic list, testimony, and American colloquial speech” (Corbett 1987: 8). In both of these comments, something like a universal language—or if not language, then sentiment—is referenced, and I wonder if you see such an idea as at all enticing or, on the other hand, perhaps even dangerous.*

*I ask this with other questions hovering in the back of my mind. You described a little while back the undertaking of “writing poetics” as uncom-*

mon even in the days of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E's advent; that observation of uncommonality seems just as relevant today. Robert Hass brought up at the aforementioned colloquium, as he had on a few occasions prior, two possible ways of thinking about an account of poetics. The first would be the attempt to complete, wholly or partially, the sort of ontological project described above. The second would be to chalk poetics up to the event of "poets talking about poetry," which makes for a useful category in historical terms, I think—when we come to the archival task of classifying documents under the headings and directions of certain convenient, descriptive facts—but doesn't move the historian, any more than it moves the poet, closer to getting at just what poetics really is; it seems akin to defining it as just another form of metadiscourse. This second approach seems unsatisfactory to me—and I suspect Hass would agree—in that it fails to account for precisely the fusion of form and content (content conscious of form; form conscious of content) that marks the writings of so much of the poetics in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. But to return to that notion of uncommonality, should the practice of poetics, the adoption of poetics as a *modus operandi* for anything like criticism, analysis, and engagement with poetry, be seen as the proper (and not only *de facto*) purview of poets? Something like this seems to be, from my pinhole view, how things stand today with English departments. A fairly apparent division is set up between what is seen as poetics and, on the other hand, scholarship.

But in "What's Art Got to Do with It? The Status of the Subject of the Humanities in an Age of Cultural Studies," your keynote address to the Northeast Modern Language Association's Buffalo meeting in 1992, you suggested that literature classes, in response to a certain type of institutionalization of literature, could be "transformed from a knowledge-acquisition approach to creative reading workshops, replacing tests with poetic response in the form of free-form journals, poems, and literary imitations" (Bernstein 1999: 50). And you suggest as much in several other essays. Is there something to be said, maybe, for preserving the party-line division? Is it only in the case of literary study—rather than other disciplines also—that engagement in poetics, or something analogous to it, can be fruitful? In one sense, it seems to me that a position such as yours could go hand in hand with a commitment to the view that there's some *ur-language* to be sought out, something to unify the traditional and nontraditional fields of study, but I'm not at all sure you see it that way.

**CB:** In my poetics of pitched tents and collapsible space modules, sincerity is a form of rhetoric and rhetoric is sincere, if acknowledged. I know

I've got it backwards. Recovering, uncovering, and covering are part of an imperfect (more perfect) dialectical process. Tradition, as Rothenberg uses the term in your citation, is what is buried alive. The culture we recover (are recovering from) is one we are bound to, but out of touch with. To get back in touch we have to—Oy!—make it newer. Or better: *Make it now*. (Even though that sounds so yesterday.) Nower. (*More now*.) Contra the Whit-manic: there's a need for a poetry that is *less* than my experience, because, in my experience, experience can be the problem. Let's just say, experience is an albatross (a sign of loss). Force of conviction's not the same as universalist doxa: I hear plenty of particularity and resistance in Jerry's songs.

I find it helpful to remind myself that there are worlds outside my worlds. Call them universes, if you like; but I am less interested in the "uni" than the verses.

*Everybody talks about poetics but nobody does anything about it.*

Poetics is the last resort of poetry, but, then, poetry is an art of last resorts. The either/or you present (citing Hass) leaves poetics stranded between the Hardy of grandiosity and the Laurel of triviality. But I keep saying poetics differs from more rationalized forms of philosophy or criticism by being embedded in the situational. Contra Thomas Nagel, it's a *view from somewhere* because it is implicated in making specific artworks (not coining universal values à la Nagel's "view from nowhere").

The aim of poetry is to show the fly it's in a bottle.

If literary criticism veers toward scientific/rationalized "rigor" rather than more associative forms of research and investigation, that's not poetry versus scholarship; it's a pinched, overly professionalized view of scholarship. Deprofessionalization is stigmatized as *poetic* because it challenges positivism (while also challenging the idea that any method reveals an ur-language: in my view, all methods are veils). But that was the problem we faced in starting the Poetics Program at Buffalo twenty-five years ago. I've never thought there should be one approach to literary studies but rather have made a case for not standardizing methods of scholarship or core bibliographies. My paranoia is that the literary academy has turned its back on aesthetics in pursuit of didactic historical and sociological studies, where art is not a value or exemplary of ways of perceiving but, rather, a crime against moral codes. But I get it: everybody's weary of questions so seeks the sensation of answers.

I'm for the plenty of nothing, to twist Ira Gershwin's lyric to an inch of truth.

**ADK:** *You talked about translation a little earlier. I was looking over Modernist Archaist: Selected Poems, by Osip Mandelstam, and noticed that you had done a few translations with Kevin M. F. Platt; translations by Eugene Ostashevsky, Bob Perelman, Clarence Brown, W. S. Merwin and Bernard Meares—some in collaboration—also appear (Mandelstam 2008). It's curious to me that the translators of each poem aren't denoted as such immediately next to the relevant pieces—you have to go to the back of the book to figure out who translated what. Granted that the pieces aren't grouped by translator, this makes for a surreal reading experience: I suppose one could religiously check each translation to see who it was “by” before reading it, but I was more inclined to read the collection straight through, which led to the conceptualization (however against the facts) of a single, autonomous voice speaking from start to finish. You spoke earlier about how “the main focus [in translation] has gotta be on how the new poems being created work on their own terms, fidelity be damned. Anyway, fidelity to what?” Do you think this approach works—or, perhaps, must work—on the level of the collection, and specifically with respect to a collection whose multiple translators work largely unmarked, masked, behind the page, mixing but not revealing themselves? Certainly different people reach for different sorts of fidelity or “terms” when translating. But I wonder how you think this affects the literary artifact produced: if the Mandelstam of Bernstein and the Mandelstam of Meares differ, whose Mandelstam is in Modernist Archaist? One obvious, if indirect, answer would seem to be: a pastiche of alternate and alternating voices comes together to “make” any writer in translation, only in this case the oddities and discrepancies of this blending are made more apparent by their unfolding in the space of a single volume. Made more apparent in one sense, of course, because, as I've noted, the translators are credited in the back of the book. But I'd like to hear how you think of this.*

*Platt's introduction begins with a quote that leads into something else I want to ask, something from an essay titled “The Word and Culture” (translated by Platt): “Poetry is a plough, turning over time so that its deep layers, its fertile black soil, ends up on the surface. There are periods when mankind, not satisfied with the present day, yearning like a ploughman, craves the virgin soil of time. Revolution in the arts inevitably leads to classicism” (Mandelstam 2008: 7). Besides the reference to the boustrophedon—that type of bidirectional text seen in ancient manuscripts whose etymology in Greek means something like “as an ox turns in plowing”—another kind of recurrence caught my attention here: that of cycles of taste and purpose, aesthetics and ethics, in the history of the practice of poetry.*

*There are other references to this “primality,” too, in the poetry itself; the speaker in “Notre Dame”—which you translated—talks of the “preternatural ribs” of the basilica at Notre Dame and how “from crude weight / Someday I too will fashion the beautiful” (35).*

*At any rate, I wanted to contextualize the recycling that Mandelstam posits here with reference to the Language school’s interest in Russian artists, theorists, and critics, particularly the formalists. There are too many points of intersection and involvement to enumerate them all, but two stand out in recent memory: Ron Silliman’s employment of cognitive linguistic devices derived from Russian formalism in his essay “Migratory Meaning: The Parsimony Principle in the Poem”—his analysis of “Migratory Noon” by Joseph Ceravolo, in which Viktor Shklovsky figures, from *The New Sentence* (Silliman 1995: 110–16)—and in Shklovsky’s “Plotless Literature: Vasily Rozanov,” reprinted by Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten, most recently in *A Guide to Poetics Journal* (Shklovsky 2013: 126–40). Who or what, besides experimental poets working in Russia with whom you sustained dialogues (Dragomoshchenko, etc.), sparked this attraction to the aesthetic wealth of Russian modernisms and avant-gardes, stretching from Boris Pasternak, Anna Akhmatova, and Vyacheslav Ivanov to Velimir Khlebnikov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, the poets of Nikolai Berdyaev’s Silver Age, even Roman Jakobson as he began his career—across symbolism, futurism, formalism, and hybrids of these? The aesthetic variety is wide; Platt, for one, describes Mandelstam as “a committed Modernist,” but I’ve also come across a video of your reading, with Ian Probst, of Khlebnikov’s “Incantation by Laughter,” which seems decidedly postmodern.<sup>15</sup>*

*What was it about these Russian movements and authors that drew you and others to them? In reverence (or correspondence) is there any acknowledgment, implicit or not, of Mandelstam’s dictum about the cyclicity of revolution and classicism (and classism)? I suppose I’m asking, in part, about how you see the structure of the various relationships of modernisms and postmodernisms to their predecessors, however recent or ancient. And, in addition to this, whether or not the global political situation in which such modernisms take place has changed more than its window dressing. Mandelstam’s quoted as saying—though I couldn’t find a definitive source for this—“Only in Russia is poetry respected—it gets people killed. Is there anywhere else where poetry is so common a motive for*

15. [writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Khlebnikov.php](http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Khlebnikov.php) (accessed December 1, 2015).

murder?"<sup>16</sup> *Mandelstam himself died in a transit camp near Vladivostok in 1938. But maybe you have an answer to his question, too.*

**CB:** In *Recalculating*, I included two of the Mandelstam translations I did with Kevin Platt. "I've been given a body. What should I do with it?" is from *Stone*, Mandelstam's first book from 1909; you might say it's an ur-modernist poem of the preconditions of authorial voice. The other Mandelstam I included is the first half of his last poem from 1937, whose first line answers the question of that early poem: "To empty earth falling unwilling." But what transfixed me in the last poem are the two lines "She is propelled by the stifled freedom / Of inspiring deficiency" (Bernstein 2013b: 100). *Inspiring deficiency* comes as close to my poetics as I can imagine.

These are part of a set of translations in *Recalculating* that makes possible other voices for myself, or, perhaps better to say, other selves for my voices. The translations bring into the American something precisely related to the original poems: I try to channel the poems into my present-in-language. I am a medium. Sure, that's a working fiction: any translator has a way with words that's her or his own. Being a medium is not the same as being faithful: it's a form of listening. If you can hear what is being transmitted, then you have all the liberty in the world. Still, these translations are not stylistically rewritten to be like my poems: I am sick of my own style and thought patterns and turns of phrase and quirks. I am seeking something that is not mine (though becomes me). If you want to have formal heterogeneity in a book of poems, then translations are essential. And yet (one more turn): the translations in *Recalculating* are leitmotifs in the opera that is *Recalculating*. I use them, and they are an integral part of the work, serving my purpose as they adhere to their own. So that connects, albeit tenuously, to Mandelstam's sense of digging up the past and plowing it back under.

I have remained deeply engaged with the Russian futurists from when I first began to read their work in the mid-1970s, starting with *Snake Train*, Gary Kern's 1976 selection of Khlebnikov; dear and much-missed Paul Schmidt did several volumes of translation of Khlebnikov that were of immense value to me in *Artifice of Absorption*. So it was with Khlebnikov that I began, but I quickly found Kruchenykh, Shklovsky, Mayakovsky, Bakhtin, Volosinov, and Jakobson. The 1980 Stephanie Barron exhibition of Russian futurism at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art was the first

16. John High and Matvei Yankelevich reproduce this quote at the beginning of their note accompanying their translation of Mandelstam's "Yet to die. Unalone still" (2009).

time many of us got a chance to see the full sweep of Russian futurist art beyond—already so important to me—the related work of Kandinsky and Malevich: Popova above all (who is a character in “Entitlement,” a short play collected in *The Sophist*), but also Goncharova, Tatlin, Rodchenko, and Stepanova. I loved the collective action of the Russian futurists, outside official art institutions, and also the book collaborations between painters and poets. As we were working on *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, this was a great inspiration.

More recently I have been very taken with Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedensky. I became aware of OBERIU (second-wave radical modernists) only in the past decade through the translations of Matvei Yankelevich and Eugene Ostashevsky, with whom I have been lucky to be able to talk about Russian modernist and contemporary poetry. I have a connection to a few contemporary Russian poets of my generation: Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, Dmitri Prigov, Lev Rubinstein, and Alexei Parshchikov. Parshchikov and friends translated *Artifice of Absorption*. And over the past few years, Ian Probstein, who lives in New York, has been translating and publishing scores of my poems and plans to collect them in a book.

Arakadii’s recent death haunts me, as do the deaths of Prigov and Parshchikov. I felt uncannily close to Arkadii. It’s an affinity I’d call non-national rather than cross-national—not that my communication with him was more than sporadic over the twenty-five years I knew him. I first met Arkadii, via Lyn Hejinian, when Arkadii came to New York in the late 1980s. I set up a reading for him at James Sherry’s loft. We invited him, and his wife Zena, to come to the Poetics Program in Buffalo for a semester in the early 1990s. Susan, Felix, and I went to see Arakadii and Zena in St. Petersburg in the summer of 2001. Most recently, Arkadii came to Penn in the fall of 2010, two years before he died. In his recent and probing book, *Common Strangeness*, Jacob Edmond has an extended commentary on Lyn Hejinian’s exchanges with Arkadii that is worth checking out. *Endarkment*, Eugene Ostashevsky’s selection of Arkadii’s work, is just out from Wesleyan University Press. As I wrote for the book’s cover: Dragomoshchenko transformed Russian poetics by exploring a meditative and introspective approach to both rhythm and content. The constantly metamorphosing detail is his constant companion through the often harsh times of the Cold War and what came after. Along with this selection, I’d recommend the Proustian *Chinese Sun*.

Anyway, to backtrack: there was something about the way Mandelstam was put forward in Cold War ideology that made him hard to hear:



the Cold Warriors had turned him from poet to symbol, at least for me. So my translations were part of a reframing I needed to do. I began to think of Mandelstam as related to Zukofsky, both negotiating their Jewish particularism with a yearning, to use Mandelstam's phrase that you quote, for "the virgin soil of time," or what Zukofsky called "rested totality" and "objectively perfect" (Zukofsky 2001: 193–202 and Zukofsky 2006: "A"-6)—something beyond the trap of the utility of voice given to you (what Stein called human identity in contrast to human nature). In "Notre Dame," from 1912, that *annus mirabilis*, Mandelstam addresses his quest to be part of something beyond himself, something that both dwarfs him and exhilarates him (as Platt and I translate it):

But, citadel of Notre Dame, the closer  
I studied your preternatural ribs,  
The more I thought: from crude weight  
Someday I too will fashion the beautiful.  
(Mandelstam 2008: 35)

In such moments, Mandelstam writes "the cocky vault's battering ram is still." But I am not sure we can count on that!

**ADK:** *This may be going off in a different direction, but while we're still talking about L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, I wanted to bring it up. The emphasis on retaining the same formal considerations in poetics/expository writing (I hinge those categories together with some hesitation, of course) as with poetry seems like it can, and maybe should, extend itself, somehow, to a consideration of the book-object, and not only because we live in a time when the very materials that convey knowledge and facilitate knowledge acquisition are uncertainly changing. Is there—or should there be, maybe—a desire to get out of the "form" of the book and into a freer field of hypertext, for instance, or is this form somehow integral to, somehow inseparable from, literary texts as they've for so long been conceived? Could L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E happen again, digitally? Do certain media have intrinsic values and capacities as such?*

**CB:** I like your phrase "uncertainly changing." I am infatuated by the difference between *sure* and *certain*, as in, *there are a lot of things I am sure about, but few I am certain of.*

A couple of days ago, I came upon a few letters my father wrote me after I left for college. He was critical of my sureness, which he found arro-

gant and unmerited. He mentioned “the generation gap,” since it was the 1960s, and my strident anti-Vietnam War views bothered him.

When I was young, I denounced my father as racist and sexist, but now I see it was not because he was, but because I was, and, no doubt still am, since that is not a malady you can ever rid yourself of. And I hated that about myself.

But now I am old and have put aside adolescent rages.

I appreciate your trepidation about speaking of the “same” formal devices for poems and essays because it’s, well, the same only different. The same device would mean the converse (not the sneaker) in the different genres. That’s what it means to read identity as a form and not (just) a content.

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E used the technology at hand: the self-correcting Selectric typewriter and cheap offset printing and photocopying. In some ways, our articles anticipated blog posts. So, yes, for sure, specific media do have inner lives, and it’s a pleasure when the medium is the masseur.

The book remains for me a central organizing structure for my work. It may be anachronistic but that’s a blessing.

If you are locked in a cage, it’s shrewd to be cagey. Trapped in time, just give me one more chance at bat.

**ADK:** *I wanted to round out this interview—which has, perhaps appropriately given its concern with form, taken place over a sizable stretch of time and space—with a few last questions. The first has to do with how you see the relationship between poetry and philosophy. So put, that question might seem opaque, or almost impossible to answer. But your work, both your poetry and your critical writing (not to mention plenty you’ve said in this interview), make it evident that the question of their relationship is one that you’ve thought about for quite some time. To cite some of the more obvious pieces of evidence, one of your books is titled *The Sophist*—and you studied philosophy as an undergraduate at Harvard, even writing a thesis on Stein’s *The Making of Americans* and Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. I was struck by your comments in the thesis on the affinities shared by the poet and the philosopher. You said that they both “dramatize the breakdown of a one-to-one correspondence between word and object,” and that you felt Stein was invested in something like the problem of other minds (Bernstein 2012b: n.p.). (Connected to this, you also mention Cavell’s writings on skepticism; did you ever work with him?) At one point in*

*the thesis, you write, "I felt, still do, that this philosophical conundrum [the problem of giving a theory of reference] directly bears on the meaning and reference of not just words or phrases in poems but of poems themselves, which certainly mean, designate, and express, but do not necessarily refer to 'things,' if things are assumed to be already existing and named objects." So I have several more and less specific questions. The more specific are these, some of which relate to our discussion of Altieri: What are your thoughts, now, on a theory of reference for poems-as-wholes? What might be at stake in such a theory? And should we expect the answer to this question to depart radically, or at all, from the answer we give to the question of how individual words refer? The less specific are these: How do you, now, understand the relationship of philosophy to poetry, and vice versa? Does—or should—one learn more from the other? I'm not necessarily asking about the division between philosophy as practiced in (analytic) philosophy departments and literary studies and poetics as practiced in English departments, unless that's where this leads you.*

**CB:** I studied with Stanley Cavell when I was in college and have been a close reader of his work, and we've remained friends, since.<sup>17</sup> *Pitch of Poetry*, which will come out from the University of Chicago Press in spring 2016, takes its title from Cavell's *The Pitch of Philosophy* and so takes up the difference in the pitches of poetry and philosophy. I was at the top of my philosophical form with my essay on Stein and Wittgenstein because in college I was so immersed in philosophy, both analytic and continental, as the split was then characterized (before so-called continental philosophy morphed into literary theory). And this was also before I became enmeshed in the poetry split between the cooked and raw (Robert Lowell was at Harvard when I was there but so remote from my concerns that I was almost unaware of it). The analogy would be precarious (but better a precarious analogy than an impecunious simile), but I can't help associating the more formally traditional "product"-oriented poets with the analytics and the more formally radical "process"-oriented poets with the continentals. That's because I associate the postwar peri-antimodernists with a commitment to rationalism and naturalized conceptions of representation and reference while I think of the continentals as insisting on skepticism and frames for reference (epistemological conditions). It's the difference, in poetry, between seeing metaphors as descriptive of a preexisting state

17. See the "Close Listening" radio conversation with Cavell in 2012, [jacket2.org/commentary/stanley-cavell-close-listening](http://jacket2.org/commentary/stanley-cavell-close-listening) (accessed December 10, 2014).

(analytical studies of a state of mind or place or historical event to which the poem refers) and the “turn toward language” in which metaphors are, to quote George Lakoff’s title, what we live by because they condition not only the way we see but what we perceive. Conditions handsome and unhand-some, as Cavell has it in one of his titles.

These two diverging roads are so engrained by now that even the one less traveled by is a superhighway.

I see the difference between philosophy and poetry in terms of genre and rhetoric, the claims to reason or knowledge or truth or impartiality (or claims to falsity, skepticism, uncertainty, affect).<sup>18</sup> In other words, I don’t see the distinction between truth claims, on the side of philosophy, and affective expressions, on the side of poetry; perversely, I am interested in affective expressions in philosophy and truth claims in poetry, and I distrust the rationalistic basis of much poetry (its so-called empiricism). Maybe the better one-on-one comparison is poetics and philosophy.<sup>19</sup> Is one regulat-ing and the other irregular? So much depends on what you’re hauling in the wheelbarrow or whether the point is the haul, or hailing the wheelbarrow as “read,” or whether you just want to forget about all this thinking and go home but can’t find it.

Can philosophy be written as a kind of poetry? Wittgenstein’s *Trac-tatus* might be read as a poem, and a great poem at that, but still, it’s not a poem. There is a compelling sense of the genre of philosophy—that it be written as prose. Anything else would put the attention on the language and not the argument, though that might be the point. Can poetry be written as a kind of philosophy? Is that the same question? Isn’t poetry a kind of outer limit for philosophy? When philosophy traffics in poetry, doesn’t it cease to be philosophy? Yet we wouldn’t say philosophy is an outer limit for poetry: poetry has little risk (or a fat chance) of becoming philosophy.

Poetry and philosophy used to share the foundational work of world making or cosmology. But that seems to have gone out of style with Lucre-tius, or maybe Leibniz’s *Monadology* or Descartes’s *Meditations*, or Spi-noza’s *Ethics*, at least for philosophy, since poets never stopped being cos-mologists (often for their own fantasy worlds, but that’s another story). To the baked goods of epic cosmologies, add the open-pit barbeque of anti-cosmologies, from Heraclitus to Dickinson (“This world is not conclusion”

18. “Writing and Method” (Bernstein 1985: 217–36) provides a more thorough consider-ation of the relation of poetry to philosophy.

19. See “The Practice of Poetics” (Bernstein 2011: 73–80).

[Dickinson 1955: no. 501]) to Celan. Or consider that Nietzsche and Kierkegaard wrote works that appear to be antic cosmological prose poems. I seem to be creating an Ouroboros (the figurative snake with its head eating its tale):

I used to be a philosopher, but now I am philosophized.  
 Used to be a poet but now am the words.  
 Used to be critical but now take the local.  
 I used to be emotional, but now I've got affect.  
 Used to be empirical, but now I am in the dark.  
 Used to believe in process but now can't get it to stop.  
 I used to be cosmological, but now I am pataposterous.  
 I used to make arguments but now am argumentative.  
 Used to be historical but now can't work up the energy even for that.  
 Used to dream of answers but no longer remember the questions.  
 I used to love knowledge but now know language.  
 Used to go to school but now vagabond.  
*Used to be, but now am.*

Poets like to quote philosophers because they got a theory that explains or a morality that proclaims. As so and so says, every time you hit a brick wall it's because some bugger put it there to keep you in your place. But it's not really a brick wall; it's a glass ceiling. And even glass ceilings have legs. Then again, philosophers like to quote poetry because it adds a superficial layer of depth to the proceedings, which generally end in poetry being found guilty of a crime it only wishes it could have committed.

People say Cavell is too literary for a philosopher. I aspire to be too philosophical for a poet.

The problem of reference is like finding the pea under the shell in a street corner scam. There is a pea all right, but it's the system, baby, always the system.

It's a mug's game.

**ADK:** *My last question is about the last poem in Recalculating. "Before You Go" seems to be in conversation with a quotation from your daughter, Emma, that appears at the beginning of the book, in which she speaks imperatively: "The road tells you what to do. . . . Retrace your route in reflection, but look only as far / as the blur of passing yellow lines to see the present. Race your future to the finish line" (Bernstein 2013b: xi). It's eerie and wonderful to hear echoes of your voices in each other's: a play-*

*fulness bolstered by directness, clever uses of common phrases, an overall confidence. I was moved by "Before You Go"; it's a poem as formally smart as any of your best, but one primitively informed by grief, and the conclusion in particular—when the line-ending refrain "before you go," effaced by parts, is finally gone, replaced by the satori of "Two lane blacktop, undulating light" (185)—is unqualifiedly arresting, even gutting. It produced a physical reaction in me, which is not something I can say about too many poems.*

*What was the significance of putting this poem at the end of the book, especially given that its ending involves the destruction of the titular phrase? It almost seems the sort of "understanding by subtraction" that poetry, in virtue of being composition, is not—and yet, insofar as it involves excision, at the same time is. I'm reminded of Beckett's claim that artwork is a "desecration of silence"; this might be understood as a claim about the costs of art, or about the impermissibility of art, or both or more.<sup>20</sup> (Relatedly, I think Warhol said—sincerely, I take it—that he preferred blank space to space with an artwork in it.<sup>21</sup>) "Before You Go" also stands in a curious relation to "Chimera," the penultimate poem in *Recalculating*, the speaker of which concludes "Resigned that tunes will never bind / Shimmering shadows tossed in time" (Bernstein 2013b: 185). That poem gives off a jadedness or exhaustion with poetry, but the book, in spite of this, goes on to issue this final piece, which—to add to the stakes—is an instance of that most "serious" of poetic genres, the elegy. I suppose what I'm trying to suggest is that there seems to be this theme of the ineffectiveness or superfluousness of poetry toward the end of the collection—one expressed, almost necessarily, in verse, and with a seriousness that seems pronounced for a collection otherwise sprinkled with overt comedy. I was wondering if you saw the collection ending in this way, too; and, if so, if there was any purposeful connection between that theme and this final poem, which seemed to speak to your daughter, or perhaps to your family more generally—you seem close to them not just in the ordinary sense but artistically, too.*

*Latently, I'm interested in how what seems to be a popular folk criticism of Language poetry, namely that it's too "impersonal" or "inhuman" (or,*

20. The exact history of this phrase is unclear. Jean-Michel Rabaté provides a story of its origins: "In January 1968, Beckett and Adorno met more cordially, for a last time, in Paris where Adorno had come to give a lecture at the Collège de France. He talked for two hours with Beckett. During that conversation, Beckett stated (in English) that his work amounted to a 'desecration of silence,' a phrase which found its way into the pages of *Aesthetic Theory*" (Rabaté 2010: 102).

21. See, for instance, Warhol 1975 (143).

*put negatively, insufficiently “personal” and “human”), appears refuted, or at least nullified, by the poem—which for me contains so much unfiltered, irreconcilable energy, but an energy that’s nonetheless conditioned by the formal constraints you’ve imposed on it, and it you.*

**CB:** I’m not interested in emotion tranquilized into legible form. My register goes from rapture to rupture, often in the same breath; from despair to hysteria to preternatural calm, from anxiety to dissociation, from agitation to evanescence. In my book, dyslexia is emotional and fragmentation a kind of aesthetic melodrama approaching tragedy. Interruption and inscrutability enthrall me. I desire impersonality, but every time I get close, it shakes me off.

Being human is a condition (animalady), not a positive value. Being human is not something poems I like or don’t like are more or less invested in. Though being “insufficiently” human sounds like a good direction for poetry, even if I have not been able to go there, keep getting pulled back into the muck.

Emma’s death was an amputation. As with a chimeric (phantom) limb, I feel it. Recovery (covering over) is not an option. Recalculating is a different measure.

When the child dies, the father dies. It’s a mortal wound. What disappears in death grows wild in imagination.

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