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# Charles Bernstein's Response to the Postmodern Condition

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Tese de Mestrado em Estudos Anglo-Americanos, especialidade Literatura Norte-Americana, apresentada à Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra, sob a orientação da Professora Doutora Graça Maria Constantino Nunes de Oliveira Capinha.

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## I. Introduction

### 1. Charles Bernstein, a Postmodern American Poet

Born in New York in 1950 and educated at Harvard, majoring in Philosophy, Charles Bernstein has turned into one of the preeminent voices of contemporary American poetry since he started writing in the middle of the 1970s. Today, dozens of poetry and essay collections later, Bernstein is not only recognized as one of the foremost contemporary American poets and English professor at the University of Pennsylvania, but he is also known as one of the founders of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine (the starting point of what came to be known as the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E School). Established in 1978 and published over the span of four years, this magazine featured contributors, such as Bernstein himself, his co-editor Bruce Andrews, and other poets such as Peter Seaton and Ron Silliman. It was meant to offer a *forum* for alternative poetic voices, “an ongoing and open-ended collaborative conVERSation and exchange on a series of particular and partisan, but also mutable and provisional, poetic principles and proclivities” (Bernstein 1999: 249) leading to an enquiry into every constituent of our language. Instead of looking through language and viewing it as a model of communication, the contributors actually paid close attention to the agonistic materiality and political significance of individual syllables, words and sentences. In the introduction to *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (1984), Bernstein and Andrews describe the market-driven approach to literature which they opposed:

[W]here the word – words – cease to be valued for what they are themselves but only for their properties as instrumentalities leading us to a world outside or beyond them, so that words – language – disappear, become transparent, leaving the picture of a physical world the reader can then consume as if it were a commodity. This view of the role and historical functions of literature relates closely to our analysis of the capitalist social order as a whole [...] (Bernstein, Andrews 1984: x).

In short, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E strongly objected to the commoditization of literature through the forces of the mainstream publishing industry and other media. Instead,

they devised a counter-model which paid not only close attention to “the details” of our language, but was also careful to found and support small press distributors such as Roof Books, Segue Publishing or Sun & Moon Press.

This mixture of Marxist concerns and a constant probing into the materiality of the signifier is also one of the main themes of Charles Bernstein’s poetry. Such probing spirit inevitably leads to a continuous reevaluation of one’s own literary heritage. It is therefore the main hypothesis of this thesis that Charles Bernstein’s poetry reflects various aspects of postmodern philosophy also envisaged by Marxism, displaying the author’s ambiguity towards the different kinds of 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-American modernist poetry and its principal representatives, Pound and Eliot, on the one hand, and William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein, on the other.

## **2. A Brief Note on the Ideas of *Modernity* and *Modernism***

Before discussing Bernstein’s poetry and evaluating its historical and social context, it seems necessary to clarify the two most important terms that will be used during the analysis. In fact, Bernstein’s works constantly remind the reader that both modernity and modernism are the undeniable basis of contemporary society, culture and arts. These two terms, however, have been the subject of an animated discussion amongst scholars and artists, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The whole extent of the discussion cannot be reproduced here, but it is necessary to clarify the working definition of the terms employed in this thesis.

In a first tentative differentiation it can be said that modernity is a broader term used to describe very general tendencies, which emerged in Western societies in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, while modernism can be regarded primarily as an artistic movement, emerging in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was based on ambiguous feelings about a society and a

world shaped by modernity. According to Matei Calinescu, modernity or “bourgeois modernity” (Calinescu 1987: 41) has its beginning in the age of Enlightenment:

The doctrine of progress, the confidence in the beneficial possibilities of science and technology, the concern with time [...], the cult of reason, and the ideal of freedom defined within the framework of an abstract humanism, but also the orientation toward pragmatism and the cult of action and success – all have been associated in various degrees with the battle for the modern and were kept alive and promoted as key values in the triumphant civilization established by the middle class (Calinescu 1987: 41-2).

This description as a whole is by and large still valid for contemporary Western societies. It is still useful today even though some aspects of it, such as the largely optimistic view of science, for example, have undergone ostensible revisions, especially during the First and Second World Wars and as a reaction to growing fears of environmental catastrophe. In fact, as Helga Nowotny suggests in *Insatiable Curiosity* (2008), modernity and the advance of science and technology were met from the start by ambivalence, which may be considered the typically modern sentiment also lying at the root of modern art:

The ambivalence that is a characteristic of modernity is a response to the tension underlying every controversy, every dialogue, every painstaking cogitation about the relationship between society and science. It is the tension between the demand for autonomy, self-determination, and human freedom and the inescapable fact of limitation, loss of control, and hegemony. [...] This contradiction and the friction resulting from it stood in the center of the creative work of modern art. The sensibility of the modern subject, which so often manifests itself as discontent with modernity and as a form of rebellion against the material and institutional achievements that in turn have created the preconditions for the existence of the modern subject, has become an integral component of the project of modern art. From Baudelaire through Nietzsche to the representatives of postmodernism, a thread of discontent, inner conflict, and ambivalence runs counter to the technological optimism of their respective times (Nowotny 2008: 148-9).

Both for Calinescu and for Nowotny, this description implies a certain normative judgment as to what kind of society is to be regarded as modern. Faith in science and technology, respect for civil liberties and a general acceptance of democracy are key values of modern societies. Therefore, there are still numerous countries in the world today that,

according to this definition, have not yet proceeded into modernity. I believe that many of these are often subsumed under the heading “non-Western”.

Of course, there are many other competing definitions of modernity that are much broader but less helpful. There is, for example, the distinction between *modern* and *ancient*, with *modern* “designating [...] the whole culture of Christianity as distinct from that of the heathen world” (Calinescu 1987: 37). Others view the end of the Middle Ages and the emergence of the Renaissance as the beginning of modernity. However, taking modernity as a description of society as a whole, it seems most accurate to stay with Enlightenment as a starting point.

Besides the term “bourgeois modernity”, Calinescu also uses “cultural modernity”, which actually describes the basis of modernism. This term can be understood very broadly as a development in the humanities, which has its roots primarily in romanticism in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century France, where it was represented by Stendhal and Baudelaire. Calinescu calls it “the other modernity”. In fact, he explicitly contrasts “bourgeois modernity” with “cultural modernity”:

By contrast, the other modernity, the one that was to bring into being the avant-gardes, was from its romantic beginnings inclined toward radical antibourgeois attitudes. It was disgusted with the middle-class scale of values and expressed its disgust through the most diverse means, ranging from rebellion, anarchy, and apocalypticism to aristocratic self-exile. So, more than its positive aspirations (which often have very little in common), what defines cultural modernity is its often outright rejection of bourgeois modernity, its consuming negative passion (Calinescu 1987: 42).

Calinescu identifies Stendhal as the earliest representative of “cultural modernity” and thus sees Baudelaire as his follower a few decades later:

Stendhal is aware that to be consistently modern (romantic, in his terminology) one has to take the risk of shocking the public, at least insofar as its taste is influenced by official academism and a host of deep-rooted prejudices, for which an inadequate understanding of tradition is responsible. In brief, for Stendhal the concept of romanticism embodies the notions of change, relativity, and, above all, presentness, which make its meaning coincide to a large extent

with what Baudelaire would call decades later “la modernité”. Romanticism, simply put, is the sense of the present conveyed artistically (Calinescu 1987: 40).

This excerpt already expresses the striving for radical newness that was to define the modernist movements at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that finds its purest expression in Pound’s imperative “Make it new!”. When Baudelaire gave the first comprehensive definition of romanticism in “The Salon of 1846”, he also placed “a new and radical emphasis on the idea of modernity and the value of novelty” (Calinescu 1987: 47). Baudelaire’s definition is echoed by Bradbury and McFarlane:

The case for Modernism’s total dominance has often been put and it is easy to see. One of the word’s associations is with the coming of a new era of high aesthetic self-consciousness and non-representationalism, in which art turns from realism and representation towards style, technique, and spatial form in pursuit of a deeper penetration of life (Bradbury, McFarlane 1976: 25).

Bradbury and McFarlane see the importance of modernism in its “quality of abstraction and highly conscious artifice, taking us behind familiar reality, breaking away from familiar functions of language and conventions of form” (Bradbury, McFarlane 1976: 24). It is a revolutionary movement shaped by radical experimentalism, internationalism, an affinity towards chaos in art and the dehumanization of the arts, which means an elimination of the “human, all too human” from the arts, which had dominated other epochs (Bradbury, McFarlane 1976: 26). These ideas which formed the basis of the modernist aesthetic in France quickly spread and meanwhile, as Bradbury and McFarlane point out, there was the development of various Germanic modernisms in Germany, Austria and the Scandinavian countries:

In Scandinavia, in Germany, and to a substantial extent in Austria, it was the eighties, nineties and early 1900s that witnessed the debate about the nature and name of Modernism in quite unparalleled passion and vehemence (Bradbury, McFarlane 1976: 37).

One of the crucial moments seems to be the famous series of lectures delivered by Georg Brandes in Copenhagen in 1888, in which he pointed out the importance of a hitherto almost unknown philosopher by the name of Friedrich Nietzsche. It was this lecture that sparked the beginning of Nietzsche's influence on critical thinking, social theory and the arts, which is still very powerful today.

At the turn of the century, modernism finally became a wide-spread cultural phenomenon and some well-known developments in Southern Europe include, for example, Marinetti's futurist manifesto from 1909 in Italy and the remarkable poetry written by modernists namely the Portuguese Mário de Sá-Carneiro, Almada Negreiros or Fernando Pessoa and his various heteronyms, all these developments allow Cyril Connolly to see the starting point of the modern movement in 1880, which is described as the point where "the Enlightenment's 'critical intelligence' had combined with Romanticism's 'exploring sensibility'" (Connolly *apud* Bradbury, McFarlane 1976: 31). Connolly believes Anglo-American modernism to have had its "high season [...] somewhere between 1910 and 1925" (Connolly *apud* Bradbury, McFarlane 1976: 31). The critic Frank Kermode also sees the height of this movement at some point around the First World War: "[A]nybody who thinks about what modernism now means will rightly look more closely at the period between 1907 and, say, 1925" (Kermode *apud* Bradbury, McFarlane 1976: 32). Virginia Woolf famously pinpointed the beginning of the modernist age to December 1910, the year in which King Edward died and the first Postimpressionist Exhibition was held; D.H. Lawrence sees the starting point in the year 1915; the critic Richard Ellmann regards the literal turn of the century in 1900 as the beginning of modernism, while Harry Levin points to the miraculous literary production of 1922, "the year of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, of Rilke's *Duineser Elegien* (*Duino Elegies*) and *Die Sonette an Orpheus* (*Sonnets to Orpheus*), of Brecht's first play *Baal*, of Lawrence's *Aaron's Rod* and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, of Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (*Sodom and Gomorrah*) and Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie*" (Woolf,

Lawrence, Ellmann, Levin *apud* Bradbury, McFarlane 1976: 33). Reading Charles Bernstein's poetry as a "postmodern" work, I believe one must always bear in mind the complexity of this discussion on the terms "modernity" and "modernism". What, then, is the postmodern condition?

### **3. Postmodernity – Towards the Emergence of a Poeticized Culture**

"The Postmodern Condition", according to Lyotard's declaration is an end to all grand meta-narratives. But following a helpful insight by Marjorie Perloff, it seems prudent to apply the term as a kind of meta-narrative itself: "The *Postmodern Condition* is itself a metanarrative – the story of how, in the face of post-World War II scientific knowledge, technology, and information theory, the delegitimation of the 'grand' metanarratives has set in (Perloff 1998:9)." This thesis assumes that the main characteristics of the narratives covered by the term are probing and doubt. There is, on the one hand, the semiotic doubt whether language as a system of signs is able to signify anything beyond itself. On the other hand, there is the constant probing into the narrative design that constitutes our society. Under this theoretical umbrella, five different theoretical facets of postmodernism will be taken into account: (1) Saussure's and Derrida's approach to language as a set of arbitrary signs that only work in ultimately self-referential semiotic chains; (2) Foucault's notion that every speech act is a piece of discourse influenced by the principal discourses dominating society; (3) this thesis tests Rorty's theory that the postmodern intellectuals' inability to believe in a finite vocabulary makes them turn towards irony; (4) the intertwining of science and arts as it can be found in Wolfgang Iser's recognition of the "aesthetic turn" (which postulates that science and epistemology are creational and aesthetics can be found in the order of things. Looking at the issue from a different angle is Richard Rorty, whose concept of a "poeticized culture" asserts that the epistemological is always cultural and we therefore need better fictions); (5) the most important concept that reverberates in all of these aspects

above is the resulting drive towards innovation in art (which constantly keeps generating new views on semiotics, discourse theory, our finite vocabulary, the aesthetic turn and continuously contributes to the development of a poeticized culture).

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984), Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodern as “incredulity towards all metanarratives” (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). By “grand metanarratives” he means a valid belief system into which people invest various forms of capital (cultural or economic, for example) and to the cause of which they are absolutely committed. An example would be the way in which after the Second World War some intellectuals in Western Europe viewed Socialism as a viable alternative. So, many of them committed their social and cultural capital to the cause of Socialism by using their intellectual reputation as a platform to tell everybody that it was the more humane system. The moment of disillusionment came for many of these Western intellectuals when the Soviet military attacked the rioters in Prague in 1968. While some sociologists would claim that such disillusionment leads to a renegotiation of one’s belief, Lyotard believes that events like this have finally led to an end of all the “grand narratives”. As a consequence of this declaration, the American philosopher Richard Rorty’s argues that the postmodern intellectuals’ inability to believe in a final vocabulary makes them turn towards irony. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Richard Rorty explains the relationship between the loss of a grand narrative and the rise of irony amongst contemporary intellectuals:

I shall define an "ironist" as someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself (Rorty 1989: 73).

Following Rorty, it seems clear that Charles Bernstein is an ironist and there is irony in his works. However, his irony differs greatly from the kind of irony that prevails in other contemporary works of literature. This poet employs what I would like to call “socially-engaging irony” as opposed to the very fashionable “evasive irony” which has come to dominate some branches of contemporary literature and the wider terrain of public discourse in the West ever since the loss of a grand narrative has become an indisputable fact, at least for many scholars and intellectuals. “Evasive irony” is the stylistic device of choice for disillusioned contemporary intellectuals to show that they are well aware of existing social problems, injustices etc., but they refuse to get too involved in discussions over these matters. One prominent example for the occurrence of evasive irony is the staged dandyism in so-called pop literature in the 1980s and 1990s. One particular example of this technique can be found in Bret Easton Ellis’ widely discussed novel *American Psycho* (1991) in which postmodern contingency is treated through a mass murdering protagonist who trivializes the recounting of murders he committed by framing it with lectures about the aesthetics of contemporary pop music.

Charles Bernstein’s writings stand in sharp contrast to this strategy. A good example for his “socially-engaging irony” can be found in his “Letter from New York” which he sent to his friend Arkadii in Russia describing the situation in New York immediately after 09-11-2001. He illustrates the nation’s way of mourning by recounting the situation at the elementary school in Manhattan where his brother is a teacher. Immediately after the attacks, this school was flooded with condolence letters and presents. He writes:

My brother teaches at an elementary school a few blocks from the World Trade Center site. When the buildings got hit, the children had to be evacuated. The school has been flooded with assigned condolence letters from children across America. “Now children,” the teachers say, “let’s send a letter to the downtrodden youngsters of SoHo.” Bags of letters on identical size cards with chocolate candy kisses arrive with such sprawled greetings as, “My name is Billy. I am sorry your parents or close relative died. My favorite sport is bungee ball. What’s yours?” Of course, such letters cannot

be passed on to the kids and besides no one in the school lost parents. The school is also being flooded with gifts, even though these kids are quite well off; the gifts would be better directed to the poorest schools in Brooklyn and the Bronx or uptown Manhattan. But holiday giving is directed obsessively, almost manically, at the 9-11 victims. As a result, the homeless and poor, a growing number these days, have even less help than usual (Bernstein 2006: 32).

This passage is full of ironic constellations and Bernstein further increases those by recounting them in a socially-engaging manner. For example, the fact that the children in SoHo are being called “downtrodden” and are getting “flooded” with gifts even though they have not lost any relatives and are “quite well off” shows that help, in this instance, was completely misdirected. Instead of providing help for the poor, it was directed at the rich who did not need it. Bernstein’s rhetoric thus calls into question the ways of mourning in a consumer society. In this excerpt, Americans – rather than providing immaterial, moral support or focusing on desperately needed appliances – flood fellow Americans with meaningless purchased goods that will probably be thrown away within days. Furthermore, a certain trivialization of life and death is expressed through means of irony when one child writes a letter to another: “My name is Billy. I am sorry your parents or close relative died. My favorite sport is bungee ball. What’s yours?” The juxtaposition of death and bungee ball in this paragraph is probably one of the most explicit instances of “socially-engaging irony” in Charles Bernstein’s works.

However, he himself insists that irony, even socially-engaging as it were, is too polite because it obeys the dominant models of representation. Instead, he devises the term “comedy” as a kind of:

acting out, in dialectical play, the insincerity of form as much as content. Such poetic play does not open into a neat opposition of dry high irony and wet lyric expressiveness but, in contrast, collapses into a more destabilizing field of pathos, the ludicrous, schtick, sarcasm; a multidimensional textual field that is congenitally unable to maintain an evenness of surface tension or flatness of affect, where linguistic shards of histrionic appropriateness pierce the momentary calm of an obscure twist of phrase, before cantoring into the next available trope; less a shield than a probe (Bernstein 1992: 220).

In this passage, Bernstein expresses his attitude towards writing and verbal expression in general. “The insincerity of form as much as content” describes his affinity with play and experimentation with form. There are many instances in Bernstein’s works where he presents certain text genres in other formats. Examples of this include “Dear Mr. Fanelli”, which is a letter of complaint written in the shape of a poem to a high-ranking manager of New York’s public transport system. Another example is Bernstein’s essay “Artifice of Absorption” which is also written in verse.<sup>1</sup> These are variants of poetic play which disrupt the text with comic tension between form and content. Such experiments destabilize certain expectations and previously held notions about certain genres. In fact, they ridicule any notion about what to expect from linguistic utterances and instead show how verbal expression is part of a “multidimensional textual field”, which is highly performative, subjective, unstable and constantly invites innovation. It is especially the performative element, “the acting out” or what he calls “histrionic appropriateness”, which Bernstein is very concerned with and which he values just as much as the written poem.

Now, considering another postmodern phenomenon, the intertwining of science and arts in various ways. There is the “aesthetic turn” declared by Wolfgang Iser, according to which epistemology is becoming increasingly aesthetic:

While it was traditionally assumed that aesthetics is only a matter of secondary, premeditated realities, we are now recognizing the fact that aesthetics already belongs to the basic layer of wisdom and reality. Traditional knowledge of reality was meant to be objectivist and fundamentalist, while aesthetic phenomena were used to illustrate laws of genuine creation. [...] Since we have realized that not only the arts, but also other human activity, including understanding, are of a creational nature, these aesthetic concepts – such as appearance, changeability, manifoldness, infinity or drifting, have become basic categories of reality (Welsch 1996: 60) [my translation].

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<sup>1</sup> “Dear Mr. Fanelli” was originally published in *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (1999) and can also be found in *All the Whiskey in Heaven* (2010). “Artifice of Absorption” originally appeared in 1987 as a monograph in the Paper Air series and was later reprinted in *A Poetics* (1992).

In this passage, Welsch acknowledges the fact that science is “creational” and that the “creational” and aesthetic are always epistemological. This means that scientific experimentation always benefits from aesthetic perspectives and that the aesthetic and the “creational” as they can be found in artistic production always lead to an epistemological gain. For example, the computer-generated models of double helixes in biology or molecules in chemistry that are molded into little plastic sculptures show how aesthetic principles such as symmetry and shape might influence ways of looking at “hard” science.

While Welsch points out that we have recognized this intertwining of aesthetics and epistemology, Rorty argues that society still needs to foster a poeticized culture:

A poeticized culture would be one which would not insist we find the real wall behind the painted ones, the real touchstones of truth as opposed to touchstones which are merely cultural artifacts. It would be a culture which, precisely by appreciating that all touchstones are such artifacts, would take as its goal the creation of more various and multicolored artifacts (Rorty 1989: 53-4).

Rorty reminds the reader that the epistemological is cultural and therefore artificial, fictional, not natural. His conclusion then is that we need better fictions. While Welsch points out that we have recognized the fact that epistemology is creational and aesthetics is epistemological, Rorty claims that we then have yet to foster a poeticized culture. Thus, he reasserts the arts’ responsibility to produce multi-faceted, polyvalent and manifold works in order to broaden the human horizon of possibility. This thesis will show that Charles Bernstein views poems written by him and others as exactly such artifacts – artifacts that are meant to contribute to the emergence of a poeticized culture. He expresses the probing nature of the poem as cultural artifact in *My Way*, when he states that:

When a poem enters the world it enters into a political, in the sense of ideological and historical, space. By refusing the criteria of efficacy for determining the political value of the poem, we confer political value on the odd, eccentric, different, opaque, maladjusted – the non-conforming (Bernstein 1999: 4).

In this, as in many other passages, Bernstein makes a claim for the importance of non-mainstream and otherwise silenced voices which can bring diversity into the cultural landscape and lead the reader to epistemological insights that are often hidden because of the imposing constraints of officially propagated arts and public discourse. It can be said that Bernstein takes Rorty's as well as Welsch's approach; he views epistemology as necessarily "creational" and the aesthetic as epistemological, but he also keeps reminding the reader that the arts need to continuously contribute challenging works to the process of establishing and maintaining a poeticized culture – through "the creation of more various and multicolored artifacts".

While Welsch's and Rorty's admittance and invitation of aesthetics into other realms carry with them the political connotation of a more progressive approach to science, society and life, at the same time they also lead to Walter Benjamin's analysis of the relation between aesthetics and politics in "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936). As Marjorie Perloff recounts, in *The Futurist Moment* (1986), Benjamin's essay sees the relation between aesthetics and politics as a modern and crucial problem leading to fascism and communism. Here are Benjamin's words:

Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. [...] The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. [...] All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war. (Benjamin *apud* Perloff 1986: 30).

Perloff emphasizes the congruency of Benjamin's theoretical framework with Marinetti's notion of modernism's aesthetics. It culminates in a war-celebrating passage of

Marinetti's manifesto on the Ethiopian colonial war, *Il Poema Africano Della Disione "28 Ottobre"* (1937), which was also quoted by Benjamin.<sup>2</sup>

This mixing of aesthetics, politics and warfare can also be found in many other cases of fascism and imperialism. For example, the aesthetics of mass demonstration are said to have facilitated the national socialists' rise to power in the Weimar Republic or, to give another example, the only way in which it seems possible for pilots to drop bombs on other human beings is, of course, in many cases the ignorance of what exactly is being bombed, but, with it, the aesthetic reward of viewing the beauty, the symmetry and the sheer spectacle of an exploding bomb from above. While this notion seems applicable to all the air raids in history, this theory has particular explanatory power for the droppings of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the napalm bombings during the Vietnam War, which were not only experienced by the pilots but also captured in motion picture. Hence our collective imagination of these bombings is not only informed by historical accounts of the suffering and human tragedy which were caused, but also, and perhaps more powerfully, by the films that show the explosion of the atomic bomb in black and white and the carpet bombings of Vietnam in full-color.

Benjamin's argument offers a powerful justification for modern industrialized nations at war:

The horrible features of imperialistic warfare are attributable to the discrepancy between the tremendous means of production and their inadequate utilization in the process of production (Benjamin *apud* Perloff 1986: 30).

What this discrepancy eventually leads to is not only warfare but also a thoroughly fascist state:

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<sup>2</sup> "War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metallization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. ... War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the smoke spirals from burning villages" (Marinetti *apud* Perloff 1986: 30).

Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art (Benjamin *apud* Perloff 1986:30).

Therefore, one has to be cautious when trying to mix aesthetics and politics, but Charles Bernstein is well aware of this. His recognizing of the political nature of art calls for a poeticized culture that must be plural and open, "a multi-dimensional textual textual field" – never authoritarian or dictatorial. Arts and letters can influence and expand the minds of researchers and inspire the probing into yet uncharted scientific territory. The above-mentioned example of the visualization of the double helix or plastic models of atoms and molecules are just a few examples of this positive impact aesthetics can have on science and vice-versa. It also opens new roads into critical inquiry – and that is what makes it radically poetic and political: changing the basic categories of reality (Welsch) in a poeticized culture (Rorty) by being less a shield than a probe (Bernstein). The debate about these questions of aesthetics and epistemology is still on-going, but the scope of this thesis cannot, unfortunately, render the whole of its complexity. To understand Bernstein's political poetics it is important to realize that his works constantly raise the question of knowledge and knowledge production. He constantly emphasizes the need to learn from views that diverge from our own, to challenge the dominant modes of representation in our society, "the touchstones of truth".

Following this, I see Rorty's "real touchstones of truth" and/or "cultural artifacts", and the need to create more "various and multicolored artifacts", the concept of a poeticized culture, closely linked to the concept of a mode-2 society as proposed by Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons (2001) who have postulated that, in contemporary societies, scientific endeavors should always be the object of the public's scrutiny. In other words, advances in the sciences and knowledge production or as Helga Nowotny calls it, the scientist's

insatiable curiosity, carry unprecedented risks while the benefits are almost never certain. Examples for potentially dangerous research are genetic engineering or the exploration of nuclear technologies. That is why the authors claim that scientific knowledge in contemporary Western societies needs contextualization to be socially robust. This means that ideally scientific projects are first presented to the public in terms of potential risks, benefits and usage contexts, and the public is then asked to vote either for or against this kind of research. The forum in which this public consideration, discussion, and ultimately, deliberation takes place is a virtual and multi-faceted one that may consist of the media, public discussions or lectures. This is what the authors call the *agora* – not only a place for the masses to express themselves, but also to negotiate and defend their rights:

The *agora* is the public space in which 'science meets the public', and in which the public 'speaks back' to science. It is the domain (in fact, many domains) in which contextualisation occurs and in which socially robust knowledge is continually subject to testing while in the process of becoming more robust. Neither state nor market, neither exclusively private nor exclusively public, the *agora* is the space in which societal and scientific problems are framed and defined, and where what will be accepted as 'solution' is being negotiated (Nowotny et al. 2001: 247, my emphasis).

This thesis proposes that the ambitious, radical and innovative poetry written by Charles Bernstein and others constitutes not only an indispensable part of our contemporary Western democracies but also a resonating body that is part of this *agora*. Especially the way in which Bernstein's poetry addresses, challenges and confronts the public with contemporary politics, technology and philosophy and how he tries everything he can to provide free and globally accessible platforms for alternative voices, such as Pennsound, can be considered valuable contributions to a contemporary *agora* and a public intellectual climate which sparks critical reflection, leading to a new sense of (post)modernity and (re)connecting arts and society. Says Nowotny:

“Society” has taken the place that was once reserved for an artistic elite. The discontent with modernity is part of modernity, as is

democracy, which has become a medium of expressing and negotiating this discontent (Nowotny 2008: 161).

Charles Bernstein has, in fact, suggested that poetry should become a *forum* much like the *agora*, only that he calls it *polis*:

Indeed, in its counterconventional investigations, poetry engages *public* language at its roots, in that it tests the limits of conventionality while forging other alternative conventions [...] Moreover, the contained scale of such poetic engagements allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the formation of public space: of *polis*<sup>3</sup>. [...] The poetic authority to challenge dominant societal values, including conventional manners of communication, is a model for the individual political participation of each citizen. The peculiar act of exercising this authority has implications for the public sphere insofar as such independent exercise of authority is not legitimated within a political context that fosters passivity (Bernstein 1992: 219).

In this passage Bernstein shows how poets are supposed to use language in order to work against conventionality and inspire alternative modes of thinking to foster better fictions. Ideally, these writing strategies are able to describe the world differently, to forge an imagined scenery and offer the public a utopian or dystopian vision of what might be or one of the many imaginable scenarios in between – and thus inspire people to act in favor of the utopia described in verse or to stand up against a bleak dystopian vision. Bernstein leaves no doubt about the characteristics that a politically engaging poetry needs to have:

We also insist that politics demands complex thinking and that poetry is an arena for such thinking: a place to explore the constitution of meaning, of self, of groups, of nations – of value. The politics of poetry for which I speak is open-ended; the result of its interrogations are not assumed but discovered in the process and available to reformulation. Its complexity and *adversity* to conformity puts such a poetic practice well outside the stadium of dominant culture. It is this refusal of efficacy, call it a refusal of submission, that marks its political character (Bernstein 1992: 219).

We can read here the refusal of “performance” and the choice of “performativity” that Lyotard speaks about.

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<sup>3</sup> My emphasis.

All of the five facets that constitute the postmodern condition as defined before will each be addressed by an in-depth reading of what I consider to be one programmatic poem. While cross-references with other poems, essays and interviews will be made at any time, the focus of this thesis will be laid on the four poems of *Let's Just Say* (2003), called "In Particular", "Thank you for Saying Thank You", "Let's Just Say" and "every lake...". Furthermore, there will a discussion of one early poem from the collection *Shade* (1978), called "Long Trails of Cars Returning from the Beach"<sup>4</sup>. An unabridged version of the short collection *Let's Just Say* was reprinted in *Girly Man* (2006). Like most of the poetry which Bernstein has written between 1975 and 1995, *Shade* is entirely reprinted in the collection *Republics of Reality* (2000).

The issue of innovation will, of course, manifest itself in all of the selected poems. But one will specifically address point five. The poem "LTCRB" from the collection *Shade* can be seen as Bernstein's testimony to a new poetics and adds another piece to the jigsaw, which is the author's all-inclusive sense concerning the different kinds of twentieth-century Anglo-American modernist literature. On the one hand, there is the powerful Pound-Eliot-tradition which has come to dominate our view of modernism. Bernstein's reaction to Eliot's used-up mannered poetic language and Pound's documentary megalomania is a mixture of fascination and distance. What makes Bernstein's relationship to modernism even more complex is that there is an alternative modernist American tradition as well, which is principally represented by William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein. Bernstein highly appreciates the radicalism and the tendency towards language experiment, play and music in the works of these poets and this thesis argues that he views himself as a poet writing in the same tradition.

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<sup>4</sup> Henceforth referred to as "LTCRB".

All the other points will principally be addressed by the four poems from *Let's Just Say*. There is the circular, therefore endless, and eventually self-referential semiotic chain in “every lake...” which becomes even more interesting through the fact that the semantic link between the different signifiers continues to change. The poem “In Particular” works with Foucault’s discourse theory, intertwining it with Roman Jakobson’s theory of the poetic function of language. “Let’s just Say” displays both Derrida’s as well as Foucault’s theories. The poem “Thank you for Saying Thank You” alerts the reader to the possibility of a poeticized culture and of poetry as a vital part of the *polis* or *agora*.

At the end of this thesis, each reading will eventually contribute certain aspects towards a better understanding of Charles Bernstein’s poetics. Hopefully, the sum of these readings will constitute a prism which will enable a comprehensive synthesis of what Bernstein’s response to the postmodern condition entails.

## II. Poetics and Society

### 1. Charles Bernstein and the Postmodern Condition in Literature, Poetics and Society

The definition of the term postmodernism has been the object of contention for a long time. Marjorie Perloff, among others, gives an excellent account of the different positions in defining postmodernism, which include the emphatic usage of the term by critics such as Ihab Hassan or Leslie Fiedler, who used it, as Hassan himself recalls, with “approbation, and even with a touch of bravado” (Hassan 1981: 31). On the other hand, there is the outright denial of the phenomenon by critics such as Frank Kermode, who insists instead on a prolonged modernist period; furthermore, the essence of what is understood as postmodern ranges from conceptions of a neo-avantgarde to positions that view it as a radical break with any avant-garde tendencies. The situation is, in short, so complicated that Robert Kroetsch may well be right when he says that “just as, when I was a graduate student, there were about 300 definitions of ‘Romanticism’ there must be up to about 300 now for postmodernism” (Kroetsch *apud* Butling, Rudy 2005: 22). As shown in the first chapter of this thesis, one has to clearly differentiate between modernity and modernism. While modernity describes the philosophical and sociological constellations of Western societies since the Enlightenment, modernism refers to an artistic movement at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since contemporary Western societies are still very much shaped by the values of modernity, we can only postulate the emergence of postmodernity. However, it is helpful to describe the arts that were produced after the Second World War as works of postmodernism. The tension that arises in the following discussion of Bernstein’s poetry comes from the very ambiguity of the prefix “post”. This thesis is based on the idea that postmodern literature presents an ostensible rupture with Modernist literature. But the problem starts with modernism’s very own ambiguity. What are key features of modernism? In the book *Modernism*, Bradbury and McFarlane give, for instance, a plethora of features to describe the term but they also admit that modernism combined in itself contradictory

tendencies. For example, they mention that there is always the temptation to categorize different epochs as driven by either primarily rational or primarily irrational forces. They cite “Neo-Classicism, Enlightenment [and] Realism” as examples for the dominance of a rational world-view and “Baroque, *Sturm und Drang*, Romanticism” as examples for the dominance of an irrational mode of thinking (Bradbury, McFarlane 1976: 47). The problem, they admit, is quite simply that such easy categorizations are no longer possible with modernism. Modernist ambiguity, according to them, is characterized by “a compounding of all these potentials: the interpenetration, the reconciliation, the coalescence, the fusion – perhaps an appallingly explosive fusion – of reason and unreason, intellect and emotion, subjective and objective” (Bradbury, McFarlane 1976: 48). What this description shows is the converging nature of the various tendencies covered by the term modernism. In fact, it may be more correct to speak of modernisms. As Leonard Orr has pointed out, instead of solving the difficulties that arise from the term modernism, any approach to the term postmodernism will always “[bring] the question of the existence of modernism as a stable period-concept to the fore” (Orr 2005: 5).

This complexity of modernism and how it has influenced Bernstein seems to suggest is that the term postmodernism has to be used very carefully when describing the author’s works. Ralph Cohen quotes Linda Hutcheon, who is without doubt another preeminent theoretician of postmodernism, on the difficulties of defining postmodernism:

Even Linda Hutcheon, in her comprehensive attempt to theorize about postmodernism, points out that postmodernism’s relation to modernism is typically contradictory. ‘It makes neither a simple and radical break with it nor a straightforward continuity with it: it is both and neither’ (Hutcheon *apud* Cohen 1988: 23-4).

While this “both and neither” may sound cryptic at first, it is a fairly good description of Charles Bernstein’s divided attitude towards Anglo-American modernist practices. On the one hand, the prefix “post” in postmodernism may suggest a rupture with attitudes represented by the Pound-Eliot-tradition. On the other hand, “post” can be taken to

mean the inheritance of modernist practices as represented by Stein and Williams, but also certain techniques that were introduced by Pound and Eliot (such as “collage”, for instance). In this sense, postmodernism is a continuation of modernism under different conditions: for example, in other media, in an extended technological playground, with changed audiences and in a society where literature plays a different role than it did in the 1930s. Bernstein’s postmodernism is exactly this: a reflection of his complex attitude towards an already complex period in literary history which came to be known as modernism.

Keeping in mind the complexity of the issue, it is nonetheless helpful to look at some of the many definitions of postmodernism. While it cannot be the goal of this thesis to recapitulate the entire debate, nor to be partial towards one or the other position, it seems promising to look for the common themes that recur in the different attempts to define the term postmodernism.

Postmodernism as a literary period begins after the Second World. It represents both a departure from certain modernist writing strategies and a continuation of others. It rejects some, but it is at the same time indebted to others. The shift from modernism to postmodernism is thus gradual rather than abrupt. In fact, according to David Antin some writers have produced works that can be viewed as something of a bridge between the two periods and they reaffirm the old scholarly wisdom that no periodization is perfect. In fact, Williams, Stein and Joyce seem to be ahead of their time by writing texts that only develop into writing styles with a considerable following in the 1950s and only become an accepted, seriously studied and more-or-less understood literary phenomenon by the 1960s. Robert Lowell is a writer that might still be considered modernist even though he already conveys distinct differences from the Pound-Eliot-tradition. Therefore, David Antin calls him neo-modernist. The situation is similar to the Black Mountain Poets and the New York School. These poets distance themselves clearly from the Pound-Eliot tradition and their poetry is revolutionary for the 1950s. Robert Duncan and Charles Olson, particularly in “Projective

Verse”, and their attitude of freeing up poetry from stifling formal constraint are an important inspiration for later generations of poets. The exploratory poets emerging in the 1960s and 70s further expand the horizon of possibility. There is a dazzling multiplicity of developments, which includes (but is certainly not limited to) concrete poetry and its important exponents in South America and particularly Brazil, sound poetry, the mixing of poetry and the comic genre as practiced by bpNichol and others, examples such as David Antin writing his poems into the “California sky” and the emergence of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E School and their usage of the cut-up technique in poetry. All these developments of one ongoing tradition suggest that while the Black Mountain poets were groundbreaking pioneers, there is without doubt a new quality to the poetry emerging during and after what David Antin calls “the great explosion of American poetry” in the 1960s (Antin 1972: 132). Of course, some techniques can be traced to artistic movements of the modernist period. Sound poetry is indebted to Dada just as the cut-up poetry is indebted to techniques of literary “collage”, as invented by Pound and Eliot. However, the sum of all these artistic forces emerging in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, ranging from bpNichol’s comics to David Antin’s sky poems, suggest a new synergy of literature and technology that does represent a significant departure from modernism as described above.

Keeping in mind this view of a gradual shift from modern to postmodern literature, the partial indebtedness of the latter to the former and the hybrid nature and in between status of some outstanding artists, there are nonetheless some definitions that try to point out how postmodernism differs from modernism and while they all offer plenty of material for discussion, their sum may further elucidate the nature of Charles Bernstein’s poetry.

A convincing list of postmodernism’s features as opposed to those of modernism can be found in Hassan’s “The Question of Postmodernism” (Hassan 1981: 34). The eleven most important terms from this long list are further explained in his 1986-essay “Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective”. Here are short extracts of Hassan’s 1986-definition:

1. Indeterminacy: This includes “all manner of ambiguities, ruptures, and displacements affecting knowledge and society.”
2. Fragmentation: Postmodernism’s “preference for montage, collage, the found or cut-up literary object, for paratactic over hypotactic forms, metonymy over metaphor, schizophrenia over paranoia. Hence, too, this recourse to paradox, paralogy, parabasis, paracriticism, the openness of brokenness, unjustified margins.”
3. Decanonization: The “‘delegitimation’ of the mastercodes in society, a desuetude of the metanarratives, favoring instead ‘les petites histoires,’ which preserve the heterogeneity of language games.”
4. Self-less-ness/Depth-less-ness: “Losing itself in the play of language, in the differences from which reality is plurally made, the self impersonates its absence even as death stalks its games. It diffuses itself in depthless styles, refusing, eluding, interpretation.”
5. The Unpresentable/Unrepresentable: “Postmodern literature, particularly, often seeks its limits, entertains its ‘exhaustion,’ subverts itself in forms of articulate ‘silence.’ It becomes liminary, contesting the modes of its own representation.”
6. Irony: “In absence of a cardinal principle or paradigm, we turn to play, interplay, dialogue, polylogue, allegory, self-reflection – in short, to irony. This irony assumes indeterminacy, multivalence; it aspires to clarity, the clarity of demystification, the pure light of absence.”
7. Hybridization: “The ‘de-definition,’ deformation, of cultural genres engenders equivocal modes: ‘paracriticism’ ‘fictual discourse,’ the ‘new journalism,’ the ‘nonfiction novel,’ and a promiscuous category of ‘para-literature’ or ‘threshold literature,’ at once young and very old.”
8. Carnivalization: “The term [...] riotously embraces indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, selflessness, irony, hybridization.”
9. Performance/Participation: “Indeterminacy elicits participation; gaps must be filled. The postmodern text, verbal or nonverbal, invites performance: it wants to be written, revised, answered, acted out. Indeed, so much of postmodern art calls itself performance, as it transgresses genres.”
10. Constructionism: “Since postmodernism is radically tropic, figurative [and] irrealist, [...] it “constructs” reality in post-Kantian, indeed post-Nietzschean, ‘fictions.’”
11. Immanence: “This refers, without religious echo, to the growing capacity of mind to generalize itself through symbols. Everywhere now we witness problematic diffusions, dispersals, dissemination; we

experience the extension of our senses, as Marshall McLuhan crankily presaged, through new media and technologies.”

(Hassan 1986: 504-8)

All of the above-mentioned aspects can be found in Charles Bernstein's poetry. Throughout this thesis, it will explicitly be stated, if applicable, to which of Hassan's categories the currently discussed feature of Bernstein's poetry pertains.

As stated before, a neat differentiation between modernism and postmodernism is very difficult and Hassan's categories may also echo some of modernism's inventions. However, regardless of the breadth and complexity of the issue, the one theme that all of Hassan's points seem to have in common is an understanding of the postmodern condition as a large-scale project of probing and doubt. This theme of probing and doubt will dominate the analysis of Bernstein's poetry. In the following, there will be a brief sketch of the theme, the principal kinds of probing and doubt which inform postmodernism in general and the works of Charles Bernstein in particular.

There is, on the one hand, the general area of linguistic doubt. The question is whether language as a system of signs is able to signify anything beyond itself. The first part of the issue has its theoretical foundation mainly in the works of Saussure and Jakobson, Derrida and Foucault. On the other hand, there is the constant probing into the narrative design that constitutes our society. The first part consists of the ideas of: the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified; the idea of language as an endless semiotic chain; the constant deferral of meaning; transdiscursivity (Perloff 1985).

The second part of our theoretic framework gives an even greater emphasis to the sociological basis of postmodernism. There is, of course, Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), which declared an end to all grand meta-narratives such as Marxism, for example, the loss of these meta-narratives and the growth of contingency are, among other factors, due to the fact that our society has, according to Niklas Luhmann

(1995), evolved from a stratified society, in which social movement was nearly impossible, to a functionally differentiated society, in which social movement (upward or downward) is possible and therefore presents chances and risks at the same time. This has enabled a dazzling multiplicity of coexisting lifestyles, personal choices and decisions, which have come to be known as one result of bourgeois modernity. Luhmann describes the difference between a stratified society and a functionally differentiated society in his book *Social Systems* (1995). He further expanded on the topic in *Theories of Distinction: Redescribing the Descriptions of Modernity* (2002):

[T]he structure of modern society is determined by functional differentiation and no longer by a coherent hierarchical stratification or by a one-center/periphery differentiation. Functional differentiation requires polycontextural, hypercomplex, complexity-descriptions without unifying perspective. Society remains the same but appears as different depending upon the functional subsystem (politics, economy, science, mass media, education, religion, art, and so on) that describes it. The same is different. The integration of the system can be thought of no longer as a process of applying principles but rather as a reciprocal reduction of the degrees of freedom of its subsystems. Reason and consensus are replaced by evolutionary tests, that is, by uncertainty, and motivating orientations shift from symbols of identity, principles and norms to boundaries and differences, to ecological problems, to individuals as distinct from society, or to more or less fundamentalistic oppositions (Luhmann 2002: 89).

For Luhmann, the crucial difference between modern and pre-modern society lies in the way in which it is organized. The stratified society had a rigid class structure that was not permeable whereas the functionally differentiated society enabled what is nowadays called social mobility. Likewise, there is no unifying perspective anymore, everything depends on the viewpoint of the given individual and the particular situation he/she is in. The sum of these individual views leads to “polycontextural, hypercomplex, complexity-descriptions without unifying perspective”. Depending on the different subsystems that make up society the views on society vary greatly. Instead of relying on the wisdom of a small elite and aiming for consensus, modern society expects dissenting voices and is ready

to call everything into question and make it subject to “evolutionary tests”. While the stratified society and the rigid class system it stood for depended on “symbols of identity” and “principles and norms” as stabilizing factors, the functionally differentiated society concentrates on “boundaries and differences” and “ecological problems”, on ongoing contradictions and realities and issues that are located outside of the respective societal system. The lengthy excerpt above is quoted not only because it provides one explanation for contingency and therefore the end of all grand meta-narratives, but it also elucidates at least one issue in Bernstein’s biography which is crucial for understanding his social and ethnic positioning as a poet. As he acknowledges in an interview, the principal conflict between him and his father arose from their different views on the possibilities of the functionally differentiated society, a conflict many writers live through at one point or another. His father’s mercantile ideology was grounded in the idea of upward social mobility or at least the maintenance of one’s social status through the generations, whereas Bernstein, like other would-be artists, was troubled by this kind of thinking:

But here’s where the ethnic ethos comes in: it wasn’t for us, the children to continue in business but to become professionals, free from the grinding labor and terrorizing uncertainty of business. The pressure, then, was to be a physician or lawyer; my own choice, at least initially toward downward social mobility, was rankling and fundamentally unacceptable, and must have made me seem ungrateful and disrespectful of the whole struggle of the business, of [my father’s] life (Bernstein 1999: 234-5).

This remark already presents in sociological terms an instance of probing and doubt of lifestyle choices in Bernstein’s own life. There are a number of poems in which Bernstein contemplates the lifestyle choices enabled by the functionally differentiated society. One example is “Didn’t We” from *World on Fire* (2005), which was collected in *Girly Man* (2006):

Inch by inch, the paths breaking  
into patches of blue and green  
  
then black and brown, then

over the pass to the top of the  
 remotest anterior, accustomed as  
 we are to torrential indifference  
 and beatific familiarity. “Look  
 up in the sky” – another ad for  
 vinyl tubing, pillow talk of  
 Whosits & Whatsits of Nob &  
 Kebob, Insley & Ufragious,  
 Ackabag & Boodalip. Bump right  
 along [...]

[...] It was in 1943 and then again  
 one more time. Beat bird without a  
 feather to call its own, a miser who  
 lives on a pile of mylar, the studio  
 with the view of the studio, my  
 electric blinker maker, strapped  
 in for take off. NO FLOATING  
 ALLOWED. As quiet as  
 the steps to indelible vanishing.

(Bernstein 2006: 37-8)

In this poem Bernstein describes the wide variety of lifestyle choices enabled by functionally differentiated American society and the resulting contrasts. It displays the complex interplay of the American landscape and how it is interspersed by advertisements. There is a comparison drawn between a “beat bird” without feathers and the American artist who is a “miser living on a pile of mylar”, in a studio “with the view of the studio”. While this poem emphasizes the option of becoming an artist, it shows the difficulties artists may face in a consumer society. If one chooses to become an artist, one might end up as an “electric blinker maker”, take-off is prevented by being strapped in. There is no floatation

possible. The message of the poem seems to be that while art nowadays may only be a set of “steps to indelible vanishing”, it is nonetheless worth pursuing a career as an artist.

It is exactly this probing and inquiring spirit into some fundamental assumptions in modern society that can also be found in his poetry, which contemplates the end of all meta-narratives. The consequence of this, the American philosopher Richard Rorty (1989) argues, is that many contemporary intellectuals have also lost the belief in the validity of “a finite vocabulary” to describe a world that has become increasingly contingent. Therefore, many intellectuals turn towards irony in order to deal with this growing contingency. The same doubt about the validity of our vocabulary is expressed throughout Charles Bernstein’s works, even though his response entails an irony of a different kind, as was already shown before and will become evident throughout this analysis.

## **2. Testimonies to Radical Innovation**

This chapter deals with Bernstein as an uncompromising innovator of poetry. The constant striving for radical newness in (post-)modern literature is grounded, in part, in the fact that it actively reflects on its own relationship to the writings of the past. The present reading suggests that “Long Trails of Cars Returning from the Beach” (“LTCRB”) comments on Bernstein’s own divided relationship towards modernism – especially towards the Pound-Eliot-tradition. Postmodern poets like Charles Bernstein or David Antin may appreciate and celebrate their poems as works of art but they are deeply troubled by some aspects of their aesthetics and while they are in many ways indebted to some modernist innovators, such as Williams and Stein, they both distance themselves very clearly from certain aspects of Pound’s and Eliot’s writing strategies. These aspects include Pound’s totalizing historical project and Eliot’s mannered language, as well as what David Antin alternatively calls Pound’s ‘Great Books’ mentality and Eliot’s nature of being “provincial”. Antin calls American modernism “the Metaphysical Modernist tradition, which was by no

means a “modernist” tradition but an anomaly peculiar to American and English poetry”

(Antin 1972: 120). As Antin further explains:

It was the result of a collision of strongly anti-modernist and provincial sensibilities with the hybrid modernism of Pound and the purer modernism of Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams. Because of the intense hostility to "modernism" of Eliot, Ransom, and Tate, it was not possible for them to come into anything but superficial contact with it except as mediated through Ezra Pound, whom Eliot at least was able to misread as a fellow provincial, chiefly because of Pound's "Great Books" mentality (Antin 1972: 120).

What Antin means by the term “Great Books mentality” is the bourgeois notion that respectability in literature is best achieved by producing large tomes. This is a view that deems quantity as more important than quality. Accordingly, a few lines of poetry can never have the same merit as a large and intricate work. Not only do poets like Eliot obey these unwritten laws, but they measure other writers’ works by the same standard – an attitude that eventually culminates in a well-known saying by another advocate of the “Great Books mentality”, Thomas Mann, who famously said in the foreword to *The Magic Mountain* (1926): “Only the exhaustive is truly interesting.”

Charles Bernstein’s discussion of Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos* is also dominated by distancing comments. He sees the “arrogance of Pound’s supremacist and culturally essentialist ideology” (Bernstein 1999: 290) as the driving force behind the historical project of *The Cantos*. What I see as Charles Bernstein’s own programmatic manifesto reflecting this distancing gesture and pointing out the poetic potential of contemporary poetry that refuses to be assimilated by “Official Verse Culture” (the Pound-Eliot tradition)<sup>5</sup> is the poem “LTCRB” which was published in *Shade* and reprinted in *Republics of Reality*. The way I

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<sup>5</sup> “Official Verse Culture operated then as it does now by denying its narrow stylistic orthodoxy under the cloak of universalized and unassailable poetic principles. Thus we had the spectacle of a poetry of abject conformity celebrating its commitment to individuality while flailing rather more viciously than might have seemed decent at actual individual expression” (Bernstein 1999: 249).

read it, this text invites an allegorical reading in respect to literary history and it reflects various aspects of Bernstein's approach to contemporary poetics:

I saw the power  
of the word in  
legend. Cast  
shadows & I hid  
under, lasting,  
crevices making  
jetty markers  
stretching out  
to sea. An  
infinite strip,  
lengths landscaped  
against a red  
sun, might  
in any case be  
lustrous

(Bernstein 2000: 136).

At the beginning of the poem, Bernstein debunks the larger-than-life mythology of modernist poets. In fact, to use Hassan terminology, the first scene of the poem carnivalizes modernism as represented principally by Pound and Eliot. The “legend” – presumably both the authors Pound and Eliot, and their obscure mythology and used-up mannerism – “[c]ast shadows” for the poet “to hide under”. However, the reading of the poem already becomes ambiguous here, because Bernstein deliberately employs a punctuation and line breaks that leave doubts about the attribution of verbs and adjectives. What is the significance of the commas before and after “lasting”? Did the poet hide under lasting crevices, which make jetty markers stretching out to sea? Or did he hide under the shadows cast by the legend (of Pound and *The Cantos*, for example) while lasting crevices made jetty markers stretching out to sea? For the sake of this reading, the latter is preferable because the image of an

intimidated poet hiding in the imposing shadow of a writer like Ezra Pound and his works makes a plausible starting point for a narrative manifesting how a poetic movement emancipates itself. Even though, as stated above, the punctuation makes the passage polyvalent and completely leaves the decision for either interpretation to the reader. It is, in fact, already in these first lines, a poem that has in part to be crafted by the reader's imagination.

During his reading at Place Center in New York on December 18<sup>th</sup> of 1977, Bernstein introduces "LTCRB" by saying that it portrays a "return from Loveladies Harbor", which is a popular tourist destination in Longbeach Township, on the coast of New Jersey.<sup>6</sup> However, Bernstein seems to play with the audience by implying that "the beach" referred to in the poem is merely one of the popular beaches of the New Jersey shore. Obviously, Charles Bernstein is not interested in the beach as a romantic image contributing to the topography of somebody's holidays. This is not a poem describing the comfort of a holiday resort. There is a stark contrast between the events described on the surface level of the poem (a return from the New Jersey shore) and the allegorical level of the poem. The text is only masked as an account of middle class American behavior. The author plays with notions of simplicity while alluding to contemporary poetry on the allegorical level. Part of this allegory is "the beach", which refers to a specific place in the historiography of the American unconscious. "The beach" was never a neutral space in the collective American imagination. In America's self-definition, "the beach" has always played a crucial role. It has long ceased being viewed primarily as the symbol of the Pilgrim's landing on the seemingly innocent shores of Plymouth and Provincetown. Instead, "the beach" as symbolic space now marks the place where America entered the Second World War. It was the allied invasion of Normandy, starting on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June 1944, that particularly solidified the connotation of "the beach" as

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<sup>6</sup> This reading is archived in Pennsound at [http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pensound/authors/Bernstein/Place-Center/Bernstein-Charles\\_07\\_Long-Trails-Cars-Retrn-frm-Beach\\_NY\\_12-18-77.mp3](http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pensound/authors/Bernstein/Place-Center/Bernstein-Charles_07_Long-Trails-Cars-Retrn-frm-Beach_NY_12-18-77.mp3).

a metonymy, a *pars pro toto*, for the most decisive moment in American history between the American Revolution and the Vietnam War (the U.S. Marine landed on dozens of beaches in Vietnam, but most of them remain more or less anonymous in the American imagination). Basing this analysis on the allegorical potential of a term as commonplace as “the beach” is a similar procedure to Bernstein’s political-historical interpretation of “the trains” in David Antin’s “Poem in a Minor Key”. While trains, just like beaches, can be part of a naïve romantic landscape, Bernstein reads them (even to the surprise of the author, David Antin) as an unconscious metonymy for the extermination of Jews in Auschwitz which was, after all, as Bernstein explains, “a train station, a European ‘hub’ for rail transportation (Bernstein *apud* Antin 2002: 12)”. While the implications of “the beach” in “LTCRB” are very different, it seems equally legitimate to interpret “the beach” allegorically.

The “long trails of cars returning” from “the beach” may be read metaphorically as a new self-confidence among American poets. After all, “the beach” also alludes metaphorically to one of the greatest poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ezra Pound, who had invested a lot of capital (literally and figuratively) into the Italian war effort under Mussolini – “his beach” was being invaded and defeated by the Allies. While *The Cantos* are a literary masterpiece and Charles Bernstein can surely recognize that, this mode of writing and, perhaps more importantly, this attitude towards literature has become impossible as a role model for postmodern writers. While they admire Pound as the groundbreaking modernist poet, they reject his approach towards authoritative composition and/or his political views.

But “the beach” from which long trails of poets were returning, or rather from which they were withdrawing in the 1970s (following the 1950s movements), was not only the Old Europe of Ezra Pound and *The Cantos*, but it was also that of Europe’s cultural hegemony, which was founded on the high culture (of the time before the First World War and in between the two World Wars) that was cultivated in European cities like Vienna or Paris. While the first had to offer such prominent figures as Sigmund Freud or the Austrian writers

Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Arthur Schnitzler, it was the latter that could be regarded as the cultural capital of Europe. There was the painter Pablo Picasso and even a group of American literary émigrés, such as Gertrude Stein, which made Paris the heart of modernist culture. But since the Second World War, the centre of cultural hegemony shifted mainly to the United States. The most cutting edge, exploratory art after the Second World War was crafted in cities like New York or San Francisco, while Los Angeles became the undisputed center of the world's film industry. Within two decades, post-war New York fostered legendary artists such as the Abstract Expressionist painters Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko (a German-Jewish immigrant), revolutionary jazz artists such as Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, and a great number of poets emerging in the 1950s such as Louis Zukofsky, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen and Carl Rakosi, whilst, in the 1960s, there were Jackson Mac Low, John Cage and David Antin. The latter sums these developments up very nicely, also echoing Robert Duncan, in "Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in American Poetry" (1972):

In fact it was the sixties that saw the great explosion of American poetry. If there were perhaps twenty or thirty strong poets among the Black Mountain, Beat poets and the first generation of the New York school, it is probable the number of impressive poets to appear in the sixties is more than double that. For those of us who came into the arena of poetry at the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties, the Beats, the Black Mountain poets, the New York poets represented an "opening of the field."<sup>7</sup> They had swept away the deadwood, the main obstacle to the career of poetry [...] (Antin 1972: 132).

Antin then goes on to analyze how these poets that emerged during "the great explosion of American poetry" in the 1960s related to their literary ancestors: "The poets of the sixties simply went about the business of re-examining the whole of the modernist tradition" (Antin 1972: 133).

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<sup>7</sup> This is a reference to Robert Duncan's first book of poetry entitled *The Opening of the Field*.

Bernstein himself is part of a new generation of poets that started emerging in the 1970s together with Bruce Andrews, Ron Silliman and other L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. The transition from Eliot and Pound to the poets of the 1960s and beyond was not so much an abrupt rupture. But however gradual this change may have been and despite the powerful alternative tradition of Stein and Williams and the very ambiguity inscribed into the concept of modernism, there is no doubt that Bernstein and other poets of his generation cannot escape Pound and Eliot and they use some of their techniques and principles (such as *collage*, for example) even if their major gesture towards Pound and Eliot is a distancing one – the poem “LTCRB” expresses exactly this and is the reflection of an epochal change, of a gap between the works of Eliot and Pound, on the one hand, and the new generation, on the other – and it is clearly, in parts, a satire of Eliot’s and Pound’s writings.

“The beach” is thus a symbol for cultural hegemony: first, there is the withdrawal from the centers of cultural hegemony of the past and/or a distancing from the flawed aspects of modernist modes of expression; in their turn, the symbolic trail is aimed towards New York in order to explore new poetic possibilities. Then, there is the ironic and apparently contradictory last scene, where cultural hegemony is established once again, but this time in America and with new, postmodern modes of expression. Therefore, “LTCRB” can be regarded as Charles Bernstein’s testimony to the vitality of the New York art scene of the 1970s and especially its contemporary poetry. Understood as a proclamation of poetic emancipation, “LTCRB” is also a representation of Hassan’s category of decanonization. Instead of granting absolute authority to the voice of the recent past, Bernstein’s generation is interested in a plurality of ideas and in an ongoing exchange between different voices.

When the poet declares to have seen “the power of the word in legend”, this line can be interpreted as a satire of the Pound-Eliot tradition that were also largely based on the aesthetic value of myths and legends. The modernist’s use of high cultural ancient myths were what sparked Leslie Fiedler to declare that postmodernism needs instead to explore its

own myths, that may be grounded in popular culture, such as the Western and its underlying Manifest Destiny, for example.

Considering the question of performativity, and as can be heard in the online archive of Pennsound, Charles Bernstein himself stumbled over the punctuation of the second sentence of “LTCRB” at the reading he gave at Place Center. This is perhaps an indicator of the *ad-hoc* basis on which he treats his own poems and demands that they be treated. As we have seen, the meanings that can be read into “LTCRB” are manifold – just like the ways of intoning the poem. The words that are written down on paper constitute merely a notation of the poem or, as Bernstein himself puts it in regard to the performative nature of Amiri Baraka’s poems: “the text [...] has become merely a score for the performance” (Bernstein 1999: 283). Far from a simple recovery of an intentionality that might have guided the writing process, the attribution of sense remains a volatile matter of performativity – both on the part of the author revisiting his work and on the part of the reader. Every reading is a new exploration of the text, nothing is cast in stone. The sense of immediacy that arises from this understanding of a poetry reading as a sensual perception of the text that inevitably leads to a reworking of the text also resembles Gertrude Stein’s belief that the poem is an act of perception.

This and other Bernstein-poems show what he calls “the contribution of sound to meaning: the way poets, especially twentieth century innovative poets, work with sound as material, where sound is neither arbitrary nor secondary but constitutive” (Bernstein 1999: 279). In fact, Bernstein’s stumbling at the reading at Place Center can be subsumed under what he calls “one of the primary techniques of poetry performance”, which is “the intervallic interruption of acoustic elements not recuperable by monologic analysis” (Bernstein 1999: 290):

While these irruptions may be highly artful, they may also fall into the body’s rhythms – gasps, stutters, hiccups, burps, coughs, slurs,

microrepetitions, oscillations in volume, “incorrect” pronunciations, and so on – that is, if you take these elements to be semantic features of the performed poem, as I propose, and not as extraneous interruption (Bernstein 1999: 290).

The polyvalence that arises when a poem is reconfigured through performance can be understood as an example of the poetics described in Charles Olson’s famous manifesto “Projective Verse” (1950), in which he declared that a poem must always be “a high energy-construct and, at all times, an energy-discharge” (Olson 1966: 16). For Olson, “the line comes from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes” (Olson 1966: 19). He goes on to liken poetry to anatomy, stating that the syllable comes from the head, by way of the ear, while the line comes from the heart, by way of the breath. When Charles Bernstein reads “LTCRB” he does exactly this, lending his ear to the individual syllables and his breath to the line. The line-break becomes one of the subtle mechanisms to allow a pause for breath. This rhythm is what guides Bernstein’s reading, not syntax or ordinary semantics. He breaks the syntax according to the flow of his reading and allows for the attribution of varying semantic value to each individual syllable. This constitutes the moment when Bernstein recognizes “the projective purpose of the act of verse” (Olson 1966: 24) which constantly forces changes upon the content. Olson says:

If the beginning and the end is breath, voice in its largest sense, then the material of verse shifts. It has to. It starts with the composer. The dimension of his line itself changes, not to speak of the change in his conceiving, of the matter he will turn to, of the scale in which he imagines that matter’s use (Olson 1966: 24).

As we see, Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” has heavily influenced Charles Bernstein’s theory of “Close Listening”. In fact, so much so that the latter could be called Bernstein’s version of “Projective Verse”:

Close listenings may contradict “readings” of poems that are based exclusively on the printed text and that ignore the poet’s own performances, the “total” sound of the work, and the relation of sound to semantics. [...] I want to overthrow the common

presumption that the text of a poem – that is, the written document – is primary and that the recitation or performance of a poem by the poet is secondary and fundamentally inconsequential to the “poem itself” (Bernstein 1999: 279 and 284).

Rather than attempting a totalitarian unit of written and read poem, Bernstein insists that there must always be unsolved paradoxes, instances of deliberate contradiction not only between different works, but also within one single work. In this manner, the poet seeks to undermine the dominance of the written poem over its performance to which most contemporary readers are conditioned. Instead, he somewhat seeks a balance between earlier epochs when poetry was exclusively oral (as in the times of the Minnesänger, for example) and the last five and a half centuries since Gutenberg’s invention of the moveable type, which eventually led to a dominance of written poetry over the performance of poetry. Rather than giving one manifestation of poetry priority over the other, Bernstein views both tendencies as complementary.

The similarity to Olson’s manifesto becomes especially apparent when Bernstein asserts that:

[p]erformance has the potential to foreground the inexorable and ‘counterlogical’ verbalness of poetry – ‘thickening the medium’ by increasing ‘the disparity between itself and its referents.’ When sound ceases to follow sense, when, that is, it *makes* sense of sound, then we touch on the matter of language. This is the burden of poetry; this is why poetry matters (Bernstein 1999: 299).

What may be concluded from what I like to call both Olson’s and Bernstein’s “theories of poetry performance” is that the public reading of poetry is given equal importance as the written poem. Therefore, both theories can be viewed as explanations for problematic poetry readings in which words may be stressed differently from what the readers would expect and create a performed poem that differs greatly in its implications from its silently read twin. In fact, Bernstein’s theory of “Close Listening” and the way it is manifested in his public reading of “LTCRB” represent two of Hassan’s hallmarks for

postmodernism. First, it shows how much emphasis is given to performance in postmodern art and, secondly, if every reading is potentially different, it contributes to what he calls indeterminacy or the statement that no absolute meaning can ever be identified.

When facing the ambiguous punctuation of “LTCRB”, one must take into account Olson’s assertion that “THE LAW OF THE LINE, which projective verse creates, must be hewn to, obeyed, and that the conventions which logic has forced on syntax must be broken open as quietly as the too set feet of the old line” (Olson 1966: 21). This aspect of “LTCRB” also echoes Robert Duncan’s famous statement:

It has seemed to me that I wrestle with the syntax of the world of my experience to bring forward into the Day the twisted syntax of my human language that will be changed in that contest even with what I dread there. And recently I have come to think of Poetry more and more as a wrestling with Form to liberate Form (Duncan 1985: 8).

These notions as expressed by the Black Mountain Poets Charles Olson and Robert Duncan affect the poetic process in three ways: (1) they change the way a poem is read and – as Bernstein would add, (2) therefore this affects the way a poetry reading has to be listened to, and (3) they also change the writing process itself. In other words, the ambiguous punctuation of “LTCRB” does not only change the way we read and hear the poem, but it is also an inextricable part of the associative flow of images that constitutes the poem.

In “The Truth and Life of Myth”, Robert Duncan has given a good insight into the creative process of a poet showing how body and thought are one:

The beginning of the poem stirs in every area of my consciousness, for the DNA code it will use toward its incarnation is a code of resources my life pattern itself carries; not only thought and feeling but all the nervous and visceral and muscular intelligences of the body are moved (Duncan 1985: 16).

Duncan shows the reader how the production strategy of “Projective Verse” and the aesthetic pleasure of “Close Listeners” can both at the same time inform the writing of a poem:

Awakening – listening, seeing sensing – to work with the weights and durations of syllables, the equilibrations of patterns, the liberations of new possibilities of movement; to cooperate in the aroused process. Attending. From the first inspiration, breathing *with* the new breath (Duncan 1985: 16).

For Robert Duncan, the creative process of a poet has psychoanalytical roots. Accordingly, the conception of a poem is dream-like. Awakening, the poet finds that he has different sensual perceptions and an altered awareness of the rhythms of his own body, most importantly the breath. Just as for Olson, the respiratory rhythm guides the poet through his work, making him pay close attention to “the weights and durations of syllables” and “the equilibrations of patterns”. It is finally the whole body that gives Duncan the sensation of the “liberations of new possibilities of movement” and even a sense of “arousal”.

This seems to be an accurate description of the creative process behind “LTCRB”. Even though the poem is organized around the idea of travelling, the scenes and associations presented are highly individual and, at times, random. The reason for this seems to be the above-cited poetic strategy by Robert Duncan. It is a process in which the poet picks everything around him up, reacts to the rhythms of his own body, “the nervous and visceral and muscular intelligences” and, most importantly, his own breath. The resulting ambiguity allows and requests a multiplicity of readings, both literally and figuratively. The reading of “LTCRB” proposed here – which diverges greatly from the author’s description of a mere “return from Loveladies Harbor” – is no doubt very much indebted to the volatility of meaning that is a main feature of Bernstein’s early works.

And one must return to one’s own close reading/close listening of “LTCRB”. The poet continues to describe the landscape he found himself in, while seeing the word cast in legend

or, eventually, one could suggest, while reading *The Cantos*. The second reference that allows the reader to conclude that Bernstein is describing a radical departure from modernist literature *à la* Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot, is “[t]he experience of the citation” that the poet finds himself in:

The experience  
of the citation,  
I find myself  
in, a book  
popping up & getting  
out, searches  
for its last  
exposure. You  
get up. You  
want to. The  
day begins much  
like any other,  
the sky mists,  
a pale obscurity  
fogs, sustenance  
consists, breaks  
signs against  
rocks. Support  
mechanisms in which  
dirt – field,  
soft – is  
sustained propping  
up a checkerboard  
of items, products  
then, as if for  
itself could be  
a fashion of  
holding back.

(Bernstein 2000: 136-7).

This is perhaps the best way of describing the underlying mechanism of *The Cantos* or *The Waste Land*, especially since the poem continues: “a book popping up & getting out, searches for its last exposure.” The allusion and collage techniques used by Pound and Eliot and other modernist poets can best be likened to the purpose of a hyperlink on the internet. Bernstein himself has alluded to this feature in modernist texts on various occasions: “Much of the innovative poetry of the past 100 years relies on the concept of hypertextuality as a counter to the predominance of linear reading and writing methods” (Bernstein 1999: 77).

Just like the hyperlink nowadays, the book pushes the reader out into worlds outside of itself. *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land* bristle with references to such a vast array of ideas, concepts, historical facts, “quotations, citations, and transductions” (Bernstein 1999: 161) that every one who is trying to read them is forced at one point or another to look up some information in an encyclopedia. An example for the extreme intellectual demands made by *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos* are Eliot’s glossary and Carroll F. Terrell’s two volume work *A Companion to the Cantos*. As is the case with many other intricate works of literature, this particular companion offers more than a thousand pages of explanations to those who venture to understand *The Cantos*. However, even if the reader does consult books that are meant to elucidate *The Cantos*, he or she may not quite be able to make sense of the work as a whole.

It took the arrogance of Pound’s supremacist and culturally essentialist ideology to give him the ambition to imagine a work on the scale of *The Cantos*, a poem that theoretically encompasses nothing less than the story – history of the determinately seminal strains of human culture. That no person has an adequate vantage point to “make it cohere” is of course a lesson *The Cantos* teaches but that Pound never fully learned (Bernstein 1999: 161-2).

This passage expresses Bernstein’s mixed feelings about *The Cantos*. He is fascinated and appalled at the same time, but his gesture towards them is ultimately a distancing one. Yet, the passage also describes modernist texts’ “popping up” and “getting out”, their moving into space beyond themselves. However, the message of these words is ambiguous

as well, because it could also be read as the description of a poet's productive process, which leads to "a book popping up & getting out" after it has found its "last exposure". In this context, "Last Exposure" would be an analogy to photography, in which exposure means the amount of light allowed to fall on the photographic medium, which is the crucial element of taking a photograph. So, in the context of poetic production, the last exposure might be read as one final idea leading to a poem, which might conclude a book. But in the programmatic context in which this chapter places "LTCRB", it makes more sense to view "the last exposure" as related to *The Cantos* and other modernist works seeking their last exposure. It is the announcement of an epochal change, after which the works of Eliot and Pound are still regarded as milestones of American literature, but no longer as representatives of the leading paradigm of contemporary poetic production.

The phrases "You get up. You want to" point to the dawn of a new poetic movement that seeks to emancipate itself and emerge from the shadows cast by the "power of the word in legend". The time period in which Charles Bernstein and others became aware of the possibilities of postmodern poetics were probably the 1950s, when Olson, Reznikoff, Zukofski and others started to challenge the classic modernism of Pound and Eliot, or even the neo-modernism produced by Robert Lowell and others. The time just after this awareness sets in – when, in fact, Bernstein's and others' poetic output began shaping the New York poetry scene of the mid-1970s – is coded in the next sentence of the poem, when a dawn is described.

[...] The  
 day begins much  
 like any other,  
 the sky mists,  
 a pale obscurity  
 fogs, sustenance  
 consists, breaks  
 signs against

rocks

(Bernstein 2000: 137).

Here, Bernstein has once again hidden very subtle stumbling blocks for the attentive reader. While a “misting sky” as a metaphor can be part of our collective reservoir of poetic imagery, “a [fogging] pale obscurity” already displays the emptiness of traditional poetic imagery. Is there fog that makes everything pale and obscure? If everything is pale and obscure in the first place, how does one see the fog? This is, of course, Bernstein’s playful way of satirizing T.S. Eliot’s mannerist poetic imagery such as we may find in *The Waste Land* (1922) and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1917).<sup>8</sup>

Bernstein disrupts the lexical pattern of these poems, thus simultaneously interfering in the accepted model of representation and in the world as such. In reference to Hassan, the process of what one might call poetic de-realization or even linguistic alienation finally becomes completely visible in “sustenance consists”. Reading these two words attentively against the background of contemporary English vocabulary they immediately give the impression that there is something wrong with it. If *sustenance* is taken to mean *food*, then one would have to ask “consists of what?”. However, when trying out different prefixes with “sist”, one quickly finds a number of suitable verbs, such as “persist”, “exist” or “insist”. It almost seems as though Bernstein has randomly combined verb and prefix in order to see

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<sup>8</sup> Unreal City,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many  
(Eliot 2001: 12).

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
Let fall its back the soot that falls from the chimneys

(Eliot 2006: 343)

how well one can hide a lack of sense: as long as it is placed within a sequence of powerfully conventional poetic language. But to be fair, the word *consist* also carries with it the obsolete meaning of *insist*. One could perhaps read the insistence of sustenance as a synonym for the young poet's hunger and all its metaphorical implications: he destroys what feeds him (it is both poetic and organic). But what definitely points towards a heightened significance of this sentence is the last part: "breaks signs against rocks". It is impossible to imagine a better description of some of Bernstein's poetry, especially in poems like "Azoot D'Puund" (1979)<sup>9</sup> and "Dear%r Fr~ien%d" (2005)<sup>10</sup>, which are not under discussion here. Signs are broken against rocks, so that legibility is almost completely destroyed. This is the kind of probing into the materiality of language, the instability of the signifier and the practice that is associated with it (moving words around through different contexts in order to show the volatility of meaning), which can also be found in the four poems of *Let's Just Say*.<sup>11</sup>

"LTCRB" continues in this programmatic way. There is, for example, the subtle hint at the materiality of the signifier, an aside that points fairly directly to Barthes and Derrida, when Bernstein breaks up the next sentence in order to explain the connotations of dirt: "dirt

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<sup>9</sup> "Azoot D'Puund" is a sound poem made up of a fantasy language which can be read as the transcription of various American accents, thus exploring the American idiom: "iz wurry ray aZoOt de puund in reduce yap crrRisLe ehk nugkinj sJuxYY senshl. Ig si heh hahpae uvd r fahbeh aht si gidrid. impOg qwbk tuUg. Jr'ghtpihqw. Ray aGh nunCe ip gvvn EapdEh a' gum riff a' eppehone" (Bernstein 2010: 34).

<sup>10</sup> In "Dea%r Fr~ien%d", Charles Bernstein imitates a computer-generated spam E-mail, warning us against the rise of a fascist society which is dominated by machines and technology:

"Dea%r Fr~ien%d,  
I sa%w yo%r pixture on  
wehb si;t; no.t su%re  
whhc one & w~ant to  
tal^k or mee.t ver~y so.on  
I am old ma%n 57 year\$  
ba%d tooth & sme.ll"

(Bernstein 2010b: 12)

<sup>11</sup> This is especially true for "every lake...", where the two consecutive lines "every slit has a slope" and "every slope has a sum" show the different meanings contained in a word like "slope". In the first line, its poetic function is shown through alliteration with "slit", while the second line emphasizes the term's mathematical implications by showing its semantic proximity to "sum".

– field, soft – is sustained”. There is no definition given for “dirt” or a synonym such as “soil”. Instead, Bernstein alludes to the potentially endless semiotic chain evoked by the term as well as to the constant deferral of meaning.

The rise of the consumer society or the postmodern tendency to integrate profane inventory into works of art (“checkerboard of items, products then”) is a process that Charles Bernstein also makes use of: through the integration of everyday-items, but, more importantly, through the integration of other kinds of supposedly sub-literary material, such as vernacular speech, grammatically or orthographically deficient language, etc. These are Bernstein’s stylistic devices of choices – the “checkerboard of items” that keeps recurring, that keeps propping up throughout his poetry: a process, not a product. A little bit further down the page, there is one of the hallmarks of Bernstein’s early poetry, which is the quotation of derivative material. In this case, “nothing is hidden” is an obvious reference to the New Criticism and New Critical Mode, which Bernstein and other L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers reject. He has, in fact, published a book whose title satirizes this school of literary analysis which is still extremely powerful in the United States nowadays: *The Nude Formalism* (1989). The first poem of this collection shows the satirical rejection of the New Formalist approach to literature by outlining a hilarious counter-model. It is called “Fragments from the Seventeenth Manifesto of Nude Formalism” and was supposedly written by one Hermes Hermeneutic:

Away with the study of flotation  
 Articulation is more than an (*sic*) manner of gritting the pendulum!  
 Down with all authentic formulations of these theses! Down with  
 Adolescent Sublime! Down with Abstract Confessionalism! Down  
 with Emphatic Symbolism! Down with Symbolic Emphatism!  
 All good poetry is the forced constriction of feelings of  
 powerlessness.  
 Poetry is not the erasure of personality but a caprice of personality.  
 But of course only those who have caprices will know what it means  
 to want to pursue them.  
 Poetry has as its lower insincerity and its upper limit  
 dematerialization.

Use absolutely no word that contributes to the direct sense of a thing seen.

(Bernstein 1989 [not paginated])

This poem thus satirizes the New Critical Mode. The title and supposed author name juxtapose the ideas of reason and magic, on the one hand, and the Enlightenment and Romanticism, on the other. At the same time, it also contains references to Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). Eliot's essay became the foundation of New Criticism by advocating the impersonality of creation and presenting the "creative act" as calculated and conscious.<sup>12</sup> Bernstein satirizes Eliot's excessive use of the word "beyond" in his programmatic manifestos by repeatedly using "down with". In addition, the line "Use absolutely no word that contributes to the direct sense of a thing seen" is a satirical reference to Pound's essay "Imagisme" (1913)<sup>13</sup> in *Poetry*, in which he famously requested that the poet shall "use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the direct sense of a thing seen" or, as Marjorie Perloff points out, Pound's "Imagist, and later Vorticist, doctrine [called] for 'direct treatment of the thing' and the 'new method' of 'luminous detail'" (Perloff 2004: 41).

Immediately after the assertion that "nothing is disguised" (therefore, there is no "beyond"), "LTCRB" takes up the motif of its title describing the "long trails of cars returning from the beach". Once again, there is the same technique at work in this section as in the opening lines: the juxtaposition of powerful, yet conventional and somewhat used-up poetic language, on the one hand, and programmatic statements, on the other. There is, for instance, the old-fashioned and fairly pleasant description of "the ordered" long trails as a dyonisiac "congestion of sand, fumes, desire". The next sentence then immediately returns to the overall programmatic nature of the poem. The poets and artists in general, who make

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Murphy 2007: 407.

<sup>13</sup> The essay was officially attributed to Frank Stuart Flint.

up these “long trails of cars returning from the beach”, are “[p]lugged by the interest that a particular pollution will give way to some more sensible sight”. Since this statement is just as ambiguous as all the other parts of the poem, one might read it both literally and allegorically. Literally, this could mean that the passengers in the cars are indeed sitting in traffic congestion and are waiting for the smog to give way to the sight of New York’s skyline. A possible allegorical reading would imply that the artists and poets want to overcome the outgrowth of modernist art and poetry (“a particular pollution”) and see their own aesthetics/poetics put into practice as a possibility to new forms of seeing – especially in comparison to such works that have driven the modernist experiment to an extreme limit with no way out, such as *The Cantos* or *The Waste Land*.

When the author reports how “the tunnel backs up far into New Jersey” this leads to thoughts that might be read as an account of what one feels if caught in a traffic congestion in a tunnel. The “idea of green that keeps going” could be understood in poststructuralist terms as signifying the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the idea that it is associated with. The word “green” is only a linguistic representation of the idea of green in the shape of letters that together form a sound which evokes the idea of this color. But the word can never be more than that.

However, “green” does not necessarily have to be read allegorically. The color could describe thoughts one has about nature while trapped inside the tunnel. “Green” can also be read as a reference to William Carlos Williams’s fascination with the spring season and belief in its potential for creation and for new poetry. Another plausible explanation could be that the inside walls of the tunnel are tiled green. As the tunnel appears endless to those waiting in it in congested traffic, the sight of these green tiles also appears endless, “to keep going”. The color “green” can also be read as a colloquial reference to what might be called the intellectual innocence of the American middle class. According to the literal understanding of the poem as the return of middle class Americans from the New Jersey shore, “green” can

be regarded as a derogatory description of the average American middle class consumer's mind and limited intellectual horizon as well as a new immigrant.

All the ideas expressed in the poem that follow this statement do probably relate to the poet's thoughts in the tunnel, although they could also be read as a comment on postmodern life. "Excruciating in the habiting of a space you can't move within, defined specifically with an intention to give up use for whatever length of time can be sustained": this sentence could be a description of the waiting time inside the tunnel, but it could also be a comment on the working conditions of modern man. In fact, this phrase is somewhat reminiscent of Bernstein's descriptions of the alienating job he held before he became an English professor, when he had to write medical abstracts everyday. At the beginning of *Content's Dream* (1986), he gives an account of what it felt like to him to have a job he hated. In an interview from *My Way* (1999), he sums up this time:

In New York, I worked initially at the United Hospital Fund [...] then briefly for the Council on Municipal Performance [...] and then for a couple of years, as Abstract Editor of the Canadian edition of *Modern Medicine*, where I wrote about 80 medical abstracts each month. This immersion in commercial writing and editing – as a social space too but more in the technical sense of learning the standardized compositional rules and forms at the most detailed, and numbingly boring, level of proofreading and copyediting – was informing in every way (Bernstein 1999: 246).

It must have been especially the "standardized compositional rules and forms" which frustrated Bernstein. As a poet, he works to undermine all of these implicit and explicit rules of composition and standardized forms. In fact, Bernstein's poetry is a continuous quest for the liberation of form. Furthermore, his work was concerned with the most intricate details of such prescriptions and it was "numbingly boring". All this must have given Bernstein the incentive to imagine alternatives to this straining daily routine. In fact, Bernstein's situation can perhaps be described by the differencing choice between performance and performativity. As Lyotard points out, while society demands that we all completely devote ourselves to societal notions of performance and that we be as productive as possible,

Bernstein and other postmodern thinkers seek refuge in the concept of performativity. The idea is to activate one's own fantasy in order to mentally dislocate oneself from the constrained everyday reality and achieve one's full creative potential.

Most work places cause alienation between man and his work: they represent "a space you can't move within, defined specifically with an intention to give up use for whatever length of time can be sustained." If this "space you can't move within" is a coded metaphor for work, then it depicts work as contradictory to human nature, suffocating and eventually pointless. Man gives up use for a given time, that is, he surrenders his creative and productive potential to the employer. What these statements convey, of course, is Bernstein's decidedly Marxist stance.

The same traces of Marxist criticism can also be found in the expression "this annoyance that you get it wrong that jerks through us" together with "you can't move within". This can be read as another reference to formalist ways of approaching literature and particularly the ways in which formalist ideology pervades the educational system, conditioning people to expect value from texts as products in terms of a gain of information. From the very beginning of primary school education, pupils are not only encouraged but actually forced to look for the right/acceptable/correct meaning and sense in all sorts of texts – also in literature. Accordingly, educators advise not only correct and incorrect ways of writing but also, and perhaps more troublingly, in reading, therefore causing a panic at the thought of not understanding the meaning of a poem. Just like other poets of his generation, such as bpNichol or Steve McCaffery, Bernstein seems to undermine capitalist approaches to reading which focus on an economy and an exchange of meaning as the primary value between the writer and the reader. Instead, he defends the idea that a gain of the right information is not the highest reward one can get from reading a poem. Like bpNichol and Steve McCaffery, Bernstein has written numerous essays and poems, such as "State of the Art" or "Azoot D'Puund" where he makes this claim by showcasing language as a set of

games in Wittgenstein's sense and exploring the possibilities of using linguistic utterances in poetry detached from notions of acceptable semantic value:

As if poetry were a craft that there is a right way or wrong way to do: in which case, I prefer the wrong way – anything better than the well-wrought epiphany of predictable measure – for at least the cracks and flaws and awkwardness show signs of life. [...] Ig ew oplep lucd nvn atik o im. ellek Emb ith ott enghip ag ossp heh ooz. ig confri wid suGan fagt iv ig muhfrei elle fihgt dundt mag elexVigr. ep gug slugr hatw ep aswp yasng Asw ousley. ehlip emhiep (Bernstein 1992: 2 and 2010: 34).

In fact, these reservations towards the notion of truth and certainty as constituents of language and of the literary text also find their expression in the phrase “‘Person makes coercion’ as if by force a certainty can be achieved”. One of the messages of Bernstein's work is that there are no certainties or in the most what Robert Duncan calls *Fictive Certainties* (Duncan, 1985). On the other hand, the “annoyance that you get it wrong” might also refer to the ambiguous readings of the poem itself. It might be a reference to Olson's “Projective Verse”, a metatextual, self-referential description of the annoyance a reader might feel when stumbling over the words of “LTCRB”:

These gaps jump  
too far, a fetid  
decay of smoldering  
ideas stacked up  
like dead newspapers  
hoarded for a  
conviction that  
there was a  
past, [...]   
to think. Breaks  
apart. Let's be  
an order

(Bernstein 2000: 140-1).

Another instance in which the poem notably returns to the programmatic level is the metatextual remark that “these gaps jump too far, a fetid decay of smoldering ideas stacked up like dead newspapers hoarded for the conviction that there was a past [...]” This is a comment on the seemingly disjunctive nature of the thoughts presented just before. The ideas that are “stacked up like dead newspapers” call attention to the way in which the lines in the poem seem to be stacked up. This once again calls attention to the materiality of written language. It is, of course, also a comment on postmodern literature’s self-reflexivity. The somewhat distancing view of the past, which was postulated in the beginning of this analysis, can be seen in the implication that one might forget about the past if it were not for an archive of old newspapers. In fact, “a fetid decay of smoldering ideas stacked up like dead newspapers hoarded for a conviction that there was a past” is one of the most prominent images in postmodern American literature, in which trash, or as Boris Groys would call it, the “profane thing”<sup>14</sup>, is integrated into the setting of a text and charged with new meaning at the same time. This attribution of meaning is, of course, a mixture of satire, consumer culture and mythology. It suggests the same insight into the volatility of the concept of “past” in our contemporary society, in which, in fact, contemporariness seems often to be held as the highest value. Bernstein wants to raise awareness of consumer culture’s obsession with forgetting and throwing away, producing anew and buying again.

In “LTCRB”, the ostensible description of middle class American behavior on the surface level inevitably leads into this scene with “newspaper smoldering in the basement”, since it is closely linked to the question how the consumer society – the “checkerboard of items, products then” – has come to dominate contemporary American life and particularly the middle class. Forgetting is an integral part of the consumer society since it forms the basis for a culture obsessed with products, with acquiring newness and throwing out the

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<sup>14</sup> Groys summarizes these tendencies for all the arts as “the accelerated erasure of the visible differences between artwork and profane thing – an erasure systematically perpetrated by the avant-gardes of this century since the 1960s” (Groys 2002: 6).

past. This function of archives and museums to preserve the collective memory of society's cultural heritage and how it interacts with the artistic process itself is one of the main concerns of Boris Groys' essay "On the New". Groys bases his argument on Kierkegaard's differentiation between the "new" and the "different". For Kierkegaard, the truly new is a "difference without difference or a difference beyond difference" (Kierkegaard *apud* Groys 2002: 4). In other words, if something is truly new, we cannot recognize it as such because it bears no relation to anything we have previously seen, "it is not related to any pre-given structural code" (Groys 2002: 4). Therefore, Groys argues that contemporary art which integrates or even emulates everyday items is a "difference beyond difference" from "real" everyday items. We cannot tell a toilet by Duchamp from a "real-life" toilet. Therefore, Groys concludes that this profane art needs the museum to make its "difference beyond difference" visible. Contrary to early 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-garde manifestos which were asking for the destruction of museums and archives [such as Malevich's "On the Museum" (1919)], these strategies actually make museums more important. And this "cultural heritage" is also one of Bernstein's concerns when one considers the presence/absence of the literary tradition in his work. Examples for this can be seen in the emulation of Gertrude Stein's "A White Hunter Nearly Dead" in "In Particular" or in the various allusions in "LTCRB" and other poems to the Pound-Eliot-tradition.

The same critique goes towards the media. The italicization of the word 'news' points to the fact that the media confront us with a growing amount of information, which in turn keeps changing with growing frequency – like any other product. As our daily lives become saturated with information concerning the present, there is a sense that – and this seems to be the implication of the passage ("like dead newspapers hoarded for a conviction that there was a past") – there is no space for history, no place for the past.

Another important aspect of this passage seems to be how Bernstein's reading at Place Center once again varies greatly from the written verse. Here, it becomes particularly

obvious how the author reads against the punctuation and the orthography of his own work and – to put it in Olson’s terms – breaks the logic of the syntax and allows his reading to be guided by the micro element of the syllable. In this passage, Bernstein intones and stresses “weather” as if it were “whether”. This playful homonymy points once again to Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” and Bernstein’s notion of “Close Listenings”, highlighting that a poetry reading is not “a mere embellishment of the poem but a restaging of its meaning (Bernstein 1999: 284)”. Therefore, a dramatization of “a difference beyond difference”: a poem is never a product, but a process.

After beginning the line with the word ‘news’, which calls attention to itself by being italicized, one of the terms that would present a semantically sound continuation of the line is ‘weather’ because a forecast is traditionally a permanent feature in most news programs. However, both syntactically and rhetorically, the word ‘whether’ fits better into the reading rhythm of the poem. Following his own breath and the reading flow it produces, Bernstein pulls the syllables together in a way he might not have had in mind when writing the poem. Thus, he once again displays the performativity of his poetry.

The image of “a movement of press” overtaking the poets and cradling them at the same time seems a very interesting and insightful description of an innovative poet’s situation in relation to what Bernstein calls “Official Verse Culture”. On the one hand, the technology for distributing printed matter has greatly improved during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has facilitated the production and distribution of books (even in small editions) and made them much cheaper than they had previously been. At the same time, however, the mainstream presses have become more and more monopolized by a commercial interest in prose and the non-exploratory poetry of “Official Verse Culture”. Bernstein defines the term in an interview and explains how it led to the formation of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine, which was a platform for dissent against “Official Verse Culture”:

Official Verse Culture operated then as it does now by denying its narrow stylistic orthodoxy under the cloak of universalized and unassailable poetic principles. Thus we had the spectacle of a poetry of abject conformity celebrating its commitment to individuality while flailing rather more viciously than might have seemed decent at actual individual expression. The prevalent phobias against groups and against critical thinking encouraged us to make our opposing commitments specific and partisan. If mainstream poetic “individuality” breeds unreflected conformism, collective formations might actually provide the space for conversation as well as for difference (Bernstein 1999: 249).

Bernstein concludes that while printing technology has dramatically improved during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the output of printed matter is as great as never before, the space for non-mainstream voices gets smaller and smaller. These exploratory poets need a cradle in the form of independent small presses such as Sun & Moon, for example, which are willing to publish exploratory new art. In “Provisional Institutions” (1999), Bernstein gives a good summary of the economic struggle, which these small presses and small magazines have to go through in order to assure their mere survival (cf. Bernstein 1999: 149-51).

We find in “LTCRB” a description of non-mainstream poetry that refuses to be assimilated by “Official Verse Culture”. Bernstein once again illustrates the rupture with Pound-Eliot-New Critical modernist poetics with the words “I ask for this memory – not to think. Breaks apart. Let’s be an order.” Bernstein seems to argue against the ignorance and forgetfulness that dominate public discourse and the media nowadays. Instead, he wants a reading audience and a scene of poets that keep a historical consciousness. However, at the same time, he rejects the hyper-reflexive poetic historicity that informed some modernist works. He asks for a sense of history to be allowed into the present, a source for the poet to be able to move towards and work at the future. But, at the same time, he refuses a poetry that grounds every one of its poems in the celebration of a universal past – an unmoving past.

Bernstein returns to the idea of a rupture with the Pound-Eliot-tradition and pleads for the emergence of a new emancipated poetry scene with the words “Breaks apart. Let’s be an

order.” In the same way in which he described the poetics of the modernists, at the beginning of the poem, he now describes at the end of the poem the new modes of writing that inform his generation: “Sinks into – is it only a folding? – with which enthusiasm realizes several glimpses. Motion to make a glance.”

This describes a poetic program that is contrary to that of the Pound-Eliot modernists’. It understands that reality can only be captured in a poem as always fragmented, tentative and incomplete – not in a decadent pessimistic way, but as opening possibilities for the future. While *The Cantos* were supposed to be a book about everything, the poetry of Bernstein’s generation promises no more than a tentative glance at life. It acknowledges the impossibility to fully capture life and its dynamics in poetry. Instead, life is looked at as an “array” of different phenomena passing us by. Poetry is supposed to give a glance at the multiplicity, variation and beauty of life, evoking in the reader the constant desire to look up from the page and reach out to, or rather, reach into the fullness of life, activating his/her creative potential.

Poetry is supposed to awaken our desire to explore “a place within that neighborliness always just outside our own.” For Bernstein, poetry offers the possibility of exploring realities that are not our own – yet. Instead of reliably giving readers the form and the imagery they expect and that they are used to – as “Official Verse Culture” does – poetry is supposed to take people to places they have not been to before. This means a genuine exploration of foreign and perhaps yet uncharted territory in terms of subject and subject matter – something which can only happen in terms of form and discourse. Bernstein’s poetry wants to confront the audience with ways of reading and ways of seeing the world that are startlingly new. The “mutual exclusion”, the cultural dialectics of *us* and *them*, of *here* and *there*, is to be made palpable but not through what Bernstein calls “packaged tours”

of the “local color”<sup>15</sup>, but rather through genuine poetic explorations of otherness: showing rather than covering up the incomprehensible and the difficult. As indicated in the introductory remarks of this chapter, “LTCRB” ends with a scene that seems to contradict the programmatic interpretation of the text as a movement away from the beach of Western cultural hegemony towards an emancipated, independent American poetry. It ends in comedy with the words: “Standing at the beach & Peter allowing the cameras”. However, if the beach is read as a symbol for cultural significance then it is only legitimate if Bernstein predicts his own impact on American letters by placing himself on the beach. But “the camera”, in these last lines, is far more important than the question whether this scene is a sane continuation of the motif of leaving the beach which is established in the first half of the poem. The camera can be read as Bernstein’s acknowledgement of independent film makers such as Henry Hills or Warren Sonbert as a source of inspiration for his poetry (cf. Bernstein 1999: 288 and 2001: 132). In fact, Charles Bernstein is friends with the filmmaker Gus Van Sant and can be seen in the supporting role of Dr. Simon in *Finding Forrester* (2000), a movie starring Sean Connery. This can be seen as another example of (post)modern literature’s particular interest in intermediality, contributing to what Hassan lists under fragmentation: “preference for montage, collage, the found or cut-up literary object (Hassan 1986: 504)”. At the same time, however, it must not be forgotten that those parodied in “LTCRB”, Pound and Eliot, were amongst the first poets to employ those methods. But here, the poem will be “re-enacted” – gaining performativity, voice and body: through a recording which is available online. That is a new technology that Pound and Eliot did not possess.

Apart from this technological aspect, these last lines alone fulfil three of Hassan’s categories: (7) hybridization, (9) performance/participation and (11) immanence. It is a

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<sup>15</sup> Bernstein 1992: 4.

scene that shows intermediality, the interplay and mutual stimulation of different media in the arena of postmodern art. At the same time, it alludes to the idea of performance and the enhanced possibilities of its electronic reproduction and distribution provided by new technology. Thus, it also shows the importance of immanence in postmodern art, the extension of the human body through technological means, such as film, for example.

### III. The Postmodern Poetics of *Let's Just Say*

While the previous chapter was concerned with outlining some of the general tendencies in Charles Bernstein's works as exemplified in "LTCRB", viewing it as a certain kind of programmatic manifesto indicating the direction in which experimental American poetry should be headed, this section wants to take a closer look at the group of poems *Let's Just Say* (Bernstein 2006) which can be viewed as a result of this poetic program. Before embarking on a detailed analysis of each of the four poems in this collection, it is necessary to map the position of these poems in Bernstein's works. There is, as pointed out before, the kind of poetry which emphasizes its own dependence on performance. One example of this is "Azoot D'Puund" from *Poetic Justice* (1979), or even "LTCRB", as shown in the previous chapter. Another kind of complexity arises from Bernstein's usage of *collage*. In his conversation with David Antin, Bernstein acknowledges this technique.

For some of the poems in the first section of *Parsing* ("Sentences"), I used transcriptions of talking, from which I took discontinuous segments and set them in a variety of formats, for the most part creating a series of sentences beginning with the same pronoun (I, you, it). (Two sources I used were Studs Terkel's *Working* and Georg Mitchell's *Yessir, I've Been Here a Long Time*.) The final poem in the book was "Roseland" in which I again used speech transcription, this time using one of [David Antin's] talks, "the sociology of art" [...] (Bernstein *apud* Antin 2002: 64).

The fact that Bernstein's early poetry is based on the integration of found material from relatively obscure sources and that it features the juxtaposition of disparate phrases makes it difficult to access. In fact, Bernstein's early poetry refuses easy assimilation and seems to constantly repeat André Gide's famous wish: "Please don't understand me too quickly" (Gide 1959). Of course, by refusing easy assimilation, the poet's early poetry stands in sharp contrast to the media and the artificial entertainment environments surrounding us in shopping malls and recreational parks of various sorts. These are, as Wolfgang Iser argues, designed to have a surface structure that is as aesthetically stimulating and enjoyable as possible (*Oberflächenästhetisierung*, cf. Iser 1996: 10).

Especially Bernstein's early poetry offers a radical alternative to these processes, which are driven by commercial interests and lie at the heart of the consumer society. His response entails the valorization of the difficult, marginalized, overlooked, unpopular and dissenting in poetry (and poetry performances).

However, it would be wrong to say that Bernstein's newer poetry is easily accessible. But the poems of *Let's Just Say* have a certain appeal to them which readers who are not critics, poets or scholars might not necessarily find in Bernstein's earlier poetry. And Bernstein has subtly hinted at the slightly increased readership of his more recent poetry in an interview with Marjorie Perloff:

On the one hand [...], some poets and poetry do-gooders think the answer is to go with the flow, to try to make poems that, while still unpopular at the Prom of American Culture are a little more popular (and don't assume I am not one of them). [...] Popularity or immediate accessibility is not a criterion of value for poetry in our time. Poetry can provide not an extension of the dominant values in American culture – as the poetry favored by the [publications-with-wide-circulation] does – but multiple, discrepant alternatives to them: often messy, inchoate, disturbing, unhappy – indeed sometimes *worse* – alternatives to boot (Bernstein *apud* Perloff 2003 [unpaginated]).

But even while reaching an increased readership, Bernstein is not interested in popularity because it is “not a criterion of value for poetry in our time”. Instead, he understands that popularity and mass appeal are related to the blatant commercialization of art (which he resists as much as he can).

However, the poems of *Let's Just Say* reflect the inevitable relation between forms and surface structures, on the one hand, that make them look accessible and, on the other hand, the disturbing deeper levels of this poetry meant to disrupt the reader's comfort-level by challenging commonly-held notions about race, class, gender, history, poetry and language, to name only a few. But apart from any scholarly evaluation it might be said that the

outstanding feature of these poems is their incredibly pleasurable form, or as Bernstein put it in an interview with Cummings and Marinaccio:

[W]hat I would want to emphasize most about the writing I like – say that of Johanna Drucker or Erica Hunt – is how much fun it is to read, how pleasurable, how maximum cool (Bernstein *apud* Cummings, Marinaccio 2000: 13).

In this sense, the four close readings of this section are meant at least in part to describe what makes *Let's Just Say* so intellectually challenging but also entertaining, pleasurable and “maximum cool”.

### 1. “In Particular”

The hypothesis of this discussion is that the poem in question criticizes not only stereotypes about ethnicity, gender, creed and class but, more importantly, the foregrounding of these categories in contemporary discourse. In fact, the poem insists so much on the interchangeability of races, nationalities, genders and class affiliations that it seems to suggest a mode of thinking that goes beyond contemporary modes of thinking about these categories, such as the ones of Gender Studies or Postcolonial Studies. The poem asserts the politically liberal notion that there is no immanent quality in an individual that inexorably links him/her to a certain place or situation. The firmest evidence for this can be found in the fact that the poem starts with one ellipsis stating that a black man is waiting at a bus stop, while the next mentions a white woman sitting on a stool.

A black man waiting at a bus stop

A white woman sitting on a stool

(Bernstein 2006: 3)

The poem ends with an inverted ellipsis mentioning a white man sitting on a stool and a black woman waiting at a bus stop.

A white man sitting on a stool

A black woman waiting at a bus stop

(Bernstein 2006: 6)

These two examples display situations that are of small political significance. However, the poem also affirms that people always have a specific belonging which can be indentified. “In Particular” pays attention to these details. However, the fact that the argument ends up being a circular one seems to indicate the futility of a discourse continuously reaffirming the different categories of belonging. The twist between beginning and end also shows the absolute interchangeability of gender, race, creed and class, on the one hand, and, on the other, the situation these individuals are found in. In between the first two lines and the last two, this poem leads the reader through a 110 permutations of different people in different situations:

A Filipino eating a potato

A Mexican boy putting on shoes

A Hindu hiding in igloo

A fat girl in blue blouse

A Christian lady with toupee

A Chinese mother walking across a bridge

An Afghanastani eating pastrami

A provincial walking on the peninsula

A Eurasian boy on a cell phone

An Arab with umbrella

A Southerner taking off a backpack

An Italian detonating a land line

A barbarian with beret

A Lebanese guy in limousine

A Jew watering petunias

A Yugoslavian man at a hanging

(Bernstein 2006: 3)

In total, this poem is a list of a 114 ellipses, each of them featuring what might be called a micro description of a different person. In fact, every line describes either a very specific attribute of this individual in a few words or refers to his or her nationality, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, class, or political stance. Each ellipsis then places a person in a certain situation, which it describes in no more than six words. These lines are indeed ellipses because most of them lack a predicate. That is, the reader gets the description of a person, which may even contain a present participle, but it is even unknown whether this individual is the object or the subject of the incomplete statement. In other words, due to the incomplete or elliptical nature of the statement, it is not known whether the person described is doing something to somebody or something else or if the subject of the imaginary complete sentence does anything to this individual. Just like zapping on television, all the reader gets in this poem are fragmentary, non-contextualized, depthless images in the process that are reminiscent of Stein's repetitive and juxtaposition technique:

A Sunni boy on scooter  
 A Floridian climbing a fountain  
 A Beatnik writing a limerick  
 A Caucasian woman dreaming of indecision  
 A Puerto Rican child floating on a balloon  
 An Indian fellow gliding on three-wheeled bike  
 An Armenian rowing to Armenia  
 An Irish lad with scythe

(Bernstein 2006: 3)

While much of the so-called pre-modernist poetry establishes a link between lines through rhymes, the link that a reader ventures to find in every line of this poem is the one between the named person and the activity that this person is engaged in. I found myself constantly looking for reasons why a person of a certain description would engage in this specific activity or be described in exactly this situation. The reason why a reader is so

desperately looking for a connection is that the ellipses are imperfect in at least two ways. Firstly, the ellipsis as such is an incomplete statement, leaving a semantic void that needs to be filled by the reader's imagination. Secondly, the statements as such are profane, they seem random, irrelevant and the conveyed information is fragmentary, if it can be characterized as a piece of information at all. In fact, drawing on classical information theory, it can be argued that the sum of all the rudimentary descriptions conveyed in each line constitutes not information, but a combination of redundancy and noise. Redundancy refers to the fact that every line features the same structure that is repeated over and over again. More important seems to be the concept of noise that Bernstein actively reflects in this poem. As the reader watches a rapid cut from line to line and from scene to scene nothing more is ever conveyed than a fragment and before the fragment is fully taken in, the reader faces the next scenic fragment. In the end, the reader is, at least at the literal level, not given a single coherent piece of information, but instead 114 lines of noise.

However, even in these fragments, which on their surface seem very awkward and profane, Bernstein reflects the poetic function of language as it was postulated by Roman Jakobson. It is the poetic function that in many cases provides the link between the described person and its activity. The central statement is, of course, Jakobson's assertion that "[t]he poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" (Jakobson *apud* Waugh 1980: 63). This means that while in non-poetic everyday language a speaker selects a given word from a list of equivalents, the resulting phrase may be composed of altogether unlike terms. In poetry, the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination means that a speaker is seeking to combine words on the basis of visual or acoustic similarities. The contrast between lines which showcase the poetic function and those that do not is the main stylistic feature of "In Particular". For example, there is a poetic equivalence between 'Afghanastani' and 'pastrami' because they rhyme. In terms of contents, the incomplete statement "An

Afghanastani eating pastrami” may lack any relation to real-life situations but what makes it immediately recognizable as a line of poetry is the way in which it almost explicitly showcases the poetic function. There are many other examples of poetic equivalence in combination involving other kinds of stylistic devices. The line “A Danish designer in a diner”, for example, establishes an even stronger equivalence relation between the words because ‘Designer’ not only rhymes with ‘Diner’ but there is alliteration in the words ‘Danish’, ‘designer’ and ‘diner’. Another kind of equivalence relation is established through homophony. For example, “A Czech man in a check suit”. The words ‘Czech’ and ‘check’ are homophonous.

Part of the meaning of the poem seems to lie exactly in the fact that the poetic function is responsible for some of the strongest links between the individuals mentioned in the poem and the situations they are in. Compared to the poetic devices linking person with situation, any other relationship, such as the ones based on nationality, ethnicity, gender, race or creed seem not only stereotypical but extraordinarily weak. This is also due to the fact that Bernstein puts some people into place where they are least expected, for example, ‘An Ojibwa pushing a button on the Trans-Siberian’. There are other statements that lead *clichés ad absurdum* – for example, “A colored youngster admiring a toaster” or “An Argentine dancing on a dime”. Here, the semantic link between the ethnicity or nationality of the described individual and the scene in which it is placed is extremely weak. That a colored youngster should admire a toaster because he acknowledges a ‘tanning process’ taking place inside the toaster is nonsensical at best and racist at worst. It is similarly terrible to assume that an Argentine solely by virtue of his or her nationality is a tango dancer. These are examples of how Bernstein debunks commonly held notions about ethnicity, gender, creed, nationality and class, to name only a few.

While every line contains a micro description of a person, it is at the same time also a micro discourse. Foucault defined a discourse as “a group of statements [that] belong to the

same discursive formation” (Foucault 2010: 117). This means quite simply the sum of statements made about a certain person, object, item, etc. in a certain historical context. For Foucault, a discourse is always “a fragment of history, a unity and discontinuity in history itself, posing the problem of its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality rather than its sudden irruption in the midst of the complicities of time” (Foucault 2010: 117).

The last part of the definition already points towards the volatile and ever-changing nature of discourses. The question has to be: Who makes these generalizing assumptions, asserting that a person of a given description fits well into a given environment? Even if the reader assumes to draw such conclusions himself, Foucault would nonetheless ask for the underlying reasons for such assumptions. What in the reader’s environment has made him or her draw these conclusions? To what extent has public discourse influenced these thoughts? Who has the capacity to influence public discourse and how? What role does power play in the quest for control over public discourse? These are questions that Foucault posed that strongly reverberate in “In Particular”. In a way, the main function of the poem seems to be to inspire the reader to undertake such reflections, consciously catching him- or herself assuming certain given characteristics linked with gender, ethnicity, creed, class and others.

One of the conclusions then may be that instead of assuming any inherent qualities in the individual that links him/her to the scene in which he/she is described, one must understand these links as random. “In Particular” takes its inspiration also from other postmodern thinkers such as Judith Butler, because it insists on the performativity of categories such as gender, ethnicity, creed, class and others. The poem itself emphasizes this through the weakness and absurdity and sometimes complete lack of any link between the person described and the situation in which this person is captured. So, the Ojibwa described in the poem may very well be “pushing a button on the trans-siberian” because race and belonging depend on an individual’s performance thereof and are elusive concepts in

postmodern thought. In other words, race and gender are not seen anymore as natural characteristics but as social and historical categories that are either rejected or embraced through performance. Or, as Bernstein himself points out, voice and identity are fictions (cf. Bernstein 1992: 6). The Ojibwa in Bernstein's poem does not perform West African as discursive *cliché* notions might suggest. Instead of being shown in the tropical environment of a West African country, the Ojibwa administers a locomotive in the cold regions between Russia and China. Again, this invites questions about the extent to which the dominant discourses in society have power over the way an individual thinks. It poses the question of what is typical and what atypical and who defines these categories. This inevitably leads to the conclusion that there are no such things as typical or atypical ways of living. "In Particular" demonstrates exactly this.

But there is another quality to these lines: perhaps a different way of looking at them. Because if one interprets the first two lines as scenes which the poem seeks to understand in terms of their meaning for contemporary American society, the 110 lines between the first and the last two can be seen as a quest for such meaning. However, Bernstein stays true to postmodern thought in that he does not offer meaning but a constant deferral thereof. In fact, this poem is informed as much by Jacques Derrida as by Jakobson or Foucault. In his famous essay "Différance", this French philosopher described the way meaning is produced through language. For Derrida, the way signifiers such as words, for example, function is described in his mixture of the words "to differ" and "to defer". In fact, part of his theory is based on Ferdinand Saussure's work which asserted that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary. This means that there is no specific reason other than linguistic conventions why a plant with a wooden trunk, branches and leaves should be referred to as "tree". So the relationship between the plant and the word "tree" is arbitrary. It follows from this that meaning is established by the interplay of the signifiers. When Derrida uses the word "deferral" he describes the process that takes place when difference is used in order to

define the meaning of a signifier. In other words, “a tree” gains its meaning by not being “a house”, “a human being”, “a car” and so on. Therefore, the question of meaning is deferred infinitely from one signifier to the next. In a way, this is also what happens in the poem at hand. In the attempt to explore the significance of a “black man waiting at a bus stop” and a “white woman sitting on a stool”, Bernstein defers meaning rather than venture an impossible answer. So, the 110 permutations of the first two lines are definitions of what these two lines do not mean. For example, in the quest to define the meaning of “A black man waiting at a bus stop”, it shows that this scene is not the same thing as “A Filipino eating a potato”. So, meaning is deferred further. The reader learns that “A black man waiting at a bus stop” does not mean the same thing as “A Mexican boy putting on shoes” either. This way, meaning is deferred until the very end of the poem. The fact that both scenes reappear in the end in reverse order and with switched genders points not only to the performativity of discursive categories but also to the impossibility to say anything meaningful about these differences. In fact, one might interpret Bernstein’s constant deferral of meaning as a comment on the futility of continuing attempts to project meaning into difference, which eventually leads to the question of perspective and the ideas of dislocation, empathy and an understanding for our shared universal humanity. When confronted with the question “What does otherness mean?” Bernstein’s answer seems to be: “It does not mean anything, it is just different.”

The fact that, in the last lines, the indefinite article is dropped before “bus stop” and “stool” could be read as an indicator for a growing impatience, an increased *ennui* with the discussion of these matters on the part of the poet. While all the lines are ellipses, the last two particularly emphasize their sketchy and provisional quality by dispensing with the indefinite article. Dropping it implies an impatience to get this discussion over with. On the other hand, leaving out the indefinite article is reminiscent of the language of news headlines. Reading it this way, the last two lines are a final mockery of society and mass

media and their tendency to pay a lot of attention to trivial events and even then to disproportionately emphasize the significance of race and gender.

However, what emerges from “In Particular” is the idea of a universal humanity. While details about a person’s origin are important, it is even more important to recognize the fact that we all have a lot in common. That is to say that by disproportionately emphasizing the differences between people, “In Particular” actually draws attention to these similarities and this shared universal humanity: if difference is the only thing there is, then difference does not exist.

## **2. A Call for Critical Thinking in the *Agora*: “Thank you for Saying Thank You”**

The second poem in *Let’s Just Say* is “Thank You for Saying Thank You”. It is a comment on various flawed approaches to literature. The title refers to an awkward and exaggerated conventionality in which somebody thanks somebody else for thanking him or her:

This is a totally  
accessible poem.  
There is nothing  
in this poem  
that is in any  
way difficult  
to understand.  
All the words  
are simple &  
to the point.  
There are no new  
concepts, no  
theories, no  
ideas to confuse  
you. This poem  
has no intellectual  
pretensions. It is  
purely emotional.  
It fully expresses  
the feelings of the

author: *my feelings,*  
*the person speaking*  
*to you now*

(Bernstein 2006: 7).

The poem asserts that it is totally accessible and there is nothing in it that is difficult to understand. These claims seem to respond to an assumed ideal of literature and poetry which demands that literature thus be easy and accessible. Bernstein answers the capitalist pressures under which literature has come to serve a customer's needs rather than to produce an exploratory art: "There are no new concepts, no theories, no ideas to confuse you" (Bernstein 2006: 7). This clearly echoes the language of advertisement that praises the easy usage of a product and directly addresses a potential customer. So: "This poem has no intellectual pretensions" (Bernstein 2006: 7). Further: "This poem represents the hope for a poetry that doesn't turn its back on the audience, that doesn't think it's better than the reader, that is committed to poetry as a popular form, like kite flying and fly fishing" (Bernstein 2006: 9). This part of the poem ironically expresses an attitude towards art which postulates that most artists are snobs who produce intellectually pretentious pieces of literature. Bernstein seems to be juxtaposing the supposedly lofty intellectual endeavor of poetry with the activities one would associate with the dull image of the common man, such as kite flying and fly fishing. These lines sound as though they address the stereotypical blue-collar worker, who wants to avoid intellectuality. The same type of customer is addressed later: "This poem appreciates & values you as a reader" (Bernstein 2006: 8). The poem, in the same vein, also contains many metaphor clichés: "It's all about communication. Heart to heart" (Bernstein 2006: 7). There are some typical hints at other epochs shining through the lines of the poem. The still dominant positivistic ideals of classic Apollinean antiquity are

revealed in the sentence: “It celebrates the triumph of the human imagination amidst pitfalls & calamities” (Bernstein 2006: 8).

The poem ironically addresses many schools of literary criticism, too. It mocks the biographical and confessional/experience approach, which is still very popular. The main assumption of this method is that one could understand a piece of literature best by looking at its author’s life and confessional authenticity. Bernstein’s poem thus asserts that it fully reflects its author’s emotions: “It is purely emotional. It fully expresses the feelings of the author: *my feelings, the person speaking to you now*” (Bernstein 2006: 7). Thereby Bernstein ironically debunks not only the notion that words mean something and the romantic idea of the poetic self, but he also seems to play with the technique of pretended orality, which has informed numerous novels from the “pop” genre from the 1960s onwards.

Of course, Bernstein also addresses the common question asked about poems: “What does the author want to tell us?” This question has obviously become outdated, as postmodern philosophy and literary analysis (after Freud, Saussure, Foucault, Derrida and others) have proclaimed the death of the author in showing his/her irrelevance for literary analysis. Their outspoken heir, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school has challenged the natural “authentic” presence of the speaker behind the text, emphasized the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, directing attention to the materiality and historicity of the signifier.

But by far the most important aspect of “Thank You for Saying Thank You” is its radical refusal of some recent hegemonic literary criticism. There is also the ridiculous assertion of the universality of poetic justice in that a “hundred readers would each read the poem in an identical manner & derive the same message from it.” This is an obvious reference to New Criticism, which held that the text is the only thing that is important and the “I” (of the writer, but also of the reader) is not of any interest. Interestingly, Bernstein chooses a phrasing one might expect from statistical studies focusing on the reader.

Therefore, he ridicules both methods. There is the one approach seeing the readership as a group, which invites statistical analysis and speculation about the kinds of readings different people might make and then there is the other, which emphasizes the readership's irrelevance or assumes its complete uniformity. In *A Poetics*, Charles Bernstein expresses his contempt for New Criticism in various places. Bernstein fights against the leveling of differences, the framing and commoditization of works of art by creating the ideal convenience poem. On the surface, it seems to be the most suitable and most convenient poem for various schools of literary analysis, students of literature and the publishing industry. It does not seem to demand a negotiation between self and the otherness of readers and critics. In fact, this kind of poem and the reading it invites are contrary to Bernstein's views on literary criticism:

By insisting that stylistic innovations be recognized not only as alternative aesthetic conventions but also as alternative social formations, I am asking that we bring devices back from a purely structural interpretative hermeneutics. In order to fully develop the meaning of a formal rupture or extension, we need a synoptic, multilevel, interactive response that accounts, in hopefully unconventional antiauthoritative ways, for the sexual, class, local-historical, biographical, prosodic, and structural dimensions of the poem (Bernstein 1992: 227).

Bernstein argues that formal and stylistic inventiveness constitutes more than just an alternative aesthetic. Poetry offers the opportunity to explore alternative realities and also subjective perspectives on life. There may be poems that exhibit feminist, African-American or gay vantage points making them manifestations of a multifaceted society. Therefore, poetry necessitates a literary analysis and interpretation which takes into account and is sensitive towards the multiplicity of forces (race, class, gender etc.) shaping the individual poem.

In "Thank You for Saying Thank You", Bernstein ridicules the notion of a sincere voice with mainstream values. In *A Poetics*, he comments:

I would speak of a phallographic voice of truth and sincerity as one that hides its partiality by insisting on its centrality, objectivity, or neutrality – its claims to mainstream values; a voice that opts for expedience at the expense of detail, persuasion at the expense of conviction. This is a constantly self-proclaimed public voice, implicitly if not explicitly deriding the inarticulations, stuttering, inaudibilities, eccentricities, and linguistic deviance of specifically marked special-interest groups (Bernstein 1992: 223).

For Bernstein, “the phallographic voice” is the opposite of a multiplicity of diverging voices and vantage points. It continues to postulate absolute (central and objective) truths, even though it becomes more and more difficult (if not impossible) to find absolute truths in a world of growing contingency. By presenting itself as the central, objective or neutral “public voice”, which supposedly speaks for everybody, it hides the fact that it has its own agenda. In fact, “the phallographic voice” is interested in maintaining the established societal order, the hegemony of the ruling class over the oppressed masses. As the name suggests, the forces behind this voice in the United States are WASP men, the white anglo-saxon protestant men. Instead of obeying this “self-proclaimed public voice”, Bernstein is interested in those who are marginalized in this system – those that the ruling class might refer to as “special interest groups”. He urges us to pay close attention to whatever is not endorsed by the “phallographic voice”, namely such details as “inarticulations, stuttering, inaudibilities, eccentricities, and linguistic deviance”.

The notion of one authoritative, public voice resembles Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of a “grand metanarrative”, which he describes in his influential monograph *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. As discussed at the beginning of this thesis, Lyotard defined postmodern as “incredulity towards all metanarratives (Lyotard 1984: xxiv)”. In his book, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, the philosopher Richard Rorty claims that especially writers and intellectuals have turned towards irony in order to cope with this loss of a grand narrative. The socially-engaging irony described at the beginning of this

thesis is the very premise of “Thank You for Saying Thank You”. Perhaps one could say that literary scholars have also lost various grand narratives throughout the last century. These were built on notions of the reader, the author and language, which could reach a unified unambiguous meaning. The abolition of these false notions about literature derive from postmodern language philosophy: the only way a writer with philosophic ambitions can still put up with these outdated reading habits is by deconstructing them through irony. Steve McCaffery comments on his collaborations with Charles Bernstein and other L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets:

[...] [T]hey were all informed by the common, fundamental desire to get away from that romantic ideogeme of the lyric self. The sheer energy of collaborative writing exceeds isolated subjectivity, for one is always in collision and in cooperation with another; the creative primal scene here is both community and alterity (McCaffery 2008: 7).

This statement expresses the notion of democratization and diversification of poetry which is in progress in some contemporary poetry. It emphasizes the necessity for the poet to work for and within the community. Bernstein and other contemporary poets and sociologists keep emphasizing the importance of an intellectual exchange on all matters concerning knowledge between not only the poet and the community, but also the scientist and the community or the politician and the community. For example, Charles Bernstein writes:

Indeed, in its counterconventional investigations, poetry engages *public*<sup>16</sup> language at its roots, in that it tests the limits of conventionality while forging other alternative conventions [...] Moreover, the contained scale of such poetic engagements allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the formation of public space: of *polis*<sup>17</sup>. [...] The poetic authority to challenge dominant societal values, including conventional manners of communication, is a model for the individual political participation of each citizen. The peculiar act of exercising this authority has implications for the public sphere insofar as such independent exercise of authority is not legitimated within a political context that fosters passivity (Bernstein 1992: 219).

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<sup>16</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>17</sup> My Emphasis.

Bernstein's desire for a politically active *polis*, which becomes engaged through the arts closely resembles the concept of a society in mode-2, as it was envisioned by the sociologists Helga Nowotny, Peter Scott and Michael Gibbons in *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies* (2003). Their argument is that nowadays scientific innovation almost always carries risks, such as severe environmental damage. Therefore, the authors claim that contemporary society has been turning into a "mode-2 society", in which science always becomes contextualized. As outlined in the beginning of this thesis, this means that researchers have to present their proposals to the public, who then decides whether the benefits outweigh the risks. Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons call the public space in which such discussions are staged *the agora*:

This archaism was deliberately chosen to embrace the political arena and the market place – and to go beyond both. The *agora* is the problem-generating and problem-solving environment in which the contextualization of knowledge production takes place. It is populated not only by arrays of competing 'experts', and the organizations and institutions through which knowledge is generated and traded, but also by variously jostling 'publics'. It is not simply a political or commercial arena in which research priorities are identified and funded, nor an arena in which research findings are disseminated, traded, and used (Nowotny *et al.*, 2003: 192).

The crucial idea of Nowotny and her colleagues is that a critical audience can influence, alter or stop political and scientific processes – especially when the potential risks outweigh the projected benefits. One example would be the discussion in Germany about whether to continue to operate nuclear power plants built before the 1980s or whether to shut them down.<sup>18</sup> This is an example of how the public is involved in two different societal realms at the same time: the question is highly political but it is an economic one at the same

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<sup>18</sup> One potential benefit of continuing to operate these power plants would be the fact that these plants have already produced enough energy to cover their construction costs. Therefore, the electricity companies can make more profit running these plants and this might help to keep the electricity prices at a reasonable level. The potential disadvantages include the increased risk of a nuclear accident. The operation of these old plants might also hinder the introduction of more expensive renewable energy into the market.

time. The *polis* can exert its power at the polling station by electing those political leaders that promise to deal with the question in one way or another. At the same time, the citizens make choices as consumers. By deciding to buy more expensive electricity from renewable sources, they can cast their vote as well. In a mode-2 society, science is also subject to public scrutiny. Research into nuclear physics, for example, depends to some extent on government funding. If the public opposes the allocation of such funds, both scientists and politicians have to react by: explaining and justifying the respective scientific endeavor; and/or improving it in order to meet the public's requirements; or by abandoning it altogether.

There are many parallels between Bernstein's poetics and the mode-2 society. The three most important ones are: encouraging activism rather than passivity and mindless consumerism; encouraging a critical inquiry into official statements, propaganda and the phallogocentric voice behind them; and valuing dissent as much as consensus.

These similarities between Bernstein's poetics and the "mode-2 theory" show how sociologically relevant Bernstein's approach to poetry is. The irony of "Thank You for Saying Thank You" exhibits a radical contempt for any totalizing viewpoint, emphasizing the importance of true diversity in terms of reading, writing and interpreting. Only if poetry allows for such true diversity it can have an impact on society and politically engage every citizen. The arts then become what they started by being: a form of engaging the community.

### **3. Let's Make Discourse: „Let's Just Say“**

The third part of "Let's Just Say" shares the general title of the poem. The poem is a list of 31 propositions that start – all of them – with the words "Let's Just Say". Every one of these lines is part of a discourse which Foucault defined as "a group of statements [that] belong to the same discursive formation" (Foucault 2010: 117). Just as the different lines

(“propositions”) of “In Particular”, each line of “Let’s Just Say” represents a discourse, a proposition of what might be. These propositions show a varying degree of probability and wisdom. There are some that represent philosophical insights into the meaning of life as generated by poetic sensibility; some are dreamy propositions of the unreal while others are playful and imaginative. More importantly, some are offsetting aberrations of English idioms or phrases that were once revolutionary but have by now become popular and largely trivialized parlances in semi-intellectual conversation-making and self-assured academic rhetoric. It already becomes apparent in the first few lines how the poem oscillates between philosophic insights, poetic day-dreaming, debunked idioms and outright platitudes or what I would call common pieces of everyday wisdom:

Let’s just say that every time you fall you never hit the ground  
 Let’s just say that when the day ends the night refuses to come  
 Let’s just say that if all else fails you at least can count on that  
 Let’s just say that a bird in the fist is better than a bird and a foot  
 Let’s just say that the scarlet ambrosia of your innermost longing is the nectar of  
 a god who never chooses to visit  
 Let’s just say that if chance accords possibilities, melancholy postpones  
 insomnia  
 Let’s just say that sleep is the darker side of dreams  
 Let’s just say that sometimes a rose is just a red flower  
 Let’s just say that every step forward is also a step nowhere

(Bernstein 2006: 10)

Propositions such as “every time you fall you never hit the ground” or “when the day ends the night refuses to come” or even “sleep is the darker side of dreams” evoke the motif of sleep and dreaming. They are, in fact, part of the dream discourse. These contemplations of the unconscious and attempts to capture it in poetic metaphor bring together psychoanalytical explanations of dream and concepts of discourse by each suggesting the existence of an alternative, fantastic reality in which the proposition is true. This dream

discourse is somewhat reminiscent of Robert Duncan's essay "The Truth and Life of Myth", which was quoted before in terms of similarities with Charles Olson's "Projective Verse". There is a very lucent description of the dream-like feeling that good narrative fiction can give the reader, Duncan writes:

This experience of waking up from a spell, from one reality into a real or true reality, waking up from a dream into the consciousness of daily life, liberated from the overwhelming creature-feeling one has in dream, as if one were being dreamt, in-bound to the fateful or plot-full [...] design of the dream, to the household and work-a-day world of comfortable or suitable procedures, is experienced in reverse by the convert to psychoanalysis, who begins to find in dreams, or, rather, in his interpretation of dreams, the real tenor of daily life. Now, not only are dreams the stuff life is made of, but life is the stuff dreams are made of (Duncan 1985: 9).

The first part, which Duncan takes from William James's comments on *Ivanhoe* in *Principles of Psychology*, can also be supported with examples from other American literature. What Duncan proposes is that the "convert to psychoanalysis" experiences this in reverse. Incidentally, the overwhelming majority of artists that emerged after Freud has been fascinated and in some way or another influenced by his theories. So, one may argue that Duncan effectively says that every artist after Freud examines his or her own dreams in order to gain an insight into life and art. All the dream-like propositions in "Let's Just Say" show that dreams are a form of discourse, inviting analyses about their origins or what hidden message they convey about the dreamer. The interpretation of dreams is in some ways similar to discourse analysis because it asks: Who dreams what and why? The elucidating nature of dream interpretations is especially emphasized by calling sleep "the darker side of dreams". Here, in the spirit of Duncan's essay, dreams are configured as the moment of clarity in which a higher insight into life and art is gained. But the unconscious is also experienced by the poet through language as a dream-like realm without gravity, in which "you fall [and] you never hit the ground"; or through the experience of daytime and nighttime as distinct entities that have their own unique characteristics such as light and

darkness, waking hours and sleeping hours, or the primarily productive time of day *versus* the primarily reflexive realm of the dream. While the distinction between day and night is a difficult one to begin with, as night is really a part of the day, the poet in “Let’s Just Say” implies that there may even be something like an in between state: “[W]hen the day ends the night refuses to come.” This could be read as the undefined, infinite middle ground between light and darkness, between conscious and unconscious or between productivity and reflexivity. This, in brief, is the Freudian aspect of “Let’s Just Say”. One might think of day-dreaming, for example. While it takes place during the day when one is awake, conscious, maybe even productive in one way or another, the day-dream represents unconscious reflexivity.

Another important aspect of the poem is the reconfiguration and one may say reassessment of English language idioms and famous sayings that have become part of a regulatory public discourse and can therefore contribute very little to an individual emancipatory mode of expression. These phrases have become meaningless for individual speech. Some of these idioms include “a stone’s throw” as a figure of speech to express proximity or the saying that “a [small] bird in the fist is better” than a large bird on the roof, emphasizing that sometimes a small but secure gain is better than a potentially large but doubtful gain. Bernstein debunks both of these idiomatic expressions:

Let’s just say that the thirst for knowledge can only be quenched if one  
learns how to remain hungry

Let’s just say that green is always a reflection of the idea of green

Let’s just say that I encounter myself not in the mirror but in the manure

Let’s just say that we think it before we see it or better we see it as we think  
it

Let’s just say that a stone’s throw might be a world away

Let’s just say that love is neither here nor there

Let’s just say that the girl is the mother of the woman

Let's just say that without disorder there can be no harmony

(Bernstein 2006: 10-1)

The “stone’s throw”, which has literally become divorced from the actual idea of throwing a stone, is nowadays used to describe the idea of a vague proximity. But as most distances thus described well exceed the average person’s throwing capabilities, Bernstein may actually be right, when he says that “a stone’s throw might be a world away”. This also describes the growing technological development surrounding us. It is by now common knowledge that the different continents may not achieve the same level of prosperity but they do seem to come closer to each other as transportation and information technology decrease the felt distance. The different continents that were once considered different worlds (as the historical-ideological differentiation between Old World and New World suggests) seem now to be only a “stone’s throw” away from each other and most of them are not. Bernstein even goes a step further by indicating how the technological progress in astronautics brings us closer to other planets, or other worlds as it were, until they seem to be only a “stone’s throw” away.

The “bird in the fist” that is supposedly better than “a bird and a foot” goes perhaps in the same direction, but it adds the dimension of play to these idiomatic reconfigurations. One bold interpretation would be to suppose that, in spoken English, the words “a bird in the” and “a bird and a” are homophonous. So, what strikes the reader as an apparent nonsense comparison gains its significance when it is read aloud and made subject to a “Close Listening”. This is one more instance of performativity in Bernstein’s works. If one gets behind the idea of the homophony of the two phrases, it becomes plain that the equivalence relation between the two parts of the statement is not grounded in denotation but in what Jakobson calls the poetic function of language. Therefore, “a bird in the fist” triggers “a bird and a foot” because the first four words are homophonous and the other two have a first

letter in common, which evidently turns into alliteration as the reader focuses on the two words in the quest for a possible relationship between them. Of course, on the semantic level there is also an equivalence relation as both hand and foot are two different “ends” of human extremities.

The principle of homophony is also present in the line “sometimes a rose is just a read flower”. Bernstein echoes Stein’s famous dictum when he says that “a rose is just a read flower”. He adds the twist of substituting “red” with the homophonous past participle of “to read”. The homophony at work in this line makes it akin to the one discussed before. But it also points to the fact that a student of American literature will have read Stein’s famous quote over and over and over again and will therefore understand it not only as Stein’s insistence on the priority of the word as a material entity on the page before anything else, but the quote itself becomes something that is quoted and read over and over again. Therefore, Stein’s rose is not just a red flower, but more than anything else a written, read and discussed flower. The other lines of the poem can be categorized as belonging either to the insightful, philosophical kind or to the more common, almost trivial sort.

The philosophical kind that expresses postmodern philosophy as discussed in the beginning of this thesis includes “Let’s just say that green is always a reflection of the idea of green”. This sentence points once more at the works of Saussure and Derrida. It is, of course, a nod towards the interplay of the signifiers and the idea of the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. But the real significance of this sentence seems to lie in its intertextual quality, as it links the collection *Let’s Just Say* to Bernstein’s early poem “Long Trails of Cars Returning from the Beach”, which was discussed earlier in this thesis. The sentence “Let’s just say that green is always a reflection of the idea of green” is nothing else but an intertextual echo of Bernstein’s 1978-poem “LTCRB”:

An idea of green  
that keeps

going [...]

(Bernstein 2000: 139)

Even if the terms modernism and post-modernism are subject to an intense debate, it seems appropriate to call such kind of self-referential intertextuality postmodern. Self-referential play can also be found in his collections *The Sophist* (1987) and *Rough Trades* (1991). The latter contains a poem entitled “Beyond the Valley of the Sophist”, whose title establishes a connection with the previous collection.

The title, *The Sophist*, implies that the poet sees himself as someone who uses “sophistry” which means the use of “clever arguments to persuade people that sth is true when it is really false”<sup>19</sup>

This is a fair description of the poet’s task of unmasking the phallogocentric voice and its effort to express truth and sincerity. Bernstein does so by employing all kinds of poetic play, many of which are in one way or another “typically Bernstein”. For example, there is one poem that resembles “LTCRB”. Echoing Robert Duncan’s *The Years as Catches*, it is called “The Years as Swatches”:

Voice seems  
to break  
over these  
short lines  
cracking or  
setting loose.  
I see a word  
& it repeats  
Itself as  
your location  
overt becalm

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<sup>19</sup> *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, sixth edition, Oxford University Press 2000: 1232.

that neither  
binds nor furnishes [...]

(Bernstein 2004: 25).

Some of the parallels to “LTCRB” include the short lines and the apparent contradictions within these lines (“setting loose”). For example, just as in “LTCRB”, the opening line of this poem questions the authority of phallogocratic voices, not only by stating that “voice seems to break over these short lines” but by placing the two words “voice” and “seems” into one line. This gives the clear message that “voice” is never objective, true or neutral. In fact, “voice”, to some extent, always represents a fiction and, just like public discourse, it is often more a staging or a performance than anything genuine.

In the poem “Beyond the Valley of the Sophist” Bernstein also explores poetic techniques of sophistry:

[...] *Bruce*  
*is bruised by bluster*<sup>20</sup> (Buster). Fight  
fire with water (warper). “This  
is a powerful, original, and deeply  
moving work and many will  
find it a disturbing one

(Bernstein 1991: 67).

Just as “LTCRB” contains passages of powerfully conventional language which conceal the lack of sense, the first two lines of this poem contain stylistic devices such as rhymes and alliterations that suggest more order and coherence than can actually be found in the contents. The second part of the excerpt shows the integration of a quote that the author probably found in a review. Bernstein has done this many times – especially in early works such as *Poetic Justice* (1979) or *Controlling Interest* (1980).

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<sup>20</sup> Emphasis in the original.

The twist in this poem is that it ends in an anecdote in which a man comes to a house “noted for its views”:

The story is told that a man came to a house noted for  
 its views  
 & was told, look to the West, at the mountain ranges that  
 Loom over the land  
 & was told, look to the South, at the turquoise-blue lake  
 Shimmering in the blue-bright sun  
 & was taken, then, to an Eastern balcony, overhanging  
 a garden unrivaled in its varieties of plants & flowers  
 & he looked to the North, at the thick-grown forest  
 & listened to the birds that filled the branches of the cascading trees  
 & he was ushered to the Western windows  
 & he said, “But I’ve already seen that.”

(Bernstein 1991: 71)

It is not clear whether this last scene is linked to the title of the poem. As the man does hardly speak it is impossible to tell whether he is the sophist or not. Also, the poem leaves it open whether the last scene represents the “beyond” of the “valley of the sophist”. The man is asked to look out of the windows of the house into four different directions and the views they offer. Every view is described as one might expect it to be described in pre-modernist landscape poetry. However, when the visitor is asked to look out of the Western window for a second time, his matter-of-fact answer contrasts sharply with the idyllic landscape descriptions that preceded it.

The poem advocates the idea of sophistry which was powerfully set forth in the previous collection. By suggesting a “beyond” the “valley of the sophist” in the title, the poem ironically imitates Bernstein’s critics. The word “beyond” was probably chosen because Eliot (the symbol for the New Critical Approach) frequently used it. “Valley” is a pejorative comment on the supposedly low literary quality of Bernstein’s sophistry. However, Bernstein shows his critics that they are wrong through “Beyond the Valley of the Sophist”. In the first part, he shows the reader the immense literary potential of sophistry

and in the second part he contrasts it with pre-modernist idyllic landscape description. The most important point is the response given by the man in the poem when he is about to be shown the Western view for a second time. He says “But I have already seen that.” This is also a comment on used-up non-exploratory literary techniques. Bernstein seems to emphasize the point that we as a literary culture have been there and done that and there is no need to go back to these pre-modernist techniques. In fact, he emphasizes that the insistence on such return is absolutely counter-productive and does not get poetry anywhere new – but sophistry does.

It has become evident that sophistry is also the stylistic device of choice in the poem “Let’s Just Say”. The propositions of this poem are meant to make the reader think differently about his or her daily experiences and language use. While they are not explicitly false, they do represent an alternative way of looking at reality. After reading “Let’s Just Say”, the reader is perhaps more likely to say “I have never thought about it this way” or “I have never seen that” instead of saying “But I have already seen that.”

#### **4. The Inevitable Circularity of Language: „every lake...“ and Différance**

Derrida’s famous essay “Différance” and Roman Jakobson’s “Poetic Function”, which were both already introduced in chapter III.1 of this thesis, can also be regarded as the key texts for understanding the last poem in *Let’s Just Say*, “every lake...”. This poem is a list of 21 lines in which two nouns are connected by the formula “every [...] has a [...]”. The following line then takes the second noun as its starting point, while the noun ending this line again becomes the starting point of the next line and so on:

Every lake has a house  
 & every house has a stove  
 & every stove has a pot  
 & every pot has a lid  
 & every lid has a handle  
 & every handle has a stem

& every stem has an edge  
 & every edge has a lining  
 & every lining has a margin  
 & every margin has a slit  
 & every slit has slope  
 & every slope has a sum  
 & every sum has a factor  
 & every factor has a face  
 & every face has a thought  
 & every thought has a trap  
 & every trap has a door  
 & every door has a frame  
 & every frame has a roof  
 & every roof has a house  
 & every house has a lake

(Bernstein 2006: 13)

The nouns in this poem define each other, both horizontally as well as vertically. In every line there is a supposed relationship between the two terms. In this poem, the structure of each line suggests that the latter is always in some way part of the first. The challenge the reader faces in this poem is similar to the one in “In Particular”, which is to find out what constitutes the relationship between the two nouns. A distinct difference between the two poems can be seen in the way in which there is no explicit connection between the lines in “In Particular” and they seem to illustrate “Différance” by presenting mutually exclusive scenes or statements, whereas in “every lake...” the symbol “&” establishes an explicit connection between the statements and the noun from the last line is always taken up as the first noun of the new line. Therefore, it seems as though one is following an argument that continues from line to line. Of course, the whole idea of “making sense” is finally debunked and the circularity of semiotic deferral exposed when the poem ends in the line “& every house has a lake”, which is the first line of the poem – only that the nouns have switched places and with an added “&” in front. This is also similar to “In Particular” where the situations in the first and the last two lines are the same only that the people depicted have

switched races and genders. What enables the circularity in “every lake...” is the changing link between the two nouns in each line. While in “In Particular”, the strongest links between person and situation are the ones making use of poetic equivalence, the situation is different in “every lake...”. The poem starts with the line “every lake has a house”, which is a nod towards romantic iconography. In other words: the only world-view, in which a lake would always signify picturesque sceneries with houses at the lake shore is arguably a romantic one. From there up until the word “handle”, the train of thought simply zooms into conventional household inventory: “house”, “stove”, “pot” and the pot’s “handle”. These are items that can be seen in everyday macro-level observation. The chain of associations from “house” to “handle” displays a hierarchical order which descends towards the smallest components.

From there, however, the chain of words goes into greater detail. The next nouns are “stem”, “edge” and “lining”. These are terms that one may come up with when looking very close at the construction (stem), the shape (edge) and the texture (lining) of the item at hand. The next line “& every lining has a margin” seems to be of an allegorical nature. There is the word “line” in it as well as the term “margin” – two major preoccupations of any poet. Therefore, this may be read as another instance in which Bernstein’s poems call attention to their own materiality. Another example would be the already-cited line from “LTCRB” where newspaper is “stacked-up” just like the lines of the poem seem to be stacked up.

The next line states that every margin has a slit. This is perhaps the most enigmatic line of the poem as “margin” neither contains nor evokes the word “slit”. However, if “slit” is taken as a homonymy for “cut”, then it could possibly be a synonym for the edge of a piece of paper or any other item. Most of the other transitions exhibit a more obvious logic. The next line, for example, “& every slit has a slope”, establishes an equivalence relation between the two terms through the poetic function of language. Just as in “In Particular” there is a “Danish designer in a diner”, this line here also establishes a connection between

two unlike terms through alliteration. In this case, the stylistic device is particularly strong because the first two letters are the same. So, instead of looking for a matter-of-fact way in which a “slit” might contain or evoke a “slope”, the two terms only need to be given a “close listening” in order to identify their kinship. But the poem moves on from the poetic function into the realm of mathematics. The “slope” can be taken as the term signifying the increase of a graph at a given point or over a certain stretch. The slope can be expressed in terms of a numerical value and, if the slope describes a stretch of the graph, it will be the sum of different local extremes. The next line stays in the realm of mathematics and while two factors do not constitute a sum but a product, the analogy is close enough to satisfy the reader’s quest for a logical connection.

In the succeeding lines, the nature of the connection keeps changing. Every factor having a face could, for example, be taken as a partial reversal of contemporary neo-liberal discourse in which workers, for example, are considered “cost factors” that need to be scrupulously measured against their “productivity”. Bernstein reminds the reader that these factors are human beings that have personalities and faces. But this is only one possible explanation for the line. It might also refer generally to the idiomatic expression “human factor”, which can be interpreted as a capitalist term which views human beings as nothing else but cost factors and potential sources of errors. Bernstein reminds the reader that these factors do indeed have faces. But “factor” and “face” are also alliterations like slit and “slope”. The poem then comes into the realm of the literary or philosophical. Every “face” having a “thought” can be taken as a powerfully conventional literary metaphor. The “thought” that in turn has a “trap” is a piece of what is also called everyday wisdom in regard to “Let’s Just Say” in the preceding section. It refers to the rigorous inquiry into one’s own thoughts, which most educational institutions demand. The trap in one’s thought might be the overlooked error in judgment or a logical fallacy, which one is not aware of. The “trap” that has a “door” is a pun on the term “trapdoor”, which refers to a door in the

floor, which can be opened in order to make somebody fall into a hole, or as the dictionary defines it: it is “a small door in a floor or ceiling”.<sup>21</sup>

From there, the poem noticeably returns to the matter fact ideas that also inform its beginning. The “door” leads to the “frame”. However, as the direction of the poem is reversed now, the sequential order in which the house “is constructed” also changes. While the beginning of the poem was a “zooming into” the house and its inventory, the end of the poem is more of a “zooming out”, as it shows two components of the house, first the (door) “frame” which in most cases has a central position in a house and may even be located inside and finally the “roof”, the topmost part of a house. From the roof the reader is lead to see the “house” and finally the romantic landscape described in the beginning, complete with “house” and “lake”. Here the poem ends but the semiotic chain may potentially continue infinitely even as the circle of deferral closes for the first, but surely not the last time.

Hence, the poem evokes the inevitable circularity of language. It does so by showing how even a chain of quite random and sometimes forced mental associations eventually leads to the term with which it started. This is a powerful metaphor for the fact that language is nothing more but the interplay of signifiers. Since the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, a certain term only gains meaning by its difference to other signifiers. So, the “lake” in “every lake...” gains its meaning by not being “a house”, “a stove” or “a pot” etc. However, as soon as the speaker’s fantasy in terms of negative definitions is exhausted, the term ultimately points only to itself and never the thing it is supposed to represent.

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<sup>21</sup> *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, sixth edition, Oxford University Press 2000: 1384.

#### IV. Conclusion

Charles Bernstein's poems ridicule any notion about what to expect from linguistic utterances and instead show how verbal expression is part of a "multidimensional textual field", which is highly performative, subjective, unstable and constantly invites innovation. Bernstein is very concerned with the performative element, "the acting out" or what he calls "histrionic appropriateness", thereby emphasizing the arts' responsibility to produce multifaceted, polyvalent and manifold works in order to broaden the human horizon of possibility.

Bernstein is an ironist and there is irony in his works. However, his is a "socially-engaging irony" as opposed to the very fashionable "evasive irony", which serves intellectuals as a means of evading difficult topics. He aims for comic tension between "performance" and "performativity" with such experiments that destabilize certain expectations and previously held notions.

He views poems as artifacts that are meant to contribute to the emergence of a poeticized culture, taking Rorty's as well as Welsch's approach; he views epistemology as necessarily "creational" and the aesthetic as epistemological and political. He also keeps reminding the reader that the arts need to continuously contribute challenging works to the process of establishing and maintaining a poeticized culture – through "the creation of more various and multicolored artifacts". His recognizing of the political nature of art calls for a poeticized culture that must be plural and open, "a multi-dimensional textual field" – never authoritarian or dictatorial.

For Bernstein, poetics is always political. Bernstein's desire for a politically active *polis*, which becomes engaged through the arts, closely resembles the concept of a society in mode-2 which emphasizes the importance of an intellectual exchange on all matters concerning knowledge: between not only the poet and the community, but also the scientist and the community, or the politician and the community.

His works constantly raise the question of knowledge and knowledge production. He emphasizes the need to learn from views that diverge from our own, to challenge the dominant modes of representation in our society, and to address, challenge and confront the public space with contemporary politics, technology and philosophy. In order to achieve this, he does everything he can to provide free and globally accessible platforms for alternative voices, such as Pennsound, which can be considered as a valuable contribution to a contemporary *agora* and to a public intellectual climate which sparks critical reflection, leading to a new sense of (post)modernity and (re)connecting arts and society. In Bernstein's view, "politics demands complex thinking and [...] poetry is an arena for such thinking".

Bernstein's poetics are exemplified in the poem "Long Trails of Cars Returning from the Beach" ("LTCRB") which can be read as a programmatic manifesto. He cannot escape the Pound-Eliot tradition of Anglo-American modernism, even though he rejects especially Pound's approach towards authoritative composition and his political views; he prefers the alternative tradition of modernism as represented by William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein. "LTCRB" carnivalizes the Pound-Eliot tradition and can be regarded as the narrative of a poetic movement emancipating itself. The poem attempts to somewhat distance itself from the Pound-Eliot tradition by ridiculing their allusion and collage technique and it points out the poetic potential of a contemporary poetry that refuses to be assimilated by "Official Verse Culture".

"LTCRB" can be read as an example of Hassan's category of decanonization. Instead of granting absolute authority to the voice of the recent past, Bernstein's generation is interested in a plurality of ideas and in an ongoing exchange between different voices. Following Leslie Fielder, Bernstein believes postmodernism needs to explore its own myths, which may be found in popular culture. He, for instance, finds inspiration for his poetry in the works of independent filmmakers to whom he pays homage at the end of "LTCRB".

The poem can thus be seen as an example of a high degree of performativity, indeterminacy and immediacy. The punctuation and line-breaks make many passages polyvalent and leave the reader's imagination with the greatest possible freedom of interpretation. Far from a simple recovery of an intentionality that might have guided the writing process, the attribution of sense remains a volatile matter of performativity. Every reading is a new exploration of the text which "has become merely a score for the performance". The public reading of poetry is given equal importance as the written poem. This approach to poetry performance, which Bernstein, for instance, has postulated in "Close Listening" shows that he was very much influenced by Charles Olson, particularly "Projective Verse". Bernstein's own reading of "LTCRB" at Place Center shows the volatility and performativity of his poetry. It is the rhythm that guides Bernstein's reading, not syntax or ordinary semantics. He breaks the syntax according to the flow of his reading and allows for the attribution of varying semantic value to each individual syllable: "Sound is neither arbitrary nor secondary but constitutive".

"LTCRB" also brings to mind Robert Duncan's theories of the poetic process. According to Duncan, the poet picks up everything around him, reacts to the rhythms of his own body, "the nervous and visceral and muscular intelligences" and, most importantly, his own breath. The resulting ambiguity allows and requests a multiplicity of readings. The sense of immediacy conveyed in "LTCRB" also reflects Stein's and Duncan's approach to the poem as an act of perception. The poem is always a process, never a product.

The contents of the poem show Bernstein's attempt to disrupt the lexical patterns. He does so especially by trying to hide a lack of sense within a sequence of powerfully conventional poetic language. This is an example of poetic de-realization or even linguistic alienation through which the poet interferes in the accepted model of representation and in the world as such.

The four poems of *Let's Just Say* (“In Particular”, “Let’s Just Say”, “Thank You for Saying Thank You” and “every lake...”) display a wide range of Bernstein’s poetic techniques. There is the integration of profane inventory into his poems, such as everyday-items, sub-literary material, vernacular speech, deficient language or the quotation of derivative material. The poems probe into the materiality of language and the instability of the signifier. He does so in the tradition of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E School which has challenged the natural “authentic” presence of the speaker behind the text and emphasized the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, directing attention to the materiality and historicity of the signifier.

Bernstein debunks commonly held notions about ethnicity, gender, creed, nationality and class. In the poem “In Particular”, Bernstein shows that categories such as race and belonging depend on an individual’s performance thereof and are elusive concepts in postmodern thought – voice and identity are fictions. Bernstein stays true to postmodern thought in that he does not offer meaning but a constant deferral thereof. Instead of obeying what he calls the “self-proclaimed public voice”, Bernstein is interested in those who are marginalized in this system – those that the ruling class might refer to as “special interest groups”. He urges us to pay close attention to whatever is not endorsed by what is also the “phallographic voice”, namely such details as “inarticulations, stuttering, inaudibilities, eccentricities, and linguistic deviance”.

The propositions of the poem “Let’s Just Say” explore realities that are not our own and give the reader an incentive to imagine alternative worlds in which these propositions may be true.

In “Thank You for Saying Thank You”, Bernstein fights against the leveling of differences, the framing and commoditization of works of art by comically creating the ideal convenience poem. He thereby valorizes the difficult, marginalized, overlooked, unpopular and dissenting in poetry (and poetry performances).

Finally, the poem “every lake...” explores the potentially endless semiotic chain evoked by a given term as well as the constant deferral of meaning. All of the poems show reservations towards the notion of truth and certainty as constituents of language and of the literary text.

Bernstein thus works to undermine capitalist approaches to reading which focus on an economy and an exchange of meaning as the primary value between the writer and the reader. Instead, poetry is supposed to give a glance at the multiplicity, variation and beauty of life, evoking in the reader the constant desire to look up from the page and reach out to, or rather, reach into the fullness of life, activating his/her creative potential – the very potential that is lost in most workplaces where people are alienated from their work. In accordance with Lyotard’s dichotomy of performance vs. performativity, Bernstein’s poems encourage the reader to dislocate himself or herself from the constrained everyday reality and explore alternatives to the straining daily routines.

On the same note, Bernstein rejects formal literary constraints imposed on poetry. Instead, he continuously seeks to undermine all of these implicit and explicit rules of composition and standardized literary forms in order to liberate form. This becomes particularly evident in his satirical rejection of the New Formalist approach which is exemplified in “Fragments from the Seventeenth Manifesto of Nude Formalism”.

Bernstein’s Marxist stance also becomes visible in the way in which he criticizes contemporary consumer culture and its obsession with forgetting and throwing away, producing anew and buying again. At the same time, he argues against a-historicity, the ignorance and forgetfulness that dominate public discourse and the media nowadays. He opposes the blatant commercialization of art and resists it as much as he can. Bernstein warns us that while printing technology has dramatically improved during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the output of printed matter is as great as never before, the space for non-mainstream voices gets smaller and smaller.

His poetry is a responsible postmodernist response to our postmodern world: a response showing how important the poet's social role can be in the building of an active citizenship.

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