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This dissertation attempts to answer two apparently straightforward questions: (1) What is the nature and function of citation? (2) How does contemporary poetry make use of it?

The first question seems the easier one, because citation is of course quite familiar to scholars. Traditionally, one cites or quotes from another work to illustrate or decorate the citing text. In the case of illustration, a citation functions to support the aims and claims of the citing text, which are typically advanced in a linear and expository way. In the case of decoration, citation's function is to adorn the text with a stylistic flourish. In both situations, however, a citation plays a role subservient to that of the citing text. An illustrative citation is simply the indifferent instrument for substantiating the citing text. And an ornamental citation, despite possessing more independence than an illustrative citation, is nevertheless shuffled away to the actual margins of the page as epigraph or footnote, lest it interrupt the flow of the writing and contaminate the citing text.

But what happens when citations find their way into poetry, a mode of writing that does not lend itself as well to linear and expository expression? When the context is altered in this way, the inherent capacity of citations to displace and substitute for the
citing text may be explored, generating new possibilities for the status of authors, texts
and readers. Citation's nature is thus revealed as hybrid, as capable of both illustration
and displacement.

Poetry would seem to be the last place to find citations, because poets are
supposed to speak in their own inimitable voices and offer literary works of originality.
But a host of poets have been making creative use of citation for nearly a century.
Eliot and Pound are obvious cases in point and are discussed in Leonard Diepeveen's
_Changing Voices: The Modernist Quoting Poem_. My project follows in the footsteps
of this work by addressing the postmodern situation, particularly so by examining John
Ashbery's early poetry and the language poetry of Charles Bernstein. Poets like these
savor the latent possibility of citations to disrupt the citing text and offer multiple
textures of expression in a given poem.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: METAPHOR AND THE PARADOX OF CITATION

Perhaps due to the uncanny persistence in the academy of romantic and symbolist poetics, scholarship has left largely untouched an important tradition in modern poetry. This tradition makes its presence felt when poets, anyone from Eliot and Pound up to the dozens of practitioners today, make use of already spoken or written language in their poems, rather than relying absolutely on their own original words and phrases. It is in large part the purpose of this dissertation to uncover a significant area of this tradition that has gone unremarked: the post-war tradition, two strains of which may be represented by John Ashbery and Charles Bernstein.

Initially, however, this dissertation attempts to answer a few apparently simple questions: (1) What is the nature and function of citation? (2) how does contemporary poetry make use of it?

The first question seems the easier one, especially as citation is something quite familiar to us as scholars. Traditionally, one cites or quotes another work or writer either to illustrate a specific argumentative point, or less significantly, to decorate the text with a stylistic flourish. Both of the two lone book-length studies of citation make this clear: Antoine Compagnon's Seconde Main, ou Le Travail de la
Citation and Claudette Sartiliot's *Citation and Modernity: Derrida, Joyce, Brecht*.

But most citations understood in this way tend toward marginalia. Even if the cited text is presented as important for the aims and claims of the citing text, a citation such as this ultimately serves only to achieve the goals of that citing text, which may be characterized as linear or expository. A quotation or citation in this sense is an inanimate object inserted in critical narratives to buttress arguments. Alternatively, if a quotation or citation is used for stylistic purposes, it begins to take on more life and independence. But then such a stylistic quotation somehow must be shuffled away to the literal margins of the page as epigraph or footnote, lest it interrupt the expository flow of the writing and interfere with the citing text.

From common usage it would seem that the nature of citation lay in its subservience to the proper text. But then what, besides perhaps an uncharacteristic flippancy, would motivate as incisive a literary critic as Walter Benjamin to remark that "Quotations in my work are like robbers by the roadside who make an armed attack and relieve an idler of his convictions" (qtd. in Hertz 14-15)? What, for that matter, happens when citations and quotations appear in a less prosaic context such as poetry, especially poetry that does not lend itself so well to expository expression? If we take Benjamin's remark seriously, we must register an otherwise hidden capacity in both the act of repeating the words of another and in the repeated words themselves. Such would be the capacity of citations and quotations to displace and substitute for the main body of writing and to challenge the authority of the author using them.

Unruly citations like these would seem to question our received notions about authors,
texts and readers. They could mean, for instance, that the author does not speak in one voice, that the text is not completely autonomous and that readers may be called upon to take a more active role in making the text than previously thought.

Issues such as these arise in the works of modernist poets like Pound, Eliot, Moore, Williams and Zukofsky, as well as contemporary poets like Ashbery, Berrigan, Howe, Perelman, Bernstein, and many others. These poets and ones like them use citations and quotations in varying ways in accordance with a collage aesthetic in which diverse fragments of language are juxtaposed without easy transitional moments, or indeed, without any connectives at all (Seitz 25). This citational attitude is revolutionary with respect to some of the most time-honored perspectives on poetry and poets, which derive much of their force both from English romanticism and French symbolism. Poets like the moderns and postmoderns mentioned above, especially the postmoderns, cease to ground the value of writing in the poet's inwardness or psychology. They likewise remain distrustful of language's capacity to point outside of itself to some other reality, especially to some transcendental one. The split between author and text, on the one hand, and between text and world, on the other, becomes a necessary precondition for any citational poetic.

Before discussing the poetry of Ashbery and Bernstein, it seems favorable to investigate further the question of citation in itself. I do this first rather than focus on citation in use, a discussion which takes up the bulk of the remaining chapters of this
study. In this move I provide a brief survey of the writings on the topic of citation as well as a survey of the literary critics who seem invested in understanding the citational ethos of certain strains of modern poetry.

Citation and Metaphor

In essence, the problem of citation is the problem of metaphor, the problem of explaining one thing in terms of another. When writers cite or quote the words of others, they substitute the words of others for those of their own, just as one might invoke a metaphor as an alternative means of conveying an idea. In citation, one’s own words are supposed to be amplified by the introduction of another’s words. But the equal and opposite consequence, that the other’s words will displace those citing them and alter the status of the text, is always a latent possibility.

An important discussion by Ludwig Wittgenstein near the end of Philosophical Investigations provides a helpful background to this problem. It is true that the terms “citation” and “metaphor” never actually appear in this writing. But Wittgenstein’s presentation of what Charles Altieri has termed “aspectual” thinking is an appropriate way to introduce the basic issues at stake in citation, especially if

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3 Wittgenstein’s idiosyncratic procedure of invoking stock statements and then subjecting the statements to philosophic and aesthetic scrutiny, is an instance of citational writing in its own right. See Bernstein on Cavell below and Marjorie Perloff, Wittgenstein’s Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996).
metaphor is understood as a substitution and citation as illustration ("Ashbery" 825). This is the famous section of the *Investigations* in which Wittgenstein treats of optical illusions and offers up the conundrum, "If a lion could speak, we could not understand him" (223). Wittgenstein here often discusses how, for whatever reason, it becomes necessary at times to point to some alternative phenomenon in speaking or writing to further some argumentative stance or simply to illustrate what it is one might be stating. As we point at something with these apparent purposes in mind, we engage in an act of seeing. Wittgenstein is suggesting that illustrating a point to convey meaning is at base this problem of seeing and indexing some object for our subjective purposes. In doing so it becomes necessary for the onlooker to distinguish, in the midst of the “tangled impression” Wittgenstein calls seeing, between figure and ground, even simply to provide a mere “description of what is seen.”

I look at the landscape, my gaze ranges over it, I see all sorts of distinct and indistinct movement; *this* impresses itself sharply on me, *that* is quite hazy. After all, how completely ragged what we see can appear! And now look at all that can be meant by “description of what is seen”.—But this just is what is called description of what is seen. There is not *one genuine* proper case of such description—the rest being just vague, something which awaits clarification, or which must just be swept aside as rubbish. (*Investigations* 200)

This is where metaphor enters the discussion. Metaphor as “a formal similarity between two different takes on reality” is “typified,” in the words of Jon Erickson, by the figure-ground relation in vision (8). To an irreducible extent, one must accept this seeing as what Wittgenstein will call “seeing-as”: “How would the following account do: ‘What I can see something as, is what it can be a picture of’?” (*Investigations* 201)

A gap opens up between what we choose as figure and what is actually out there in the
object realm as undifferentiated phenomena and which necessarily entails representation of that “out-there,” the necessity of metaphor in the act of seeing and conveying meaning.

This problem of representation becomes even more marked in the shift from the three-dimensional reality of a landscape to the two-dimensional reality of a painting of a landscape (or of drawings on paper) and finally to the one-dimensional scene of language itself. According to Wittgenstein, the contradiction between figure and ground is far more unstable in two-dimensional representation than in three-dimensions, however much the three-dimensional situation is also marked by representation and interpretation. The two-dimensional context brings to light what Charles Altieri, in an essay on John Ashbery, has called, following Wittgenstein, an “aspectual” reality (Altieri 825). When, for instance, we look at a two-dimensional representation of a cube, the image’s geometric abstraction from reality makes it possible to attend to the image in various ways, as here “a glass cube, there an inverted open box, there a wire frame of that shape, there three boards forming a solid angle” (Investigations 193). The “aspectual” nature not simply of the image but of the act of pointing to it and seeing it in the apparent terms according to which one points to it, reveal that figure and ground in the image, and finally in the citation, are constantly shifting. We cannot ultimately decide what is a metaphor or representation of what.
In this way it becomes necessary to submit that these acts of seeing and pointing are indeed *acts.* They are volitional and intentional and not simply neutral descriptions of objectively self-present phenomena. This is the consequence, for Wittgenstein, of establishing that, to an inexorable degree, all seeing is "seeing-as."

For instance, Wittgenstein wonders whether he "really see[s] something different each time, or do[es] . . . [he] only *interpret* what . . . [he] see[s] in a different way" (Investigations 212). In this way, "seeing an aspect and imagining are subject to the will." Wittgenstein further illustrates this point with a metaphor. "In a law-court, for instance the question might be raised how someone meant a word. And this can be inferred from certain facts.—It is a question of *intention.* But could how he experienced a word—the word "bank" for instance—have been significant in the same way?" (Investigations 212) In terms of citation, these remarks imply both a will to cite and a will of citation. The will to cite denotes both critics’ needs to illustrate their arguments and receivers’ needs to form the precise aspectual consciousness of the sender. A will of citation, however, designates the subjective nature of citation itself, whose internal contradiction between figure and ground, as a "chimera," as "this queerly shifting construction," is a producer of aspects (Investigations 196).

Jon Erickson’s discussion of the figure-ground relation in *The Fate of the Object: from Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art, and Poetry,* seconds Wittgenstein’s discussion of optical illusions and connects the figure-ground relation to metaphor.

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4 See Altieri, "John Ashbery" 826; also see Compagnon, *Seconde Main* 30-31.
A figure-ground relation typifies the workings of metaphor: the relation of a formal similarity between two different takes on reality, each of which can be taken literally or used metaphorically according to which constitutes the figure and which the ground in any context. (8)

This remark, like Wittgenstein’s discussion of optical metaphors, has the effect of presenting citation as the indication of a figure-ground relation between author’s words and the cited words. Although the common understanding implicitly establishes the cited text as the “vehicle” for the “tenor” of the author’s argumentative stance, the relation could just as easily be reversed. The secret to making use of citation in a way closer to its true being would be “to acknowledge and develop what would be the most productive tension between these things and to stop worrying about overcoming any split; rather, by operating creatively within it, it is already overcome” (8). The force of Erickson’s move in this section is to show, like that of Wittgenstein, how it is that the dichotomizing inherent in metaphor and citation is never a settled issue. This portrait of metaphor and citation of course is contrary to the standard way of imagining both in which the metaphor and the cited text is subservient to the literal and main text respectively.

The clash between figure and ground in metaphor, the clash between citing text and cited text in citation, implies the essential paradox of citation inherent in Antoine Compagnon’s and Claudette Sartiliot’s respective investigations of citation. But before examining these critics, it is crucial to emphasize that, however much intention and will are constitutive features of citation, this does not mean that metaphor cannot

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describe as well as interpret, that citation cannot illustrate as well as displace.

Perception is not eliminated by thought, since "the concept of a representation of what is seen, like that of a copy, is very elastic, and so together with it, is the concept of what is seen. The two are intimately connected. (Which is not to say that they are alike.)" (Investigations 198). This truth Wittgenstein also attends to in his examination of the possible interpretations of a geometric representation of a shape.

Thus, when looking at the geometric representation of a triangle,

> a triangle can really be standing up in one picture, be hanging in another, and can in a third be something that has fallen over.—That is, I who am looking at it say, not 'It may also be something that has fallen over,' but 'That glass has fallen over and is lying there in fragments.' This is how we react to the picture. (Investigations 201)

It makes little sense to make the former of Wittgenstein's hypothetical statements—"It may also be something that has fallen over"—which would surely strike the listener as odd, at least as an initial reaction to the image. We cannot "take account" of all the differing aspects of the image at once, cannot see both the figure(s) and the ground(s) at the same time. This failure becomes the source for the eminently social criteria for what will constitute the figure in the image, what will effectively describe the thing it indicates.

Stephen Melville, in his provocative essay "Description," engages this dichotomous problem of metaphor and citation in the context of phenomenology.

Drawing upon the German hermeneutic tradition, particularly the writings of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, Melville reveals the dichotomy inherent in the aesthetic enterprise. Rejecting the notion that description of paintings is inevitably
overwhelmed by the fact of interpretation—that "it’s interpretation all the way down"—Melville shows how the contradictory forces of interpretation and description cannot be reconciled (Seams 49). As regards Gadamer, for instance, Melville argues how “what Gadamer finally offers is a way of working through the question of interpretation to a position from which interpretation can be seen not to be self-supporting but to depend on something like the terms of our attachment to particular works” (Seams 49). This means that the “challenge” that phenomenology poses for art criticism “is to be located in its suggestion that no theoretical adjudication between the relative weights or roles of description and interpretation is possible, even as neither of these terms is simply disposable” (Seams 49). The same dynamic holds true for the relation between citing and cited texts. The differing roles of citing and cited texts are undecidable, though neither can simply be cast off.

Wittgenstein has prepared the way for this situation in which art seems to be joined with philosophy, art and philosophy as two very different but mutually supporting mechanisms for knowledge and perception. Even in the section of the Philosophical Investigations just discussed, Wittgenstein shows how the contrasting interpretive and descriptive elements of metaphor are to be understood, as the distinction between, “working drawings” or “blueprints,” on the one hand, and “paintings,” on the other. A similar issue is important in chapter five below as I

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6 See my reading of Ashbery’s “The Skaters” below in chapter four.
7 Melville’s essay is part of a larger work entitled Seams: Art As a Philosophical Context, ed. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (Amsterdam: G+B Arts, 1996) and part of his ongoing project to use the conditions of art as meaning-making forces that provide a path for philosophical reflection. This study extends Melville’s notions about art to include art as a way of understanding citation, particularly in the sections I devote to John Ashbery’s poetry. Ashbery’s work seems to derive many of its ideas and
present the clash between philosophy and poetry as embodying the antagonisms in Bernstein's use of citation. For now it will suffice to say that while Ashbery seems content in his own understanding of citation to embrace interpretation and description as a condition for the artwork, Charles Bernstein, on the other hand, engages the opposition between poetry and philosophy.

Previous Studies of Citation

Antoine Compagnon's 1979 work Seconde Main ("second hand") is the first study to develop the topic of citation at book length, providing an historical and structuralist approach to the topic, a topic, he is careful to note, that cannot easily be defined. As Compagnon notes in the first lines of his study, "Ce livre est sans objet, sans objet identifiable, car il en a plusieurs" ("This book is without an object of study, without an identifiable object, because it has many objects.") (9). Compagnon further offers an extensive history of citation that he partitions into three periods: (1) the classical ("la rhétorique ancienne"), (2) the canonical ("le commentaire patristique") and (3) modern ("l'avènement de la citation moderne") (11). Although Compagnon aesthetic principles from the visual arts, especially from surrealism and dada and so many of the emergent trends in art since the end of the second world war.

8 It is not entirely clear, however, what Bernstein finally makes of this opposition, as in certain of his writings he attempts to override the differences between the two in favor of stressing writing as the concealed third term that trumps them both. Doing so would be tantamount to dispensing, in Melville's terms, of the opposition between poetry and philosophy. In other writings, alternatively, Bernstein seems to respect their differences in the manner of a Stanley Cavell, an important American philosopher under whom Bernstein studied and about whom I have much to say in chapters three and five.

9 Divisions such as these have proven useful for Claudette Sartiliot. See below.
is careful to note that there can be no easy definition of citation, the first section of *Seconde Main*, "La citation telle qu'elle-même" ("citation as such") offers a "pointe de traite" ("point of departure").

Compagnon relies extensively on C.S. Peirce’s unique semiotic categories to view citation as a curious hybrid of subject and object (59-65). He notes that we typically do not envision citation in this way, usually seeing it as an object in itself. "Dans son emploi habituel, la citation n’est ni l’acte du prélèvement ni celui de la greffe, mais seulement la chose, comme si les manipulations n’etaient pas, comme si la citation ne supposait pas un passage à l’acte." ("In its common use, citation is neither the act of excision nor that of grafting, but only a thing, as if it were not manipulated, as if citation did not necessitate an element of action.") (30-31). In examining modernist and postmodernist uses of citation, it will be necessary to understand the ways in which citation takes on a life of its own, as a subject, and not simply a deanimated element of a system with a central plan. And, noted in our look at Wittgenstein, citation implies the will of another who makes use of it.

Compagnon will further offer a definition of citation inspired from "un formaliste russe," or Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theory of dialogism is a significant offering in understanding citation and intertextuality. Bakhtin (along with Jacques Derrida) is also a figure upon whom Claudette Sartiliot relies in formulating her own theory of citation.10 Again, Compagnon here stresses the active, subject-centered side of citation as well as its typically object-related definition.

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Prétendre que la citation n’est qu’énoncé répété participe d’une réduction dont la linguistique a l’habitude: celle de l’acte de parole, de l’énonciation. L’acte de citation est une énonciation singulière: une énonciation de répétition ou la répétition d’une énonciation (une énonciation répétante), une ré-énonciation ou une d’énonciation. L’énonciation est la force qui s’empare d’un énoncé et qui le répète; c’est pourquoi elle est au principe de la citation qu’un formaliste russe définissait ainsi: <<un énoncé à énonciation reproduite>>.

Une <<bonne>> définition de la citation, c’est-à-dire une base acceptable, provisoire de travail, sera: un énoncé répété et une énonciation répétante; il ne faut jamais cesser de l’envisager dans cette ambivalence, la collusion, la confusion en elle de l’actif et du passif. (55-56)

To pretend that citation consists only of a repeated statement participates in an oversimplification that is all too common in linguistics, which forgets the act of speech, of speaking. The act of citation is a particular sort of speaking: a speaking of repetition or a repetition of a moment of speaking (a “repeating-speaking”), a re-stating or a re-stating of stating. Speaking is nothing more than the force that lays hold of a statement and the force that repeats it; thus a Russian formalist defined the principle of citation: “a statement with a reproduced act of speaking.”

A working definition would be: a repeated statement and a repeating stating; what must not be forgotten here is citation’s ambivalence, its collusion, the confusion in it of active and passive. (55-56)

This definition of citation is the most useful in all of the scholarship on the topic, as it pertains to poetic uses of citation. Most significant in Compagnon’s definition is its presentation of citation as a paradox or an instance of “ambivalence,” as he puts it.

This definition parallels the dichotomizing inherent in metaphor.

Both of the poets I discuss in this paper imagine citation in similar ways, even if they will surely part company with Compagnon in his dismissive assessment of the use of citation in modern literature. Despite setting up a very workable definition of

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11 Diepeveen’s definition of literary quotation constitutes, along with Compagnon’s definition of citation, the most useful definition of the specific poetic phenomenon I am discussing.
citation, Compagnon for some reason has trouble understanding how to apply it in examining the modernist texts of a Joyce, Pound or Borges (384-386). To be sure, moderns such as these are outside of Compagnon’s focus, a focus that includes much older figures like Montaigne. But there is nothing inherent in Compagnon’s theory of citation that would prevent it from applying usefully to modern and contemporary literature. As I argue below, Compagnon’s theory of citation is a stronger model than the one offered by Claudette Sartiliot to apply to modern literature. Compagnon’s is also a theory that bears striking resemblance to the nuanced attention paid to modernist uses of quotation in Leonard Diepeveen’s groundbreaking Changing Voices: The Modernist Quoting Poem. Surprisingly, however, Compagnon recoils from the forms and uses of citation exhibited by figures such as Joyce, Pound or Borges. Their use of citation Compagnon terms, “la citation capricieuse” (“capricious citation”), and “la citation déviante n’est ni motivée ni nécessaire” (“deviant citation that is neither motivated nor necessary”) (384-385).

But we would do well to take heed of Compagnon’s challenge to modernist literature, given the sophistication of his inquiry into citation. However much the citational writings I shall discuss in this paper as primary texts are treated sympathetically as exemplary citational texts, it must not be forgotten that creative and avant-garde uses of citation necessarily carry a certain risk within them. The risk includes the potential to generate a mere inverted form of the very phenomenon one would resist, which would flow from the disparity between citing and cited text: a citation or quotation that sits on the page as an inert object without resonating with anything outside itself.
In the years separating Compagnon’s study and Sartillot’s, Fredric Jameson published his famous article, “Post-modernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” This article provides further useful background on the topic of citation. Although Jameson never actually examines citation directly, whether in itself or as the secondary effect of some other order, Jameson’s catalogue of the formal features of postmodernism is nevertheless useful in understanding how citation has changed over time, especially in his discussion of parody and pastiche.

The “aesthetic depthlessness” of postmodernist cultural production is postmodernism’s constitutive feature, Jameson submits. In discussing the contrast between van Gogh’s modernist painting of peasant shoes and Andy Warhol’s postmodernist “Diamond Dust Shoes,” Jameson contends that the Warhol reveals “the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense—perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the post-modernisms to which we will have occasion to return in a number of other contexts” (“Postmodernism” 60).

After a brief discourse on the “waning of affect” as the first theme in his inventory of post-modern effects, Jameson’s next section “The Postmodern and the Past,” reveals how “pastiche eclipses parody” (“Post-modernism” 64-69). This “waning of affect” Jameson discusses just prior to his section on parody and pastiche and helps to frame his presentation of those two interrelated concepts (“Postmodernism” 61-62). One consequence of the waning of affect is the “end” of certain expressivist tendencies in culture, “the end for example of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the individual brushstroke (as symbolized by the
emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction”) (“Post-modernism” 64). The
“waning of affect” concept goes even further because the individual subject enjoys (or
laments) “a liberation” not simply from anxiety but one “from every other kind of
feeling as well, since there is no longer a self to do the feeling.”

This “disappearance of the individual subject,” coupled with “the increasing
unavailability of the personal style, engenders the well-nigh universal practice today of
what may be called pastiche” (“Post-modernism” 64). Pastiche, for Jameson, is an
effect of postmodernist cultural production (which itself Jameson links, in a
circumstantial way, back to the force of multinational capitalism). The novel qualities
of pastiche parallel the rise of postmodernism and replace or “eclipse” parody as a
way of managing the past. Parody, unlike pastiche, is a way of encountering the past
that necessarily entails the subjecthood of the figure having the encounter; pastiche,
however, requires no such antecedent consciousness to do its work. As “modernist
styles become post-modernist codes,” parody, with all its norms and standards falls
away, “find[ing] itself without a vocation.” “[I]t has lived and that strange new thing
pastiche slowly comes to take its place” (“Post-modernism” 65). Jameson elaborates
this distinction further.

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a
dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any
of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue
you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs. . . .
(“Post-modernism” 65)
Jameson then integrates this distinction between parody and pastiche into a larger, more historical critique in which the newer dispensation, pastiche, is thoroughly ahistorical, however much pastiche seems to feed off of history.

For the purposes of this dissertation, there is no need to go into more detail about this discussion of Jameson's, which is similar to one seen, in any case, in Claudette Sartiliot's theory of citation. The only difference there is that Sartiliot would champion pastiche or, to use her own words, the "intertext" for the same reasons Jameson laments it (e.g. Sartiliot 103). But Jameson's distinction will be useful in various ways throughout this study, because differences along these lines do tend to appear between the moderns and the postmoderns. As Jameson might argue, with Eliot's and Pound's respective citational writings, the hand of the artist, his "individual brushstroke" is plainly evident, especially in the case of Eliot in whose "The Wasteland" the "satiric impulse" is felt deeply. Alternatively, Ashbery and Bernstein would be the avatars of pastiche, randomly assembling tidbits of inherited language and discourse in hopes of offering up pleasing aesthetic patterns. This representation of the postmodern might seem to be particularly true, at least at first blush, with Ashbery whose relationship to modern and postmodern art is so close and who, unlike Bernstein, espouses no discernable political stance, at least through his writings. But a look at both these poets surely reveals them as hybrids, as containing elements of both parody and pastiche, if even the postmoderns make use of the latter more than the moderns would.

In a similar way, Claudette Sartiliot will entitle the first chapter of her book on citation, "The Eclipse of Quotation and the Advent of Modernity." She does so mainly to impart her thesis about citation announced in the first line of Citation and Modernity: "The definition of quotation derived from classical rhetoric no longer pertains to the role of quotation in modernist texts" (3). Jameson makes the same claim about parody and pastiche, as the latter would "eclipse" the former, but Sartiliot would praise pastiche or, to use her words, the "intertext" for the same reasons Jameson challenges pastiche and postmodernism.

Extending Compagnon's analysis, Sartiliot mainly wishes to offer a detailed account of modernist uses of citation, since Compagnon's work offers a generalist history of citation up to, but not truly including, modernist citation. In addition, she seeks to separate herself from Compagnon in other ways, by affirming, probably too indiscriminately, the virtues of modernist citation, where Compagnon had labeled modernist uses of citation "capricieuse." If Compagnon's dismissal of modernist citation seems immoderate, he does nevertheless stress, in his work, the formal and aesthetic capacity of citation in his dichotomous definition of citation, including the citation itself and the act of citing. Sartiliot's work is useful as a means of understanding a wing of modernist citation, what one might call the post-structuralist understanding of citation, since in the main, hers is a book on Derrida. Also, Citation and Modernity, while it ostensibly focuses on literature (Joyce, Brecht) as well as philosophy, is finally philosophical in its basic outlook, rather than literary or aesthetic. The unfortunate consequence of her book for the purposes of this study, however, is that Citation and Modernity is overrun by theory and philosophy, theory
and philosophy that tend to overwhelm the discussion of the more overtly literary figures of Joyce and Brecht, who function merely as exempla in her analysis. In part, this study hopes to remedy this relative lack of attention to literary and particularly poetic uses of citation.

Nevertheless, Sartiliot’s work is highly effective on certain fronts. For one, Sartiliot stresses the importance of the shift from Renaissance modes of citation to modernist ones. Relying somewhat on André Topia’s remarks on the citationality of Joyce’s use of interior monologue in *Ulysses*, Sartiliot notes that till the end of nineteenth century, or at least till Flaubert—who appears as a transitional figure—writers could borrow freely from the traditions, add to the existing canon, or struggle with the tradition to inscribe their names within its boundaries, whereas, for modernist and postmodernist writers, quotation represents a definite break with the tradition as well as a means of questioning the nature of the literary text. (3)

Sartiliot betrays an evident tendency, in this passage, to celebrate historical ruptures in the modern and postmodern use of citation, without her remarking the important sense in which, for Anglo-American modernist poets like Pound and Eliot, citation and quotation were means of returning to history.13 But Sartiliot is surely right to notice a change in the modern period in the textual treatment of other sources. Leonard Diepeveen makes a similar move when, from a more literary standpoint, he points out how Eliot, Pound, Moore and cummings offer us a similar moment of transition between the use of literary allusion to the use of citation and direct quotation in literary and poetic works.

15 See Stephen Melville’s discussion of Stanley Cavell’s take on modernism in *Philosophy Beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986) 3-33. Also
Also, Sartiliot’s text points out the crucial historical definition of quotation, the function of which is either for illustration or ornamentation, and in particular the "paradoxical" nature of this definition.

The classical definition and theory of quotation reflects the paradoxical nature and practices of citation, which writers turned to their advantage through play and simulation. According to classical rhetoric, the functions of quotation are either illustration or ornament. (4)

I will return to a similar dichotomy throughout this study, a dichotomy that is nevertheless closer to Wittgenstein and Compagnon (and Diepeveen), to show how various poets respond to it. My view of this dichotomy differs in important ways from Sartiliot’s as the opening paragraphs of this chapter suggest, but Sartiliot here comes closest, in my view, to hitting up the basic citational dynamic. Unlike Sartiliot, however, I cannot accept that this “classical” definition of citation is substantially less with us today in our modernity, than it was in the past, however much the outward indications of poetic writing and its use of reference have changed markedly over recent generations. As a result, this dissertation will take issue with Sartiliot’s novel thesis that “a traditional definition of quotation derived from classical rhetoric no longer pertains to the role of quotation in modernist texts” (3). Her “call for a new definition and theory of citation” seems sensible, given the great difference between traditional and modernist uses of citation (3). But in the process her work seems positioned too fiercely against the illustrative possibilities of citation to the point that her affirmation of intertextuality is, in the end, a deep affront both to intentionality and textual concreteness, even of the foreshortened modern and postmodern varieties.

see Rosalind Krauss, “Re-presenting Picasso,” Art in America, December 1980: 91-96, discussing the
In addition, Sartiliot seems to forget one side of the paradox of modernism, that while modernism shows our break with history it also offers us a return to history as the ground for the break with it.\textsuperscript{14} To be sure, Sartiliot notes in passing that history is a resource to which writers must return, but this admission goes against the grain of her thesis that the "classical" definition of citation must be thrown out. At its worst, Sartiliot's attitude implies an inordinate (and ironic) faith in historical progress, because the writers of today she champions have allegedly avoided the "violence" of the oedipal scramble for authority that plagued pre-modern writers by instituting a utopia of post-structuralist free play and indeterminacy. This is especially so as she fails to note the usefulness to modern and postmodern writers of Compagnon's definition of citation. Sartiliot relies too much on the face value of Compagnon's work and ironically engages in precisely the sort of citational violence that she uses to condemn less "enlightened" historical figures bent on establishing their own authority. But Sartiliot's study is clearly a valuable early step forward in understanding how the issue of citation plays itself out in modernity.

\textsuperscript{14} See Melville, \textit{Philosophy} 3-33.
Previous Scholarship on Literary Uses of Citation

Until Leonard Diepeveen's *Changing Voices*, there was not, unfortunately, much material available discussing literary uses of citation. Hugh Kenner’s work on Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky marked perhaps the first instance of someone using terms such as “quotation” and “citation” to imagine a poetic. Marjorie Perloff, a critic who follows in Hugh Kenner’s footsteps in this respect, has made some provocative comments on one of the figures I plan to discuss below: John Ashbery. She has used Fredric Jameson’s valuable distinction between parody and pastiche to show how Ashbery has practiced the “neutral mimicry” of pastiche in his poetry that is in sharp contrast to the forms of citation employed in T.S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland.”

In the consciousness of the postmodern poet, fragments of earlier poetry float to the surface, not to be satirized as in, say, Eliot’s work, or to make the past contemporaneous with the present as in Pound, but as the “blank parody” Fredric Jameson has defined as pastiche, which is to say, the neutral mimicry that takes place when there is no longer a norm to satirize or parodize. (Poetic License 282)

Perloff argues that, unlike Ashbery’s use of voice, Eliot’s use of voice in “The Wasteland” is relatively consistent, whereas in Ashbery’s most challenging work, the voices are ever-shifting (“Normalizing”). I employ and extend Perloff’s way of approaching Eliot and Ashbery in the relevant sections below. And, recently, in an

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16 Also see Perloff, “Normalizing.”

17 Charles Bernstein, whom I discuss in this dissertation’s third and fifth chapters, also started to examine this topic in poetry during the eighties (at about the same time as Perloff), although here I use Bernstein as a primary text.
essay dealing explicitly with poetry entitled, “Gathered, Not Made: A Brief History of Appropriative Writing,” Raphael Rubinstein cites Perloff and lists both Ashbery and Bernstein, among several others, as exemplars of appropriative writing (31-34).

Diepeveen’s work on uses of quotation in American modernist poetry marks a pivotal moment in the study of literary uses of citation and is easily the most significant work on the topic. But before I present the ultimate significance of his study, and its basic quality, it would do well here to define some key terms. As his title indicates, Diepeveen’s emphasis is on the role of quotation in modernist poetry rather than on citation. This is so because Diepeveen is at pains to distinguish literary uses of allusion from those of quotation.

This book . . . begins with a simple premise: quotations are different from allusions . . . . The indirection of . . . allusion, its implied status, is its defining and most useful characteristic. Not for nothing can an allusion, with differing degrees of precision, refer to many things (not just texts), for inexactitude lies at its center. Quotation, on the other hand, is specific: the exact transferring of a text into another, new text. In this transfer quotation duplicates the context and texture of another work and consequently heightens the disruption that more general borrowings bring into a text . . . . [I]n its exactness lies the quotation’s power. The exactness of the quotation introduces into the quoting poem a disruption that radically changes the structure of the poem. (viii)

This distinction between allusion and quotation that Diepeveen makes in this passage is essential and, I would argue, deeply formative of our modernity.

Before outlining in greater detail the aims and claims of Diepeveen’s work, however, there are some semantic concerns. Diepeveen is against using the term “citation” to describe the modernist use of reference, because he sees citation as a general rubric including, among other terms, those such as “intertextuality” and
“allusion.” As a result, the term “citation” is for Diepeveen not specific enough to acknowledge the modernist revolution in reference that the term "quotation" offers.

On the other hand, Claudette Sartiliot will present citation as the term embodying the very revolutionary qualities that Diepeveen attributes to quotation. Even more ironically, Sartiliot offers up citation as the “eclipse” of quotation, the latter of which she sees as an older, less intriguing form. Which term, quotation or citation, is the revolutionary term? The elegance and clarity of Diepeveen’s claims for quotation over against allusion notwithstanding, I side in this study with Sartiliot (and Compagnon) in presenting citation as the important, historically innovative term, if only because there is far more intellectual treatment afforded citation than quotation. Alternatively, “quotation” as a term describing the more salient aspects of Ashbery’s and Bernstein’s respective forms of reference, seems too specific to be especially valuable, especially because, however much citation offers indirection, the term nevertheless accurately describes the diverse and concrete textual referencing at work in Ashbery and Bernstein. Quotation is only one of several forms of reference of which these writers may make use to generate the textual disruptions Diepeveen attributes only to quotation. Likewise, Ashbery and Bernstein do tend to abjure literary allusion in favor of more specific forms of textual and non-textual reference. As a result, Sartiliot’s and Compagnon’s opposition between illustration and displacement seems to cover more ground for the objects of this study, even in the literary uses of the highly specific and express forms of reference I am discussing here.
Diepeveen's study of modernist uses of citation, however, is a highly significant work that helps to establish clear ways of understanding postmodern uses of citation in poetry. Diepeveen offers not simply an opposition between allusion and quotation but rather a "continuum" that presents each term at opposite ends. The more direct and concrete the form of reference in a poem, the more it approaches the condition of quotation and likewise the innovative and modern use of reference. Allusions are more conceptual, paraphrasable and more easily assimilated into the flow of the alluding text. Further, allusions can point not only to other texts but also to historical events and actual people, further underscoring its indefiniteness. "Allusion is a very general term. Because it has historically emphasized conceptual paraphrase, allusion can include both textual and nontextual references" (8). On the other hand, quotation is ruthlessly specific and essentially textual. When a poet makes use of a quotation in a poem, worlds outside the text are only implied, never actually indicated. "When a work of art quotes, the emphasis upon a 'paraphrasable,' nontextual world fades" and "the quotation's material texture begins to assert itself" (16). This opposition of Diepeveen's is parallel to the opposition I set up between a citation's capacity to displace the citing text and to illustrate it. As with Diepeveen, I also see a spectrum in citation between these two poles. The more illustrative a citation is, the more subservient it is to the citing text and the less jarring the juxtaposition between the two texts. Alternatively, the more the citation displaces the surrounding text, the less illustrative it is, the more independent status it acquires.
As we shall see, both Ashbery and Bernstein seem to acknowledge as inherent in using a citation the relative concreteness of the citation and its potential to displace the surrounding text. Both poets manage further to produce texts that occasionally look remarkably similar to one another, if we are to place such Ashbery poems as “America” and other of the more disjunctive and syntactically complex poems in his *The Tennis Court Oath* side by side with several of the poems in Bernstein’s *The Sophist*. Nevertheless, the two poets manage to go off in very different directions, as I point out below.

A Brief Overview of the Remaining Chapters

The five chapters below cover, first, the citational background of each poet discussed here. I include one background chapter on Ashbery, and one on Bernstein. The background chapter on Ashbery makes much use of Ashbery’s longstanding preoccupation with surrealism and the avant-garde visual arts. Ashbery’s interest in surrealism, particularly with its emphasis on jarring juxtaposition of incompatible objects, is a fitting way of understanding the citational quality of his poems.

Bernstein, on the other hand, seems to derive his interest in citation/ality less from the visual arts and more from philosophy, particularly the philosophy of Stanley Cavell and modern continental philosophy. Bernstein’s citationality, as seen through his interest in philosophy, is revealed in his criticism and essays. Bernstein’s *Content’s Dream*, in particular, shows this commitment in his early, serial essays and
in his explicit discussions of citation as he sees it in the work of other writers. In these situations, Bernstein presents citation as containing two material components—

"sighting" and "sounding"—that serve as indicators for him when citational issues are at stake. In the end, Bernstein is more extreme than Ashbery about the role of citation in poetry, in his utopian attempt to maximize use of the displacing capacities of citation.

I further devote two chapters, again one to each poet, showing how each poet's citationality works in practice. With Ashbery, I discuss his early poetry, including *Some Trees, The Tennis Court Oath,* and *Rivers and Mountains.* I do this both to show yet another way in which Ashbery's citationality reveals itself and, more importantly, how Ashbery's fixation on poetic form reveals the multi-vocal nature of his poetry.

A clear-cut extension of his interest in philosophy, Bernstein's citational practice is revealed in his collection of poems, entitled *The Sophist* and discussed in chapter five. In this work, Bernstein offers the figure of the sophist, an alternative philosopher, as emblematic of his citationality. Unlike the philosopher, the sophist does not believe in absolutes and must rely on already emergent discourse to achieve knowledge and wisdom. Bernstein's sophist, however, is a far more extreme figure than that imagined by Plato; for Bernstein's figure inhabits a world in which nothing is original and all that one can do is to regurgitate the already written in ways that ideally provoke the reader to new understandings.
In my sixth and concluding chapter, I take a historical turn by presenting Ashbery and Bernstein as each embodying two competing strains of postmodernism, one connected with avant-garde art, the other with post-structuralist theory. In this bifurcation, Ashbery represents the avant-garde moment and Bernstein the post-structuralist. Since citational poetics seem to arise in part from cubism and the collage art of the early twentieth century, the turn to language inherent in such a move can provoke different forms of citationality depending on one's view of language.

A perplexing paradox that surfaces in this dissertation is that, however much the presence of quotations or citations have the effect of underscoring the texture or materiality of the cited discourse, focusing inordinately on the materiality of such citation, as Bernstein does, oddly tends to dematerialize rather than severely concretize the overall writing. Hence the hypostatizing and theorizing that exists alongside Bernstein's commitment to the materiality of the signifier. By contrast, Ashbery resists the apparent need for such abstraction by taking an attitude derived from avant-garde art. In this respect, Ashbery is more inclined to incorporate into his writing elements of found discourse that have no concern with Bernstein's ruthless commitment to the non-instrumental dimension of language. To be sure, there are several important Bernstein texts that militate against this tendency, and some of the poems in Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath* tend, as with Bernstein, likewise to make a fetish of non-instrumental language. But the general, opposing trends in the two

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poets must be noted. In the end, the two poets represent the outer limits of citational use in poetry. The texture of citation, so important to its poetic use, cannot be emphasized any further, apparently, without dematerializing the medium.

Why is it that so many contemporary poets make use of found language in their poems? The ultimate answers are beyond this study, but one would do well to note a constellation of factors, some of which are suggested in Jameson’s essay on post-modernism. Our consumer-driven economy seems pivotal in creating the possibilities for a citational poetics. Once the economy shifts from one oriented toward production to one oriented toward consumption, romantic terms like “originality” and “creativity” fade into the background. The power of modern advertising and public relations is yet another factor. To the extent that both of these forces tend to strip the ability of individuals to speak in their own voices, a citational poetics becomes increasingly possible, because such voices are increasingly overrun by the slogans of consumerism. Finally, electronic media seem to have contributed, in the sense that cable television and computers tend to emphasize disjunction.

Economic and cultural globalism would further seem to be significant in this respect, as disharmonious voices from other cultures intermingle with those of native cultures.

I leave it to others to explore further the cultural and historical bases for this rampant poetic phenomenon. But at the very least, a few general principles should be clear. First, however much it may be true that historical forces contribute to citational

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poetries, there is an important sense in which citational writing remains outside of history and culture. As Bernstein and Compagnon imply, citationality is a feature of all speaking, a problem Plato faced in his dialogue entitled *Sophist*. Second, contrary to popular stereotypes, poetry does not remain immune from historical contingency, as both Ashbery and Bernstein are at all eager to demonstrate.
CHAPTER 2

UT PICTURA POEISIS\(^1\): JOHN ASHERBY'S ART OF CITATION

"You have to tread a narrow path between two things."

---Ashbery\(^2\)

Ashbery’s entire oeuvre reveals a distinct investment in appropriating inherited language for poetic purposes. Such poetic purposes, however, are largely driven by Ashbery’s long-term interest in the avant-garde visual arts, especially those, like dada and surrealism, that run counter to the high modernist attitude of seriousness and purity in art and literature. By the time Ashbery had begun writing in the late forties, the tendency of European art to purge itself of elements foreign to its own material nature had shown signs of weakening. Clement Greenberg’s famous essays on abstract expressionism notwithstanding,\(^3\) dada and surrealism had offered new aesthetic alternatives to the general movement toward abstraction in modernist painting.\(^4\)

\(^1\) The phrase, from Horace’s “Ars Poetica,” translates: “as with the painter’s work, so with the poet’s” (Lehman 99).


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At base, Ashbery details the great extent to which inherited language helps to form human consciousness. Because dada and surrealism had ceased to be genuinely new by the time Ashbery began writing, Ashbery was in a position to take their core principles as givens and use them for his own purposes. In the minds of alert writers and artists in the Euro-American landscape, avant-garde art movements like dada and surrealism had become traditions themselves. Either such trends had become integrated into one’s assumptions about the world or they had become a primary source for the aesthetic debates of the day. As a result, it became possible to locate the hybridity of dada and surrealism in the unconscious, so much had times changed since the days of high modernism a generation before.

In America, however, matters were different, particularly for poets who, unless they knew some Pound (and knew some French) were largely left outside of the avant-garde. Painters, on the other hand, especially in New York City, the dawning capital of the art world, were drawing upon these European trends and creating an art, whose fulfillment in minimalism and pop art, would soon set the standard for the world.

Ashbery, along with his friend Frank O’Hara, poet and a curator of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, was living and writing in New York in the early fifties, the heyday of abstract expressionism. Quite naturally, Ashbery and O’Hara found themselves on the brink of a revolution in art, one in which an aesthetic running counter to modernism, emphasizing the inevitable contamination of art with its foreign

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4 See Anna Balakian, Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute (New York: The Noonday Press, 1959) 147. But also consider that Ashbery did manage to retain, to some extent, the high modernist trust in the materials of the medium of poetry. See below.
other, would be developed to generate new forms. For Ashbery, the point of such development was to understand how human consciousness was contaminated and driven by already emergent discourse.

But Ashbery's precise stake in repeating the words of others for poetic purposes is difficult to discern. Ashbery is a far more elusive figure Bernstein, leaving the student of his work with few direct statements of poetics by which to evaluate his writing. On the other hand, this general lack of programmatic content in Ashbery's corpus may actually be to the benefit of Ashbery's output and may cast him as a more desirable citational poet. Ashbery's success in this respect would be so because citational poetics are most effective when self-conflicted, when the balance between Compagnon's l'énoncé répété and l'enonciation repétant is in productive tension, when aesthetic material is as salient as meaning. It is to Ashbery's credit that this balance rarely becomes especially precarious, toppling, on the one hand, into journalism, where the wordness of the words does not matter and, on the other, into Bernstein's radically non-instrumental writing that often reaches the same result of dematerializing the medium.\(^5\) So, it may be in Ashbery where the ethic of citational poetry is better embodied.

Nevertheless, Ashbery has given some revealing interviews and has written some valuable art criticism as a journalist for such publications as *Art News*, *Art in America* and even *Life* and *Newsweek*.\(^6\) The art criticism offers a more direct

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\(^5\) See chapter three below.

way of entry into Ashbery's aesthetic world and displays the great extent to which his citational writing is driven by analogy between avant-garde painting and his own writing.

Ashbery's Background

Ashbery began to write in the late forties. After graduating from Harvard, he settled in New York, joining his college friend Frank O'Hara and beginning work on an M.A. in English at Columbia. While in New York, Ashbery remembered that "there was little experimental writing occurring in America at the time," even in New York (Reported Sightings 390). As a result, one interested in poetic experimentation could not help but to gravitate toward the innovative painters in the city who were busy making New York the center of the art world it would soon become. As Ashbery was to put it, "American painting seemed the most exciting art around. American poetry was very traditional at that time, and there was no modern poetry in the sense that there was modern painting. So one got one's inspiration and ideas from watching the experiments of others" (qtd. in Kostelanetz 20).

This was the age of abstract expressionism, an art movement that helped Ashbery formulate his ideas about poetry and writing. But, in the end, Ashbery was, at least implicitly, to decide that abstract expressionism was more an offshoot of two of the more significant art movements of the century—dada and surrealism, especially the latter (Bergman xiv). On surrealism, Ashbery was to devote much thinking and
writmg over the next three to four decades, and the writings lead the reader to
understand why it is that Ashbery cares so about the juxtaposition of diverse
fragments of discourse.⁷

Abstract expressionism inspired Ashbery to consider two features of art that
would play significant roles in formulating his poetics. One of these features could be
traced back to dada, the other to surrealism. On the one hand, Ashbery dwelled on the
significance of abstract expressionist paintings by Pollock and de Kooning and found
in them something they held in common with surrealism—what he was later to call
"automatism." Such automatism in abstract expressionism involved the drip-work of
Pollock, which led to non-figurative canvases openly displaying the basic materials of
the medium. The technique and attitude of abstract expressionism also had the
paradoxical effect of erasing the hand of the artist from the work and reinstating it
with the explicit evidence of the artist as actor.⁸ This peculiar sort of self-effacement
in abstract expressionism was attractive to Ashbery, who abjured the more simplistic
concepts of romantic subjectivity that stressed the value of expressing the artist’s inner,
psychological nature.

The sort of psychology that was at least partially acceptable to Ashbery was
rather the psychological orientation of surrealism. Surrealists, in their debt to Freud,
were interested in letting unconscious processes define the content and style of the
painting. But surrealist canvases were mainly figurative, rather than abstract, even if

⁷ See Balakian, Surrealism 134.
⁸ In the words of Harold Rosenberg, abstract expressionism was deemed “action painting.” See

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that meant placing diverse objects in odd juxtaposition. In the end, however, Ashbery was to reject automatism, because he decided that automatism placed too great an emphasis on the workings of the unconscious mind. This is certainly not to say that Ashbery at all abjured the unconscious or its potential role in creating art; for Ashbery eventually came to favor an art that combined both conscious generated and unconscious generated elements. Such would ultimately offer both a more complete model of consciousness itself and a better art.

The interplay between consciousness and unconsciousness became, on the surface at least, a method for Ashbery to compose. In producing text, he self-consciously embraced artifice as an ironic means of letting his unconscious take over the composition. At least in the beginning, Ashbery would consciously rework his texts later after the initial “unconscious” writing. Ultimately, however, Ashbery was, in his own words, “training” himself to mediate between the two simultaneously, so that by the late sixties he felt he didn’t have to revise his writing very frequently (“Craft Interview” 115).

But this dichotomy of conscious artifice and unconscious mind was to become even more significant for Ashbery’s writing and would form the ground against which the poet’s citationality becomes thinkable. For modernists like Pound and Eliot, the unconscious mind was collective, containing the wisdom of the great thinkers and artists of human history, wisdom that was becoming undone through the ever-

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9 As Lautréamont had put it: “Beautiful like the fortuitous meeting, on a dissecting table, of a typewriter and umbrella” (qtd. in Balakian 154).

10 In the surrealist art Ashbery admired, particularly that of de Chirico—rather than that of Dali, Magritte or Miro—Ashbery noted that the interplay between conscious and unconscious was what made the paintings succeed. See below.
increasing rationalization of society. Only through a strenuous effort to reform a shattered civilization, by collecting the significant cultural elements of the past, could something like the ideal mind be re-fashioned. This remained true even as Pound departed from Eliot’s aesthetic system in “The Wasteland” by stressing the tension between citational fragments, not just the fragments themselves articulated in common.

For Ashbery, on the other hand, the unconscious mind is distinctly different. First, the unconscious mind, while it nevertheless remains collective rather than individual, has lost its status as the privileged site of culture that it had possessed in the work of Eliot and Pound. Second, the unconscious, while retaining an historical orientation to it, takes history less seriously and aestheticizes it. Third, historical forces such as the rise of popular culture and mass society, the same forces that had contributed to the fragmentation Pound and Eliot lamented, were eroding tradition and replacing it with multiple traditions. Many of these traditions would inevitably find their way into the unconscious of an individual who became increasingly unable to keep such multiplicity at arm’s length. As a result, there was no longer any question of resisting the historical forces of fragmentation in any heroic, large-scale way, as

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13 See generally Jessica Prinz Pecorino, “Resurgent Icons.”
Eliot and Pound sensed they could. By the time of Ashbery’s poetic flowering in the sixties, the modernizing currents of culture were so strong that one could respond to them only with diminished expectations.

The unconscious in Ashbery is filled with a cacophony of voices of all kinds that are always ready to come out. “I am constantly using different voices without being aware of it, of different people who seem to be talking in these poems without bothering to indicate to the reader where one stops and another one starts up again because I’m interested in a kind of polyphonic quality that attracts me in music” (Munn, “Interview” 61). Voices like these do not suggest that they are elements of a unified personality, at least in the traditional sense; indeed, the personality is reconfigured as multiple. As Ashbery wondered, in a speech on the avant-garde in the late sixties, “has tradition finally managed to absorb the individual talent?”, paraphrasing the title of Eliot’s essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (Reported Sightings 390). Inherited language has collapsed the cultural distinction between itself and the rational mind and has reversed the standard terms under which consciousness operates. Now, more than ever before, all that is considered rational will operate in terms of the already spoken.

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16 This is at least one sense in which Platonic metaphysics is, as Marx might have put it, stood on its head. For now, prefabricated representations structure our understanding of this truth. This state of affairs foretells Bernstein’s later commitment to the sophist as the one who uses received opinions or conventional wisdom as the primary source for knowledge and inquiry. See Chapter five below.
Surrealism was useful for yet another aspect of Ashbery’s poetics of appropriation: the practice of jarring juxtaposition. Had Ashbery refused to embrace this side of surrealism, his commitment to the unconscious might have led him to make a fetish of the irrational, might have turned him into something of a beat poet. But because Ashbery was an able critic of surrealism, he was not simply overwhelmed by its emphasis on the unconscious. Ashbery had sharply criticized one of surrealism’s literary (rather than painterly) techniques, that of “automatic writing.” In the face of his unwavering commitment to record the movement of consciousness, a movement that is always driven by unconscious forces, Ashbery also remained enamored of artifice, which prevented him from imagining the unconscious as in some fundamental way more truthful than the conscious mind.

On the other hand, the practice of automatic writing abjured artifice in favor of letting the unconscious rule composition. But for Ashbery this commitment was disingenuous, since the writerly and plastic means of representation common to literature and art, remained essential to their respective natures. This was one attitude derived from modernism that Ashbery never completely abandoned, however much Ashbery was willing to embrace another discipline—the avant-garde visual arts—as a necessary adjunct of his own poetic writing. In the end, art in general would serve as the ultimate baseline for Ashbery’s writings.

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17 “I’m interested in the movement of the mind, how it goes from one place to the other. The places themselves don’t matter that much; it’s the movement that does” (Munn “Interview” 62).
One could not, in Ashbery’s view, simply cast aside artifice in favor of the play of the imagination. This critique of surrealism led Ashbery to gravitate more toward the significant surrealist painters rather than writers, particularly to de Chirico. Significant most of all in Ashbery’s embrace of surrealism are both the elements of unconscious play as well as the conscious and artificial gestures of appropriation and juxtaposition surrealist painting entailed. “[T]he complexity of form involves making so many conscious decisions that one’s unconscious is kind of left free to go ahead and proceed with the poem” (Munn “Interview” 62). These commitments go a long way toward forming the background for Ashbery’s stake in poetic appropriations.

Ashbery also noted points of convergence between abstract expressionism and dada that would be crucial for understanding his citationality. Ashbery’s explicit interest in the dadaesque nature of abstract expressionism concerned the sense common to both in which art is at once a gamble and a game. These ideas he pursued in the 1968 lecture “The Invisible Avant-Garde” in which Ashbery staked out a theory of art that would strive to be independent of the “acceptance-world” commonly associated with the avant-garde, in its never ending hunger for the novel. Ashbery’s new theory involved the artist’s taking risks with writing, fashioning poems that defeated one’s expectations of poetry, but which nevertheless maintained discernible links both with expectation and the past. Pollock and de Kooning’s genius, for Ashbery, lay in their ability to generate this “independent” art, that was at the same time both new and not-new. “The Midas-like position into which our present acceptance-world forces the avant-garde is actually a disguised blessing which previous artists have not been able to enjoy, because it points the way out of the
predicament it sets up—that is, toward an attitude which neither accepts nor rejects acceptance but is independent of it” (Reported Sightings 394). By eliminating one’s investment in the cycle of acceptance or rejection, an artist or poet could generate work that would be new in a more fundamental sense than that commonly integrated into the “acceptance” mania of the New York art world.

But, in an even more direct way was Ashbery indebted to dada. As does surrealism, dada likewise exhibits the spirit of appropriation. Unlike surrealism, however, it does so without at all emphasizing the vagaries of the unconscious. This decidedly non-psychological orientation in dada helps one understand the significance of Ashbery’s specific use of appropriation and his general view and use of artifice. Further, while dada does display an investment in juxtaposition, as some of Duchamp’s famous canvases do, more important is dada’s stress on the tension between the appropriated object and the object’s new context, not simply on the act of appropriation and subsequent juxtaposition. Duchamp’s upside down urinal, signed “R. Mutt” and then placed in an art museum, is an obvious example.

But the general context of poetry enables Ashbery to serve up knowledge and strategy he derived from avant-garde painting in specific and the visual arts in general. This twin drive to appropriate and recontextualize has enabled Ashbery’s poetry to think itself in terms both of its medium and the inevitable impurity of that medium. Ashbery’s citationality then becomes not only an investigation into the ways in which consciousness is shaped by inherited language but also the sense in which citationality necessarily involves art, a sense that Ashbery has been able to explore in the literary mode of poetry.
Such is the way in which Ashbery’s citational commitment turns away from the standard rhetorical use of citation as illustration or ornamentation. In Ashbery, citation becomes fundamental to expression and a way of remarking the lack of equivalence between proper and cited text, as well as a way of dismantling the commonplace distinction between proper and cited text. The multiple framing and textual hybridity, the confusion of figure and ground in Ashbery’s writing, broaches art as the model for understanding appropriation and citation.

Ashbery’s commitment to the avant-garde is both critical and selective. While embracing some of the core principles of surrealism—the cultivation of the unconscious, the fascination with all manner of artifice, the spirit of juxtaposition—Ashbery also managed to distance himself from many of the art world’s notorious excesses. Crucially, Ashbery in 1955 moved away from New York to France in the middle of buzz. He was to stay in Paris for the next ten years, and it can be argued that this move enabled Ashbery to know the avant-garde better than if he had remained in New York during this time. In the end, Ashbery’s encounter with the avant-garde led him to be skeptical of the latter’s inordinate stress on the new that ultimately bespoke merely a superficial effect of the deeper issues. Ultimately, Ashbery’s skepticism of and independence from the capriciousness of the art world enabled him to formulate and enact a highly sophisticated theory of art. More relevant to this study, however, Ashbery encourages us to consider citation as an art and art as the real context for citation.
The Role of Surrealism in Ashbery’s Art Criticism

John Ashbery’s art criticism offers the scholar of his work with a useful means of understanding his ethos of appropriation and citation, not to mention his general poetics. The anthology of his art criticism, Reported Sightings (1989), reveals Ashbery to be preoccupied with the deepest questions of modern art, ones investigated by such important figures as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. This remains true even as much as Ashbery wrote this criticism quickly and for a large audience.

Although it was surely the case that abstract expressionism led Ashbery to think seriously about avant-garde art and its relation with poetry, Ashbery was ultimately to regard abstract expressionism, as David Bergman has put it, as an “outgrowth of surrealism” (viii). Indeed, it was surrealism and its concern with appropriation, juxtaposition, assemblage, “automatic writing” and the unconscious that had arrested Ashbery’s attention from even a very early age. Surrealism—particularly surrealist painting—became a locus for envisioning all the important questions of art and poetry. Through the various discussions in Ashbery’s writings of surrealism and his writings on individual artists, one can come to terms with Ashbery’s attitude toward citation and his poetic writing in general. Again, this attitude imagines both art and citation as hybrid modes of expression, whose hybridity is employed as an animating force in his poetry.
In fact, Ashbery's writings on specific artists lead one to his poetics of citation in much the same way that Bernstein's critical writings on other poets do.\(^\text{18}\) Further, Ashbery seems to be aware of this trend. "[P]oets when they write about other artists always tend to write about themselves" (Reported Sightings 106). Although here Ashbery speaks of other poets, he seems to wink at the reader with this remark, implying the same is true for him, however uniquely he may see himself as a poet. This remark gives us yet another reason to read Ashbery's art criticism, for it offers a way into his poetics. This is so, because Ashbery says that when poets write about other artists they write about themselves, and Ashbery is precisely doing just this in Reported Sightings.

Ashbery acquired a taste for surrealism at a young age. As he remembered it in an interview with Pietr Sommer, Ashbery noted that "[I]n 1937 there was an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, of Fantastic Art Dada and Surrealism [sic]. And there was an article about it in Life magazine, and I saw all those surrealist painters reproduced; Magritte, Dali, et cetera, and I immediately knew I wanted to be a surrealist painter" (312). In the same way was Ashbery attracted to the canvases of Chaim Soutine. Ashbery's writing on Soutine renders the painter as a clear-cut surrealist who inspired Ashbery to experiment with his poetry. "The fact that the sky [in Soutine's paintings] could come crashing joyously into the grass, that trees could dance upside down and horses roll over like cats eager to have their tummies scratched was something I hadn't realized before, and I began pushing my poems around and standing words on end" (Reported Sightings 241).

\(^{18}\) See chapter three below.
The freedom to bend space in this way and enable plants and animals to behave in impossible ways led Ashbery to try to do the same in his writing. Much of this is plainly evident in poems like “The Instruction Manual,” “The Skaters” and “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” all of which guide the reader through the viewing of an absent painting as they simultaneously offer a document to be read as a poem. Ashbery was ultimately to find his own ways of challenging conventional understandings of time and space and how these ways could be represented. One additional feature important in Ashbery’s remark on Soutine would be that despite how much Ashbery stresses his need, after seeing Soutine’s paintings, to “stand words on end,” Ashbery’s statement also foretells his animistic commitment the mysterious life of things. This commitment will become part of Ashbery’s inquiry into artifice and ultimately of inherited language.

In the sixties, Ashbery’s praise of surrealism would often know no bounds. Surrealism—always with a capital “S”—would be the paradigm for contemporary art. “[W]e are all indebted to Surrealism, the significant art of our time could not have been produced without it” (Reported Sightings 7). According to Ashbery, surrealism embodies the principle that unifies the contemporary art of the sixties. “Surrealism is . . . the connecting link among any number of current styles thought to be mutually exclusive, such as Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and ‘color-field’ painting.” In the post-war American art scene, what predominates, in Ashbery’s view, is actually an updated surrealism. “[Surrealism] was not to erupt meaningfully again
until after the war, in New York, but it is still what’s happening” (Reported Sightings 8).19

In Ashbery’s view, surrealism has become so prominent in contemporary art that its influence has filtered down into popular culture and everyday life. “Surrealism has become part of our daily lives: its effects can be seen everywhere, in the work of artists and writers who have no connection with the movement, in movies, interior decoration and popular speech” (Reported Sightings 4). Specifically, though, it is surrealism’s preoccupation with the unconscious that attracts Ashbery. But, for Ashbery, surrealism’s all-pervasiveness is not to be mourned as a cheapening of the movement, because such pervasiveness simply means that Americans have correctly learned to acknowledge the existence of the unconscious. Therefore, the reach of surrealism into increasingly mundane areas of life, as surrealism becomes part of pop culture, is not simply a “degradation,” because “it is difficult to impose limitations on the unconscious, which has a habit of turning up in unlikely places.” In any event, “corruption,” according to Ashbery, “was part of... [the] program [of Surrealism]” (“Growing Up Surreal” 41).

The rise of psychiatry in the fifties and the Freudian elements of the new left that emerged in the sixties would provide suitable context for this attitude. But the implications of Ashbery’s view of surrealism are significant, for they suggest that surrealism—and no other art form—is indeed the voice of the unconscious. Second, they imply that, for Ashbery, manipulating the unconscious is entirely necessary to

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19 In a semi-facetious review of a William Rubin exhibition, Ashbery went even further: “[A]ll artists now working in America (except Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland, for reasons I cannot fathom)
producing successful art. The interplay between conscious and unconscious forces grounds Ashbery’s theory of art and poetry and serves up his view and use of inherited language, as internally conflicted.

The Right Balance: The Interplay of Conscious and Unconscious Forces in Kitaj

The painter R.B. Kitaj was for Ashbery both one of these latter-day surrealists and an artistic exemplar of the successful interplay of conscious and unconscious forces. In fact, Ashbery was to devote much writing on Kitaj, and if there is a painterly analogue for Ashbery’s poet, then it is no doubt Kitaj.

First, Ashbery links Kitaj to the dream, yet another emblem of unconscious writing and representation to which Ashbery returns throughout his career, having stressed the “oneiric basis” of surrealism. Kitaj’s “drawings are a kind of anthology of ‘usual’ human dreams, suffering and errors, transmuted by the hand of a master draftsman into a bizarre but genuine ‘high art’” (Reported Sightings 301).

For Ashbery, Kitaj seems to reach the ideal of poetic reticence, an ideal where one’s fixation on the dream necessitates a release from the claustrophobic confines of the self. This fixation generates “self-abnegation in the interests of a superior realism, one which will reflect the realities both of the spirit (rather than the individual consciousness) and of the world as perceived by it: the state in which Je suis un autre, are Surrealists.” Further, “Congress is 95 percent Surrealist, President Johnson is a Surrealist, and Vietnam is a Surrealist place” (“Growing Up Surreal” 65).
in Rimbaud's phrase" (Reported Sightings 26). The remark also offers the obverse of Ashbery’s practice of combining diverse rhetorical modes that, while charting the movement of consciousness, offers up a picture of consciousness in general, rather than one of the capricious wanderings of an individual imagination. This movement, as Ashbery notes, necessitates a profound otherness, the sense in which we are never wholly present to ourselves.

It is this general commitment to otherness that shows the mark of citation on Ashbery’s poetics, the need to let other voices speak through one’s own. Ashbery’s fascination with dreams that are ultimately collective in nature helps one to understand the reasons for his need to mix different voices in his poems. Indeed, one critic has noted that Ashbery achieves the Zen-like “empty mind” necessary to tap into the diverse rhetorical modes at his disposal (Bergman xix-xx). Again, Kitaj’s dream representations constitute a model for Ashbery’s apparent need to assemble various rhetorical elements in his writing. As a result, Ashbery is, like Kitaj, “always speaking in another voice” (Reported Sightings 300).

But at the same time, Ashbery notes that Kitaj “seldom” speaks in this way “noticeably.” In the same sense, Ashbery and Kitaj do not for the most part engage “frontally” the fact that they mix varying, inherited speech patterns. “What is precisely new and exciting in Kitaj’s work is the immense culture which saturates it but seldom appears there frontally. The works teem with references to films, poetry, novels and photography, but they make their effect with purely plastic means” (Reported Sightings 300). This is to say that despite Kitaj’s fixation on diverse

20 Bernstein makes a similar move. See 165 below.
cultural references, his paintings remain paintings, giving off citational effects without exhibiting much evidence of actual citation. As Marjorie Perloff put it in "Normalizing Ashbery," again echoing Jameson's remarks on parody and pastiche

almost everything [in Ashbery] sounds like a citation, sounds like something we've heard before or read somewhere—but where? And that is of course one of the main features of Ashbery's poetic: living at a moment when one's language is so wholly permeated by the discourses that endlessly impinge on it, a Keatsian image complex, or even an Eliotic distinction between citation and invention... is felt to be no longer possible.

In this way, Kitaj manages to remain faithful both to the medium in which he chooses to work and the wider culture outside of his work.

Ashbery attempts to do the same with regard to poetry, offering elusive citations and quotations that nevertheless make their presence felt as poetic.

Additionally, Ashbery's own combination of voices, stored in the unconscious, with consciously employed poetic artifice, displays his poetic use of citation. For Ashbery, citation risks metaphysics and requires poetic artifice to give citation a proper place and voice.21

In the end, Ashbery's remarks on Kitaj hold the key to understanding the citational nature of Ashbery's writing. For a poet such as Ashbery, who was as preoccupied with consciousness as he was of artifice, it is small wonder that Ashbery's citationality is conditioned by consciousness. This means that the diverse voices that make up Ashbery's poetry have been milled in subtle ways by thought. The brute presence of a quotation or citation in a poem, that so conditions Eliot's,
Pound's and Bernstein's respective modes of citation, is absent in Ashbery. In corroboration, Ashbery makes it clear that when the various cultural fragments in Kitaj make their presence felt, they do so not in the fashion of an Eliot, Pound or Bernstein, where the citationality of the writing is made so manifest. Rather, such fragments seem a second-order reality organized both by a mind that is itself difficult to pin down and by self-consciously manipulated poetic artifice.

In the modernist case, citational fragments exude the proper names, quotation marks and italics that explicitly mark their status as received. Bernstein seems to have extended this attitude to its logical extreme by emphasizing, even more than do Eliot and Pound, the gesture of citing, to the point that it becomes less and less important to be clued into the source of the citation. In Eliot and Pound, especially the former, the source is important to responding to the poem adequately; in Bernstein it, rather defiantly, is not, but the gesture of citation is nevertheless parodied and relied upon as essential for poetic writing.

As to the significance of source (or lack thereof) in Bernstein, Ashbery is in agreement but doesn't so "frontally" parade the very sourceness of his citationality. He rather likes it blended into the fabric of consciousness and artifice, which attends to laws of its own. As Ashbery put it when asked in an interview why he "once expressed an interest in having no external references within a poem," Ashbery responded, "[b]ecause I want the reader to be able to experience the poem without having to refer to outside sources to get the complete experience as one has to in Eliot

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21 This attitude contrasts with that of Bernstein, who equates citation with the non-instrumentality of language and does not trust poetic artifice nearly so much, mainly because of
sometimes or Pound” (“Craft Interview” 122). In Ashbery’s view, the requirements of the medium of painting make Kitaj’s citationality less overt; and perhaps it is out of Ashbery’s love for painting that he cannot help but envision poetry in its terms. Ashbery even does so in regard to the question of citation, which he places in relation to consciousness, the same consciousness that surrealism helped him to consider so deeply. Ashbery finally remains skeptical that the “frontal” presence of a citation or quotation tells the truth of communication and language. Such a “frontal” presence rather seems for Ashbery to miss the problem of consciousness and subjectivity, and it is in this sense (and others) that Ashbery remains a curious hybrid of romantic subjectivity and avant-garde language play.

But when dealing with consciousness—one particular embodiment of the mystery to which Ashbery is willing to attend—Ashbery refuses to simplify such a mystery. Even when the mystery of consciousness is occasionally made clear in Ashbery, such clarity is usually qualified and conditioned by later lines, never allowing the point of elucidation to come wholly to rest. This is especially so, because the “avoidance of all metaphysical temptations becomes itself a kind of religion” (Reported Sightings 60). Likewise, for all of Ashbery’s abstraction, the poet is likewise committed to the physicality of appearances, things and language. To be sure, in some writings Ashbery does show his longing to touch the “mystery behind physical appearances” (Reported Sightings 31). But Ashbery nevertheless manages not to forget about those physical appearances in reaching for the metaphysical.

Bernstein’s own move to envision writing as the essential term defining citation.
This is so as Ashbery notes the sense in which physical appearances themselves remain, perhaps to an irreducible extent, opaque. Thus, in an essay from the early sixties, "The New Realists," in which Ashbery entertains the topic of dada and Duchamp, Ashbery speculates about the consequences for art of already manufactured objects appropriated and placed in an aesthetic milieu. According to Ashbery, these are finally not mere "phenomena." Rather, these are "part of our experience, our lives—created by us and creating us" (Reported Sightings 82).

Rhetorical Mixing and the Problem of Automatic Writing

Ashbery's apparent views on competing contraries that are crucial to art—between conscious and unconscious, artifice and reality, metaphysics and physics—produce a hybrid or mixed overall effect, exuding Erickson's "productive tension" proper to the figure/ground relation in metaphor that likewise accurately describes the dichotomy of citation (8). Ashbery's desire is to mix such contraries. "Why should poetry be intellectual and nonsensory or the reverse? Our eyes, minds and feelings do not exist in isolated counterparts but are part of each other, constantly cross-cutting, consulting and reinforcing each other" (Reported Sightings 280). Mixing contraries such as these helps to generate a productive tension in his poetry that aims to attend to

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22 The last remark about inherited objects—"created by us and creating us"—will deeply fashion Bernstein's understanding of citation, conditioned as it is by Stanley Cavell's Heideggerian theory of language. Such a theory emphasizes the circular instrumentality of language. To paraphrase Hugh Kenner, we use words but words use us. See Kenner's introduction to Zakoisky's Prepositions.
as many of the reader’s faculties as possible. Alternatively, “an art constructed according to the above canons [where poetry would be, for instance, intellectual or sensory, never both] will wither away since, having left one or more of the faculties out of account, it will eventually lose the attention of the others.” This mixing attitude will also have the effect of drawing on the greatest powers of citation, itself a mixed phenomenon.

With this attitude, Ashbery is able to embrace artifice as a paradoxical way of generating a more potent form of realism in art, “a counterfeit of reality more real than reality,” as he put it in an essay on Gertrude Stein (qtd. in Lehman 330). Similarly, artifice enables the unconscious “irrational” forces necessary for producing strong art, “making so many conscious decisions that one’s unconscious is kind of left free to go ahead and proceed with the poem” (Munn “Interview” 62). Until Rivers and Mountains, Ashbery’s first unqualified success as a poet, Ashbery was, in fact, deeply committed to artifice in his experiments with highly structured, overdetermined poetic forms such as sestinas, pantoums or villanelles. As Ashbery put in the famous “Craft Interview” of 1974, “[F]orms such as the sestina were really devices at getting into remoter areas of consciousness. The really bizarre requirements of a sestina I use as a probing too rather than as a form in the traditional sense” (125). Of course, surrealist assemblage and dadaesque blague were also important to Ashbery during this time and afterward when he had learned to synthesize his particular mixture of commitments to

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23 See below in chapter four where I discuss Bernstein’s concerns with Plato’s sophist as a mixing of the contraries of being and non-being.
both artifice and consciousness. Artifice in general had offered a way to “remove the conscious mind from the creative mind so that the unconscious could take over” (Reported Sightings 26).

Such was the source of Ashbery’s difficulty with that shibboleth of surrealist literature, “automatic writing,” with which he thought he had to come to terms, even early in his career. In so much of his art criticism, “automatic writing” is a stumbling block for Ashbery and a source for ambivalence. Ashbery’s trouble with “automatic writing” makes it clear in another sense how he wanted to mediate between conscious and unconscious. In one sense Ashbery was “bored by the automatic writing of orthodox surrealism. As he put it “[t]here is more to one’s mind than the unconscious” (qtd. in Kostelanetz 30).24 Apropos of the artistic freedom desired by proponents of “automatic writing,” Ashbery noted that “real freedom would be to use this method [“automatic writing”] where it could be of service and to correct it with the conscious mind where indicated. And in fact the finest writing of the Surrealists is the product of the conscious and the unconscious working hand in hand, as they have been wont to do in all ages” (Reported Sightings 5). As it seems to be for Ashbery, the real problem for a surrealist is how to do deal “in plastic terms with material from the unconscious,” rather than how to get an accurate representation of the unconscious into poetic form (Reported Sightings 8).

24 In this it also becomes clear that the surrealism Ashbery finally championed was more a visual than written one, especially regarding de Chirico, the “one great Surrealist painter” (Reported Sightings 8). It was also more an individual one than a group one, as Ashbery routinely went his own way in aesthetic pursuits, most famously in his removal from New York in 1955 to Paris for the ten years following.
If, as noted earlier, Ashbery has decided to de-emphasize his mind and personality in his writings, in the interests of a “superior realism,” then here is yet another way in which “automatic writing” is suspect to Ashbery. David Bergman notes that “Ashbery locates the ‘superior realism’ not in the spontaneous outpourings of the diarist, where we have traditionally located the discourse of the authentic and sincere, but in the highly formal, even overelaborated rococo framework of the self-conscious artist” (vii). Artifice is necessary to derive from unconscious forms this greatest power.

However much Ashbery seems to reject a psychological understanding of the self, he nevertheless retains some very compromised sense of self in his writings. As a result, Ashbery’s method of balancing the self against the impersonal forces surrounding it is highly indirect. David Bergman is correct to note how this romantic attitude somehow survives in a decidedly non-romantic age but does so less out of a retreat to a pre-industrial past and more so out of a discovery of the modern objects and ways of speaking and seeing that invite his attention. Like Gertrude Stein, who invented the form, Ashbery is skilled at the “impersonal self-portrait.” For Ashbery differs from the English Romantics in that it is not “individual consciousness” that matters to poetry. Rather it is the collective “spirit and what it sees” (Bergman xxi).25

Besides serving as the repository of various voices, the unconscious is also driven by history and memory, including a particular commitment to history as more an archeological investigation than one into psychological forces. Bergman further

points out the archeological orientation of Ashbery's examination of paintings and the mind. Here "the surface of the paintings Ashbery admires is not a battlefield of competing expressionistic forces but an archeological site, where the accreted objects of various civilizations lie in surprising juxtapositions" (Bergman xxi). Significant here are the citational qualities of such an interest in history not to mention those arising out of the notion of a painting as a field of competing and diverse elements.

Art Risks: Metaphysics, Illustration and Politically Involved Art

Another feature of surrealism that incited Ashbery to criticism involved similar questions about metaphysics. Ashbery was particularly skeptical of politically involved art that led to simplistic abstractions. "[A] temptation to ideology . . . continues to undermine the avant-garde in Europe today." For, in the end, "art isn't about ideas but is ideas" (Reported Sightings 223).

Metaphysics, in Ashbery's view, are particularly toxic to art, especially if they are unmoored to the more concrete forces of artifice. Regarding painter Fairfield Porter, Ashbery believes that Porter's paintings "are intellectual in the classic American tradition because they have no ideas in them, that is no ideas that can be separated from the rest. They are ideas, or consciousness, or light, or whatever" (Reported Sightings 314). So, here, Ashbery resists the conventional, instrumental
notion of art as a neutral container for ideas, that ideas are somehow detachable from art. In this respect, Ashbery is, as Bernstein is, very anti-platonic in his view of metaphysics.

Porter himself went further, approaching the polemics against instrumental language that Bernstein was to champion in the eighties. And Ashbery is willing, in his essay on Porter, to let such non-instrumental ideas breathe, to exude, in Porter’s own words, a “respect for things as they are” (qtd. in Lehman 81). Of course, in this context, however, the issue is one of art (rather than language). For Porter, art can never be “raw material” for a “factory” producing a “commodity called understanding.” Porter named the bad art “art as sociology” (*Reported Sightings* 314).

But then Ashbery had already made remarks such as these in one of his great poems, “These Lacustrine Cities” from *Rivers and Mountains*. The cities of which Ashbery speaks are, to their detriment, “the product of an idea: that man is horrible, for instance, / though this is only one example” (9). What is most curious about these lines is that the cities are damned less because they have some puritanical investment in man as essentially depraved and more because the lacustrine cities exist simply because of some antecedent consciousness, whatever the content of that consciousness may be. In this respect, the cities have not achieved the benefit of the American idiom that Ashbery is implicitly articulating, that they suffer the burden of the preplanned, the lack of coincidence or simultaneity between physic and metaphysics.
Ashbery was a poet who had mastered his craft by the sixties, a decade, of course, ripe with social and political unrest, and held fast to his view of art over against the forms of political art that were surfacing during the time. In the same essay on Porter, Ashbery extends his sympathetic account of Porter's hostility to ideas unmoored to physical reality by criticizing overtly politicized art on the same grounds. This political art falls prey to the crime of "illustration" in Ashbery's view, which as we have seen is one of the standard uses of citation.

Thus politically 'concerned' artists continue to make pictures that illustrate the horrors of war, of man's inhumanity to man; feminist artists produce art in which woman is exalted, and imagine that they have accomplished a useful act; and no doubt there are a number of spectators who find it helpful to be reminded that there is room for improvement in the existing order of things. (Reported Sightings 315)

But for Ashbery such overtly political art here misses out on the "secret business of art":

Yet beyond the narrow confines of the 'subject' ... the secret business of art gets done according to mysterious rules of its own. In this larger context ideology simply doesn't function as it is supposed to, when indeed it isn't directly threatening the work of art by trivializing it, and trivializing as well the importance of the ideas it seeks to dramatize. (Reported Sightings 315)

Ashbery's criticism here has much to say about this theory and use of citation. Illustration, again one of the standard uses of citation, all too easily emphasizes the content or, as Ashbery puts it, the "subject" of the artwork in place of its formal properties and, in a more general sense, the subject's conditions of appearance. This

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26 See chapter four below for more discussion of this poem.
attitude about art will suggest a way of approaching inherited language not as a
communication or message to help illustrate one’s own ideas but rather as a thing in
its own right, much as modernist painters take the materials of their medium—paint,
canvas, etc.—as things unto themselves. Especially so when manipulated by poetic
artifice, this has the effect of rehabilitating and foregrounding the aesthetic side of
citation, generating the fruits a productive tension between the opposites.

Such illustration, and we would do well to recall Ashbery’s clever poem of the
same name,\(^27\) falls prey not simply to idealism but rather to the wrong sort of idealism.

If I understand Porter, it is not idealism that is dangerous, far from it, but idealism perverted and destroyed by being made ‘useful.’ Its
uselessness is something holy, just like Porter’s pictures, barren of
messages and swept clean, in many cases by the clean bare light of
November, no longer masked by romantic foliage. (Reported Sightings 316)

Like the Walter Benjamin of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical
Reproduction,”\(^28\) Ashbery stresses the value of art as ritual and magic at the same time
that he notices the “withering” of the aura around the work of art, when art is
reproduced (and in Ashbery’s case) appropriated and recycled. Ashbery makes use of
the materials available to his poetic writing, materials from mass culture, like the
Esquire magazine fragments he used in writing The Tennis Court Oath,\(^29\) finding in
such materials something mysteriously artful and alive, especially when viewed
through the lens of contemporary art. One must also underscore, however, that what
Ashbery is doing when he appropriates or cites inherited language is very new

\(^{27}\) See below in chapter four for discussion of this poem.


\(^{29}\) See Lehman, *Last* 149.
historically, as he collapses the distance between art and life. Ashbery does so by
taking the artificial element of language and writing so seriously that it functions as a
way of looking at the world, a world to be read, a “cryptogram” as he was to put it in
his discussions of R.B. Kitaj (Reported Sightings 307-308).

In Ashbery’s view, R.B. Kitaj is, like Porter, an artifactually minded painter
rather than an illustrator, one who abjures the “literary” tendencies in illusionistic
painting common during the centuries leading up to modernism. But Kitaj, for
Ashbery, also maintains discernible links to the ritualistic history of art. Kitaj avoids
the inordinate abstraction common to the illustrative painters Ashbery is challenging,
painters who do not take their medium very seriously. Happily, Kitaj is not a “painter
of ideas.” Rather, Kitaj “is constantly scrutinizing all their [the ideas’] chief
indicators—in an effort to decode the cryptogram of the world” (Reported Sightings
307-8). But here the accent is on the term “effort,” since Ashbery seems to have little
faith that such a cryptogram of the world could actually be decoded. Ashbery is as
fascinated with the cryptogram itself as with the effort to decode it.

Kitaj’s populism might pose a problem for Ashbery’s apparent antagonism to
overtly political painting that tends to focus more on illustrating something else (an
idea or a political event) than on the ways such ideas might be accessible to the
viewer. As a result, then, Kitaj’s political commitments must be qualified by the
painter’s simultaneous hostility to this sort of illustration; for in the end Kitaj’s need to
speak directly to the people is linked, in Ashbery’s imagination, with Picasso’s and
Léger’s respective commitments to the French Communist Party.
The will to produce art for the people—even if it fell short of its goal and produced an art of extreme sophistication—nevertheless deflected, reflected their work and made it something very different, something far better, than if they had ignored social issues and remained willingly in the field of self-referential art-for-art’s sake. The failure is an honorable one, and far richer and more involving than success would have been. (Reported Sightings 304)

Ashbery wants to connect the hostility to illustration with his commitment to surrealist assemblage, two gestures that help to form the foundation for Ashbery’s citationality. In corroboration, Fairfield Porter’s aesthetic finally offers a little anthology of ways of seeing, feeling and painting, with no suggestion that any one way is better than another. What is better than anything is the renewed realization that all kinds of things can and must exist side by side at any given moment, and that is what life and creating are all about. (Reported Sightings 244)

Ashbery’s own commitment to surrealism, plainly evident in this passage, corresponds to the diverse rhetorical modes present in his poems. However much Ashbery may be interested in the curious artifacts of mass culture, Ashbery is not suspicious of “high-bred rhetoric” and rather exhibits a “fondness for a polyphony of clashing styles from high-bred to demotic, in a given poem, musical composition . . . or a picture” (Reported Sightings 243).

But however much antipathy Ashbery displays toward illustrative painting, what must be acknowledged is the great extent to which Ashbery refuses to be puritanical about illustration. This crucial, paradoxical feature of Ashbery’s poetic and aesthetic shows the deeply hybrid nature of his citationality, a nature that rehabilitates the illustrative side of citation, that is, after having stressed the
importance of its aesthetic element. Ashbery even challenges the “east coast” bias against “literary painting,” the same illustrative sort of painting that should never be subservient to anything other than its material being.

[The prejudice against ‘literary’ painting is perhaps a typically East Coast one. In any case it is difficult for New Yorkers to conceive of art as something hybrid: there is abstraction and there is perhaps something called ‘information art,’ but an art in which equal importance is accorded to a number of unrelated components is hard for us to grasp. (Reported Sightings 296)

Ashbery’s postmodernism is evident in the statement but the paradoxical reaffirmation of the instrumental side of citation is also a condition for the hybridity of postmodern art forms.

The heart of Ashbery’s view of citation, derived from modern art, particularly surrealism, is clear: “[A] little anthology of ways of seeing, . . . with no suggestion that any one way is better than another.” Ashbery thus is a poet for whom citation’s double nature may be used in equal measures, much like his double commitment to artifice and the unconscious.

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30 This move is in apparent opposition to many of the moods of a Charles Bernstein who, in his drive to stress the “materiality” of language, tends to miss the uses to which the conceptual moment of writing may be put. This is essentially to say that words are not paint—they do have meanings, meanings that are always, to an essential degree, abstract.
CHAPTER 3

CITATION AND PARATACTIC COMPOSITION IN BERNSTEIN’S ESSAYS

Between John Ashbery and Charles Bernstein, Bernstein appears easily as the more conscious and explicit purveyor of a poetics of citation. Throughout his oeuvre, Bernstein has imagined some of the fullest possibilities of multi-vocal writing in such works as Content’s Dream, The Sophist, Artifice of Absorption and A Poetics.

In the intervening decades between Ashbery’s surrealist appropriations and Bernstein’s citational writing, certain historical, economic and technological forces had extended their reach to the point where inherited language could not help but be imagined as the sine qua non of any communication. Economic globalism, mass societies and electronic media immediately spring to mind as forces responsible for this change. Historical trends such as these have made it impossible for one speaking to imagine that her words are, in any meaningful sense, original.¹

Bernstein’s writings in Content’s Dream offer several uses of the actual term “citation” and manage for the reader a direct point of entry into this issue in his work. Unlike Ashbery, Bernstein is very forthcoming about the topic of citation. Approaching Bernstein’s poetics with an eye for linguistic usage rather than concepts is
especially helpful in this situation, for Bernstein’s poetics attend frequently to the forms taken of the speaking subject’s primary encounters with language. Here, language’s brute sensuality must be emphasized, two forms of which the speaking subject must ultimately confront. As pure sound, language is, on the one hand, a physical property. On the other, language is, in Wittgenstein’s famous description, its use. For all its abstraction when compared with the plastic and dramatic arts, language may be defined, according to Bernstein, as the consequence of provisional, contextual utterance rather than vocabulary or abstract grammatical principles.

Such an anti-metaphysical view of language deeply conditions Bernstein’s understanding of the role a general “citational” ethic plays in his and others’ writings. Bernstein’s faith in these views reaches far, to the extent that he cites as he writes of citation, a consequence of the privilege he extends to the sensual qualities of language. Within his investigation into the material side of language, usage holds a strategic place and is finally seen as the precondition for any conceptualism.

Examined from this perspective, two of the works mentioned above—Content’s Dream and The Sophist—are only apparently separate modal projects. Content’s Dream, an ostensible collection of essays, and The Sophist, an ostensible collection of poems published over several years, both aim to conceptualize citationality as the result of practicing it. The only difference between the two in this regard is that The Sophist is concerned less with naming and theorizing this dominant force in his poetics and

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1 See Perloff, “Normalizing.”
2 As we shall see, however, there is considerable tension between Bernstein’s twin commitments to the sensuous qualities of language and linguistic usage.
more with openly displaying the great reach of citationality upon his writing. On the
other hand, Bernstein's early serial essays, included in *Content's Dream*, help to
provide a general understanding of his citationality.

The context of Bernstein's uses of the term "citation" in the anthology
frequently include references to two terms—"sounding" and "sighting" of language that
inevitably takes place when one cites or quotes from another. In such references,
Bernstein implicitly argues that the place the sensuality—or, to use his own term, the
"materiality"—of language holds in his citational poetics is essential. In this respect,
Bernstein is very much in support of Diepeveen's remarks on how quotation brings in
unique textural qualities into the poem. This materiality of the "word as such" may be
partitioned into three forms: (1) the visual appearance of written letters and words
(which Bernstein terms, punningly, "sighting"); (2) language's audible dimension as
pure sound (which Bernstein terms "sounding"); and (3) language's performative
capability as dialogue or physical gesture, as reflected in poetry's shorthand designation
of such. (In regard to this last, gestural element of sensuous language, Bernstein
combines the terms "sounding and sighting.") "Sounding" and "sighting" in this way
are specific glosses on language's inherent materiality, its non-instrumental features that
create the very conditions for meaning. When these features of language are
acknowledged to be primary, citationality for Bernstein cannot help but be entangled
with the material features of poetry, poetry that he defines as the most material mode of
language or literary use.
Language’s non-instrumental character may be seen as essential not simply to citation but to the nature of poetry as well. This definition of poetry may be appropriate aside from the cultural or institutional view of poetry, where poetry is defined as the product of the discursive practices that surround it. Drawing on the Imagist/Objectivist tradition in poetics, however, critics such as Marjorie Perloff have defined poetry as that mode of communication that, more than any other, “denies the instrumentality of language” (“Essaying” 407). Because Bernstein’s view of citationality is defined by the non-instrumental nature of language, it would then seem that, in Bernstein’s scheme, citationality is essential to poetry as well. Moreover, in conjunction with this accent on the primary physicality of language, language is acquired, as any parent or child knows, not through abstract explanation of such apparently basic principles as vocabulary or grammar. Rather, language acquisition occurs through the child’s becoming directly acquainted with language in its contextual and provisional use, through repeating the words and gestures of parents and others.

Equating the citational, both with language’s non-instrumental character and its use, helps not only to explain the fundamental connection Bernstein draws between poetry and citationality, but also the obvious interdisciplinarity of his writing, which frequently seems at once to exist both as philosophy and poetry, theory and practice. Bernstein’s theoretical refusal to separate thought and expression indicates how “poetic” many of his apparent “essays” may be, and in turn how conceptual his

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"poetry," may be. So, by emphasizing the importance of the citational, Bernstein necessarily emphasizes both the material nature of language, to which poetry, of all modes, is theoretically most committed; and the contextual essence of utterance. A commitment such as this one is deeply at odds with the standard uses of citation.

Challenging and compelling writing thus does not pretend to get outside of language and representation to describe a reality allegedly external to it, the language used as a mere means for the metaphysical end of representation. Instead such writing has, as its starting point, a repetition and recontextualization of what always already is, and what it cannot hope to transcend. For Bernstein, citationality would seem then to be an immediate reflection of writing in general, placing his value of citation on as high a plateau as Compagnon’s and Sartilot’s.

Citation and Poetics: Bernstein’s "Tale of Terms"

Bernstein’s first uses of the term “citational” to describe a poetics appear in his essays of the late seventies and offer the simplest and most direct way into this problem in his work. Although the terms are frequently applied in examining the work of other writers, Bernstein (like Ashbery) seems to be discussing his own poetics in the process—or at least his own understanding of them—the more precisely Bernstein

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4 See generally Jessica Prinz, Art Discourse/Discourse in Art (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 67)
delineates the poetics of other writers. Uses like these nevertheless reveal both the
deep sense in which Bernstein’s own poetics may be described as citational and one of
the term’s first uses as substantively descriptive of any poetics.\(^5\)

Investigating these uses and their contexts promises to yield, at the very least,
the writer’s conscious understanding of a citational poetics. But even as, in his case,
Bernstein views this question in other like-minded writers, that question still reflects at
once his awareness of his own writing’s motives and the inevitable implication of
critics’ interests with their analyses and their objects of study. As we shall see,
Bernstein’s poetics are, at least in theory, so closely tied to his actual poetic practice
that the two are difficult to separate. These poetics are configured in this dichotomous
way, despite that Bernstein’s poetics arrive to the reader in fragments, which generally
give rise to a collage aesthetic that helps to form both his and Ashbery’s respective
citational poetics. Ideally, such a poetic roots itself in particular contexts against which
it is seen, its objecthood respected as a result.\(^6\) Consequently, to know Bernstein’s
uses of the term citation is to know not simply his citational poetics but also his
citational practice, the latter of which I also turn to discuss regarding these issues, both
in selected “essays” of *Content’s Dream* and selected “poems” of *The Sophist.*

The adjetival form of the term “citation” (“citational”) exhibits by far the
term’s most common use in Bernstein’s writing. This term roughly articulates an
unconventional compositional model defined by the architecture of collage, “serial

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disjunction,” and parataxis (Content’s Dream 301). Compositional values such as these help to enact for Bernstein the “dialogic nature of human understanding,” which feeds off of an endless cycle of repetition and variation (Content’s Dream 20).

Opposing such values would be a more one-sided “expositional” or “narrational” mode of composition devoted primarily to writing’s smooth, linear development under the aegis of a controlling purpose.

At the most general level, Bernstein’s use of the term “citational” or “citation” in his essays implies basic compositional values and distinctions that foretell his special commitment to language’s materiality. In one of his early, more conventional essays, “The Objects of Meaning: Reading Cavell Reading Wittgenstein,” Bernstein notes how Cavell’s use of texts relates to the use of collage and juxtaposition in more strictly literary writing, especially to the use of prior texts, of pervasively citational language, in Pound, Zukofsky and Olson, up to the present. (Cavell himself points out that his quotes from Wittgenstein in the last section of The Claim of Reason are not interpretive but citational [p. xiii].) (Content’s Dream 166)

Readers of Cavell must notice that in his work “citations come [to the reader] with dizzying speed and aphoristic brevity” in a “game of tag through intellectual history,” the buzz of name references constituting a “fugue of citations” (Content’s Dream 168-69).

At stake for Bernstein here is less the content of Cavell’s philosophy and more Cavell’s compositional procedure which, as the longer quotation above indicates, is

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6 Note, however, that the objecthood of citation is not so well represented in Bernstein’s poetry, poetry that all too often seems the mere illustration of his essays, however disruptive the citational quality of the poems.


8 Bernstein studied under Cavell during Bernstein’s undergraduate days (My Way 241-42).
defined by “collage” and “juxtaposition.” This method of manipulating the parts of one’s writing pertains more to “ordering and arrangement” than to “exposition,” is more the product of “invocative” logic and “bricolage” than “deduction” (Content’s Dream 167). Cavell’s compositional method is of crucial importance for Bernstein, ultimately the real test of the philosopher’s (Wittgensteinian) convictions about language and the world, which will be important for how Bernstein ultimately envisages the same issues. Bernstein’s investment in citation, however, remains primarily, and self-consciously, philosophical. Bernstein here is implicitly challenging the stock philosophical attitude about language and writing as merely instrumental to consciousness.9

Bernstein’s reading of Cavell concludes that Cavell argues (convincingly) that we are paradoxically “split off from a world which we are wholly inside of” (Content’s Dream 165). For both Cavell and Bernstein, this world is frequently likened to the world of language, which is, at once, of us and not of us: “But we are ‘beside ourselves in a sane way’ for what is beside us is also ourselves. At the same time in & beside.—The signs of language . . . “ (Content’s Dream 43). Split subjecthood, as defined by Cavell, will be deeply significant both for Bernstein’s poetics (and, for that matter, his politics) and the poet’s general understanding of social organization. Language manages to ensure that consciousness does not create ex nihilo. Rather, these social and conventional forms generate the possibilities of consciousness, consciousness that often mistakenly proclaims its autonomy from them. In his book on

9 Of course, Ashbery engages the same problem (albeit in a different way). See above.
Thoreau, Cavell notes that “words come to us from a distance; they were there before we were; we are born into them” (Senses 64). In this paradox, we are estranged from words but are nevertheless “present to them” or remain inside and beholden to their uses and meanings (Senses 65). This insideness always ensures that, to an irreducible extent, reality itself is compositional.

If this is true of our relation to language and the world, part of our, and Cavell’s, responsibilities would be to outline the parameters of how we are inevitably inside language, because this language that we are “born into” is “our point of origin” (Senses 64), but it is also an origin that sets defining limitations on what we might do with it and how in turn the world is constituted.

But are we merely the instruments of language’s inherent forces? Alternatively, another part of such responsibilities would entail outlining how we are inevitably “split off” from language, whether language is inert and available for our controlling use, or whether it retains animistic life, where its “besideness” makes a profound claim on our subjectivity. Is language effectively dead, except when we use it, or does it contain our uses as well as our silence? If we are so “split off” from language, how deeply does that split run? As a result, Cavell’s language and compositional method cannot merely serve as a husk for such convictions; they must also embody them.

Thoughts along these lines are echoed in an essay of Bernstein’s published a year later, “Semblance,” which explicitly connects such a “serially disjunct” method of composition with the materiality of language. In Barrett Watten’s “intersentential” collages, we discover that the “seriality of the ordering of sentences within a paragraph
displaces[,] from its habitual surrounding[,] the projected representational fixation that the sentence conveys” (Content’s Dream 36). In accordance with such a “representational fixation,” the official view of composition provides that the sequence of the discussion must proceed to “narrow down” the possibilities of representation. This is done so that what is finally represented comes to the fore, limiting, as much as possible, the inherent power of language to do as it will.

On the other hand, Watten’s writing “displaces” such a fixation by granting each sentence more independent status. It does this instead of ordering each sentence so that a sentence functions as a piece subservient to a larger “expositional” or “narrational” composition plan, which would thereby “direct attention away from the sentence as meaning generating event onto the ‘content’ depicted” (Content’s Dream 36). Alternatively, this kind of writing that Bernstein admires in Watten chimes with the value on quotation in poetry that Diepeveen expresses, because it enables the reader to “savor the tangibility of each sentence before it is lost to the next, determinately other sentence” (Content’s Dream 37: my italics). For Bernstein, such a manner of juxtapositional” arrangement encourages the reading process to occur “along ectoskeletal” and finally “citational” lines.
This juxtapositional technique of collage composition that Bernstein admires, particularly in Cavell, Bernstein had already made use of for his own purposes and taken even further as a dominant architectural principle in his writings. Two of Bernstein's important serial essays anthologized in Content's Dream—"Stray Straws and Straw Men" and "Three or Four Things I Know About Him"—do not present their compositional principles as merely clever ornaments or accessories to the "content" of the writing, to camouflage its "meaning" in some clever way. Rather, such principles are irreducible to the writing's overall claims and goals. Bernstein's turn to the essay form itself, not in its modern, systematic Anglo-American form, but rather in its traditional continental, rambling nature (after Montaigne), is revealing in light of his commitment to seriality as well.

Each of these essays is organized via numbered passages of writing, passages that frequently exist so much on their own terms as to create a general disjunctive effect of reading, which for Bernstein, as we have seen, has a citational character. Here, the narrative flow of the writing is interrupted and the seams between parts are exposed. The overall composition gains for its juxtaposing such distinct passages with one another, as each in turn comments on each other, so as to produce a whole that is both greater than the sum of its parts and remains true to its compositional origins. Also, the passages themselves are frequently direct or indirect citations.

The text of one of Bernstein's earliest published writings, "Stray Straws and Straw Men" is self-referential in this respect, specifically concerning various topics related to composition, both in its "subject matter" and in its "ectoskeletal" shape. The
essay also includes a relevant discussion of the gap between the writer’s inwardness and writing’s external appearance.

The work begins with an unattributed quotation discussing how the source of all writing comes directly from the heart, then proceeds to reflect on romantic notions of poetry and composition that tend to focus more on the author’s “personality” than on objective composition (Content’s Dream 44). Then, Bernstein’s speaker will see opprobrious romantic tendencies in the avant-garde, specifically in surrealism’s value of “automatic writing.” Bernstein will further see the same problem in modernist stream-of-consciousness technique, which also, in his view, fraudulently attempts to represent a privileged, occult consciousness directly, without taking into account the mediation of writing, thus “making the writing a recording instrument of consciousness” (Content’s Dream 42). Finally, Bernstein will return to Cavell, whose work manages a way of mediating the apparent opposition between writing and consciousness. In general, the essay challenges the idea of a natural, seamless writing secondary to a transcendental consciousness that would lend authenticity to the writing. The essay is ultimately an attack on any writing that would occlude its inevitably non-instrumental dimensions. It is a challenge to those who would forget the claims of poetic artifice when writing.

The essay’s first sentence, “I look straight into my heart & write the exact words that come from within” is an expression of the dominant, romantic understanding of compositional “sincerity” and “authenticity” that will constantly be

10 See chapter two above on Ashbery treatment of automatic writing.
questioned in the essay (Content's Dream 40-41). The unnamed speaker states that his words issue forth ultimately from the "heart," "from within," a source to which he has absolute access, implying that writing is rooted in human inwardness. The opposition Bernstein is questioning, between an external writing and its putatively internal source in the human, sounds elsewhere in the essay, especially in the third passage, where an alternative that Bernstein admires

may discomfort those who want a poetry primarily of personal communication, flowing freely from the inside with the words of a natural rhythm of life, lived daily. Perhaps the conviction is that poetry not be made by fitting words into a pattern but by the act of actually letting it happen, writing, so that that which is "stored within pours out" without reference to making a point any more than to making a shape. (Content's Dream 41)

This romantic understanding of poetry's "honesty, its directness, its authenticity, its artlessness, its sincerity, its spontaneity, its personal expressiveness" is "in short, its naturalness," the external shape of which need not be considered. In this view, the artifice of external shape would taint the naturalness of the writing (Content's Dream 41).

This attitude toward writing is in sharp opposition to one Bernstein favorably attributes to Ron Silliman in the foregoing passage number two, where Silliman

has consistently written a poetry of visible borders: a poetry of shape. .

. . Such poetry emphasizes its medium as being constructed, rule governed, everywhere circumscribed by grammar & syntax, chosen vocabulary: designed, manipulated, picked, programmed, organized & so an artifice, artifact—monadic, solipsistic, homemade, manufactured, mechanized, formulaic, willful. (Content's Dream 40-41)

\[11\] This is one way in which Ashbery is at odds with Bernstein's attitude about the interplay between consciousness and writing. See John Ashbery, Other Traditions (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000) 3-4.
A poetry that takes into account its external shape as an ineffable moment to its purpose will for Bernstein be the “prerequisite of authenticity, of good faith,” barring the “deceptive” “natchural[ness] [sic]” of a “sincere” romantic writing (Content’s Dream 49). Further, phrases such as “a poetry of visible borders” and “a poetry of shape” directly invoke the claims Bernstein makes for Watten’s collages as “ectoskeletal” and finally citational writing.

According to Bernstein, when poetry explicitly acknowledges the importance of its external shape, it also respects the integrity and context of its material. Such material is ultimately seen as coming from outside the self, but which, in circular fashion, nevertheless makes a fundamental claim on the self. In what could be a paraphrase of Stanley Cavell, Bernstein notes that a writing has particularity when “it contains itself, has established its own place, situates itself next to us” (Content’s Dream 43). Such a program for writing is finally a reflection again of our being split off from a world of which we are nevertheless inside:

Next to. Fronting the world with a particular constellation of beliefs, values memories, expectations; a culture; a way of seeing, mythography; language. But we are “beside ourselves in a sane way” for what is beside us is also ourselves. At the same time in & beside.—The signs of language, of a piece of writing, are not artificial constructions, mere structures, mere naming. They do not sit, deanimated, as symbols in a code, dummies for things of nature they refer to; but are, of themselves, of ourselves, whatever is such. (Content’s Dream 43)

As a result, language and writing constitute us at least as much as we constitute them; and to a crucial extent, and both must be recognized as external and objective, or “citational.”
The topics of Bernstein’s “Three or Four Things I Know about Him”—a more ambitious, challenging and rewarding serial essay than “Stray Straws and Straw Men”—expand into areas more diverse than simply the relation between writing and consciousness. At stake here is not only the split between composition and mind but also other and larger sources of fragmentation in both the self and society generally. The title of the essay is a gloss on Jean-Luc Godard’s film about a prostitute, “Two or Three Things I Know about Her.” Correspondingly, Bernstein’s title sounds a general theme of prostitution and exploitation of the body in such subjects as the modern office worker, the lover, the consumer, the friend and the writer. The key link between the two essays remains writing and its uses. In “Two or Three,” however, Bernstein is more careful to outline the wider consequences both of his particular views and the range of material, bodily uses, establishing a connection between the human body and the “bodiedness” of language’s material dimension.

Along the way, Bernstein is also careful to note that such usage can slip into exploitation, thus charging the discussion on writing in “Stray Straws and Straw Men” with political overtones. When writing’s non-instrumental dimensions are finally evacuated via exploitation—rather than being emphasized through a more neutral, antimetaphysical “use”—one can see such exploitation as a symptom plaguing modern society where bodies are prostituted by the needs of forces as diverse as corporate capitalism and self-protective lovers. In this way, “Three or Four Things I Know about Him” is both more personal and more public than “Stray Straws and Straw Men.”

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12 Bernstein’s move of citing Godard is not accidental with regard to the issue of citation, since Godard’s work is a fitting filmic analogue of the disjunctive composition Bernstein admires. See chapter five’s discussion of Bernstein’s similar move to cite Bob Dylan.
Like the older essay, "Three or Four" is arranged paratactically into numbered passages, but its structure as such is made even more apparent than "Stray Straws" by lending the various passages generally more autonomy and internal consistency. This strengthens more the shaped and collage-like quality of the piece. The first passage, again, is a quotation, but this time (and twice later) it is attributed to a specific someone, in this case to Marx, rooting it more specifically in its own context: "... the task of history, once the world beyond the truth has disappeared, is to establish the truth of this world..." (Content's Dream 13). This is somewhat in opposition to "Stray Straws." The two serial essays each embody divergent tendencies in Bernstein's writing. Context is far more solid in "Three or Four" than in "Stray Straws," lending more credence to Bernstein's poetics of embodiment. Although "Three or Four" is more "embodied" in this respect than much of Bernstein's more poetic writing, one notices these aspects in spite of (perhaps because of) Bernstein's need to insist on the material qualities of his writing.

The second passage, though, in its apparently heightened artifice, reads more as a modernist, free verse poem. The writing lacks any orthographic justification in the margins and includes much use of empty space, the latter of which connects with the poem’s theme of vacancy and discontinuity, here specifically in the office worker's dull life:

> a lot of what i experience is just a tremendous sense of space and vacant space at that sort of like a stanley kubrick film sort of a lot of objects floating separately which i don’t particularly feel do anything for me

(Content's Dream 14)
It is thus a "concrete" poem, form following function, ironically concrete despite both the speaker's compromised bodily integrity and the obvious degree to which the poem's language is transparent and referential. Bernstein's otherwise concrete representation of the speaker's work redeems the dematerialization implied in his exploitation by the powers that be. Such abstraction extends to the "objects" that "float separately," which make up no grounded or articulated whole. Bernstein's implicit hope is that his own objects or passages will resist the abstractions and exploitation of modern life.

Other passages in the essay, however, are more radically non-instrumental, much more so than anything in "Stray Straws and Straw Men." In passage six, Bernstein tampers with many sentence fragments and their orthography, to question the uniformity that modern printing methods encourage: "avoidances: movies. I think it's rather boring already dAncInG with LaRRy rIners. marKINGS: not done by a machine. hAnDcRaFt" (Content's Dream 21). The passage's experiments with orthography connect with a later quotation of Clark Coolidge's that forms the content of passage nine. This quotation discusses the consequences of writing's modern standardization in print, one result of which is uniform spelling: "... that whole sense that spelling things right in English is really a sort of aristocratic notion..." (Content's Dream 25). This quotation further connects both with the problem of writing's materiality and of writing's being used as fodder for exploitation. Such uniformity in writing obscures the true source of the rules governing writing, which in Bernstein's view is the domain of provisional statements or "hAnDcRaFt," rather than that of powerful institutions.
aiming to set uniform standards. Bernstein draws the point both in the diction of "hAnDeRaFlt" and in its unconventional orthography, which defamiliarizes typical encounters with print by forcing readers to stutter through reading the word.

The critical narrative just presented, however, does not wholly account for the more challenging moments of Bernstein's paratactic composition in these essays. Bernstein had already prepared the reader for poetry's troubled connection with the natural in a quotation-fragment dangling within the first passage of "Stray Straws and Straw Men": "Natural: the very word should be struck from the language." (Content's Dream 40), which confuses consciousness with its "syntacticization." In passage four of "Three or Four," we learn that "personal subject matter & flowing syntax . . . are the key to the natural look." That same first passage also contains another quotation-fragment that likewise prepares the reader for the humanism presupposed in such naturalness: " . . . but what the devil is the human?" Such humanism is again echoed later in defense of poetic artifice that finally defines the human: "Technical artifice' they scream, as if poetry doesn't demand a technical precision. . . . Technicians of the human" (Content's Dream 42-3).

These repetitions, however, are unlike those that are typically found in the modern expository essay. Instead of indicating to the reader how the topics will be integrated into the expository flow of the essay—and even what finally the topics are—Bernstein simply lends his topics a sense of their own rootedness in particular contexts and juxtaposes them. Bernstein does this without explicitly subordinating
such topics to each other or to a larger, controlling purpose. Such is the rationale of the quotation-fragment in passage one, of "establishing the truth of this world" (Content's Dream 13).

"Three or Four"'s beginning even offers clues that reading the fragments of writing that Bernstein presents us with in this non-linear, paratactic way is essential to the essay's aims and claims:

"I look straight into my heart & write the exact words that come from within. The theory of fragments whereby poetry becomes a grab bag of favorite items—packed neatly together with the glue of self-conscious & self-consciously epic composition, or, lately, homogenized into one blend by the machine of programmatic form—is a diversion... There are structures—edifices—wilder than the charts of rivers, but they are etched by making a path not designing a garden." (Content's Dream 40)

All writing consists of fragments, Bernstein seems to argue, sewn together in some way, but the natural mode of composition glosses over this hard truth, claiming pretensions for the writing to which it cannot live up.

Connections among topics such as these the reader must establish, for the autonomy and particularity of topics within a given passage or quotation are made manifest, not their capacity to subordinate to a general, normative concept. So the reader must then weigh context against context to draw conclusions about what the writing is doing, contexts that here seem more to generate multiple possibilities of meaning than either to eliminate meaning or structure it uniformly apart from utterance.

The essay's first passage-fragment has even wider significance for this paratactic mode of composition. If the essay's first sentence seems indicative of a romantic attitude toward composition, exhibiting a fraudulence about the relation
between (external) writing and (internal) consciousness, then the larger context of which it is a part further complicates the theory of composition Bernstein is interrogating. Because that first sentence is part of a larger quotation, it makes sense to see the rest of the quotation in its terms. But, strikingly, what the reader receives from that passage is a link between the false authenticity of romantic composition and the speaker's implicit criticism of Pound's poetic for his *Cantos*, a work that would seem more friendly to Bernstein's compositional ethos: "The theory of fragments whereby poetry becomes a grab bag of favorite items—packed neatly together with the glue of self-conscious & self-consciously epic composition. . ." (Content's Dream 40).

As architecturally irregular as Pound's *Cantos* are, they seem for the speaker to be linked to "self-conscious & self-consciously epic composition." Pound would articulate his fragments so that, first, the fragments are "favorite items," and second, they are placed in a "grab bag," connected or "glued" together too "self-consciously," too much in the service of an "epic." In this way, Pound has, according to Bernstein, designed a garden instead of charting a path. In the process, Pound has (in Bernstein's view) liquidated some of the aesthetically innovative potential of a poetic of fragmentation into an abstract "epic" blueprints, in effect homogenizing and dematerializing the pieces, too much in the service of (Pound's own) supervisory consciousness.

According to Bernstein, the criteria of Pound seem suspect for several reasons. That the quotation itself is both unattributed and internally inconsistent should also serve as evidence for the poetic Bernstein is implicitly advocating here. Pound's
quotations and citations, however diverse they may be—apart from the supposedly unifying consciousness Bernstein ascribes to Pound’s work—can be tracked down with a little effort (as Bernstein’s own quotation of Marx at the start of “Three or Four”). Bernstein’s citations, however—and for that matter Ashbery’s—are frequently not traceable to a specific source outside the poem, implicitly presenting the reader with a world of severe citationality in which distinctions among sources of quotations are no longer especially pertinent. Further, even if these citations and quotations are so traceable, they offer no easy access to the writing’s overall plan (whether “path” or “garden” variety). This is so except in the citation’s simultaneous objecthood and subordination to the compositional ethos of the poem, rather than to a governing concept or consciousness. The quotation above, about composition and Pound, likewise confronts the reader with an imagination in which its diverse elements somehow belong together.

It is questionable whether Pound’s *Cantos* may legitimately be faulted for being so “self-consciously epic” or so abstract. But Bernstein’s remarks here account well for the experimental, poetic excesses that crop up frequently in most of his own writings. These excesses show precisely what Bernstein means by “making a path,” where language-derived uncertainties or mysteries have more importance than they would in a dogmatically rationalized poetics and direct the reader to read more in accordance with a compositional ethos than a referential one.

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13 See Marjorie Perloff, “Normalizing.”
14 This view of Pound seems inaccurate, more an act of projection by Bernstein than description of Pound. Bernstein, it can easily be argued, is susceptible to the charge of excessive self-consciousness and abstraction, even if Bernstein’s self-consciousness and abstraction take different
Take, for example, passage six in “Three or Four Things I Know about Him”:

6. a fun is what i want to avoid the work of sitting down & m’um the cheezy. it’s a hundred and forty five miles. you don’t go for now reason. couldn’t stop thinking about it wanted to go to sleep so bad. under. stuff. thing. what’s that gnawing, keeps gnawing. switch, fug, cumpf. afraid to get down to it. avoidances: movies. i think it’s rather boring already dAncInG with LaRRy rIvers. marKINGs: not done by a machine. hAnDcRaFt, so you get into a scene and you say to y’rself—this is it, is outside it, & y’guys all know what’s going on. Daddy-O you a hero. OHH. can’t even get tired. what is it—dead—very wrinkled anyway. quiet . . . i could hear the very ‘utmost of m’heart. EEzzy. its fear eats away the . . . i’m totally afraid of what it will sound like. flotsam. a $1 transcript. stomach sputters. noise, interference, & i can’t work. TeAztHE MeEk. we’re‘iz’iz puliticks? poised: there is no overall plan. (Content’s Dream 20-21)

In the midst of so many individuated passages in the overall composition—like the first (by Marx), the second (concrete poem on the office worker), the fourth (by Habermas) etc.—at first blush, this passage radically and productively destabilizes the compositional strings or “paths” the reader has been constructing up to this point.

The first sentence, for example, seems under-determined at first glance but could easily be otherwise: “a fun is what i want to avoid the work of sitting down & m’um the cheezy” (Content’s Dream 20). Superficially the sentence recalls the structure of passage two’s long concrete poem with its lack of uppercase orthography. Further, the sentence’s diction seems to echo that of the earlier fragments about the malaise and forms. Ashbery would deem them the “product” of an “idea.” See the discussion of “These Lacustrine Cities” below.

15 “Scientism” means science’s belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we no longer understand science as one form of possible knowledge but rather must identify knowledge with science” (Content’s Dream 19).
exploitation of the modern office worker and his need to escape such exploitation
(“avoid the work”) in “fun.” Here, the reader would pause before “want” and “to”
generating a fairly comprehensible “a fun is what I want [. . .] to avoid the work.”

But from here matters soon become difficult, as Bernstein does not allow us
such a straightforward reading; for no orthographical mark—comma, period, even just
empty space—warrants such a pause. Perhaps the sentence could be broken elsewhere:
“a fun is what I want to avoid.” If so, the statement could be implying awareness of
the ways in which consumer capitalism seems to rationalize life supposedly outside of
labor. In that case, what are we to make of the nominalization of “fun”? Is “a fun” a
capitalist reification of leisure that offers no authentic release from the grips of such
exploitation, transforming an active, non-rationalized process into an inert object ready
for consumption? If so, such inertia for the object would be an undesirable
objectification for Bernstein’s need to lend language an animistic objecthood that
makes a serious claim on our subjectivity.

Or, perhaps the “fun” offers an attractive physical alternative to tainted action
and labor, like the (ironic) “work of sitting down,” which so abstracts the worker from
his action (or inaction) and purposes. And what is “m’um the cheezy,” a statement that
is so cryptic as to distort the narrative flow of the sentence even more? The phrase in
general seems to concern speaking versus remaining silent. For “m’um” we could read
“mum’s the word” with only slight variation—a missing “s” and a misplaced
apostrophe—or even “mumbo jumbo,” a torrent of words designed to silence others,
effectively by drowning out their speech.
This would tend to agree with the term “cheezy,” which may be read as “cheese it!” or “stop it!” But if so, to what end? What do the vicissitudes of modern work and leisure have to do with silence or speaking out? To policing authorities? We could construct such a relation, something like “modern alienated labor tends to silence the worker, either through self-censorship, censorship perhaps derived distantly from actual force, or through indirect linguistic control (“mumbo jumbo”).” But then what is the purpose of the apostrophe in “m’um?” Is it a contraction? (What is omitted?) Does “m’um” evoke reflexivity, as in French where the indirect object pronoun is often contracted with the verb? What verb is contracted here? A stutter (“um’)? A hum?

Perhaps both are, since each of these would seem to resonate with the problem of silence versus speech, reflecting a nascent yet possibly stifled speech, resembling the discontinuous composition Bernstein champions.

And what about “cheezy”?” Does it invoke contemporary American usage, as a synonym for “chintzy?” If so, how would cheap aesthetics relate to the rest of the sentence, unless perhaps in some special way to the general market-driven consciousness of the modern citizen? What about cheese cracker brand “Cheezit?” Is the implication something like “don’t speak out, just (literally) consume”?

Passages such as these in the midst of Bernstein’s work indeed guarantee that “there is no overall plan,” one statement in the passage that may be read more or less straightforwardly on its own terms. (But even this statement is yoked to the term “poised” preceding a colon. What is the relation between these?) Bernstein’s implicit and explicit aims in composing essays such as these is first to confront the reader with
the brute materiality of language and discourse. Second, he aims both to collapse the
space between object and meaning and to stall the process by which material fact is
made into a meaning that might be abstracted from it. In addition, such abstraction
would suggest unfortunate exploitation of language that may be linked to the
exploitation of others.

In citational terms, this amounts to immersing the readers in the world of
language, which is not separate from the world as an inert instrument, but which, as
animistic object, makes a significant claim on speaking subjects, rather than offering the
descriptive account of ideas or emotions. This claim is significant enough to imply that
the social bond itself contains compositional values that are fundamental to language
and writing.

“Sighting” and “Sounding” Language

In most of the areas where Bernstein mentions the “citational” features of
writing, or even “citationality” in general, he is noting the materiality of language in
medium specific forms, forms which he names “sighting” and “sounding.” So, there is
a clear sense in which, according to Bernstein, we encounter words as separate from
ourselves, seeing them as they arrive to us, as Cavell would note, “from a distance,” in
writing or print. This is so even as much as the claim they make on us inevitably brings
us inside their uses. Likewise, already existing language is sounded when someone
speaks to us, the sound never completely lost to its sense. In either case, language, for all its abstraction in instrumental use, takes on material characteristics, bounded by both time and space. Such materiality even more specifically forms the background against which Bernstein’s citationality must be seen, for in his writing, citationality ceases to be the abstract domain of instrumental use, and instead is given over to a materialist poetics, remarking the gap between the word and its abstraction in the idea.

As regards “sighting” language and its foundational moment for the citationality of language, Bernstein’s ideas are most accessible and provocative in his essay “Making Words Visible / Hannah Weiner.” Here, Bernstein directly connects what he calls a “pervasive citationality” with Weiner’s emphasis on “seeing” words in her “The Clairvoyant Journal,” a title which itself literally connects “clear seeing” and writing.

“To see words” is to be inside language and looking out onto it. For Weiner, this has involved an actual seeing (clairvoyance), although at the level of the text it is present as a pervasive citationality (both in the sense of a sighting and a quoting)” (Content’s Dream 266). Weiner’s writing attempts to “physicalize” language and render it “palpable,” to give the reader “a view of what is given, what has been handed down” (Content’s Dream 269)—in short, to give us a sense of the citational basis of utterance. Bernstein’s Weiner is able to remark the gap between writing and metaphysics without forgetting her point of origin “inside” language.

The connection Bernstein establishes implicitly in his serial essays between parataxis and citationality attends to fairly general features of discourse in its

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16 See Bernstein, Content’s Dream 266-70.
17 Indeed, the cover photo of the Clairvoyant Journal has Weiner posturing before the camera with the sentence “I see words” written on her forehead in marking pen.
compositional structure. But what is it about this specific connection between
“sighting” and “quoting” that seems necessary for Bernstein? His premise in linking
language’s materiality with the “pervasive citationality” of Weiner’s writing, especially
in the second quotation above, is that the reader cannot know citationality outside of
two forms that serve as a point of origin. First, the essence of citationality must be
made palpable and, second, it must be made so in a way that is consistent with its
medium, one part of which is writing, and so here in visual form, in seeing words.
Without such a “physicalization” of language, language’s citational quality, its nature of
having been “handed down,” is threatened in a very basic way. It might, then, appear
to be less a borrowed thing than the unmediated product of abstract consciousness.

Though we are usually unconscious of it, we also see words in this concrete
way both when we speak and when we cite another’s words. As with Wittgenstein’s
discussion of the figure-ground relation in the Philosophical Investigations,\(^\text{18}\) we peer
into the ground of given language and pull words that, inasmuch as they differ from
their ground, constitute a figure that stands out from that source. The figure, though,
nevertheless derives its substance from that ground, a ground from which, according to
Cavell, we derive our own substance as humans as well, however much, differently, we
seem to stand apart from language. Cavell’s understanding of language bears the same
structure of his understanding of modernism. According to Cavell, modernism is
characterized by an ambivalent attitude about history. On the one hand, “making it

\(^\text{18}\) See chapter one above.
new” implies denying the connection between one’s own work and that of the past. On the other, one is inevitably returned to history, history that serves as the condition of possibility for one’s work.19

Weiner’s optical metaphor furthermore has the benefit of encouraging the reader to acknowledge the sense in which the speaking subject and the spoken words bear a reciprocal relation. Limited to seen words, we can no longer perpetuate the fantasy of ex nihilo creation, of the self-identical, infinite subject. According to Bernstein, Weiner’s emphasis on “seeing words” is salutary because it grants them an even talismanic objecthood in the face of so much dematerialization, and thereby challenges the legitimacy of the Cartesian ego. But in the process the horizons of both human and linguistic possibility are indicated.

It is in this sense of reciprocity between seer and sighted that we are both inside language and beside it. Before we use words, in seemingly autonomous fashion, this elementary reciprocity must be established. The speaking subject first “sights” the words to be used from the language pool and then implicitly notes their besideness, their palpability and strangeness, a “sighting” to which our uses of language are limited. “The citational: shards of language, ciphers to be examined for evidence, yet which we are forever beholden to . . . which holds our sight within its views. [. . .] writing as a specific kind of object making . . . (Content’s Dream 269).

Again for Bernstein, the Cavellian paradox proper to the social bond obtains, and further so in both philosopher and poet’s implicit equation of the social bond with language. In its basis in convention, language is separate from us. But while we think

19 See Melville, “On Modernism”
we simply make use of it for our needs, we are nevertheless also being used by it in its
animistic besideness to us. Such besideness makes a claim on our being and thus brings
us inside it where it serves as a point of origin. Again, this split articulates the
opposition between (subject-centered) instrumental and (object-centered) non-
instrumental uses of language. "We all see words: signs of a language we live inside of.
& yet these words seem exterior to us—we see them, projections of our desires, and
act, often enough, out of a sense of their demands" (Content's Dream 266).

One of the dangers in this sort of seeing is for Bernstein the possibility that the
material reciprocity of vision between seer and seen will be eliminated in favor of the
subject’s "seeing through" words and terms. Along the way, the palpability of terms
will be lost to metaphysics: "Weiner's writing is a chronicle of a mind coming to terms
with itself, quite literally: for the terms are, in fact, made visible. We all see words, but
it is our usual practice to see through them. Weiner has focused her gaze not through,
not beyond, but onto" (Content's Dream 270). If we are never disabused of the
metaphysics of language, metaphysics that offer a mere partial understanding of
language, we risk losing the truth of language’s besideness to us, that its strangeness is
nevertheless a point of origin.

In citational terms, this disrespect for language’s objecthood amounts to
refusing to grant the cited material any real integrity or status, as is typical in the
standard uses to which citation is put: illustration, ornamentation and allusion. In the
first case (citation as illustration), the cited material does occupy space in the main
body of the work, but its objecthood is lost in its subservience to the principle,
argument or statement that it merely describes. In the second case of citation as ornamentation, the cited material is given objecthood but marginalized as epigraph, note or footnote. In the final situation (citation as allusion), the cited material is abstracted from its context to fit the demands of the citing text.

Such dematerialization and marginalization of the cited language dims the vision of words in what Bernstein has termed amblyopia, “a medical term for reduction or dimming of vision in the absence of apparent pathology” (A Poetics 184), as Tom Becket put it in a 1987 interview with Bernstein. Bernstein uses the term as an “ethico-cultural metaphor” in which our relation to language is rendered problematic by censoring the material basis of language, the ‘bodily rootedness’ of it:

... this dimming of vision (what I’ve called “sight”) is something like hysterical, imaginary, since a task of poetry is to make audible (tangible but not necessarily graspable) those dimensions of the real that cannot be heard as much as to imagine new reals that never before existed. Perhaps this amounts to the same thing. (A Poetics 184)

Here, Bernstein is at pains both to note the effect of such vision to dematerialize and/or marginalize the materiality of language. He shows that “new reals” are not so much created out of nothing, but rather are cited reals, those that are “unearthed.” In Heideggerian fashion, Bernstein asks “could it be that language is as much a part of the earth as of the world? And that this is what is censored? That the tools we use to construct our worlds belong to the earth and so continuously (re)inscribe our material and spiritual communion with it?” (A Poetics 184) As tonic to this amblyopia, Bernstein proposes instead an “ambi-opia,” or a “multi-level seeing, which is to say, ...

vision repossessed.” This vision does not dematerialize or marginalize the “bodily rootedness of language,” but rather envisages both the origin of and departure from language simultaneously.

Poetic Amblyopia

One of Bernstein’s longer poems from the Sophist collection is similarly entitled “Amblyopia” and is indeed the source for Becket and Bernstein’s discussion in the interview. This five hundred-odd line poem resonates with the materialist themes about language Bernstein treats in the problem of “sighting” and citing it. The poem generally discusses the split between body and spirit that, in Bernstein’s view, helps to plague language use and social life. This split is reflected in such dimmed vision, where a radical split between subject and object occasions even moral problems. When the two are partitioned from each other absolutely, subjecthood threatens to overwhelm the life of objects.

The poem’s beginning lines, for example, offer situations in which bodies are divorced from souls or spirits, narrating an oblique tale of a “moral dwarf”: “He was a moral dwarf in a body as / solid as ice. Everywhere he looked / he felt fear and / evasion” (The Sophist 112). The body seems strong, but frozen and inflexible, and

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certainly capable of melting. These lines come off sounding like a nursery rhyme, but here both the nursery rhyme’s comic and pointed nature are blunted with Bernstein’s explicitly moralistic tone and paratactic composition.

The next several lines apparently move away from the moral dwarf, yet the reader is still put in the position of imagining that the contiguity of the two moments is no accident:

\[\ldots No \text{ notice}\]
\[\text{no location bore any}\]
\[\text{resemblance to the true}\]
\[\text{form of these cinders:}\]
\[\text{intransigence, pestering. It}\]
\[\text{was the logic of}\]
\[\text{insurgence, a stone door}\]
\[\text{opening onto a dirt}\]
\[\text{floor. } (The \text{ Sophist 112})\]

The rhyming, elemental imagery at the end of the passage ("stone door," "dirt floor") seemingly connects with the ice of the first few lines and continues to frame the discussion of troubled bodies.

But what do we make of “No notice / no location bore any / resemblance to the true / form of these cinders?” One could argue that the elemental, bodily imagery continues in the “true / form of these cinders,” implying dematerialization, an “insurgence” against the stone and dirt. Or, the imagery could imply that smaller atomistic elements constitute the buildings of civilization, thereby again falsifying the conceit of humanistic, \emph{ex nihilo} creation. In that sense, then, the “opening onto a dirt / floor” of “a stone door,” a scene that evokes a technologically backwater age, could evince an “insurgent” contrast.

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Such concerns come even more to the foreground several lines later when the speaker states of the “moral dwarf,” in a philosophical tone,

The physical
present, he would say
to himself, is unrelated to the
physical afterthought (*The Sophist* 112),

Even what the dwarf perceives as physical is divided absolutely between object and subject. Immediately after,

Towns
steamed in the
light: a glimmer
of the ghosts of the people who had lived there (*The Sophist* 112).

This ethereal scene filled with “steam” and “glimmer / of the ghosts” seems a stark contrast with the solid, elemental forms of ice, stone and dirt the poem mentions earlier. It further accentuates the disturbed relation between body and soul the poem is articulating, which is further explored just afterward when we find that a disembodied

Personality is barbarity
so we eat at each other
with waxing spirits when
all the time we are on the wane. (*The Sophist* 113)

These lines present yet another scenario in which body and spirit, concrete and abstract, are out of harmony or balance. Ironically our “barbarity” comes as the result of the “spirit[‘s]” or “personality[‘s]” superseding physical being in a manner radically foreign to it, by “eat[ing],” ultimately creating a situation in which our whole being (“we”) is “on the wane.” Such a problem is even marked by the passage’s rhythms, each line
understressed and ending unstressed. Similarly, the “Heart,” is a kind of generic, 
inauthentic source for emotion, laughably “a steel brace that men / use to erect their 
sagging spirits” (The Sophist 113).

Still, Bernstein warns, a split subjecthood defines us, rendering impossible any 
absolute identity of body and spirit: “I am not I because my / sister has stolen a / pear 
and I have tasted of / its pit” (The Sophist 113). This Edenic parody not simply rejects 
(seemingly) the Christian doctrine of original sin, but indicates that positing an 
originary unity of body and spirit is mere fantasy. Rather, this split is deeply formative 
of our subjectivity. The unanswered question is thus how do we manage this split 
subjecthood. Will spirit overwhelm body? Will the split between body and spirit be 
intensified to the point of Jekyll-Hyde schizophrenia? Or, can the two be balanced in 
productive tension, the one not lost to the other?

These concerns about the relation between body and spirit are echoed 
throughout “Amblyopia” in its treatment of terms related to perception. For instance, 
in a quotation later in the poem, “Perception does not merely serve / to confirm 
preexisting assumptions, but / to provide orgasms with new information” (The Sophist 
125). As do several other passages in the poem, this one sounds like the institutional 
writing of experts, but of course with one obvious and important slippage. Where we 
would expect the term “organism” that could be “provide[d] . . . with new / 
information,” instead Bernstein has inserted a near homonym, “orgasms” (a Freudian 
slip if there ever was one). This has the effect of introducing a stark, if humorous, rift 
in the otherwise seamless theory of perception articulated here.
An interruption of this sort is especially important in this context since the theory of perception presented here is baldly abstract and is presented (almost) purely in an instrumental form of discourse. In correspondence with the latter point, the theory articulates the presence of an infinite subject, for whom all sensory data exist, suggesting the primacy of the human over language and representation, instead of offering a consciousness based on the physical. Perception, in this scheme, gives nothing truly new as it merely “confirm[s] preexisting assumptions,” offering only “new information” to that same superseding consciousness. The interruption of “orgasm,” however, renders ironic this abstract depiction of perception, bringing home its basis in the body rather than in the generic organism.

Bernstein’s complication of instrumental writing is seconded by the very fact that the passage is (presented as) a quotation that doesn’t easily serve the end of illustration or ornamentation. Quotations in contexts like these in themselves undermine the abstract theory and language seemingly contained within them. In this way, words and citations are to be sighted (or “cited”) rather than seen through.

Finally, Bernstein’s treatment of movies (“Frames of Reference”) adds another possibility for the problem of language and citationality. Over against the possibility that words may undesirably be “seen through” rather than “sighted,” is the possibility that media may find other ways of generating Cartesian subjectivity. This is done through the spectacle, in which the viewer is permitted the implicit fantasy of consuming images, images whose explicit function is to thrill. Filmic spectacle, in Bernstein’s estimation, deeply affirms the Cartesian split between self and world that he
will argue leads to the same problem of missing the medium, that is, in failing to see how media fashion their images: "Films put me in an ontological position of a subject, giving sway to the Cartesian split between my subjectivity and the externality of a world which exists without me" (Content's Dream 98-99). So, if self and world, subject and object, lose either their distinction or their fundamental reciprocity, language collapses into inert objectification disguised as spectacle. As movies "spectacularize" the world, they "totalize" it for us, enabling us to get a handle on it, on our own immersion in it. Subduing the truth of our being-in-the-world, and being overcome by the world, is not only exhilarating but liberating (or shall I say, gives the illusion of liberating—what else could it do?) from the chains of insideness. (Content's Dream 113)

So, while it must be registered that language is necessarily "beside" us, for our uses and departures, conscious or unconscious, we cannot forget that we remain "chained" "inside" it as well, as it serves as our point of origin.

Sounding and Citation

If Bernstein's "sighting" attends to one side of the medium-specific, material duplicity of poetry and writing, then his "sounding" attends to the other, recalling less the spatial organization and graphic nature of the former and more a temporal
succession of sounds. More important, however, is the sense in which “sounding,” instead of appealing to the “besideness” of “sighted” language, rather informs us of our embeddedness in language, our being “chained” inside it.

As Bernstein establishes a link between “sighting” and citation, he will likewise form one between “sounding” and citation. This much is evident in Bernstein’s early essay on Cavell’s compositional style. Again, Bernstein is at pains here to point out that Cavell’s essays are structured more along the lines of “ordering and arrangement” than “exposition.”

His style, accordingly, is not really deductive and expository—although it is filled with arguments—as much as *invocative*. Whatever answer, what authority, he provides comes not from argument but from *sounding* the words to see what they tell, to make their resonances tangible, and, specifically, with the realization that we literally make the world come into being by giving voice to it, by our (re)calls. (*Content’s Dream* 167: my italics)

The “invocative” logic of Cavell’s composition is connected to the collage ethos Bernstein attributes to Cavell earlier in the paragraph: “Cavell’s use of texts relates to the use of collage and the use of prior texts, of pervasively citational language. . .” (*Content’s Dream* 166). According to Bernstein, Language’s “chains of insideness” ensure that, in the first instance, reality will be compositional. And in “sounding the words to see what they tell,” Bernstein’s Cavell displays his primary investigation into language use, rather than semantics.

At the very end of the paragraph, Bernstein quotes some lines from Robert Creeley (“*words, words / as if all / worlds were there*—Robert Creeley, ‘A Token” “*Content’s Dream* 167).” In another essay, Bernstein shows how Creeley similarly
exhibits a link between sounding language and citation. In “Hearing ‘Here’: Robert Creeley’s Poetics of Duration,” Bernstein explicitly draws a connection between the emphasis on sound in Creeley’s work and Creeley’s citationality. First, Bernstein is quick to distinguish Creeley’s citationality from any superficial commitment a writer might make to reproducing the words of others. Here—and Bernstein could be thinking of his own writing as well—Creeley “has a funny way of making it seem like he’s citing, and in turn literalizing clichés, when in fact he’s manufacturing the sensation of hearing clichés out of word combinations not otherwise heard that way” (Content’s Dream 302). This citational commitment is more extreme than simply parroting the talk of others; it penetrates down to “individual words” as well as “sentences and phrases.” “The citational process is not primarily intended to call attention to the ‘way’ something is said—say its dialect or point-of-view—but to the sound as physical duration, as sequence of syllables.” Creeley’s use of off-rhymes, “marvelously moronic at times, . . . bring to conscious ear the sound of the words as musical” (Content’s Dream 303).

Indeed, “sounding” is one of Bernstein’s favorite terms, not simply in its relation to citation, but generally so, much more so than “sighting” is. Again, the term clearly aids Bernstein in his tendency to try to recoup the non-instrumentality of language, in his on-going rejection of abstraction and metaphysics as they generally indicate an instrumental view of language. These rejections of abstraction and metaphysics play themselves out in precisely the ways Bernstein suggests here for

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22 Like Hannah Weiner’s writing, Creeley’s citationality in this sense is also best demonstrated in his journal-text, in “A Day Book.” This can be connected to the personal writings in Bernstein’s serial essays.
Cavell and Creeley. The citational, in their view, brings us into contact not so much with language's brute strangeness and our departures from it (as in the case of "sighting") but rather with the mysterious significance of its ordinaryness. In this way, sounding the language testifies to the possibilities of language, which in turn delimit human possibility. It is to this extent that we remain forever inside language as much as we do beside its animistic objecthood.

Bernstein uses “sounding” in certain significant areas to articulate his skepticism of metaphysics. In a revision of an adage already stressing the anti-metaphysical understanding of language—Williams’ “No ideas but in things”—Bernstein specifies, “No ideas but in sound” in a provocatively entitled essay, “Living Tissue / Dead Ideas” (1984). With this revision, Bernstein further brings home the medium of poetry to concreteness. Likewise, in his cryptic “preface” to Content’s Dream, Bernstein revises an excessively abstract statement, “the gossamer wings of thought,” into “I would have said bats’ waves of sound” (Content’s Dream 9-10). In the process, Bernstein does three things: (1) he lends an actual body to the wings (“bats”); (2) he transforms the disembodied, ethereal “gossamer wings” to physical “waves of sound”; and (3) he permits the latter term, “sound,” once more to replace an abstraction (“thought”) with concreteness.

As poetic writing maximizes the use of the anti-metaphysical effects of “sounding language,” “sounding” in this way becomes the form of tapping into all linguistic possibility. Time and again, Bernstein will stress the importance of the “possibility” for what language can do when words are sounded, “to see what they
reveal." This attitude is opposed to one in which words are manipulated by a consciousness allegedly antecedent to them, which would then function as an excessive and unpoetic departure from the words themselves. Bernstein notes that when language, the “membrane through which we perceive,” language, “is sounded, the possibilities of its structure [are] heard” (Content’s Dream 123). Elsewhere, to “sound the language” is to “reveal its meanings” (Content’s Dream 74).

These linguistic possibilities are derived from outside the self, but such possibilities nevertheless form the basis of human possibility, the way in which we are “inside” language. “Sound,” for Bernstein, is very much our home, lacking so much of the distance and estrangement of “sighting,” suggesting a level of intimacy to which sighting cannot lay claim. Such citational sounding—and the particular non-instrumental view of language it presupposes—have profound implications for expression and communication. In his introduction to the “Language Sampler” of the Paris Review of 1982, Bernstein notes that “[t]here are no terminal points (me → you) in a sounding of language from the inside, in which the dwelling is already/always given” (Content’s Dream 239). The “givenness of language,” or its general citationality, provides a certain “dwelling,” an “inside” that serves at once as the frame and point of departure for communication and expression.

Bernstein’s remarks here, concerning language as both a sounding and as a dwelling place, bear a striking similarity to the later writings of German philosopher Martin Heidegger. More generally, Heidegger’s own understanding of language and poetry deeply resembles Bernstein’s and further charges the citationality of sounding
and dwelling in Bernstein. First, Heidegger notes “the true relation of dominance between language and man,” in order to reveal the precedence of language to which man must “listen” first in order to speak at all (Poetry 216). “It is [strictly] language that speaks. Man just speaks when, and only when, he responds to language by listening to its appeal” (Poetry 216). The relation between man and language becomes “inverted” when “man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man” (Poetry 215).

Further, this listening of which Heidegger speaks is linked with poetry, “an ever more painstaking listening” than that which commonly occurs when one speaks:

But the responding in which man authentically listens to the appeal of language is that which speaks in the element of poetry. The more poetic a poet is—the freer (that is, the more open and ready for the unforeseen) his saying—the greater is the purity with which he submits what he says to an ever more painstaking listening. . . . (Poetry 216)

Such a poet-speaker is diametrically opposed to the speaker who treats language as a vehicle for “the mere propositional statement that is dealt with solely in regard to its correctness or incorrectness” (Poetry 216).

Heidegger’s remarks on poetry as the medium for this authentic speaking occur in his essay on Hölderlin, “. . . Poetically Man Dwells . . . ,” where the philosopher also seeks to establish that poetry is a sort of “dwelling” that occurs when language is treated more on its own terms than is commonly done. Regarding the first issue, the connection between poetry and dwelling, Heidegger first disclaims that Hölderlin’s apparently casual linkage of “poetry” and “dwelling,” in the phrase “poetically man
dwellings,” is not meant in the forms the two terms are typically understood. Hölderlin’s statement speaks of man’s dwelling. It does not describe today’s dwelling conditions. Above all, it does not assert that to dwell means to occupy a house, a dwelling place. Nor does it say that the poetic exhausts itself in an unreal play of poetic imagination. . . . Perhaps the two can bear with each other. This is not all. Perhaps one even bears the other in such a way that dwelling rests on the poetic. If this is indeed what we suppose, then we are required to think of dwelling and poetry in terms of their essential nature . . . When Holderlin speaks of dwelling, he has before his eyes the basic character of human existence. (Poetry 214-215)

The “basic character of human existence” for Heidegger is man’s response to language. Since poetry is what “first causes dwelling to be dwelling,” poetry’s basic stuff, language, must also be at issue.

But where do we humans get our information about the nature of dwelling and poetry? Where does man generally get the claim to arrive at the nature of something? Man can make such a claim only where he receives it. He receives it from the telling of language. Of course, only when and only as long as he respects language’s own nature. (Poetry 215)

Most modern speech, according to Heidegger, does not respect language’s own nature, for “there rages round the earth an unbridled yet clever talking, writing, and broadcasting of spoken words” (Poetry 215). Heidegger’s treatment of language as the basic stuff of poetry, which in turn “really lets us dwell,” supports Bernstein’s understanding of citationality as a sounding of given language, language which, despite arriving from outside the self, forms the basis for intimacy and “dwelling.”
The paradoxical intimacy of this givenness of language is further intensified as Bernstein links citationality to the body: “It is the touch of others that is the givenness of language. So writing could be such ‘finishing touches,’ not telling another what she or he does not know but a resonating (articulating) of the space in which both are enwrapped (enraptured)” (Content’s Dream 243). That citationality in literature is likened to the body’s having been touched by others forms for Bernstein an “erotics of reading” that calls to mind Roland Barthes’s The Pleasure of the Text. In both Barthes and Bernstein, the forces that delay and obstruct fulfillment in writing play an essential role in producing and intensifying fulfillment. 23

In the fascinating tract-poem, Artifice of Absorption, Bernstein discourses on two terms that play an important role in the work of the famous art critic, Michael Fried—“absorption” and “theatricality.” 24 For Bernstein—who would rather make use of the term “anti-absorption” for Fried’s “theatricality”—citation functions again as a paratactic rupture in composition. Anti-absorptive forces such as citation seemingly frustrate our access to the text but paradoxically also serve as the precondition for such access. In Bernstein’s case, citation introduces an impediment to our common reading practices, inevitably causing readers to pause before reaching an end, or constructing one for themselves.

The sexual analogy
seems inescapable: an interruptiveness
that intensifies & prolongs desire, a postponement
that finds in delay a more sustaining pleasure &

presence. That is, and [sic] erotics of reading &
writing, extending from Barthes's description
of the pleasures of the text (which is an erotics
of absorption). . . . (Artifice 52)

Such erotic delay is found within the mechanics of this quotation itself, where the line
breaks and the uses of the ampersands manage for the reader an awareness in the poem
of its own semantics and poetics. Further, these "connectives"—as well as the
curiously placed conjunction "and" near the middle of the passage (where there should
be an "an")—play on the very paradox of connective, which separates as it unites.
Bernstein's "absorptive" text of fulfillment is thus undergirded by its inevitable
"theatricality."

Shortly after this passage in Bernstein's Artifice of Absorption, Bernstein
discusses French philosopher Georges Bataille's erotics of reading, particularly the
latter's theory of transgression, a

[. . .] paradigm
case of using anti-absorptive (socially disruptive,
anticonventional) techniques for absorptive
(erosic) ends" (Artifice 52).

This would articulate Bernstein's ultimate strategy in theorizing and practicing citation,
a condition in which language's duplicitous nature, sound and sense, remains always in
productive tension.

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25 See the discussion on Plato's treatment of erotics chapter five below.
26 This connective paradox is not unlike the paradox both of citation and modernism.
Citation illustrates as it displaces, concretizes as it abstracts, just as modernism turns away from and
toward history.
Performance: Sighting and Sounding

In another significant essay, Bernstein discusses both sighting and sounding at the same time to define the performativite essence of poetry and thus the performativite essence of citationality. This discussion chimes with his understanding of the "theatricality" of language which makes us, as readers, aware of the nature and process of reading, precisely to intensify the experience. In an essay on Jackson Mac Low, "Jackson at Home"—the title of which echoes the Heideggerian thesis about language as dwelling place—Bernstein connects Mac Low's citational, documentary writing procedure with performance. A "natural historian of language," Mac Low has suggested that his texts are scores whose primary realization comes in performance (an idea interestingly related to his notion of the text as documentation). Performance actualizing the possibilities inherent in the text by grounding it (embodying it) expressively in a sounding or voicing. So that the text only comes alive in an active reading of it (in a performance, or, silently, by a reader). (Content's Dream 255)²⁷

Reading Mac Low is similar to "reading the proof of a theorem or looking at quotations of odd colloquialisms or puzzling over unfamiliar pictographic or hieroglyphic writing forms." This "sounding or voicing" involved in such composition furthermore exhibits a "citational quality [in] the writing."

But the visual side of performance is not, according to Bernstein, lost in Mac Low's composition. That Mac Low "wants us to both hear and look at wordness in ways that don't let the language dissolve into an experience just of its 'content' is

evident in the strong visual dimension of much of his work” (Content’s Dream 255-6). In this way, readers must attend as much to the “graphic look” of the text as to its “verbal meaning” (Content’s Dream 256).

Mac Low’s work for Bernstein reaches an ideal that Bernstein will implicitly claim as a goal for his own writing. In this respect, Bernstein’s work can produce in the reader a consciousness simultaneously aware of both the instrumental and non-instrumental dimensions of the writing. Bernstein lauds Mac Low for providing a “model” by which “the seams” of the work are seen “at the same time as experiencing their product: [to] watch the spell being created without losing sight of the machinic principles through which it is engendered” (Content’s Dream 256).

Despite their apparent difference of material, sighting and sounding have much in common. They do seem inflected along the Cavellian lines that Bernstein indicates, sighting implying the “besideness” of language to us, sounding implying our “insideness” in language. But sighting and sounding both provide the basis for semantic and human possibility. Sighting the physical strangeness of language forces us to repudiate continuity, but sounding forces us to acknowledge our intimacy with language. But both, to varying extents, arise out of Bernstein’s need to bring to the fore the non-instrumental features of language.

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28 See Melville, Philosophy 3-33.
A Few Qualms

It may well be objected that Bernstein's extreme insistence of the non-instrumental side of language, the faith he has in the "materiality" of the signifier common to Language poetry, is defensive and too insistent to be accepted on its face. If, as his Heideggerian commitments suggest, one of Bernstein's essential goals in writing is to re-invigorate language that has become lifeless through excessive instrumental use, one might wonder whether stressing so much the non-instrumental would solve the basic problem. In other words, is Bernstein's project in this respect a reaction formation, a counter phobic strategy designed to avoid a problem that is taken too seriously as the source for a host of other problems? Even though language use was no doubt far different for those first uses of language than it is for people today, language was even for such cave dwellers technology, something engineered by humans for certain pragmatic purposes. This implies that, however enigmatic or rooted in the body material language use was then, it was still contaminated with instrumental use. It seems that this issue must be acknowledged as much as Bernstein's alternative observation, accurate and incisive as it is, that however much language is employed for instrumental purposes, it remains thingly.

Bernstein's anti-humanism in this respect strikes a particular post-structuralist chord, despite Bernstein's move to a historically more opportune period of language use. This is so also despite Bernstein's "Thought's Measure," in which Bernstein
embraces Wittgenstein over Derrida, because Bernstein’s apparent embrace of “language as its use” does not seem entirely clear. As mentioned earlier, Bernstein wishes to embrace the material component of language and Wittgensteinian language use. But for Wittgenstein, language, when viewed through the lens of usage, remains mysterious and opaque, despite the great degree to which language is employed instrumentally. In this respect Wittgenstein tends to fade from Bernstein’s poetic purview. Alternatively, Bernstein’s stress on the materiality of the signifier is so insistent that, in his poetic practice, it frequently becomes abstracted into a sign rather than remaining an object. All too often, Bernstein’s poems may be read as mere illustrations of his essays, which casts in doubt his use of citation for the ends of displacement over illustration. This may be one reason Bernstein’s essays, and the essays of the Language poets in general, are more widely read than their poems, however much Bernstein and others will deny any essential difference between poetry and prose. Ironically, Bernstein’s essays are more intriguing than his poems because of his unique blend of referential, instrumental language use and more poetic, non-instrumental language use. Frequently, in Bernstein’s essays, one admires the works because he need not take his extreme attitude about non-instrumental writing completely seriously.

Issues along these lines surface in Bernstein’s strange remarks on Pound in “Three or Four.” For Bernstein, Pound is a difficult figure, one to whom Bernstein is no doubt attracted because of Pound’s earth shattering innovations in poetics. On the other hand, Pound is an arch enemy of Bernstein because of Pound’s fascist politics.

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29 See Erickson, Fate.
There could be no deeper split for someone like Bernstein who imagines his own poetics and politics as reinforcing each other. In corroboration, Bernstein must note that there is nothing truly fascistic about Pound’s poetics. Nevertheless, Bernstein tries to find fault with Pound’s poetics, because Bernstein has trouble imagining how one person could produce such good and evil. In Bernstein’s view, Pound’s “designing a garden” in the *Cantos* rather than “making a path” bears the earmarks of elitist system building (*A Poetics* 123). Although Bernstein cannot quite connect such system building with faulty instrumental language use (at least in Pound’s case), Bernstein’s criticism of Pound on this ground is incomplete for the same reasons that his critique of instrumental language use is incomplete. Bernstein has trouble imagining a system that is nevertheless at the same time undergirded by indeterminacy, since Pound’s *Cantos* are hardly systematic in any normative sense. Probably Bernstein’s partisan commitments, push him severely in one direction, of embracing the non-instrumental side of language, rather than another, one that would, less puritanically, accept the corruption of language and ultimately of citation.

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30 See Charles Bernstein, “Reading Pound,” online posting, POETICS, 15 June 2001 <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/Bernstein/poundber.html>: “Pound’s work contradicts his fascism.” Also see Bernstein, “Pounding Fascism,” *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992): “[T]he success of *The Cantos* is that its coherence is of a kind totally different than Pound desired or could—in his more rigid moments—accept. For the coherence of the ‘hyperspace’ of Pound’s modernist collage is not a predetermined Truth of a pan-cultural elitism but a product of a compositionally decentered multiculturalism” (123).

31 Perhaps Ashbery has the antidote to this attitude, that “all kinds of things can and must exist side by side at any given moment” (*Reported Sightings* 244).

32 There are, however, exceptions to this oversimplified critique of Bernstein’s, most notably *Artifice of Absorption* and (less directly) the serial essays. But Bernstein seems to have difficulty embracing the post-modern situation of universal contamination he would seem to champion.
Perhaps embracing fully the postmodern condition of hybridity is impossible for Bernstein, because doing so would suggest a weakening of the political commitments in which Bernstein is invested. As his statements of politics constantly stress—and this position seems general to Language poetry—making use of the non-instrumental features of language is politically (not just aesthetically) radical. This is ironic given Bernstein’s essentially Heideggerian poetics and is probably the weakest element of Bernstein’s (and Language poetry’s) programme, leading one critic to label the critique of ideology inherent to Language poetry “self-defeating” (Erickson 176-77). It becomes highly difficult to imagine Language writings inspiring any real political solidarity outside of the highly specialized and cerebral coterie of the Language poets themselves. Even worse, the non-instrumental use of language has been most markedly used by electronic media and high tech advertising, the latter of which would form precisely the sort of complicity Bernstein would like to avoid (Erickson 176).

Bernstein’s inordinate stress on the non-instrumental features of language is seconded by his inordinate need to be or appear progressive or left wing, and Pound remains a problem for him even though Pound’s fascism was both abstract and effectively harmless. (Perloff, “Pound & Fascism”).

If Bernstein’s politics seem incoherent, what does the final analysis of his poetics reveal? It seems that Bernstein is most effective as a poet and essayist when he either adulterates his puritanical commitments, as in Artifice of Absorption, or acts

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34 Another element of Bernstein’s puritanism is that his politics must somehow be aligned with his poetics. See Ashbery’s attitude about politics above.
somewhat against the grain of what he prescribes, as in the serial essays. This generally
means finding some new and productive “tension,” as Jon Erickson puts it, between
mutually contradictory forces like figure and ground, or here between the instrumental
and non-instrumental, the referential and non-referential, and the “material” signifier
and abstracted signified (8).

Such is the aim of Compagnon’s definition of citation in which contradictory
elements mingle, between l’ênoncé répété and l’enonciation répétant. Bernstein’s
citational poetic does manage such productive tension at times, even if it frequently tips
too often toward displacement rather than illustration. Nevertheless, for our purposes
Bernstein surely represents the outer limits of citational poetics, a subject to which I
will return in this paper’s last chapter.

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35 See Marjorie Perloff, “Pound and Fascism,” POETICS (online posting: June 15, 2001)
<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/perloffpound.html>.
CHAPTER 4

CITATION AND ARTIFICE IN ASHERBY’S EARLY POETRY

Ashbery’s poetry shows marked signs of his preoccupation with the avant-garde visual arts, particularly his early poetry. Further, these signs condition the way in which citation helps to drive his poetics. In an obvious sense, Ashbery’s preoccupation with the visual arts is present when he explicitly, or very nearly so, engages the topic of painting in his poems. Such is the case with poems like “The Painter,” “The Instruction Manual,” “The Skaters,” and famously, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” the last of which a meditation on Parmigianino’s baroque masterpiece. More important, however, is the degree to which Ashbery was driven to experiment with all manner of poetic artifice. If the avant-garde visual arts were conditioned by the drive to reduce subject matter to the medium itself and its disciplinary mechanisms, then the same could be said of poetry. Thus, the basis for

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Ashbery’s extensive use of villanelles, pantoums, sonnets and sestinas in his first volume, *Some Trees* (1956), reveals indirectly Ashbery’s deep-held interest in the avant-garde visual arts.

But Ashbery was to be more direct in attempting to accomplish in poetry the same effects as those accomplished in the dada and surrealist art he admired. *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) showed Ashbery making poems from cut-up fragments of magazines and children’s books that approximated the avant-garde gaming of dada and surrealism. However, such experimentation produced a slightness in Ashbery’s writing, one that he was quick to abandon. Ironically, the more directly and specifically Ashbery’s interest in the avant-garde visual arts made its present felt in his poems—in treating words much as a modernist painter might treat paint—the less likely his writing was to exude the faith in both competing sides of citation that his mature work generally exhibits. In the end, Ashbery was to bring his sense of poetic artifice and the avant-garde into harmony with one important element inherent to poetry but not so much to visual art—meaning. This meaning inevitably follows on the heels of the material qualities of language, language of course that is the basic stuff of poetry.

As a result, Ashbery returned to meaning in *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), to generate the very hybridity and successful corruption for which he had lauded surrealism. Surrealism itself had commingled both the abstract tendencies in modern art—which treated the medium of art as its principal subject matter—and the “literary”
qualities common to pre-modern painting. Even in *Rivers and Mountains*, however, meaning is everywhere shifting and unstable. Nevertheless, by this point, Ashbery was able to come into his own both as a poet and as a poet who wanted to realize in poetry something analogous to the powerful changes that had occurred and were occurring in the avant-garde visual arts, but without sacrificing the inherent powers of poetry in the process.

It is in the midst of these transformations that Ashbery’s use of citation is made manifest, for in both experimenting with poetic artifice and avant-garde gaming, Ashbery also explored the capacity of citation to displace the citing text. And, in acknowledging the capacity of language to make meaning, Ashbery explored, but in a very new way, the capacity of citations to illustrate and explain. Both of these tendencies are made especially apparent in “The Skaters” from *Rivers and Mountains*, among the best examples of Ashbery’s citationality at work. In that poem, all of the relevant dimensions of Ashbery’s poetic discussed thus far—poetic artifice, avant-garde painting, citation as both illustration and displacement—are brought to bear.

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2 Greenberg argues that the very same quality shows the inadequacy of surrealism. See “Surrealist Painting,” *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, John O’Brien, ed., vol. 1 (Chicago: U of
Temptations and Trappings: *Some Trees*

*Some Trees*, Ashbery's first collection of poems, especially shows his concern both with the visual arts and with poetic artifice. "The Painter" is an obvious instance of each interest, both because its subject matter involves painting and because the poem is presented in the overdetermined form of the sestina. Ashbery's artifice, however, is already implicated in a dialectic with its opposite, namely nature, that prefigures Ashbery's commitment to the divided nature of citation. So while Ashbery has included many artificial and elaborate poetic forms in *Some Trees* such as the sestina, Ashbery has also done so to note how it is that nature, or rather the power of nature, oddly becomes stronger when intermingled with artifice. In a review of Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*, what Ashbery had in mind became apparent: "to do what can't be done, to create a counterfeit of reality more real than reality" (qtd. in Lehman 330). This intermingling, too, will prefigure the intermingling in Ashbery of both contrary sides of citation.

The nascent citationality of *Some Trees* is further present in the poems when various voices, usually two, meet and struggle with one another, a struggle that is itself part of a larger and more general play on dichotomies in the collection. Many of the poems in *Some Trees* set up a relationship between two forces or voices that compete with one another, always failing to sustain a relation of symmetry, even as each is presented as legitimate to the struggle. This much is evident in one of the earliest poems Ashbery ever wrote, "The Painter," with its conflict between the
painter, who embodies some probably oversimplified version of the avant-garde, and the people in the buildings, who mock the painter for trying to make painting less instrumental and more material. "Eclogue," for instance, offers a dialogue between two shepherds who speak at cross purposes. "A Boy," is a poem about communication and includes the voice of a father and son talking. "Glazunoviana" is a two-stanza poem asymmetrically arranged. The first half includes questions and the second half "answers" that recycle a few of the same terms as those in the first stanza ("bear," "window") but which provide no actual response or continuity with the first stanza. Many of the poems likewise consist of two stanzas, but with unequal line amounts.

Ashbery's "Illustration" is yet another significant poem in the collection with respect to art and citation. As its title suggests, the poem is implicated in the problem of representation that drives "The Painter." The poem's remarks on the dangers of illustration reveal the conventional trappings of citation in which the citation is subordinate absolutely to citing text. The poem also broaches the term "monument," which itself will likewise serve as an indication when an undesirable poetic or aesthetic is under attack. Both "The Painter" and "Illustration" present cautionary tales about aesthetic representation, each exhibiting, however, an opposite danger. "The Painter" exhibits the danger of abandoning traditional forms of representation; and "Illustration" exhibits the danger of embracing too much such traditional forms.

3 Terms like these ultimately lead to the problems Ashbery has with "explanation" in "The Skaters." See below.
One final poem from the collection, "The Portrait of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers," however, stands on its own as a successful early depiction of citationality at work. The poem both quotes some obscure words from Shakespeare and discusses the problems of representation that animate "The Painter" and "Illustration." In this respect, the poem prefigures a trait common in Ashbery's mature work: a merging of art with its discussion. Such a mixture reflects the divided nature of citation, both to stand for itself and to stand for the citing text.

"The Painter"

"The Painter" may easily be taken as an early statement of poetics Ashbery is offering his readers. On the one hand, the poem is, like "Poem" and "Pastoral" from Some Trees, a sestina, and so is linked with Ashbery's experiments with poetic form that constitute a significant portion of this first volume of poetry. On the other, Ashbery's fixation on painting is of course evident, drawing a connection with the avant-garde concerns that would so preoccupy his imagination from the mid fifties to the mid sixties, the decade he spent in Paris.

The poem confronts the reader with a clash of opposing theories of art or representation. There is what one might call the traditional school of representation, located in the poem's "buildings" and the artists who people them. And then there is

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4 See generally Jessica Prin, Art Discourse/Discourse in Art (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1991)
the sea, indicating what one might call the modernist school in favor of presenting to
the viewer or reader objects themselves, rather than symbols of them. Ashbery’s
painter wants to side with the modernist school, and it is important that Ashbery has
chosen the sea for the thing to be presented directly as art, for the sea, as the traditional
symbol of the unconscious, links the move with Ashbery’s deeply held interest in
surrealism. Of course, we might also link Ashbery’s painter’s need to offer up the sea
as art with the move to use citation, directly repeating the actual words of others (or of
offering up the illusion of such) rather than resorting to literary allusion, which
functions along more representational and symbolic lines.5

But Ashbery’s painter cannot quite have it his way and in fact self-destructs
when he attempts to leave the advice of those in the buildings entirely behind. This is
to underscore that, however much Ashbery’s courting the French avant-garde takes
him away from traditional forms of representation (and citation), Ashbery was never
to abandon absolutely the benefits of tradition and traditional, illustrative uses of
citation. This ambivalence is no doubt reflected in Ashbery’s need to create a poetic
that was responsive to the ingenuity of the French avant-garde. This is the deepest
way in which readers may understand what Ashbery means when he proclaims his
poems are hybrid. For Ashbery’s remark does not simply mean that we encounter, in
any given Ashbery poem, a number of competing rhetorical modes, but also that the
competing rhetorical modes are presented to us partly as things unto themselves and
partly as representational forces.

5 See generally Leonard Diepeveen, Changing Voices: The Modern Quoting Poem (Ann
Indeed, “The Painter”’s first line reveals the painter as existing in an ambivalent state. The painter is, “[s]itting between the sea and the buildings” (my emphasis). As we shall see with “Illustration”’s “monuments,” “buildings” in “The Painter” stand in for some undesired figural reality in stark opposition to the present, animated thing, which in “The Painter” is deemed “the sea.” This stock romantic topos, however, is blunted when one discovers that Ashbery has managed a way to assimilate this opposition to the concerns of modernism where Pound’s “direct treatment of the thing” holds sway. In this way, “monuments” and “buildings” are suspiciously figural where the sea is direct and luminous.

Although “buildings” is one of the six words Ashbery repeats in the poem in various ways as part of the overdetermined demands of the sestina form, it is also true that Ashbery has overwhelmingly chosen terms associated with painting, most of which concern the basic materials of painting: “portrait,” “subject,” brush” and “canvas.” (The only other term is “prayer.”) Still, however, this painter struggles with achieving some “direct treatment of the thing,” in Poundian words, for the struggle to do so is fraught with perils of various kinds. This painter, as the opening stanza indicates, is somewhat naïve. He is likened to “children [who] imagine a prayer / Is merely silence” (Some Trees 54) and hopes that the sea, his “subject,” will paint itself on the canvas, simply by virtue of the painter’s having encountered it directly.

6 The same is true of “nature” itself, especially in the collection’s title poem. Nature is given special status over against the monuments of civilizations.
The "people who lived in the buildings," however, "put him to work" in an effort, presumably, to help this poor painter.

... "Try using the brush
As a means to an end. Select, for a portrait
Something less angry and large, and more subject
To a painter's moods, or, perhaps, to a prayer." (Some Trees 54)

These important lines describe the opposition quite clearly. Of immediate interest is the sense in which the "people" of the buildings urge the painter toward a more traditional, representational aesthetic. In particular, "the brush" is no longer an object unto itself, a thing with a life of its own. It now becomes its opposite, "a means to an end," an indifferent tool. The passage also introduces a speaking voice into the poem, and in a general way indicates the roots of Ashbery's taste for citation.

Further, the people in the buildings stress the need for the painter to take a more active and willful role in painting, a suggestion that runs directly counter to Ashbery the art critic who is often valuing the "self-abnegation" of the artist, one much like the painter of the first stanza. Lastly, the people want the painter to take control of his "subject," which eliminates the sea as too "large" and "angry." Better would be a figure more subject / To a painter's moods, or, perhaps, to a prayer" (Some Trees 54). The painter, however, wants something else for his art: "How could he explain to them his prayer / That nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?" In this statement Ashbery's problematic romanticism reveals itself, because nature here is stressed at the expense of the representation of nature. But the painter also rejects the artist's personality as a genuine source for creation, favoring instead the "self-
abnegation" of the artist, resembling Eliot’s artist who has lost his personality in literary tradition. The romantic desire for nature to usurp the canvas thus becomes transformed into the modernist need to present the thing itself.

Ashbery’s “self-abnegation” seems also to be one manifestation of his surrealist need to access his dreams and unconscious as sources for art. If too much of the painter’s will were involved in manipulating and controlling his “subject,” then important unconscious insights might prevent him from making the best art possible. This idea is taken to its extreme in “The painter,” but the basic principle remains clear.

Imagine a painter crucified by his subject!
He provoked some artists leaning from the buildings
To malicious mirth: "We haven’t a prayer
Now, of putting ourselves on canvas,
Or getting the sea to sit for a portrait!"” (Some Trees 55)

The sarcasm of the people in the buildings is surprisingly well-placed by the poem’s end, because the painter is on a suicide course. This move could remark an ambivalence in Ashbery about his aesthetic commitments. Or, it could simply present two very partial sides to an argument that cannot easily be resolved. As the painter’s canvas is left white, are we still to respect the painter’s aesthetic? Is the painter’s canvas simply an instance of the modernist flat canvas?

Surely we cannot see the blank canvas as the direct example of the sort of art Ashbery is advocating here, simply because it cannot exist and leads to a kind of aesthetic destruction. At the same time, however, we realize the painter is trying out something different, something potentially worth paying attention to. This attempt of

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the painter's would be one of the senses in which we may understand Ashbery's citational writing, for the painter's subject in this poem may be understood as the prevailing forms of inherited language into which Ashbery is frequently tapping. Such diverse rhetorical modes, located in the unconscious, are imagined as things unto themselves. Further, Ashbery is there not to manipulate the differing rhetorics as examples to adduce some "message," but rather to lend greater independence to such elements.

"Illustration"

"Illustration"'s first line stresses some of the difficulties latent in Ashbery's inquiry into citation. "A novice was sitting on a cornice." The line introduces a parodic tone to the poem, a tone that will be maintained throughout a poem that reads as a kind of mock myth. The rhyming of the terms "novice" and "cornice" belies their deep opposition to one another. This "novice" plays matter to the cornice's spirit and so invokes Ashbery's theme of blending opposites in his writing. But, as we soon discover, this "novice" is, like the painter, both a suicide threat and a figure of ambivalence for Ashbery. Unlike the painter, however, the novice would like to avoid material reality, to accomplish a purely spiritual existence.

A novice was sitting on a cornice
High over the city. Angels

Combined their prayers with those
Of the police, begging her to come off it. (Some Trees 48)
These lines underscore the novice’s excessive commitment to spirit. The line and stanza break after “[a]ngels,” however, defeats the expectation that the novice’s apparent desires are redeeming, as the “[a]ngels” refuse her desires, just as the “police” do.

The novice’s desire are finally unmasked near the middle of the poem’s first section where we discover that this novice, after rejecting the “friendship” of one “lady” seems only able to accept symbolic offerings, “[f]or that the scene should be a ceremony / Was what she wanted.” Ashbery would seem to respect that aesthetic imperatives inhere in the novice’s desires, but again, the aesthetic imperatives that do so inhere are of an undesirable sort and seem tacitly linked to the novice’s excessive spirituality.

... “I desire
monuments,” she said. “I want to move

Figuratively, as waves caress
The thoughtless shore.” (Some Trees 48)

Unlike the painter’s sea, the novice’s sea is a mere figure, a representative of spiritual action.

The novice’s desire for “monuments” and her need to “move figuratively” would seem to damn her in Ashbery’s view, and fittingly, she reaches a sad end, one that she would not have anticipated.

With that [her last remark], the wind
Unpinned her bulky robes and naked

As a roc’s egg, she drifted softly downward
Out of the angels’ tenderness and the minds of men. (Some Trees 49)
The great irony is that her suicidal leap exiles her from precisely the places in which she wished to reside permanently. Her need for “ceremony,” “monuments” and figurativeness corresponds, in the poem, to her refusal to take things on their own terms or, in the words of Fairfield Porter that Ashbery was fond of quoting, to “respect . . . things be as they are” (Lehman 81). Her ultimate curse is the one of illustration, where she desires all too readily the abstractions of reality than reality itself.

This peculiar form of denial becomes the subject of discussion for the poem’s second half. The second section’s first lines reflect Ashbery’s own distrust of monuments, buildings and heroic statements of any sort that are untempered with a commitment to material reality.

Much that is beautiful must be discarded
So that we may resemble a taller

Impression of ourselves. Moths climb in the flame,
Alas, that wish only to be the flame. (Some Trees 49)

Apparently, the woman of the poem’s first section wishes for greater stature, a “taller impression” of herself in her desires for ceremony and monuments, desires that in the poem’s second section are debunked. Desires like these are unmasked as suicidal, like the moths who “climb in the flame / . . . that wish only to be the flame.” Such moths and, by extension, the woman of section one, “do not lessen our stature” with their self-destructive desires. Further, these suicidal cases like the ones mentioned in Ashbery’s “Illustration” miss out somehow on “much that is beautiful.” In letting things be as they are, that is, in citing them, beauty is maintained; conversely, in resorting to excessive figuration or “illustration,” beauty is lost.
The speaker is not as certain about the woman and her significance as this account suggests, however, for in the second section’s second half the speaker does note as alternative beauty the woman produces rather than embodies.

.... For that night, rockets sighed
Elegantly over the city, and there was feasting:

There is so much in that moment!
So many attitudes toward that flame .... (Some Trees 49)

Such indecision, however, is somewhat remedied by the poem’s end, as the woman, “of course, was only an effigy / Of indifference, a miracle / Not meant for us.” The last line in this passage reminds one of one of Kafka’s famous aphorisms, “There is hope, but not for us,” and like the Kafka statement, manages to draw a distinction about two ways of being and knowing. On the one hand, there is the figurative and monumental mode embodied by the “novice”; on the other, there is the citational attitude that lets things be as they are.

The irony of this bifurcation is that both sides of it are not mutually exclusive. Although Ashbery did not seem to realize this truth until Rivers and Mountains, “Illustration” allows the student of Ashbery the chance to glimpse a problem that he will explore further in The Tennis Court Oath and resolve in Rivers and Mountains, namely that one cannot obviate the signifying, metaphorical element of language in attempting to rehabilitate the long-lost aesthetic component of citation. Charles Bernstein struggles with this problem in different ways. It is for this reason that the two sections of “Illustration,” despite their seeming commitment to citation-as-ornamentation, nevertheless manage to illustrate each other, “in the interests,” as Ashbery has put it, “of a superior realism” (Reported Sightings 16).
"The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers"

In the "Picture" poem Ashbery manages to merge, for seemingly the first time, his avant-garde heritage and his need to mix various voices in any given poem without warning. Indeed the very title of this poem implies this advance, that underscores that the portrait of the artist in a *prospect* of flowers. The poem's epigraph from Pasternak about some "he" who was "spoilt from childhood by the *future*, which he mastered early and apparently without great difficulty" (*The Picture* [my italics] 18) also implies a forward-looking aspect of Ashbery's poetry, not simply because both title and epigraph emphasize childhood with all its attendant potential.

The poem's first section displays quite particularly both the blending of voices important in all of Ashbery's poetry and a quasi-surrealist juxtaposition.

Darkness falls like a wet sponge
And Dick gives Genevieve a swift punch
In the pajamas. "Aroint thee, witch."
Her tongue from previous ecstasy
Releases thought like little hats. (*Some Trees* 27)

The first line's comparison of a wet sponge with how darkness falls is a jarring one that takes some work in the reader before its apparent sense is felt. This is so mainly because an important connective is withheld. The line seems to imply that darkness falls the way a wet sponge falls, that is, heavily and with a thud. But until the reader supplies this connective the comparison is significant more for its lack of equivalence than any unseen connection between the two.

Another jarring juxtaposition occurs in the next few lines when "Dick gives Genevieve a swift punch," where but "in the pajamas," and there the enjambment
heightens the reader's sense of disjunction. Then, too, a voice is quoted, from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and we never truly know who is doing the quoting, and who is being addressed. Then, near the end of the first stanza, another comparison is introduced, notable more for its strange disjunctiveness than for any similarity. “Her [whose?] tongue from previous ecstasy / Releases thoughts like little hats.” Again, the question remains, as it does in the poem's first strange juxtaposition, whether thoughts are released as little hats are released or, simply, just as little hats are.

The polyphony of the poem continues in the next stanza with

“He clap'd me first during the eclipse.
Afterwards I noted his manner
Much altered. But he sending
At that time certain handsome jewels
I durst not seem to take offence.” *(Some Trees 27)*

This voice again comes out of the blue but we could attribute it to Genevieve whom Dick had earlier “punched / In the pajamas” and now, perhaps, has “clap'd [her] during the eclipse.” The diction is archaic and laden with romance conventions, but here the romance between Dick and Genevieve is unmasked as abusive. Dicks beats her, apparently feels guilty about it and then gives Genevieve jewels as apology; Genevieve is terrified with Dick's violence but notes his gift-apology as an example of his reformation and hopes things will get better. One notes that the homosexual Ashbery critiquing the rituals of heterosexual romantic love as concealing brutality.

As mentioned earlier, the poem's explicit orientation is towards the future, toward “prospects” and its title indicates this sense. This is further made evident in the poem's second section, a section, it should be noted, that abandons the multivocal surrealist collage play of the first section. The principal voice that speaks here
addresses some “children” who will ‘pass through” “these lives” “to be blessed.”
More promise seems to issue forth “from a whole world” where “music / Will sparkle
at the lips of many who are / Beloved” (Some Trees 28). Then, others, presumably
those less fortunate who are “dirty handmaidens / To some transparent witch”
nevertheless “will dream / Of a white hero’s subtle wooing”; and both will receive
“gifts,” from “time.” The stanza’s end doubles the first stanza’s violence, in its
presentation of romance (“a white hero’s subtle wooing”) as concealing a violent
underbelly, as the language of the following line suggests: “And time shall force a gift
on each.”

This evident prospective orientation in the poem prepares the reader for the
final stanza that surprisingly reverses such a future-directed poem. The reversal has
the effect of underscoring the citational nature of Ashbery’s writing. The poem’s third
section introduces a first-person speaker that presumably refers to the author
examining an old photograph of himself.

Yet I cannot escape the picture
Of my small self in that bank of flowers:
My head among the blazing phlox
Seemed a pale and gigantic fungus.
I had a hard stare, accepting
Everything, taking nothing,
As though the rolled-up figure might stink
As loud as stood the sick moment
The shutter clicked. Though I was wrong,
Still, as the loveliest feelings

Must soon find words, and these, yes,
Displace them, so I am not wrong
In calling this comic version of myself
The true one. For as change is horror,
Virtue is really stubbornness

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And only in the light of lost words
Can we imagine our rewards. (Some Trees 28-29)

Ashbery’s speaker is not who he expects to be in some grand future. Rather the present speaker “cannot escape the picture” from the past. His hopes and desires are less true than is the “comic version of [him]self,” which is the “true one.” The speaker draws a direct parallel between this situation and the realm of expression and communication, as “the loveliest of feelings / Must soon find words, and these, yes, /
Displace them.” Not only do words and images have a life in themselves but they also precede their meanings. In the same way does inherited language precede our own and hold us within its limits.

Emptying Out the Mind: The Tennis Court Oath

If Some Trees offers the reader a mélange of voices orchestrated so that they may be reconciled with the extremes of poetic artifice, then The Tennis Court Oath offers such voices arranged in the service of more painterly ends. The sort of painting that interested Ashbery in poems like “The Painter” gives way in The Tennis Court Oath to a direct attempt in certain poems like “America” and “Europe” to create with poetry, as directly as possible, the effects that avant-garde European painting had generated with dada and surrealism. More particularly, Ashbery aimed in some of these poems for the effects of action painting in his poetry that focused on the base materials of the aesthetic medium rather than on using such materials to represent
things and ideas. On the other hand, these works are anomalies in Ashbery's corpus, anomalies, however, that reveal Ashbery to be making as much use as possible of the aesthetic component of citation.

But Ashbery was to turn aside from this sort of writing and never return to it. "America" and "Europe" frustrate the reader's access to the text almost completely. But two of the poems in the collection, "Thoughts of a Young Girl" and ""How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher," manage to survive both as strong poems and as strong citational poems. Both poems largely refuse to engage in standard, "frontally" representational poetic writing. In the process, they make use of citation and quotation in very unconventional ways, but do so, unlike with "Europe," without completely frustrating the reader's access to the text.

"Europe"

The much maligned "Europe" betrays an obvious commitment of Ashbery's to come up with a poetic analogue for the painterly advances he was witnessing and had witnessed in New York in the fifties with the rise of abstract expressionism. The poem uses language the way a Pollock or de Kooning might use paint, as a thing with

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a life of its own. Much of the poem’s writing is lifted from a throwaway popular text, *Beryl of the Bi-plane*, “an Edwardian book for girls” (Lehman 160), that makes the work Ashbery’s first citational long poem.

As has been noted, the work is unsatisfying. This is so in the citational sense as well as in the other senses critics have noted. However, the work seems a necessary stage in the development of Ashbery’s citational poetics, one that ultimately made for the success of *Rivers and Mountains*, particularly of its “The Skaters.”

*Rivers and Mountains* manages the right citational balance for which Ashbery is reaching, one where the illustrative and aesthetic dimensions of citation and quotation are placed in productive tension, thus earmarking Ashbery’s hybridity and also the hybridity of citation. “Europe,” unfortunately, suffers from an excessive commitment to the aesthetic side of citation and seems to forget both that words mean and that words cannot be applied to a work as paint can be applied to canvas.

Further, “Europe” attempts to be too oppositional to modernist forms of citation as Ashbery, unlike Pound and Eliot, chooses not the “great” works of the western world from which to cite but rather an obscure children’s work. Ashbery seemingly chooses *Beryl of the Bi-plane* to undermine modernism by breaking down the apparent barriers between high and low culture and by parodying the implicit claim to heroism in modernism (especially Pound’s) by generating a long work that makes no grand attempts. Ironically, the poem is entitled “Europe,” as if to heighten the rejection of high-bred western culture. (Even more ironic is the poem’s odd

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11 See, for example, Perloff, *Poetics* 268-69.
contrast with the two poems from this collection that include the word “America” in their titles, poems that are much more accessible and straightforward than “Europe.”

The poem is partitioned into 111 short sections that seem to constitute only the slightest concession to the sequential nature of reading and writing, a quality of course largely foreign to the visual arts. But even in a detail such as this, Ashbery seems to bend his writing back toward painting as so many of these numbered sections are so forshortened and blank that Ashbery merely seems to accomplish the feat of shutting the reader out of the work. For instance, take the following passage from “Europe”:

101.

the doctor, comb

Sinn Fein

102.

dress

103.

streaming sweeping the surface
long-handed twig-brooms
starving
wall great trees (Oath 82)

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12 The errors of “Europe” parallel closely the errors of some of Charles Bernstein’s work. See below.
Ashbery was probably aiming for the effects of erasure de Kooning had generated with his own painting. But so little is left behind, one wonders whether Ashbery had transformed himself into his naïve painter from the poem of the same name from *Some Trees*. In terms that Michael Fried would use, the work’s inevitable portion of theatricality is so high that readers are positioned more to ponder their condition as readers than to bond with the work in an absorptive way. The poem does not attempt to draw in the viewer very much at all, as Ashbery’s successful poems do, like “The Skaters” and “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” the latter of which is about this very question.

To be sure, Ashbery is mindful of the issues about reading already present in such an opaque work that draws upon an Edwardian book for girls as its primary source material. Indeed, the poem seems to take even further the problems associated with reading in another poem from the collection, “How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher...” to defeat openly the sort of reading that cannot help the imprisoned speakers in that poem break free. In Ashbery’s transformation of the *Bi-plane* book, a text that is presented as eminently readable, the book is deconstructed to generate an undecidable text. Correspondingly, the primary text dates from before the first world war and as such is to be located in a pre-modern landscape of innocence, especially as the work is about children and for children readers. Ashbery’s appropriation of it, however, brings the text into the avant-garde.

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14 See below.
vagaries of the New York art world as words become things. This move is likewise suggested by the poem's title that gathers up elements of the old world and alters them to the point that they belong to the new.

"Europe" is an important moment in Ashbery's development as a poet, not simply a wrong turn. For the idea that motivated "Europe" seems to play an essential role in Ashbery's poetics. In particular, we see Ashbery's urge to appropriate the language of others, however much is lacking here the tempering move to mix diverse rhetorical speech forms, a move that develops later. We also see Ashbery's urge to treat words as things, which will support the aesthetic side of citation. But this sort of move makes itself felt without Ashbery's countervailing tendency to allow for the illustrative side of citation to make its presence felt, which is to say that it lacks Ashbery's trademark rhetorical hybridity.

"Thoughts of a Young Girl"

The title of "Thoughts of a Young Girl" would seem to indicate an inventory or a train of associations about the thought processes a "young girl" might exhibit. This short poem sets up the basic problem of citation as Ashbery explores it in The Tennis Court Oath, which is to intensify his investigation into representation and reference that begins in Some Trees. The title also emphasizes an abstract force ("Thoughts") and how a poem might handle thought in itself, if even a "Young Girl's" thoughts.
Strangely, however, the poem's first of two six-line stanzas is a full quotation, and even more oddly, the quotation is from a letter written, not by a young girl, but by "The Dwarf:"

"It is such a beautiful day I had to write you a letter
From the tower, and to show I'm not mad:
I only slipped on the cake of soap of the air
And drowned in the bathtub of the world.
You were too good to cry much over me.
And now I let you go. Signed, The Dwarf." (Oath 14)

Paradoxically, however, what is written here in the form of a letter does not seem far removed from the stereotypical thoughts a young girl might have, because the girl is probably imprisoned in a "tower," one of the many images associated with medieval romance that Ashbery employs for various effects, tied to the ends of parody and pastiche.

It is also important that these "thoughts" of a young girl are written and hence made less abstract through their documentary quality. But then such documentation removes us yet further from the actual thoughts of a young girl, at the same time it paradoxically serves as our only point of access to such thoughts. And, of course, Ashbery presents us with such thought markers in quotation marks, indicating their status as received, second hand, further removing the reader from those thoughts. Likewise, the thoughts are signed by "the Dwarf" (whoever that may be) rather than the young girl. The dwarf, as does his or her presence in a tower, however, gives off the airs of medieval romance that the "girl"s" apparent incarceration in the tower and her letter to some unknown figure likewise suggest.
The problem of illustration inherent in the issue of citation and quotation is directly presented in the curious first stanza where the Dwarf attempts to prove his sanity to his addressee with a letter that offers evidence that “I only slipped on the cake of soap of the air / And drowned in the bathtub of the world,” evidence that proves his madness more than debunks it. The poem’s second stanza shifts the frame yet more as the gap delimiting the two stanzas becomes highly significant since this letter is offered almost entirely without context.

I passed by in late afternoon
And the smile still played about her lips
As it has for centuries. She always knows
How to be utterly delightful. Oh my daughter,
My sweetheart, daughter of my late employer, princess
May you not be long on the way. (Oath 14)

To be sure, there is some common ground between these two stanzas. The second continues with the use of language common to medieval romance, as the “daughter” being addressed here is also a “princess,” although certainly not an actual one. Indeed, because “the smile still played about her lips” for “centuries,” the voice may not be addressing anyone alive at all. “She” may, for instance, be a painting or a sculpture. Similarly, the same claim about the female figure’s smile suggests further British fairy tale imagery.

But this view does not lead the reader very far. What seems most prevalent in the second stanza of the poem, besides its lack of correspondence with the poem’s first stanza, and even the poem’s overall title, is the lack of determination about who is speaking to whom about whom. The addressee could be the young girl mentioned in the poem’s title, for the other two figures implied in this stanza are unlikely bets—the
mysterious “her” with the smile and the speaker who is presumably a parent of one self or another and thus would be too old to be considered to be a young girl, in particular the mysterious “her.” There is further ambiguity about the addressee of the second stanza, someone who is both the speaker’s daughter and the “daughter of my [the speaker’s] late employer.”

In two opposing ways, one for each stanza, the young girl in the title is displaced. In the first stanza, she is substituted with a figure, the Dwarf; in the second, the “young girl” is diffused through one or more of three figures. In this way, the title tells us that the poem is only its most indirect illustration, as the poem observes to varying degrees more a logic of displacement than direct association.15

This is so, however, if the title is read in its conventional senses as I suggested earlier. But the title may also be read differently so that the “thoughts” mentioned here may not necessarily be those the girl possesses or those that are “hers” but rather those that nevertheless are associated with such a person. This would more accurately account for the highly indeterminate poem the reader is offered and is even encouraged by two phrases in the poem’s first stanza: “I only slipped on the cake of soap of the air / And drowned in the bathtub of the world” (Oath 14). The “of” phrases that end both of these lines manage to defamiliarize and displace the image the line offers until that point. These displacing prepositional phrases indicate that the title’s similar prepositional phrase is not presented in the sense one might think.

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15 Ashbery has correctly sensed the citationality of titles. His general procedure of placing titles at the head of poems that either are citations or quotations themselves or refuse to be illustrated by the body of the poem is yet another way of enacting his citational poetics.
Instead, the thoughts we might think to be ones such a girl might “have” are indistinguishable from those “about” her, revealing the deep extent to which one is spoken rather than simply speaks.

“‘How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher . . .’”

The romantic imagery of “Thoughts of a Young Girl,” especially its concerns with “towers” and monuments, has its reverse side shown in “‘How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher . . .’” The theme articulated in “Illustration” from Some Trees, that “Much that is beautiful must be discarded / So that we resemble a taller / Impression of ourselves” continues in this important poem (Some Trees 49). The alternative view reveals a set of voices imprisoned in an excessively figurative existence. The poem makes it clear that sacred monuments imprison beauty and life, that divine sepulchers are finally not for inhabiting. The poem further contains a few instances of citation and quotation, each of which is situated in the context of attacking the garden-variety illustration that is Ashbery’s nemesis.

One of the poem’s most salient features is the great degree to which voices of various kinds issue forth at the reader from hidden areas beneath, under and behind other things that supposedly take precedence over the voices themselves. This is an obvious case, for Ashbery, of the unconscious attempting to break its way into view. In fact, much of the poem seems to be about how forces thought to be secondary
attempt to attain primary significance, and the tragedy and loss of beauty and life that
occurs when they do not. Citation's typically secondary status draws an obvious
parallel.

In this way it makes sense to consider Ashbery's use of citation and quotation
and even his modernity. For in reversing the terms in this way, from conscious to
unconscious, from allusion to direct quotation, from tradition to modernity, Ashbery's
project is made apparent, even though he remains, to a crucial degree, tied to
traditional illustration and its reliance on the conscious mind. What Ashbery really
favors is a new synthesis of these opposites, one in which the hitherto marginalized or
repressed side acquires more status.

The voice that speaks the poem's opening lines speaks from a trapped position
much as the Dwarf does in "Thought of a Young Girl," and again romantic love plays
a role in the discussion.

How much longer will I be able to inhabit the divine sepulcher
Of life, my great love? Do dolphins plunge bottomward
To find the light? Or is it rock
That is searched? Unrelentingly? Huh. And if someday

Men with orange shovels come to break open the rock
Which encases me, what about the light that comes in then?
What about the smell of the light?
What about the moss? (Oath 25)

The speaker characterizes his situation as one of death in life, confinement within a
situation that is nevertheless marked with possibility. The speaker has difficulty
communicating with his lover, exhibited by the various questions he asks that are not
answered and seem tinged with desperation.
This speaker is a voice suppressed. Like Eliot’s Prufrock—and, for that matter, so many of the voices of “The Waste Land,” a poem that is likewise concerned with romance and love—this speaker fears redemption. The speaker worries about his neglect and distance from the “light,” as much as he fears what he will do if and when he is set free. But unlike Prufrock and so many of the voices in “The Waste Land,” this speaker is treated sympathetically in the body of the poem, as the person “behind” this voice seems to be unfairly imprisoned, suggesting a social situation in which hitherto unheard voices are unjustly silenced.

In the next two stanzas the poem’s first voice ends his address with nothing like the pathetic demise of a Prufrock, but neither does he succeed in overcoming his confining situation. As “the light bounces off of mossy rocks down to me / In this glen” a parenthesis forces its way into the discourse that takes on a life of its own.

Light bounces off mossy rocks down to me
In this glen (the neat villa! which
When he’d had he would not had he of
And jests under the smarting of privet

Which on hot spring nights perfumes the empty rooms
With the smell of sperm flushed down toilets
On hot summer afternoons within the sight of the sea.
If you knew why then professor) reads (Oath 25)

Effectively, Ashbery has managed to promote the front ranks discourse that would typically possess only secondary status. Inside the parenthesis are further a few features worth noting. First, there is an instance of stuttering through confusing verb tenses (“When he’d had he would not had he of”), a line that foretells some of the
experiments with syntax that the Language poets were to undertake two decades later. This line is much more challenging to the reader than any in the poem up to this point, and ironically Ashbery delivers it to us in a Rousselesque parenthesis.

Then, there is a jarring, surrealist juxtaposition of the sacred and profane: "...the smarting of privet / Which on hot spring nights perfumes the empty rooms / With the smell of sperm flushed down toilets." But the redemptive sea, which takes on an elemental rather than ethereal quality, remains "within sight." The imagery of confinement continues, but this time it is the sea and a shadow under it that comes to life, stressing further the great extent to which Ashbery has trusted in the unconscious breaking through the ordinary conscious world and generating truth.

The poem's ending lines display much more openly the citational promise enacted and fulfilled in the first seven stanzas. For instance, Ashbery mixes quasi-conventional narration with disjunct and mundane quotation and a parody of a the chorus' famous speech in Sophocles' Antigone.

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The boy took out his own forehead
His girlfriend's head was a green bag
Of narcissus stems. "OK you win
But meet me anyway at Cohen's Drug Store

In 22 minutes." What a marvel is ancient man!
Under the tulip roots he has figured out a way to be a religious animal
And would be a mathematician. But where in unsuitable heaven
Can he get the heat that will make him grow?

For he needs something or will forever remain a dwarf,
Though a perfect one, and possessing a normal-sized brain
But he has got to be released by giants from things.
And as the plant grows older it realizes it will never be a tree,

Will probably always be haunted by a bee
And cultivates stupid impressions
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143
So as not to become part of the dirt. The dirt
Is mounting like a sea. And we say goodbye. . . . (Oath 25-26)

Again, that dwarf from “Thoughts of a Young Girl” appears and emphasizes the correlation between physical confinement and divine longings, though here such a dwarf is to be opposed to the more legitimate voice at the poem’s opening who yearns to be free both from the confinement and the divinity. The poem further questions the legitimacy of a kind of puritanical spirituality needing to be “released from things,” however much this need generates a kind of anemia, for “as the plant grows older it realizes it will never be a tree” and finally becoming “part of the dirt.” As always the shadows of the unconscious loom large.

The poem is aware that reading is inevitably bound up in deciding whether to embrace the puritanical position or what we might call the animistic or elemental position, the latter of which that seems to be favored in the poem. Late in the poem

In the yard handled the belt he had made

Stars
Painted the garage roof crimson and black
He is not a man
Who can read these signs . . . his bones were stays . . .
And even refused to live
In a world and refunded the hiss
Of all that exists terribly near us
Like you, my love, and light. (Oath 26-27)

The voice saying that “He is not a man who can read these signs” is challenging the puritanical position, for the alternative is to embrace the life of things “that exist . . . terribly near us” and, particularly, the life of language as a thing. Things like these have their own sort of light, a light that the imprisoned speaker at the beginning of the poem wrongly fears.
Next, a biblical speaker emerges, one which is also confined.

After which you led me to water
And bade me drink, which I did, owing to your kindness.
You would not let me out for two days and three nights,
Bringing me books bound in wild thyme and scented wild grasses

As if reading had any interest for me, you . . .
Now you are laughing.
Darkness interrupts my story.
Turn on the light. (Oath 27)

This speaker similarly confined similarly rejects reading for something real as darkness interrupts. This speaker finally merges back into the voice that begins the poem and is put back in confinement as the need paradoxically re-emerges to “turn on the light.” So while Ashbery wants to offer the unconscious and its attendant valuing of things in themselves, at the same time Ashbery is never insisting on a radical separation between the two.¹⁶ In Ashbery’s scheme, one somehow needs the other and neither can be imagined in isolation from the other. The process of doing so yields the essential hybridity of Ashbery’s writing and the hybridity of his attitude toward citation.

Who are you, anyway?
And it is the color of sand,
The darkness, as it sifts through your hand
Because what does anything mean,

The ivy and the sand? That boat
Pulled up on the shore? Am I wonder,
Strategically, and in the light
Of the long sepulcher that hid death and hides me? (Oath 27)

¹⁶ This sort of move will characterize Charles Bernstein’s overtly ideological stake in the non-instrumental side of language.
Citational Triumph in *Rivers and Mountains*

Ashbery’s move in *The Tennis Court Oath* was, in large part, to treat words as things in an attempt “to respect things for what they are,” in the words of Fairfield Porter that Ashbery was fond of citing (Lehman 81). If it can be argued that Ashbery took these ideas too far in *The Tennis Court Oath*, in *Rivers and Mountains* Ashbery manages to treat words as things but with an important qualification. Ashbery rather accommodates the inevitable meanings of words, the fact that words do in fact signify, however much they are things as well. This does not make *Rivers and Mountains* any less of an investigation into artifice, however.

The poems of *Rivers and Mountains* continue to strive for the benefits of radical artifice and the particular citational quality of the writing, while at the same time managing to orchestrate meaning and theme. In this way, Ashbery returns, in a more authentic way than ever before, to the dadaist and especially the surrealist interests that had inspired him for a much longer time than did abstract expressionism. The twin, and contrasting, concerns with artifice and the unconscious that one finds in Ashbery’s art criticism is engaged consistently throughout *Rivers and Mountains* and offers an opposition not unlike the opposition between the contrasting illustrative and ornamental sides of citation. The “difference in potential” between these two poles offers a productive tension in *Rivers and Mountains* that can be seen as a cardinal example of a successful citational poetics (Erickson 8). For these reasons, *Rivers and Mountains* is Ashbery’s first truly mature work.
The collection’s famous first poem, “These Lacustrine Cities,” is one of Ashbery’s truly great poems and sounds the collection’s basic concerns. The poem is more an explicit criticism of the aesthetics and ethics that Ashbery abjures. By the collection’s end, however, “The Skaters” will manage, at modernist long-poem length, to offer the alternative path Ashbery wants to take with his poetry. In either poem, Ashbery avoids the opacity of part of The Tennis Court Oath, especially in “Europe.” Perhaps this is so because Ashbery was finding ways of bringing criticism into the fold as one source of a particular rhetorical mode at his disposal. In this respect, Ashbery attempts to render simultaneously art and criticism of art, rather than simply the former, which is so often the case in The Tennis Court Oath. In this way, by embracing the illustrative component of language and citation, as well as the thingly quality of both, Ashbery manages a species of literary success, as he still manages to see the limitations inherent in each.

“These Lacustrine Cities”

“These Lacustrine Cities” offers a critique of the social and aesthetic values with which Ashbery disagrees. In this gesture, we see the old problems Ashbery has had with monuments that excessively figuralize the literal at the expense of “much that is beautiful.” The cities are inordinately abstract in other respects and such abstraction leads naturally to a kind of complacency that is undergirded by anger, all of which further prevents the city dwellers from appreciating things in themselves.

These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing

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Into something forgetful, although angry with history.
They are the product of an idea: that man is horrible, for instance,
Though this is only one example.

They emerged until a tower
Controlled the sky, and with artifice dipped back
Into the past for swans and tapering branches,
Burning, until all that hate was transformed into useless love. (Rivers
9)

Of particular note in the first stanza is how prefabricated the cities are. The discussion
of origins is at direct odds with the relatively unconscious and self-abnegating
improvisational ethos that Ashbery is advocating implicitly and explicitly throughout
his writings.

That the lacustrine cities “grew out” of anything would damn them in
Ashbery’s mind, especially the Ashbery of The Tennis Court Oath. When we
discover that the cities “are the product of an idea,” that they are the product of any
idea, the die is cast. The cities are produced from inordinate abstraction and are
therefore alienated from the animistic life of things. The problem of illustration and
“explanation,” the latter term of which we shall see is the bugbear of “The Skaters,” is
further engaged when we discover that one “idea” that produces the cities could be
that “man is horrible.” Ashbery follows this idea with “for instance,” and then in the
next line we find that the idea is “only one example.” The apparent problem here, if
we are to acknowledge Ashbery’s apparent animistic commitments, his apparent
skepticism of “illustration,” and his treatment of words as things in The Tennis Court
Oath, could be that the cities have taken the wrong path because they are closed off to
real beauty. They have the relationship between principle and example inflexibly
backward.
Not surprisingly, a monument appears in the poem's second stanza. The monument, a familiar “tower,” halts the development of the cities. Besides resonating with the respective towers of “Thoughts of a Young Girl” and “How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher...”, the tower resembles the “monuments” of “Illustration” and the “buildings” of “The Painter”—undesirable architecture that reverses the relation between concrete and abstract to such an extent that the latter is privileged at the expense of the former. The “tower” encroaches on the beauty of nature by “controlling” the “sky.”

But Ashbery, in *Rivers and Mountains* never truly becomes strident in his criticism of the non-poetic emblems of culture, because he reserves the possibility of a human construction that accesses the beauty and power of nature. Ashbery will demonstrate this in other sections of *Rivers and Mountains*, but an immediate contrast with his criticism of monuments in “These Lacustrine Cities” can be found in “Sonnet” from *Some Trees*. In this poem Ashbery remarks that the “result” of “A building... against the sky.../... is more sky” (*Some Trees* 68). This building certainly does not “control” the sky as does the tower of “These Lacustrine Cities,” and it remains, as a building, a human construction, an instance of artifice that does not belie its origins in the concrete. The “result” is that, while this building would no doubt offer itself as figurative, it does not do so to such an extent that the ground of the figure is lost as a mere illustration or “product of an idea.”

But the artifice surrounding the tower in “These Lacustrine Cities” is secondary to the controlling tower and becomes merely another “instance” or “example” of its inappropriateness. The “swans” and “tapering branches” that
demonstrate this weak artifice are clichés from history that lull the citizens of these cities into a form of false consciousness. While such false consciousness does promote a kind of peace—"transforming" 'all that hate'—it nevertheless anesthetizes those citizens into a state of "useless love."

The general hedging and difference-splitting of "These Lacustrine Cities" represents a well-tempered citational poetic, most notably in a poem such as this one where only one or two speakers seem to be present. Ashbery notices that a single speaker, or "monument" for that matter, is a betrayal both of the multiplicity of experience and the animation of things. The failure of the speaker's portrait to be sufficiently unified and monolithic is analogous to what Ashbery evidently considered earlier as a competing concern, that of appropriating various rhetorical modes into a given poem. Ashbery's willingness to embrace both the monument and the multiplicity, the figure and the ground, while acknowledging the limitation inherent in each, demonstrates his skill at achieving a productive tension of the two poles of citation, not simply the aesthetic component.

Much of Ashbery's most celebrated poetry exhibits his fascination not simply with artifice but with referential prose of varying kinds, particularly of art criticism. Such temperance or "fence-sitting," as Ashbery was to call it, is further accomplished in some of the prevailing themes of *Rivers and Mountains*. Themes that concern the tension between another significant opposition for Ashbery, that between the conscious and unconscious minds, form a balance that I have already suggested is significant for Ashbery's citationality.
"The Skaters"

"The Skaters" is the first poem of Ashbery's displaying the successful citational poetics toward which he was progressing on a grand scale. "Europe" had failed because the poem was merely a one-dimensional foray into the erasures and reconstitution of a single, throwaway text. "The Skaters," however, while nevertheless making use of a similar text—another children's book (One Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do)—blends several other diverse elements. As he put it to Richard Kostelanetz in the mid 1970s, Ashbery wanted to write a poem by "put[ting] everything in, rather than, as in 'Europe,' leaving things out" (24).

"The Skaters" comprises several essential elements, only one of which consists of passages from the children's book. In keeping with some of the dominant themes from Rivers and Mountains—in poems such as the title poem, "Civilization and Its Discontents," and "These Lacustrine Cities"—the poem exudes a sense of loss and tragedy that never quite becomes pinned down. At the same time, however, the poem gives off signs of hope, particularly in its prominent voyage and travel themes. Both of these opposing themes, of human limitation and hope for better things in the future, balance one another, much as Ashbery learned to balance the twin and competing dimensions of citation, "[t]his continual changing back and forth," as he put it in the body of "The Skaters" (Rivers 44).

While this general thematic material tends to frame the discussion of more particular phenomena, Ashbery's preoccupation with the visual arts shines through in a likewise divided fashion. Much of the poem details the act of seeing, but does so in
accordance with further dichotomizing. Ashbery's speaker is at the same time interested in seeing the skaters' smooth movement over the ice as they fade into the horizon, or the "distance," as the poem often puts it. On the other hand, one recognizes the modernist flat canvas and the surrealist emphasis on juxtaposing disparate elements.

Significantly, the same ambivalent principle holds true for the poem's use of citation as well. While Ashbery does cite from a children's book in "The Skaters," as he does so in "Europe," Ashbery's use of the children's text in "The Skaters" is markedly different than that of *Beryl of the Bi-plane* in "Europe." Instead of fragmenting the text to nearly unrecognizable proportions, Ashbery in "The Skaters" drops in, here and there, a quotation in full. The quotations, on the surface at least, would thus appear to be more illustrative, especially because they are of the how-to variety, detailing how to draw pictures with linear perspective, for instance, or how to combine household chemicals to write invisible messages. To be sure, Ashbery is not in "The Skaters" shying away from such a practice. Indeed, such quotations tend to deliver, albeit in a very skewed way, the sort of explanation that is often a source for anxiety in the poem. But such quotations, because of their context, because of the surrounding citing text, appear as mysterious object in their own right. And, by contrast, the flood of diverse images and discourses, that do not tend to illustrate beyond themselves, often appear all too real and mundane.

The poem is frequently at pains to convey to the reader some sense of how it is that the awesome diversity of discourses and representations, not to mention life in itself, constitutes a bewildering awakening to the limitations of human beings.
The answer is that it is novelty
That guides these swift blades o’er the ice
Projects into a finer expression (but at the expense
Of energy) the profile I cannot remember.
Colors slip away from and chide us. The human mind
Cannot retain anything except perhaps the dismal two-note theme
Of some sodden “dump” or lament. (Rivers 34)

Linked to such limitations on the human mind are the diverse phenomena that people
try to contain with the urge to collect similar items.

But how much survives? How much of any one of us survives?
The articles we’d collect—stamps of the colonies
With greasy cancellation marks, mauve, magenta and chocolate,
Or funny-looking dogs we’d see in the street, or bright remarks.
One collects bullets. An Indianapolis, Indiana man collects slingshots
of all epochs, and so on. (Rivers 34)

At the same time, however, there is hope, because soon “the water surface
ripples, the whole light changes” (Rivers 34). Further, “melodious tolling does go on
in that awful pandemonium, / Certain resonances are not utterly displeasing to the
terrified eardrum” (Rivers 35).

By presenting two contrary attitudes about the diversity of contemporary life,
and the struggles of human beings who must live in the midst of it, Ashbery is
seemingly arguing in favor of a certain mental or emotional flexibility as the
appropriate way to live in the post-war period. Again, surrealism is the embodiment
of such an attitude, both with its practice of assemblage and with its blending of
figuration and abstraction. Fittingly, Ashbery’s interest in art makes its appearance
throughout the poem in like fashion.

On the one hand, Ashbery stresses the significance of linear perspective in
seeing. The poem’s first few pages introduce the issue of seeing and
How strange it is that... narrow perspective lines
Always seem to meet, although parallel, and that an insane ghost could
do this,
Could make the house seem so much farther in the distance, as
It seemed to the horse, dragging the sledge of a perspective line.
(Rivers 36)

Soon afterward, however, such perspective lines are linked with the note of human
limitation and tragedy struck earlier in the poem.

And so much snow, but it is to be littered with waste and ashes
So that the cathedrals may grow. Out of this spring builds a tolerable
Affair of brushwood, the sea is felt behind oak wands, noiselessly
pouring.
Spring with its promise of winter, and the black ivy once again
On the porch, its yellow perspective bands in place
And the horse nears them and weeps. (Rivers 36)

The fragile hold of the perspective lines on visual reality easily dissolves, it appears,
as

A great wind lifted these cardboard panels
Horizontal in the air. At once the perspective with the horse
Disappeared in a bigarrure of squiggly lines. The image with the
crocodile in it became no longer apparent. (Rivers 36)

Indeed, later in the poem, Ashbery explicitly links the theme of perspective lines with
that of the “comfort” of containing the diversity of life, a comfort that is both to be
challenged and to be acknowledged as a sign of human limitation.

Only one thing exists: the fear of death. As widows are a prey to loan
sharks
And Cape Hatteras to hurricanes, so man to the fear of dying, to
the
Certainty of falling. And just so it permits him to escape from time to
time
Amid fields of boarded-up posters: “Objects, as they recede, appear to
become smaller
And all horizontal receding lines have their vanishing point upon the
line of sight,”
Which is some comfort after all, for our volition to see must needs

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condition these phenomena to a certain degree.  
But it would be rash to derive too much confidence from a situation  
which, in the last analysis, scarcely warrants it.  
What I said first goes: sleep, death and hollyhocks  
And a new twilight stained, perhaps, a slightly unearthlier periwinkle  
blue,  
But no dramatic arguments for survival, and please no magic  
justification of results. (Rivers 52-53)

But the poem also sharply criticizes the need for such containment, in part as
the search for “meaning” and “explanation,” two of the more significant terms in the

poem. At one point early in the poem, the voice of a literary critic emerges.

It is time now for a general understanding of
The meaning of all this. The meaning of Helga, importance of the  
setting, etc.
A description of the blues. Labels on bottles  
And all kinds of discarded objects that ought to be described. (Rivers 38)

The poem quickly mocks such discourse, even as much as the poem is willing
elsewhere to acknowledge such discourse as perhaps inevitable.

Isn’t this a death-trap, wanting to put too much in
So the floor sags, as under the weight of a piano, or a piano-legged girl  
And the whole house of cards comes dinning own around one’s ears!  
But this is an important aspect of the question
Which I am not ready to discuss, am not at all ready to . . . . (Rivers 38-39)

In place of what the poem shortly thereafter calls “this madness to explain,” Ashbery
instead offers a brief but nuanced portrait of his poetics, poetics that indicate the
citational dimensions of such poetics.

This leaving-out business. On it hinges the very importance of what’s novel  
Or autocratic, or dense or silly. It is as well to call attention
To it by exaggeration, perhaps. But calling attention
Isn’t the same thing as explaining, and as I said I am not ready  
To line phrases with the costly stuff of explanation, and shall not,
Will not do so for the moment. Except to say that the carnivorous Way of these lines is to devour their own nature, leaving Nothing but a bitter impression of absence, which as we know involves presence, but still. Nevertheless these are fundamental absences, struggling to get up and be off themselves. \textit{(Rivers 39)}

The “leaving-out business” reminds one of Ashbery’s remarks about “Europe,” and there is an important sense in which Ashbery retains here in “The Skaters” the view that citations cannot merely illustrate. Inevitably, absences and gaps will occur, and “lin[ing] phrases with the costly stuff of explanation” will not solve the fundamental dilemma that citations never completely displace, never completely illustrate. It is for this reason, that Ashbery is much less fearful of using citations in “The Skaters” in an ostensibly illustrative way, because the absences growing out of the use of such citations may be cultivated, for the same reason that the illustrative aspects of otherwise fragmentary citations may be cultivated.

Thus, Ashbery’s citations to the children’s book do not necessarily offer the comfort of containment the Ashbery of \textit{The Tennis Court Oath} would have thought. Significantly, the first two quotations from \textit{One Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do} involve the perspective lines that had been presented earlier in the poem as an instance of such containment.

\begin{quote}
The lines that draw nearer together are said to “vanish.”
The point where they meet is their vanishing point.

Spaces, as they recede, become smaller. \textit{(Rivers 48)}
\end{quote}

By this point in the poem, such simple truisms have become loaded with significance. Their appearance in the poem at this stage functions in paradoxical ways. Is the reader to accept the comfort of containing the “motley spectacle” linear perspective
promises? Or, is the reader to see such a quotation as a “phony explanation,” that
keeps one from the truth of things? This straightforward information the children’s
book delivers offers no easily illustration. Likewise, the “motley spectacle” the poem
offers, in more complicated and diverse discourse, seems recognizable enough as an
illustration of the speed and diversity of contemporary life.

Still, I am prepared for this voyage, and for anything else you may care
to mention.
Not that I am not afraid, but there is very little time left.
You have probably made travel arrangements, and know the feeling.
Suddenly, one morning, the little train arrives in the station, but oh, so
big.

It is! Much bigger and faster than anyone told you.
A bewhiskered student in an old baggy overcoat is waiting to take it.
“Why do you want to go there,” they all say. “It is better in the other
direction.”
And so it is. There people are free, at any rate. But where you are
going no one is. (Rivers 43)

In the end, the Ashbery’s quotations from the children’s books serve as another
ambivalent portion of the “motley spectacle” of discourse and communication. The
to-and-fro rhythm of the differing rhetorical forms in the poem, “the kind of rhythm
substituting for ‘meaning’” (Rivers 47), holds the key to Ashbery’s divided poetics of
citation, a phenomenon that is itself divided. The paradoxical nature of such citational
poetics is revealed in a particular passage that combines Ashbery’s preoccupation with
the visual arts, with citational discourse and with the themes of limitation and diversity
that drive the poem.

The figure 8 is a perfect symbol
Of the freedom to be gained in this kind of activity
The perspective lines of the barn are another and different kind of
example
(Viz. “Rigg’s Farm, near Aysgarth, Wensleydale,” or the “Sketch at
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Norton’’
In which we escape ourselves—putrefying mass of prevarications, etc.—
In remaining close to the limitations imposed. (Rivers 47)

In this passage, Ashbery displays the citational ethos that drives his poetics. Infinity is symbolized, to be represented and thus to be cited, offering a “freedom” that is not as undivided as would appear. On the other hand, “perspective lines” that contain freedom, however limited they may be, offer up freedom as well, freedom from the self and its narcissism.
In one section of his essay “Thought’s Measure,” Bernstein articulates the convergence of sighting and sounding, which as we have seen, forms much of the basis of Bernstein’s citationality. Nevertheless, this essay briefly displays, as well as discusses, citationality in a sense similar to the one in which Bernstein’s serial essays do. Just before Bernstein mentions this coupling of sighting and sounding, which lies at the heart of his self-proclaimed materialist poetics, Bernstein notes

I certainly am not, however, advocating gesturalizing the ways language can make meaning: as if to dramatize the capacities of language were enough, as if poetry wasn’t just as much as ever the revelation of meaning, an active process with language as the medium, requiring an acknowledgment that language always occurs in forms and structures. *(Content’s Dream 72-73)*

This passage has the function of defining Bernstein’s interdisciplinarity, the sense in which his poetics engage prose as well as poetry. But more important, Bernstein sets the stage here for establishing that the citational nature of his poetics is not limited to what would conventionally be defined as poetry. Citation, as it turns out, is an essential part of Bernstein’s poetics, complementing both Compagnon’s and Sartiliot’s respective
citationality, where the citational forms the ground for all utterance. As a result, it would seem useful to examine how this interdisciplinary citationality occurs in what on the surface seem to be separate modes of writing.

Bernstein's interdisciplinarity runs even deeper, however, broaching the ancient debate between philosophy and poetry that engaged the ancient Greeks. In this respect, Bernstein embraces both the sophist and sophistry as means both of joining this debate and of offering up an old metaphor to explain a citational figure and practice. In Plato's classic formulation, the sophist is one who, unlike the philosopher, derives knowledge and wisdom, not from transcendent geometric forms, but rather from language (logos), opinion and second hand information (doxa). In this way, the sophist is like the poet, one who creates with words. Plato's condemnation of both is based on similar grounds. Citation, it seems, must be associated more with the sophist than with the philosopher, and the move intensifies Bernstein's linking citation with poetry, poetry defined as that mode of writing that "denies the instrumentality of language" (Perloff, "Essaying" 407).

As we have seen, Bernstein's positions about issues such as these are inconsistent, so the final significance of Bernstein's inquiry into sophistry and citation remains unclear. But there are two possibilities: 1) either Bernstein simply embraces the sophist over against Plato's philosopher, or 2) Bernstein maintains a divided attitude about the two disciplines. The second position, I will argue, is the more appropriate one for citation, but the fact that the first is within Bernstein's poetic purview indicates a certain citational risk, that of eliminating the tension between illustration and displacement in an attempt to valorize the latter at the expense of the former.
Before discussing the interdisciplinary and citational issues involved in Bernstein’s interest in the sophist, however, I present first a discussion of two poems from The Sophist and further discussion of Bernstein’s serial essay, “Three or Four Things I Know about Him.” I do this to show, in a straightforward way, the interdisciplinarity of Bernstein’s project, the sense in which poetry can theorize, like philosophy, and prose can be poetic. In the end, the split between philosophy and poetry is evocative of the split between illustration and displacement that defines citation.

Two Case Studies

Just after Bernstein makes the remark quoted above from “Thought’s Measure,” he attempts to display or “reveal” his poetic commitments, rather than simply summarize or “dramatize” them. This is the sense in which the immediate truth of citation wins out over the secondary, indirect nature of the paraphrase or the allusion. Not surprisingly, the next sentence is a direct quotation:

“Form is never more than the extension of content”—no bodiless souls or soulless bodies. It is by and through structurings that the world gets revealed; they cannot, any more than the body can, be avoided. But there is no given (set of) structure(s) for all cases; they must always be generated [(re)discovered] anew. (Content’s Dream 73)

The quotation perhaps belies and, at minimum, displaces Bernstein’s immediately foregoing remarks. In typical fashion, one would have thought such a quotation would support or illustrate the writer’s statements about the primacy of structure and, hence, of form, the “ectoskeletal” nature of Watten’s sentence collages, for instance. But that
what comes afterward does not directly support Bernstein's preceding statements drives
home the disruptive, rather than illustrative, nature of citation. The rest of the passage
manages to repeat the themes about citation we have already discussed: the physicality
or bodiedness of citation and given language, the givenness of structures that must be
discovered (perhaps again) for different circumstances to be seen.

Bernstein's remark—"Form is never more than the extension of content"—is
itself a quotation from Robert Creeley, the same one that Charles Olson made use of in
his famous essay "Projective Verse." (Olson 614). Bernstein's statement seems double-
sided in the sense that it both challenges his own foregoing statements about language
and form but may also harmonize with those statements in a backhanded way. On the
one hand, the quotation privileges content over form; on the other, content and form are
presented as inseparable. This may simply be Bernstein's way of approaching his topic
through a different perspective. But that the displacement occurs in the form of a
quotation brings it into a paradoxical correspondence with earlier remarks.

"Dysraphism"

Also, this quotation, despite its apparent status as literary or artistic bromide, is a
self-citation of sorts. Bernstein had reversed Creeley's remark in a seminal poem—
"Dysraphism," from The Sophist—albeit in an ironically reconstructed state: "Extension
is never more than the form of content.” Bernstein further displaces the semantic importance of form in the statement but paradoxically emphasizes it by rearranging the status of the primary terms, and without altering the basic syntax of the statement.

The poem “Dysraphism” presents a vivid case of a citational poem of Bernstein’s, which also has the function of articulating a poetics. So, just as Bernstein’s essays manage both to discuss straightforwardly a citational poetics and to display his faith in the basic citationality of expression, his poems likewise manage both to display citationality and to theorize it.

“Dysraphism” is a poem drenched in quotation fragments, many of which are proverbial or exhortational in tone. Because of this particular citational basis to the poem, the themes running throughout concern power relations between the classes and genders, and the status of prose versus poetry. Many of these power relations are in turn grafted onto a psychoanalytic backdrop in which unconscious, repressed and dreamlike forms challenge the standard forms the conscious mind privileges, making the poem into a quasi-surrealist document.

Bernstein discusses the relation of form versus content in both “Thought’s Measure” and “Dysraphism.” In the latter, Bernstein engages in syntactical play that frequently mimics the architecture of a given proverb (or a proverb form) for psychoanalytic effect. Immediately after remarking, contra “Thought’s Measure,” that “Extension is never more than a form of content” (The Sophist 47), Bernstein likewise quotes another statement and then reconstructs it. “‘I know how you feel, Joe. Nobody likes to admit / his girl is that smart.’ I feel how you know, / Joe, like nobody to smart that girl is his admit” (The Sophist 47).
The revision is hardly elegant, especially near the end ("to smart that girl is his admit"), but it nevertheless comments on the foregoing statement in such a way as to unearth, so to speak, what might be termed its largely hidden assumptions and motivations. The first statement seems lifted from youthful dating circumstances ("his girl") and designed to console the male figure ("Joe") for acknowledging publicly, that "his girl" is smarter than he. Implied in this is a sense that "Joe" may be defensive about this truth and especially its public disclosure. Bernstein's syntactically altered statement heightens this sense by conveying a hidden strain of violence in the first ("like nobody to smart that girl"). The altered statement also inverts the know/feel relation, implying not simply the speaker's empathy for "Joe" but also sympathy, "I feel how you know, Joe," collapsing the distance between the two.

This psychoanalytic focus on the unconscious occurs in the title of Bernstein's collection of essays, Content's Dream, which is actually cited in the poem and juxtaposed with a mundane remark about how to serve drinks to others.

... Fill
the water glasses—ask each person
if they would like
more coffee, etc." Content's dream. (The Sophist 45)

Bernstein's commitment to the dream, or to the psychoanalytic logic of challenging the everyday in favor of the alternative truths it conceals, links him, as with Ashbery, to the surrealist tradition in art, but again with reservations about the underlying psychologism of the symbolic or "deep" images concealed. When asked by Tom Becket in an interview about the title of Bernstein's essay anthology, Bernstein had this inventive reply.
Dream in the sense of aspiration, to breathe in, to pronounce with a full breathing: "the legitimate aspirations of the heart. "I have a dream..." I have an exposition of sleep come upon me [...] Or what is a dream, a reverie that displaces the real or a hum that supersedes the repressed, whose logic is of desire not deduction, wherein we wake to dream not from it? Or, say, the dream of Content: what content would dream, if allo(u)wed, to state its discontent, anticipate its aspiration. (A Poetics 190)

Like Ashbery, Bernstein is more interested in displacing the real than in rejecting it outright, for Bernstein here emphasizes the importance of poetic form by presenting the dream-image of its opposite. Bernstein also likens the dream with citation, since both are presented in opposing deductive logic.

Such syntactically altered revisions of given discourse are to be found elsewhere in "Dysraphism." The gnomic "Life is what / you find, existence is what you repudiate" (The Sophist 44) is another such example. But when one investigates the diction of the lines, the phrase makes a sort of backhanded sense, very much compatible with the revision of "I know how you feel, Joe...." As I have already remarked, the poem's treatments of given discourse, frequently in the form of proverbs and pithy exhortations, are presented under the aegis of psychoanalysis, such that what appears phenomenally often masks other possibilities for meaning and significance.

"Life is what / you find, existence is what you repudiate" may sound as though its coeval structural balance is belied by its semantic content, oddly setting up life and existence as oppositions, ultimately favoring the former over the latter. But there is more than simple wit here, for Bernstein's "existence" reads etymologically as one's "standing out" (of "life") that is to be "repudiated" or rejected. On the one hand, Bernstein demonstrates a skepticism about abstraction in the semantics of his maxim,
favoring instead "life" which is to be "found." A statement like this resembles Cavell's approach to the paradox of modernism, a play between a repudiation of history and of an acknowledgement of its presence. It also implies Bernstein's citationality, since "found" materials involve citation, and a standing out ("existence") implies the god-like authority of one who uses citation for the ends of illustration.¹

The poem uses the same methods to articulate a poetics derived from a similar ambivalent attitude about givenness and appearances. Appearances and stock proverbs seem divorced or "repudiated" from us in their essence as mere appearance, but on the other hand, they are also presented as one's only recourse to living and ultimately to understanding language and poetry.

Bernstein toys with Marxian terminology in "Dysraphism" in the quotation about "the truth of the world" (quoted in "Three or Four") and explicitly relates it to a Heideggerian poetics. "A wash / of worry / the wordhood of / the whirl" (The Sophist 47). Marx's statement, which involves eliminating comforting illusions about the world in favor of seeing it on its own terms, is revised to encompass poetics. "[T]he worldhood of / the whirl" immediately recalls Pound's vortex "into which ideas are constantly rushing," Pound's program for a highly charged poetic writing of which Bernstein is an heir of sorts. The "worldhood of the whirl" could then easily imply the efficacy of Bernstein's materialist poetics, which are emphasized explicitly in later lines. "That is, in prose you start with the world / and find the words to match; in poetry you start / with the words and find the world in them" (The Sophist 49).

¹ The aphorism also opts for the vulgate "life" in place of the Latinate "existence," revealing Bernstein's suspicion of bureaucratic writing and the language of experts.
Indeed, Bernstein points out that the very title of the poem is “a prosodic device” 
(The Sophist 44), defining the term at the bottom of the poem’s first page.

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

The mis-seaming of which Bernstein speaks seems particularly appropriate for describing the citationality of “Dysraphism” and its ambivalence about given speech.

Important here is the way Bernstein manages words, focusing on etymology and usages before semantics. The fragmented nature of Bernstein’s compositional procedure and his citationality is also made clear by stressing the asymmetrical relations between heterogeneous parts in a given piece of writing.

“Three or Four” Revisited

As a result, Bernstein’s poetry is often pointing directly toward an explicit poetics. And, as we have seen in Bernstein’s serial essays, the reverse is true as well: his poetics are pointing toward a poetic practice. One section of “Three or Four Things I Know About Him,” engages explicitly in a citational rhetoric. Another offers a case in
which a specific text is called upon to add to the essay’s general seriality. The essay’s eighth section, contains (along with section seven) probably Bernstein’s most conventionally personal writing, but the passage, for all its confessionalism, is connected with Bob Dylan’s popular 1975 LP “Blood on the Tracks.” Unlike “Dysraphism,” this writing of Bernstein’s emphasizes citationality’s capacity to condense and intensify the meaning making process, without forcing its citations into becoming mere illustrations. Nevertheless, the passage does displace confessionalism by altering the bare confessionalism of the essay’s seventh section.

As I have argued above, the use of language in section six in “Three or Four” is radically non-instrumental. In the immediately following section, however, Bernstein’s first person address to the reader includes an intimately personal discussion of the speaker’s social and emotional coldness. The passage begins by presenting the speaker’s adolescence and adulthood as a long exercise in “seeming detached, cynical, cold, intellectually cool” (Content’s Dream 21). This, it turns out, is a “tool for social power by manipulation” and establishes the speaker’s sad over-reliance on himself and his need for “control” (Content’s Dream 22). He does not give people comfort that much—that is, seem to them warm, nurturing, supportive. . . . [He] has a technique of bathing people in that cold, a puritan conviction that people should know the world is hard, and that they should face it strong and stern” (Content’s Dream 22).

He acknowledges that “people should know that” but upbraids himself for sensing he is unable to “go beyond it, [to] show that one shares that hardness with others, who care.
That [he] is one of them. One of us” (Content’s Dream 23). The purpose of the passage seemingly complements passage two’s concrete poem about the alienated office worker by discussing another, more personal form of alienation and exploitation.

Near the end of the passage, however, Bernstein includes a (slightly erroneous) reference to the Dylan song, “Shelter from the Storm.” He doesn’t, “[he] sometimes feel[s], give people a feeling of getting ‘shelter from the storm/cold’ but rather can be the cold that people seek the shelter from” (Content’s Dream 22). This notation foreshadows passage eight, which is equally personal and emotional but instead relies on the technique of citation to reach its ends. One interruption in a largely seamless, linear, expository flow in passage seven becomes instead a deeply “dysraptic” display of citationality that rather gains in its emotional power for having done so.

Passage eight also continues the theme, built into the very form of the essay, of fragmentation, alienation and exploitation. Such is how the passage roughly begins, but not before another quotation, especially well-chosen for its articulating personal issues by way of an economic metaphor.

There are those who worship loneliness, of being alone, as a way of being whole in the world that demands personal fragmentation as the price for fitting into society—the cult of Thoreau, Kierkegaard, etc., in the best and worst sense” (Content’s Dream 23).

Such isolation can be useful. It is to be “out of debt” emotionally, “to owe no one anything, the self-made man, on your own and in control—the delusion of security in isolation” (Content’s Dream 23).
Bernstein repeats the Dylan citation in the passage shortly after these remarks and in the process reflects the theme of exploitation along the lines of gender: "‘Come in she said. I’ll give you shelter from the storm. She she she, waiting; ready to comfort, to nurture, to support our shipwrecked egos. And so we take the comfort, but without transforming ourselves...” (Content’s Dream 23). Here women are exploited by a probably male “we” who use the emotional tenderness of women to shore up a male sense of isolation. Hence, again, the title of the overall piece, “Three or Four Things I Know about Him.”

From here the passage is awash in Dylan quotations and uses the “Blood on the Tracks” recording as a likeminded mine of repentant voices, driven by loss. In this respect, Bernstein’s choice of recording is apropos. Bernstein draws an obvious connection between himself and Dylan whose song lyrics of the 1960s were deeply conditioned by a disjunct, surrealistic diction, and even many citations. At the same time, however, “Blood on the Tracks” is atypical as a Dylan recording; its lyrics are far more linear than Dylan is frequently noted for. Even more strikingly, these song lyrics are confessional; the entire recording resounds with the loss (to divorce) of Dylan’s wife. So, Bernstein, in an uncharacteristic mood, effectively doubles his thematic and poetic commitments by citing a likeminded, yet uncharacteristic Dylan.

Drawing upon so much of “Blood on the Tracks,” the passage continues to discuss the theme of exploitation and personal isolation among those who, lacking social power, might unfortunately compensate for it by controlling others, damming everyone in the process:
Especially of note here is the (doubly) self-conscious citational moment in the passage where the speaker quotes Dylan quoting an unnamed source: "'Love is so simple, to quote a phrase, you've known it all the time I'm learning it these days'" (Content's Dream 24).

The passage generally manages citations in order to collapse themes with structure, form with content. Further, Bernstein's citing Dylan's song lyrics plays a fundamental role in establishing the passage's themes, as his Bernstein's general programme of citation in the article is meant to do for the general essay. In this sense, the passage is rather unlike Bernstein's typical writing. What makes the passage atypical, however, is not just its explicitly emotional and psychological orientation, a focus that is often challenged elsewhere in the essay, but its particular citational strategy of condensing, rather than displacing thematic threads. Here, Bernstein comes closest to using citation and quotation in a conventional way, and such use exposes the twin, competing sides of citation and the interdisciplinarity at the heart of Bernstein's project, suspended between illustration and displacement, between philosophy and poetry.
Sophist and Citation

The chief consequence of this general interdependence or identity of theory and practice for Bernstein's citationality reflects his strong faith in the circular instrumentality of poetic writing and its material base, language. One indelible feature of poetry's essence is its accent on the non-instrumental character of language. This faith in what has become familiar in language poetry as the "materiality of the signifier" stresses for poetry the purely technological features of language, both to create the possibilities of meaning and, in turn, to embody meaning.

But despite poetry's unique capacity to awaken readers and auditors to the physical and formal components of language—orthographic black marks on the page, pure sound—poetry cannot obviate meaning or content. Rather, meaning and content are inextricably bound up with language's technology and are impossible without it; and as a result, poetry evinces the special ability to manifest both language's non-instrumental character as well as the inevitable, and reciprocal, connection between it and language's instrumental character. The instrumental nature of language pertains to the capacity of physical signs to signify, and taken with language's non-instrumental character, the implied relation is circular. Because of this rationale, Bernstein's poetics aim at being no mere abstraction from poetry but rather at serving as a praxis in themselves; likewise, the poetry is inevitably committed to theorizing its conditions of appearance.
This breaking down of the traditional opposition between theory and practice, concept and letter, philosophy and poetry, broaches the problem of Bernstein's odd, non-poetic title for his 1987 collection of poems, *The Sophist*. The title sounds a classic philosophical theme and immediately recalls Plato's dialogue of the same name. For millennia, philosophy and poetry have been adversaries and sometimes ironic bedfellows. The particular self-conscious, modernist quality of Bernstein's writing, which philosophizes and theorizes as it practices, and practices as it philosophizes and theorizes, marks an intervention in what Plato termed the "ancient debate" between the two.

If Bernstein's writings are taken seriously in this respect, theory and practice need new criteria to distinguish them from each other, since both *Content's Dream* and *The Sophist* blur the conventional boundaries between poetry and expository modes like philosophic writing and the essay. The former work, a collection of "essays," anthologizes writings that challenge the conventional notion of the genre, especially as institutionalized in the modern university. An ostensibly more "poetic" venture, *The Sophist* nevertheless contains some, always very atypical, prose-like selections. The question remains, however, whether Bernstein affirms the dichotomy or whether he is implying that there is no difference between poetry and philosophy.

Such interdisciplinarity, among these modes in particular, will have striking consequences for any citational writing, because when the technical component of language and citation is accentuated over against their conceptual moment, the reader's experience of the text necessarily changes, no matter what the apparent literary mode. Bernstein's blending the philosophical and poetic modes is figured along these lines and
establishes writing he has claimed as “anti-absorptive” elsewhere, relying upon
terminology from art critic Michael Fried. Such writing attempts to defamiliarize the
reader’s rote experience with language that works in an “absorptive” way. The
“absorptive” technique leads the reader away from the thingly character of the
expression. Absorptive writing dominates the world’s writing in such familiar forms as
the newspaper, the memorandum and the textbook and occurs when readers ignore the
technology of language and attends to its conceptual content to such an extent that they
forget the material side of language.

The near-identity between the title of Bernstein’s collection of poems and Plato’s
atypical dialogue is also significant for what the dialogue finally reveals about the nature
of language and truth, which has remarkable resonance for both Bernstein’s general
project and his citationality. Bernstein’s work manages to challenge its apparent generic
boundaries in its implicit engagement with Platonic forms of representation and
metaphysics. Bernstein hardly (if at all) acknowledges one of Plato’s most
uncharacteristic dialogue in The Sophist poems, which one might well argue is a rather
haphazard collection of poems and “writings” from the early to mid 1980s. But the
poet’s collection nevertheless exhibits a marked and challenging intervention in the
history and theory of poetry and representation.

Given Bernstein’s radically materialist poetics, the issue with this gesture of
using a philosophic title for a book of poems would seem to concern language use. If
this is so, Bernstein would seem yet again to be prepared to debunk the claims of
instrumental prose, as they have traditionally been articulated in formal philosophy. The

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2 See generally Michael Fried, Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of
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argument would run that philosophy, as with all forms of instrumental writing, particularly the post-war bureaucratic writing against which Bernstein is so antagonistic, makes use of language so that language's inevitably material component is obscured in favor of its capacity to communicate concepts. As with institutional prose, philosophy in this sense idealizes language through and through, in the process stripping philosophic discourse of its material grounding in language.

Bernstein's title, then, would seem to be ironic or wry, for through the eyes of a philosopher in the officially platonic mode, Bernstein's work could well be termed sophistry. More specifically, Bernstein's writing would, in the eyes of such a philosopher, represent the pale outcome of a flawed attempt to accomplish truth, something for which philosophy, allegedly the highest human activity, is best suited.

But the term "sophist," of course, goes much further, implying more than simply "philosophy," if even philosophy's feeble imitation. The term also connotes several other meanings: the ancient Greek civilization; Plato's dialogues, especially the late dialogue entitled Sophist; the view that truth is phenomenal rather than metaphysical; the idea of philosophic fraudulence; and the original status of philosophy and poetry, including the "ancient quarrel" between them to which Plato turned in the Republic and in so many other works.

The implications Bernstein's ironic title have for the problem of citationality flow both from the language-use concerns in his work and the general tension between philosophy and poetry as it appears throughout history. On this latter issue, especially important is the ancient Greek situation, where Plato attempted to codify the line

between philosophy and poetry. As a result, taking a close look at the origins of so-called sophistry, which in turn reveals much about the origins of philosophy and poetry, helps even to clarify the general materialist language-use theme in Bernstein’s writing. Bernstein’s favoring the materialist nature of language over against its conceptual dimensions will form the basis for his frequent jabs at (platonic) idealism in *The Sophist*.

In particular, two poems from Bernstein’s *Sophist*—“The Order of . . .” and “The Simply”—seem focused on philosophic themes that are traceable to platonic idealism. In the former poem, Bernstein’s task engages platonic ideas at the conceptual and formalistic levels to counter idealism by enacting meaning in the concrete being of poetry itself. In “The Simply,” however, Bernstein’s look at idealism is less direct, more situated in the flux and confusion of social and historical life. In both cases, the writing wrestles with the dream of absolute truth, whether such truth is sensible and the possibility that real truth would merge object and concept.

“*The Simply*”

“The Simply” is the first poem in Bernstein’s *The Sophist* and it does serve as an introduction of sorts to the platonic and counter-platonic themes in the overall work. The citationality of the poem is also immediately made apparent, as what Bernstein seems to offer here is a heterogeneous collection of various fragments of discourse. But at first the poem seems to be preoccupied instead with Marxist issues of justice. Thus the focus on society-page writing:
On July 3
Fred Timmons, Bayne and Hattie Smith, Mary Sutherland, Margaret Hartford and Lizzie Daniels enjoyed a treat of strawberries and cream at the home of Grace Kendziora.” (The Sophist 9)

In the same vein, another fragment offers an examination of power relations among the colonizer and the colonized, a quasi-citation from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (“For all that / we have not up to the present noticed any more / Religion among these poor savages than among brutes” [The Sophist 10]). The poet seems to be attempting to link a citational and fragmented compositional style of writing to a radical politics.

Elements such as these, however, are positioned within the problems of appearance versus reality that dominate Plato’s concern with the sophist. The primary thematic element in the poem concerns truth and falsehood and particularly the problem of perspectives and their inevitable partiality. This theme is explicitly platonic because it concerns the forms of being and knowing that run counter the realm of the Forms, which in Plato’s scheme constitute a kind of absolute truth.

Early in the poem the term “fraudulence” makes its appearance, specifically in the context of those seeking “salvation”: “They think they’ll get salvation, but / this is fraudulent” (The Sophist 7). The theme of appearance versus reality is made manifest here, intensifying in later lines, with a particular Marxist (Althusserian) inflection: “. . . in despair / seeing ‘lived experience’ as only possible under the hegemony of an ideology, an ‘imaginary’” (The Sophist 7). Represented with a somber tone, Bernstein seems to be showing us that life is everywhere rife with illusion and that truth is
something beyond one’s grasp. There is the need to demystify appearances, in hopes of reaching truth; but one, it appears, cannot escape what Heidegger has called the “circuit of appearances” to reach that truth (Plato’s Sophist 234).

Bernstein engages directly the question of a more enabled truth-seeking, as an alternative to Plato’s realm of the forms.

To
bare it, make it palpable—but not so it can be
transcended, rather circulated, exposed to air, plowed, worked
until fertile for inhabitation. (The Sophist 8)

Bernstein rather offers a demystification of illusion that does not eliminate the need for illusion. Walter Benjamin makes an appearance.

.... Over
and over plagued by the dialectic of such Messianism—tied
as it is to a conviction in a primeval totality of
word and object, each echoing the truth of the other and
the very contours of the cosmic. (The Sophist 8)

Bernstein would seem to reject the “primeval totality of word and object” as some undesirable “dialectic of . . . Messianism.”

Later, in this poem, Bernstein is likewise interested in the problem of idealism, particularly in communication.

.... This would be the ‘now time’
of the communicative moment, reducing as it does to an idealization of nonhistorical, nonspatial—which is to say—antimaterialist possibility. (The Sophist 9)

this “‘now time’” seems out of reach if one looks at communication objectively, marked as it is with absence. Bernstein’s apparent position on communication would seem to challenge Plato’s notion of speech as self-presentation in the Phaedrus and elsewhere.
Then, in the context of Marxism

.... In the current
debate, idealism is greatly endangered by the common
claim among “Marxists” that indeed it, as the cultural
the social is the material base; surely
the task must be to salvage idealism from such
ravages. (The Sophist 10)

The Marxist commitment to historical materialism is mocked here by a voice yearning
for a higher truth. Later, Bernstein worries about the platonic “cannibal[ism] of
“search[ing] for material” (The Sophist 11). “The Simply,” as its title shows, never
offers a nominal, abstract truth; rather, it is the material (and adverbial) process that
dominates Bernstein’s poetics.

“"The Order of . . .""

“"The Order of . . .,"” at first blush, appears as a meditation on architecture that
Bernstein exhibits directly, by making the graphic look of the page into a deconstructed
blueprint or, even more provocatively, into a ruins in print. The theme of ruins in this
(punning) concrete poem calls to mind the ancient Greek resonance of the title of the
poem-collection. The most direct indications that Bernstein is examining Plato and
ancient Greek philosophy are found in a few important areas. At the most general level
is the overwhelming presence of terms with saliently Greek etymologies—
"hypostatization," "autotelic," "geometric," "aperion," "synchronous," "logos," and

See Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Illuminations, Hannah Arendt,
“archai.” Then, too, is the satiric inclusion of a “string cite,” common in legal citation, but from ancient Greek authors like Herodotus, Thucydides, Clearchus, Aeschylus, etc.:

_Hdt._ 1.65; _Hdt._ 1.99; _Thuc._ 4.76; _Clearchus_ 3; _Aesth. Per._ 400; _Eur. Tro._ 801; _Arist. Nub._ 914; _Xen Cyr._ 6.4.3; _Soph._ 726D; _Aesth. Ag._ 521; _Il._ 10.472; _Hes. Op._ 76; _Thuc._ 3.108; _Phys._ 24.13; _Od._ 8.179. (The Sophist 85)

It is as though Bernstein is suggesting this plethora of passages in classical works amounts to authority similar to that of case law.

This string cite passage is also relevant for the basic problem of citation, as this study has outlined it. Curiously, nothing of the content of these citations seems especially relevant to the poem’s apparent aims, and several of the citations are simply fraudulent, particularly the one referring to Plato’s _Sophist_ (“Soph. 726D”), a passage that does not exist in the dialogue. It seems here that Bernstein is also mocking the high modernist use of citations in poetic contexts. Where Eliot provided readers of “The Waste Land” with actual footnotes that included citations, Bernstein here promotes citations like Eliot’s by placing them squarely in the flow of the actual poem and even foreshortens the citations so that they appear even more like they belong in footnotes than Eliot’s citations.

This move in particular adds further irony to the issue of philosophic fraudulence that Bernstein is at times willing to associate with poetry. The cluster is placed in the poem, seemingly, to confront the reader with the non-instrumental quality of the citations that refer to passages in, for example, Xenophon’s _Cyrus_, and that also seem to
have little relevance to the poem’s explicit theme of architecture and metaphysics. Many of them pointedly refer, as with Herodotus and Thucydides, to famous battles, and many simply have no textual referent whatsoever.

Bernstein’s game with his readers intensifies his comment on modernist citation. In the tradition of Pound or Eliot’s citations, one might seek in these citations the key to his modernist collage text. But Bernstein’s inordinate commitment to the non-instrumental side of language renders these citations fundamentally opaque. In this way, Bernstein implicitly critiques the aesthetics of a Pound or Eliot, particularly in their use of citation, as he critiques the metaphysics of a Plato.

But the poem engages platonic metaphysics in further ways. In the poem’s fifth line, among a litany of various “orders”—here Bernstein seems engaged in a Wittgensteinian context play about a single word—is a “geometric order” recalling the lintel of the Lyceum: “Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here.” Later, in noticeably smaller type, Bernstein dangles a fragment: “Idea of explaining the visible world by a postulated invisible world” (The Sophist 84). In the same grain, a report, suitably in indirect discourse (even in iambic pentameter), is offered, where a mysterious “He” says that it is neither water nor any other of the so-called elements, but some other aperion nature, from which come into being all the heavens and the worlds in them. (The Sophist 85)

The mysterious “He” sounds like Plato or an abstract summary of Plato, and this summary would be ironic, since Plato’s initial move is to abstract essences from experience.
On the second and final two pages, however, the term "geometry" is repeated but in a more radically altered context:

GEOmEtry
REgArdEd
As
ImmAnEnt (The Sophist 86)

Here, the word "geometry" itself is defamiliarized in its uncharacteristic capitalization of certain individual letters that constitutes the word. The "immanence" of "geometry" furthers the cause of questioning the validity of the mathematics. It suggests that the idealization of space in math is impossible outside of math's being situated in actual time and space. Moreover, separating the consonants from the vowels also challenges the idealization of linguistics, separating sounds in which the flow of air is staggered from sounds in which the air flows naturally. Here, however, Bernstein's "linguistics" remain rooted in actual statements, much as Wittgenstein would have had it.

"Mathematics" suffers a similar fate in the poem's final page, reduced to being a "Peculiar function," the functionalism of mathematics seen as a decidedly non-ideal signifier of an intellectual condition. The typography of the statement, all in broken, asymmetrical print, is ironically juxtaposed with a statement in italics—"The Fabric of the Heavens,"—that ironizes metaphysics, accentuating their (metaphorical) "fabric." The "peculiar function" is also placed near a witticism fragment on cosmetics, "A perspicuity of blusesse," and an interrupted quotation fragment ("... as though"), the metaphysical essence of which marks a decided challenge to platonic metaphysics in which appearance and essences are sundered and the latter privileged over the former.
The most sustained mediation on these themes occurs in the indented block of print occupying the middle of the poem’s final page.

Disappearance of the----------; the world no longer conceived of as united by its immanent structure, a universe in which change is reduced to relations among \textit{flux} and \textit{logos}—there are some who call it \textit{indifference}—components straining to adapt to one another, fighting each other, coming apart, a periodicity in phenomena alone insufficient to generate a visual differentiation of the various \textit{archai} as well as their ultimate collection into a single layered structure. \textit{(The Sophist 87)}

The passage begins by invoking fellow language poet Ron Silliman’s famous L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E anthology essay, “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World.” The line also rhymes with Marx’s statement about the truth of the world (from “Three or Four”) or Heidegger’s “worlding of the world.” In the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E essay, Silliman discusses language-use functions in the midst of a capitalist economy, and his remarks resonate well with Bernstein’s theory of the amblyopia of language users who miss the brute fact of language when speaking, writing, reading or listening. Bernstein dramatizes such amblyopia by blocking out the word “word” in the Silliman formulation.

Just afterward, however, Bernstein seemingly takes it back by debunking a “world . . . / conceived of as united by its immanent structure.” In the process, Bernstein offers a portrait of the world as Plato might have seen it, a vision “\textit{indifferent}” to the material facts of reality. According to Bernstein, temporality and change would for Plato prove threatening, as “components straining to adapt to / one another, fighting each
other” make it impossible for one pair of eyes to take in the whole. This state of affairs would be “insufficient to generate a visual differentiation of the various / archai.” Again for Bernstein, the solution to the problem of time and difference is not to construct any ideal world behind or above the phenomenally present, but rather to reconcile oneself to such flux by achieving ambi-opia, or “multi-level seeing.”

Plato and Bernstein

When taken together, this approach to Plato, on the one hand, and Bernstein’s title for his collection of poems, on the other, would seem to paint the poet as a self-proclaimed sophist. The logic would run that because Plato offers a perspective on reality and language that is hostile to poetry and poets, why not line up opposite of Plato on other, perhaps more fundamental and well-established issues? If Plato deems sophistry and poetry to constitute different forms of fraudulence, then why not embrace sophistry as a yet more extreme statement of protest? Plato’s simultaneous need to define and exalt the philosopher above all others could be challenged more directly by aligning oneself with sophistry, since poets make no actual claim to be philosophers or to challenge them.

4 This is one of the fundamental arguments of sophism, that, in the words of Protagoras, “man is the measure of all things.” If the standard for judging reality lay in man’s apprehension of the world, then Plato’s valorization of geometry and mathematics is misplaced.
But there are many more reasons to be found in the history of sophistry for recommending connecting Bernstein’s stake in poetry with sophistry. George Kerferd notes, in his *Sophistic Movement*, that the term “sophia,”—the root of “sophist,” “sophistry,” etc.—”was in fact associated with the poet,” among others (24). Moreover, at least one of the more important sophists (Protagoras), emphasized the importance of literature in understanding reality (40). And, W.K.C. Guthrie, in the third volume of his *History of Greek Philosophy*, connects the term “sophistes” not simply to teachers, as was standard (44), but to poets as well (29). According to Guthrie, this was a principle reason Plato must have been troubled about poets as well as these dangerous teachers. Poetry was thus linked with moral instruction and advice, and the deceptive mimetic play of poetry and the arts could only produce appealing half-truths that would lead the youths of Athens astray. The sophist was a deviser or contriver, one who gave off the airs of being a skilled technician, especially in the arts of rhetoric, but was finally a charlatan (30-31).

But the more one pursues an historical and philosophical understanding of sophistry and sophists, the more they would seem to recommend themselves to Bernstein’s understanding of language and poetry. This is especially so considering that Bernstein, while an undergraduate at Harvard in the late 1960s, had the rare opportunity to study with four of the premier English-speaking philosophers of the time: W.V. Quine, Hilary Putnam, John Rawls, and (above all) Stanley Cavell (*My Way* 241-42). Bernstein actually majored in philosophy and his poetics derive from a particular commitment to the materialist, rather than idealist, trends in the history of philosophy. The sophists, in particular, seem to have popularized the materialist outlook.
As a result, further and more significant details of the sophist programme are relevant to Bernstein's apparent engagement with this philosophical theme in his own book of poems, *The Sophist*. At the most general level, the sophists were concerned, as any philosopher of the time would be, with "the nature of truth and above all the relation between what appears and what is real or true, the relation between language, thought and reality" (Kerferd 2). This was so because both Plato and the sophists were laboring to solve some of the various conundrums raised by a significant forerunner, Parmenides, whose statement, "non-being does not exist," abruptly "sundered the world of appearance from the world of being" (Kerferd 71). This statement seems to lie at the source of the ontological and phenomenological disputes that Plato and sophists argued about. Indeed, Plato's own *Sophist* dialogue aims to establish the existence of the sophist, as "fraudulent philosopher," while the platonic "voice," the Visitor from Elea, uses Parmenides statement as his logical point of departure.

In fact, Parmenides' maxim was to become virtually unsolvable, even as Plato in *Sophist* pursued the problem to such an extent that it would appear that Plato's own idealism, or at least the traditional portrait of his idealism, had been compromised. The issue that plagued everyone, it seemed to be, was that if non-being does not exist, then fraudulence does not exist, and consequently there is no difference between Plato's philosophy and that of the sophists, because everything, or to be more specific, every statement, must be true. If one wanted to establish a criterion for truth, Plato reasoned, it had to be elsewhere, and this inevitably had the effect of simultaneously idealizing this
criterion and denigrating phenomenal reality. It seemed one could not have it both ways, that is, grant equal respect to appearance and reality. As a result, the split between idealism and materialism was engendered.

As is well known, Plato took the idealist route, constructing the realm of the forms, a region of absolute truth preceding the truths of speaking in particular and the phenomenal world in general (Kerferd 76). The sophists were also in a difficult position, since they could not, any more than other pretenders to serious thought, brush aside the Eleatic dilemma, which forced a choice between being and becoming, stability and flux, reality and appearance. Since it was no longer possible to have both, the Sophists abandoned the idea of a permanent reality behind appearance in favor of an extreme phenomenalism, relativism and subjectivism. (Guthrie 47)

Bernstein’s decidedly anti-metaphysical views of language and his commitment to the basic citationality both of poetry and of all speaking, would align the poet with the sophists in their own embrace of appearance and phenomenal reality. But there are yet more correspondences since the sophists were also engaged in language play as orators and masters of rhetoric. In corroboration, one of Plato’s ways of attacking the sophists is to characterize them as “antilogikoi” or as experts in the arts of antilogic, which was a technique of earning victory in an argument without concern for the actual truth (Kerferd 62).

In his Plato’s Sophist, Martin Heidegger defines the term antilogikoi tellingly as “semblant artists” (xvi), a term well-befitting Bernstein. The sophist is one who finally possesses a know-how of opinions, appearances and phantasms (xxiii). These sophists, in essence, were actors—yet another category of opprobrium of Plato’s—for they
donned arguments like masks, juxtaposing one argument with another. Such a practice resonates well with Bernstein's own technique of juxtaposing speech and ways of speaking in a single poem or essay. Further, some sophists, like Hippias and Gorgias, occasionally "adopted the principle roles of the rhapsode," a figure who would recite the lines of Homer in a public performance for a prize. This move to take on the role of the rhapsode had the effect of "emphasizing their continuation of the functions of poets in earlier days" (Kerferd 29). In conjunction, Bernstein's writings are driven by the use of multiple voices and personae, a use that has its roots in the practices of sophists.

But perhaps the most significant parallel between Bernstein's poetics and the practices and values of the sophists revolves around the issue of referentiality in speaking. This issue, as it turns out, is also central to Plato's concerns in *Sophist*. The problem for Plato was that the sophists were false philosophers because, in their zeal to win arguments with skillful rhetoric, they would address things in speech that either were not present or did not exist. Plato, on the other hand, wanted to ensure that speaking was in fact referential and that when the spectre of non-being enters the folds of speaking, that is, when one addresses something as something it is not, fraudulence rears its ugly head.

Countering expectation, Plato's dialogue, however, does not finally make this claim, as much as it seems to want to. In the end, Plato's argument is much more complicated and necessitates a closer look at his text that ultimately seems to qualify the idealism particular to the stock portrait of Plato. This investigation has the effect of
revising the way Bernstein’s citationality and interdisciplinarity must be understood. This split between idealism and phenomenalism, between Plato and sophism, is finally too simplistic to describe accurately the issues at stake in Bernstein’s writings.

As already remarked, the dialogue’s basic purpose is to establish the existence of the sophist construed as a false philosopher. This involves thinking the conditions of appearance for fraudulence in speaking. To do so, one, according to Plato, must take as a basic assumption Parmenides assertion that non-being does not exist, else how could we speak of it? According to Martin Heidegger, Plato’s (and Aristotle’s) view is that “truth, unconcealedness, is not at home in logos” (Plato’s Sophist 127), and Plato must show where it is in fact at home. Heidegger further discloses Plato’s stumbling block: “But if not in logos, the positive question arises: where then? From this point we acquire again an orientation toward the central question of the Sophist, the question of the being of deception, whether there is such a thing as non-being, whether non-being is” (Plato’s Sophist 127).

The great irony is that, in setting up the dialogue in these ways, Plato forces himself to the conclusion, overturning Parmenides, that not only does non-being, in fact, exist but that non-being is equivalent to the concept of difference. As the Visitor of Elea remarks, “it seems that when we say that which is not, we don’t say something contrary to that which is, but only something different from it” (Plato 51). Heidegger’s gloss on this passage is instructive: “Thus we do not have here radical opposing of non-being and Being or an entwining of both . . . , but instead being is not, yet not in the sense of the non-being, but differently; and non being is, yet not in the sense of being, but
This conclusion has the effect of forcing Plato to look more closely at the phenomenal world than the traditional portrait of Plato, emphasizing above all his world-withering idealism, would allow.

Second, Plato concludes that being and non-being frequently mix, especially in language. This point leads Plato to suggest that a relational and differential system of being establishes the conditions of possibility for any statement. The Visitor from Elea at one point argues to Theaetetus that “it’s inept to try to separate everything from everything else. It’s the sign of a completely unmusical and unphilosophical person” (Plato 54). Further, “to dissociate each thing from everything else is to destroy totally everything there is to say. The weaving together of forms is what makes speech possible for us” (Plato 54). In Heidegger’s formulation

Plato discovers this *eteron* ['other'] precisely in the sophist, in a certain sense for the first time as a particular kind of non-being and precisely as the kind that does not express a total difference from the other, or from the one in relation to which it is the other, but instead expresses the fact that every being, insofar as it is, is itself and something other. (*Plato’s Sophist* 329).

Fraudulence is thus possible, because “if [being] doesn’t blend with [non-being] then everything has to be true. But if it does then there will be false belief and false speech, since falsity in thinking and speaking amount to believing and saying [non-being]” (Plato 55).

In this way Plato’s well-known attack on mimesis is compromised. All speech is “speech about something” (Plato 58) and if speech addresses a being as a being it produces truth in the form of likenesses or icons rather than in the form of deceiving appearances or simulacra (Plato 64). This opposition of Plato’s has great significance
both for Bernstein’s investigation of the sophist and for the citationality of his writing. The consequences flowing from Bernstein’s donning the mask of the sophist are only superficially antagonistic to Plato, as the move has the final effect of awakening one to important nuances in Plato, poetry and citation that have largely been misunderstood.

Likewise, Plato rejects the system of referentiality that is frequently attributed to him. Because it becomes possible to address something as something else, fraudulence is possible. In Heidegger’s reading of the issue, all speech “signifies,” “means something,” is “understandable. But to mean something in this way and at the same time to let the thing meant show itself in this meaning—that does not occur in all speech” (124). Because logos, or speech, enables a seeing of something only as something in terms of something else, it creates the possibility of distortion. “That is, because this logos is a showing which lets that about which it speaks be seen as something, there remains the possibility that the thing might get distorted through the ‘as’ and that deception would arise. Something can be distorted only if it is grasped in terms of something else” (Heidegger 125). If, on the other hand, the “as” is well-tempered, a truthful image emerges.5

A close look at Plato’s Sophist and Heidegger’s reading of the dialogue offers a very different Plato from the traditional one. This has important implications, as we shall see, for the status of Bernstein’s critiques of idealism and instrumental writing. But the complications even manage to reach deeper levels. Stanley Rosen’s account of

5 This is a problem similar to the one of seeing with which Wittgenstein struggles, as outlined in chapter one.
Plato, in his *Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry* (1988) offers an even more unconventional portrait of Plato. Rosen's work settles the issues for Plato between philosophy and poetry that so preoccupy Bernstein.

Rosen's account offers a far more nuanced understanding both of Plato of the key issues involved here, than any other advanced in this context. The crucial issue, for Rosen, revolves around a troubling paradox. One of Plato's purposes in siding with philosophy, in the conflict between philosophy and poetry, is to argue the inferiority of art and poetry, because art and poetry ultimately offer a weak mimesis or "falsehoods masquerading as truths" (Rosen 1). But, of course, to do so Plato also resorts to art and poetry of a sort to make this point.

Rosen argues convincingly that because Plato indulged in poetry himself despite his apparent ideas, this obvious problem in his corpus is no mere superficial problem, for it rather touches on the finally dualistic core of Plato's project. This is so even as Plato's condemnation of mimesis depends, as Compagnon puts it, on an "effet de mimésis" (110). When Socrates, in the *Republic* implies that the "philosopher who, like Socrates, constructs the city in his discourse, engages in prosodic mimesis of the political 'Idea,'" whether one calls this mimesis poetry or not is irrelevant to its productive or demiurgic, as well as to its mimetic character (Rosen 5). Consequently, there is no "noetic apprehension" or "pure seeing" of the Platonic forms; rather, Plato's idealism is "saturated with mimesis" (Rosen 5).

Rosen pursues the apparent conflict between philosophy and poetry through all its twists and turns in Plato and the conclusion he draws is striking. Plato's move to banish the poets from the Republic is usually presented as a consequence of Plato's
apparent distrust of mimesis. If the artisan’s production of, for instance, beds are somewhat removed from the ideal form of a bed, then the painter’s painting of a bed must therefore be even further removed from that ideal bed, so long as the artist imitates the artisan’s work.

As a result, the grounds for Plato’s condemnation of poets would appear to be ontological and phenomenological. But, as Rosen will argue, this is only apparently so. As one reads the Republic closely, it becomes clear that two other frameworks control Plato’s condemnation of mimesis. Even more significant than the apparent ontological condemnation is the political and moral condemnation. The trouble with aesthetic representation is that such representation presents the possibility of deceiving others with its misleading, simulacral resemblance to the truth. In the Republic, however, this occasions for Plato moral and political problems.

The defect of mimetic art is political or moral, not ontological or phenomenological. Its danger lies, not in an abstract misrepresentation of the eidetic hierarchy, but in the concrete misrepresentation of the moral character of the gods, in a favorable representation of immoral human beings, and in general, in the misuse of mimesis by which the same man is led to imitate many things, rather than the one thing he imitates best. (Rosen 9-10).

Rosen further makes it clear, along the way, that the ontological or phenomenological dimension of mimesis is secondary to the political and moral dimensions when he points out that Socrates advocates the “noble lie” as a medicinal way of keeping order among the citizens of the perfect state. The philosophers are permitted this indiscretion because they are aware of what they are doing, are not themselves deceived as to the false appearances they are manipulating. In fact, even the philosophers never actually accomplish pure knowledge of the forms, mainly because
Socrates (and Plato) never make it entirely clear what that knowledge would look like. In any case, "full knowledge of the nature of philosophy is politically unnecessary and (since [in the Republic] it is suppressed) undesirable" (Rosen 12). So, it cannot be, especially when considering the other nuances of Plato's rejection of poets, that mimesis as such is deeply offensive to Plato.

Thus the implications of Plato's rejection of mimesis must be understood in a moral or political framework. But even this framework withers before one final context that states the matter most clearly. Ultimately, the principle problem Plato has with poetry and mimetic arts is erotic, as mimesis in this respect involves both desire and production. The mimetic arts, it seems, provoke too much untempered desire in the citizens of Athens. But mimesis really is not at issue in this formulation, since Plato's fear derives from the problems inherent in poiesis, in "making." The principle fear is the fear of narcissism, that where Plato, in the Republic (and in the Ion) emphasizes the erotic and intoxicating effects of artistic production, both on the maker and the audience, his real fear is ironically that the maker will elide the difference between himself and his product. This seems a crucial portion of Plato's anxiety about Protagoras' maxim, "Man is the measure of all things."

It would, in the worst-case scenario according to Plato, produce such extreme mirror play that only the self would be produced, and that this would falsely stand in for more than the producer or simply encourage others to indulge themselves in their own vices. If the problem of poetry is at base the problem of other minds—and one might also describe the problem of citation in the same way—then poetry needs philosophy to help it escape the prison of selfhood. So, images as such are not the problem; it is
simply misleading, narcissistic images that threaten the *Republic*. The desired alternative, in Plato's scheme, are images that do not merely reflect the producer but, as Stanley Cavell might have put it, situate themselves next to us and hold our being within their own.

Plato's critique of image-making, Rosen notes, is ultimately tied to an argument about what constitutes the good life, especially as demonstrated in the *Philebus*.

Poets and philosophers in their conventional identities are quarreling about the best human life, and so, not about eternity, but rather about the artifacts that render eternity accessible. Poetry, like philosophy, when each is taken apart from the other, runs the risk of replacing the whole by the part, or in other words of replacing the original with the image. (Rosen 26)

So, in the end, there is no actual quarrel between philosophy and poetry, but rather each is necessary to temper the other.

Stanley Cavell's remarks about the opposition between philosophy and poetry are also on point here. In an essay on Wittgenstein, Cavell shows that while Wittgenstein cannot be read as conventional philosophy, his work pushes the bounds of philosophy to approach literature, even as his work is nonetheless not poetry. The "rigor" of "self-descriptions" in Wittgenstein's text "is meant as evidently philosophical; but it is a rigor that—puzzling as this may at first sound—essentially and explicitly claims something like beauty for certain of its characteristic passages" (*Reader* 373).

Cavell argues that Wittgenstein's writing certainly has the effect of "challenging any given distinction between supposed genres of philosophy and literature" (*Reader* 373). Still, "it does not follow that the distinction between philosophy and literature is thereby meant to be levelled..." Instead, "the genres occur simultaneously and
perhaps work to deepen their differences, even to bring them to a crisis.” So,
Wittgenstein’s writing (and I would include Bernstein’s writing in this formulation) may
just as easily rehabilitate the distinction on different grounds. If in Wittgenstein’s
philosophical inquiry into language, the Austrian philosopher notices how poetic
philosophy can be, then in Bernstein’s poetic inquiry into language, the poet flirts with
philosophy.

Cavell further manages to state the issues with Bernstein’s interest in the sophist
issue clearly, and Cavell’s remarks also explain the basic issue with citation. The
problem with the sophist necessarily involves the basic question of fraudulence.
According to Cavell, Wittgenstein’s philosophic project seems to open itself up to what
would seem not to be a philosophical ways of investigating. “Wittgenstein’s originality
[is] to have internalized the issue of philosophy’s enmity toward a kind of charlatry (a
test of its seriousness) by concluding forced or fixated or otherwise inauthentic
responses to philosophical perplexity as an essential part of the investigation of those
perplexities” (373). In Cavell’s understanding, this same problem of fraudulence occurs
in the author for the first time and with particular insistence in modernism.

Assessing Bernstein

This conclusion might disconcert the Bernstein who stresses so relentlessly the
non-instrumental qualities of language as central to the poetic enterprise specifically and
all expression in general. Certainly, Bernstein would hardly object to the possibility that
his own severe commitment to the material nature of art ends up producing ideas. This is indeed what he aiming for; the trouble would occur where this commitment ironically (or paradoxically) leads to dematerializing the medium. Jon Erickson has noticed this trend in postmodern art that turns aside from the principle of “expressive labor” common to modernist art in favor of a very different alternative, which had its origins in Duchamps’s ready-mades: “conceptual investment” (7). The appropriative, specifically citational nature of Bernstein’s work would align him with Duchamps. This is the same mood in which Bernstein’s stress on the material qualities of language may be taken.

So, a kind of negative idealism slips in through the back door of Bernstein’s project, one might well argue. In this sense, Bernstein would be seen as simply an inverted form of Plato, one who wishes so much to counter Plato’s idealism that he ends by creating a different species of the same idealism. Plato might then (correctly) see Bernstein’s images as simularial and misleading.

This argument makes a good deal of sense but it does not account very well for the refinements in Bernstein’s work in recent years, not to mention other more salutary moods, like those found in “Artifice of Absorption” and “Dystraphism.” To account for such refinements, we will note that Bernstein has recoiled a bit from the inordinate emphasis he has placed on the material aspects of language. Bernstein has tempered his approach to language by embracing the instrumental, more signifying element of writing and poetry, and this may be why his essays are often considered to be more important writings than his ostensible poems.
If in Bernstein’s apparent need to let the principles of difference, materiality and chance rule his poetry, he runs the risk of presuming that he actually retains access to such principles absolutely and that this engenders a kind of negative idealism despite his best efforts. The antidote to this paradox, it seems, would be to follow the advice of a Stanley Rosen and, oddly, a Plato, both of whom tend to stress the dualistic nature of expression and representation, for in Rosen’s terms, “dualism is the king of all men” (26). Tempering a commitment to making extensive use of the material features of language in writing poetry, would be to acknowledge the ways in which identity is nevertheless created, despite that difference precedes it.

Bernstein has managed to do this in two of his recent publications My Way (1999) and Close Listening (1999). In the latter, an anthology of essays that Bernstein edits on the auditory element of contemporary poetry, Bernstein makes an apparently uncharacteristic move by embracing what he terms as “iconicity.”

Iconicity refers to associations with timbre or intonation or patterning. Iconicity refers to the ability of language to present, rather than represent or designate, its meaning. Here meaning is not something that accompanies the word but is to foreground the various iconic features of language—to perform the verbalness of language. The poetry reading, as much as the page, is the site for such performance. (Close Listening 17)

Ironically, Bernstein has come to the same conclusion about poetry and mimesis that Rosen’s Plato does, that the quarrel between poetry and philosophy is ultimately a question of which representations and images succeed, not an issue of whether truth lay outside of image making. This position seems to bring Bernstein’s poetic to a kind of
fruition, where the writer no longer seeks the inverted form of purity based on the
materiality of language. Or, this position is moderated with an acknowledgment of its
inevitable contamination with abstraction.

As we have seen, Bernstein's understanding of a citational poetics necessarily
involves a strong commitment to the non-instrumental side of language. This is a
brilliant first move, since it helps to enhance the traditional understanding of citation by
noting the formalistic elements of citation, forms that Compagnon has noticed as well. It
becomes necessary, however, for one to acknowledge the conceptual and traditional
element of citation, that citations do illustrate. They do so despite however much the
standard understanding of citation may be demystified to show the inevitable gap
between cited text and proper text, not to mention all of the language and
representational play that occurs when one attempts to let one expression stand in for or
support another. Such is in the inevitable hybridity and the essential dichotomy of
citation.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

If there is one lesson in the foregoing critical narrative, it is that, for poetry to make productive use of citation, the use made of citation must be faithful to the essence of citation. Such a proposition is simple enough, except that citation's nature is profoundly hybrid and at war with itself, as it both illustrates and displaces the citing text. As Leonard Diepeveen has presented it, Eliot, Pound and others found the intrusion of the words and texts of others to be a refreshing way of communicating and intensifying poetic themes. Pound's *Cantos*, however, more than any other modernist text, has pointed the way to the citational poets of the present who wish to make use of inherited language for different ends, ends that accommodate to a greater and greater extent, the capacity of citations to displace the surrounding text.

At the same time, however, a certain risk follows on the heels of such a way of using citation, just as it follows on the heels of any citational poetics. The risk is that displacement and citational rupture become ends in themselves. If this risk is realized, the consequence is that the motive of using citation in poetry in order to render the text more concrete oddly turns back upon itself and produces a writing that is highly abstract. Although Eliot and Pound did not have to face such a risk head on, the
danger of undisciplined dispersal, of merely reflecting the animistic life of language itself without any hint of a consciousness organizing the language, is the postmodern heritage of Ashbery and Bernstein.

Significantly, both Ashbery and Bernstein run this risk in different ways and in doing so both of them imagine an interdisciplinarity foretold by citation's hybrid nature. Once citation becomes important, even necessary, as a prosodic device, the poet making use of the citation becomes aware of citation's double nature, making it impossible for a poet to stay within the bounds of what traditionally passes for poetry. Thus, both Ashbery and Bernstein have latched on to another discipline as a symptom of their extreme citationality. In an age when poetry is inevitably corrupted by the multifarious discourses surrounding it—from fresh advertising copy to worn-out proverbial expressions—writers like Ashbery and Bernstein somehow require a sister discipline to tell the divided tale of citation.

But both Ashbery and Bernstein are nevertheless from separate generations, however much they are both contemporaries and united by citational preoccupations and moods such as these. As Marjorie Perloff has put it in one essay, there have been generally two phases of postmodernism.¹ On the one hand, was the early utopian phase of postmodernism in the 1970s, which found its voice among post-minimalist artists who were managing the contamination of art with other elements. Conceptual art and performance art were two examples of such utopian postmodernism. On the other hand, was (is?) the postmodern phase that linked itself with continental

philosophy and “theory.” Such a trend was exemplified in the language poetry of the
eighties, as writers like Ron Silliman and Bob Perelman used Marxist and post-
structuralist writings to generate a “textual politics.”

In this scheme, Ashbery, preoccupied by the visual arts to a great extent, and
likewise making himself more into an interdisciplinary writer than a poet, belongs to
the utopian phase of postmodernism. Bernstein, a Language poet himself and
probably the most famous member of this “group,” belongs to postmodernism’s
second phase, which found continental philosophy to be extremely important,
particularly those writings from both the left-Marxist tradition (Marx, Lukacs,
Gramsci, Althusser) and those from the French post-structuralism (Derrida,
Beauvillard, Deleuze and Guattari). The distinct interests of Ashbery and Bernstein
would probably appear odd to each other. Ashbery’s temperament would likely
distrust philosophy as “the costly stuff of explanation,” and Bernstein would likely see
Ashbery’s commitments as both unintellectual and apolitical.

To be sure, surrealism interests both Ashbery and Bernstein, but even within
this context can one see stark differences between the two writers, differences that also
have much to say about each writer’s respective citationality. Surrealism is an

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2 See generally George Hartley, Textual Politics and the Language Poets (Bloomington: U of

Bernstein’s only published remarks on Ashbery are included in the colloquy
“Characterization” (with Tom Mandel, Ron Silliman, Michael Palmer, Barrett Watten, Bob Perelman,
Larry Eigner, Carla Harryman, Robert Grenier, Stephen Rodefer, Lyn Hejinian, and Susan Bee)
surprisingly, Bernstein deems Ashbery’s The Tennis Court Oath as Ashbery’s “best book” (433), a
remark that is part of a larger, and partially correct, challenge to the widespread critical acclaim
Ashbery received in the seventies. Bernstein argued that Ashbery’s more challenging work was ignored
by critics who celebrated Ashbery’s “tamer” writing of the seventies. But more challenging does not
necessarily mean better.

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attractive art movement for both, because it shows the principles of assemblage. But surrealism is a problem for both because of its psychologism and its preoccupation with the unconscious.

The is problem was to be greater for Bernstein than it was for Ashbery, however, and the ways in which each writer responds to this dimension of surrealism foretells how it is that each makes use of citation. Ashbery invested more time and effort than did Bernstein to understand the nature of surrealism. Where Bernstein simply rejected the essentializing aspects of surrealism—those that posited the unconscious as a special repository of truth—Ashbery found greater complexity in the issue. Ashbery's ultimate conclusion about surrealism both noted and accepted the inevitable corruption of surrealism, its merging of opposites—of high and low, for instance, or of abstraction and figuration. And Ashbery's acceptance of the corruption of surrealism conditions in a profound way his citationality that tends to respect and make use of, for aesthetic purposes, both capacities of citation, that to illustrate and that to displace.

Bernstein, however, only seems intermittently capable of acknowledging such corruption, wishing instead to achieve some sort of citational purity in which the non-instrumental power of citation, that is, citation's capacity to displace the surrounding text, overwhelms absolutely the capacity of citation to illustrate. It seems generally true that in Language poetry such extremities have found their advocates, and it is for this reason that the limits of citational poetics have already been forged. Employing the Kant of the Critique of Judgment to discuss the art of modernism and postmodernism, Stephen Melville offers a useful paradigm for understanding this
citational dynamic. Bernstein, developing as a writer during the 1980s, has exemplified the postmodern concern with blocking the reader's access to the writing. In Kantian terms, this experience of reading involves an experience of the sublime, in part a painful experience that rather underscores the inability of human beings to comprehend the overwhelming nature of language itself (Vision 14). In contrast, Ashbery is more to be associated with Kant's experience of the beautiful, a more pleasurable experience in which the reader or viewer, by virtue of encountering the artwork, feels a sense of attunement with the world and other human beings (Vision 13).

In the end, two things seem certain. One is that long gone are the days when the insertion of a quotation in a poem was a revolutionary act as to poetry or aesthetics. Now, quotations are just one citational device for poets who have noticed the increasingly citational nature of all utterance. Another point of certainty is that Ashbery, and particularly Bernstein, mark the outer limit of citational poetics, one in which writers explore, as much as possible, the capacity of citations to displace the citing text, as such citations are equated with the non-instrumentality of language.
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