Language Poetry and Ecopoetry: A Shared Pragmatic Work in A.R. Ammons, Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, and W.S. Merwin

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Abstract

The central aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that A.R. Ammons, Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, and W.S. Merwin commit to a pragmatic poetic project of working language to facilitate cultural renewal. In illuminating this shared pragmatic work in poems from the turn of the 1990s, the thesis contradicts ecocritical assertions about the inimical relationship between ecopoetry and postmodern poetries such as Language. As ecocriticism established itself as a school of literary criticism in the 1990s, its proponents were damning of the influence postmodern literary theory was exerting on American poetry. Ecocritics argued that postmodernism had dangerously devalued the referential relationship between word and world at a time of escalating environmental crises. Taking Bernstein and Howe as representatives of Language poetry, and Ammons and Merwin as representatives of ecopoetry, the thesis will contest this ecocritical argument by illustrating that these four poets share a vision of poetry as a uniquely positioned medium for rejuvenating language and, subsequently, shifting cultural attitudes in a politically progressive manner.

In order to make this argument, the thesis builds on a body of literary criticism which explores American poetry's debt to American pragmatism. Critics connecting poetry to pragmatism have argued that pragmatists such as William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Ralph Waldo Emerson have helped American poets establish an epistemological middle ground between foundationalism and the sceptical side of postmodernism. The poets studied in this thesis extend this tradition of pragmatic poetry by using their writing to engage in an ongoing poetic rejuvenation of language and ideology. Furthermore, the thesis shows how these poets' pragmatic approach to language and epistemology aligns them the 'progressive' side of the Culture Wars which were erupting in the early 1990s.

Contents

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Introduction:

Section One: Language Poetry and Ecopoetry

Objectives

This thesis looks at work published around the turn of the 1990s by A.R. Ammons, Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, and W.S. Merwin. These four poets can, due to their affiliation with particular genres of poetry, be divided into two groups: Language poets and ecopoets. On the basis of differences between the two groups' reputed relationships with postmodern literary theory, there would appear to be a degree of conflict between the two groups. Language poetry offers a theory based poetics that foregrounds the irreconcilable gap between language and the reality it seeks to represent. Indeed, Language poets are praised by critics including Marjorie Perloff, Lee Bartlett, Geoff Ward, and Jerome McGann for reinvigorating the politics of contemporary poetry by embracing continental philosophy.[1] Kate Soper, Nick Selby, and Scott Knickerbocker argue that ecocriticism took an antagonistic stance to postmodernism and literary theory as it burgeoned as a branch of literary study in the 1990s.[2] Founding ecocritics such as Leonard Scigaj and Lawrence Buell express concerns in their work from this period that, due to the influence literary theory was wielding in contemporary poetry in the 1990s, poets were turning a blind eye to the world beyond language at a time of environmental crisis.[3] These critics subsequently

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[1] Marjorie Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), p. 161; Lee Bartlett, 'What is "Language Poetry"?', *Critical Inquiry*, 12.4 (Summer 1986), 741-752 (p. 745); Jerome J. McGann, 'Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes', *Critical Inquiry,* 13.3 (Spring 1987), 624-647 (p. 626); Geoff Ward, *Language Poetry and the American Avant-Garde* (Keele: British Association for American Studies, 1993), p. 16.

[2] Kate Soper, *What is Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1995), p. 151; Nick Selby, 'Ecopoetries in America', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945*, ed. by Jennifer Ashton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 127-142 (p. 128); Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), pp. 2-3.

[3] Leonard Scigaj, *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky 1999), p. 27. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text; Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau,*

praise poets such as Ammons and Merwin for continuing to engage with non-human nature in their poetry in the face of contemporary poetry's preoccupation with the materiality of language. Taking Ammons and Merwin as representatives of ecopoetry, and Bernstein and Howe as representatives of Language poetry, this thesis will debunk the notion that the politics of ecocriticism and of postmodern poetry are inimical by showing that these poets share a vision of poetry as a uniquely positioned medium for rejuvenating language and, subsequently, shifting cultural attitudes and knowledge in a politically progressive manner.

This thesis refers to this process of linguistic rejuvenation as a form of poetic 'work'. This term describes these writers' poetic processes especially well due to their treatment of the writing of poetry as a form of labour, with the new meanings or values that the poem yields being the product of that labour. As Section Two of this introduction will demonstrate, by attempting to work language in this way, these four writers extend a tradition of pragmatic poetic practice which originates with Ralph Waldo Emerson. The poets share the position on epistemology advanced by Emerson in 'Experience' and 'The Poet', essays which dictate that human knowledge of reality is limited and that, subsequently, our ability to successfully navigate our experiences in the world depends on our willingness to continually reassess and adapt the truths we hold about reality.[4] The poets I analyse in this thesis also follow Emerson by treating writing as a means of catalysing this rejuvenation of knowledge and values. The employment of the term 'work' is not only, then, inspired by these poets' shared sense of writing as a form of labour, but also by the notion that this process is an ongoing one. Rather than approaching poetry as a means of expressing values or meanings that already exist, in other words, the writers analysed treat poetry as a practice with which one must continually engage to refresh perceptions of reality.

There is a further layer to this argument in that the poets analysed in this thesis see a political element to this poetic work. These four poets all feel that the epistemological insight their poetry provides can challenge the dominance of one ideology. Whilst each poet has their own political focus, the positions they take on these

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Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 62, p. 96, p. 102.

[4] Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Experience', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Richard Poirier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 216-234; Emerson, 'The Poet', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, pp. 197-215.

issues find them similarly positioned on the 'progressive' side of the Culture Wars, which took place in the early 1990s in America. According to James Davison Hunter, at the turn of the 1990s Americans were especially polarised on issues such as abortion, gay rights, women's rights, and multiculturalism. The two sides of this 'War' consisted, Hunter claims, of Americans that shared a 'progressive' '*tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life*' (Hunter's emphasis), and those that exhibit an 'orthodox' tendency to '[commit] to an external, definable, and transcendent authority'.[5] As will be established later in this introduction, there is a strong element of compatibility between the epistemological outlooks of pragmatism and progressivism. For this reason, I will clarify in my conclusion how my findings throughout the thesis about the pragmatic qualities in my four chosen poets' work aligns them with the 'progressive' side in the Culture Wars. This will add another dimension to my argument that the politics of ecopoets and Language poets are closer in the 1990s than a reader of ecocriticism might think.

The thesis consists of six chapters: an introduction; chapters on Bernstein, Ammons, Merwin, and Howe (in that order); and a conclusion. Each chapter except for the conclusion is divided into two sections. The first sections of each chapter could be roughly described as diagnostic. The first sections of the Ammons and Bernstein chapters are diagnostic in the sense that they identify features of these two poets' work which reinforce the idea that postmodern poetries and ecopoetries are inimical. The first sections of the chapters on Howe and Merwin analyse how each poet diagnoses a particular political issue in their work. The second sections of these chapters then proceed to show how its chosen writer's treatment of poetry as a form of pragmatic work resolves these problems. The second sections of the chapters on Ammons and Bernstein show how, despite their differences, these two poets are ultimately united in using poetry to rejuvenate language in an Emersonian fashion. The second sections of the chapters on Howe and Merwin show how both poets see the poetic working of language as a means of combatting the issues they identify. In terms of this introduction, Section One will explain how and why the idea of a conflict between Language poetry and ecopoetry has emerged and touch on some of the ways in which this idea can be deconstructed. Section Two will set out the thesis' concept of poetic

[5] James Davison Hunter, *The Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), pp. 44-45.

'work' so that it can be applied to the poetry of Ammons, Bernstein, Howe and, Merwin in subsequent chapters.

Language Poetry

Both Howe and Bernstein are affiliates of the Language group. Whilst Howe is by her own admission not 'a hard-core Language poet', especially when compared to Bernstein, who is an emblematic figure within the group, both poets are connected to Language through their readership, avenues of publication, and, more importantly, through their shared interest in deconstructing linguistic and literary conventions.[6] Poets associated with Language have, to varying degrees, treated their grouping under such a name with suspicion and, in turn, critics are tentative in their attempts to define Language poetry. George Hartley writes that the Language group can, most loosely, be described as consisting of a selection of poets who were born between 1940-50, and who are published in the same anthologies, including *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* and *In the American Tree,* as well as poetry magazines such as *This, Tottel's,* and *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*.[7] Key names affiliated with Language poetry include Ron Silliman, Bernstein, Barrett Watten, and Steve McCafferey, who Marjorie Perloff names Language poetry's 'founding fathers', as well as Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman, and Howe.[8]

Critics such as Perloff, Bartlett, Michael Greer, and McGann argue that a key point of similarity between poets grouped under this name is that they adapt poststructuralist and Marxist theory to poetry. For Perloff, Language poetry was at its core 'essentially a Marxist poetics that focused, in important ways, on issues of ideology and class' but which also 'owes its greatest debt to French post-structuralism'.[9] Similarly, in 'Ideology and Theory in Recent Experimental Writing', Greer argues that 'the unity of 'language poetry' as a theoretical project' is 'constructed' through 'an explicit engagement with several competing theories of language and subjectivity',

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[6] Susan Howe and Maureen N. McLane, 'Susan Howe, The Art of Poetry, No.97', *The Paris Review* (2012) <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6189/the-art-of-poetry-no-97-susan-howe> [accessed 25 September 2016]

[7] George Hartley, *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989), p. xi.

[8] *Differentials*, p. 162.

[9] Ibid, p. 158.

specifically Marxist criticism and poststructuralism.[10] McGann proposes that a central ambition of the Language poets was to 'marry the work of the fifties' New American Poetry with the post-structural work of the late sixties and seventies'.[11] Bartlett states that Language poetry embraces a 'critique' that is 'leftist' and a 'critical activity of deconstruction'.[12] Linda Reinfeld also centralises the influence of 'ideology critique' and 'literary theory' in her description of Language poetry when she notes how the movement 'flourishes within an open intellectual community whose participants share a lively interest in Continental writers' such as 'Ludwig Wittgenstein, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Jacques Derrida'.[13]

Language poetry's theoretically sophisticated critique is commonly argued to have two key targets: the dominant workshop model poem and the capitalist ideology which such poems help consolidate. Of these two targets, critics are generally more willing to endorse Language's critique of the former. Hartley argues that Language poets can be identified through their 'poetic concerns' about 'the dominant model for poetic production and reception today -- the so-called voice poem'. What particularly worries Language poets about the 'voice poem', Hartley argues, is its '[dependence] on a model of communication that needs to be challenged: the notion that the poet (a self-present subject) transmits a particular message ('experience,' 'emotion') to a reader (another self-present subject) through a language which is neutral, transparent, 'natural'.'[14] Perloff also acknowledges the extent to which Language poets were united by their scepticism of the voice poem in 'Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject' when she explains that Language poetry heavily invested in 'theories of the postmodern' such as the 'demise of the transcendental Ego, of the authentic self, of the Poet as lonely Genius, of a unique artistic style'.[15]

In another essay, 'After Language Poetry', Perloff also highlights the extent to which Language poetry was resistant to, in Bernstein's words, the 'official verse

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[10] Michael Greer, 'Ideology and Theory in Recent Experimental Writing or, the Naming of "Language Poetry"', *Boundary 2*, 16.2/3, (1989), 335-355 (p. 344).

[11] McGann, p. 626.

[12]Bartlett, p. 745.

[13] Linda Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p. 3.

[14] Hartley, p. xii.

[15] *Differentials*, p. 132.

culture' which dominated American poetry. Perloff states that by the mid-seventies, continental theorists had produced 'a highly sophisticated and challenging body of texts about the nature and function of *écriture* or *writing*' that were 'studied on every campus across the U.S.'. Perloff presents the poetry of this time as being predominantly out of step with such developments due to the fact that 'workshop poetry across the United States was wedded to a kind of neo-confessionalist, neo-realist poetic discourse' and was 'designed for those whose intellect was not up to reading Barthes or Foucault or Kristeva'. In light of this, Perloff posits that Language poetry was highly influential in helping return poetry to intellectual relevance by emphasising that 'the subject […] was itself a complex construction' and, subsequently, that 'there was actually something at stake in producing a body of poems, and that poetic discourse belonged to the same universe as philosophical and political discourse'.[16] Bartlett similarly sees Language poetry as attempting to disrupt mainstream poetry's pacification of readers, citing *American Poetry Review* as an example of a publication that 'can be read (like a Mickey Spillane novel) with slack attention while waiting for a bus'.[17] Like Perloff, Bartlett sees Language as reinvigorating the intellectuality of American poetry by challenging such standards of poetry.

Critics tend to find Language poetry's loftier claims to iconoclasm less convincing. Ron Silliman's 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World' (hereafter shortened to 'Disappearance of the Word'), which opens the 'Writing and Politics' section of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, is the archetypal Language poetry manifesto due to the manner in which it clearly articulates how poetry can work to expose the capitalist manipulation of its subjects through language. Bartlett praises this essay as an especially articulate statement of the ambitions of Language poetry's 'ongoing political analysis', whilst Greer argues that the essay is emblematic of Language's 'impulse to move outside the dominant terminology in order to re-think the relation of poetry to history and historical development'.[18] In the essay's opening pages, Silliman provides a variety of examples of 'social phenomena' that he argues demonstrate the commodification of language, including the misspelling of film subtitles, the popularity of speed-reading, and the use of small print in advertising and

[16] *Differentials*, p. 161.

[17] Bartlett, p. 747.

[18] Bartlett, pp. 745-746; Greer, p. 346.

packaging to distract consumers from certain information.[19] Silliman argues that there is a correlation between the 'capitalist stage of development' and the 'anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word' and he argues that these examples are evidence of the extent to which capitalism has fetishised language. Silliman argues that these phenomena, although being products of different industries, are connected by their '[total] attention to the development of all visio-spatial information', a prioritisation of the world's signifieds over the signifier of the word which Silliman describes in his paper's title. Essentially, Silliman argues that by manipulating subjects into seeing language as a transparent medium which communicates meanings that exist independently of language, capitalism is able to take the meaning making process of language out of the arena of social production and to subsequently pass on 'its own mode of reality […] through language' so that it is 'imposed on its speakers' (p. 125, p. 121, p. 131).

Ultimately, these claims lead Silliman to state the role poetry can play in combatting this 'imposition' of a capitalist 'mode of reality' on 'speakers':

> By recognizing itself as the *philosophy of practice in language,* poetry can work to search out the preconditions of post-referential language within the existing social fact. This requires (1) recognition of the historic nature and structure of referentiality, (2) placing the issue of language, the repressed element, at the center of the program, and (3) placing the program into the context of conscious class struggle.[20]

The 'post-referential language' Silliman refers to is not a language devoid of referentiality, rather it is a language which has moved beyond the referential fetish described in his essay. Crucially, Silliman's ideal political poetry will not yet aim to establish the conditions for the 'post-referential' language but will rather achieve the 'preconditions' for it, preparing the ground on which such a language might be built. It is in this sense that a Language poem works towards a political goal and it is this rather

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[19] Ron Silliman, 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World', in *The Language Book*, ed. by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), pp. 121-132 (p. 121). Further references to this essay are given after quotations in the text.

[20] Silliman, p. 131.

technical and abstract approach to political writing that, as this introduction will illustrate shortly, frustrates ecocritics and ecopoets.

Not only does Bernstein outline a similar approach to political poetry in several essays in *Content's Dream* (1986), a point which will be expanded on in Chapter One, but his poetry often disrupts poetic conventions in a manner that embraces Silliman's ambitious program for poetry. An example of such a poem is 'Standing Target', which opens with the following lines:

> Deserted all sudden a all
> Or gloves of notion, seriously
> Foil sightings, polite society
> Verge at just about characterized
> Largely a base, cups and
> And gets to business, hands
> Like "hi", gnash, aluminum foil[21]

The poem baffles its reader from the start by opening with a line that is neither grammatically correct ('a all') nor syntactically coherent. The opening line is a jumbled version of a one-line stanza found later in the poem which reads '*All of a sudden all deserted*', but given that the meaning of this later line is itself ambiguous, it would be false to suggest that Bernstein expects us to decode this opening line. Bernstein knows, furthermore, that having been thrown by the opening line, the reader will be frustrated by the conjunction 'or' in the second line as this suggests that our understanding of this more syntactically sound (but nevertheless vague) line is dependent on our understanding of the first line.

Lines three and four suggest that Bernstein is formulating a comment on 'polite society' and its passive aggressive tendency to form expedient categorisations of people, or as the poem puts it, its tendency to 'Verge at just about characterized'. The 'Foil sightings' might, in this sense, pertain to the way that people who question the official narrative set by a dominant power are dismissively 'characterized' as cartoonish, paranoid wearers of foil hats. At the same time, the final three lines in this extract suggest that the 'Foil' mentioned in line three is linked to some kind of

[21] Charles Bernstein, 'Standing Target', in *All the Whiskey in Heaven: Selected Poems* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), pp. 55-66 (p. 55).

disposable 'business' lunch in which pleasantries are exchanged and food is 'gnash[ed]' from 'aluminum foil'. Both of these readings are somewhat tenuous but this is, for Silliman, part of the point of the Language poem in the sense that its disruption of conventional syntax and its lack of clear and coherent subject matter forces a reader to invest in the sense-making process of the poem in a manner that, supposedly, counteracts capitalism's commodification of the word.

Perloff, in a passage that is often cited in sceptical critical accounts of Language's political ambitions, observes that 'what the Language poets call late monopoly capitalism is never compared to the economic system of existing Marxist countries'. This observation leads Perloff to question rhetorically whether Silliman is 'implying that in contemporary China, "the optical illusion of realism" has given way to a valorization of "gestural poetic forms"'.[22] Greer rightly claims that in raising this issue, Perloff confuses the 'intellectual movement' of 'Western Marxism' with 'the cultural politics of contemporary communist states'. Nevertheless, Greer himself is sceptical of Silliman's critique and questions whether one can 'speak unproblematically of a mode of production of language'. 'Ultimately', Greer argues, capitalism is 'rendered too monolithically' in Silliman's essay in that the 'commodification of language is nearly total or thoroughgoing', leading him to doubt Silliman's idea that '*[o]nly* certain avant garde texts […] offer spaces of possible resistance' (Greer's emphasis) .[23] Ward also observes that there is 'a discrepancy between the aims and the achievements of Language poetry' and gives McCaffery's analysis of the 'parallels between economic and linguistic structures' as an example of a Language critique that is 'ingenious, overly intricate, and in the end ludicrous'. Ward admits that, on this basis, it is 'necessary, as well as easy, to pick holes in Language arguments' but also expresses his admiration for the 'heroically gargantuan' tasks Language poets undertake. Like Perloff, Ward also appreciates that Language helped re-politicise American poetry despite the 'prevailing mediocrity of America's cultural output during the Reagan and Bush administrations'.[24]

Greer is keen to assert that his comments on Silliman's 'Disappearance of the Word' are not reflective of a general critique of Language poetry and he criticises

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[22] Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), p. 234.

[23] Greer, p. 339, p. 348.

[24] Ward, pp. 15-16.

Perloff and Bartlett for treating the poets affiliated with Language as a homogenised group. Benjamin Friedlander is also cautious about generalising the poetry and poetics of Language poets on the basis that their 'work […] belonged to a moment of provisional and strategic formulation, and cannot be subject to strict definition or rigorous critique'.[25] As has already been demonstrated in this section, however, very few critics actually attempt to provide a 'strict definition' for Language poetry. Furthermore, there are notable similarities between the essays in which the 'strategic formulations' described by Friedlander are advanced. In the 'Writing and Politics' section of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, for instance, Silliman, Andrews, Bernstein, McCaffery, and Michael Davidson apply the theory of commodity fetishism to language in a similar manner. There is a shared recognition among these essays that a capitalist ideology is embedded in language and that, therefore, attempts to protest politically in conventional writing only serve to reinforce the current political conditions.[26] In this sense, whilst Greer may claim that his comments about 'Disappearance of the Word' are specific to Silliman, they are relevant to a whole range of Language essays that very memorably make similarly ambitious claims for poetry in the face of such Marxist critique.

Ecocriticism

In order to open up a discussion on why a postmodern poetic manifesto like 'Disappearance of the Word' might frustrate ecocritics, we might consider a line from A.R. Ammons' 1993 long poem *Garbage*: 'What are we to think of the waste, though'.[27] Ammons was inspired to write *Garbage* in 1987 after seeing a mammoth pile of rubbish whilst driving on the I-95 in Florida.[28] In the same year, the Mobro 4000, a barge loaded

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[25] Benjamin Friedlander, 'A Short History of Language Poetry // According to Hecuba Whimsy'', in *Qui Parle,* 1.2 (Spring/Summer 2001), 107-142 (p. 117).

[26] Bruce Andrews, 'Writing Social Work & Political Practice', *The Language Book,* pp. 133-136; Charles Bernstein, 'The Dollar Value of Poetry', *The Language Book*, pp. 138-140; Steve McCaffery, 'Intraview', *The Language Book*, p. 189; Michael Davidson, 'Michael Davidson', pp. 149-150.

[27] A. R. Ammons, *Garbage* (New York and London: W.W. Norton Company, 1993), p. 90. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[28] Lorraine C. DiCicco, 'Garbage: A.R. Ammons's Tape of the Turn of the Century', in *Papers on Language & Literature*, 32.2 (Spring 1996), 166-188 (p. 176).

with garbage, embarked on a 164-day return journey from New York to North Carolina, Louisiana, Florida, Mexico, Belize and the Bahamas. As each port denied the barge the opportunity to dump its cargo of garbage, the Mobro 4000 become emblematic of a calamitous national attitude to waste management.[29] Such events only added to the concerns of American environmentalists who had seen Ronald Reagan launch an 'overt attack on the EPA' (Environmental Protection Agency) during his presidency.[30] *Garbage* is a text in which Ammons expresses a great frustration regarding the fact that, at a time of ecological crises, a great many theorists are content to 'kick the *l* out of the wor*l*d and cuddle | up with the avenues and byways of the word' (p. 77).

Such concerns get to the heart of the purported tension between ecocriticism and literary theory. Ammons' frustration with his culture's investment in textuality is shared by many ecocritics who, as Soper explains in *What is Nature*, remind readers that 'it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer; and the "real" thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier'.[31] In this quotation, Soper channels ecocritical frustrations in showing how postmodern discourses could be considered to distract from escalating environmental problems. Nick Selby traces this tension back to 1962 and the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring.* Selby argues that Carson provided the first warning of impending ecological crises at a time when emerging 'postmodern literary theories' were raising concerns about a 'textual' rather than ecological crisis. The tension between ecocriticism and postmodernism has essentially arisen, Selby proposes, through divergent perceptions of the relationship between humans and nature, with ecopoetry 'asserting, ultimately, that the earth we inhabit is always already a reality we ignore at our peril' and postmodernism arguing that 'even something so seemingly solid as the land we inhabit is, ultimately, an ideological construct'.[32]

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[29] 'Anthony J. Marro, 'Preface', in *From Newsday: Rush to Burn: Solving America's Garbage Crisis?* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1989), ix-xii (p. ix).

[30] Leif Fredrickson et al., 'History of US Presidential Assaults on Modern Environmental Health Protection', in *American Journal of Public Health*, 108.2, (May 2018), 95-103 (p. 95).

[31] Soper, p. 151.

[32] Selby, p. 128.

Whilst, then, the frictions between ecologically oriented criticism and postmodern literary criticism has its roots in the 1960s, it was in the early 1990s that this tension began to be comprehensively articulated in criticism related to ecopoetry.[33] Scott Knickerbocker argues that 'much first-wave ecocriticism (ecological literary criticism), roughly the first ten to fifteen years of its existence as a recognized scholarly field, responded contentiously to other literary theories, especially postmodernism'. Knickerbocker claims that such an opposition to postmodernism from ecocriticism results in a 'battle of representation' in which 'poststructuralists are on the side of language' and ecocritics are 'on the side of physical reality'.[34] Knickerbocker here is contrasting postmodernism and ecocriticism on the basis of statements like Jacques Derrida's '[t]here is no outside-text', which Scigaj suggests has come to serve as a motif for the postructuralist position on language's isolating of human from world.[35]

Scigaj's *Sustainable Poetry* (1999), which Caitlin Maling and J. Scott Bryson credit as the foundational critical work on ecopoetry, provides an example of the kind of ecocriticism that Knickerbocker argues pits itself against postmodernism.[36] Scigaj's concerns over the poststructuralist influence on literary criticism are expressed in the following passage:

> The Derridean play of differences and the postmodern premise that all experience is mediated by language […] often result in creating poetry and literary criticism characterized by a hermetically sealed textuality that avoids

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[33] Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street, 'Editor's Preface' in *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, ed. by Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2013), p. xxix ; J. Scott Bryson, 'Introduction', in *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction,* ed. by J. Scott Bryson, (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2002), 1-13 (pp. 1-2).

[34] Knickerbocker, pp. 2-3.

[35] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 158; Scigaj, p. 36.

[36] Bryson, p. 2.

Caitlin Maling, 'Planting Roots: A Survey of Introductions to Ecopoetry and Ecocriticism', *Cordite Poetry Review* (2013), 1-5 (p. 1) <http://cordite.org.au/essays/planting-roots/> [accessed 10 May 2018]

> recognizing the fact that all writing is situated in the socioeconomic and environmental present of its moment of composition, influencing it and being influenced by it. [37]

Scigaj proposes in this passage that postmodernist and poststructuralist theory, in emphasising the extent to which language mediates its referents, fails to make clear that a piece of writing is always defined by its creation in a certain 'socioeconomic and environmental' context. In light of this neglect of extralinguistic context, Scigaj questions 'how we prepare [literature students] to cope with the toxic blooms our generation has bequeathed them' if they 'are regularly taught to admire the aesthetic blooms of textuality and language theory and devalue referential reality' (p. xvi).

Scigaj is particularly concerned with the influence that Perloff has wielded in moving 1980s and 1990s American literary criticism towards 'Derridean notions of the play of difference in written language and Lacanian and Wittgensteinian tenets that assume that all experience is mediated by language' (p. 27). Indeed, Scigaj argues that '[b]y embracing Derrida in the 1980s and Wittgenstein in the 1990s, [Charles] Altieri and Perloff have solidified an aesthetic approach to contemporary poetry based on language theory' which is 'unhelpful' for 'readers who want contemporary poetry to confront with honesty the actual world we live in daily' (p. xvi). Scigaj suggests that in exclusively championing poets who embrace postmodernism -- four of the eight poets he lists as Perloff's favourites are affiliated with Language poetry (p. 27) -- Perloff is responsible for dangerously depoliticising literary criticism and, by extension, literature itself.

Scigaj is particularly fierce in his critique of postmodern poetries, but many ecocritics voice concerns about postmodernism's depoliticisation of contemporary poetry. Whilst Jonathan Skinner, for instance, is a critic who has called the antagonism between ecopoetics and avant-garde poetry into question, he nevertheless allies himself with ecocritics in stating that an era of poetry 'noted for linguistically sophisticated approaches to difficult issues' should 'be criticized for [its] overall silence on a comparable approach to environmental questions'.[38] Buell also warns against

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[37] Scigaj, p. 27.

[38] Jonathan Skinner, 'Editor's Statement', *Ecopoetics*, 1 (2001) 5-8 (p. 7) <https://ecopoetics.files.wordpress.com/2008/06/eco1.pdf> [accessed 10 May 2018]

'[underrepresenting] the claims of the environment on humanity' and reminds us of Annie Dillard's point that '[l]anguage need not know the world perfectly in order to communicate perceptions adequately'. Moreover, Buell identifies a certain hypocrisy of what he calls 'antirefentialism' when he points out that by '[forbidding] discourse the project of evoking the natural world through verbal surrogates and thereby attempting to bond the reader to the world as to discourse', 'antireferentialism' has come to 'police' writing in a manner reminiscent of the 'pastoral imagination'.[39] Greg Garrard too is troubled by the way that '[s]tructuralism and post-structuralism […] have emphasised the linguistic function of signs that relate to each other rather than refer to real things' due to the way these schools 'disable the possibility of activism'. Baudrillard is cited by Garrard as an example of a postmodern theorist whose 'implacable scepticism towards stable truth claims must be antithetical to an ecocriticism that attends to problems of representation, but is founded ultimately in the assumption of real environmental problems'.[40]

Scigaj's criticisms are largely aimed at critics like Perloff and Altieri, who exclusively promote a particular brand of post-structurally influenced poetry, rather than the promoted poets themselves. However, the line between critic and poet is blurred in Language poetry. Whilst Language poetry became, as Friedlander acknowledges, 'an industry for the universities', Language poets engaged in this industry themselves by writing theoretically sophisticated essays on poetry, philosophy, and politics.[41] Silliman's 'Disappearance of the Word' certainly implicates Language poetry in Scigaj's criticism that poetry is being taken away from the arena of grassroots political action. Silliman's essay argues that conventional sense in language helps reinforce the capitalist status quo and that, therefore, all attempts to protest through conventional language are undermined by their implicit reinforcement of a status quo which perpetuates the conditions which the protester seeks to challenge. For this reason, Silliman outlines a long game for political poetry, one that involves the initial disruption of conventional sense so as to recapture the sense making processes of language for the social whole. For a critic raising concerns about pressing contemporary issues like Scigaj, such a strategy is, at the least, impractical in its surrendering of agency in contemporary political debates. At worst, Silliman's strategy

[39] Buell, p. 62, p. 96, p. 102.

[40] Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism,* 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 9-10, p. 192.

[41] Friedlander, p. 116.

would implicate the poet in Scigaj's criticism of 'establishment American poets today [that] cleanse their texts of all references to the pollution created by middle class consumption' in order to fulfil 'the political agenda of a class that must repress the actual environmental consequences of its actions in order to sustain privileges and pleasures without guilt' (p. 29).

This ecocritical concern regarding the overtly theoretical political strategies of postmodern poetries such as Language can be neatly summarised in relation to an argument of Andrews' in 'Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis'. Like Silliman, Andrews believes that we live 'in an era where the reproduction of the social status quo is more & more dependent upon ideology & language (language in ideology & ideology in language)'. For this reason, Andrews argues that writing attempting to achieve a 'political dimension' must focus on 'writing *as* politics' rather than 'writing *about* politics'.[42] For ecocritics such as Scigaj, contemporary poetry's irresponsible neglect of 'writing *about* politics' has led to a situation in which poetry no longer utilises its latent potential for engaging in current affairs. Put simply, ecocriticism from the early 1990s laments the unfashionableness of poems being 'about' issues such as environmental degradation. The distinction that Andrews makes between two forms of political writing gets to the heart of the tension between ecocriticism and postmodern literary theory and, for this reason, this project will use the terms 'writing *as* politics' and 'writing *about* politics' as shorthand for the deconstructive politics of Language poetics exemplified in 'Disappearance of the Word' and the ecocritical poetics endorsed by Scigaj.

Defining Ecopoetry

Thus far, this introduction has established some critical definitions of Language poetry and explained how these definitions implicate Language poetry in ecocriticism's claim that, due to the influence of literary theory, poetry's power to directly address contemporary issues has been dangerously played down. At this point it is necessary to provide some definitions of ecopoetry in order to clarify how the political element of poets such as Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, Ammons, and Merwin are perceived by ecocritics to provide a counterpoint to the politics of postmodern poetry. Bryson

[42] Bruce Andrews, *Paradise and Method: Poetry and Praxis* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), p. 50. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

loosely defines ecopoetry in relation to 'three overarching characteristics'. The first is its 'ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world'. Rather than anthropomorphising nature or seeing humans as disconnected from nature, ecopoetry, according to Bryson, appreciates the interconnectedness between human and nonhuman nature. Bryson's second attribute for ecopoetry is 'a humble appreciation of wildness'. Due to ecopoetry's 'ecocentric perspective', it appreciates 'how little control we actually have over the wildness of nature'. Thirdly, Bryson sees ecopoetry as being defined by its 'intense skepticism concerning hyperrationality, a skepticism that usually leads to an indictment of an overtechnologized modern world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe'. Essentially this third attribute seems to manifest itself in ecopoetry's perception that technological advancement has corresponded with the increasing exploitation of the planet's resources.[43] It should also be added that Scigaj's claim that 'Wittgensteinian grammars, as well as Derridean plays of differences along chains of signifiers […] create machine-like systems that buffer us from the quotidian reality in which we live', speaks to the way that ecocriticism often thinks of postmodern literary theory as playing its part in contributing to an increasingly technologically sophisticated but ecologically ignorant culture (p. 64).

Anne Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street largely subscribe to Bryson's definition of ecopoetry in *The Ecopoetry Anthology* but are keen to emphasise the differences between three key subsets within this wider genre. The first subset is 'nature poetry', which consists of poems that reflect on nature, though not necessarily from an ecocentric perspective. The second subset is 'environmental poetry', a genre of poetry which makes 'ecocentric arguments' but which is not attentive to modern ecocritical discourse's 'deconstruction of concepts' which '[complicate] the straightforward activist urgency of much environmental poetry'. The third subset is 'ecological poetry' which 'engages questions of form most directly, not only poetic form but also a form historically taken for granted -- that of the singular, coherent self'.[44]

Fisher-Wirth and Street's 'ecological poetry' comes closest to Scigaj's version of 'ecopoetry', though Scigaj would no doubt, given his criticisms of postmodern literary theory, be wary of Fisher-Wirth and Street's claim that 'ecological poetry is the most willing [of their three subsets] to engage with, even play with postmodern and

[43] Bryson, pp. 5-7.

[44] Fisher-Wirth and Street, p. xxix.

poststructuralist theories associated with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and the avant garde'.[45] Scigaj's description of 'ecopoetry' is very similar to Fisher-Wirth and Street's description of 'ecological poetry' in its stating that a poem's interest in ecology must be manifested in both its content and its aesthetics in order for it to constitute ecopoetry. Like Bryson, Scigaj argues that ecopoets respect the interdependency between human and nonhuman nature but that ecopoetry is, crucially, distinct from environmental poetry in the way that it incorporates its 'sensitivity to ecological thinking' into the 'very poetic phenomenological dimensions of each major text' (p. 11). This incorporation involves adopting a degree of 'postmodern self-reflexivity' in order to '[affirm] that human language is much more limited than the ecological processes of nature' (p. 11). From Scigaj's perspective, then, the ecopoet not only preaches an ecocentric message but also foregrounds the extent to which language is limited as a means of making sense of nature. However, Scigaj also argues that ecopoets turn this 'postmodern self-reflexivity' back on literary theory by showing how we can still use linguistic reference to make sense of our environment in a way that contradicts 'the fashionably heremetic treatment of poetry as a self-contained linguistic construct whose ontological ground is language theory' (p. 11). The ecopoet described in *Sustainable Poetry* is, then, a poet who is alert to our inevitable limitations in conceptualising our environment whilst still attempting to explore and change perceptions about nonhuman nature through the metaphorical power of language.

An example of a poem that, with Scigaj's criteria in mind, would constitute an ecopoem is Merwin's 'For a Coming Extinction', a poem which uses 'postmodern self-reflexivity' to affirm the limitations of language and exhibit a 'sensitivity to ecological thinking'. The poem expresses sadness and anger regarding the impending destruction of the gray whale, an extinction which is implied by the poem to have been brought about, at least partly, through humans' arrogant privileging of language as a means of making sense of the world. The poem's first stanza reads as follows:

[45] Fisher-Wirth and Street, p. xxix.

Gray whale
Now that we are sending you to The End
That great god
Tell him
That we who follow you invented forgiveness
And forgive nothing[46]

In these lines the speaker sarcastically articulates what she believes to be the attitude of the human race. The speaker suggests that humankind is 'sending' the gray whale to 'The End', to extinction, in the name of a 'great god'. Later in the poem the speaker describes a 'court' of extinct animals, whose ranks the gray whale will join, as 'sacrifices', and it is presumably to this 'god' that these species are 'sacrificed'. In this religion, then, it would seem that humans are a privileged species, and this is confirmed by the poem's final line which instructs the gray whale to tell the 'great god' 'That it is we who are important'.[47] One might observe, however, that there is a contradiction in this religious belief, in that humanity is acting in the name of a 'great god' and yet it is also acting as informer to this 'god' by instructing the gray whale to 'tell him' of humanity's importance and of the concept of 'forgiveness'. The hypocrisy here is that the speaker seems to be both justifying the destruction of the gray whale on the basis of the existence of a 'great god' in whose order humans are supreme, yet it also seems that humans have generated these rules by themselves, rather than through any appeal to a divine authority. Merwin thus presents humanity as maniacal and dangerously irrational, as the species seems to be justifying its destruction of the gray whale on the basis of a divine order that has a tenuous claim to existence.

The first stanza thus implies that humankind's assumption that its perspective and interests as a species are reflective of a divine authority are erroneous, and that, subsequently, all attempts to 'tell him' (the 'great god') of humanity's importance amount to a dead letter. The second stanza opens with the speaker's admission 'I write as though you could understand | And I could say it', which suggests that she is aware that such messages not only fail to reach a 'great god', but that such an attempt at

[46] W.S. Merwin, 'For a Coming Extinction', in *W.S. Merwin: Collected Poems 1952-1993,* ed. by J.D. McClatchy (New York: The Library of America, 2013), pp. 304-305 (p. 304).
[47] *Merwin Collected Poems,* p. 305.

communication via the gray whale fails at the first hurdle.[48] The poem argues, in this way, that humankind's assumption is that its development of a language gives humanity a divine right to dominion over the other animals populating the earth.

The poem suggests that if humans were to focus on listening rather than speaking, their actions in the world would be less destructive. The third stanza of the poem evidences that Merwin appreciates that the whale is an animal which has its own language:

> The bewilderment will diminish like an echo
> Winding along your inner mountains
> Unheard by us
> And find its way out
> Leaving behind it the future
> Dead
> And Ours[49]

The description of the dying sounds of the whale as an 'echo winding along' the creature's 'inner mountains' references the fact that the whales use echolocation to navigate their environment. The whale uses sound to physicalize its environment, and Merwin's description of sound as a moving physical presence in 'winding along your inner mountains' references this highly developed element of the whale's sensory perception. Additionally, by attributing the emotion of 'bewilderment' to the dying whale's noise, Merwin is acknowledging that whales also express themselves sonically in a sophisticated fashion, though these sounds are often beyond the frequency of human hearing and are thus 'unheard by us'. In this way, this stanza emphasises that the whale is a creature which is privy to a realm of perception which is unavailable to humans and that it has, as a result of this, developed its own complex form of communication.

'For a Coming Extinction' presents humanity as a species that dictates, a species that assumes that the sense it makes of the world through its language is authoritative. The erroneousness of this assumption is foregrounded through the description of the whale's dying noise, which emphasises that this creature has its own unique sense of

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[48] *Merwin: Collected Poems*, p. 305

[49] *Merwin: Collected Poems*, p. 305.

perception and its own language. Human and whale make sense of the world in a distinct way, but humanity's mistake, the poem argues, is to assume that just because it cannot hear, and far less understand, the communications of the whale, that the sense that humankind makes of the world is supreme. In this way, Merwin not only condemns the actions of humankind but he also takes the species' collective ego down a few notches. Humankind is not presented as a tyrant abusing its unique power to extinguish a weaker species, rather the species is presented as arrogant, deluded, irrational, and foolish in its myopic view that its specific sense of the world is authoritative.

'For a Coming Extinction' is ecopoetic according to Scigaj's criteria. The poem undoubtedly expresses a strong environmental message in its anger and ruefulness about humanity's attitude towards the gray whale, however Merwin certainly avoids what Fisher-Wirth and Street call the 'straightforward activist urgency' of 'environmental poetry'. The poem is ostensibly addressed to the gray whale, however, the problematic nature of this communication is foregrounded to demonstrate the disparity between humanity and the whale's respective perceptual and conceptual apparatus. Indeed, the poem brings to mind Ludwig Wittgenstein's aphorism that 'If a lion could speak, we would not be able to understand him'; a lion, whale, and human have such diverse perceptual and conceptual frameworks that the forging of an understanding between species would be a highly complicated matter even if they shared a common language.[50] The poem's success emerges from the speaker's failure, as the failure of the communication between speaker and addressee draws attention to this disparity between human and whale, contradicting the anthropocentric attitude of humanity as described in the poem's first stanza in the process. In this way, Merwin's poem exhibits the kind of 'sensitivity to ecological thinking' that Scigaj praises by modelling an approach to language that considers humanity's epistemological limitations.

'Writing as Politics'/'Writing about Politics'

The output of Language poetry's 'founding fathers' took two extremely different forms. On the one hand these poets are well known for bombastically iconoclastic but

[50] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. by P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th edn (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009), p. 235.

articulate mission statements for poetry, on the other hand these essays set out the stall for a poetry which calls the conventions surrounding linguistic articulation into question by disrupting our efforts to make the meanings of a poem cohere. For this reason, it is easy to overlook the fact that poems by Language poets such as Silliman and Bernstein frequently approach politics more directly and constructively than essays like 'Disappearance of the Word' and 'The Dollar Value of Poetry' might have one believe. These poems show that Silliman and Bernstein write, in Andrews' words, '*about*' politics whilst at the same time treating writing '*as*' a form of politics; in fact, these two ventures are inextricably linked in Language poems, to the extent that it is often hard to separate one from the other.

When we look further into 'Standing Target' we can see that the poem is making a specific remark about the way the cutthroat nature of capitalist society has been concealed behind a veneer of civility. Whilst it has been established that the disjointedness of the poem's opening section suggests that Bernstein is contributing to the Language poetry project of disrupting conventional sense, the stuttering phrasing of the opening sections can be read as the frenzied expression of a poetic voice. In other words, from this perspective, Bernstein is not just assembling fragments of language for the reader to play with, rather we are reading the incoherent ramblings of an anguished speaker.

Even if the lines of the poem appear to be non-sequiturs, the use of dynamic verbs such as 'Plummeting', 'blasting', 'Scopes', 'startle', 'bumping', 'collapsing', 'slips' and 'aim' help build a sense of erratic uncertainty in the poem.[51] The combination of verbs describing a rushed or clumsy form of swift movement and verbs suggesting that someone is being targeted hint that the poem is describing a dynamic of cat and mouse. The sense of anxiety built in the poem through these verbs is complemented by the poem's lack of fluidity, with the poem being disrupted by disjointed lines and caesuras which break down the poem into even smaller fragments of expression. The connections between the poem's description of erratic movement and the poem's own formal stuttering is captured in the inclusion of a quotation in the following lines:

[51] 'Standing Target', pp. 55-56.

Startle, scares. Scans distance
(Arcane), his mittens in the
Other room: "Watch out for
That plane!" Heavy platelet
Material.[52]

As readers we are not prepared for a quotation of any kind at this point in the poem, never mind a quotation warning of an incoming plane. This captures the way that uncertainty is not just a theme in the poem in a negative sense or, to put this another way, the poem's interest in uncertainty is not just evident in our difficulty in making sense of the poem in a straightforward way. Rather the poem advances the theme of uncertainty positively by describing several situations in which the speaker feels uncertain or anxious.

There are hints throughout the poem's opening section that the speaker's frenzied style of expression stems from a social anxiety. As the earlier analysis of the poem showed, we can interpret the poem's opening lines as referring to a 'polite society' in which people are expediently and swiftly 'characterized'. Some of the anxious movements described using the aforementioned dynamic verbs also seem to be catalysed by a sense of social pressure. For instance, when the speaker describes 'Plummeting emphatically near earshot', we observe that this description of dramatic falling is linked to the overhearing of something. The lines 'blasting back | Past imperceptible arrogance' are similarly anticlimactic in the sense that the grand description of 'blasting back' is seemingly catalysed by an 'arrogance' that can barely be perceived. In both cases, these extreme kinds of movement appear to be caused by the speaker's suspicion that they are being judged, demeaned, or, as the poem puts it, that they are being reductively and covertly 'characterized'. [53]

The speaker's suspicions are validated later in the poem, when Bernstein writes a stanza that reads like a rudimentary appraisal:

[52] 'Standing Target', p. 55.

[53] 'Standing Target', p. 55.

> Neurological impairment, speech delay, psychomotor difficulties with wide discrepencies and fluctuations, excessive neurotic fears and compulsive behaviour, a diffuse hostile attitude, general clumsiness, confused dominance, poor fine motor coordination, asymmetrical reflexes, aggressive, callous, arrogant, excessive inhibitions, rebellious suspicious, attention seeking, erratic friendship pattern, overexcitable in normal situations.[54]

Such criticisms specifically home in on the appraisee's 'general clumsiness', which is deemed to manifest itself both in the appraisee's substandard 'motor' functions and 'reflexes', as well as her emotional instability and poor social skills. If this is indeed an appraisal of the poem's speaker, the criticisms about the speaker's limited functions and erratic disposition chime with the stuttering, feverish style of expression Bernstein adopts in the poem's opening section. However, it is unsurprising given Language poetry's scepticism about authority figures in a capitalist society that, in including this appraisal, 'Standing Target' is encouraging us to scrutinise the appraiser rather than the appraisee. Given the criticisms listed by the appraiser in this quotation, it seems that the speaker is being judged for her inability to perform in a manner that her superiors see fit, whether that is because she is limited in performing tasks or whether she is not disposed to performing tasks. With this established we can see that whilst the appraisal hides behind technical language, phrases like 'confused dominance' are a way of dressing up the appraiser's true concern, namely that the speaker will not fall in line. We thus see the passive aggressive nature of this appraisal, which conceals its frustrations at being unable to assert control over the appraisee behind technical language and jargon.

At this point we begin to see how Bernstein is, in Andrews' words, 'writing *about* politics' in the sense that his poem is *'about*' capitalism's systems of control and, more specifically, the way its mechanisms for control are hidden behind a façade of objectivity and amiability. The poem is not just an exercise for disrupting conventional sense, rather such a disruption is intertwined with a message about the way that the domineering, ruthless tendencies of capitalism are concealed behind surface level

[54] 'Standing Target', pp. 58-59.

niceties and passive aggressive jargon. Another way of thinking about this would be that, even if the poem is contributing to the long-term Language project of overhauling capitalist systems of language, and is therefore approaching writing '*as* politics', it also offers a more direct critique about a specific element of contemporary capitalism, and is therefore also a piece of writing '*about* politics'. The mixing of long-term and short-term political goals is key to this point. The poem could be read as contributing to, in Silliman's words, a project of re-centring the 'repressed element' of language, but it also has a more immediate argument it wants to communicate to its reader. From this perspective, Bernstein moves seamlessly between Language poetry's wider ambition to expose the limitations of language and the poem's more immediate diagnosis of a particular symptom of capitalist manipulation. We should not, with this in mind, see the poem primarily as a playground for the theories and poetics articulated in essays like 'The Dollar Value of Poetry' (hereafter shortened to 'Dollar Value') because this poem itself performs a diagnostic function like those essays.

From this perspective, 'Standing Target' is a difficult, self-reflexive poem, but it is not afraid to be '*about*' an issue. Admittedly, in circling back to Bernstein's interest in the way language is used as a tool of manipulation, the poem returns to the staple Language poetry argument regarding the manipulative function of conventional language. However, whilst ecocritics who are wary of literary theory's influence on contemporary poetry might suggest that there are more important issues a poem could address, ecocriticism's traditional primary complaint with postmodern poetry -- that it dangerously plays down the capacity for a poem to be '*about*' something -- is, at least in the case of 'Standing Target', rendered redundant. At this point, the ecocritical issue with a postmodern poem like 'Standing Target' would be related to its *choice* of subject matter rather than the notion that Bernstein is sceptical of a poem having a subject matter outside of language.

Grounds for Comparison

Once we recognise that a poem like 'Standing Target' strikes a balance between treating 'writing *as* politics' and 'writing *about* politics', we see that there are few fundamental differences between this poem and 'For a Coming Extinction'. Merwin makes his point about the arrogant, destructive attitude humans currently exhibit towards the 'gray whale' both through a speaker who sarcastically articulates humanity's flawed claim to superiority and also through the poem's foregrounding of the limitations of a language that, the poem suggests, humans cite as evidence of their

superiority. Like 'Standing Target', then, the poem's message is delivered in both the subject of the poem (the tragic killing of a 'gray whale') and the poem's acknowledgment of its own limitations in making sense of this subject. It is true that Merwin's scathing tone in 'For a Coming Extinction' allows the reader to more easily pick up on the poem's themes than they would when reading 'Standing Target', which takes a more ironic and, comparatively, more detached approach to its subject matter. However, even if this suggests that the two poets are striking a different balance between writing '*about*' and approaching writing '*as*' politics, they are working with a similar scale.

Over the past ten to fifteen years, a few critics have started to argue that despite ecocriticism's theoretical quibbles with postmodernism, ecopoetry can crossover with avant-garde poetry in intriguing and insightful ways. Harriet Tarlo and Mandy Bloomfield both argue that the postmodern notion of, in Tarlo's words, 'the gap between language and […] the world' has inspired avant-garde poets to engage in an ongoing and experimental investigation of the different possible relationships humans can establish with the world through language.[55] Both Tarlo and Bloomfield dispel the notion that experimental poetry solely caters to poets who want to conduct convoluted experiments with language and instead suggest that this type of poetry provides an open space in which a poet can pay tribute to the complexity of our ecosystems. Bloomfield presents Howe as a poet who blurs the line between avant-garde and ecopoet by performing an

> oscillation between a keen awareness of the cultural constructedness of landscape […] and a desire for contact with a primordial wildness performs a thinking-through of the problematics of place, landscape, and "nature" that is parallel to and contemporaneous with ecocriticism's debates.[56]

Far from prompting Howe to turn a blind eye to the world beyond language, Bloomfield argues that the poet uses postmodern discourse about 'the cultural constructedness of

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[55] Harriet Tarlo, 'Radical Landscapes: Experiment and Environment in Contemporary Poetry', *Jacket2*, 32 (April 2007) < http://jacketmagazine.com/32/p-tarlo.shtml> [accessed 17 June 2018] (para. 5 of 28).

[56] Mandy Bloomfield, 'Palimtextual Tracts: Susan Howe's Rearticulation of Place', *Contemporary Literature*, 55.4 (2014), 665-700 (p. 668).

landscape' as a starting point from which to think and re-think our relationship with non-human nature. Tarlo makes a similar point to Bloomfield when describing how embracing a 'more dynamic, open form style of writing' in her own poetry helped her to better '[engage] with the spatial' and she subsequently suggests that 'poets might even attempt to embody the vast, complex, inter-related network of vegetation, insect and animal life that such a space contains, and to reflect intelligently upon it'.[57] Both critics suggest, then, that the openness of experimental poetry makes it a useful medium for exploring the inescapably complex and intractable structures and workings of nature.

An element of Bloomfield and Tarlo's criticism that is especially significant in terms of this thesis is the emphasis they place on the ongoing nature of experimental poets like Howe's investigation into the relationship between humans and nature. This is evident in Bloomfield's reference to Howe's use of poetry as a means of 'thinking-through' the 'problematics of space', a description that acknowledges that the poem is, for Howe, a place for processing ideas about non-human nature rather than for expressing conclusions on this subject. It is for this reason that Bloomfield describes Howe's poetry as performing an 'oscillation' between her awareness of the 'cultural constructedness of landscape' and 'a desire for contact with a primordial wildness', rather than using the poem as a means of stating her position on how this awareness and this 'desire' can be reconciled. Tarlo also emphasises that the experimental ecopoetry she studies and writes treats poetry as a place of process when she writes that 'the subtleties of experimental poetics provide an ideal linguistic arena in which to engage in this shifting and sifting of assessing and reassessing our relationship with the places and spaces we inhabit'.[58] Here Tarlo is suggesting that these poets' understanding of the materiality of language leads them to appreciate that we must attend closely to the 'gap' between 'world' and 'word' in order to participate in an ongoing negotiation with non-human nature. In other words, Tarlo suggests that such poets recognise that because absolute knowledge of non-human nature is beyond us, we must pay close attention to how we are making sense of nature.

Bloomfield and Tarlo's descriptions of the way poets have bridged experimental poetry with ecopoetry suggest that such poets are working on principles that are symptomatically pragmatic. The next section of this introduction opens its summary of

[57] Tarlo, para. 20 of 28.

[58] Tarlo, para. 13 of 28.

pragmatism by citing Hilary Putnam's claim that 'perhaps *the* unique insight of American pragmatism' is that 'one can be both fallibilistic and anti-skeptical'.[59] Putnam is referring here to the way that pragmatists such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey formulate a method for proceeding in the search for truth in a world where certain truth is unattainable. Of course, there are differences between the philosophies of these pragmatists, but they have contributed to the development of an epistemological outlook which dictates that the validity of a belief should be determined by the practical benefits of holding that belief. The great legacy of pragmatism for Richard Rorty is its suggestion that we should value a truth according to its ability to make humans live harmoniously with each other. When it comes to pragmatism's influence on American poetry, critics including Richard Poirier, Kristen Case, and Andrew Epstein have argued that American poets such as Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, Robert Frost, and Wallace Stevens demonstrate a pragmatic sensibility in their work by conducting an ongoing poetic investigation into the relationship between word and world. Like James, these critics argue, pragmatist poets believe that absolute knowledge of the world is unattainable for humans and therefore use the poem as a means of exploring the different ways in which we can make sense of the world through language.

Pragmatism has been conspicuous by its absence from debates surrounding the potential for crossover between experimental poetries and ecopoetry. The poets discussed by Bloomfield and Tarlo are similar, for instance, to those discussed by Poirier, Case, and Epstein in the sense that both see poetry as a literary form that is well positioned to engage in an ongoing negotiation of the gap between word and world. The supposed tension between ecopoetry and postmodern poetries such as Language will be contradicted by demonstrating that Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin extend the tradition of pragmatist poetry in their work from the turn of the 1990s. Ecocriticism has set itself apart from postmodernism over concerns that postmodern poetries are overly preoccupied with deconstructing hierarchies of power, but in connecting these four poets with the tradition of pragmatist poetry, I will demonstrate that all four poets occupy a middle ground between scepticism and foundationalism. In the next section of this introduction, I will provide a summary of American pragmatism, a survey of the criticism on a pragmatist tradition in American

[59] Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life* (Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 152.

poetry, and an outline of the pragmatic model of poetic work that I will identify in the poetry of Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin.

Section Two: A Pragmatic Epistemological Outlook and a Pragmatic Poetic Work

As the thesis title suggests, I will be arguing that Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin are united in approaching the writing of poetry as a form of pragmatic work. In order to clarify exactly what a shared pragmatic work entails, this second section of the introduction will begin by establishing what 'work' means in the context of these writers' poetic processes, before moving on to clarify why this work is performed in the spirit of American pragmatism. Finally, this section will establish the significance of the Culture Wars to this thesis and provide a layout for each chapter which follows.

A Shared Poetic Work

Ammons, Bernstein, Howe and Merwin have explained their position on the function of poetry by employing metaphors which compare particular ecological processes to the poetic process. These metaphors are revealing in light of my argument about these poets approaching poetry as a form of work. The most famous of these metaphors is from Ammons' *Garbage*:

> there is a mound,
> too, in the poet's mind dead language is hauled
> off to and burned down on, the energy held and
> shaped into new turns and clusters[60]

As will be explored in detail in Chapter Two, these lines are the centrepiece of the long poem *Garbage*, in which Ammons uses the garbage heap as a motif for exploring the materialistic notion that all life in the universe comes about through the transference of energy between different forms of matter. In these lines, Ammons' description of 'dead language' being 'hauled | off to and burned down on' invites us to imagine the 'poet's mind' as being similar to some kind of machinery for compacting or recycling rubbish at a garbage dump. In this way, Ammons presents poetry as participating in this materialistic process by processing 'dead language' in such a way as to transfer 'energy' into 'new turns and clusters'.

[60] *Garbage,* p. 20.

Of the four poets studied in this thesis, it is Ammons and Bernstein who are most easily allied to polarised sides of the 'battle of representation' between ecocritics and postmodernists described by Knickerbocker. As Section One demonstrated, Ammons expresses his frustration with the postmodern privileging of human language in *Garbage*, whilst Bernstein essays like 'Dollar Value' exemplify the ways in which Language poetry had embraced postmodern discourse surrounding the materiality of language. However, in the opening lines from 'Living Tissue / Dead Ideas', Bernstein outlines a vision of poetry that resonates with Ammons' idea of language being reinvigorated through poetry:

> Think of dead ideas as deposited in language and writing, as the compost heap in which present language and writing grows. Suppose dead ideas as comprising an historical unconscious lived out as perception, as smell and taste, as speech. Imagine consciousness resounding with an inexhaustible repository of ideas, as a cave to be mined. And consider poetry as that mining, so the incorporation of dead ideas (call them prior texts) into a work is […] the spiritual domain of poetry, its subject (subject-ness) percolating through.[61]

The image of 'the compost heap' in this description helps Bernstein emphasise that our 'perception' of the world is informed by this mulchy mix of 'dead ideas', 'language', and 'writing'. In the essay 'Thought's Measure', Bernstein emphasises the centrality of language to human consciousness when he writes that '[l]anguage is the material of both thinking and writing', before stating that '[i]n talking about language and thinking I want to establish the *material,* the stuff, of writing'.[62] The 'compost heap' analogy helps Bernstein reinforce these points by encouraging the reader to imagine language as an essential epistemological resource which continually shapes a shared sense of 'perception' within a particular culture. Language is not, by this analogy, a medium that we use to express ideas and thoughts which exist outside of language, rather it is the 'material' in which such ideas and thoughts are generated. The 'compost heap' analogy also allows Bernstein to convey that this generative process is an ongoing one in which

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[61] Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), p. 363. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[62] Ibid, p.61, p.63.

'present language and writing' grows from the mix of 'dead ideas', 'language', and 'writing', before 'dead ideas' are again deposited into the mix and the composting process continues. Bernstein describes 'consciousness' as a place of storage for 'an inexhaustible repository of ideas' and states that poetry provides a means of 'mining' this 'repository'. It would thus seem that if, as Bernstein suggests, our sense of 'perception' is being shaped by the '[depositing]' of 'dead ideas' in 'language and writing', then poetic writing would seem to bring certain 'ideas' to the forefront of the mix at the expense of other 'ideas'. In this sense, poetry for Bernstein would seem to play a vital role in shaping the future of 'language and writing' and, in turn, shaping our 'perception' of the world.

The excerpted passages from Ammons and Bernstein find both writers emphasising the importance of their medium by inviting a comparison between ecologically conscious modes of recycling and the process of writing poetry. There are some differences between the two poets' presentation of poetry as a form of recycling. Most notably, whereas Ammons sees the 'poet's mind' as the thing which performs the recycling, Bernstein sees the poet as adding to the mix of a language which composts of its own volition. This speaks to a significant point of divergence in the two poets' work in that Ammons understands the language user as being in a position of control over language whilst Bernstein frequently emphasises the extent to which the individual's perception of the world is dictated by inherited systems of language. The implications and significance of this difference will be established over the course of Chapters One and Two. Nevertheless, both poets invite this comparison between modes of recycling and poetry in order to present the poetic process as a means of linguistic rejuvenation.

Merwin also argues for connection between ecological and poetic processes in his work. Ecocritics have often noted the intertwined nature of Merwin's work as a poet and his work as a conservationist in Hawaii. Merwin himself invites such analysis in an interview with Jeffrey Brown. In response to Merwin's answer about the trial and error nature of life as a conservationist in his Maui garden and 'one thing leading to something else', Brown asks how that process compares to the process of writing poetry. Merwin replies that it is '[e]xactly like poetry. I think a real poem always,

always, in my experience, takes you by surprise'.[63] This idea of the 'real poem' is reiterated by Merwin in many interviews. For instance, in a *Paris Review* interview with Edward Hirsch he states '[t]he kind of writing that matters most to me is something you don't learn about. It's constantly coming out of what I don't know rather than what I do know. I find it as I go'.[64] Implicit in such statements is a view that poetry is a literary form in which a writer finds ideas, rather than merely being a vehicle for expressing ideas. Implicit in such statements is the idea that, in writing a poem, a poet opens themselves up to a process of discovery and enlightenment. For Merwin, then, both the poet and the conservationist must surrender a degree of control in their work to commit to an educational process.

Merwin's sense of the interconnection between writing and poetry and conservation can be clarified through Thoreau's statement that 'in Wildness is the preservation of the world', which Merwin states in an interview for *92nd Street Y* gets to the heart of poetry's potential for conveying what 'just got away'.[65] Merwin echoes this sentiment of Thoreau's in his essay 'The House and the Garden', which details his attempts to repair some of the damage to the Hawaiian soil inflicted by European immigrants. Merwin explains that during his lifetime he has seen 'the very idea of a garden […] not merely altered but reversed'. Whereas historically, Merwin states, gardens have 'existed as enclaves designed and maintained to keep *out* the wilderness, to guard what was inside for human use or pleasure', after 'it became possible for human beings to destroy environments anywhere on earth', it became necessary for 'anyone who wanted to protect and save any remaining bit of the natural environment

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[63] 'How poet W.S. Merwin found paradise by planting palm trees', *PBS,* <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/poet-w-s-merwin-found-paradise-planting-palm-trees/> [accessed 02 September 2017]

[64] Ed Hirsch & W.S. Merwin, 'W.S. Merwin, The Art of Poetry No.38', *The Paris Review,* 102 (Spring 1987) <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2692/w-s-merwin-the-art-of-poetry-no-38-w-s-merwin> [accessed 02 September 2017]

[65] Henry David Thoreau, 'Walking', in *Henry David Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. by Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: Library of America, 2001), pp. 225-255 (p. 239); J.D. McClatchy & W.S. Merwin, 'W.S. Merwin, accomplished poet, and his exclusive full interview with 92nd Street Y', *92nd Street Y,* online video recording, Youtube, 10 May 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSb8P5Qg5x8> [accessed 02 September 2017]

[…] to keep encroaching human exploitation and disturbance *out*'.[66] Merwin is echoing Thoreau here by suggesting that the best course of action for humans seeking to save the environment is to help protect regenerative wild processes from human intervention. With this established, we can see that writing poetry and conserving the environment are connected ventures for Merwin in that both require commitment to a process of discovery and learning and, furthermore, that it is through these processes that the world will be preserved.

Merwin and Howe are the focus of consecutive chapters due to the influence Thoreau, and specifically his idea of 'wildness' as 'the preservation of the world', has in both their work. 'Walking', the essay from which this quotation is taken, opens with Thoreau expressing his intent to 'speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness'.[67] In 'Personal Narrative', Howe invokes Thoreau when she states that, whilst writing the poem 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time' in the 1980s, she 'wished to speak a word for libraries as places of freedom and wildness'.[68] As Chapter Four will clarify in greater detail, throughout her work Howe frequently establishes connections between the mapping of the American land and the mapping of the American page. A positivist American culture has, in Howe's eyes, tried to impose rigid epistemological structures on the American land and the literary page, and she looks to the library in an attempt to catch glimpses of 'freedom and wildness' that have been consigned to history.[69] It is with this notion of certain library texts having a connection to 'wildness' in mind that Howe explains in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* how '[d]uring the 1980s I wanted to transplant words onto paper with soil sticking to their roots […] I wanted jerky and tedious details to oratically bloom and bear fruit as if they had been set at liberty or ransomed by angels' (p. 16). This quotation demonstrates not only Howe's sense of libraries playing host to 'wildness' but also her ambition as a poet to delicately

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[66] W.S. Merwin, 'The House and Garden: The Emergence of a Dream.' in *The Kenyon Review*, 32.4 (2010), 10-24 (pp. 23-24).

[67] Thoreau, p. 225.

[68] Susan Howe, 'Personal Narrative', in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (New York: New Direction Books,2007), pp. 11-19 (p.16). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[69] Susan Howe, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover & London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p.46. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

facilitate a 'wild' process by helping 'words oratically 'bloom'. Like Merwin, Howe believes that poetry, in facilitating this 'bloom[ing]', could preserve 'wildness', and it is in this sense that she subscribes to Thoreau's aphorism.

In each of these excerpts, the poet draws a comparison between writing poetry and a particular ecological process to emphasise, firstly, that the meanings of their work are generated in the process of writing, and secondly, that writing in this way helps rejuvenate language and the perspectives it provides on the world. In order to clarify how these comparisons show the four poets to be endorsing poetry as, what this thesis is labelling, a form of poetic 'work', it is helpful to establish how each poet exhibits what Jed Rasula has coined as a 'composting sensibility'. Rasula traces this 'composting sensibility' back to Thoreau who, in becoming 'attuned to the rhythms by which literary models decayed and enriched the soil', was 'prepared' when writing *Walden* 'for his own notebook entries (the ready mulch of chronicle) to fertilize and incubate the book that was latent in them'. Rasula shows how numerous American writers have followed Thoreau in exhibiting this 'composting sensibility' by treating poetry as a place of process and renewal. Rasula states, for instance, that Henri Atlan's notion of 'a field of interanimating tendencies converging on "the possibility of the emergence of newness, of the unpredicted" […] is the aspiration of poetics informing *This Compost*'.[70] This emphasis on 'the emergence of newness' and 'the unpredicted' suggests that Rasula sees his analysed poets as treating their medium as a means of uncovering something or discovering some new kind of direction. This idea of writing being a generative process leads Rasula to build on Thoreau's metaphorical equivalence of writing and composting. Ammons and Howe are discussed on several occasions in *This Compost*, Merwin and Bernstein are both mentioned once in passing. However, in the excerpts from these poets provided above, they all compare the writing of poetry to ecological processes to convey how poetry participates in, in Atlan's words, 'the emergence of newness' in language.

Whilst all the poets thus exhibit this 'compositing sensibility', Ammons, Howe, and Merwin take this 'sensibility' to an extra level in the sense they view the poetic process as intimately connected to ecological processes. Ammons sees poetry as participating in the universal process of energy transfiguration, meaning that it is part of the ecological process which sustains our ecosystem. Howe and Merwin also, in

[70] Jed Rasula, *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), p. 1, p. 4.

presenting poetry as a vehicle for proliferating wildness, see poetry as participating in an ecological process. For Bernstein, on the other hand, the compost heap analogy is not intended to suggest that the generative process of language is actually connected to composting, rather the analogy helps him clarify his understanding of the complex process of linguistic renewal and, also, helps him emphasise the materiality of language. Despite this difference between Bernstein and the other three poets, in drawing comparisons between poetic and ecological processes, all four poets support the idea of poetry being a form of work.

There are three key reasons why this thesis uses the term 'work' when discussing Ammons, Bernstein, and Merwin's approach to writing poetry. The first two of these reasons are connected to these writers' commitment to poetry as a process of linguistic rejuvenation. Firstly, the term 'work' conveys that, for these writers, poetry is a place of process; they do not, in other words write poems to express pre-established ideas or arguments, rather they see the writing of poetry as a process engaged by the poet in order to establish such ideas and arguments. Poetry can, from this view, be described as 'work' in the sense that the writing of the poem is a form of labour, with the meanings the completed poem yields being the product of that labour. Secondly, the term 'work' captures these writers' sense of the weightiness or importance of their poetic engagement of language. All four writers present the writing of poetry as a form of 'work' which has the potential to benefit an entire culture by refreshing and refining our perceptions of the world. Ammons sees the 'poet's mind' as the place of rejuvenation for an entire language, Bernstein sees poetry as a means of exploring the 'repository of ideas' within 'a shared consciousness', and Merwin and Howe see poetry as channelling 'wildness' and thus assisting in the 'preservation of the world'. With this in mind, the description of poetic writing as a form of 'work' captures these writers' perception of poetry's power and influence and, subsequently, the significance of their poetic labours.

There is another aspect of the comparison between writing and ecological process that justifies the description of Ammons, Bernstein, Merwin, and Howe's poetic engagement of language as a form of 'work'. According to the *OED*, as a verb, 'work' can also mean '[t]o bestow labour on, do work on; to shape craft, manipulate'. This type of 'working' can specifically mean to 'farm, cultivate, till (land, soil, etc.)' or 'to cultivate (a

plant or crop)'.[71] Cultivating a plant involves facilitating the germination of a seed. The cultivator of a plant is not the producer of the seed, rather she helps facilitate the process by which the seed achieves its potential for germination. By using ecological processes as metaphors for the writing of poetry, the poets I analyse in this thesis emphasise that the poet is not the creator of meaning in language, rather she engages the material of language to stimulate a reaction or release a dormant energy. In other words, by this view the poet 'works' language in the same way an agriculturalist works a plant or crop in that the human contribution to both processes involves releasing a material's potential for growth or development.

Unlike the agriculturalist, however, who might well see the yielding of a particular crop as being the reward for their working of a piece of land, for these poets the working of language is viewed as reward in itself, regardless of what produce this work yields. This is an important point because it conveys that the rejuvenation of language is an ongoing project for these poets, meaning that they are not working language in order to achieve some envisioned final restructuring of language, rather they commit to the rejuvenation of language as an impulse. In other words, these four poets see it of vital importance that language is never allowed to remain static and should be continually reshaped, reinvigorated, and rejuvenated.

An Impulse Toward Poetic Work

The pertinent question at this point is why Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin feel that this, evidently impactful, poetic work is necessary. The brief analysis of these poets suggests that they believe, albeit to differing degrees, that language shapes our perception of the world. In this sense, it can be said that these poets support the idea that our perception of the world is ideologically mediated by language. In 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus', Louis Althusser defines 'ideology' as that which 'represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'.[72] This definition is useful insofar as each of the poets studied voice concerns

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[71] 'work, v.', *OED Online* <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/230217?rskey=7qAMEI&result=2> [accessed 07 August 2018]

[72] Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster, pp. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), pp. 85-126 (p. 109).

with the way a particular ideological perspective can become engrained within a culture and it is for this reason that all four poets understand a poetic work which rejuvenates language and, subsequently refreshes our perceptions of the world, as such a useful activity.

In the quotations from these four poets analysed thus far, it is Bernstein who most clearly supports the idea of language ideologically mediating perceptions of the world in his description of a 'historical unconsciousness' embedding itself in our language and, subsequently, continually shaping our 'perception'. The title of Chapter One includes a quotation from Bernstein's poetic essay, 'Artifice of Absorption' (1992), in which he claims poetry to be a form of 'epistemological | inquiry'. It is because of poetry's ability to '[mine]' the 'inexhaustible repository of ideas' of a linguistic 'consciousness' that Bernstein believes that literary form can explore the different ways in which we can know the world. Bernstein argues that, when used as a form of 'epistemological | inqury', poetry has the potential to 'reconnect us | with modes of meaning given in language | but precluded by the hegemony of restricted | epistemological economies'.[73] As Chapter One will explain in detail, Bernstein borrows the notion of 'restricted | epistemological economies' from George Bataille to refer to the epistemological outlook of a culture which attempts to naturalise its specific ideological interpretation of reality as the authoritative interpretation. On the basis of the essay 'State of the Art', it would seem that Bernstein believes the U.S. employs a 'restricted epistemological economy' because it promotes the idea of a 'universal voice of rationality' which, the essay argues, forces an entire nation to see the world on the terms of the heterosexual white male (*A Poetics*, p. 5). Bernstein proudly claims that American poetry contradicts the 'restricted epistemological economy' of the U.S. by providing a space for expressing the 'sharp ideological disagreements that lacerate our communal field of action, making it volatile, dynamic, engaging' (*A Poetics*, p.1). It is this idea of poetry having the capacity to contradict the hegemony of the dominant Western ideology and explore alternative ways of understanding the world that leads Bernstein to approach the writing of poetry as a form of work.

Howe acknowledges in *The Birth-Mark* that '[e]very statement is a product of collective desires and divisibilities. Knowledge, no matter how I get it, involves

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[73] Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 17-18. Further references to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

exclusion and repression' (p. 45). Howe recognises, in a manner similar to Bernstein, that in a world of diverse ideological perspectives, the establishment of a bank of common 'knowledge' involves the privileging of certain perspectives over others. It is in this sense that our conceptions of truth unavoidably involve 'exclusion' and 'repression'. As previously mentioned, Howe critiques the positivist epistemological outlook of the U.S., which she argues has led to the 'exclusion' from history of a variety of American literary figures who have attempted to explore the different ways in which humans can make sense of the world. Howe believes that human knowledge of the world is inescapably limited and that we should, therefore, investigate different ways of understanding the world rather than marginalising figures who deviate from the bounds of conventional knowledge. As Chapter Four will demonstrate, Howe suggests that poetic language can challenge the United States' positivist epistemological outlook by exploring the '[s]trange translucencies' in language that 'form a ladder to an outside state outside of States' (*The Birth-Mark*, p.46). Of course, the capitalisation of 'States' lets us know that such a statement reflects Howe's ambition to move beyond the rigid structures of American culture but, as Chapter Four will argue, Howe praises poetry capacity's for constantly exploring, exposing, and exploiting the gaps in systems of language and thus helping humans exploring how the world can be interpreted in fresh and insightful ways.

A large portion of the poems in Merwin's *The Rain in the Trees* deal with connections between language, culture, and the environment in a manner which suggests that a worldview comes embedded in a particular language. In the poem 'Chord', for instance, Merwin explores the legacy of colonialism in Hawaii by contrasting John Keats' attentiveness to his environment with the actions of European entrepreneurs who were, at the same time, 'cutting down the sandalwood | forests' of Hawaii.[74] The last line of the poem describes one upshot of such destruction: 'an age arrived when everything was explained in another language'.[75] As Jane Frazier observes, Merwin is demonstrating in this final line how '[f]rom this moment forward, the land will be seen from the viewpoint of outsiders, and the original inhabitants' perspective will be lost'.[76] For Merwin, intricate connections exist between place,

[74] *Merwin: Collected Poems,* p. 635.

[75] Ibid., p. 664.

[76] Jane Frazier, *From Origin to Ecology: Nature and the Poetry of W.S. Merwin* (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), p. 118.

culture, and language. With this in mind, Merwin's poetry expresses great concern regarding the hegemony of European languages over native languages in places like Hawaii, as he believes the perspectives offered by a specific language are intimately connected to the culture and environment of a particular place.

In this way, Merwin's idea that the meanings of a language are determined according to cultural context suggests that there is a specific perspective on reality ingrained ideologically in a particular culture's approach to language. Moreover, Merwin voices concerns that, in a globalised world, ideological perspectives are transplanted into a foreign environment. Merwin's poetry suggests that, whilst language always mediates our relationship with nonhuman nature, ideology determines the actions of humans in a way that has a great impact on their environment. In this sense, Merwin recognises the imminent danger of an ideological perspective becoming naturalised. As the second section of Chapter Three will argue, Merwin presents poetry as the antidote to this naturalisation on the basis that the poet can explore and refine the relationship between word and world and, subsequently, alter the way we view non-human nature through language.

Of the four poets studied in this thesis, Ammons is the least invested in the theoretical idea of 'ideology', but throughout *Garbage* he suggests, firstly, that language is a tool for guiding our actions in the world rather than a medium through which we absolutely know the world, and secondly, that humanity's inability to recognise this has led to an irresponsible and hazardous treatment of the environment. In terms of this first argument, Ammons argues that 'words are a specialization on sound | making a kind of language: but there are many | not just languages but kinds of language'. Ammons then goes on to list a range of animals, including whose 'languages' are the same as ours in that 'they warn, inform, | reassure, compare, present'. Ultimately, 'words' are, for Ammons, 'a way of fending in the world', our language does not allow us to know reality, rather it is a tool we use to negotiate with our environment and its constituents (pp. 49-51). Unfortunately, *Garbage* suggests that humans are now blind to the true function of language, and the poem suggests that, in creating 'networks of words | intricate as the realities they represent', humans have created a world in language that is out of sync with the real world (p. 74). As a result of the naturalisation of this particular worldview, Ammons claims humanity has become ignorant of the effect its actions are having on the world, a point expressed in the following metaphor:

we have replaced
the meadows with oilslick: when words have
driven the sludge in billows higher than our
heads -- oh, well, by then words will have left
this poor place behind[77]

The suggestion in these lines is that humans have naturalised ideas about the world in language that do not help us function harmoniously with the world, and that the environment has suffered as a result. Ammons thus suggests that, in naturalising a particular 'imaginary relationship' between humans and reality, humanity has become inattentive and uncaring in its treatment of the environment.

At this point we can see that a difference between Ammons and the other three poets is that whereas Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin specifically critique a Western ideology which, in becoming naturalised, has helped one section of people assert control over other groups of people, Ammons warns against the naturalisation of ideology in general because of the way it puts humans out of sync with the natural flow of the universe. To put this another way, whilst Howe, for instance, specifically criticises the way the naturalisation of a positivist ideology has helped maintain a particular dynamic of power in a patriarchal society, Ammons warns against the naturalisation of a specific ideology on the basis that it is healthy for humanity as a whole to think and rethink the nature of their relationship with reality. Regardless of this difference, we can see that all four poets endorse the poetic working of language as an impulse that should be indulged in order to prevent the naturalisation of one ideology. All four poets thus share Bernstein's notion of poetry being a form of 'epistemological | inquiry' in that they all write poems to open up possibilities for finding meaning through language and thus understanding the world in a new way.

Even on the basis of this brief introductory analysis of the four poets, the pragmatic character of their approach to language shines through. Pragmatism argues for a theoretical middle ground between the naivety of foundationalism and the inertia of scepticism. Morris Dickstein clarifies this point when he states that '[p]ragmatism today is less an attack on the foundations of knowledge, as it was portrayed by its early

[77] *Garbage*, pp. 75-76.

critics, than a search for method when the foundations have already crumbled'.[78] Scholars involved in modern criticism of pragmatism often support Dickstein's view by suggesting that the lasting legacy of pragmatism is not its anti-foundationalist epistemological perspective, but rather the method of procedure that philosophers like James and Peirce outline in light of this anti-foundationalist perspective. The poets analysed in this thesis demonstrate a particularly Jamesian pragmatic influence in their poetry in their recognition that, even if we are unable to know reality in any absolute sense, the truths we hold about reality, and the conceptualisations of reality that we forge, have practical repercussions in terms of our actions in the world. Furthermore, these four writers' recognition that our language affects our understanding of the world, and their subsequent endorsement of poetry as a means of working language, aligns them with a range of American poets who critics argue write in a tradition of poetic pragmatism.

The Epistemological Outlook of Pragmatism

Hilary Putnam's claim that 'perhaps *the* unique insight of American pragmatism' is that 'one can be both fallibilistic and anti-skeptical' is useful for elucidating pragmatism's contribution to poetry.[79] Christopher Hookway clarifies Putnam's argument by describing how scepticism 'occasions despair by suggesting that all of our beliefs are illegitimate, that we can be given sufficient reason to doubt each proposition that we currently believe'. Hookway cites Putnam's own description of fallibilism as dictating that 'there is never a metaphysical guarantee to be had that such-and-such a belief will never need revision'.[80] From these two descriptions, one begins to understand why the two theories might be considered to be somewhat incompatible: on the one hand 'anti-scepticism' would seem to argue that we do not have to 'doubt each proposition that we currently believe' whilst 'fallibilism' appears to suggest that we should be prepared to revise our propositions. As Putnam argues, pragmatism reconciles these two

[78] Morris Dickstein, 'Introduction: Pragmatism Then and Now', in *The Revival of Pragmatism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 1-19 (p. 16). Amazon Kindle Ebook.

[79] Putnam, p. 152.

[80] Christopher Hookway, *The Pragmatic Maxim: Essays on Peirce and Pragmatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 22-23.

theories, and it does this by recommending a particular method for uncovering truth in a world that is presently unknowable.

Putnam's notion of pragmatism's 'unique insight' can be fleshed out by examining James and Peirce's reasoning for formulating a pragmatic 'method' or 'maxim'. James is a sceptic in the sense that he believes humankind's perception of the world to be limited. James, for instance, questions the very notion that we have access to a reality '"independent" of human thinking', arguing of such an 'independent reality' that '[w]e may glimpse it, but we never grasp it; what we grasp is always some substitute for it which previous human thinking has peptonized and cooked for our consumption'.[81] In this sense James argues that our perceptions of the world are unavoidably mediated, meaning that absolute knowledge is unattainable.

For this reason, James argues that truth is, to a degree, manmade as, in terms of human perception of the world,

> you can't weed out the human contribution. […] The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands. […] Man engenders truths upon it. No one can deny that such a role would add both to our dignity and to our responsibility as thinkers.[82]

In these lines James is asserting that, because knowledge is mediated by human thought, truth is something imposed on, rather than found in, the world. In his typically vivacious style, James continues to give a variety of examples of human categorisation to support his claim that '[m]an engenders truths upon [the world]'. For instance, James describes how '[w]e carve out groups of stars in the heaven's [*sic*], and constellations, and the stars patiently suffer us to do so, -- though if they knew what we were doing, some of them might feel much surprised at the partners we had given them'.[83] James' point here is that there is no transcendent truth to the categorisation of groups of stars, rather such categorisation is imposed onto them by humankind.

With this in mind, James suggests our human perceptions of the world are limited in the sense that '[w]ere we lobsters, or bees, it might be that our organization

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[81] William James, 'Pragmatism', in *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, ed. by Giles Gunn (New York: Penguins Book, 2000), pp. 1-132 (p. 109).

[82] James, p. 112.

[83] Ibid., p. 110.

would have led to our using quite different modes from these of apprehending our experiences'. Furthermore, it is arguable too, James suggests, that alternative 'categories' for making sense of reality might 'have proved on the whole as serviceable for handling our experiences mentally as those which we actually use'.[84] In this manner, James is not only arguing that the human species develops its own version of reality, but also that alternative understandings of reality could be equally helpful for 'handling our experiences' of the world.

However, rather than questioning the credibility of 'truth' on this basis, James argues that the fact that we 'engender truth upon the world' means that we have a great 'responsibility' in our pursuit of truth. I might like to believe that I can fly, but if I were to genuinely hold such a belief or convince others of its legitimacy, the results would be perilous. As a solution, James offers a 'pragmatic method' which we can apply to areas of epistemological inquiry:

> What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right.[85]

In order to clarify James' theory, we can think of the practice of acupuncture. Acupuncture, a form of traditional Chinese medicine, involves the insertion of fine needles at specific points on the skin. The Taoist philosophy from which acupuncture originated as a practice dictates that the 'life-force energy' of 'chi' circulates in the body and that acupuncture helps stimulate this healthy circulation. The practice of acupuncture has, since the 1970s, become increasingly adopted by Western practitioners and, as such, a variety of Western scientific theories have been advanced in order to explain the success of the practice. If we were to specifically apply the 'pragmatic method' to ascertain whether the truth of acupuncture lies with the Taoist theory or, for instance, the scientific theory that acupuncture stimulates the release of

[84] James, p. 76

[85] James, p. 63.

endorphins, one would conclude that the 'dispute is idle' as there is no 'practical difference' between our acceptance of either proposition being true.[86]

Admittedly, in the wider context of medical practice, the scientific theory for the effects of acupuncture fits in with a system of biological classification that is arguably more successful in keeping human beings healthy than that provided by Taoist theory, and on this basis, one might well argue for the practical benefit of accepting the scientific theory over the Taoist theory. However, the James of *Pragmatism* would still argue that in a culture of traditional Chinese medicine, one that is unexposed to Western science, the Taoist theory would still constitute a 'truth'. Indeed, this position of James's is demonstrated in his claim that truth:

> lives […] for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs 'pass,' so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them. To 'agree' in the widest sense with a reality can only mean to be guided either straight up to it or into its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we disagreed.[87]

Whilst acupuncture developed out of a logic that is deemed outdated by modern Western science, the practice itself yields results in a way that means the theory 'passes'. Indeed, this is part of the process by which the 'pragmatic method' theoretically advances a more accurate picture of truth, as James sees the revision of 'truths' as a natural part of the process of philosophical inquiry. Moreover, James' wording in this paragraph is highly significant, with a proposition's truth being valued according to how well it 'guides' us, or allows us to better 'handle' our 'surroundings'.

There are strong similarities between James' 'pragmatic method' and its consequentialist predecessor, Peirce's 'pragmatic maxim', which dictates that we should, firstly, '[c]onsider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have', and then conclude that 'our

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[86] 'acupuncture.', in *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, by Paul Lagasse, 8th ed (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), in *Credo Reference* database <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/acupuncture?institutionId=1278> [accessed 08 August 2018]

[87] James, p. 93.

conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object'.[88] However, a key difference between James and Peirce's pragmatisms -- a difference that is significant in terms of this thesis' decision to prioritise the pragmatism of James -- is neatly summarised by Albert Atkin in the following lines:

> Peirce sees pragmatism as a logical principle. The [pragmatic] maxim is a tool of analysis designed to make our concepts clear and logically precise. For James, pragmatism is a philosophical outlook. For him, pragmatism is an approach to philosophy that looks towards the consequences of belief, which looks at human action, and moves the whole enterprise of understanding them, away from scientifically founded philosophy.[89]

Having established these differences, Atkin explains that Peirce can be seen as a traditionalist and James an anti-traditionalist on the basis that the former's pragmatism 'retains the architectonic approach with first principles and categories', whilst the latter's 'moves away from the philosophies of Kant and Hegel, with their emphasis upon first principles, categories etc'.[90] To put this another way, one might say that Peirce develops an innovative approach to traditional philosophy whilst still working with traditional philosophical concepts, whereas James wants to 'move away' from such concepts.

This difference between James and Peirce is reflected in the respective goals they hold for their mode of philosophical inquiry. Whilst Peirce believed that the application of the 'pragmatic maxim' would eventually uncover '[t]he opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate', James saw the 'pragmatic method' as a means of helping us living harmoniously.[91] As Rorty states, for James '[o]ur responsibility to Truth is not […] a responsibility to get things right. Rather it is

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[88] Charles Sanders Peirce, 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear' in *Peirce on Signs*, ed. by James Hoopes (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 160-179 (p. 169).

[89] Albert Atkin, 'Peirce, Charles Sanders: Pragmatism | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* < https://www.iep.utm.edu/peircepr/> [accessed 06 August 2018]

[90] Ibid.

[91] Peirce, p. 177.

a responsibility to ourselves to make our beliefs cohere with one another, and to our fellow humans to make them cohere with theirs'.[92] When it comes to the growing body of work on pragmatism's influence on poetry, it would certainly seem that these pragmatist poets are more indebted to James than Peirce.

Emerson, Pragmatism, and Poetry

Since the publications of Richard Poirier's *The Renewal of Literature* (1987) and *Poetry and Pragmatism* (1992), a body of criticism has developed linking pragmatism to American poetry. Critics who pick up on this connection often argue that the pragmatic approach to epistemology has enabled a range of American poets to establish a meaningful relationship with their environments in spite of humankind's inevitably limited knowledge of the world. There is little claim from critics that such poets subscribe to the pragmatic 'method' or 'maxim', nor are they described as having a goal of assembling absolute knowledge (as does Peirce), however critics suggest that these poets see the writing of poetry as an activity akin to the philosophical inquiry outlined by Peirce and James.

Kristen Case's *Pragmatism and Poetic Practice* is an example of a critical work which captures the way James and Peirce's contributions to epistemology have empowered American poets. Case cites Frost's 'After Apple-Picking' as an example of a pragmatist poem that embraces the idea that meaning is something made through human activity in the world, rather than something passively received from a transcendental source. Through the scenario of a farm labourer pondering her sense of distance or alienation from her immediate environment, Frost, Case argues, asks the question '[b]y what yardstick do we measure truth and value'.[93] However, Case suggests that later in the poem, Frost resolves this tension through his description of the apples that the labourer has sorted during the day:

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[92] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 177. Google Books Ebook.

[93] Kristen Case, *American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice: Crosscurrents from Emerson to Susan Howe* (Rochester: Camden House, 2011), p. 15.

There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down and not let fall.
For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap,
As of no worth.[94]

In these lines, Case argues, Frost resolves his speaker's anxieties by showing that 'it is human labor […] alone -- not any intrinsic property of an object that determines value'.[95] In other words, Case is arguing that Frost's speaker is relieved of her anxieties about the authenticity of her perceptions of knowledge and meaning through the realisation that meaning and knowledge do not exist in a reality independent of humans, a reality which renders meaning and knowledge as sealed off from humans, rather they are constituted in the process of investigation.

'After Apple-Picking', Case argues, exemplifies the pragmatist influence on American poetry through its recognition that

> meaning is generated through the interaction of mind and world -- it is *made.* Knowing is not a passive activity, the mere beholding of an object by a perceiving subject, it is a kind of work, a by-product of active engagement with the world.[96]

Case is suggesting that meaning is neither, for pragmatist poets like Frost, something which exists externally to us and which we receive transcendentally, nor is it something from which we are isolated. Instead, Case argues, these poets see meaning as 'generated' through the activity of 'engaging with the world'. Moreover, Case's specification that this 'engagement' is 'active' echoes James' and Peirce's fallibilistic idea that our investigation into reality is an ongoing one. Such ideas about 'active

[94] Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. by Edward Connery Lathem (London: Vintage Books, 2001), pp. 68-69 (p. 69).

[95] Case, p. 16.

[96] Case, p. 16.

engagement' lead to Case claiming that 'practice' is central to 'pragmatist thought'.[97] Pragmatism argues that humans do not just possess knowledge or truth but rather that these are things found through a particular practice in the world. Case shows how poets including Frost, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, and Howe use poetry as a means through which to practice an active investigation of the world.

Case thus neatly clarifies how Frost channels the epistemological outlook of James and Peirce in his use of poetry to generate meaning in a world in which absolute meaning is beyond his grasp. However, whilst the body of work on poetry and pragmatism certainly recognises the legacy of James' and Peirce's writings on epistemology, for critics such as Poirier and Michael Magee, Emerson is the archetypal pragmatist. As Case, Magee, and Andrew Epstein acknowledge, there are many sides to Emerson's philosophy and if 'Nature' is the most famous Emerson text, the most famous Emerson is the transcendentalist who claims that, when immersed in nature, 'I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God'.[98] However, Magee rejects the view that 'Emerson's complicity with something like Kant's "transcendental ego" at an early stage in his career as a thinker remains a central […] aspect of his philosophy' and proposes that '[s]ometime around 1840' Emerson established 'a view of thought as *interaction* that I can only identify as pragmatist'.[99]

Magee's argument is supported by the position on epistemology that Emerson adopts in 'Experience' (1844). Emerson appears to share James' view that '[m]an engenders truth upon [the world]', for instance, when he writes that '[l]ife is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in focus'.[100] By the time of writing 'Experience', then, Emerson is evidently no longer claiming to 'see all' but rather appreciates the limitations that humans face in attaining knowledge about the world. The human understanding of reality is further complicated, Emerson claims in 'The Poet' (1844), by the fact that '[w]hat we call nature, is a certain self-regulated motion, or change; and nature does all things by her

[97] Case, p. 16.

[98] Emerson, 'Nature', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, pp. 235-247 (p. 6).

[99] Michael Magee, *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), p. 56.

[100] 'Experience', p. 218.

own hands, and does not leave another to baptise her, but baptises herself; and this through the metamorphosis again'.[101] Evidently Emerson not only believes by the time of writing these two essays that our perceptions of nature are defined by a particular 'hue' but also that nature itself is in a constant state of fluctuation. In light of these epistemological limitations, Emerson proposes that humans should privilege ideas about the world which are suited to a current 'moment' on the basis that '[w]e live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them', a thought that is echoed in James' argument that 'we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood'.[102] In these essays, then, Emerson shares both James' anti-foundationalism and his belief that humans will be best guided in their actions if they commit to a fallibilistic approach to truth.

Not all critics who are sympathetic to this reading of Emerson as a fallibilist are willing to label him a pragmatist. Stanley Cavell, for example, observes some key differences between the transcendental philosophy of Emerson and the scientific approach of James and John Dewey. According to Cavell, whereas Dewey endorses the application of 'science and its method' as the route to truth, Emerson encourages his reader to turn inwards and follow 'his privatest, secretest presentiment'. Such a difference, Cavell claims, manifests itself in Emerson and his two pragmatists' divergent approaches to the 'wager' of writing. For the pragmatists, Cavell proposes, writing is a 'necessary intellectual preparation for a better future', but Emerson understands writing 'itself as a present step into that future'.[103] In this vein, Cavell is stressing that whilst Dewey and James use writing as a means of establishing ideas which can then be acted upon in society, for Emerson the work of philosophy takes place in the process of writing.

When it comes to work connecting pragmatism to poetry, however, Emerson is frequently seen as the best representative of pragmatism precisely because of his philosophical investment in the process of writing. Poirier is specifically interested in 'pragmatism as a form of linguistic skepticism' which manifests itself in a 'recognition that language, if it is to represent the flow of individual experience, ceases to be an instrument of clarification or of clarity and, instead, becomes the instrument of a saving

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[101] 'The Poet', pp. 205-206.

[102] James, p. 98.

[103] Stanley Cavell, 'What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist', *Cardozo Law Review*, 18.1 (September 1996), 171-180 (p. 174, p. 179).

uncertainty and vagueness'.[104] For this reason, Poirier sees Emerson as the archetypal pragmatist due to the way the philosopher's approach to writing is interlinked with his belief that, due to humanity's limited knowledge of reality, 'the true art of life is to skate well on [its surfaces]'. Emerson understands, Poirier proposes, that the knowable world is subject to constant change and that, subsequently, the ideas about the world that we formulate in language should constantly be re-evaluated and challenged by language. However, Poirier argues that writing is not, for Emerson, just a means of documenting re-evaluated thoughts, rather the philosopher sees the process of writing as a means of testing language in a bid to make 'words […] reveal the parameters of fate and limitation' and 'open spaces beyond these, horizons of new, barely apprehended possibility'.[105] In other words, Poirier suggests that Emerson approached the writing process as a means through which to discover fresh ideas.

The specific Emerson text that Poirier cites to demonstrate Emerson's idea of writing as a means of epistemological investigation is 'Circles'. An Emersonian 'circle', as Poirier describes it, is a system of conventionalised knowledge and it is described as being potentially dangerous in the sense that it 'actively creates truths and knowledge and then subtly enforces their distribution'. These 'circles' are 'codified' in language and therefore '[determine] vocabulary by which the self learns to *resist* its own sense of identity'. Whilst Poirier admits that the notion of the 'circle' suggests a rather 'imperilled view of human freedom', Emerson claims that one with a 'quick and strong [...] soul' can break out of a 'circle'. Subsequently, Poirier argues, Emerson sees the 'soul' as being at its most potent in the transitionary moment between one 'circle' being broken and the inevitable moment in which a subsequent 'circle' is formed. In establishing a new 'circle', Poirier explains' one does not 'destroy' the previous 'circle', rather the 'remnants [of the former circle] get taken along in the swell created by actions of the soul, just as, according to James, "previous truths" get included in any engendering of truth'. One of the reasons that Emerson envisions this transitionary moment to be so powerful, Poirier suggests, is that it opens up possibilities of 'personal and cultural renewal'.[106]

Whilst *Poetry and Pragmatism* opens up some intriguing connections between poets including Frost, Stein, and Stevens, Poirier is himself rather vague in narrowing

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[104] Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. 3-4.

[105] Poirier, p. 30.

[106] Poirier, p. 11, pp. 22-25.

down exactly what style of writing allows language to become the 'instrument of a saving uncertainty and vagueness'. One example that Poirier does give comes in an analysis of Frost's poems 'Mending Wall' and 'For Once Then, Something'. Poirier is specifically interested in the recurrence of the word 'something' in these poems, and he cites the line 'For once, then, something', from the latter poem, as an example of a 'phrase [that] refuses to surrenders its vagueness to any one of a variety of competing emphases, which can fall on the word "once" or on the word "something"'. The pragmatic quality of these vague phrases seems to derive, for Poirier, from the fact that they '[point] toward future realization, toward the existence of things which [sound] cannot verbally represent'. On the basis of such observations, Poirier argues that Frost is aware that 'the word is not the thing it represents' and that, subsequently, '[l]anguage […] can create an abyss -- a Frostean gap with a vengeance -- and writing is constructed on that abyss'. However, what marks writers like Frost and Stevens out as pragmatists, he argues, is that the recognition of this abyss represents 'an invitation simply to get moving, to make a transition'.[107] With this established, it would seem that what Poirier has in mind when he discusses writing that incorporates a 'linguistic scepticism' is writing that awakens us to the gaps in the worldview that language creates for us. If, as Emerson asserts in 'Circles', language 'codifies' and 'distributes' a dominant epistemological perspective, it would follow that when poets like Frost probe the limitations of language, they probe the epistemological outlook of their particular 'circle'.

Michael Magee echoes Poirier's elucidation of an Emersonian 'circle' in the opening of *Emancipating Pragmatism* when, expanding on Emerson's idea that '[a]ll history becomes subjective', he writes that '[h]istory is a series of written texts whose words might be moved this way and that or, if all else fails, forged', with knowledge being depicted as a text that is reinterpreted and reworked throughout history. However, Magee is keen to emphasise that '[t]his is not to say that history isn't true -- only that it becomes true, unfolding in time as a result of discovery, re-interpretation, and negotiation of meaning between readers. It is true whenever "we" agree on and believe record'. [108] Having established James' position that truth lives on 'agreement', and that to '"agree" in the widest sense with a reality can only mean to be guided either

[107] Poirier, p. 146, p. 148, p. 149.

[108] Magee, pp. 1-2.

straight up to it or into its surroundings', one can see how Magee's vision of history as a text that is reworked to better forge 'agreement' is pragmatic.

One can see, then, that, like Poirier, Magee sees the transitionary moment when the 'words' of the 'text' of 'history' are reworked as offering the possibility of 'personal and cultural renewal'. In this sense, both Poirier and Magee echo Dewey who, as Magee explains, suggests

> that "experimental" poetry […] was a type of democratic symbolic action, designed to see whether the world would stand for and promote, or conversely frustrate, democracy, whether the linguistic structures of the poem would be consonant with or dissonant to the social structures against which the poem acted.[109]

The suggestion from both Poirier and Magee is that our language holds certain truths, truths that relate to a wider historical 'text', and that we can, therefore, rework the words that form this language through poetry in a bid to rework the truths of that social text.

Kacper Bartczak also picks up on this Emersonian idea that the poet could play an important role in reworking language and, subsequently, reworking cultural values which are codified in that language. Bartczak argues that pragmatism offers experimental American poetry a middle ground between deconstruction and foundationalism. Bartczak suggests that criticism connecting pragmatism to poetry has failed to show that pragmatism offers 'much more than the message already honed by post-structuralism and deconstruction'. Correcting this failure, Bartczak proposes that, by focusing on neopragmatism, Language and post-Language poets have realised that '[w]hile it is naïve to expect poetry to be a place where subjectivities receive an "expression," poetry, being a special state of language, necessarily carrying network combinations of human stances, will see the ongoing emergence of subjectivities'. Bartczak explains that whilst the notion of subjectivity in language is called into question by post-structuralism, neopragmatism suggests that we do have subjectivity in the sense that language is a

[109] Magee, p. 29.

> tool of inter-subjective communication inseparable from the emergence of subjects. Language is the result of human plurality and sociality. The need of communication is primary and precedes, conditions, without incapacitating, the processes of self-formation: the human comes into being through the presence of other humans and communications with them.[110]

In this way, Bartczak suggests that, for neopragmatists like Rorty and Donald Davidson, humans create networks of language which, whilst they do not provide representation for any reality external to human thought, do provide a medium through which we can make sense of the world and make sense of ourselves. Moreover, as humans and, especially, as poets we have, through our 'interactions' and networks, the power to '[rewrite such] linguistic maps'. In this way, we can see that Bartczak is making a similar argument to Poirier and Magee in suggesting that our perception of the world is constituted by networks of language and that the poet can, by experimenting with language, shift this network and the attitudes and stances embedded within it. Indeed, the poet performs an important task in carrying out such a shift Bartczak claims, because the 'linguistic states' we find ourselves in 'will affect the world'. From Bartczak's perspective, then, neo-pragmatism is indeed distinct from post-structuralism in terms of its influence on poetry in the sense that the former's 'poetics of the evolving self is […] a platform for political stances' and is, therefore, 'more feasible than the aesthetics of endless dissolution'.[111]

Whilst there are some clear differences between Poirier and Magee's elucidation of an Emersonian social text, and Bartczak's neopragmatic notion of a 'linguistic map', all three critics similarly argue that a society's epistemological perspective is codified in language. Furthermore, all three critics suggests that the pragmatist poet plays an important role in re-symbolising the social language so as to re-symbolise that society's epistemological perspective. In this sense, these critics conceive of humanity's relationship with reality in a similar manner to neopragmatists like Rorty. Rorty argues that we should 'see the history of language, and thus of the arts, the sciences, and the moral sense, as the history of metaphor'. In elucidating this view,

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[110] Kacper Bartczak, 'Pragmatism and Poetry: The Neo-Pragmatist Difference in the Discussion of Contemporary Poetry', *Pragmatism Today: The Journal of the Central-European Pragmatist Forum*, 2.2 (Winter 2011), 46-63 (p. 47, p. 55).

[111] Ibid, p. 58, p. 62.

Rorty describes history as a process of 'successive metaphors', in which 'familiar […] uses of noises and marks' that 'we can handle by our old theories about what people will say under various conditions' are first challenged, and then displaced, by 'unfamiliar uses of noises and marks' which '[make] us get busy developing a new theory'. Rorty describes this as a process in which the 'literal' is succeeded by the 'metaphorical', and he clarifies it further by referring to Donald Davidson's suggestion that we 'think of the history of language, and thus of culture, as Darwin taught us to think of the history of a coral reef. Old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors'. In giving an example of this process in action, Rorty refers to the poetry of W.B. Yeats, a poet whose originality came, Rorty claims, not from his ability to express more succinctly 'something which had been yearning for expression', but rather from his 'having hit upon some tools which enabled him to write poems which were not just variations on the poems of his precursors'. Once we had the poetry of Yeats, Rorty argues, 'we were less interested in reading Rossetti's', and this provides a rather literal example of the way Rorty sees our language, and subsequently our conception of the world, as shifting through the succession of 'metaphor'. Indeed, as Rorty points out, in light of this view, we can see 'the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species'.[112]

Pragmatist Poetry in the Early 1990s

My argument is that the poets analysed in this thesis are pragmatic in the way that they treat poetry as a means of epistemological investigation. These poets take a Jamesian approach to epistemology by embracing fallibilism whilst also exhibiting a drive in their work to forge better, more practical and ethical conceptualisations of reality. The four poets recognise the impossibility of arriving at absolute truth but they also understand that there is much at stake in terms of the way we make sense of the world. As James puts it, '[w]e live in a world of realities that can be infinitely useful or infinitely harmful', meaning that, whilst humanity always 'engenders' truth, one set of 'truths' can influence our actions in a far more damaging or constructive way than another.[113] Given their belief that language is constitutive of an epistemological perspective, they

[112] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 16, p. 20, p. 17.

[113] James, p. 89.

understand, like Rorty, that language is a key 'tool' for carving out a more practical conception of their environment. My description of a 'more practical conception' is vague because each poet studied identifies a specific ideologically enforced attitude which they deem to be unpractical. Broadly speaking, however, these poets are similar to Rorty in their ambition to facilitate a view of the world which allows us 'to trust and to cooperate with other people, and in particular to work together so as to improve the future'.[114] The poem is an excellent medium for exploring the possibilities for making sense of our experience, and this thesis will analyse how my chosen writers experiment with the world-making 'tool' of language in their poems.

However, on balance, this thesis' idea of a pragmatic poetic 'work' is slightly more indebted to Emerson than James in two keys ways. Firstly, the particular relevance of Emerson's philosophy to Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin's poetic work can be clarified by considering how the philosopher treats the re-vitalisation of language through writing as an ongoing activity. Whereas the pragmatic 'method' or 'maxim' requires that we reflect on the practical benefits of rejecting established truths in favour of a newly proposed alternative, Emerson believes that to sharpen our perceptions of an everchanging world we should instinctually look to tailor our understanding of the world to the current moment. Emerson is thus important to this thesis in terms of his argument that we should adopt the rejuvenation of perception as an impulse. As was established in my description of Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin's treatment of poetry as a form of work, these poets also embrace the working of language as an impulse due to their wariness about the naturalisation of a particular ideological position in language. Like Frost, as described by Poirier, they thus see it as imperative that, in order to continue to navigate the gap between word and world, we 'get moving' and 'make a transition'.

This difference between Emerson and the classical pragmatists returns us to Cavell's argument that the two parties invest in the 'wager' of writing in different ways. For the classical pragmatists, writing is a neutral space in which the benefits of holding one truth over another can be analysed in an objective manner, whereas Poirier and Magee argue that Emerson understands that our very language affects our perception of the world. It is for this reason that Emerson explores the process of writing to explore different possibilities for perceiving the world. Poirier and Magee convincingly argue on this basis that although James, Peirce, and Dewey contribute to American

[114] *Philosophy and Social Hope*, pp. 8-9.

poetry by developing a position on epistemology that was radical for its time, Emerson's use of writing as a means of epistemological investigation establishes a tradition for using poetry as a form of philosophical practice. In arguing that Emerson intends for his writing to re-symbolise language and in turn, the values which are embedded within it, Poirier and Magee show how Emerson anticipates the postmodern idea that a particular worldview is codified in language.

Emerson thus sets a precedent for my chosen poets' treatment of poetry as a form of pragmatic 'work' in the sense that he, firstly, endorses writing as a process for engaging ideas about the world, secondly, argues for the cultural significance of writing that performs this epistemological investigation, and thirdly, endorses a process by which writers continually work language to perpetually sharpen their perception of the world. Like the pragmatic Emerson, as interpreted by Poirier and Magee, these poets recognise that there is a pernicious element to the naturalisation of a particular ideology in language and thus embrace the rejuvenation of language through poetry as an impulse in their work.

Leading critics on pragmatist poetry have overwhelmingly focused on modernist poets such as Stein, Frost, and Stevens. In demonstrating how Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin perform this Emersonian work, the thesis will illuminate the potential for connecting Emersonian pragmatism to postmodern poetry. Given the way that, as will be explored in Chapters One and Two, postmodern poetry in the early 1990s often explored the instability of linguistic expression, Poirier and Magee's claims that Emerson sees certain values as being codified in language suggest that the philosopher anticipates postmodernism in some intriguing ways. Indeed, Bartczak is to be given credit for recognising poetry's potential for influencing a culture's 'linguistic maps'. With this in mind, this thesis will contribute to the fascinating body of work on pragmatist poetry by emphasising how a fruitful comparison can be drawn between the pragmatic side of Emerson's philosophy and the postmodern poetic interest in discourse around the materiality of language and ideology.

The Culture Wars

In each chapter of this thesis I demonstrate the pragmatic quality of one of my four chosen poets' approach to epistemology. The main reason I am interested in the poetry written at the turn of the 1990s is because this period was both formative in the development of ecocriticism and also, as Chapter One of this thesis will argue, when leading Language poets such as Bernstein were becoming less prescriptive in terms of

political poetry.[115] To put this another way, Language poetry was becoming less radical in its political project at the same time that ecocriticism was defining itself through its opposition to postmodern poetry which emphasised the ideological function of language. It is for this reason that this time period in American poetry is ideal for exploring the supposed opposition between ecopoetry and postmodern poetries.

However, by demonstrating that Ammons, Bernstein, Merwin, and Howe share a pragmatic epistemological outlook in this period, the thesis also opens up a connection to the Culture Wars which were taking place in the early 1990s. James Davison Hunter introduced the idea of a cultural war within America in his 1991 book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America.* His argument is that, at more than any other time in American history, Americans in the early 1990s could be divided in two in terms of their identification with a 'progressive' or 'orthodox' worldview. These two camps were divided, Hunter argues, by contrasting 'systems of moral understanding', with 'progressivists' sharing a '*tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life'*, and Americans that share an impulse towards 'orthodoxy' deriving 'moral understanding' from '*commitment* […] *to an external, definable, and transcendent authority*' (Hunter's emphasis). By these definitions, the 'orthodox' perspective is defined by a devotion to established moral codes which provide 'a consistent, unchangeable measure of value, purpose, goodness, and identity, both personal and collective'. 'Orthodox' Americans, Hunter argues, find their moral guidance in 'an authority that is sufficient for all time'. In contrast, Hunter states that the 'progressivist' perspective is defined by a tendency to see 'truth […] as a process, as a reality that is ever unfolding'. Whereas, for instance, a Christian that takes an 'orthodox' approach to morality, would argue that the Bible has the final word on an issue such as homosexuality, a 'progressivist' Christian would, according to Hunter, be more likely to 'translate the moral ideals of a religious tradition so that they conform to and legitimate the contemporary *zeitgeist*'.[116]

Hunter warns his reader against thinking of 'progressive' and 'orthodox' as terms denoting political positions. Hunter acknowledges that Americans of an 'orthodox' worldview tend to be 'cultural conservatives' and 'progressivists' tend to be 'liberal or libertarian' in their 'social agenda', but he reminds us that '[o]n political matters one can compromise', whereas there is no room for 'compromise' when it

[115] Fisher-Wirth and Street, p. xxix; Bryson, 1-13 (pp. 1-2).

[116] Hunter, pp. 44-45.

comes to 'ultimate moral truth'. Hunter's point is, then, that whilst this 'culture war' over contemporary issues such as 'abortion, child care, funding for the arts, affirmative action and quotas, gay rights, values in public education, or multiculturalism' might be fought in the arena of political debate, it has its roots in competing 'moral visions' that are cultural rather political. Indeed, Hunter claims that one upshot of this being a cultural rather than political 'war', is that these debates affect issues like family and education in a way that 'intersects the lives of most Americans, even those who are or would like to be totally indifferent'.[117]

These poets' 'progressive' tendencies are evident not only in the political views articulated in the poems but also in the approach to language taken by the poets. Given that these poets share the Emersonian/pragmatic objective to rework and resymbolise language to explore the possibilities for more constructive linguistic representations of the world, their poetry can be considered to an enact the 'progressive' '*tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life*'. Moreover, neopragmatist philosophers including Rorty, who has been influential in my argument about a poetic form of epistemological renewal, have contributed to this debate about the Culture Wars.[118] In the conclusion to this thesis I will return to the context of the Culture Wars and explore how the pragmatic quality of my chosen poets' work affiliates them with 'progressives' in the cultural war described by Hunter.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter One I advance the argument that Bernstein takes a significantly more flexible, constructive, and ultimately pragmatic position on meaning in his work from the early 1990s than he exhibited in his earlier work. Whilst Bernstein's essays and poetry in the early 1990s remain vigilant in their awareness of language's limitations in conveying the presence of its objects, in this period the poet moves away from a deconstructive approach to reference endorsed in essays from *Content's Dream* (1986). This change in Bernstein's work will be charted in Chapter One by exploring the influence of Wittgenstein on Bernstein's 'essay-in-verse', 'Artifice of Absorption' (1992). The chapter finishes by arguing that Bernstein's preference for Wittgenstein over Derrida helps the poet establish a pragmatic middle ground between the extremes of scepticism and the naivety of foundationalism. In taking this position, I argue,

[117] Hunter, p. 46, pp. 42-43, p. 50.

[118] *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 48.

Bernstein carves out a more pragmatic and constructive political role for poetry. Bernstein is less focused in this period on specifically escaping a capitalist ideology and instead outlines an Emersonian political project in which the working of language through poetry revitalises our perceptions of reality. Moreover, this chapter will also explain how, in moving away from prescriptive arguments about poetry's responsibility for foregrounding the manipulative side of capitalist ideology, Bernstein becomes more sympathetic in *A Poetics* to, what Andrews calls, 'writing about politics'. In this sense, whilst the chapter's priority is to clarify how Bernstein performs a pragmatic working of language in the early 1990s, it also engages ecocriticism's concerns about postmodern poetry directly by showing how Bernstein's philosophy on meaning in language is more compatible with ecopoetry than some ecocritics would have us believe.

Chapter Two continues to explore the themes of Chapter One by arguing that whilst Ammons' *Garbage* (1993) is out of step with the postmodern poetry of its time, this long poem shows that Ammons shares Bernstein's Emersonian approach to epistemology. The first section of the chapter uses Paul Hoover's criteria for a postmodern poem to show how Ammons' commitment to a spontaneous and immediate style of self-expression in *Garbage* sets him apart from postmodern poets like Bernstein, who drew attention to the way that presence in language is ideologically mediated in the 1970s onwards. The chapter's second section argues, however, that despite this difference Ammons actually shares with Bernstein both an epistemological outlook influenced by Emerson and a desire to rejuvenate language through a project of poetic work. Furthermore, in exploring the intriguing neopragmatist quality of Ammons' *Garbage*, Chapter Two also proposes that we should not underestimate the theoretical sophistication of experimental poetry such as *Garbage* purely because it is not strictly a postmodern poem.

Chapter Three investigates Merwin's critique of environmental and cultural degradation in Hawaii and his attempts to reconnect humans to non-human nature through the medium of the poem. Critics including Scigaj, Frazier, and Kate Dunning argue that in *The Rain in the Trees* (1988) and *Travels* (1993) Merwin is more open to the possibility that language can help humans integrate within their environments than he was in earlier, more deconstructive collections such as *The Lice* (1967).[119] Merwin

[119] Kate Dunning, 'From Environmental Poetry to Ecopoetry: W.S. Merwin's Poetic Forest', *Merwin Studies*, 1.1 (2013), 67-96 (p. 67); Frazier, p. 13; Scigaj, p. 177.

retains an awareness of language's limitations in *The Rain in the Trees*, the collection which I focus on, Merwin also suggests that we can and should modify our approach to language in order to forge a more fruitful relationship with our environment. The first section of Chapter Three will reveal the pragmatic quality of Merwin's argument that although we can never absolutely know the world through language, the ways in which we use language to relate the world has great repercussions for both human and non-human nature. In the second section of the chapter I explore how Merwin uses poetry as a means of refreshing perceptions of reality. As the chapter will explain, my analysis of Merwin's nature poems in *The Rain in the Trees* is indebted to Cavell's *The Sense of* Walden, which suggests that Thoreau explores ideas about writing through descriptions of his physical labours at Walden Pond.[120] I draw a similar comparison between Merwin's descriptions of his working of the land in his Maui Garden and his poetic working of language. In both of these enterprises, Merwin commits to processes of discovery which he believes reconnect humans to their environments.

In the first section of Chapter Four I clarify Howe's critique of a hegemonic tendency in American culture which has, historically, marginalised figures who deviate from conventional structures of expression. The section explains how Howe identifies in *The Birth-Mark* a number of 'enthusiasts' (p. 11) from different periods in American history, such as the Puritan Anne Hutchinson, the poet Emily Dickinson, and the literary critic F.O. Matthiessen, whose voices have been censored in the records of history and literary criticism (p. 1, p. 15). In the second section of this chapter, I analyse the poem 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time' to show how Howe attempts to literally give voice in her poetry to these forgotten 'enthusiasts'. Howe argues that the voices of these 'enthusiasts' lie hidden within certain historical texts. My analysis will examine Howe's process for channelling the voice of the Reverend Hope Atherton who accompanied soldiers from Hatfield, Massachusetts into the Battle of Turner's Falls in 1676. Atherton's account is included in George Sheldon's text *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts* but Howe suspects that it has been censored.[121] Subsequently, Howe

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[120] Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 5.

[121] George Sheldon, *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts: The Times When and the People by Whom It Was Settled, Unsettled and Resettled*, 2 vols (Deerfield: Press of E.A. Hall & co., 1895), pp. 166-168, in *HathiTrust* <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100332036> [accessed 01 August 2018]

attempts to poeticise Sheldon's text in her poem 'Articulation' to give voice to Atherton and remedy his marginalisation in the records of American history. Cavell's *The Senses of Walden* is used again in this chapter to explain how Howe's poeticising of Sheldon's text is a form of poetic work.

Charles Bernstein's Poetry of 'Epistemological | Inquiry'

Section One

The introduction explained that the political project outlined by many poets writing in *The Language Book* is implicated in criticisms from ecocritics such as Scigaj, Buell, and Garrard about the malign influence of literary theory on the politics of American poetry. Many Language poets argued in their formative work that because capitalist ideology is embedded in conventional language, a poet wishing to confront the status-quo should, in Andrews' words, approach 'writing *as* politics' rather than as a means of 'writing *about* politics' (*Paradise and Method*, p. 50). By dismissing the political efficacy of 'writing *about* politics', ecocritics argue, these poets undervalue the potential for poetry to confront contemporary issues such as environmental degradation and climate change. Scigaj is particularly damning in his criticism of Derrida, who he sees as a key influence for, what he labels, 'postmodern establishment poetry':

> In denying any extralinguistic grounding for language, Derrida takes a reductionist position, for Saussure clearly posits a social, communal ground for language (113). Language has at least a mediate connectedness to the referential world from the standpoint of social praxis […] At least two people must agree over relatively stable signifiers to create a language; otherwise, one has an indecipherable, secret code, or an endless chain of deferred signification.[122]

Scigaj takes issue with Derrida's idea that there is no meaning outside of language on the basis that our everyday communication evidences our ability to impose a stable structure on to language. In referring to 'the standpoint of social praxis', Scigaj connects this criticism of Derrida to his wider argument that we have enough autonomy over language to communicate ideas about our environment in poetry.

However, Scigaj actually finds an ally in this argument about Derrida in Bernstein, a Language poet who is certainly part of the 'postmodern establishment' but shares Scigaj's view that Derrida is overly pessimistic in his evaluation of our agency in language. Indeed, behind the flippant tone of the following lines from Bernstein's poem 'The Lives of the Toll Takers' lies a similar point to Scigaj's:

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[122] Scigaj, p. 27.

difference or

différance: it's
the distinction between hauling junk and
removing rubbish, while
I, needless not to say, take
out the garbage
(pragmatism)[123]

In the first two lines of this excerpt, Bernstein alludes to Derrida's multifaceted concept of 'différance' which, in A. W. Moore's words, is partly used to 'indicate the joint significance of both difference and deferral to his account of the meanings of signs'. In creating this concept, Moore argues, Derrida's combines his idea that 'a sign's meaning is determined in contradistinction to that of other signs', or its 'difference' from other signs, with his idea that a 'sign's meaning is given by its connection with other signs', or that meaning is 'deferred'.[124] These elements of Derrida's critique of signification will be clarified later in this chapter, however, one does not have to be an expert on Derrida to see that Bernstein is reacting dismissively to the sense of uncertainty in Derrida's theory in these lines by boisterously claiming that, rather than deliberating over the theoretical differences between 'hauling junk | and removing rubbish', he 'take[s] | out the garbage' in the spirit of 'pragmatism'. Bernstein is a nuanced reader of literary theory and, for this reason, there is a tongue-in-cheek quality to this critique of Derrida. However, as this chapter will show, by embracing a Wittgensteinian approach to meaning in language at the expense of Derrida, Bernstein echoes Scigaj's argument about shared rules in language helping to produce 'relatively stable signifiers'.

The fact that Bernstein and Scigaj are aligned in this argument about Derrida partly speaks to Scigaj's myopia in evaluating the contributions that a diverse group of postmodern theorists have made to American poetry. Indeed, Scigaj also criticises Wittgenstein for downplaying our ability to forge a meaningful relationship with our

[123] Bernstein, 'The Lives of the Toll Takers', in *Whiskey in Heaven*, pp. 150-179 (p. 150).

[124] A.W. Moore, 'Derrida', in *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 512-541 (p. 531).

environment when, as this chapter will show, this philosopher actually performs important work in arguing for, in Scigaj's words, a 'social, communal ground for language'. However, Bernstein and Scigaj's unlikely alignment on Derrida also speaks to the fact that, by the time of writing 'Lives of the Toll Takers' (1994) and *A Poetics* (1992), Bernstein had moved away from the deconstructive political project he had previously outlined in essays from *Content's Dream* (1986). In these later works, Bernstein endorses a style of political poetry that is more pragmatic in terms of its political ambitions and its theoretical underpinning. This pragmatic side of Bernstein's poetic approach to politics is more compatible with the ecocritical view espoused by critics such as Scigaj.

This chapter will clarify Bernstein's position on meaning, language, and political poetry by analysing Bernstein's 'essay-in-verse' (*A Poetics*, p. 3), 'Artifice of Absorption'. In order to examine the transition that occurred in Bernstein's politics between *Content's Dream* and *A Poetics,* Section One of this chapter will establish Derrida's influence on the deconstructive side of 'Artifice of Absorption' and Section Two will explain why Bernstein's position on language in this piece of writing is ultimately more compatible with the philosophy of Wittgenstein. Finally, the chapter will demonstrate how the Wittgensteinian influence on Bernstein's poetry connects him to the tradition of Emersonian pragmatism in American poetry.

The Theory of a 'Meaning Complex'

The 'essay-in-verse', 'Artifice of Absorption', provides a protracted but comprehensive statement on Bernstein's position on the workings of language and the workings of poetry. In order to clarify his ideas about meaning and language, Bernstein establishes a critical framework of terms such as 'absorption', 'impermeability', and 'artifice', which are fleshed out over the course of the essay through a process of piecemeal description. Bernstein develops these key terms in a riddle-like manner by characterising certain aspects of his terms and theories and, subsequently, contrasting and comparing these characteristics in order to gradually establish his own position on the sense-making processes of poetry.

A key argument of this chapter's first section is that Bernstein adopts this style of criticism so as to practice what he preaches in terms of his argument that language always mediates the intended meanings of a speaker or writer. This is to say that Bernstein commits to the hybridising element of producing an 'essay-in-verse' by writing a piece of literary criticism that models the approach to language which he

values in poetry. Indeed, it is because of this intriguing blend of poetry and criticism in 'Artifice Absorption' that I have chosen to focus on this piece of work so extensively in this chapter. I have also adopted a style of analysis for this section which draws out Bernstein's position on language and meaning piece by piece through a close reading of its opening page. Whereas in the remaining chapters of this thesis I tend to open my analysis of a poem by making an argument about a text, and then proceeding to justify this argument through a close commentary of that text, in analysing 'Artifice of Absorption' I have chosen to tease out Bernstein's argument through close readings of particular extracts so as to foreground the significance of Bernstein's style of elucidation.

'Artifice of Absorption' opens with a description of the problematic theory of a 'meaning complex' in poetry:

> The reason it is difficult to talk about
> the meaning of a poem—in a way that doesn't seem
> frustratingly superficial or partial—is that by
> designating a text a poem, one suggests that its
> meanings are to be located in some "complex" be-
> yond an accumulation of devices & subject matters.[125]

Over the course of the essay, Bernstein fleshes out his own view on language and meaning by contradicting certain assumptions which arise from this notion of a 'meaning complex'. Whilst it is important to stress that Bernstein disagrees with this 'meaning complex' theory, it is useful to engage with his explanations of this theory because Bernstein explains his own philosophy on language by setting himself apart from this idea of a 'meaning complex'.

Discussions about 'the meaning of a poem' are problematic, Bernstein suggests in this excerpt, because they imply a theory of meaning in poetry in which a text's 'meanings' exist 'be- | yond' -- in a different location from -- the 'accumulation of devices & subject matters' that constitute the text. In this description, then, Bernstein articulates a geography of the poem for this 'meaning complex' theory in which the 'accumulation of devices & subject matters', which we can think of as the mass of literary 'devices' and themes that contribute to the meaning of a poem, exist in a

[125] *A Poetics*, p. 9.

separate location to the 'complex' of 'meanings' that these 'devices' and themes produce.

The implications of this theory of the poem's geography can be better understood once Bernstein's use of the term 'complex' is elucidated. In using the term 'complex', Bernstein is referring to Pound's use of the term in 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste'. In this essay, Pound states that he is using the term 'complex' in 'the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as [Bernard] Hart'. Clarifying this reference to Hart, Lawrence Rainey states that there is a correspondence between Pound's use of 'complex' and Hart's definition of 'complex' as a 'system of collected ideas, with a strong emotional tone' which manifests itself in '[tendencies] to produce actions of a certain definite character'.[126] The idea of a 'complex' is central to Pound's theory of the powerful communication of an 'Image' in poetry, as is evident when he writes that an 'Image' is 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time'. If then, for Pound, a 'complex' consists of a 'system of collected ideas, with a strong emotional tone', a poetry which expresses an 'Image' communicates this 'system of collected ideas' in 'an instant of time'. Pound further emphasises the immediacy involved in the 'Image' poem's communication of a 'complex' when he writes that it 'is the presentation of such a "complex" instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation […] which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art'.[127] Evidently for Pound the power of poetry arises from the immediate transmission of a 'complex' of 'ideas' from writer to reader.

For Pound, whilst the 'complex' exists externally to, and independently of, the text, in the poet's mind for instance, the text 'presenting' the 'Image' is, conversely, dependent on the 'complex' for its existence: if there was no 'complex' to 'present', there would be no 'Image'. Pound hopes to achieve, in this sense, ambitions similar to a painter who wants to replicate a certain scene on her canvas. In the case of the painter, whilst the scene will exist regardless of her painting of it, the painting itself is shaped according to the scene it hopes to represent and, therefore, would not exist without its subject. Similarly, according to the logic of the 'Image', if the 'complex' of 'ideas' in the mind of a writer did not exist, there would of course be no 'Image' poem

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[126] Lawrence Rainey, *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey (MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), p. 95.

[127] Ezra Pound, 'A Few Don't by an Imagiste', *Modernism: An Anthology*, pp. 95-97 (p. 95).

expressing that 'complex'. This explains the geography of the poem according to the 'meaning complex' theory described by Bernstein. This 'meaning complex' theory echoes Pound's idea of the 'Image' in asserting that whilst meaning exists independently of the text, the text is dependent on its 'complex' of meanings. The poem is, in this view, a well-tuned vessel for transporting a set of ideas or meanings from the writer's mind to the reader's.

Jacques Derrida's analysis of the concept of 'structure' in 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' provides a useful context for elucidating the implications of this 'meaning complex' theory. In the opening pages of this essay, Derrida observes that in Western philosophy the conception of 'structure'

> has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure -- one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure -- but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure.[128]

Derrida argues in this excerpt that, in Western philosophy, a conception of 'structure' exists in which a 'structure' is necessarily subject to the 'organizing principle' of a 'center' which is, therefore, both a part of the 'structure' whilst also transcending that 'structure'. Derrida suggests that the 'center' allows for 'repetitions', 'substitutions', 'transformations', and 'permutations' through a signifying chain that are 'always *taken* from a history of meaning […] whose origin may always be revealed or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of presence'. If we were to return to the example of the artist producing a painting of a natural scene, we could imagine the finished painting as a structure which is organised according to an image of the scene in the artist's mind, a mental image which is itself organised according to the layout of a real place seen by the artist. If the artist is religious, she might believe that her God is the ultimate source of this order and that the series of interconnecting structures which end with the painting begin with Him. Derrida names this originary source of meaning

[128] Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference,* trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 351-370 (p. 352).

which imbues and stabilises meaning throughout a series of structures as the 'transcendental signified'.[129] Western philosophy has historically believed, Derrida argues, that the links between such a series of 'structures' allows for the '[original]' 'meaning' of the series to be 'present' in each part of the signifying chain.

Bernstein's 'meaning complex' theory seems to work on the classical assumptions about the hierarchy of structure described by Derrida. The text is a structure which is, according to the 'meaning complex' theory, subservient to an organisational principle (the 'meaning complex') which is both constitutive of the text as a totality and yet also independent of that totality. Indeed, given the significance Pound places on the immediate communication of meaning, the total subservience of text to 'complex' is evidently something which Pound values highly in art. In both Pound's idea of the 'Image' and poetry in general, according to the 'meaning complex' theory described by Bernstein, the power of the piece of writing comes from the immediacy and accuracy in its 'presentation' of ideas which exist outside and independently of that writing. Put another way, according to both 'Imagism' and the 'meaning complex' theory, poetry is at its most powerful when it instantaneously expresses the 'presence' of a 'complex' of meanings that exist outside of the poem.

The '[Factitiousness]' of Poetic 'Facts'

Five lines after introducing the idea of a 'meaning complex' in the above excerpt, Bernstein writes the following passage which, although it may not be apparent on first reading, refutes the theory of the 'meaning complex':

[129] 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', pp. 352-354.

> "Artifice" is a measure of a poem's
> intractability to being read as the sum of its
> devices & subject matters. In this sense,
> "artifice" is the contradiction of "realism", with
> its insistence on presenting an unmediated
> (immediate) experience of facts, either of the
> "external" world of nature or the "internal" world
> of the mind; for example, naturalistic
> representation or phenomenological consciousness
> mapping. Facts in poetry are primarily
> factitious.[130]

Bernstein defines 'Artifice' as a 'measure of a poem's | intractability to being read as the sum of its | devices & subject matters'. It is important to note that in the first excerpted passage in this analysis Bernstein referred to an 'accumulation of devices & subject matters' but that he is now referring to a 'sum' of 'devices & subject matters'. The key difference between 'sum' and 'accumulation', in the context of their usages in 'Artifice of Absorption', is that whereas, as per the *OED*, both nouns refer to amounts, a 'sum' specifically refers to a 'total amount or quantity, the totality, aggregate, or whole (*of* something immaterial)' whereas an 'accumulation' refers to '[a]n accumulated mass; a heap, amount, or quantity formed by successive additions'.[131] An important difference, then, between these two words is that a 'sum' is more easily viewed as a neat, totalised whole than an 'accumulation' or, to put this in another way, the constituent parts of an 'accumulated mass' are more distinguishable than the constituent parts that produce a 'sum'. If I add two numbers in my head, five and three for instance, the 'sum' I reach is eight. When I then disclose the result of my sum, the number eight, to my friend, I give her no indication as to the constituent parts of the sum which gave me this number. If I give her an 'accumulated mass' of something,

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[130] *A Poetics*, p. 9

[131] 'sum, n.1', *OED Online* <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/193902?result=1&rskey=XBrCh4&> [accessed 25 July 2018]; 'accumulation, n.', *OED Online* <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1275?redirectedFrom=accumulation> [accessed 25 July 2018]

however, whether it be a 'mass' of numbers or perhaps a 'mass' of books, the implication is that the constituent parts of the paperwork will still be identifiable.

Applying this definition to the 'meaning complex' theory explained in 'Artifice of Absorption', an 'accumulation of devices & subject matters' can be understood as referring to the 'signifiers' of the poem, whereas a 'sum' of 'devices & subject matters' can be understood to refer to the meanings that these 'accumulations' produce in the 'sum 'of the 'meaning complex' formula. In the case of Pound's 'Image', for instance, the 'accumulation' of 'devices & subject matters' would be the text which 'presents' the 'complex', whereas the 'sum' of 'devices & subject matters' would be the 'Image' which is presented as a result of the text's total expression of its 'complex' of meanings. Given Pound's endorsement of poetry which communicates a 'complex' of meanings 'instantaneously', it would follow that his 'Image' poem aims to present itself as the 'sum of its | devices & subject matters'. Therefore, from Pound's perspective, the effect of the 'Image' poem would be compromised if a reader's attention was drawn to the 'accumulation of devices & subject matters' through which the meanings of the poem are transmitted.

With this established, Bernstein's definition of 'artifice' as 'a measure of a poem's | intractability to being read as the sum of its | devices & subject matters' becomes clearer through the prepositional 'as'. To 'read' a poem 'as' the 'sum' of its constituent parts would be to read the poem 'as' its meanings. In such a 'reading', the poem's 'complex' of meanings would have to be immediately available to the reader, with the signifiers of the poem taking on the quality of transparency when referring to their signifieds. Bernstein has already established that, according to the 'meaning complex' theory, the 'complex' of meanings belonging to the poem lie 'be- | yond' the constituent parts of the text. If the poem is, therefore, to be read 'as' its meanings, it must function as a window through which the reader can immediately access the 'complex' of 'meanings' which lies 'be- | yond'.

The remaining lines of this excerpt implicitly argue that 'artifice' is always present in a text and that, for this reason, a poem can never be read 'as the sum of its | devices and subject matters'. If, for Bernstein, 'artifice' is a 'measure' which corresponds positively to a text's inability to being read 'as the sum of its devices & subject matters', it would thus follow that the presence of 'artifice' disrupts the connection between word and meaning as theorised according to the 'meaning complex' concept. Thus, if this concept is accurate, and language becomes meaningful by immediately expressing the 'presence' of its objects, the presence of 'artifice' would

effectively break the connections between word and object, subsequently denying, or at least limiting, meaning in the poem.

Bernstein's scepticism regarding the plausibility of the 'meaning complex' theory is confirmed in the excerpted passage, albeit implicitly, through the contrast established between 'artifice' and 'realism'. Having provided his vague initial definition of 'artifice' as a 'measure of a poem's | intractability to being read as the sum of its | devices & subject matters', the poet writes that it is in the 'sense' of this definition that 'artifice' is the contradiction of 'realism'. Bernstein defines 'realism' through its 'insistence on presenting an unmediated | (immediate) experience of facts', with the word 'facts' being used to include all that exists outside of language, be this of 'the "external" world of nature' or of 'the "internal" world | of the mind'. If, therefore, '[realist]' poetry privileges a use of language in which a poem's core of meanings are expressed to the reader with some '[immediacy]', writing which registers high on the 'artifice' 'measure' is antithetical to 'realism' in the sense that it prevents a poem from 'being read as the sum of its | devices and subject matters'.

On this basis, 'realism' would seem to be compatible with the theory of a 'meaning complex'. As with the 'meaning complex' theory, 'realism' dictates that the meanings of a poem, which exist outside of the 'accumulation of devices & subject matters' which constitute the poem, are accessed directly through the transparent window of the text. Using Derrida's terms, 'realism' is compatible with the 'meaning complex' theory in its proposition that a text can convey the 'immediate', 'unmediated' 'presence' of its objects. Thus, when Bernstein follows his description of the claims of 'realism' with the statement that 'facts in poetry are primarily factitious', he not only disputes the validity of 'realism' but also simultaneously disputes the validity of the 'meaning complex' theory and its idea that poems can absolutely express the 'presence' of their referents.

'No Outside-Text': Inhabiting Poetry

Having pieced together some segments from the 'Artifice of Absorption' jigsaw through the analysis thus far, we now have a better picture of Bernstein's position on the production of meaning in poetry. By stating that 'facts in poetry are primarily factitious', Bernstein contradicts the 'meaning complex' theory by arguing that reading a poem 'as the sum of its parts' is an impossibility. As the poet has already established that 'artifice' is a 'measure' which corresponds to the poem's inability to being read as the 'sum' of its parts, we now understand that 'Artifice of Absorption' implicitly argues

that 'artifice' must, in fact, be present in every poem. Whilst poems can presumably register low or high on the 'artifice' measuring scale, if no poem can be read as the 'sum of its devices & subject matters', then 'artifice' must even be present in texts registering on this scale's lowest point.

Whilst the distinction Bernstein makes between 'artifice' and 'realism' hints that 'artifice' is a style of writing, when one works through the excerpted passage it seems that 'artifice' is, in fact, an essential quality of writing. In making this argument, Bernstein echoes to some extent Derrida's statement that '[t]here is no outside-text'.[132] Derrida makes this claim on the basis of his rejection of the classical understanding of 'structure' described in 'Structure, Sign, and Play'. Derrida argues that the classical understanding of 'structure' is present in the way that, in the 'epoch of the logos', the structure of language has been thought to be constituted and stabilised through its link to the outside world. According to Derrida, Aristotle, for instance, thought that

> the voice, producer of *the first symbols*, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind. Producer of the first signifier, it is not just a simple signifier among other things. It signifies "mental experiences" which themselves reflect or mirror things by natural resemblance. Between being and mind, things and feelings, there would be a relationship of translation and signification.[133]

Aristotle's idea of signification, as described by Derrida here, is compatible with the classical conception of 'structure' in the sense that Aristotle conceives of a chain of signification in which the 'structure' of '*first symbols*' is derived from the 'voice', which derives its own meanings from 'mental experiences', which are, in turn, thought to 'mirror' the 'structure' of external reality. If we return to the idea of the 'center' in the classical conception of 'structure', which allows for 'a history of meaning' to be 'anticipated' throughout the chain of 'signification' in 'the form of presence', it would seem that, by Derrida's description, Aristotle believes that spoken language is able to express the 'presence' of its referents.

The classical conception of 'structure' suggests that 'signs' can express the 'presence' of referents because they are anchored to a source of meaning which exists

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[132] *Of Grammatology,* p. 158.

[133] *Of Grammatology,* p. 11.

outside of the signifying chain. Aristotle, for example, thinks that 'signs' such as those found in spoken language express the 'presence' of their referents because the structure of signification is governed by universal laws which exist outside of this process. Derrida contradicts this view on the basis that '[f]rom the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. *We think only in signs*'.[134] In contrast to Aristotle, then, who believes that 'signs' are imbued with meaning by a transcendental source, Derrida argues that, in fact, meaning does not exist outside of signification. In Gary Gutting's words, in taking this position on signification, Derrida is confronting '*epistemological foundationalism*' (Gutting's emphasis) and its 'efforts to ground all knowledge in some fundamental certainty such as intellectual insight […] or sense experience'.[135] If, as Derrida argues, meaning only exists in 'signs', this means that, for humans at least, reality is not constitutive of signification, but rather signification is constitutive of reality.

Derrida's discussion of signification is indebted to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, the influential semiotician whose conception of the 'sign' is essential to Derrida's philosophy, but whose ideas about structuring language are contested by Derrida. Saussure understands language as a system in which the 'linguistic sign' is the individual unit. The 'sign', Saussure argues, 'unites […] a concept and a sound-image' or, what he will later call, a 'signified' and 'signifier'. A 'signified' is a 'concept' which exists in the mind and a 'signifier' is the 'sound-image' which we attach to these 'concepts'. For instance, the word 'cat' is a 'signifier' that has been arbitrarily attached to our concept of a 'cat'. Together, a 'signifier' and 'signified' form a 'sign'.[136] With this established, a connection can be made between two of the Derrida quotations used thus far in this section. When Derrida discusses 'signs' he is referring to Saussure's unit of the 'linguistic sign', which subsequently means that when Derrida argues that '[f]rom the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs', he is arguing that there is no meaning outside of language. This explains why Derrida argues that '[t]here is no outside-text', as 'signs', including linguistic signs, are constitutive of reality.

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[134] *Of Grammatology,* p. 50.

[135] Gary Gutting, 'Derrida', *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 289-317 (pp. 294-295).

[136] Ferdinand De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. by Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy, trans. by Wade Baskin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 66-67.

Saussure states that the value of 'signifiers' and 'signifieds' is determined through their respective differentiation from other 'signifiers' and 'signifieds' respectively. This is to say that, in Saussure's theory', a 'signifier' is distinguished by its differences from similar sounding 'signifiers' and a 'signified' is distinguished by its difference from similar concepts. The signifier 'cat', for instance, is distinguished by its differentiation from similar 'sound-images' such as 'rat', 'sat', or 'car', and the 'signified' cat is distinguished by its difference from other concepts, for example through its differences from other domesticated animals. Saussure proposes that the pairing of a 'signifier' and 'signified' is an arbitrary process and that, therefore, there is no natural bond connecting a 'sound-image' to a 'concept', which explains why different languages can have vastly different 'signifiers' for the same 'signified'.[137]

Derrida subscribes to this idea that the meaning of a 'sign' is determined by its differences from other signs, as is evident in his claim that the 'transcendental signified […] is never absolutely present outside a system of differences'.[138] However, as Colin Wight observes, whilst poststructuralists such as Derrida '[embedded] their account of structure in Saussure's framework', they 'were keen to reject the idea of an objective, or scientific, account of structure, and the belief that the context itself could provide the grounds upon which the potentially infinite play of differences could be halted'.[139] In other words, whereas Saussure thought that the application of a structure to language could stabilise the 'play of differences' between 'signs', Derrida argues that, because humans only have access to meaning through language, we are unable to reach a position outside of language from which language can be assessed scientifically as a structure.

The upshot of Derrida's engagement with the structuralist legacy is that, although he continues to see language as a medium in which 'signs' are constituted through their difference from other 'signs', he denies that humans can reach a position of objectivity from which to analyse and clarify a structure of these differences. As a result, Derrida implies that humans are at the mercy of a language whose 'signs' are in a perpetual state of deferral to each other. For instance, the meaning of the 'sign' 'cat' is dependent on its difference from the other 'signs', perhaps 'dog' and 'rabbit', but

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[137] *Course in General Linguistics*, pp. 118-119.

[138] 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', p. 354.

[139] Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 134.

those 'signs' are in turn dependent on their differences from other 'signs', and thus the chain of signification continues. Indeed, because there is, for Derrida, no transcendental signified outside of this 'system of differences' stabilising meaning within the linguistic system, 'signs' are forever committed to this endless chain of deferral. Derrida refers to this perpetual deferral of meaning through a chain of signification when he explains that the 'absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely'.[140]

At this point in my analysis of 'Artifice of Absorption', Bernstein can be understood as subscribing to Derrida's philosophy of signification in the sense that he believes, firstly, that language cannot express the 'presence' of referents, and secondly, that we should subsequently be aware of our limited ability to control language. In terms of this first point of comparison with Derrida, in rejecting the idea that a poem can be 'read as the sum of its | devices & subject matters' and that 'Facts in poetry are primarily | factitious', Bernstein is proposing that writing never absolutely expresses the 'presence' of referents which exist outside of language. From this perspective, meaning is produced rather than communicated through the writing process, which suggests that, far from expressing 'facts' about an extra-linguistic reality, writing can only ever provide an interpretation of the world outside language.

Moreover, Bernstein's denial that a poem can be read as the 'sum of its | devices & subject matters' holds implications for the reader as well as the writer. In rejecting the premise that a poem's 'meanings are to be located in some "complex" be- | yond an accumulation of devices and subject matters', Bernstein is also denying the idea that a set of meanings can be extracted or detached from the text. Indeed, in contrast to Pound's idea of a reader immediately comprehending an 'Image' through a poem, Bernstein argues that 'a "poem" may be understood as |writing specifically designed to absorb, or inflate | with, proactive -- rather than reactive -- styles of | reading'. This would suggest that a reader cannot extract a 'sum' of meanings from a poem because those meanings change according to the reader's investment in the text. Whilst in the excerpted passages from 'Artifice of Absorption' Bernstein has not stated that language is constitutive of reality, his assertion that language can only interpret referents, and that, in turn, we can only ever interpret language, means that, for Bernstein, '[t]here is no outside-text' for linguistic meaning. In other words, whilst Bernstein does not explicitly state in 'Artifice of Absorption' that there is no meaning outside of language,

[140] 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', p. 354.

he does assert that the meaning we find in language cannot be absolutely translated into or extracted from language.

In terms of the second point of comparison with Derrida, Bernstein's understanding of meaning and language leads him to respect humans' limited ability to control or master meaning in language. Having established Bernstein's view that a poet is unable to absolutely express intended meanings in a poem, and a reader is unable to dissect the text in order to absolutely clarify its meanings, it would seem that Bernstein understands the poem is a literary form in which the writer and reader participate in language rather than a literary form through which meanings are expressed. Bernstein sees language as a material that humans engage in order to express themselves through writing rather than a vessel for transporting meaning into the mind of a reader. Throughout his work, Bernstein argues that language is a material with which a writer and reader work in order to find meaning. For instance, Bernstein emphasises the materiality of language in 'Thought's Measure' when he writes that '[i]n talking about language and thinking I want to establish the *material,* the stuff, of writing' (*Content's Dream*, p. 63). In using the word 'material', Bernstein is reinforcing the idea that language is a medium of limited malleability, a 'material' which one can shape and craft but which never absolutely submits to the intended meanings of an author.

By this logic, the writer engages language in a manner not dissimilar from the way a sculptor engages a particular material in order to express an idea or an interpretation of an object. The product of a sculptor's work will be affected by the type of material she uses: if the sculptor is producing a figurative work she might choose to work with marble because of that material's capacity for imitating human skin. If, on the other hand, the sculptor requires a material that is flexible, strong, and durable on the other hand, she might choose to use a metal. The different effects that these materials have on the finished work demonstrates the extent to which a sculptor works *with* her materials. Each material has a distinct integrity and a limited malleability, meaning that the sculptor must embrace the fact that her final piece will be determined through a combination of her artistry and the integrity of the material she uses. The analogy between producing a poem and producing a sculpture works on the basis of Bernstein's idea that a poem can only provide an interpretation, rather than an absolute expression, of a poet's intended meanings, and that a reader can, in turn, only interpret the meanings of the poem. The example of the religious painter was used earlier in this section in order to clarify the 'meaning complex' theory of meaning in

which a poem is thought to express a pre-existing 'complex' of meanings. This sculptor analogy shows how, for Bernstein, pre-existing meaning cannot be expressed in a poem because the meaning of a poem is created in the writing process.

The Dangers of Translatability

The analogy of the poet as sculptor shows that Bernstein does not believe that ideas that exist outside of language, in an author's mind for instance, can be absolutely translated into language in the form of a poem. Bernstein provides an explanation for why meaning cannot be translated into language in 'Dollar Value' when he argues that 'poetry [is] untranslatable and unparaphrasable, for what is untranslatable is the sum of all the specific conditions of the experience (place, time, order, light, mood, position, to infinity) made available by the reading' (*Content's Dream,* p. 58). By this explanation, one of the reasons that meaning fluctuates in the poem is because our readings are always defined by context. One can imagine how the immediate circumstances of the reading of a poem, such as 'time', 'place', and 'mood', could shape a reading of a text but, by this thinking, it is conceivable that a reader brings a lifetime's worth of experience to a reading of a text. For instance, a child seeing a tree for the first time will no doubt have a different experience from a veteran arborist surveying the same tree. As Bernstein acknowledges in stating that the 'conditions' of a reading experience are '[infinite]', the meanings we attach to referents change from person to person depending on their experience.

On the basis of Bernstein's criticism of standardised grammar, however, it would seem that the poet thinks that in our cultural use of language we dangerously privilege the 'translatable' over the 'untranslatable'. Bernstein writes in 'Dollar Value' that

> the social forces hold sway in all the rules for the 'clear' and 'orderly' functioning of language and Caesar himself is the patron of our grammar books. Experience dutifully translated into these 'most accessible' codes loses its aura and is reduced to the digestible contents which these rules alone can generate.[141]

Bernstein's argument is essentially that grammar privileges modes of expression which are 'clear', 'orderly', and 'translatable'. In other words, conventional grammar

[141] *Content's Dream,* p. 59.

presents as meaningful only those elements of language which can be exchanged relatively unproblematically. If we revisit our example of the child and the arborist, we can now say that, in actuality, if they have been schooled in a specific grammar they will, from Bernstein's perspective, have been taught to perceive the world in a similar way. By Bernstein's logic, the child and the arborist are trained to talk about the tree through a grammar that privileges 'translatable' meaning and this allows them to communicate with a degree of clarity. However, the big question for Bernstein now is: on whose terms is this discussion of the tree 'clear'? In 'Dollar Value', Bernstein quotes Wittgenstein's aphorism that '[t]o imagine a language means to imagine a form of life' (*Content's Dream*, p. 59). This statement is used by Wittgenstein to refer to the ways in which the rules for a particular language are defined according to the culture from which the language emerges. Bernstein's argument is that in naturalising a particular sense of the world, grammar forces us to see the world on terms set for us by controlling forces. Throughout *Content's Dream* Bernstein emphasises how fundamental language is to our perception of knowledge and, with this in mind, he argues that 'language control = thought control = reality control' (*Content's Dream,* p. 60).

Due to the way that capitalism reinforces a particular ideology through the 'clear' and 'orderly' functioning of language, Bernstein argues that writing which offers 'an image of the antivirus' to this clarity by being 'indigestible' and 'intransigent' can remove itself from the '*service* of the capitalist project' (*Content's Dream,* p. 60). It is important to note that this exposition is achieved, according to 'Dollar Value', through an 'image of the antivirus', not the 'antivirus' itself. This detail emphasises the deconstructive approach that Bernstein advocates in this essay. In providing an 'image of the antivirus', one is not providing the 'antivirus' itself but a glimpse of what the 'antivirus' might look like. In this case, the 'image' is of language's 'untranslatability', which suggests that the political project Bernstein outlines in 'Dollar Value' involves foregrounding the limitations of language as a tool for communication and subsequently exposing the ideologically enforced view of language's transparency (*Content's Dream*, p. 58). As with Silliman's 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World', then, Bernstein's essay suggests that rather than, in Andrews' words, 'writing *about* politics', poets hoping to add a political dimension to their work should use poetry as a means of confronting and dismantling conventional assumptions about language.

Bernstein is particularly fond of bringing the reader into the poem through 'direct address' in order to achieve this goal of emphasising the 'untranslatability' of language. Indeed, a few lines after expressing his fondness for 'direct address' in 'Artifice of Absorption', Bernstein addresses his reader:

> Why just yesterday (but when was
> today, dear reader?) Bob Perelman was saying "I'm
> also using more repetition, deictics [words that
> point, like 'this' word but which word is *this*
> word 'this' or this], speechlike elements which posit
> a co-presence of 'speaker & listener'[142]

Bernstein deliberately disrupts the flow and clarity of this passage in the first and second line by pointing out that his simple anecdote about speaking to Bob Perelman 'yesterday' is not absolutely translatable to the reader because the reader's 'yesterday' is not his 'yesterday' at the point of writing this text. In directly addressing the reader in this way, Bernstein hopes to emphasise to the reader that they are not passively '[absorbing]' thoughts and stories from the mind of Charles Bernstein, rather 'yesterday' means something different at the time of reading than it did when that word was written on an original manuscript by Bernstein. In this way, as with Perelman's use of 'deictics', Bernstein's use of 'direct address' is intended to illuminate 'a co-presence of "speaker & listener"'. In light of Bernstein's arguments about political poetry in 'Dollar Value', the use of 'direct address' can be considered to have a political end in that it alerts the reader to their role as co-producer of meaning in a text and, thus, draws their attention to the fallacy of a transparent language. From this perspective, even if a poem does not engage a political subject in its content, it could still be political if it overtly involves the reader in the constitution of meaning in the text.

The Deconstructive Side of 'Artifice of Absorption'

This point about Bernstein's advocated deconstructive approach to political poetry in *Content's Dream* needs to be contextualised in relation to Derrida's philosophy. As was established in the analysis of Derrida's anti-foundationalist claim that '[t]here is no

[142] *A Poetics,* p. 32.

outside-text', Derrida questions the stability of meaning in language. Derrida adopts what he calls a method of 'deconstruction' in order to expose the instability of meaning in texts. According to Gutting, deconstruction specifically 'shows how texts based on binary oppositions themselves violate both the principle of exclusion and the principle of priority' and, in doing this, 'reveals points at which [a text] introduces one of the opposing terms into the definition of the other or reverses the order of priority between the two terms'.[143] In *Of Grammatology* Derrida confronts the way in which Western philosophers who subscribe to a 'metaphysics of presence', such as Aristotle, have privileged speech over writing. In exposing the inconstancies in these binaries, Derrida calls into question culturally embedded values. For example, in Gutting's words, deconstruction enables Derrida to critique the values of a society which presents 'distinctively "masculine" traits as obviously superior to distinctively "feminine" traits (e.g., domination over sympathy, clarity over depth)'. By probing the inconsistencies in the workings of the binary between male and female, Gutting argues, Derrida is able to question the idea that 'the social and political subordination of women to men is entirely natural and appropriate'.[144]

Whilst Bernstein does not advance a deconstructive critique in exactly the same technical way as Derrida, the political approach advocated in 'Dollar Value' is deconstructive in the sense that, instead of encouraging poets to articulate ideas and arguments about politics, Bernstein suggests that poets should foreground the limitations of language in order to expose the manipulative ideological presence of capitalism in our modern use of language. Rather than constructing a moral argument against naturalised cultural values, Derrida uses deconstruction to find contradictions in texts that reinforce these cultural values so as to demonstrate their illogicality. The similarity between the deconstructive approach of Derrida and Bernstein, then, is that both attempt to draw attention to the inconsistencies in cultural assumptions and values. Moreover, as the earlier analysis of Derrida demonstrated, both Bernstein and Derrida want to expose how language can be used as a tool in order to naturalise the values of a particular culture.

The deconstructive side of Bernstein's political poetry can be taken a step further when we consider that 'Artifice of Absorption' not only channels Derrida in its arguments about the essentialness of 'artifice' to writing, but also in the way it

[143] Gutting, p. 294.

[144] Gutting, p. 295.

advances these arguments. As has been acknowledged throughout this section, Bernstein deliberately makes 'Artifice of Absorption' something of a riddle for a reader in that he refuses to clarify his arguments and his key terms in a direct manner. Bernstein's argument about language's requirement of 'artifice' is implicitly rather than explicitly advanced on the opening page of 'Artifice of Absorption' through Bernstein's rejection of a 'meaning complex' theory of meaning in poetry. Bernstein's explanation of 'artifice' is itself somewhat evasive in the sense that, whilst he describes it as if it were a technique employed in a certain type of writing, it becomes clear that it is in fact an essential part of all writing. All of this demonstrates that, in 'Artifice of Absorption', Bernstein not only establishes his position on language by advancing arguments about the opacity of meaning in language, but he also establishes this position by adopting a style of writing which respects the opacity of language.

This reveals one final, important connection between Bernstein's work and Derrida's. Gutting explains that Derrida can be an 'intimidating and frustrating' writer, partly because he

> deploys a variety of writing styles, most of which have little to do with the analytic philosopher's efforts to clarify and refine our common-sense intuitions. He will, for example, play with language through puns, bizarre associations, or perverse self-referentiality, simply to effect a disorientation of our ordinary conceptual categories.[145]

This writing style of Derrida's is not, then, the mark of a failed attempt to communicate, rather the testing aspect of his writing demonstrates the extent to which he incorporates his arguments about language into his writing. Derrida is, after all, a philosopher who believes that 'signs' are in a constant state of 'play' as a result of our immersion in language. In this sense, Derrida's refusal to 'clarify and refine our common-sense intuitions' reflects his general scepticism of clarity in language.

Bernstein takes a similar approach to writing in 'Artifice of Absorption' in that his ideas about our immersion in language and the 'untranslatability' of meaning in language, lead him to produce a form of criticism which refuses to advance an argument or establish its key terms in a direct and comprehensive manner. Whilst on the surface it might seem that Bernstein is focused on meaning in poetry in 'Artifice of Absorption',

[145] Gutting, pp. 290-291.

this analysis has demonstrated that Bernstein's argument about the essentialness of 'artifice' to writing provides an insight into his philosophy on meaning in language as a whole. It is for this reason that 'Artifice of Absorption' takes the hybrid form of an 'essay-in-verse' as, if one subscribes to Bernstein's philosophy on language, it would seem that all writing should acknowledge the limitations of language. There is, then, a deconstructive side to 'Artifice of Absorption' in the sense that its refusal to comprehensively explain its key terms and arguments is partly intended to contradict common assumptions about the 'translatable' quality of meaning through language.

Section Two

As Section One of this chapter demonstrated, Bernstein's argument about the essentialness of 'artifice' to language is compatible with the theoretical position which Bernstein takes on language in 'Dollar Value'. However, as 'Artifice of Absorption' develops, Bernstein moves away from the deconstructive approach to political poetry advocated in 'Dollar Value', as well as from the poststructuralist theory which underpinned such an approach. This change in Bernstein's work is evident in his 'insistence' in 'Artifice of Absorption' 'that poetry be understood as epistemological | inquiry' (*A Poetics,* pp. 17-18). Whereas in 'Dollar Value' Bernstein argues that poetry should engage in politics by illuminating the materiality of language in a bid to expose the illusion of a 'clear', 'translatable' language, these lines from 'Artifice of Absorption' suggest that poetry can investigate the ways in which we know the world. To put this another way, rather than focusing on contradicting false ideas about how we know the world through language, as Bernstein does in 'Dollar Value', in 'Artifice of Absorption' Bernstein focuses on how poetry can help us explore possibilities for knowledge and meaning.

I will elucidate Bernstein's idea of poetry as a means of 'epistemological inquiry' in 'Artifice of Absorption' in this section by demonstrating how this text is ultimately more compatible with Wittgenstein's philosophy on meaning and language than it is with Derrida's. Wittgenstein's philosophy is similar to Derrida's in its anti-foundationalism but Bernstein finds Wittgenstein's pragmatic procedure for reacting to anti-foundationalism particularly convincing. Once Wittgenstein's influence on 'Artifice of Absorption' is established, it is clear that by the early 1990s Bernstein is advocating a political poetry which encourages poets to write '*about* politics' whilst also approaching 'writing *as* politics'.

Derrida's 'House of Cards'

As this chapter will demonstrate, Wittgenstein's influence on Bernstein is evident at many points in 'Artifice of Absorption', but in order to understand how Bernstein interprets this philosopher it is useful to first look at 'Objects of Meaning: Reading Cavell, Reading Wittgenstein' (hereafter, 'Objects of Meaning'), an essay from *Content's Dream* in which Bernstein reflects on the philosophy of Wittgenstein and an interpreter of Wittgenstein's work (and Bernstein's thesis advisor at Harvard), Stanley Cavell. Whilst Bernstein argues that both Wittgenstein and Derrida share an ambition to '[get]

rid of the idea that words refer to metaphysical absolutes, to universals, to "transcendental signifieds"', Bernstein's preference for Wittgenstein over Derrida is expressed clearly in the following passage from 'Objects of Meaning':

> What Derrida ends up transforming into houses of cards -- shimmering traces of life, as insubstantial, as elusive -- Wittgenstein locates as meaning, with the full range of intention, responsibility, coherence, and possibility for revolt against or madness without. In Wittgenstein's accounting, one is not left sealed off from the world with only 'markings' to 'decipher' but rather located in a world with meanings to respond to.[146]

Bernstein evidently sees Derrida as taking the position that, due to the absence of a 'transcendental signified', the meaning we find in language is a weak and fragile shadow of reality, a 'house of cards' which collapses when we try and grasp it. Thus, according to the Derrida described by Bernstein, language is a medium through which the slippery referents of reality forever escape us, meaning that the medium ultimately isolates humans from the world rather than integrating them within it. Whilst Bernstein sympathises with Derrida's idea that '[t]here is no outside-text', he evidently objects to Derrida's sense of humanity's lack of agency in language. By Bernstein's reading, whereas Wittgenstein believes that humans can still have a significant amount of agency in terms of 'intention', 'responsibility', and 'coherence' through language, Derrida is sceptical that humans are able to move beyond a '[deciphering]' of 'markings'.

The reason Derrida believes human agency in language is severely limited, Bernstein argues, is because he conflates his conclusions regarding the fallacy of a 'metaphysics of presence' with the idea that 'there is something wrong with presence itself, that it is illegitimate or failed, as if presence could only be of this kind' (*Content's Dream,* p. 181). Bernstein challenges this notion of 'failed presence' in language when he suggests in 'Artifice of Absorption' that 'You know what I mean & you also mean | a lot more than you can say & far more than you could ever intend, | stipulatively or no' (*A Poetics,* p. 17). Of course, we cannot know exactly what Bernstein 'means', for as his earlier repudiation of 'realism' and the 'meaning complex' theory asserted, the omnipresence of 'artifice' in writing prevents 'an unmediated (immediate) experience

[146] *Content's Dream,* p. 181.

of facts, either of the "external" world of nature or of the "internal" world of the mind'. In this sense he accepts, as does Derrida, that the impossibility of full presence means that things are never absolutely knowable through language. Absolutely knowable, however, is not the same as knowable. We can never know exactly what someone means, for as the analogy of the poet as sculptor demonstrated in the previous section, the mediatory quality of language always distorts sentiment so that meaning always expresses both more and less than is intended. Yet Bernstein argues that, in spite of the way that our sentiments are overwhelmed by meaning, we are still able to know each other in language, even if that knowledge is not absolute. Meaning in language is not transparent and it does not necessarily communicate intended meaning in an exact manner, but it is still expressive in an authentic and potent way. At this point it is clear that Bernstein's criticism of Derrida is not related to the philosopher's rejection of a 'metaphysics of presence', nor is it related to Derrida's assertions about the instability of the 'sign', it is rather connected to how Derrida reacts to the instability of the 'sign' by playing down the potential for human agency in language.

In order to establish why and how Bernstein and Wittgenstein diverge from Derrida in terms of agency in language, we can think about the way these three react to the non-fixity of the 'sign'. For Derrida, the absence of a transcendental signified means that the sign does not have fixed boundaries, which results in the extension of 'the domain and the interplay of signification infinitely'.[147] As was explained in Section One, whereas philosophers supporting a 'metaphysics of presence' thought the 'signs' of language were positively determined by an 'organizational principle' which transcended the structure of language, Derrida argues that 'signs' rely on other 'signs' for their meanings. In terms of fixity in language, this means the boundaries between 'signs', which delineate exactly what meanings are contained within a 'sign', are fluid. Bernstein though, while subscribing to the idea of the non-fixity of the 'signs' of language, evidently believes language can be meaningful in a more authentic way than Derrida suggests.

The main reason Bernstein takes issue with Derrida's reaction to the non-fixity of language is because he thinks the philosopher fails to adequately re-evaluate his understanding of the term 'presence' in light of his knowledge about the absence of a 'transcendental signified'. For example, Bernstein writes that

[147] 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', p. 354.

> The lesson of metaphysical finitude is not that the world is just codes and as a result that presence is to be ruled out as anything more than nostalgia, but that we can have presence, insofar as we are able, only *through* a shared grammar.[148]

Bernstein suggests in these lines that, in light of philosophy's relatively newfound awareness of the limitations of metaphysics, we should look to re-evaluate our understanding of the term 'presence'. Rather than '[ruling] out' the possibility of 'presence' on the basis that 'presence' cannot exist in the way traditionally understood in philosophy, Bernstein proposes that we should instead focus on how 'a shared grammar' allows us a different but significant form of 'presence' in language. This is where the influence of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is most evident in Bernstein's position on language and meaning. Altieri argues that the later Wittgenstein, despite moving closer to Derrida in his rejection of the 'logical atomism' he had argued for in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, formulated 'a theory of meanings leading neither to nostalgia nor to free play'.[149] Whereas Derrida conflates the rejection of foundationalism, and specifically logocentrism, with the failure of meaning, for Wittgenstein this initial failure signals the need for a different system by which to evaluate meaning. For both Bernstein and Altieri, Derrida throws the baby out with the bath water somewhat by rejecting a logocentric system of meaning in language whilst continuing to evaluate meaning *according* to this system.

Wittgenstein's 'Language Games'

In light of these criticisms of Derrida, both Bernstein and Altieri endorse Wittgenstein's re-evaluation of meaning in language. Bernstein states that Wittgenstein moves beyond Derrida in his awareness that '[l]earning a language is not learning the names of things outside language, as if it were simply a matter of matching up signifiers with signifieds" (*Content's Dream,* p. 172). Similarly, Altieri argues that the development of Wittgenstein's alternative system for evaluating meaning in language begins with the questioning of why it is necessary to 'consider reality as primarily static configurations of objects'.[150] The following quotation from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*

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[148] *Content's Dream*, p. 182.

[149] Charles Altieri, 'Wittgenstein on Consciousness and Language: A Challenge to Derridean Literary Theory', *MLN*, 91.6 (1976), 1397-1423 (p. 1411).

[150] Altieri, p. 1411.

is particularly useful for clarifying why Bernstein and Altieri prefer Wittgenstein to Derrida in terms of his criteria for evaluating meaning in language:

> For a *large* class of cases -- though not for all -- in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.[151]

From the outset of *Philosophical Investigations,* Wittgenstein establishes his scepticism for the idea that words are defined ostensively, the idea that meaning comes about through the process of labelling objects with words. Meaning does not occur in language through the establishment of a referential relationship between word and referent, Wittgenstein claims, but rather it occurs when these relationships are brought into use. In order to clarify this perception, Wittgenstein uses the example of two builders who establish a language so that one can communicate to the other which object they require in their work. If the worker responds to her instructor's call for a 'slab' by bringing the necessary object, this word slab is indeed meaningful. This does not mean that there is a fixed relationship between the word 'slab' and the object the responsive worker picks up, but rather that the way the caller has used the word 'slab' has meaning in this context.

The builders' use of the word 'slab' is an example of a word functioning in a 'language game', a key Wittgensteinian concept. The notion of the 'language game' is pivotal to Wittgenstein's demonstration that meaning does not occur through ostensive definition but rather through the activity of using these definitions. Wittgenstein argues that 'it only makes sense for someone to ask what something is called if he already knows how to make use of the name'.[152] This logic applies to the case of the builders' use of the word 'slab', in which the responding builder's perception of 'slab' is determined by how she and her colleague use that word. For Wittgenstein, the builders' use of the term slab is meaningful in their specific 'language game'. If the builders were to make clear to a newcomer to the language that a specific object is referred to as 'slab', Wittgenstein would argue that the newcomer would still not understand the meaning of the word until they could understand the 'language game' in which the word was used.

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[151] Wittgenstein, p. 25.

[152] Wittgenstein, p. 19.

This idea that meaning arises through the activity of using language partly inspires Wittgenstein to label the contexts in which we use language as the contexts of certain 'language games'. Another reason for using this term is that Wittgenstein analyses the specific term 'game' in order to show how language works in satisfactory manner despite the fact that words cannot express the 'presence' of their 'referents'. Wittgenstein directly asks his reader what the essential essence of a 'game' is. This puzzle, he expects, will be impossible to solve, the reason for which he explains thus:

> For how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game, and what no longer does? Can you say where the boundaries are? No. You can *draw* some, for there aren't any drawn yet. (But this never bothered you before when you used the word "game".)[153]

There is, Wittgenstein argues, no essential essence that can be found in every activity which constitutes a 'game'. It is unsurprising that Wittgenstein argues this point as he shares Derrida's view that, due to the absence of a 'transcendental signified', the sign is without definite limits. However, as Wittgenstein argues in the excerpted passage, practically speaking, the lack of fixed 'boundaries' in the term 'game' rarely causes users of this word significant problems.

Wittgenstein uses the example of family resemblance to elucidate this idea that language can be meaningful in an unproblematic and practical way despite its instability in referring to referents.[154] Family resemblances consist of a pool of features which, whilst they are unlikely to be manifested in every family member, are common to a number of people in a family. Whilst there may well be less resemblance between distant family members, it is likely that they are linked in terms of their characteristics by a series of overlaps through mutually closer family members. Similarly, whilst there is no essential essence of a 'game' which is shared across all games, there are a pool of common features which are dispersed across a variety of activities and allow us to effectively categorise certain activities as 'games'. Clearly, then, Wittgenstein thinks that the words we use, with 'game' being an example, lack fixed 'boundaries'. There is no essential essence that allows these activities to be grouped together as 'games' but

[153] Wittgenstein, p. 37.

[154] Wittgenstein, pp. 36-37.

the overlapping 'resemblances' that exist in the pool of activities that we refer to as 'games' make this word a useful one for English speakers to use.

Context, Conventions, & Fixity in 'Artifice of Absorption'

The Wittgensteinian influence on 'Artifice of Absorption' can be demonstrated through the following passage in which Bernstein both emphasises the importance of context in the creation of meaning and the non-importance of absolute fixity in signification:

> The semantic strata of a poem should not be
> understood as only those elements to which a
> relatively fixed connotative or denotative meaning
> can be ascribed, for this would restrict meaning to
> the exclusively recuperable elements of language—a
> restriction that if literally applied would make
> meaning impossible. After all, meaning occurs
> only in a context of conscious & nonconscious,
> recuperable & unrecoverable, dynamics.[155]

The argument of this passage is that the 'semantic strata of a poem' should not be exclusively restricted to the 'elements to which a relatively fixed connotative or denotative meaning can be ascribed'. This argument will be explained later in this section, however for now it is the passage's implicit acceptance of the idea that 'elements' of a poem are 'relatively fixed' which is especially revealing in light of my summary of Wittgenstein's analysis of fixity in language. Bernstein argues that the criteria for meaningful language should not be '[restricted]' to 'elements' with a 'relatively fixed meaning'. This suggests Bernstein is not challenging the notion that meaning should be 'ascribed' to 'elements' with a 'relatively fixed meaning', but rather that he is challenging the notion that meaning should be 'ascribed' to these 'elements' alone. In this sense, Bernstein is implicitly accepting that meaning can be 'relatively fixed' in language.

Wittgenstein's influence on Bernstein is evident in the poet's argument that we conventionalise provisional rules for using language in a manner which boosts, what Bernstein calls in 'Dollar Value', the 'translatability' of language. It is through this idea

[155] *A Poetics,* pp. 12-13.

of there being provisional rules in our conventions that Bernstein is able to talk of there being 'elements' in a poem 'to which a | relatively fixed connotative or denotative meaning | can be ascribed'. Bernstein's description of these 'elements' as being 'relatively fixed' emphasises that meaning is not absolutely or transcendentally fixed but provisionally fixed. Wittgenstein's discussion of the concept of a 'game' demonstrates how meaning might be 'relatively fixed'. We know, Wittgenstein argues, that there are shared rules in place which help us determine what is and is not a 'game' and it is through our mutual recognition of these rules that the term is effective. In this mutual recognition, which is facilitated through the establishment of conventions, we must respect these rules and thus *grant* them a degree of fixity within our conventions in order for them to be useful. Whilst, then, Bernstein acknowledges that language cannot absolutely express the 'presence' of its 'referents' because the 'signs' of language are not fixed by a 'transcendental signified', he subscribes to the Wittgensteinian view that the 'relatively fixed' conventional boundaries we establish in language make these 'elements' meaningful in a way that is perfectly adequate for the purposes of communication.

This phrase 'relative fixity' is effective for conveying how Bernstein locates his position on language and meaning in a pragmatic middle ground between the philosophy of a 'metaphysics of presence' critiqued by Derrida and the scepticism of language which the poet believes Derrida to endorse. Like Wittgenstein, Bernstein is inclined to think of language as a medium which is imbued with meaning through shared conventions. This sheds some light on the reasons why Bernstein argues in 'Objects of Meaning' that Wittgenstein understands language as a medium through which we make sense of the world, even if that sense does not constitute an absolute knowledge. The poet argues this point in the following lines:

> we are initiated by language into a socious, which is for us the world. So that the foundations of knowledge are not so much based on a pre-existing empirical world as on shared conventions and mutual attunement. It is this understanding of Wittgenstein's view of language that leads Cavell to say that our conventions (grammar, codes, territorialities, myths, rules, standards, criteria) are our nature, that there is no gap between nature and culture, between fact and convention.[156]

[156] *Content's Dream*, p. 172.

This passage clarifies why Bernstein argues that Wittgenstein sees man as 'located in a world with meanings to respond to' rather than isolated from the world as does Derrida. The point is that we can integrate successfully and effectively within the world without absolute knowledge of the world or of each other. From Bernstein's perspective, the 'shared conventions' through which we make sense, the shared conventions which give us a working angle on a referent in a 'language game', are the means through which we integrate in the world rather than being an impediment to that integration. Thus, instead of seeing humans as vainly attempting to look into the world through language from an outside position, Bernstein instead sees humans as using language as a tool to orient themselves within a world that is not comprehensively knowable.

To refer back to the Scigaj quotation included in the opening pages of this chapter, it is clear at this point that Bernstein shares Scigaj's concerns about the way Derrida plays down the possibility for, in the latter's words, 'a social, communal ground for language'. Bernstein's critique of Derrida is more thorough than Scigaj's, partly due to his recognition that Derrida's divergence from Saussure is not 'reductionist' but rather a deliberate move in his development of a *post*-structuralist philosophy. However, there is otherwise a remarkable similarity between Scigaj's point that 'two people must agree over *relatively stable signifiers* to create a language' (my emphasis) and Bernstein's acceptance that 'relatively fixed connotative or denotative meaning can be ascribed' to elements of language. As I will show in the remainder of this chapter, Bernstein is still committed to exploring meaning in language in his work -- after all, it is his favourite poetic subject -- but in 'Artifice of Absorption' he is not discouraging other poets from directly taking on political subject matter.

Stretching the 'Threshold' of the 'Phonically | Significant'

Whilst the above excerpt from 'Artifice of Absorption' discussing the 'recuperable' 'elements of language' evidences the influence of *Philosophical Investigations* in the essay's theoretical underpinning, it also demonstrates the differences between Bernstein's and Wittgenstein's projects for exploring meaning. Wittgenstein's aim in *Philosophical Investigations* is to show how language can be expressive in a satisfactorily precise and effective way despite its lack of absolute fixity. In this sense, Wittgenstein is preoccupied with demonstrating how, despite the impossibility of communicating absolute meaning in language, our conventions for the use of language

restrain the 'play' of the sign in a manner which allows for effective and satisfactory communication. This is seen in Wittgenstein's analysis of the term 'game' when he questions the motives for his reader's potential worries about the lack of clear 'boundaries' for this term on the basis that 'this never bothered you before when you used the word'. Bernstein, in contrast, turns this investigation inside out by exploring the possibilities for meaning when we experiment with the limits of convention.

Bernstein argues against limiting the 'semantic strata of a poem' to 'elements' which possess 'a relatively fixed connotative or denotative meaning'. These 'relatively fixed' terms have a degree of '[recuperability]' in the sense that they are embedded in a manmade network of conventional language. However, Bernstein acknowledges the limitations of this '[recuperability]' when he writes that if '[recuperability'] was to become our sole criteria for meaningful language, meaning in language would be 'impossible'. Bernstein's point is that a degree of '[recuperability]' is manufactured into 'recuperable' language through a process of conventionalisation but these 'elements' of language are not anchored to a system of meaning outside of these conventions. Therefore, to exclusively use '[recuperability]' as the criteria for meaningful language would be to deny the conditions which allowed such words to become 'recuperable' or conventionalised in the first place.

Therefore, if there is no strict line dividing 'recuperable' from 'urecuperable' 'elements' of language, it would thus follow that there is no strict line between meaningful and non-meaningful 'elements' of language. Bernstein builds on this point by suggesting that whilst the establishment of conventions in language allows for effective communication, language use which deviates from these conventions is not necessarily less meaningful. Critiquing Veronica Forrest-Thompson's notion of 'nonsemantic' elements in a text, Bernstein writes that 'there is no fixed | threshold at which noise becomes phonically | significant; the further back this threshold is | pushed, the greater the resonance at the cutting | edge' (*A Poetics,* p. 12). In these lines, Bernstein is arguing against the conflation of '[phonic significance]' and clarity. If, for instance, linguistic terms like 'game' are always open-ended then the distinction between meaningful and non-meaningful is not clear cut, as the boundaries between what is and is not meant by a term are ambiguous. In this sense, whilst the establishment of conventions in language aids clear communication and expression, this does not mean that language use which deviates from these conventions by experimenting with the 'threshold' of '[phonic] significance' should be considered less meaningful.

Bernstein's claim that writing which tests the 'threshold' of convention can achieve a 'greater' 'resonance' alludes to Louis Zukofsky's *"A"* and its idea of 'Lower limit speech | Upper limit music'.[157] As Bernstein writes in his introduction to *Zukofsky: Selected Poems*, Zukofsky explores this 'Upper limit music' by creating a poetry of 'sound sense' in which 'the meaning is not behind the words but in the words as they unfold, and refold, in the ear'.[158] In other words, Bernstein is arguing that Zukofsky's poetry enjoys how the sounds of words in combination produce a certain musical texture. In 'Artifice of Absorption' Bernstein praises poetry which makes 'sound sense' when he writes that '[t]here are relative degrees | of valences of impermeability that can be angled | against one another to create | interlinear or interphrasal 'gaps' that act | like intervals in musical composition' (*A Poetics,* p. 22). A piece of music can, in exploiting certain evocative 'intervals', bring about a visceral reaction in its listener. The listener may not be able to pinpoint exactly why they find a particular chord especially evocative, but this does not change the fact that the chord has stirred their emotions. It is in this sense that Bernstein argues that a poem which explores the ambiguous spaces of meaning can achieve a 'resonance'. Shortly after Bernstein makes his statement regarding the 'greater' 'resonance' achieved at the 'cutting edge' of meaningful language, he states that 'Meaning is no where *bound* | to the orbit of intention, purpose, or utility' (*A Poetics,* p. 13). Wittgenstein shows us that the rules we create for language allow for meaning that is '[intentional]', '[purposeful]', and '[useful]' but Bernstein's point is that language use which is ambiguous in terms of intended meaning or communicative 'purpose', but which evokes some kind of reaction in a reader or listener, is in no way a lesser form of meaning.

These ideas about the 'resonance' of language can be clarified by looking at the opening lines of Bernstein's particularly '[impermeable]' poem 'Dodgem':

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[157] Louis Zukofsky, *"A"* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 138.

[158] Charles Bernstein, 'Introduction to *Louis Zukofsky: Selected* Poems', *Jacket2*, 30 (July 2006) <http://jacketmagazine.com/30/z-bernstein.html> [accessed 23 July 2018]

The naturally enfolded

erases

each … of … of …

"some

opens & our

brought luck

place, before

cash. The

I live …

too![159]

The combination of ellipsis ('each … of … of …'), confusing syntax ('The | I live … | too!), irregular line lengths, and unattributed and unintroduced quotations all contribute to the 'impermeability' of this excerpt. The '[impermeable]' quality of the poem certainly makes it difficult for a reader to immediately clarify what this poem is about. However, as with 'Standing Target', the frustrating experience of reading 'Dodgem' helps the reader empathise with the helplessness and desperation of the poem's speaker. In the opening three lines of this excerpt, the speaker appears to be warning us of an '[erasure]' by '[enfolding]' but the ellipsis in the third line implies that the page on which the speaker writes has been subjected to this '[erasure]' by '[enfolding]'. The words 'some | opens' hint that this '[enfolding]' is not completely pervasive, and that we can still catch glimpses of a 'brought luck | place' which existed 'before | cash'. However, the speaker's fragmented cry of 'The | I live … | too!', which could be read as a desperate statement of her existence in the face of this oppressive force,

[159] Bernstein, 'Dodgem', in *Whiskey in Heaven*, pp. 21-24 (p. 21).

demonstrates the extent of the speaker's distress. Whilst, then, the poem is deliberately flawed as a communicative device for its speaker, the 'impermeability' of the poem creates a powerful sense of dread, desperation, and helplessness.

The musical 'resonance' of this excerpt complements the poem's sense of uncertainty, claustrophobia, and desperation. Bernstein's reliance on monosyllabic words, coupled with the long but inconsistent spacing, means that, when read aloud, these lines produce sounds which are sporadic and spluttering. Indeed, Bernstein foregrounds the image of a 'Dodgem' in the title because of the way the bumper car's jolting movements and its tendency to gracelessly and suddenly collide with other bumper cars reflects the sense of panicked fear which is made palpable through the semantic and sonic 'resonance' of the poem. With Bernstein's description of Zukofsky's work in mind, it can be argued that 'Dodgem' does not make sense on the level of narrative but utilises 'sound sense' by allowing the meanings of the poem to 'unfold […] in the ear'.

The Aesthetic Pleasures of 'Metaphoricity'

'Dodgem' is a useful poem to analyse at this stage in the chapter because it is a particularly '[impermeable]' Bernstein poem and thus provides an extreme example of a poem which creates a 'resonance' at the expense of 'translatability'. However, not all Bernstein poems have to achieve this level of 'impermeability' in order to contribute to his project of testing the 'threshold' of the 'phonically | significant'. Section One established that Bernstein's description of 'artifice' as a 'measure' evokes the idea of a scale which evaluates texts according to the extent to which they foreground 'artifice'. Having established Zukofsky's influence on Bernstein, it is clear that this scale is indebted to Zukofsky's idea of a 'Lower limit speech' and 'Upper limit music' in poetry. 'Dodgem' would register in an especially high position on this scale because, using the words Bernstein uses to describe Zukofsky's work, the poem explores 'sound sense' rather than drawing the reader's attention to meaning 'behind the words'.[160] However, whilst 'Dodgem' registers at the high end of Bernstein's 'artifice' scale, his poems which occupy more of a middle ground between 'Lower limit speech' and 'Upper limit music' also push the 'threshold' of '[phonic significance]'. Indeed, insofar as one can detect a criterion for poetry which pushes this 'threshold' in Bernstein's work, it would seem

[160] Bernstein, 'Introduction to *Louis Zukofsky: Selected Poems*'.

that, at a minimum, he believes that poetry must indulge the 'metaphoricity' of language if it is to push this 'threshold'.

The term 'metaphoricity' is introduced in the following lines from 'Artifice of Absorption' in which Bernstein explains his issue with the idea that literary criticism plays a clarificatory role in the analysis of texts:

> The obvious problem is that the poem said in any
> other way is not the poem. This may account for
> why writers revealing their intentions or
> references ("close readings"), just as readers
> inventorying devices, often say so little: why
> a sober attempt to document or describe runs so
> high a risk of falling flat. In contrast, why not
> a criticism intoxicated with its own metaphoricity,
> or tropicality: one in which the limits of
> positive criticism are made more audibly
> artificial; in which the inadequacy of our
> explanatory paradigms is neither ignored
> nor regretted but brought into fruitful play.[161]

As was established in Section One, Bernstein sees language as a material which humans engage to express themselves rather than a medium through which they absolutely express pre-established meanings or ideas. It is because of this relationship between humans and language that Bernstein suggests that 'You know what I mean & you also mean | a lot more than you can say & far more than you could ever intend'. If a metaphor is, as per the *OED,* [s]omething regarded as representative or suggestive of something else', language is, from Bernstein's perspective, metaphorical in the sense that it is 'suggestive' or a representation of intended meaning rather than an absolute expression of intended meaning.[162] For instance, whilst we might want language to absolutely express meanings we have in our minds, by Bernstein's logic the articulation

[161] *A Poetics,* p. 16.

[162] 'metaphor, n.', *OED Online* <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/117328?redirectedFrom=metaphor&> [accessed 25 July 2018]

of our thoughts in writing would be metaphorical in the sense that language provides a mediated version of these thoughts rather than absolute expression of the original thought. Bernstein's point in this excerpt is that, because language is a medium in which we immerse ourselves in order to construct expression, literary criticism engages in an impossible task when it seeks to clarify or decode the meanings of a poem. To return to the analogy of the poet as sculptor, from Bernstein's view the attempt to comprehensively clarify the words of a poem through more words is like a sculptor attempting to clarify and pin down the meaning of a sculpture by producing another sculpture.

In proposing that literary criticism should be 'intoxicated with its own metaphoricity', Bernstein suggests that literary criticism should embrace the fact that criticism inevitably contributes further meaning to an analysed text instead of clarifying or decoding the meaning of that text. Bernstein is thus suggesting that literary criticism should abandon notions that it is in an authoritative position when it comes to reading texts. Indeed, this point about relinquishing control is further emphasised by the suggestion that humans should give themselves over to the '[intoxication]' of 'metaphoricity'. Bernstein suggests that because of the 'fruitful play' of language, the objective of literary criticism should be to extend or draw out the meanings of a text rather than to clarify or decode a text. Indeed, 'Artifice of Absorption' is a piece of literary criticism which embraces the 'metaphoricity' of language because of the way Bernstein opens his key terms up to further possible meanings over the course of the essay rather than attempting to establish categorical definitions. Importantly, the 'play' of language in 'Artifice of Absorption' is, in this sense, 'fruitful' because our understanding of these key terms grows as the text progresses, even if the boundaries of these terms are unclear. Bernstein is not refusing to clarify his key terms in order to highlight the struggle we face to make sense of each other in language, rather the 'fruitful play' of his essay allows these key terms to become progressively wider in scope and inclusivity.

Bernstein's poem 'Of Time and the Line' is not as '[impermeable]' as 'Dodgem' but it still indulges the 'metaphoricity' of language. The first ambition of the poem is to demonstrate the malleability of the word 'line'. The poem brings together various statements which use the word 'line' or 'lines'. The basic definition of 'line' in the *OED* is a 'thread-like mark' but 'Of Time and the Line' explores the malleability of this word by utilising different subcategories of the word and showing how the meaning of the

word changes according to the context of its use.[163] Among the 'lines' mentioned in the poem are the 'lines' of an actor', a 'line of ladies' dress', 'Maoist lines', the 'iambic line', and the 'lines of an imaginary' which 'are inscribed on the social flesh by the knifepoint of history'.[164] However, Bernstein shows how, even when it is clear which definition of 'line' is being used, the precise meaning of the word can be evasive. This is seen from the poem's opening lines:

> George Burns likes to insist that he always
> takes the straight lines; the cigar in his mouth
> is a way of leaving space between the
> lines for a laugh. He weaves lines together
> by means of a picaresque narrative;
> not so Hennie Youngman, whose lines are strict-
> ly paratactic.[165]

In the context of the opening two lines of the excerpt, we might expect that the type of 'lines' to which Bernstein is referring are 'lines' from a particular part in a dramatic production. However, even if he is referring to the 'lines' an actor might take, we are left to wonder which specific type of actor's lines Bernstein has in mind. These 'lines' could refer to 'lines' from a specific script in which one character has 'straight lines' and one character has comic 'lines'. One might think, for instance, of a script for *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* in which the 'lines' are divided between Burns and Gracie Allen, these being the kind of 'lines' which an actor has to learn. A particularly fastidious reader could, however, ask further questions at this point. For instance, it is unclear whether the 'straight lines' to which Bernstein refers are the literal 'lines' in a script or whether the poet is instead alluding to Burns' general role as the taker of 'straight lines' in his show with Allen.

The ambiguousness of the word 'line' is exploited further when Bernstein suggests that 'the cigar in [Burns'] mouth is a way of leaving space between the lines

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[163] 'line, n.2.', *OED Online* <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/108603> [accessed 25 July 2018]

[164] Bernstein, 'Of Time and the Line', in *Whiskey in Heaven*, pp. 148-149 (pp. 148-149).

[165] Ibid., p. 148.

for a laugh'. One might initially think that the 'lines' here are the outlines of Burns' upper and lower lips or perhaps the 'lines' of his teeth, with his 'cigar' being held between these 'lines'. This would make sense given that Bernstein writes that there needs to be 'space between the lines for a laugh', as one tends to part the teeth and lips before laughing. This reading can be scrutinised, however, when we question why Burns would need a 'cigar' wedged between his teeth in order to laugh, or perhaps why Bernstein is describing this comedian that 'plays it straight' as laughing. One can better understand the statement by considering that a 'line' is something that can exist, as the poem's title suggests, in time as well as space. 'Lines' are not just defined by the words they contain but also by their delivery. In this sense, it becomes clear that the 'space between the lines' to which Bernstein is referring is a temporal space. In other words, Bernstein is suggesting that Burns uses the 'cigar' as a prop with which to play between 'lines' so that he can maintain his façade of 'playing it straight' whilst milking the applause.

With this understanding of a 'line' as something which can exist both in space and time established, it becomes difficult to precisely determine the type of 'lines' to which Bernstein is referring when he describes Burns as 'weaving lines together'. This 'weaving' occurs both on the page of a script, with the 'picaresque narrative' being built up 'line' by 'line', and also in space and time through Burns' delivery. Whilst a good monologue might consist of both a nicely paced 'weaving' of 'lines' in script form and a well delivered 'weaving' of 'lines' in a live performance, there are different skills involved in both types of 'weaving'. In the case of Hennie Youngman, lines are not 'weaved together' but 'paratactic'. Youngman also plays with the content and timing of his lines by delivering a series of quickfire gags.

Given the number of different interpretations this analysis has drawn out from the first five uses of the word 'lines' in the poem, we can see how Bernstein is testing the 'threshold' of the 'phonically | significant' by playing with the ambiguous areas of linguistic convention. In each instance there is more than one potential meaning of the word 'lines', which creates a certain amount of ambiguity in each statement. However, Bernstein is not attempting throw his reader off or disrupt the reading of the poem. In the case of George Burns '[taking] the straight lines', for instance, there is a strong element of compatibility between the various interpretations of this statement and its definition of the word 'line'. Whilst this statement could be considered to refer to either the comedian's approach to a specific script, his general dynamic with Gracie Allen, or the façade of sincerity which he plays for laughs, one could argue that it refers to all of

these at the same time. This is the most impressive aspect of Bernstein's poem. Whilst we can, as in this analysis, explore the various possible precise meanings of the line, we get a strong sense of the kind of 'lines' Burns '[takes]' from our first reading. When we dig into the poem and consider the possibilities of meaning in each use of the word line, each line yields further meaning. Significantly, this perpetual yielding does not involve a contradiction of the reader's earlier ideas or interpretations, rather these interpretations complement each other in a way which produces a crescendo of consonance or, in Bernstein's Zukofskian lexicon, an impressive 'resonance'.

'Lining In' and 'Lining | Out': The Philosophical Function of 'Metaphoricity'

'Of Time and the Line' thus demonstrates the aesthetic pleasures of a poetry which invests in 'metaphoricity'. However, the poem also evidences how Bernstein's desire for 'metaphoricity' is intended to perform an epistemological function. As Bernstein acknowledges in 'Objects of Meaning', language inducts us into a 'socious, which is for us the world'. The 'foundations of knowledge' in this 'socious', Bernstein argues, 'are not so much based on a pre-existing empirical world as on shared conventions and mutual attunement'. Bernstein believes that in being trained to use language in a certain way, we are trained to understand the world in a particular way.

At this point we are returning to some of the ideas found in 'Dollar Value', which references Wittgenstein's aphorism 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life' in support of its argument that our use of language under capitalism enforces a particular ideological perspective.[166] 'Artifice of Absorption' approaches this critique of ideology in a gentler way than 'Dollar Value' in that, rather than fiercely criticising capitalist ideology, the essay provides more general warnings of how 'The | uncritical absorption of a poem' can correspond with an unconscious absorption of the poem's ideology (*A Poetics,* p. 21). In other words, in 'Artifice of Absorption' Bernstein is less outspoken on the malign influence of capitalist ideology and more focused on the dangers of any ideology being naturalised and, subsequently, creating the illusion of an authoritative worldview.

Bernstein's concerns about a particular ideology being naturalised through language are especially evident in the following lines:

[166] Wittgenstein, p. 11.

> the meaning of which I speak is not meaning as we may "know" it, with a recuperable intention or purpose. Such a restricted sense of meaning is analogous to the restricted senses of knowledge as stipulatively definable.[167]

The word 'know' is in scare marks in this excerpt because Bernstein believes that we only 'know' referents in language from within our conventions. Therefore, Bernstein is suggesting that, if a person were to believe that they absolutely 'know' a referent through language they would, in turn, mistake their conventionalised knowledge of the world for absolute knowledge of the world.

It would thus seem that Bernstein subscribes to the Jamesian idea that '[t]he world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands'. If we are unable to access truths about 'a pre-existing empirical world', as Bernstein suggests, it must follow that we cannot reach a neutral perspective outside of our 'conventions' from which to establish the foundations of absolute truth. James argues that, because of such limitations in knowing the world, humans should be aware that they inevitably 'carve' the world up into categories in a manner which suits human purposes. James acknowledges that, at the time of giving his lecture, the people sitting in front of him are usefully categorised as an audience. At other times, he observes, a collection of people can be usefully categorised as a 'nation' or an 'army'. James states that we thus have a large 'responsibility as thinkers' as, if we cannot appeal to an external authority in order to justify our knowledge of the world, we must be especially attentive to the way our ideas about reality effect the world.[168]

Bernstein makes a similar point to James' in 'Of time and the Line', when he writes

[167] *A Poetics,* p. 17.

[168] James, pp. 111-112.

When

making a line, better be double sure
what you're lining in & what you're lining
out & which side of the line you're on; the
world is made up so (Adam didn't so much
name as delineate).[169]

Bernstein echoes James here by arguing that humans 'delineate' the world. When Bernstein writes that our 'world' is 'made up' of 'lines' he is referring to the various ways in which humans make distinctions, both in and out of language, between what is and is not true, or between how things are and are not. Furthermore, Bernstein also seems to share James' view about our 'responsibility as thinkers' on the basis of his warning that one needs to be 'double sure' of what they are 'lining in' and 'lining out' when they 'delineate'. Like James, Bernstein believes that we can never be certain of the accuracy of our [delineations]' and that, for this reason, we need to be very careful when it comes to establishing truths about the world.

Some of the '[delineations]' of the world described in 'Of Time and the Line' are presented as being '[irresponsible]'. We are told in the poem, for instance, that 'Chairman Mao put forward | Maoist lines, but that's been abandoned (most-| ly) for the East-West line of malarkey | so popular in these parts'.[170] In these lines, Bernstein criticises the way that the U.S. government reinvented China's public image for American citizens because of its fluctuating relationship with the Chinese during the Cold War. Mao Zedong announced the existence of the People's Republic of China in 1949 but it was not until 1979 that the communist state was recognised by the U.S.. In the 50s and 60s, successive U.S. presidents presented Mao's China as a dangerous ideological threat to America; however as the Cold War progressed it became apparent to successive administrations that China could be a useful ally.[171] The extent of this

[169] 'Of Time and the Line', p. 148.

[170] 'Of Time and the Line', p. 148.

[171] Barry Stentiford, 'Mccarthyism', in *Encyclopedia of Chinese-American Relations,* ed. by Yuwu Song (Jefferson: McFarland, 2009), pp. 192-193 (p. 192); 'Chen Jian, 'China and the Cold War after Mao, in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, ed. by Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 181-200 (p. 198).

turnaround on China was evident when George Bush Senior controversially attempted secretly to maintain a friendly relationship with China after the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 despite calls from many Americans for condemnation of China.[172]

Bernstein's lines addressing 'Maoist lines' and the 'East-West line' in 'Of Time and the Line' hint that whilst American citizens were initially encouraged to view China in terms of the state's communist 'Maoist lines', the government later wanted its citizens to view China more sympathetically because of its potential alignment with the U.S. side of the 'East-West' Cold War 'line'. The poem thus implies that the hawkish ['re-delineation]' of the world by the U.S. government was irresponsible given that it was ultimately less determined by the character and actions of the regime in China than it was by the potential usefulness of the state as an ally to the U.S. in the Cold War. By alluding to the hypocrisy of this transition, Bernstein shows how, in James' words, the U.S. government has not shown a great deal of 'responsibility' in its '[delineation]' of the world. Moreover, not only were the reasons for enforcing these 'lines' in relation to China questionable, but the 'us vs them', bipartisan mentality of these 'lines' during the Cold War meant that these '[delineations]' were forcefully imposed upon American citizens.

Having established both Bernstein's sense of connection between poetry and epistemology and his wariness about the naturalisation of particular ideologically enforced worldviews, we are able to better appreciate Bernstein's claim that poetry can perform a form of 'epistemological | inquiry' in the following lines from 'Artifice of Absorption':

> It is just my insistence
> that poetry be understood as epistemological
> inquiry; to cede meaning would be to undercut
> the power of poetry to reconnect us
> with modes of meaning given in language
> but precluded by the hegemony of restricted
> epistemological economies[173]

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[172] Ann Devroy, 'Bush Defends Sending Secret Mission to China', *The Washington Post*, 22 December 1989, p. 27.

[173] *A Poetics,* pp. 17-18.

In terms of the reference in this excerpt to 'restricted | epistemological economies', elsewhere in 'Artifice' Bernstein describes a 'restricted economy' in language as relying on an 'economy of reading' in which meaning is valued according to its 'utility'. In focusing on 'utility' in the valuation of meaning in language, a 'restricted economy' will privilege 'relatively fixed', 'recuperable' elements of language in order to facilitate the exchange of meaning within a conventional system. Due to the way Bernstein connects the use of language to 'shared conventions' for 'the foundations of knowledge', it follows that, as he writes in 'Artifice of Absorption', 'a restricted sense of meaning is | analogous to the restricted senses of knowledge as stipulatively definable'.

Bernstein's argument, therefore, is that poetry can be used as a form of 'epistemological | inquiry' in the sense that it can investigate the possibilities for meaningful language and, subsequently, investigate the different ways in which we can know the world. A poem such as 'Of Time and the Line' performs this 'epistemological inquiry' by exploring what we are able to '[line] in' and '[line] | out' in our '[delineation]' of the world by exploring the 'metaphoricity' of language. 'Of Time and the Line' is a poem which applies a certain pressure to the word 'line' in order to explore the multiplicity of meanings we can find in our language when we test the limitations of the 'threshold' of the 'phonically | significant'. The poem thus not only emphasises the fallibility of our '[delineation]' of the world in language, but it also explores the possibility for shifting and stretching these linguistic '[delineations]' in order to explore the different possible ways in which we can make sense of the world.

Political Poetries and Emersonian 'Swerving'

Thus far this section has covered three important aspects of Bernstein's position on meaning in language in 'Artifice of Absorption'. Firstly, in clarifying Bernstein's preference for Wittgenstein over Derrida, I have demonstrated that Bernstein actually agrees with Scigaj that there is a social grounding for language that grants a relative degree of fixity to linguistic signs. Secondly, I have established that whilst Bernstein accepts Wittgenstein's idea that the shared rules which ground our language allow for sufficient systems of communication in societies, he diverges from Wittgenstein by using poetry to experiment with these rules and thus explore the potential for meaning in language. Thirdly, I have explained that there are epistemological ramifications to this poetic project. Bernstein believes that the rules by which we establish a common ground in language consolidate a particular ideological perspective on the world and, therefore, his desire to test the limits of meaning in our language is commensurate with

a desire to explore how we can know the world in different ways. The comparison with James showed that Bernstein is particularly keen to emphasise that because the true nature of reality is unknowable, we should be especially careful about the way we 'delineate' truth and meaning.

The remainder of the chapter will link these points about the poetic project in 'Artifice of Absorption' to the larger arguments of the chapter by showing how Bernstein's position on meaning in language in this text, firstly, allows for more direct political poetry, and secondly, demonstrates Bernstein's commitment to a form of poetic work that is indebted to Emerson. In order to get back to both these arguments, it is helpful to consider how the epistemological outlook in 'Artifice of Absorption' shows that he has moved beyond the type of warning about capitalist ideology he offered in 'Dollar Value'. In the latter essay, Bernstein echoes Silliman's call in 'Disappearance of the Word' for a poetry which foregrounds the limitations of language in order to expose the manipulative presence of capitalist ideology in conventional uses of language. By the logic of these essays, to make conventional sense is to reinforce the ideology on whose terms such sense is made. 'Artifice of Absorption' has a more nuanced take on this matter by creating a picture of a scale for measuring the extent to which a text foregrounds 'artifice'. As was shown through the analyses of 'Dodgem' and of 'Time and the Line', whilst Bernstein endorses poetry which, at a minimum, embraces the 'metaphoricity' of language, his poems register at different positions on this scale. This means that Bernstein is less black and white in his criteria for political poetry in 'Artifice of Absorption' than he is in 'Dollar Value'. In the case of 'Time and the Line', for instance, Bernstein is, in Andrews' words, 'writing *about* politics' as well as using 'writing *as* politics' when he addresses the U.S. government's expedient projection of China to American citizens.

Bernstein's move away from the strictly deconstructive politics of 'Dollar Value' is not only evident in *A Poetics* in 'Artifice of Absorption' and its theoretical take on meaning in language, but also in its opening essay, 'State of the Art', which focuses on identity politics. Such a focus is evident in the following lines:

> The cultural space of diversity is […] torn to shreds when the tragic death of one white heterosexual teenage boy from AIDS is given a public acknowledgement equivalent to the tragic deaths of thousands of individual gay men.
> I sometimes even wonder whether men can understand the voice of the women we live next to and from whose bodies we have come, since I hear every day the

> male version of the universal voice of rationality trying to control, as if by ventriloquism, female bodies.[174]

Bernstein's recognition that there are factors which exist outside of class struggle that contribute to inequality in the U.S. is significant. Perloff observes that whilst the 'strong political thrust' of the Language poetry of Andrews, Bernstein, McCaffery, Silliman, and Watten was centred around a 'Marxist poetics that focused, in important ways, on issues of ideology and class', these poetics were 'less attuned to questions of gender and race'.[175] Essays like 'Disappearance of the Word' and 'Dollar Value' ignore issues related to 'gender and race' because they see these issues as being symptoms of a capitalist ideology. In these essays, it is argued that when a person makes conventional sense, they make sense on the terms set for them by capitalism and that, for this reason, all attempts to protest the status-quo through conventional grammar and syntax are complicit with that status-quo. However, by privileging class struggle and ideology critique in this way, these essays are inattentive to the fact that factors such as 'gender and race' also contribute significantly towards inequality. In acknowledgement of this fact, Perloff refers to poet Harryette Mullen's experience of being among 'fellow minority graduate students at Santa Cruz' who realised 'that it was all very well for white male poets to renounce "voice" but that "We *need* our subjectivity"'.[176] These concerns about the renunciation of 'voice' resonate with the broader idea of the incompatibility between feminism and postmodernism. Seyla Banhabib, for instance, argues that postmodernism's commitment to the 'three theses' of 'the death of man', 'the death of history', and 'the death of metaphysics', means that postmodernism ultimately 'undermines the feminist commitment to women's agency and sense of selfhood, to the re-appropriation of women's own history in the name of an emancipated future, and to the exercise of radical social criticisms which uncovers gender "in all its endless variety and monotonous similarity"'.[177]

Bernstein's position on meaning in language in 'Artifice of Absorption' is more compatible with movements like feminism and, to return to a central argument of this

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[174] *A Poetics*, p. 5.

[175] *Differentials*, p. 162.

[176] *Differentials*, p. 167.

[177] Seyla Benhabib, 'Feminism and Postmodernism', in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 17-34 (p. 29).

thesis, environmentalism. Bernstein himself is particularly focused on exploring the ways in which the ideological view on reality can be pushed and stretched by experimenting with the language which facilitates that view. However, his notion of 'artifice' as a 'measure' indicates that there are range of positions a poet can take between communicating in complete adherence to socially established rules for language and, at the other end of the scale, producing a poetry which solely explores the materiality and music of language. Bernstein's recognition of identity politics in 'State of the Art' shows he appreciates that many poets will want to address in a more direct manner the social disadvantages set against certain groups of people on the basis of race, gender, or sexual orientation. In developing a more flexible approach to political poetry, Bernstein is also more accommodating in 'Artifice of Absorption' of more direct forms of political poetry than he was in 'Dollar Value'. Admittedly, Bernstein instructs poets to, at a minimum, acknowledge the 'metaphoricity' of language in their work, but it is hardly shocking that an experimental poet would encourage a poet to engage the writing of poetry as a meaning making process rather than merely as novel way of communicating pre-established ideas. Even Scigaj empathises with this position when he acknowledges that 'poetry becomes one-dimensional doggerel when it sinks to propaganda'. Furthermore, his claim that 'environmental poetry seldom stoops to that level' (p. xiv) will be supported in later chapters on Ammons and Merwin which show that both poets use the poem as a meaning making device whilst at the same time addressing environmental issues.

From the perspective of ecocritics such as Scigaj, Buell, and Garrard, then, this shift in Bernstein's work might be described as pragmatic in the basic of sense of the word. However, the political pragmatism of *A Poetics* is tied to its philosophical grounding in Emersonian pragmatism. The Emersonian influence is evident in Bernstein's statement that '*Poetry is aversion of conformity* in the pursuit of new forms, or can be', which alludes to Emerson's claim in 'Self-Reliance' that '[t]he virtue in most request [in society] is conformity.[178] Self-reliance is its aversion'. Bernstein returns to the Emersonian idea of 'self-reliance' in an interview with Penelope Galey-Sacks, in which Bernstein states that

> The best formulation for me is the one coming from Emerson: aversion of conformity in the pursuit of new forms. The concept of aversion -- which is a

[178] 'Self-Reliance', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, pp. 131-151 (p. 133).

swerving-away-from -- is more appealing and also more accurate than the idea of breakage and transgression.[179]

Bernstein's allusion to 'Self-Reliance' in 'State of the Art' is extremely telling in terms of his move away from the deconstructive poetics of Language poetry's 'founding fathers'. As this chapter has established, a key difference between 'Artifice of Absorption' and deconstructive essays like 'Disappearance of the Word' and 'Dollar Value' is that whereas the latter essays focus on confronting capitalist ideology, the former essay warns more generally against the sedimentation of one particular set of conventions or ideology. In this sense, Bernstein's argument that poetry should test the 'threshold' of the 'phonically | significant', which he sees as an act which tests the 'threshold' of our epistemology, is not a reaction to the particular context of a capitalist society, but rather it is symptomatic of the poet's general rule that we should '[avert]' 'conformity'.

Like James and Emerson, Bernstein recognises that we can never reach a position of objectivity in regard to truth and knowledge of the world and, therefore, he embraces an Emersonian pragmatist tendency of '*swerving-away-from'* so that one dominant ideology does not become naturalised. In terms of the Jamesian influence on Bernstein's work, 'Of Time and Line' demonstrates the extent to which Bernstein wants to find the truth that 'works'. Bernstein's warning in this poem that 'When | making a line, better be double sure | what you're lining in & lining | out' is not a warning against '[delineation]', after all the poem itself thoroughly embraces the act of '[delineation]' in indulging the pleasure and powerfulness of metaphoricity in language, rather these lines are proposing that we must be very careful as to how we 'delineate' the world in light of our epistemological limitations.

In terms of this thesis' identification of its chosen writers' poetic working of language, it is significant that in claiming poetry as a form of 'epistemological | inquiry', Bernstein suggests that the poet has the capacity to rejuvenate cultural values from the inside of a particular ideology. In this sense, Bernstein distances himself from his earlier claim in 'Dollar Value' that in order for language to be 'decentered, community controlled' it must be 'taken out of the *service* of the capitalist project' (*Content's Dream*,

[179] Charles Bernstein and Penelope Galey-Sacks, 'Poetry's Club-Foot: Process, Faktura, Intensification', *Etudes Anglaises: Revue Du Monde Anglophone*, 65.2 (April 2012), 135-148 (p. 8).

p. 60). As has been established through my analysis of Wittgenstein's influence on 'Artifice of Absorption', in *A Poetics* Bernstein articulates a poetic project which tries to investigate the possibilities for meaning from within the current ideology by probing and playing with its rules. A key difference, then, between 'Dollar Value' and 'Artifice of Absorption' is that the former endorses a poetry which deconstructs the dominant ideology and the latter endorses a poetry which works or explores different possible futures for the dominant ideology. Indeed, in embracing an Emersonian tendency of '*swerving-away-from*', it is clear that the Bernstein of *A Poetics* no longer argues that we should, or perhaps is less convinced that one can, entirely escape a 'capitalist ideology' and establish an alternative, utopian ideology; rather he outlines a poetry that embraces the rejuvenation of language and ideology as an impulse. In other words, Bernstein is less interested in the early 1990s in establishing an alternative to a capitalist ideology and, instead, warns of the dangers that can occur from any ideology being naturalised.

Ultimately, in clarifying Bernstein's claim that the poet can perform an 'epistemological | inquiry' this chapter has provided a portrait of a writer who thoroughly subscribes to the idea that poetry works language. To return to my criteria for poetic work, Bernstein not only embraces poetry as a process for finding meanings, but he also sees this investigation as having a valuable impact on the wider culture, on whose rules meaning in language is grounded. Bernstein subscribes to Wittgenstein's argument that 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life' and he sees poetry as a means of exploring possibilities for meaning in language so as to, subsequently, explore how we might 'imagine' a different, more honest, fairer 'form of life'.[180] This comparison with Wittgenstein also shows that Bernstein sees the poet as a worker of language in the sense that he is not the creator of meaning, rather he engages language in such a way as to uncover potentials for meaning which were otherwise obscured by the restrictive, hegemonic epistemological outlook that dominates American culture.

[180] Wittgenstein, p. 11.

'Words Are a Way of Fending in the World': A.R. Ammons' Poetic Processing of Language

Section One

Ammons and Bernstein are held to be archetypal representatives of ecopoetry and Language poetry respectively. In terms of critics' claims that a tension exists between postmodern poetry and ecopoetry, Bernstein's support of Derrida's argument that '[t]here is no outside-text' certainly allies him with a postmodern school of thought which frustrated ecocritics in the early 1990s.[181] In turn, certain passages in *Garbage* exhibit a direct political urgency that some literary theorists would see as naïve due to its ignorance of the manipulative ideological function of standardised language. On this basis it is slightly harder to unstick Ammons and Bernstein from polarised sides of a tension between ecopoetry and Language poetry than it is Howe and Merwin. Merwin is identified as a touchstone ecopoet in *Sustainable Poetry* but even Scigaj admits that Merwin is 'the most postmodern of environmental poets' due to his attempts to 'awaken his readers from the clichés and abstractions of an exhausted language' (p. 48). Likewise, though Howe is regularly included in lists of prominent Language poets, critics such as Bloomfield have convincingly demonstrated that her work crosses over into ecopoetic territory.[182] With this in mind, the first section in this chapter will explore Paul Hoover's criteria for postmodern poetry, as stated in his *Postmodern American Poetry* anthology (1994), to pinpoint exactly why, by the time of *Garbage*'s publication in the early 1990s, Ammons' experimental poetry was out of step with postmodernism.

Building on my analysis of the Emersonian influence in Bernstein's poetry, the second section of this chapter will demonstrate the strength of Ammons' pragmatist credentials and, subsequently, demonstrate how *Garbage* exhibits a firm commitment to the poetic working of language and, in turn, cultural values. In carrying out this analysis, I also hope to draw attention to the way that whilst critics like Hoover rightly argue that postmodern poetry changed significantly in the late 1970s onwards, the danger of too great a focus on the genre of the postmodern is that it obscures the philosophical sophistication and experimental sensibilities of a pragmatic poet like Ammons.

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[181] *Of Grammatology*, p. 158.

[182] 'Palimtextual Tracts', p. 668.

Hoover's Criteria for the Postmodern Poem

The reason this first section focuses on Hoover's definition of postmodernism is because the first edition of his anthology captures the moment in which Language poetry was becoming the dominant force in contemporary American poetry. Hoover firmly places Language poetry as the leading avant-garde poetic movement of the 1980s and early 1990s.[183] For Hank Lazar, in emphasising the importance of Language poetry's contribution to avant-garde poetry, the anthology confirmed that this group of poets, who had once been adversaries to the poetic mainstream, had now become a literary institution.[184] Indeed, Hoover himself acknowledges in the second edition of his anthology that his prediction in the 1994 edition that 'language poetry will influence mainstream practice in the coming decades' proved to be an 'understatement' given the way that 'leading language poets hold endowed chairs at leading universities, and their practice has become so historicized that […] critics have referred to a "postlanguage" generation.[185] Hoover reads the acceptance of Language poetry in English departments as speaking to the way American avant-garde poetry become noticeably more theoretical and academic towards the end of the 20th century (p. xxix). It is this development in avant-garde American poetry which sparks the concerns of founding ecocritics in the early 1990s.

Ammons' omission from Hoover's anthology also speaks to the divide that was opening up between critics who championed the kind of postmodern poetry produced by Language poets and those who promoted the work of ecopoets who engaged with political issues in more of a spirit of direct activism. Critics including Stephen Cushman, Epstein, and Perloff have questioned Hoover's omission of Ammons. Perloff raises the issue of Ammons' omission in order to show how the production of a comprehensive postmodern poetry anthology can put a strain on a genre that is fluid and open to

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[183] Paul Hoover, 'Introduction', in *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology,* ed. by Paul Hoover (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1994), pp. xxv-xxxix (p. xxxv). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[184] Hank Lazar, 'Charles Bernstein's Dark City: Polis, Policy, and the Policing of Poetry', *The American Poetry Review*, 24.5 (September/October 1995), 35-44 (p. 39).

[185] Paul Hoover, 'Introduction', in *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, ed. by Paul Hoover, 2nd edn (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), pp. pp. xxix-lvii (p. xxxiii).

change.[186] For Cushman and Epstein on the other hand, this omission is evidence of the extent to which the experimental quality of Ammons' poetry has been underappreciated.[187] The common cause between these two arguments is a concern that Hoover's definition of postmodern poetry and selection of particular poets could distract us from the experimental qualities of writers whose work does not comply with his criteria for a postmodern poetic style. This section, however, will defend Hoover by illuminating an important difference between Ammons and Bernstein which speaks to the former's significant divergence from postmodern poetry in the early 1990s.

In the 'Introduction' to *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, Hoover defines the postmodern poem by its conformity to four interconnected criteria. For Hoover, the postmodern poem:

1. is published after World War II and, consequently, reacts to the specific anxieties of that period
2. opposes mainstream poetry, culture, and ideology
3. emphasises process over product
4. foregrounds the indeterminacy of the text

In terms of the first criteria, the era of postmodern poetry, according to Hoover, begins after World War II (p. xxv). Hoover links the emergence of postmodern poetry to the United States' unprecedented position of power following the War, a time when the nation 'finally acquired its full share of cultural anxiety and world knowledge' (p. xxxix). Hoover also alludes to Fredric Jameson's argument that postmodernism provides the 'perfect expression of late capitalist culture as dominated by multinational expression' (p. xxvi). Despite the generation gap between Ammons (born in 1926) and Bernstein (born in 1950), the significance of which will come into play later in this

[186] Marjorie Perloff, 'Whose New American Poetry? Anthologizing in the Nineties', *Diacritics,* 26.3/4 (Autumn/Winter, 1996), 104-123 (pp. 115-116).

[187] Stephen Cushman, '"Pray Without Ceasing" and the Postmodern Canon', in *Complexities of Motion: New Essays on A.R. Ammons's Long Poems*, ed. by Stephen Schneider (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), pp. 261-278; Andrew Epstein, *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 297-298.

section, both poets came into their prime as writers following World War II, with Ammons publishing his first book of poems in 1955 and Bernstein debuting his poetry in 1975. Furthermore, even if Bernstein approaches politics from a more theoretical position than Ammons, the subject matter, and especially the political subject matter, chosen by these two poets addresses issues that are identifiable with the post-War period.

This thesis has provided several examples of Bernstein essays and poems which critique the rise of capitalist ideology in the U.S. The critique in these writings ranges from fierce warnings against the 'reality control' (*Content's Dream*, p. 60) of capitalist ideology ('The Dollar Value of Poetry') to more subtle satirising of corporate speak ('Standing Target') to the specific identification of blind spots in U.S. foreign policy ('Of Time and the Line'). *Garbage* traverses a range of subjects but America's waste management problem is Ammons' literal and figurative starting point. America's attitude towards waste came under particular scrutiny in the landfill site debates of the 1980s, partly due to the growth of consumer capitalism and the vast amounts of rubbish that came with it.[188] With this in mind, Lorraine C. DiCicco states that 'it is not surprising that Ammons writes a long poem so titled or that he would present [garbage] as the governing symbol of this century' given the way public concern with garbage '[reached] a climax in the landfill site debates of the 1980s'.[189]

Both poets are therefore aware of the repercussions of America's emergence as a dominant world power following World War II and thus attempt to hold the nation's political institutions to account on certain issues. Hoover takes this point a step further in his second criterion for a postmodern poem, which is that the poem engages in an 'ongoing process of resistance to mainstream ideology' (p. xxvi). At this stage, Hoover is not suggesting that the postmodern poet needs to understand the concept of ideology as defined by theorists such as Althusser. Much of the work included in Hoover's anthology predates the theory boom in America and the theoretical definitions of 'ideology' that came with it. With this in mind, when Hoover writes that postmodern poets throughout the post-War era have challenged 'mainstream ideology', he is suggesting that these poets challenged the conventional ideas and ideals of the day.

[188] DiCicco, p. 170.

[189] Ibid, p. 170.

Whilst this challenge to 'mainstream ideology' has taken different forms, with Hoover suggesting that Frank O'Hara, Language poets, and performance poets have produced aesthetically diverse but similarly resistant poetries, Hoover explains that postmodern poets often share a disdain for the 'narcissism, sentimentality, and self-expressiveness' of 'mainstream culture' and the way these vices are expressed in the culture's 'life in writing' (p. xxv). Postmodern poets therefore, according to Hoover, sense a link between the wider values of a culture and literary conventions, and they subsequently attempt to challenge these cultural values by disrupting convention in their poetry.

On the basis of Hoover's anthology, it would seem that there are two main reasons why postmodern poetry counters 'mainstream ideology'. Firstly, Hoover suggests that it is the purpose of the avant-garde to '[renew] poetry as a whole through new, but initially shocking, artistic strategies' (p. xxv). In other words, the postmodern poet counters the mainstream in part because they recognise the importance of shaking up convention, regardless of what those conventions are. Secondly, Hoover's 'Introduction' implies that postmodern poets challenge 'mainstream ideology' due to a wariness of the way convention can become conflated with assumptions of authority. Hoover writes that '[i]n general, postmodern poetry opposes the centrist values of unity, significance, linearity, expressiveness, and a heightened, even heroic, portrayal of the bourgeois self and concerns' (p. xxvii). Hoover is thus arguing that whereas mainstream culture celebrates art which operates on the assumption that it can absolutely express the emotions and intentions of its creator, postmodern poetry illuminates the ways in which artistic mediums complicate this process of expression. It is for this reason that Hoover claims postmodern poets see a certain 'narcissism' in the 'sentimentality' of traditional writing as they understand the process of self-expression to be far more complicated than 'mainstream ideology' would have its subjects believe.

The similarities between Ammons and Bernstein's respective attempts to oppose 'mainstream ideology' can be clarified by showing how both present traditional poetic form as an ideological tool. One of the many 'lines' which Bernstein discusses in 'Of Time and the Line' is the 'iambic line', the 'prestige' of which, he states, 'has recently | suffered decline since it's no longer so | clear who "I" am, much less who you are'.[190] Bernstein alludes here to the prominent Language poetry argument about the

[190] 'Of Time and the Line', p. 148.

deceptiveness of the voice poem. Bernstein parodies the voice poet in 'Stray Straws and Straw Men' when he writes 'I look straight into my heart & write the exact words that come from within' (*Content's Dream*, p. 40). As the previous chapter emphasised, Bernstein calls into question this idea that a poem can immediately and absolutely express the emotions and feelings of its author by arguing that language always mediates intended meaning. In these lines from 'Of Time and the Line', Bernstein reminds his reader that, in light of the fact that the meanings of a poem are always to some extent created in the process of writing, the 'I' of the poem is less stable than the voice poem would have us believe. Moreover, the previous chapter's discussion on deictics clarified Bernstein's view on why the 'you' of the poem can refer to a great many different people depending on who is reading the poem and when it is being read.

In terms of the reference to the 'iambic line' in 'Of Time and the Line', just as, as the previous chapter explained, Bernstein sees the standardisation of grammar as the standardisation of a particular worldview, so he sees the standardisation of form in a poem as standardising expression. Bernstein describes how the poet works to a certain 'measure' when making decisions about the order and structure of the poem and, furthermore, he states his preference for 'a poetry that does not assume a measure but finds it, articulates it'. In making this point, Bernstein acknowledges that this type of preferred poetry 'would exclude a common characterization of poetry as that writing which uses a measure handed down by tradition, e.g., iambic pentameter'. As Bernstein suggests earlier in the essay, '[o]*rdering and sequence express values'* and it is for this reason that he endorses poetry which develops its own 'measure' rather than '[assuming]' an established 'measure' (*Content's Dream*, p. 75) and, in turn, adhering to certain established values. In connecting the 'decline' of the '*iam*bic line' (my emphasis) to the complicated nature of the statement 'I am' in poetry, Bernstein alludes to the way a traditional metre like 'iambic pentameter' mediates, rather than facilitates, self-expression.

Ammons also argues that standardised poetic form standardises expression. Explaining the 'random' quality of his form in a 1980 interview with Philip Fried (republished by *Terrain.org* in 2009), Ammons says 'I usually feel that I don't have anything to say of my own until I have tripped the regular world, until I have thrown the Western mind itself somehow off'. Expanding on this idea that an experimental form evades 'the regular world', Ammons subsequently states 'if I began to write a sonnet, for example, I think I would be stultified and silenced by that form, because it's my nature to want to trip that form out of existence as a way of making room for myself

to speak and act'.[191] It is for this reason that Ammons employs an experimental poetic form in *Garbage*. The poem consists of eighteen sections and is written in free verse. Whilst, as Helen Vendler notes, Ammons' decision to write in couplets gives 'the impression of neatness', this 'impression' is undermined by the fact that 'the line-breaks are sufficiently unexpected to keep the couplets from seeming conclusive'.[192] As with most of Ammons' poems, *Garbage* overwhelmingly relies on the colon for punctuation in a manner that adds to the inconclusiveness of the couplets.

Ammons' desire to break away from the 'regular world' of expression in traditional forms manifests itself in the poet's procedure of using adding machine tape as manuscript for his poetry. Ammons first used rolls of adding machine tape when writing *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965) and the poet resumed this practice when writing *Garbage.* Ammons explains in an interview with Stephen Schneider that he first chose to use adding machine tape because of his struggle to continue writing a poem after changing the paper in his typewriter. This admission demonstrates the importance Ammons places on being immersed in the writing process and throughout his interview with Schneider it becomes increasingly clear that Ammons values the adding machine roll for allowing him to maintain a spontaneous flow in his poem. Ammons proudly states, for instance, that *Garbage* 'was entirely improvisational. It was not premeditated nor was it revised'.[193] It is thus apparent that Ammons aims to create an unplanned, unrevised poetry that is similar in its procedures to Jack Kerouac's style of 'spontaneous bop prosody', a style that, significantly, Hoover claims offered a postmodern contradiction to the literary convention in the late 1950s (pp. xxix-xxx).

'Writing-as-Product' and 'Writing-as-Process'

This analysis demonstrates that Ammons and Bernstein's reluctance to use conventional poetic forms stems from their sense of traditional form's complicity in

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[191] A.R. Ammons and Philip Fried, 'A Place You Can Live: Interview by Philip Fried', *Terrain.org*, 24 (22 October 2009) <http://www.themanhattanreview.com/archive/1-2_place.html> [accessed 18 July 2018]

[192] Helen Vendler, '*The Snow Poems* and *Garbage*: Episodes in an Evolving Poetics', in *Complexities of Motion*, pp. 23-50 (p. 28).

[193] A.R. Ammons and Stephen Schneider, 'From the Wind to the Earth: An Interview with A.R. Ammons', in *Complexities of Motion*, pp. 325-349 (p. 325).

perpetuating mainstream ideology. Postmodern poets take different routes to undermine mainstream culture, but Hoover suggests that postmodern poems commonly achieve this subversion by privileging 'writing-as-process over writing-as-product' (p. xxvii). In arguing that mainstream poetry embraces 'centrist values of unity' in its 'heightened, even heroic, portrayal of the bourgeois self and concerns', Hoover implies that this type of poetry focuses on 'writing-as-product'. In such poetry, the 'self' and its 'concerns' constitute the product and the job of the poem is to communicate these to the reader as clearly and coherently as possible. Postmodern poetry, on the other hand, attempts to explore the poem as a sense making device, meaning that it is interested not just in what meanings the poem produces but also in how these meanings are produced.

The previous chapter explained that Bernstein sees 'artifice' as an essential part of writing, meaning that there is always some sort of contrivance involved in using language to express 'facts' which exist outside of language. The chapter also showed how Bernstein emphasises the 'artifice' involved in writing poetry in 'Standing Target', 'Dodgem', and 'Of Time and the Line', poems which in their own ways foreground the limitations of language as a communicative tool. This is most obviously seen in 'Dodgem' and the opening section of 'Standing Target' where the disjointedness of the syntax and grammar is partly intended to prompt the reader to more actively engage in the text. Through the reader's activity in the poem, Bernstein hopes to convey a sense of the poem as a site of participation in which writer and reader constitute meaning rather than the poem being a means of a writer dictating ideas to a passive reader. Even in 'Of Time and the Line', which is more coherent than 'Standing Target' and 'Dodgem' in terms of its syntax and grammar, Bernstein demonstrates how words frustrate our attempts to establish comprehensive, absolute definitions for them. The poem ultimately teaches us to enjoy the untameable 'metaphoricity' of language rather than striving for absolute authority over language. In all three poems, Bernstein emphasises that the poem always mediates intended meaning and, moreover, that the meanings of a poem are fluid as they will change depending on the contexts in which they are read. These poems are thus postmodern in their exploration of the process by which a poem produces meaning.

In *Garbage*, Ammons draws attention to the process of poetry by providing a representation of the poet's mind at work rather than meticulously refining and crafting the poem in order to heighten the emotional quality of the poem or better convey its ideas and arguments. Ammons expresses his scorn for the idea that a poem

should undergo an extensive crafting process in order to heighten its emotional quality when he describes the work of 'hackers' in the closing pages of *Garbage*:

> the hackers […]
> hack away at intensity: they want to move,
> disturb, shock: they show the idleness of
> pretended feeling […]
> the strident hackers miss no chance to
> dramatize, hurt, fairly or unfairly, for they
> fear their emptiness[194]

In labelling these kinds of poets 'hackers', Ammons implies that such poets inflict pain on themselves and others in order to contrive some emotion in their writing whilst also suggesting that, in carrying out such a laboured, inauthentic attempt to instigate some sense of drama in their poem, they are essentially poetic 'hacks'. In a 1986 interview with Jim Stahl, Ammons identifies Robert Lowell as a 'hacker' when he describes how Lowell 'jacked the poem up: that is to say he kept hacking at himself and at the poem á la Yeats' so as to 'get the greatest conflict and density and brutality and energy and tension and whatever else concentrated and focused in the poem'.[195] From this angle, Ammons' description of how 'hackers' 'hack away at intensity' in *Garbage* can be read as an accusation that poets like Lowell both self-flagellate in order to stir up emotion in a poem and also 'hack away' at the poem in terms of editing in order to heighten the text's sense of drama. The suggestion at the end of the above excerpt that 'hackers' engage in these practices because they 'fear their emptiness' implies that there is an inauthenticity to this poetry, that the ostensibly personal and sincere products of confessional poetry such as Lowell's comes about through an extensive, contrived editing process.

If the 'hackers'' poetry is thus read by Ammons as a poetry of 'product' because of the way its claims to sincerity mask a markedly insincere poetic process, the openness, spontaneity, and casual tone of *Garbage* is demonstrative of his commitment

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[194] *Garbage*, pp. 120-121.

[195] A.R. Ammons and Jim Stahl, '"The Unassimilable Fact Leads Us On …": Jim Stahl', in *Set in Motion: Essays, Interviews, and Dialogues*, ed. by Zofia Burr (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 41-55 (p. 45).

to providing an honest account of the poetic process. As has been established, Ammons claims that *Garbage* was 'entirely improvisational' and that he used adding machine tape as his manuscript so that he could write sections of the poem without stopping. Ammons' self-reflexive description of contemplating writing a poem on the opening page of *Garbage* certainly reinforces the idea that this is a spontaneous, improvised piece of writing:

> Creepy little creepers are insinuatingly
> curling up my spine (bringing the message)
>
> saying, Boy!, are you writing that great poem,
> the world's waiting for: don't you know you
>
> have an unaccomplished mission unaccomplished;
> someone somewhere may be at this very moment
>
> dying for the lack of what W.C. Williams says
> you could (or somebody could) be giving: yeah?[196]

Ammons' unpolished style of poetic procedure creates a sense of spontaneity and informality in these lines. Firstly, Ammons' description of 'creepy little creepers' attempting to provoke the speaker into the action of writing, placed as it is at the opening of the poem, emphasises that the poet is detailing his immediate experience of this impulse to write. From the start of the poem, then, Ammons makes clear to the reader that this poem has not been planned in advance and that the poem is being immediately composed in a moment of inspiration.

This sense of the poem as being an immediate, spontaneous transmission of its author's feelings is reinforced by the ostensibly uninformative adjectives in the passage. Alex Albright argues that Ammons and Kerouac, both of whom used rolls of paper as manuscript, are similar in the way that they 'flaunt the traditionally held notion that true literary art is created through carefully considered revision'.[197]

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[196] *Garbage*, p. 11.

[197] Alex Albright, 'Ammons, Kerouac, and Their New Romantic Scrolls', in *Complexities of Motion*, pp. 83-110 (p. 84).

Ammons' description of 'hackers' implies that, given the opportunity, a more traditional poet like Lowell might suggest that a poet could (or even should) come up with a more inspired description of the impulse to write than this. The description of 'little creepers' as 'creepy' and an 'unaccomplished mission' as 'unaccomplished' could, from this perspective, be viewed as lazy or uncreative. However, Ammons is a poet with a different set of values from the traditional poet and such descriptions are attempts to provide a more honest reflection of how the mind actually works. Ammons deliberately utilises a poetic procedure which limits opportunities to revise his work and helps him maintain a continuous flow. In this sense, the phrase 'creepy little creepers' can be understood as the poetic product of a mind in the moment. The poet's poetic procedure attempts to convey an immediate reflection of the mind's workings and, in the case of 'creepy little creepers', Ammons is not only building steam in the poem but also foregrounding his commitment to the spontaneous.

The punctuation used also adds to the improvisational tone of the passage with the brackets, for instance, conveying the sense that the poet is actively processing the situation and occurrences that he describes whilst he writes. One might question what purpose it serves to provide the clarifications '(bringing the message)' and '(or somebody could)' in the context of this opening passage. These two bracketed clauses offer no relevant or useful supplementary information and they thus give the opening of this long poem a rather clumsy tone. However, when we consider that Ammons is attempting to immediately record his thought process on the page we can understand these bracketed clauses not as providing supplementary information for the reader's benefit, but rather as an attempt to accurately reflect the thought process in its rawness. Indeed, Ammons frequently uses brackets in the poem to self-reflexively clarify, elaborate on, or make observations about, what he has just written. In the latter half of the poem, for instance, Ammons follows a rare rhyming couplet with "(check that rhyme)" (p. 69), an instruction which allows the poet to reinforce his spontaneous aesthetic on two fronts: it allows Ammons to self-reflexively comment on a fresh couplet and also emphasises that this decision to employ a rhyming couplet was not premeditated.

The Indeterminacy of Postmodern Indeterminacy

Both Bernstein and Ammons endorse an experimental approach to poetry in which elements of the writing process are laid bare to the reader. Furthermore, both poets argue that traditional forms channel poetic expression through a filter that reinforces

mainstream values. In this sense, both poets turn away from established forms in a bid to turn away from established modes of expression. The crucial difference between the two poets, one that is significant in terms of Ammons' exclusion from Hoover's anthology, can be clarified by their distinct engagement with indeterminacy as a theme. Hoover argues that 'since the publication of [Ashbery's] *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*' in 1975, 'indeterminacy' has become the 'most important theme' in postmodern poetry. For Hoover, '[i]ndeterminacy means the conditionality of truth, as well as a compositional tendency away from finality and closure; the text is in a state of unrest or undecidability' (p. xxxi). Both Bernstein and Ammons embrace 'indeterminacy' as a theme in their poetry but, with the ascendency of literary theory in the late 20th century, it is Bernstein's style of 'indeterminacy' that is more representative of postmodern poetry.

In 'Corsons Inlet', a poem which will be looked at in some detail in the next section of this chapter, Ammons documents his experience walking around the titular Corsons Inlet. Ammons attempts to describes the layout of his surroundings in the poem but he declares 'I have reached no conclusions, have erected no boundaries […] I have drawn no lines'.[198] Epstein argues of these lines that '[t]here are few places in postwar poetry where the rejection of closure is expressed so directly, even didactically'.[199] Ammons continues this commitment to a 'rejection of closure' in *Garbage*. The aforementioned spontaneous and self-reflexive comments in the poem are testament to this as they highlight the extent to which the poem is being made up as it goes along. The poem digresses from subject to subject from its opening section. Indeed, over the five pages of the poem's opening section, Ammons describes the nagging voice inside of him compelling him to write a poem, moves on to the descriptions of the affordability and nutritional value of 'soy flakes' (p. 14), contemplates his contentedness with his modest but secure financial situation, muses about the value of 'elegance', 'simplicity', and 'moderation' (p. 15), and ends on a note of uncertainty and worry with the poet pondering the anxiety that stems from concerns over 'the | lives of those we love' (p. 16). The poem continues in this way by digressing through subjects as diverse as death, sex, the perils of being a 'blabbermouth' (p. 78), the possibilities for finding meaning in a world without absolute meaning, and, of

[198] A.R. Ammons, 'Corsons Inlet', in *A.R. Ammons: The Selected Poems* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), pp. 43-46 (p. 44).

[199] *Attention Equals Life,* p. 125.

course, waste management. As one might expect given the variety of these subjects, Ammons' tone often changes from flippant to melancholy to philosophical in the space of a section. Moreover, Ammons self-deprecatingly acknowledges when one of his tangents feels laboured. Midway through the poem's ninth section, for instance, the poet follows his description of local cats attempting to kill a rabbit and successfully killing a chipmunk by admitting that he is 'running too many | threads and dropping too many stitches in this | weaving' (p. 60). Similarly, after eccentrically reflecting on a 'wish' that 'neanderthals were | still here' on the basis that they could form 'a nest | of workers down in the basement, sturdy little | whippersnappers to run errands', Ammons perhaps unsurprisingly admits 'I | think I'm at the crux right now: I can hardly think | or think of hardly a thing to say' (p. 65). The poem is thus indeterminate in the sense that its author appears to have little plan for how its ideas are going to be articulated or even what ideas the poem will express. The poem is thus, in Hoover's words, in 'a state of unrest or undecidability' because the direction of the poem emerges in the moment of composition. Furthermore, whilst *Garbage* certainly has some core themes such as death, environmental degradation, and the purpose of poetry, these ideas are articulated through impassioned tangents rather than neatly structured arguments.

When establishing Hoover's second criterion for the postmodern poem, I suggested that when Hoover states that poets throughout the postmodern era have challenged 'mainstream ideology', he is referring to the way that poets through this era confronted the normative cultural ideals and ideas of their day. However, there is much to suggest in Hoover's 'Introduction' that, by 1994, the ascendency of literary theory in American poetry meant that the archetypal postmodern poet was responding to a more theoretical idea of 'ideology'. Hoover acknowledges, for instance, that '[b]y the late 1970s, a new generation of postmodernists had either challenged a speech-based poetics by means of language poetry or extended spoken poetry into performance poetry' (p. xxvi). This questioning of 'speech-based poetics' sheds some light on a claim which Hoover makes shortly afterwards that '[p]ostmodernism decenters authority and embraces pluralism. It encourages a "panoptic" or many-sided point of view. Postmodernism prefers "empty" words to the "transcendental signified," the actual to the metaphysical' (p. xxvii). Hoover's reference to the notion of the 'transcendental signified' and '"empty" words' highlights the extent to which poststructuralist theory had influenced postmodern poetry by the time of the anthology's publication. As was shown in the previous chapter, post-structuralist philosophers like Derrida argue that

without a 'transcendental signified' guaranteeing meaning in our systems of signification, we cannot claim to be fully 'present' in language. In the climate of poststructuralist theory such as this, poets like Bernstein used poetry to cast aspersions on the lyric 'I' of 'speech-based poetics' by showing how language inevitably mediates intended meaning.

This is not to say that all of the poets in Hoover's anthology from the late 1970s onwards are all as focused on the discourse surrounding the materiality of language as Bernstein. However, Hoover's description of the way Language poetry changed postmodern poetry in this period suggests that he would concur with McGann's claim that '[t]he difference between pre- and post- 1973 American poetry lies in the extremity of the ideological gap which separates the traditionalists from the innovators in the post-1973 period'.[200] By the time Hoover published his anthology, the archetypal postmodern poet exhibited a tendency to explore the ways in which our perceptions of reality are shaped by a number of exterior forces and, furthermore, how these forces affect the way we understand and express ourselves as individuals. To return to the issue of 'indeterminacy' as a postmodern theme, in a more theoretical era of postmodernism poets became highly conscious of the 'indeterminacy' of self-expression as an enterprise.

Kevin McGuirk acknowledges that Ammons' credentials as a postmodernist have suffered due to the influence of theory. McGuirk suggests that Ammons' 'celebrity of the '70s identified him with an early postmodernism that seems safely humanistic compared to subsequent developments in both the theory and practice of the postmodern'.[201] The implications of such 'developments' in postmodernism for Ammons can be clarified by considering how the Beats' commitment to 'spontaneous composition' became somewhat outdated as a postmodern style. Allen Ginsberg describes this method of composition as requiring 'an absolute, almost Zen-like, complete absorption, *attention* to your own consciousness' (p. xxx). Whilst this documenting of 'consciousness' would have been radical in its time due to the way it foregrounded 'poetry-as-process', such claims about the possibility of unmediated expression of consciousness came under scrutiny in the age of literary theory. Whilst

[200] McGann, p. 627.

[201] Kevin McGuirk, 'A.R. Ammons and "the only terrible health" of Poetics', *Postmodern Culture*, 9.1 (1998), in *Project Muse* database <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/27679> [accessed 18 July 2018]

Ammons' criticism of 'hackers' like Lowell was cited as evidence of his opposition to the 'centrist values of unity' earlier in this chapter, his stable narratorial, authoritative tone suggests that he sees his poetry as fully expressing a unified self. This is evident in the fact that whilst Ammons' penchant for self-correction, tangent, and repetition in *Garbage* makes certain passages quite dense, a coherent point or idea invariably emerges after repeat readings. One example of such a passage comes in the following lines in which Ammons asserts his materialist philosophy:

> the new's an angle of emphasis on the old:
> new religions are surfaces, beliefs the shadows
>
> of images trying to construe what needs no
> belief: only born die, and if something is
>
> born or new, then that is not it, that is not
> the it: the it is the indifference of all the
>
> differences, the nothingness of all the poised
> somethings, the finest issue of energy in which
>
> boulders and dead stars float; for what
> if it were otherwise and the it turned out to
>
> be *something*, damning and demanding, strict and
> fierce, preventing and seizing: what range of
>
> choice would be given up then and what value
> could our partial, remnant choices acquire then [202]

The two repeated words that muddy the waters in this passage are 'it' and 'something'. In this excerpt, Ammons iterates his materialist philosophy by voicing his wariness of the idea that anything invented or born can provide an explanation for that which precedes it. Ammons explains that 'new religions', new 'beliefs' are, like anything new,

[202] *Garbage*, p. 27.

'an angle of emphasis on the old'. The truth of the matter, for Ammons, is that there is no reason or truth behind existence and, moreover, to believe in no reason requires no 'belief'.

At this point we can begin to unpick the confusing usages of the pronoun 'it' in this passage. In terms of working out what the pronoun 'it' is standing in for in this excerpted passage, we might first consider how the 'somethings' that are 'born or new', the 'somethings' that Ammons says are not 'it', might claim to be 'it' in the first place. Given that Ammons has been talking about 'religions' being an 'emphasis on the old' and making 'beliefs' out of the fact of there being nothing to believe in, one could interpret the 'it' as being the case, the truth, in the same sense that one confirms a statement with the phrase 'that's it'. Indeed, this interpretation of the 'it' would be supported by the fact that the pronoun 'it', as per the *OED*, stands in for something else, usually something 'previously mentioned, implies, or easily identified', but in this case, with nothing in *Garbage* directing us towards the 'identity' of this 'it', the pronoun can be considered to stand in for something that 'is' but whose 'isness' is unknown.[203] Furthermore, when Ammons follows up his assertion that the 'born or new' cannot be 'it' with the clarification 'that is not the it', the definite article would suggest that the 'it' being contested is the fundamental something, in postmodern parlance, the 'transcendental signified' from which all the somethings in the universe emerge.

Ammons states that the 'it', the thing that is constitutive of thingness in the universe, is in fact 'the indifference of all the differences, the nothingness of all the poised somethings'. In other words, it is the absence of an 'it', the absence of a 'transcendental signified' constituting order and meaning on the world, that allows for 'somethingness', as 'indifferent difference' becomes the source from which disparate objects become 'something'. Indeed, Ammons notes that a world in which meaning is constituted negatively through 'indifferent difference' is preferable to a world in which meaning is constituted through positive delimitation as it allows for a greater 'range of | choice' in the finding of meaning in the world. 'Itness', then, for Ammons, is something constituted by the absolute absence of a transcendental constitutive source rather than something constituted through the presence of a transcendental constitutive force.

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[203] 'it, pron., adj., and n.1' <http://www.oed.com.ueaezproxy.uea.ac.uk:2048/view/Entry/100246?result=2&rskey=rjhvdg&> [accessed 30 July 2018]

This passage is like a tricky knot which requires patience, close attention, and analysis in order to be unravelled but which, ultimately, is able to be straightened out. Ammons may put his reader through their paces in this passage but there is an intriguing and clear argument to be found at the end of this puzzle. This point can be clarified by considering a contrast Ward establishes in his essay 'Ashbery and Influence' between John Ashbery and Craig Raine, a poet whose work also provides his reader with certain riddles. Ward opens his essay by describing the confused response of British critics to John Ashbery's poetry. One such critic, Gavin Ewart, Ward explains, complains that Ashbery sets up certain questions in his poetry but then gives '[n]o answer'. On the basis of such British 'puzzlement' at Ashbery's ambiguous poems, Ward contrasts Ashbery with Raine, a poet whose 'allegedly daring and innovative use of metaphor disguises only superficially a process very like that of the crossword puzzle: a definite answer exists, and the game is to find it'. Overall, Ammons is not a similar poet to Raine, whose 'wit and ingenious use of metaphor', according to Ward, belies the fact that these 'crossword puzzles' have much in common with 'the essentially soluble and disposable nature of media discourse in that very ingenuity'.[204] Ammons hopes that the process of decipherment in the denser passages of *Garbage* makes the reader assimilate a particular message in a deeper way and, in this sense, the 'puzzle' aspect of his poetry differs from Raine, whose metaphors are, at least in Ward's view, enjoyable but short-lived distractions. However, as in Raine's poetry, the above excerpt from *Garbage* shows how Ammons provides puzzles in his poetry but ultimately directs his reader to a coherent point. We might also notice on this front that, in terms of producing a poetry which does or does not provide 'answer[s]', Bernstein is the Ashbery to Ammons' Raine. It is easy to see how this is true for perplexing Bernstein poems such as 'Standing Target' and 'Dodgem', but it also holds for more syntactically coherent writings such as 'Of Time and the Line' and 'Artifice of Absorption'. In the former piece, Bernstein foregrounds how words evade our attempts to apply categorical definitions to them, showing, in other words, how the meanings of a piece of writing fluctuate depending on context. Similarly, whilst in the previous chapter I performed a close reading of the first page of 'Artifice of Absorption' in order to clarify Bernstein's position on meaning in language, an objective of that chapter was to show how the essay refuses to give its reader a comprehensive overview of its key

[204] Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 83-84.

terms and, instead, relishes the fact that terms such as 'artifice' and 'absorption' swell with meaning as the essay attempts to clarify them. Whilst Bernstein and Ammons are allied in challenging the heightened sentimentality of traditional lyric poetry, their different approaches to the stability of self-expression and meaning in their texts highlight the extent to which Ammons would, by the measure of poets like Bernstein, be considered to reinforce, to some degree, 'centrist values of unity'.

The Postmodern and the Pragmatic

The crucial difference between Ammons and Bernstein can be clarified by returning to the former's assertion that he avoids using traditional poetic forms in order to '[trip] the regular world' and '[throw] the Western mind itself somehow off'. Whilst both poets subscribe to the view that poetic form can perform an ideological function, Ammons implies in these lines that the rejection of such a filter for expression is commensurate with a rejection of ideology entirely. In other words, Ammons and Bernstein are divided in the sense that the latter argues that self-expression is inevitably ideologically mediated, and that a poem which acknowledges this conflict is therefore to be lauded, whereas the former believes that one can escape the ideological mediation of the self in poetry by abandoning traditional forms.

This point of divergence between the two poets clarifies Hoover's choice not to include Ammons in his anthology of postmodern poets. Whilst, on the basis of the analysis carried out in this section, one could certainly argue that an earlier Ammons poem such as 'Corsons Inlet' would not be out of place in Hoover's anthology, the decision to exclude Ammons' work from the 1970s onwards is justified due to the significant influence literary theory exerted on postmodernism. As was emphasised in the introduction, critics argue that Language poetry was pivotal in renewing American avant-garde poetry's sense of relevance and purpose at a time when continental theory was challenging and inspiring intellectuals. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the work of a poet like Bernstein, in drawing out the implications of literary theory for poetry, has had a lasting effect in illuminating the fruitful overlaps which exist between continental philosophy and literature. In the second edition of *Postmodern American Poetry* (2013), Hoover largely sticks to his original description of the history of postmodern poetry between 1945 and the early 1990s; his criteria for postmodern poetry do not change and neither does his decision not to include Ammons in the anthology. Critics such as Cushman and Epstein might object to this, but Hoover's decision is justified if such regulation around the term 'postmodern', when applied to

poetry at least, helps draw attention to a body of poetry which engaged postmodern ideas in such intriguing ways in the early 1990s.

However, whilst Ammons may not be a postmodernist, he is an experimental poet whose work integrates innovative twentieth century philosophy with sophistication and insight. This element of his work is yet to be fully appreciated. Defenders of Ammons' credentials as an experimental poet have suggested that Harold Bloom's championing of Ammons, and his work connecting Ammons' work to a transcendentalist lineage, has led to an underappreciation of the more avant-garde elements of his poetry. Cushman argues that 'partisans of the Emersonian lineage Bloom claims for Ammons' will welcome his exclusion from the *Postmodern American Poetry* anthology on the basis that 'his work identifies itself too fully with the sublime tradition of the transcendental signified to keep such disreputable company'.[205] Perloff also acknowledges the extent to which Bloom shaped the reception of Ammons' poetry when she describes how Bloom has been 'one of his most passionate advocates and [placed] him firmly in the "visionary company" of Emerson, Whitman, and Stevens, a visionary company that excluded Williams, as it excluded Pound and Eliot'.[206] Cushman and Perloff are arguing that Bloom, in presenting Ammons as a 'visionary' who indulges in notions of the 'sublime', has aligned the poet with the transcendentalist philosophy exemplified in Emerson's 'Nature'.

In the next section of the chapter, I will challenge this view of Ammons as a transcendentalist by clarifying the pragmatic element of the epistemological position he stakes out in *Garbage*. As was established in the introduction, critics such as Epstein, Macgee, and Poirier have drawn attention to the sceptical side of Emerson's philosophy and shown how, in many essays, the philosopher takes the pragmatic view that in a world whose workings and processes are beyond human intelligence, we must strive to constantly refresh our perceptions of reality in order to stay attuned with a fluctuating environment. In the remainder of this chapter I will draw out this pragmatic side of *Garbage* by analysing areas of compatibility between Ammons' approach to meaning in language and the pragmatic philosophy of James, Rorty, and most importantly, Emerson. Ultimately, I aim to show how, in channelling Emersonian pragmatism, Ammons presents the writing and reading of poetry as a means of re-

[205] Cushman, p. 261.

[206] Perloff, 'Whose New American Poetry?', p. 117.

working language and, subsequently, helping humans deal with a world which is unknowable in the absolute.

Section Two

'Tomorrow a New Walk is a New Walk'

Epstein has convincingly argued in multiple essays that Ammons should be considered part of the lineage of pragmatic American poets and his analysis of 'Corsons Inlet' is especially helpful for clarifying elements of Ammons' pragmatic epistemological outlook. Epstein argues that the Jamesian influence on this poem is evident in Ammons' recognition that, when faced with 'the mind-bogglingly complex systems, patterns, and swarming particulars of the nonhuman world', one 'must, in pragmatist fashion, move forward tentatively, viewing all ideas as provisional, all situations as contingent, ready to adjust to new configurations of an everchanging reality'.[207] As was argued in the introduction, a key appeal of pragmatism is that it recognises the human limitations of knowledge and subsequently outlines a procedure for generating ideas about reality which humans can live by in order to better deal with their experiences in the world. It is on this basis that Epstein reads 'Corsons Inlet' as being a pragmatic poem philosophically.

In documenting his walk around Corsons Inlet, Ammons acknowledges the limits of perception by emphasising that we are unable to fully comprehend the structures of the natural world or, in his words, that 'Overall is beyond me: is the sum of these events | I cannot draw, the ledger I cannot keep'.[208] Ammons is explaining in these lines that he is unable to completely fully comprehend (far less communicate) the intricate structure and processes of this environment. Crucially, in terms of Ammons' pragmatist credentials, the poet confesses to finding these limitations freeing:

[207] *Attention Equals Life,* p. 125.

[208] 'Corsons Inlet', p. 44.

the walk liberating, I was released from forms,
from the perpendiculars,
straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds
of thought
into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends
of sight:

I allow myself eddies of meaning:
yield to a direction of significance
running
like a stream through the geography of my work:
you can find
in my sayings
swerves of action
like the inlet's cutting edge [209]

Ammons feels relieved to be freed from the rigid orders which humans apply to the world and which render them inattentive to the intricacies of ecosystems by locking them into 'binds | of thought'. The poet chooses to enjoy the nuanced way the composite parts of the landscape are stitched together through different 'hues' and 'shadings'. In this way, Ammons shows how the sharp, clear-cut lines of categorisation humans attempt to apply to the world, such as 'straight lines','blocks', and 'boxes', fall short of capturing the intricate, sophisticated structures of environments such as this inlet. In recognising this fact, Ammons understands the limitations of human perception and thus surrenders a degree of authority as a documentarian of the landscape. Subsequently, rather than attempting to dominate the landscape by uncovering some kind of essential, comprehensive order in his surroundings, Ammons allows the landscape to lead him by following its 'flowing bends and blends of sight' and 'yield[ing] to a direction of significance'.

Even if Ammons presents himself as being unable to fully comprehend his surroundings in the poem, he evidently still finds affirmation, 'meaning', and 'significance' in his poetic plotting of the relationship between word and world. 'Overall' might be 'beyond' the poet but he feels able to convey certain aspects of the

[209] 'Corsons Inlet', p. 43.

inlet by channelling 'eddies of meaning' and producing 'sayings' which provide 'swerves of action | like the inlet's cutting edge'. However, Ammons emphasises that even these learnings about this environment are only provisionally relevant when he proclaims in the poem's closing lines that 'there is no finality of vision, | that I have perceived nothing completely | that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk'[210]. Here Ammons again acknowledges that he is unable to fully comprehend and understand this landscape while also pointing out that, because the natural world is in a constant state of flux, he will be confronted by a new experience if he takes a walk along the same course tomorrow and, subsequently, his experience would yield a different poetic documentary if he were to write one.

It is because of the way 'Corsons Inlet' emphasises the challenges humans face in, firstly, comprehending their environment and, secondly, keeping track of a constantly changing natural world, that Epstein describes the poem as Ammons' 'purest articulation of his pragmatist suspicion of absolutes, closed systems, and totalizing narratives'.[211] However, it is Ammons' enthusiasm for finding 'eddies of meaning' in spite of these limitations that truly mark him out as a pragmatist. The closing line of the poem is not lamenting but celebrating the fact that 'tomorrow a new walk is a new walk' and Ammons' findings throughout the poem spur him on to commit to an ongoing investigation of the world. Epstein remarks of this line:

> I take that final line, probably Ammons's most famous statement, to be a particularly pithy expression of a central theme at the heart of the poetics of everyday life: the notion that each day, each ordinary event and moment, is filled with value, is charged with so much meaning that our attempts to represent and master it are doomed to fail.[212]

The introduction explained that many critics have seen pragmatism as a middle ground between the naivety of foundationalism and the nihilism of more extreme forms of scepticism. In this sense, Epstein neatly captures the pragmatic quality of 'Corsons Inlet' in these lines by observing Ammons' enthusiasm for finding possibilities for meaning in nature, even if such an enterprise only provides limited insights into reality.

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[210] 'Corsons Inlet', p. 46.

[211] *Attention Equals Life*, p. 124.

[212] *Attention Equals Life*, p. 125.

To refer again to Putnam's argument regarding the 'unique insight of pragmatism', Ammons is a pragmatic poet in the sense that he provides a fallibilistic warning that 'tomorrow a new walk is a new walk' whilst at the same time showing in an 'anti-skeptical' manner how cathartic it can be to find 'eddies of meaning' in nature.[213] As was established in the introduction's summary of *Poetry and Pragmatism*, Poirier states that Frost saw the gap between world and word as 'an invitation simply to get moving, to make a transition' in order to prevent this gap from becoming an 'abyss'. One can sympathise with Epstein's frustration with the way that Ammons' 'abundant connections to pragmatist thinking and poetics have been strangely overlooked' given that Ammons wholeheartedly views this gap as an 'invitation […] to get moving' in 'Corsons Inlet'.[214]

'Big Meaning': Ammons' Pragmatic Epistemological Outlook

In *Garbage*, Ammons utilises the long poem format to flesh out the pragmatic ideas articulated in 'Corsons Inlet'. In the poem's fourteenth section, for instance, Ammons launches an impassioned defence of meaning in a postmodern age. It is, the poet proclaims, 'fashionable now to mean nothing, not to exist, | because meaning doesn't hold, and we do not exist | forever' (p. 88). Ammons' acknowledgement that 'meaning doesn't hold' because 'we do not exist | forever' reflects his argument that there is no divine force in the universe imbuing and stabilising our systems of signification with meaning. This view of Ammons' was introduced in the previous section through the analysis of a passage in which Ammons argues that there is no positive force structuring meaning in the universe. Instead, Ammons argues that our possibilities for meaning stem from the 'indifference of all the | differences, the nothingness of all the poised | somethings, the finest issue of energy in which | boulders and dead stars float' (p. 27). These lines speak to Ammons' materialist philosophy which, as will be shown by the end of this chapter, is a crucial influence in turning him towards an Emersonian form of poetic work. Paul K. Moser and J.D. Trout define materialism as 'a general view about what actually exists. Put bluntly, the view is just this: Everything that actually

[213] Putnam, p. 152.

[214] Poirier, p. 149.

exists is material, or physical'.[215] David Armstrong supports this definition by stating that materialism is primarily the 'view that the world contains nothing but the entities recognized by physics', that 'everything there is is wholly constituted by […] connections and arrangements' between entities such as 'molecule, atom, fundamental particle and so on'.[216] Bringing these two ideas together, Zina O'Leary argues that, for the materialist, 'only material things (things that actually exist in time and space) are real, and that everything else, including thoughts, feelings, and mental states, can be explained as the result of material interactions'.[217]

It is on the basis of Ammons' adherence to materialism that he makes the following assertion in the fourth section of the poem:

> scientists plunge into matter looking for the
> matter but the matter lessens and, looked too
>
> far into, expands away: it was insubstantial all
> along; that is, boulders bestir; they
>
> are 'alive' with motion and space [218]

Ammons suggests in these lines that scientists carry out a fruitless pursuit when, in a study of matter, they attempt to find some deeper truth beyond the fact of matter itself. If, as O'Leary argues, materialists see everything in existence as physical matter and argue that changes in forms of matter are catalysed by 'material interactions', we can see how Ammons' claim that the 'bestirring boulders are '"alive" with motion and space' links into the poet's perception of a 'materialistic notion of the | spindle of energy' (p. 25). Indeed, these lines reinforce Ammons' claim that the 'itness' of all

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[215] Paul K. Moser and J.D. Trout, 'General Introduction: Contemporary Materialism', in *Contemporary Materialism: A Reader*, ed. by Paul K. Moser and J.D. Trout (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1-34 (p. 1).

[216] David Armstrong, 'Naturalism, Materialism, and First Philosophy', *Contemporary Materialism*, p. 40.

[217] Zina O'Leary, 'Materialism', in *The Social Science Jargon-Buster*, (London: Sage Publications, 2007), pp. 156-157 (p. 156).

[218] *Garbage,* p. 30.

things in the universe comes from the ultimate 'indifference of all the | differences, the nothingness of all the poised | somethings, the finest issue of energy in which | boulders and dead stars float'. For Ammons, there is no greater truth to the universe than the existence of matter which is transfigured through material interactions in time and space.

From this view, there is no purpose or absolute meaning to existence in the world. Instead, what allows for meaning in the world is, using Armstrong's words, the changing 'connections and arrangements' of objects. It is the absence of a constitutive 'it' in the universe that leads Ammons in the fourth section to deny the existence of 'Big Meaning', which is 'meaning which could direct, | delimit, interfere' (p. 85). Ammons thus argues that 'meaning doesn't hold' because 'we do not exist | forever' on the basis that if there is no absolute or 'Big' meaning in the world (p. 88), then the values and truths humans live by will exist only as long as they exist. In other words, when humans expire as a species, all the meanings they project on to the world will die with them.

As in 'Corsons Inlet', however, Ammons urges us not to underestimate the power of meaning in a world free of 'Big Meaning'. Indeed, he ponders how 'meaninglessness is | a funny category' in the sense that the notion of 'meaninglessness missing meaning', like the notion of 'vacancy still empty', suggests not that meaning is impossible but merely that there is 'not meaning yet' (p. 86). There is, Ammons detects, a certain freedom to this predicament. If humans were able to grasp absolute meaning it would 'direct' and 'delimit' our interpretations of the world, but in a world devoid of 'Big Meaning' the possibilities for interpreting the world are open-ended. It is for this reason that Ammons suggests that 'there is truly *only* meaning, […] meaninglessness becomes what to make of so many | meanings' (p. 86). In this way, this section of *Garbage* further demonstrates Ammons' symptomatically pragmatic epistemological outlook. In acknowledging the absence of 'Big Meaning' Ammons exhibits a fallibilistic awareness of the inescapable gap between humans and reality, and between word and world, but his sense of the overwhelming meaningfulness of life and his optimism at finding different possibilities for a meaningful relationship with reality highlights his refusal to resort to a sceptical position.

Language as a Tool for 'Fending in the World'

Ammons performs his defence of meaning because he sees an inherent danger in the notion that humans are alienated from their environments due to their limited ability to know reality. Due to the fact that there is no transcendental meaning to human

existence on earth, Ammons argues that 'life […] if it is to have | meaning, must be made meaningful' (p. 67) and, in this way, he echoes James' argument that '[m]an engenders truth upon [the world]'. However, on the basis of Ammons' critique of the damage humans are inflicting upon the environment, it would seem that the poet also supports James' caveat to this point that '[n]o one can deny that such a role would add both to our dignity and to our responsibility as thinkers'.[219] James' point is that if there is always an element of interpretation in the human perception of reality, we must be very careful as to what interpretations we abide by and, more importantly, which we act on. For his part, Ammons is particularly concerned about the way the modern world's sense of a gap between humans and non-human nature is having very damaging repercussions for the environment.

At several points in *Garbage*, Ammons observes that a pervasive, dangerous cultural disconnection has emerged between humans and their environments. As evidence of this ideological blindness, Ammons cites his disappointing experience researching in the library in which he 'punched | out Garbage at the library and four titles | swept the screen' with 'only one, Garbage Feed, | seeming worth going on to; and that was about | feeding swine'. Ammons then remarks that despite all the 'titles, row on row, of western goodies' there was not 'a word on Disposal' (p. 49). These lines suggest that the West has accumulated a vast amount of resources for learning about the world and yet the fact that Ammons cannot find any information about waste management suggests that there is a dangerous blind spot in the modern understanding of the world. Ammons revisits this point in depth in the twelfth section of the poem when he laments the fact that humans have attained 'networks of words | intricate as the realities they represent' (p. 74). The words that humans have at their disposal are thus similar, by this view, to the resources available to Ammons in the library in the sense that they exist in abundance and yet seem to have distanced people from their environments rather than helped them better understand the world. This point is reinforced when Ammons writes that 'since words were | introduced here things have gone poorly for the | planet: it's been between words and rivers, | surface-mining words and hilltops, cuneiform | record in priestly piles' (p. 74). Evidently, Ammons thinks that whilst language has become more sophisticated, it has been used to invent its own world rather than getting humans closer to their environments. Moreover, Ammons predicts that living in this invented world of words will set humans

[219] James, p. 112.

on course for a future where 'words have | driven the sludge in billows higher than our | heads' and speculates that humans might even have to leave the planet (pp. 75-76).

Ultimately for Ammons, this dangerous world-building tendency which manifests itself in language reflects a modern desire 'to kick the *l* out of the wor*l*d and cuddle | up with the avenues and byways of the word' (p. 77). Ammons attributes the modern inattentiveness to the environment as stemming from what he perceives to be the arrogance of the idea that humans are alienated from non-human nature through language. Indeed, in a section which explores the similarities between human and other species' communicative faculties, Ammons angrily urges that we 'have some respect for other speakers of being and | for god's sake drop all this crap about words, | singularity, and dominion' (p. 50). The poet suggests that 'words are a specialization on sound | making a kind of language: but there are many | not just languages but kinds of language' (p. 49) and then proceeds to explain how various species communicate through such 'specialization[s] on sound' and thus possess their own 'languages'. The blue jay, for instance, is said by the poet to possess an 'extensive vocabulary' which 'signals states | of feeling or being -- alarm, exasperation, | feeding, idleness' (p. 50). Likewise, Ammons cites 'whales' pod-songs' as involving a language which 'keep intimate | transactions fluid' (p. 50) and he even claims to be able to 'tell the weather' from the way 'our cousins the birds talk in the morning' (p. 51). Significantly, Ammons focuses in such examples on the way these languages are set to practical purposes by these animals. Ammons reinforces this point about the value and success of language use being determined by its ability to produce some kind of reaction in another being when he writes that 'the words do for us what other | languages do for others -- they warn, inform, | reassure, compare, present: we may be alone in | words but we are not singular in language' (p. 50). Building on this idea, Ammons writes that 'words are a way of fending in the world' (pp. 50-51), meaning that the purpose of language, in his mind, is not necessarily to represent the world, but rather to help us forge a fruitful relationship with our environment and the other animals which populate it.

In this way, Ammons adopts an approach to language which resonates with Rorty's sense of language being a tool which helps humans adapt to the demands of life rather than a means of representing reality. The introduction explained that Rorty has built on the anti-foundationalist side of James' philosophy in his brand of neopragmatism. Rorty's pragmatist attempts to 'break with […] the Cartesian-Lockean picture of a mind seeking to get in touch with a reality outside of itself' and, instead, 'start[s] with a Darwinian account of human beings as animals doing their best to cope

with their environment -- doing their best to develop tools which will enable them to enjoy more pleasure and less pain'. 'Words, Rorty adds, 'are among the tools which these clever animals have developed' and he argues that we should 'see the employment of words as the use of tools to deal with the environment rather than as an attempt to represent the intrinsic nature of that environment'.[220] In stating that 'words are a way of fending in the world', Ammons is making a remarkably similar point to Rorty about how the purpose of human language, just like the languages of other species, is to help us navigate our experience in the world. Moreover, Rorty's critique of attempts to 'represent [in language] the intrinsic nature of that environment' is relevant to Ammons' critique of the world-building tendency that Ammons identifies in modern language use. As is suggested by Ammons' reference to the existence of 'networks of words | intricate as the realities they represent', the poet believes that a great number of environmental problems stem from human attempts to reflect the world in language. Ammons does not discourage the use of language to apply order to the world, in fact he commends the ability of 'art' to '[make] shape, order, meaning, | purpose where there was none, or none discernible' (p. 67). Indeed, 'Corsons Inlet' provides an example of such 'art' in the sense that Ammons documents the 'shape' and 'order' of his surroundings, whilst at the same time acknowledging the limits of his documentary. However, the combination of Ammons' argument that language's ultimate purpose is to help animals '[fend] in the world' and his dejection at the complex worldview embedded in modern language emphasises that we must be attentive to the repercussions that follow from our applications of 'shape, order, meaning' to the world.

The Sanctification of Garbage

The remainder of this section will focus on how Ammons sees the poetic use of words as having the potential to help humans better '[fend] in the world'. Rorty argues that due to the tool theory of language we should think of words as 'nodes in the causal network which binds the organism together with its environment'.[221] By making this argument, Rorty is reinforcing his point that though words cannot represent an external reality, they can be used in such a way as to help us become better connected to the 'causal network' of our environment. This is another Rorty argument which is

[220] *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 20.

[221] *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 20.

highly relevant to *Garbage* due to the detailed picture of a 'causal network' that the poem paints and, moreover, Ammons sees poetic writing as a use of words which does indeed help humans connect to the 'causal network' he envisages.

In order to explain how Ammons sees poetry as integrating humans within a 'causal network', it is of course first necessary to clarify what exactly this 'network' consists of for Ammons. Having clarified Ammons' materialist philosophy, which dictates that everything that has been produced in the world is, in O'Leary's words, 'the result of material interactions', one can see how materialism endorses the idea of a 'causal network'. However, it is important to note how Emerson's influence on Ammons intersects with his materialist philosophy. As was argued in the introduction, Emerson argues that we must be ready to constantly re-assess our conceptions of the world in order stay in touch with nature, which is in a perpetual state of flux. This point about the importance of staying attentive to the moment is reiterated in the following lines of 'Experience':

> All good conversation, manners, and action, come from a spontaneity which forgets usages, and makes the moment great. Nature hates calculators; her methods are saltatory and impulsive. Man lives by pulses; our organic movements are such; and the chemical ethereal agents are undulatory and alternate; and the mind goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits.[222]

In keeping with the instruction of 'Self-Reliance' that one should be prepared to '[t]rust thyself' over accepted social truths in the pursuit of real truth, Emerson argues in this passage that 'the mind' 'prospers' through a 'spontaneous' attentiveness to the moment rather than through established knowledge.[223] Additionally, it would seem that the 'prosperity' of the 'mind', at least in this passage, is not necessarily achieved through an increased knowledge of the world in a scientific sense, but rather through the formation of a more natural and harmonious relationship between world and mind, one in which a person's movements become more 'organic' by mirroring the 'saltatory' and 'impulsive' patterns of nature in their patterns of thought.

The idea that one can establish a more nourishing and harmonious relationship with nature by respecting the provisionality of thought is reinforced later in the essay

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[222] 'Experience', p. 226.

[223] 'Self-Reliance', p. 132.

when Emerson cites Mencius' claim to 'fully understand language […] and nourish well my vast-flowing vigor'. Explaining this notion of 'vigor', Mencius explains '[t]his vigor is supremely great, and in the highest degree unbending. Nourish it correctly and do it no injury and it will fill up the vacancy between heaven and earth'. Supporting Mencius' concept of 'vigor', Emerson writes '[s]uffice it for the joy of the universe, that we have not arrived at a wall, but at interminable oceans. Our life seems not present, so much as prospective; not for the affairs on which it is wasted, but as a hint of this vast-flowing vigor'.[224] In these lines Emerson embraces the idea of 'vigor' as an omnipresent, eternal, and ongoing current that humans should attempt to channel in order to participate in 'the joy of the universe'. Once again, then, these lines find Emerson arguing that because nature exists in a state of metamorphosis, human thought and the language in which it is articulated must metamorphise in order to stay attuned to nature.

The connection between the Emersonian and materialist philosophy is that both emphasise that the world is in a constant state of metamorphosis but Emerson specifically adds two key ideas to Ammons' perception of a fluctuating universe. Firstly, Emerson's assertion that an essential current of 'vigor' flows through the universe brings a sense of spirituality to the more scientific materialist position Ammons adopts in *Garbage*. The central image of *Garbage,* the garbage dump, is a monument to the wonders of the transfiguration of energy and Ammons' celebration of the dump is, symbolically, an Emersonian celebration of the current of energy running throughout the universe. Ammons speculates that if there is a God, God is likely to be 'nothing more than or | as much as energy at large' (p. 54), thus suggesting that energy is the closest thing to a divine power in the universe. It is in this sense that Ammons treats the garbage dump, a place where things are left to decompose and rot, as the gateway to a divine presence. This sense of the spirituality of the garbage dump is most prominent in the first five sections of the poem and in the following lines Ammons sets the scene for his depiction of life on his described dump:

[224] 'Experience', p. 229.

the garbage trucks crawl as if in obeisance,
as if up ziggurats toward the high places gulls

and garbage keep alive, offerings to the gods
of garbage, of retribution, of realistic

expectation, the deities of unpleasant
necessities: refined, young earthworms,

drowned up in macadam pools by spring rains, moisten
out white in a day or so and, round spots,

look like sputum or creamy-rich, broken-up cold
clams
[…] but there on the heights

a small smoke wafts the sacrificial bounty
day and night to layer the sky brown, shut us

in as into a lidded kettle, the everlasting
flame these acres-deep of tendance keep: a

free offering of a crippled plastic chair:
a played-out sports outfit: a hill-myna

print stained with jelly [225]

Ammons presents the dump as a sacred place by describing the way that 'garbage trucks crawl as if in obeisance', with the implication that the trucks are, in awareness of their lowliness in relation to a higher power, humbly 'crawling' as a mark of deference. The comparison of this 'crawl' of 'obeisance' around the dump to the climb of a ziggurat, a temple, adds to this sense of the dump as a sacred area. Moreover, Ammons' description of the trucks' destination as the 'the high places gulls and garbage

[225] *Garbage,* pp. 18-19.

keep alive' suggests that this dump is a temple to a sky deity given that the 'trucks' are moving towards a summit. Ammons describes the 'garbage trucks' as providing 'offerings to the gods of garbage', as if garbage is something of value in this religion's currency. This idea of garbage as an 'offering' to a God is returned to later in the passage when Ammons describes that on 'the heights' of the dump 'a small smoke wafts the sacrificial bounty', with the idea of 'garbage' being a 'sacrifice' again suggesting that this rubbish is something of worth. We might also notice that this excerpt as a whole establishes a hierarchical order that is both literal and metaphorical, with the deferential 'garbage trucks' 'crawling' up the dump's 'ziggurat' from below, whilst the 'smoke' that 'wafts the sacrificial' bounty emerges from the summit of the dump.

This sanctification of the garbage heap is intended to be humorous. Of course, Ammons is aware that there is an irony in his presentation of garbage, which is by definition deemed by society to be worthless, as something of great spiritual value. This is best demonstrated in the excerpt when Ammons follows his grandiose description of the dump's 'sacrificial bounty' housing an 'everlasting flame' with a comedically anti-climactic clarification of the specific objects contained in this ethereal dump after the colon. The objects, including 'a crippled plastic chair' and 'a hill myna print stained with jelly', far from being spiritual, are cheap in many senses of the word; they're deemed to be of no monetary value as is apparent in their being garbage, the chair's brokenness suggests shoddy construction and the insubstantiality of its material, and the kitsch jelly stained print gives the impression of aesthetic cheapness. Moreover, when Ammons describes the non-manmade materials in the garbage dump, for instance, the 'refined, young earthworms' that have been soaked in pools of rain before being dried white in successive days, that matter is presented as being repulsive. In both the case of the dump's worthless manmade objects and its collection of nauseating natural phenomena, Ammons seems to be aware that there is a degree of irony in his description of the garbage dump as a sacred place.

However, as Ammons admits later in *Garbage*, 'when I kid around / I'm trying to get in position to be serious' and this humorous description of the sacred garbage dump expresses a serious message (p. 54). The garbage dump is presented as a sacred site in the poem because the decomposition of a multiplicity of objects in this site attests to the power of the force of the materialistic process by which material interactions catalyse the transference of energy. Indeed, the symbolic resonance of the 'everlasting flame' which is described in the above excerpt as incinerating the garbage is evident when Ammons proclaims two sections later that 'the burning's forever, O

eternal | flame principle of the universe' (p. 31). The 'flame' which heroically incinerates a multitude of waste which has been thoughtlessly produced by humans is, for Ammons, a symbol for the awesome power of the process by which energy is transfigured through different forms of matter. It is, therefore, through this witty but ultimately sincere sanctification of the garbage heap that Ammons attributes a spiritual dimension to the process of energy transfiguration.

The Poetic Processing of Language

Emerson also adds to Ammons' materialist philosophy by arguing that the human mind which 'lives by pulses' in an attempt to mirror the 'saltatory' and 'impulsive' movements of nature can attain a level of synchronicity with the essential 'vigor' of the universe. Moreover, in the following lines of 'The Poet', Emerson proposes that perceptions of reality can be refreshed through language:

> For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin.[226]

For Emerson, the comparison between language and 'limestone' in these lines is justified on the basis that language is 'made up of images, or tropes' which had, at the moment of their 'poetic origin', a degree of life in their 'symbolisation of the world', but which now are 'dead' and 'fossilised'. This links to criticisms that Emerson makes throughout his work in regard to inherited knowledge, such as his complaint in 'Self-Reliance' that '[e]verywhere I am hindered of meeting God in my brother, because he has shut his own temple doors, and recites fables merely of his brother's, or his brother's brother's God'. Such a circumstance is unfortunate, Emerson suggests, because in truth '[e]very new mind is a new classification'.[227] In light of Emerson's instruction that human thought should attempt to synchronise with the fluctuations of

[226] 'The Poet', p. 205.

[227] 'Self-Reliance', p. 146.

nature, it would thus appear that Emerson believes language too should be in a state of metamorphosis, and he suggests that the poet can help catalyse such a process by 're-symbolising' the language.

Ammons also presents poetry as a means of reinvigorating language in *Garbage*. This point is made particularly memorably in lines from the second and penultimate sections of *Garbage* in which Ammons establishes an extended metaphor between the poem and recycling technology:

there is a mound,

too, in the poet's mind dead language is hauled
off to and burned down on, the energy held and

shaped into new turns and clusters, the mind
strengthened by what it strengthens[228]
[…]
poetry is itself like an installation at Marine

Shale: it reaches down into the dead pit
and cool oil of stale recognition and words and

brings up hauls of stringy gook which it arrays
with light and strings and shiny syllables and

gets the mind back into vital relationship with
communication channels[229]

Ammons is comparing poetry to two different types of machinery in these passages. In the first, Ammons suggests that poetry is able to engage language in such a way as to re-energise it in a similar manner to the way an incinerator will catalyse the transference of energy by compacting and burning waste products. The second passage's extension of the poem-recycling metaphor feels particularly indebted to

[228] *Garbage*, p. 20.

[229] *Garbage*, pp. 108-109.

Emerson's notion of the poet enlivening language due to its reference to poetry extracting 'words' from a 'cool oil of stale recognition' and revitalising them. However, what is most significant about this second passage is its suggestion that, in performing this reinvigoration of language, the poet 'gets the mind back into vital relationship with | communication channels'. Given Ammons' argument that the purpose of language is to help animals '[fend] in the world', as well as his frustration with the intricate but environmentally inattentive modern uses of language, one suspects that when Ammons argues that poetry can re-establish a 'vital relationship with | communication channels', he is suggesting that poetry can help us achieve a more harmonious relationship with the environment and its constituents.

Like Emerson, Ammons also believes that this poetic invigoration of language occurs when a poet attends to the moment. The previous section referenced Ammons' disdain for 'hackers' like Lowell who, he feels, inauthentically attempt to heighten the emotions in a poem by, firstly, trying to search for emotionally intense feelings within themselves or trying to seek out situations which might spark intense feelings, and secondly, subjecting their poems to an extensive editing process so as to sharpen the emotional quality of their work. By contrast, the poetic writing Ammons endorses in *Garbage* finds its meanings during the writing process, as is shown in the following lines:

> on writing a poem — you sit vacant and
> relaxed (if possible), your mind wandering
>
> freely, unengaged and in search of focus: you
> may sit this way for several minutes till the
>
> void unsettles you a bit and you become impatient
> with the intrusion of an awareness of yourself
>
> sitting with a touch of unwelcome exasperation
> over a great blank:[230]

[230] *Garbage*, p. 42.

In these lines, Ammons describes how the writing of a poem begins with an uncomfortable clearing of the mind in a bid to achieve some sort of 'focus'. However, the poet who persists in this meditative attention to the moment is eventually rewarded:

but you keep your mind

open and on the move and eventually there is a
trace of feeling like a bit of mist on a backroad

but then it reappears stronger and more central,
still coming and going, so the mind can't

grab it and hold on to it: but the mind begins
to make an effort, to shed from itself all

awareness except that of going with the feeling,
to relax and hold the feeling — the feeling

is a brutal burning, a rich, raw urgency:
the mind knows that it is nothing without the

feeling, so concentrating on the feeling, it
dreams of imminent shapes, emergences, of

clust'ral abundances, of free flow, forms discernible,
material, concrete, shapes on the move,[231]

The poet who keeps her patience is rewarded by a 'trace of feeling' that flows like the current of energy that Ammons perceives as circulating throughout the universe, that 'burns' like the waste items smouldering on the rubbish dump, and subsequently has a generative effect on the poet who is now 'dreaming of imminent shapes'. It is clear that the poetic process that Ammons is outlining does not involve pursuing 'conflict',

[231] *Garbage*, pp. 42-43.

'density', 'brutality', and 'energy', as it does for the 'hacker' poet, but it instead requires the writer to clear their mind of distraction so as to stay focused on, and attentive to, the moment.

According to Ammons, the poet is not only rewarded for her patience and concentration by the 'trace of feeling's' ability to generate 'imminent shapes', but also through an orgasmic kind of release:

> then the mind gives way from its triggering, and
> the mechanisms of necessity fall into, grasping the
>
> upheaval, the action of making; the presence
> of pressure appears, forces open a way, the
>
> intensity heightens, groans of anguish and
> satisfaction break from the depths of the
>
> body, and the sweet dream occurs, the work
> payloads, the fall-away slips through, the body
>
> contracts and returns, ease lengthens through
> the byways, and the mind picks up on the
>
> environment again, turns to the practical
> policing of the scene, restores itself to
>
> normalcy and the objective world, the body hitching
> itself up on the way:[232]

The orgasm metaphor, which is particularly evident in the descriptions of how 'intensity heightens' in 'the action of making' and produces 'groans of anguish', is used here to emphasise the poet's potential for easing some kind of pressure. Furthermore, it would seem that the release offered by the act of poet creation, 'the action of making', helps the mind 'pick up on the environment again'. Ammons' sense of the orgasmic

[232] *Garbage*, p. 43.

quality of poetry brings to mind Bernstein's 'The Klupzy Girl', and its opening lines 'Poetry is like a swoon, with this difference; | it brings you to your senses'.[233] Ammons is claiming that in surrendering to, and becoming enraptured in, the moment, the poet sharpens her 'senses' in relation to her environment, and is subsequently provided a fresh perspective on returning to the 'policing of the scene'. With this in mind, it is likely that when Ammons, in his comparison of the poem to a Marine Shale 'installation', writes that poetry strengthens the writer's 'vital relationship with | communication channels', he is suggesting that the 'communication channels' in question are those that allow animals a heightened sensitivity to their environment.

Ammons thus suggests that by committing to the poetic process he outlines, a poet can achieve a climactic, cathartic moment of reconciliation with her environment. Moreover, it would seem from Ammons' assertion that this reconciliation sharpens 'the practical | policing of the scene' that this process allows the writer a degree of clarification in relation to particular problems or issues. There are numerous sections in *Garbage* in which Ammons works through moments of tension and anxiety. Scigaj observes, for instance, that '[a]s Ammons expatiates on subjects that range from the trivial to the profound, he rarefies and condenses his meditations in ways that mimic Anaximines's [*sic*] understanding of nature's movements', and he cites Ammons' description of his visit to the Lake Cayuga farmers' market as an example (p. 112). The populace of the market are, according to Ammons, 'a little ruffled, like yards | trying to come out of icebound winters into | springs, the old stalks still there', and he picks out specific characters such as a 'wobble-legged man', 'aging | women, drooped breasts under loose T-Shirts', and a range of other 'toothless, big-bellied, bald, broad-rumped' market visitors (p. 112). In light of Ammons' own anxieties and disbelief about his age, and his complaints about his ailments, these descriptions initially seem to provide an example of one of the poem's many melancholic musings. Yet, as Scigaj points out, the poet realises in the process of this description 'that visiting a farmers' market is a ritual sharing and bonding of humanity that renews life. It is humanity "at our best, not killing, scheming, abusing" but renewing life, just as the "huge beech by the water" exfoliates yearly' (p. 112). Scigaj's reading thus argues that it is through the poetic probing and pondering of this experience that Ammons is able to achieve this moment of clarity.

[233] Bernstein, 'The Klupzy Girl', in *Whiskey in Heaven*, pp. 84-89 (p. 84).

As was acknowledged in the previous section, Ammons weaves a variety of different subject matters and tones in and out of the poem. This attests to his commitment to using poetry as a means of making sense in the moment rather than as a means of expressing pre-established ideas or positions. As Vendler observes, the 'unsettling changes (thematic, generic, lexical)' found in Ammons' poetry are intended to 'mimic a universe constituted of continual creations and destructions, to ratify a metaphysics acceding to the necessity of change'.[234] In other words, Ammons' tendency to digress through different subject matters and tones is part of his attempt to attune himself to the fluctuations of the universe.

One of the sections of *Garbage* which best demonstrates how Ammons' commitment to digression yields meaning involves a description of the mixed fortunes of a local cat who Ammons observes hunting local wildlife. The 'tabby' is successful in killing a chipmunk that Ammons had seen 'streaking around [,] plunging into | cement holes by the back steps or into ground | holes by the hydrangea or scrambling into the | crack under the middle post of the garage' (p. 59). Prior to this description, Ammons details the cat's failed attempt to catch a 'sniffy rabbit' who, as 'the tabby dived out for him', evaded his pursuer with 'a few lean spreads of limbs' and 'moved off just far enough away to be | out of range of a cat sprint' (p. 58). After moving on to the story of the chipmunk being killed, and then admitting being 'a little shook up about the chipmunk', who Ammons had witnessed enjoying the 'the sunlight nearly coming in' with 'leisure and pleasure' (pp. 58-60) on the evening previous, Ammons returns to the 'sniffy rabbit':

[234] Vendler, p. 47.

the

rabbit knows that if he doesn't like it here he
can't just go off somewhere else to live: so

he carefully dissolves from panic and nibbles
a sprig of weed, eases into a forward move

and *lives in fear*: not helplessly, but in the
knowledge of his capabilities, his devices, his

bounces and split swerves: and he has young to
beget and young to raise[235]

The rabbit exhibits in these lines a pragmatic (in the general sense of the word) attitude which Ammons endorses throughout the poem. The rabbit is disturbed by the experience but recognises that whilst his survival is threatened by his exposure to the cat, his survival and the survival of his 'young' also depends on him putting himself in the open. In other words, in order to survive the rabbit must at times occupy a middle ground between the safety of the warren and the territory of the preying cat. In this way, Ammons develops an argument which is built throughout the poem about how we must 'deprive ourselves of, renounce, safety to seek | greater safety' (p. 26) in our dealings with the environment. Ammons recognises that there is a safety in society and that, because of life's challenges, one can often 'wake up thrown' (p. 26). There is a tendency, he suggests, to respond to these moments of panic by retreating into the 'structure | of protection, caring, warmth, numbers' (p. 26). However, a few lines later he suggests that 'the safe | world of community, not safe, still needs | feelers sent out to test the environment, to | bring back news or no news' (p. 26). In other words, we might be tempted to retreat into the comfort of society in order to avoid environmental issues, but we jeopardise that society by ignoring non-human nature. Indeed, in light of Ammons' frustration with the modern tendency to build worlds in language, and his sense of the repercussions this has for the environment, one can see how the retreat into society might put that same society in danger.

[235] *Garbage*, p. 60.

This idea about a pragmatic middle ground of survival is specifically applied to the issue of waste management in *Garbage*'s second section, when Ammons suggests that whilst we must confront the issue of waste management and make 'garbage' the 'poem of our time', we should resist 'a temptation | to trashlessness' which is 'too far off, and, | anyway, unimaginable, unrealistic' (p. 18). In other words, Ammons' position on this issue is that his society must discomfort themselves by facing up to the waste management crisis but also, in order to establish a practical solution, recognise the scale of the problem. Ammons would thus have us confront this problem with the cautious pragmatism of the rabbit rather than with the rashness of the chipmunk. Nonetheless, in arguing that 'garbage has to be the poem of our time', Ammons instructs us that action is necessary and that, like the rabbit, whilst we might experience a degree of '*fear*' in addressing the vast waste management problem, it is imperative that we also '[ease] into a forward move' and, in an Emersonian manner, keep sharp by living in 'split swerves' modelled by the rabbit.

Ammons finds several layers of meaning in his experience watching these animals but it is important to stress that, in light of his point about the absence of 'Big Meaning', he is not speaking for the rabbit here. Indeed, Ammons acknowledges that there is a degree of comedy in the way he projects such symbolism into the actions of the rabbit when he follows his explanation of the challenge the rabbit faces by playfully observing that he has to do 'without | benefit of tenure, estate, living rust, term | insurance, or social security' (p. 60). However, in committing to this moment of contemplation, Ammons achieves a moment of clarification on the nature of life. To put this another way, this poetic process allows Ammons to *make* sense of his experiences in the world. I emphasise Ammons' commitment to the *making* of sense here because of the way this word captures the pragmatism at the heart of Ammons' epistemology. Ammons understands that meaning is made by humans, that humans project meanings on to a world which is without absolute meaning, but he also recognises the significance of making sense as an enterprise and how the sense we make of the world will shape the future of our species and all other animals who inhabit the earth. Furthermore, Ammons' rejection of closure throughout the poem, his commitment to developing and transitioning the poem's ideas and arguments rather than refining and settling them, speaks to the poet's ambition to engage with a natural world which is in a constant of metamorphosis.

Conclusions

Ammons' vision for poetry suggests he would agree with Rorty that we should view words as 'nodes in the causal network which binds the organism together with its environment'.[236] In a world in which all life exists due to the circulation of energy through disparate forms of matter, Ammons argues, the poetic revitalisation of words is a way of synchronising human thought with the fluctuations of the universe. Though the respective pragmatisms of James and Emerson are interwoven in *Garbage*, the specific influence of these two philosophers can be drawn out by considering how Ammons perceives the poetic processing of language to integrate him with his environment. There is, on the one hand, a Jamesian empiricism to Ammons' pragmatism in that he endorses poetry as a means of establishing ideas which will help humans '[fend] in the world'. In one sense, then, Ammons subscribes to this poetic process as a means to an end in that he believes poetry can help make sense of the world in a way that is fruitful for humans and their environments. On the other hand, Ammons also suggests that poetry, in participating in the re-energising of language, participates in the circulation of energy throughout the universe and, furthermore, he suggests that this very act sharpens human perception. In other words, the working of language is not just a means to an end -- a means of finding ideas that will help us '[fend] in the world' -- rather the process itself helps us '[fend] in the world' by connecting us to our environment.

In the opening pages of this chapter I stated that I would both attempt to draw some similarities between the influence of Emerson on Ammons' and Bernstein's work and also demonstrate the relevance and sophistication of Ammons' approach to philosophy. In order to summarise how the chapter has advanced such arguments, it is helpful to consider how both poets embrace, in Joan Retallack's words from *The Poethical Wager* (2003), a 'poetics of responsibility with the courage of the swerve'. Retallack opens this wide-ranging piece of work by stating that '[l]ife is subject to swerves -- sometimes gentle, often violent out-of-blue motions that cut obliquely across material and conceptual logics. As it is, they afford opportunities to usefully rethink habits of thought'. Like Emerson, who argues that '[m]an lives by pulses' due to the 'saltatory' and 'impulsive' nature of reality, Retallack sees the 'swerve' as a pervasive force in the world and thus argues that it is helpful to replicate the force of the 'swerve' in 'habits of thought'. In terms of a 'poetics of the swerve', Retallack

[236] *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 20.

describes how poems can engage in a 'constructive preoccupation with what are unpredictable forms of change' by carrying out an 'unsettling transfiguration of once-familiar terrain'.[237] Ammons and Bernstein both refer to swerves in their work, with Bernstein endorsing an impulse of '*swerving-away-from*' and Ammons praising the 'sniffy rabbit' who stays attentive by to his environment by living in 'split swerves'.[238] Having demonstrated how central an Emersonian commitment to the working of language is to both poets over the course of the last two chapters, it is clear that these references to the act of swerving are not merely coincidental, rather they encapsulate the two poets' shared commitment to an Emersonian working of language. Indeed, this penchant for swerving is reflective of the way both poets adopt the working of language as an impulse in their poetry due to their wariness of the repercussions that can occur from the sedimentation of one particular ideology.

The fact that Ammons and Bernstein both attempt to channel the swerve in their poetry speaks to my argument that the experimental quality of *Garbage* should not be underestimated despite its tenuous postmodern credentials. Once again, Retallack's exploration of the 'swerve' in poetry is useful to reference on this point because of the way she traces this tendency back to the ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus. Retallack explains that Epicurus developed an atomistic view '[attributing] the redistribution of matter that creates noticeable differences to the sudden zig zag of rogue atoms'. This 'zig zag' course of atoms led Epicurus to argue, Retallack states, that '[s]werves made everything happen yet could not be predicted or explained'. Furthermore, Retallack shows that in using the idea of the swerve to develop both a 'social philosophy' and a view of 'physics', Epicurus' engaged in a 'post-Socratic, or perhaps neo-pre-Socratic, blurring of genres' which set a precedent for a 'poesis of the swerve'.[239]

As Scigaj acknowledges through his reference to Anaximenes in his analysis of the Lake Cayuga passage from *Garbage*, Ammons nods to the pre-Socratics in the process of fleshing out his materialist philosophy. The best example of this comes in the second section of the poem when Ammons, in support of his argument that the transfiguration of energy is the essential force in the universe, states that 'the poem' is 'about the pre-socratic idea of the | dispositional axis from stone to wind, wind | to

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[237] Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 1.

[238] Bernstein and Galey-Sacks, p. 8.

[239] Retallack, p. 2.

stone'. Moser and Trout state that the materialistic view 'originated with western philosophy itself, among the pre-Socratic philosophers in ancient Greece', a view which is supported by *The Columbia Encyclopedia,* according to which the 'doctrine [of materialism] was formulated as early as the 4th cent. B.C. by Democritus, in whose system of atomism all phenomena are explained by atoms and their motions in space'.[240] Ammons draws on this connection by suggesting that the poem is a means of participating in the transfiguration of energy along this 'pre-Socratic' notion of a 'dispositional axis'. Although Ammons is not mentioned in *The Poethical Wager*, his comprehensive endorsement of an Emersonian act of swerving, as well as his allusions to the pre-Socratics, demonstrate how relevant his poetry is to the poetics of the 'swerve' outlined by Retallack.

Although one could frame Ammons' exclusion from *The Poethical Wager* as further evidence of Ammons' poetry being overlooked in criticism on experimental poetry, I would argue that Retallack's book does valuable work in exploring philosophical traditions beyond continental theory that influence avant-garde American poetry. This chapter has shown that whilst Ammons' sense of the stability of language as a tool of self-expression in *Garbage* sets his apart from Language poets like Bernstein, who have extensively critiqued the notion of 'voice', the poem also demonstrates the extent to which he is engaging with relevant and intriguing neopragmatic ideas. In this sense, whilst Ammons' interest in scientific and classical philosophies over postmodern literary theory might set him apart from postmodernism, we should be careful not to overlook the areas of philosophical overlap between a poet like Ammons and a poet like Bernstein.

[240] Moser and Trout, p. 1; 'materialism', in *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, ed. by Paul Lagasse, 7th edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), in *Credo Reference* database <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/materialism?institutionId=127> [accessed 27 July 2018]

Even when I can no Longer See | I Continue to Arrive at Words': W.S. Merwin's Negotiation of the Gap between Word and World

Section One

The quotation in the title for this chapter is from Merwin's 'The Blind Seer of Ambon', a poem from his 1993 collection of poems *Travels* which describes the work of German-born botanist Georg Eberhard Rumphius, author of a posthumously published catalogue of plants from Amboina (now an island of Indonesia). Tragedy befell Rumphius frequently throughout his life; his family died in an earthquake in 1674, his original manuscripts were destroyed in a fire as they neared completion in 1687, and, as Merwin's poem's title suggests, Rumphius went blind (in 1670).[241] Despite facing these obstacles, Rumphius produced in *Herbarium Amboinense* a work greatly admired not only for its thoroughness in translating the plant names in up to seven languages, but also for Rumphius' creativity as a namer, as evidenced in the shell names 'Little Dream Horn', 'Prince's Funeral', 'Peasant Music', and 'Double Venus Harp'.[242]

In 'The Blind Seer of Ambon' Merwin plays on Rumphius' biography by describing how, in the face of adversity, the botanist continues his masterful naming process. The opening three stanzas of the poem read thus:

[241] H.C.D. De Wit, 'In Memory of G. E. Rumphius (1702-1952)', *Taxon*, 1.7 (1952), 101–110 (p. 104).

[242] Jacob Mikanowski, 'The Doomed Blind Botanist Who Brought Poetry to Plant Description', *Atlas Obscura* (18 February 2016) <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-doomed-blind-botanist-who-brought-poetry-to-plant-description> [accessed 03 August 2018]

I always knew that I came from
another language

and now even when I can no longer see
I continue to arrive at words

but the leaves
and the shells were already here
and my fingers finding them echo
the untold light and depth[243]

The third stanza demonstrates the inferiority of language to the natural world. The speaker/Rumphius makes clear that the 'leaves | and the shells were already here', that they existed before the 'words' he uses to name them, and that his sense of such objects is limited to an 'echo' of a 'light and depth' which is not fully perceivable. However, despite the speaker's limited perception, his sensing of an 'echo' suggests that he gains an understanding of these 'leaves' and 'shells' through touch, even if he is not able to fully comprehend these objects. The poem thus suggests that whilst the objects of non-human nature will always be something of a mystery to humans, the attentive perceiver can achieve an enlightened understanding of such objects despite the limitations of human perception. Rumphius is the emblematic figure of such a predicament because, whilst one of his senses is impaired, he still feels able to capture a sense of these natural objects through the names in his catalogue; whilst he 'can no longer see', he '[continues] to arrive at words'.

Merwin's celebration of Rumphius' work in 'The Blind Seer of Ambon' is significant because it captures a shift in Merwin's attitude to the relationship between humans and nature that Scigaj, Kate Dunning, and Frazier argue occurred in Merwin's work in the 1980s, a shift that I will argue is symptomatically pragmatic. Prior to this period, Merwin had taken a more sceptical view of this relationship. Scigaj acknowledges that Merwin is 'the most postmodern of environmental poets' (p. 48), largely because in well-known collections from the 1960s, such as *The Moving Target* (1963) and *The Lice* (1967), he takes a very sceptical, anguished position on the relationship between humans and non-human nature. This scepticism is manifested in

[243] Merwin, 'The Blind Seer of Ambon', *Merwin: Collected Poems*, pp. 678-680 (p. 678).

these collections in both Merwin's misanthropic anger at humanity's destructiveness in poems like 'For a Coming Extinction', but also in his sense that language alienates humans from non-human nature. Critics writing on Merwin's work from the 1960s cite Merwin's poetry's reversion to silence as a marker of the poet's scepticism about language. Frazier, for instance, writes that Merwin's work from this period uses 'a spare, image-heavy diction that has been widely noted for its use and summoning of silence'.[244] Altieri connects 'Merwin's recurrent use of a basic vocabulary of images' such as 'knives, shadows, gloves, salt, ash, etc.' in *The Lice* to the poet's tendency towards silence on the basis that it 'forces on the reader a sense that no specific instance of an image contains its complete meaning'.[245] Bryson sees Merwin's 'reluctance toward offering finalizing statements' as evidence of a reversion to silence in Merwin's poetry that is reflective of the poet's 'scepticism concerning human language and its ability to communicate something meaningful about the world'.[246]

Frazier, Scigaj, and Dunning argue that over the course of his career in poetry, Merwin has gradually adopted a more optimistic view regarding language's capacity for integrating humans in non-human nature. As Frazier writes, whilst Merwin's poetry is known for emphasising the extent to which humanity is alienated from non-human nature, 'over the years he has increasingly demonstrated a shift toward affirming humankind's place in the natural world, the necessity of reconceptualizing this relationship, and the human responsibility for maintaining and supporting the ecosystem in which we exist'.[247] Scigaj and Dunning support Frazier's view that Merwin has progressively come to focus on the interconnections between humans and non-human nature, but they explicitly discuss this transition in terms of Merwin's development as an ecopoet. Scigaj argues that, from *The Rain in the Trees* (1987) onwards, Merwin exchanges a 'poetics of absence' for 'a new ecological poetic by becoming intensely absorbed in the present moment of human interaction with nature' (p. 177). Dunning argues that Merwin's development into an ecological poet is evident

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[244] Frazier, p. 63.

[245] Charles Altieri, 'Situating Merwin's Poetry since 1970', in *W.S. Merwin: Essays on the Poetry,* ed. by Nelson and Folsom (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), pp. 159-197 (p. 178).

[246] J. Scott Bryson, '"Between the Earth and Silence": Place and Space in the Poetry of W.S. Merwin', in *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, pp. 101-116 (p. 101).

[247] Frazier, p. 13.

when one appreciates the differences between his earlier poems, which tended to '[represent] humans and nature as being distinct characters', and later poems which '[meld] humans and nature together into a representation that literally unifies them in origin, existence, and end'.[248]

This chapter will build on Dunning's, Frazier's, and Scigaj's work by specifically focusing on the pragmatic way in which Merwin's *The Rain in the Trees* (1987) presents language as a medium which is never able to fully capture the essence of nature, but which can be an essential instrument for helping humans integrate more fruitfully with the natural world. Rumphius is, in this sense, the emblematic figure for this pragmatic portion of Merwin's career because of the way his attentiveness to non-human nature enabled him to forge a highly meaningful relationship with his environment despite his blindness. This chapter will argue that Merwin too finds a pragmatic middle ground between recognising the limitations of human perception whilst also showing that we can better understand our environment by being attentive to nature in our approach to language. This is a significant development in Merwin's work because whereas, as Frazier, Altieri, and Bryson argue, the poet's work from the 1960s explores how language is, in general, a flawed medium for making sense of the world, in *The Rain in the Trees* Merwin diagnoses problems which arise from a particular attitude to language rather than the medium of language itself.

There are two key elements of Merwin's pragmatism in *The Rain in the Trees* and each will be elucidated over the course of a section in this chapter. Section One will focus on Merwin's critique of the effects that colonisation and globalisation have had on the culture and language of his adopted home, Hawaii. Merwin often praises the Hawaiian language in his poetry, which he believes was uniquely tailored to the local environment, and he suggests that the land and the people of Hawaii have suffered as a result of this language being displaced. The pragmatic element of this critique is in Merwin's appreciation of the fact that whilst language will always be a limited tool for conceptualising our environments, there is much at stake in how we conceptualise our environments. Section Two will focus on how Merwin's use of poetry as a means of rejuvenating language and refreshing human perceptions of non-human nature evidences that Merwin commits to the writing of poetry as a form of pragmatic work that can help us continually attune ourselves to the world around us. In illuminating the pragmatic quality of Merwin's poetry in this way, I will not only be advancing my

[248] Dunning, p. 67.

overall argument in this thesis about the similarities in Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin's poetries, but also adding to the work conducted by Dunning, Frazier, and Scigaj by showing how his ecopoetic approach to language in the late eighties onwards overlaps with a newfound pragmatism in his poetry.

'Put it on a Piece of Paper': The Ineffability of Non-Human Nature

In order to begin clarifying the pragmatic quality of Merwin's approach to language in *The Rain in the Trees*, it is first necessary to show how, like James, Peirce, and Emerson, Merwin acknowledges the limitations humans face in their perception of the world.

In 'Sky in September' Merwin humbles human perception and language by stating that 'in spite of the months of knowing | and the years | autumn comes with astonishment' and that the 'the day comes with a color | its words cannot touch'.[249] In such lines, Merwin is emphasising that, try as they might, the experience of the world's beauty can never be fully captured in human memory or, indeed, in language.

In 'Paper' Merwin makes a similar point by using an ironic speaker who is ignorant of the inferiority of language to nature. As with many of the poems in *The Rain in the Trees,* 'Paper' opens with an assertion that the poem will proceed to dismantle in the lines 'What an idea | that you can put it on a piece of paper'. The third line of the poem asks 'what is a piece of paper and how can you tell', before the fourth line replies 'put it on a piece of paper'.[250] Merwin is being ironic in proposing that the best way to explain what constitutes 'a piece of paper' is to write an answer on a 'piece of paper'. By giving this answer, Merwin prompts his reader to imagine a humorous scenario in which someone is trying to clarify what a piece of paper but, rather than contemplating the actual object in question, they use that object as a means of reverting to a linguistic clarification of that object.

Merwin plays with the contentiousness of this reductive advice again in the second stanza:

[249] Merwin, 'Sky in September', in *Merwin: Collected Poems*, pp. 640-641 (p. 640).

[250] Merwin, 'Paper', in *Merwin: Collected Poems*, p. 648.

at the beginning
there are the tall sub-polar mountains
above a peninsula
set in a plain of ice
under deep snow[251]

Following this grand description, the stanza closes with the bathetic instruction 'put it on that paper'. The description of the 'tall sub-polar mountains' highlights the ludicrousness of this instruction by alluding to the ancientness of the 'mountains', which existed in a 'beginning' long before the invention of a piece of 'paper'. Merwin also acknowledges the vastness of this scene, with these 'mountains' being immersed in a 'deep snow', and the sheer whiteness of the scene. By providing these descriptions, Merwin asks us to reflect on whether markings on a 'piece of paper' can come even remotely close to capturing the beauty and awesomeness of such natural scenes.

Merwin again attempts to humble our sense of the power of human language in 'After the Alphabets', which opens with its speaker declaring 'I am trying to decipher the language of insects | they are the tongues of the future'.[252] In these opening lines, Merwin plays with the trite saying that 'x' is the 'y' 'of the future' (and perhaps specifically the cliché that 'children are the future') by pointing out that insects are the bona fide 'tongues of the future' because they will outlive the human race. The saying that 'x' is the 'y' of 'the future usually implies that 'x' will be a part of a more advanced or technologically developed future, and Merwin knows that we would not expect creatures that are inferior to humans in terms of size and intelligence to be described as 'the tongues of the future'. On one level, then, Merwin is playing with this phrase by acknowledging that 'insects' might literally outlive humans and their 'Alphabets' in some kind of apocalyptic scenario, however, the poem's awe for the 'language of insects' implies that the poet is at least partly using the saying at face value given the way the poem goes on to describe the language's sophistication. Firstly, Merwin writes that the 'insects' not only 'describe buildings as food' but that they actually have 'vocabularies' for such purposes.[253] In this way, Merwin returns to some of the themes from his poem 'For a Coming Extinction'. The introduction showed how this poem both

[251] 'Paper', p. 648.

[252] Merwin, 'After the Alphabets', in *Merwin: Collected Poems*, p. 652.

[253] 'After the Alphabets', p. 652.

acknowledges that the gray whale has unique perceptive faculties for reading and understanding the world, and also critiques the unjustness of the whale being slaughtered because humans have a misguided sense that their perceptive faculties as a species are authoritative. 'After the Alphabets' provides a similar warning by showing that 'insects' have an alternative perspective on the world in which 'buildings' are seen as 'food', whilst also emphasising the sophistication of the 'language of insects' who possess 'vocabularies' for formulating such a perspective.

Merwin pays his greatest compliment to the insects of 'After the Alphabets' when he states that 'the speakers are their own meaning in a grammar without | horizons'. Elsewhere in the poem Merwin emphasises the importance of bodily movement to the 'language of insects' when he describes their ability to 'sing with wings' and capacity for 'making music with the legs'.[254] In this way, the poet portrays these creatures as 'their own meaning in a grammar without | horizons' in the sense that, rather than adhering to established, shared grammatical rules, their language emerges from organic forms of expressive movement and sound. Merwin thus applauds the flexibility and versatility of these creatures' language in this line, with the implication being that their linguistic rules are open to change or alteration depending on the situation in which they find themselves. The fact that these 'speakers' are described as 'their own meaning' in light of their flexible grammar reflects the fact that these 'insects' are able to adapt their grammar so as to fit the world as they find it.

'After the Alphabets' attempts to confront the arrogance of anthropocentricism by showing that insects categorise the world in an alternative way to humans which is sophisticated and which, due to its attentivity to the environment, arguably allows the creatures to establish more sustainable relationships with the world. In a more basic sense, the poem also attempts to humble humanity by showing that its languages, its 'alphabets', are not everlasting or privileged. The warning of the poem is, in this sense, that we should not overestimate the authenticity of our representations of reality through language. As with 'Sky in September' and 'Paper', then, 'After the Alphabets' emphasises the limitations of language as a tool through which humans make sense of the world. These poems argue that language is never able to fully capture the essence of objects found in reality and that, furthermore, our conceptualisations of the world are shaped by the particulars of our existence within it. With this in mind, Merwin is

[254] 'After the Alphabets', p. 652.

suggesting that language is a means of structuring a particular experience of the world rather than a means of absolutely capturing the essence of reality.

Native Languages and Local Environments

Whilst poems such as 'Sky in September' and 'After the Alphabets' demonstrate that Merwin continues to emphasise the limitations of language in *The Rain in the Trees,* the collection also exhibits a pragmatic understanding that, despite the gap between humans and reality posited by language, the representations of the world we consolidate in language can affect our quality of life, our treatment of other humans and animals, and our treatment of the environment. 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys' is one poem which exhibits such an understanding by describing Hawaiian as a language which, due to its attentiveness to the local environment, allows for a heightened perception of that environment. The poem thus shows that whilst Merwin still has his reservations about language's ability to help us make sense of our experience of the world, by the time of writing *The Rain in the Trees* he also realises that some languages provide a better perspective on the world than others. 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys' opens with the following stanza:

> Finally the old man is telling
> the forgotten names
> and the names of the stones they came from
> for a long time I asked him the names
> and when he says them at last
> I hear no meaning
> and cannot remember the sounds[255]

There is a vagueness to the first two lines because of the omission of the indirect object 'me' following the verb 'telling'. The absence of this indirect object is used by Merwin to emphasise the fact that, whilst the 'old man' is attempting to communicate these names to the speaker, she '[hears] no meaning', and 'the old man' therefore does not succeed in 'telling' her these 'names'. In other words, the verb has no object because the communication is incomplete. We would usually consider the giving of a 'name' to

[255] Merwin, 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys', in *Merwin: Collected Poems*, pp. 659-660 (p. 659).

be a relatively simple communicative process but Merwin's omission of the indirect object suggests that to give a 'name' is to do more than to utter a sound and point to that sound's referent, it is rather to try and 'relate' something more complex to the listener. Again, if we take the speaker's admission that she '[hears] no meaning' into account, this particular use of the verb 'tell' could be used to convey the complexity involved in communicating this 'name'.

In this way, Merwin's use of the verb 'tell' highlights the complexity involved in the 'old man's' attempt to communicate 'the forgotten names'. The speaker can hear the 'names' and she is aware of the objects to which these 'names' refer, and yet she still feels that she has not learnt the 'names'. The second and third stanza suggest that the speaker struggles because of her inexperience of the native environment and this language:

> I have lived without knowing
> the names for the water
> from one rock
> and the water from another
> and behind the names that I do not have
> the color of water flows all day and all night
> the old man tells me the name for it
> and as he says it I forget it
>
> there are names for the water
> between here and there
> between places now gone
> except in the porcelain faces
> on the tombstones
> and places still here[256]

The first four lines of this second stanza play with the idea of 'telling', learning', and 'knowing' in a similar manner to the first stanza. Again, because the speaker is talking about 'knowing' a 'name', a type of knowledge that we might assume is relatively simply attained, these lines initially seem to provide a simple, factual statement that

[256] 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys', p. 660.

the speaker was not aware of these 'names' until this point in her life. Whilst this is clearly true, as the speaker does not know the 'names' the 'old man' is 'telling', Merwin is also implying that the speaker faces a degree of difficulty in ascertaining knowledge of these 'names' *because* she has lived 'without knowing' them. This suggests that the speaker's trouble in learning the 'names for the water | from' a particular 'rock', for instance, is partly due to the fact she has lived her life in a language that does not categorise its environment in this detailed way. The poem thus suggests that the language of 'the old man' has created 'vocabularies' for describing 'the water | from one rock' in the same way that the 'insects' described in 'After the Alphabets' have 'vocabularies' for describing 'buildings as food'; in each case, in Merwin's view, the development of a particular language corresponds with the development of a particular perspective on the world. In this way, both poems echo Wittgenstein's argument that '[t]o imagine a language is to imagine a form of life'.[257] 'Hearing the Name of the Valleys' implies that the 'names' spoken by 'the old man' do not register with the speaker because, in Wittgenstein's words, she comes from another 'form of life'.

Not only does this stanza suggest that the speaker has trouble adopting the linguistic frame of reference of the Hawaiian language, but it also implies that the names in this language achieve a superior level of insight in relation to its referents than the native language of the speaker. The speaker states that 'behind the names that I do not have | the color of water flows all day and all night', lines which literally suggest that the language we use affects the way we see the world. The description of 'the colour of water' being positioned 'behind' these 'names' gives the impression that these 'names' provide a unique window onto the world. This window apparently heightens the speaker of this language's ability to perceive 'color', suggesting that the named object is perceived with a greater richness through this window. In the third stanza, Merwin implies that that these 'names' achieve this impressive level of insight because they are tailored to a particular landscape. In the first two lines of this third stanza, for instance, Merwin's use of the adverbs 'here' and 'there', in the lines 'there are names for the water | between here and there', implies that the 'names' in question are only applicable to the water found in the particular location currently occupied by the 'old man' and the speaker. The second and third stanzas suggest, therefore, that the 'names' the 'old man' tells the speaker hold an especial potency because they are highly attuned

[257] Wittgenstein, p. 11.

to the local environment. Whilst Merwin states in 'Sky in September' that the 'words cannot touch' the 'color' that comes with the autumn day, 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys' implies that the Hawaiian language has a remarkable sensitivity to colour that is currently unavailable to the non-native speaker. This suggests that whilst language is inevitably inferior to nature in terms of its expression of colour, the Hawaiian names come closer to channelling nature's incredible spectrum of colour because the language is highly attuned to its local environment.

'An Age Arrived When Everything Was Explained in Another Language'

If we return to Althusser's basic definition of ideology as that which 'represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence', it would seem that Merwin not only believes that the human relationship with reality is ideologically mediated, but furthermore that our language helps structure that mediation.[258] Merwin implies that the speaker's failure to understand the Hawaiian language in 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys' does not just arise from her inability to speak the language, but also from the fact that she comes from a different ideology from the 'old man'. It is important to establish that, for Merwin, a particular linguistic structuring of the world corresponds to a particular ideological view of the world because of the way *The Rain in the Trees* details the damaging repercussions that have occurred from the colonisation of Hawaii and the subsequent displacement of the native language and ideology. This theme emerges in 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys' when Merwin writes 'there are names for the water […] between places now gone | except in porcelain faces | on the tombstones | and places still here'. The poem has up until this point emphasised the degree to which the Hawaiian language is intimately connected to the local environment and, for this reason, the speaker's suggestion that 'there are names for the water […] between places now gone […] and places still here' ominously suggests that the reference points for this language are diminishing. The speaker states that these 'places now gone', now exist only 'in the porcelain faces | on the tombstones', a metaphor which implies that, whilst the memorialisation of these 'places' means that the 'names' still hold some currency in the cultural memory, the changes affecting the landscape are gradually rendering these 'names' redundant. The 'names' provided by the 'old man' are first described by the speaker as 'the forgotten

[258] Althusser, p. 105.

names', and the reason for this is that, as the objects for these 'names' are effaced, the 'names' recede from the public consciousness.

Poems like 'Chord' and 'Losing a Language' from *The Rain in the Trees* specifically attribute this decline of the Hawaiian language to Hawaii's colonisation, with the former poem telling of how, in the nineteenth century, 'an age arrived when everything was explained in another | language'. The poem contrasts the actions of John Keats with the actions of labourers contributing to the deforestation of Hawaii and, in the process, advances an argument that the diminishment of the referents of the Hawaiian language has led to the decline of the language itself. All lines of the poem save for the last, which is given at the bottom of this excerpt, contrast the work of Keats with the work of the labourers:

> While Keats wrote they were cutting down the sandalwood
> forests
> while he listened to the nightingale they heard their own axes
> echoing through the forests
> while he sat in the walled garden on the hill outside the
> city they thought of their gardens dying far away on the
> mountain
> while the sound of the words clawed at him they thought of
> their wives
> while the tip of his pen travelled the iron they had coveted was
> hateful to them […]
> and an age arrived when everything was explained in another
> language[259]

The poem draws our attention to the fact that, whilst in England, Keats was producing poetry which sharpened readers' perceptions of non-human nature, Hawaii's natural resources were being exploited by colonists. Given the way that 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys' presents the Hawaiian language as being intimately connected to the local environment, we can see how, from Merwin's perspective, degradation of that environment might in turn negatively impact upon the native language. Furthermore, because Merwin presents the Hawaiian language as providing a richer, more authentic

[259] Merwin, 'Chord', in *Merwin: Collected Poems*, p. 664.

picture of the local environment than the English language, we can see how the degradation of the environment could start a vicious circle in which the alienation of the language from the local environment perpetuates the degradation of that environment. Merwin believes that damage inflicted on the environment simultaneously damages the local language, which thus makes the users of that language, quite literally, less sensitive to that environment. Merwin is implying, then, that the destruction of the Hawaiian environment has weakened the referential power of the native language, a process which subsequently makes inhabitants less perceptive to their environment and less sensitive to the dangers of environmental degradation.

In contrasting the actions of the labourers with the work of a Romantic poet like Keats, Merwin implies that this celebrated British writer was unconsciously complicit with the malign force of Western colonialism. Gauri Viswanathan argues that 'the discipline of English [came] into its own in an age of colonialism' and that there existed an 'imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects in the literature and thought of England, a mission that in the long run served to strengthen Western cultural hegemony in enormously complex ways'.[260] Likewise, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin suggest that '[t]he historical moment which saw the emergence of "English" as an academic discipline also produced the nineteenth-century colonial form of imperialism' and that '[t]he study of English and the growth of Empire proceeded from a single ideological climate and that the development of the one is intrinsically bound up with the development of the other'.[261] Merwin's 'Chord' invokes such arguments by implying that, ironically, the Romantics' poetic celebration of nature was complicit in British empire's exploitation of natural resources in places like Hawaii.

The poem thus points to at least two ways in which the industrialisation of Hawaii's natural resources led to the dawning of an 'age […] when everything was explained in another | language'. Firstly, Merwin understands the Hawaiian language as being bound to the environment in such a way that neglect of the language has repercussions for the environment. Secondly, the poem's implication of Keats in the imperialism of the British Empire suggests that the early European exploitation of the

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[260] Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 2.

[261] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p. 3.

Hawaiian environment set the course for a period of colonisation in which Hawaiian culture, including the native language, would be displaced. Frazier supports this second reading of 'Chord' when she writes that the final line of the poem 'introduces the disappearance of genuine connections to nature by means of an imported culture. From this moment forward the land will be seen from the viewpoint of outsiders, and the original inhabitants' perspective will be lost'.[262] With this in mind, the title of the poem 'Chord' could be interpreted as a metaphor for the layered, exploitative process of colonisation. The descriptions of the labourers' work present the blunt truth behind colonisation by showing how the workers and their employers were wholly incentivised by economic gain, whilst the comparison with Keats alludes to the subtler side of colonialism by implying that a colonial presence in places such as Hawaii was consolidated through notions of cultural superiority. Like a musical chord, these different components of colonisation worked in harmony to exploit places like Hawaii.

The poem which follows 'Chord' in *The Rain in the Trees*, 'Losing a Language', shows how the prophesy in the final line of 'Chord' has been realised in the modern day. In this poem, Merwin shows how the Hawaiian language, and in turn the Hawaiian culture, has suffered as a result of language becoming a commodity in a globalised world. The opening two couplets of the poem intimate that the native language has been displaced at the expense of a newer language:

> A breath leaves the sentences and does not come back
> yet the old still remember something that they could say
>
> but they know now that such things are no longer believed
> and the young have fewer words[263]

The first line of the poem describes the death of a language, with the 'breath' in question representing both the breath of the speakers who give the language life and also the figurative lifeforce of the language. The second line focuses on the confusing position of 'the old' who vaguely remember such sentences as 'something that they could say' once, but which cannot be said now. Even if 'the old' do have a slight grasp on the forgotten worldview which the lost sentences had consolidated, the admission

[262] Frazier, p. 118.

[263] Merwin, 'Losing a Language', in *Merwin: Collected Poems*, pp. 664-665 (p. 664).

that 'such things are no longer believed' implies that this worldview is no longer taken seriously. The speaker of 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys' desperately wants to learn the 'names' spoken by the 'old man' but cannot grasp them because she has lived her life in a different language and, subsequently, with a different worldview. In contrast, the speaker's claim in 'Losing a Language' that the worldview remembered by the 'old' is 'no longer believed' implies that, in general, people tend to see the new, dominant language, and the worldview which it enforces, as being authoritative. In other words, they have no desire to open themselves up to a different way of seeing the world as does the speaker in 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys'.

A crucial detail about the dominant language is given in the statement that 'the young have fewer words'. In 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys' the speaker admires the way that the language of the 'old man' is so finely tailored to its environment, and the fact that it has a 'name' not just for 'water' in general, but a 'name' for 'water | from one rock | and the water from another'. This language appears to achieve a great level of insight by providing such an intricate symbolisation of the environment. The speaker's claim that the 'the young have fewer words' in 'Losing a Language' suggests that the dominant language which is displacing the native language is less intricate. One reason for this dominant language's comparative lack of intricacy is revealed later in the poem when the speaker states:

> the children will not repeat
> the phrases their parents speak
>
> somebody has persuaded them
> that it is better to say everything differently
>
> so that they can be admired somewhere
> farther and farther away[264]

These lines state that the eponymous lost language has been discarded so that the 'children' can be understood and 'admired' in a foreign place. As 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys' demonstrated, Merwin believes that learning words in a new language requires more than an understanding of the words attached to referents, rather it

[264] 'Losing a Language', p. 665.

involves absorbing that language's unique ideological framework. For this reason, from Merwin's perspective, there is always a degree of untranslatability between languages from different parts of the world, because each language is rooted in a native culture.

'Losing a Language' suggests that this untranslatability between cultures has been overcome to a degree through the promotion of a master language which has 'fewer words' and subsequently allows its speakers to 'be admired somewhere | farther and farther away'. In this way, the poem implies that the native language has been displaced by English so that an easier communication can be facilitated in a globalised world. At this point it is useful to establish how postcolonial theorists have argued that globalisation has helped dominant nations retain power over former colonies. Harold James defines 'globalisation' as 'the cross-national movement of factors of production (labour, goods, capital) as well as of ideas, including technologies'. He acknowledges, furthermore, that '[p]olitical scientists see globalization as a control on traditional power as exercised by nation-states, or the diffusion of power through a web of international institutions and rules that establish a state of affairs that is, in Robert Keohane's phrase, "after hegemony"'.[265] Sankaran Krishna explains how postcolonial theory understands globalisation as a legacy of colonialism and, subsequently, 'contests the claim that free-market ideology is a natural common sense and that it produces prosperity or improved lives for all'. Postcolonial theory has been particularly attentive, Krishna argues, to 'issues of cultural domination' in which 'economically developed and dominant nations invariably set the standards and constitute the model against which others are evaluated or evaluate themselves'.[266] In other words, Krishna argues that globalisation has allowed Western nations to retain dominance over weaker nations and peoples by promoting a transnational market and cultural exchange which operates on terms set by those Western nations.

In 'Losing a Language', Merwin adopts a postcolonial theoretical position when he implies that the lost language has been displaced at the expense of a foreign language which has 'fewer words'. The language described in 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys' may have provided a richer ideological perspective on to the local environment, but it was also inaccessible to the speaker of the poem. The speaker of

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[265] Harold James, 'Globalization, Empire, and Natural Law', *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, 84.3 (May 2008), 421-436 (p. 423).

[266] Sankaran Krishna, *Globalization & Postcolonialism: Hegemony and Resistance in the Twenty-first Century* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), pp. 3-4.

the poem accepts this, it even appeals to her, but in a globalised world this kind of inaccessibility is a hindrance rather than a virtue. A solution for overcoming this untranslatability between languages is to reduce the number of words incorporated in that language. For instance, we are told in 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys' that in the Hawaiian language there are 'names for the water | from one rock', but if these 'names' for 'water' different 'rock[s]' became enveloped by the broader 'name' *water*, the language would be more easily translated into English. At this point we can see how a language with 'fewer words' would be more appealing to the globalist as it would help facilitate an easier communication between speakers from different counties. In other words, Merwin suggests that language has become a commodity in a globalised world due to the way it is valued according to its potential for exchange within a 'free-market ideology'. At the same time, we can also appreciate why, given Merwin's appreciation for the Hawaiian language's uniquely intricate and sensitive mapping of the local environment, the poet would be intensely wary of the displacement of the native language at the expense of this more accessible language.

The Desensitising Effect of an Environmentally Alienated Language

On the basis of the analyses of 'Chord' and 'Losing a Language', it is apparent that Merwin believes that, since the European discovery of Hawaii, Hawaiians have been ideologically manipulated into seeing the world on terms set by foreigners seeking to exploit the islands for economic gain. This manipulation has involved the displacement of a Hawaiian language that offered a 'grammar without | horizons' for an English language which tightly regiments its speakers' experience of the world to consolidate the hegemony of Western ideology. 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys' and 'Losing a Language' present Hawaiian as a language which is structured according to the local environment, and which helps Natives establish an impressive sensitivity in relation to that environment. In other words, Hawaiian is described by Merwin as a language which defers to the environment in its structure. In contrast, *The Rain in the Trees* presents the modern, simplified Hawaiian language, as well as the imported English language, as languages which are structured so as to consolidate the viewpoint of a hegemonic ideology.

The Rain in the Trees details the repercussions of the cultural desensitisation that develops from the displacement of more organic native languages. The poems in this collection often discuss this displacement in terms of a disconnection from origins

that produces ecological and humanitarian problems. 'The Lost Originals', a poem which paints the tragedy of this disconnection particularly vividly, opens thus:

> If only you had written our language
> we would have remembered how you died
>
> if you had wakened at our windows
> we would have known who you were
>
> we would have felt horror
> at the pictures of you behind the barbed wire
>
> from which you did not emerge
> we would have returned to the shots of you lying dead with
> your kin[267]

'The Lost Originals' follows 'Chord' and 'Losing a Language' in *The Rain in the Trees* and we see some of the themes of these poems, as well as 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys', reprised in these lines. In the first couplet, Merwin again connects language to memory with his speaker's claim that the death of this group of people is not 'remembered' because the speaker and her community use a different 'language'. The poem suggests that, had the deceased group 'written' the 'language' of the speaker and her community, their deaths would be 'remembered'.

On first reading, the speaker's suggestion that those who speak her language (the 'we' represented by the speaker in the poem) cannot remember how these speakers of a foreign language (the 'you' addressed in the poem) died seems to be contradicted by the fact that she is able to describe the events that should be 'remembered'. We quickly realise, however, that the poem believes there is more to memory than the ability to describe past events, and it implies that the amnesia of the speaker and those who share her language is manifested in their lack of empathy for the poem's deceased addressees. The speaker knows, for instance, that 'pictures' of these people 'behind the barbed wire' exist, but she believes that her peoples' inability to '[feel] horror' when viewing such 'pictures' is tantamount to an inability to

[267] Merwin, 'The Lost Originals', in *Merwin: Collected Poems*, p. 666.

remember such past events. Similarly, when the speaker states that 'If only you had written our language […] we would have returned to the shots of you lying dead with your kin', it is not a lack of knowledge of such events that accounts for her culture's lack of memory. Instead, the line implies that the fact that the speaker's people are not tormented by these pictures shows that the event is not truly 'remembered'.

Given that Merwin suggests in 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys' and 'Losing a Language' that our use of language fosters a specific worldview, the fact that the speaker's language makes its users forget the treatment of these foreign peoples clearly reflects poorly on the worldview it enforces. As has been clarified, in the poems 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys' and 'Losing a Language' Merwin contrasts the environmentally attentive Hawaiian language with the transposable but desensitised English language. The extent to which the English language is desensitised is demonstrated in stark terms in 'The Lost Originals', with the speaker effectively claiming that the language is incapable of acknowledging the horrific treatment of these persecuted foreign language speakers.

'The Lost Originals' lists the ways that the speaker's community would have 'remembered' and reacted to the persecution of these foreign peoples throughout the poem, culminating in the speaker's claim that, had these foreigners 'written our language', 'we might have believed | in a homeland'.[268] Of course, these lines at least partly refer to the injustices of colonialism, with Merwin again criticising the West for encroaching on the land and culture of these foreign peoples and, in the process, condemning many of them to death. Had the colonists respected a 'homeland', the line suggests, these atrocities might not have happened. However, having explained Merwin's admiration for the intimacy with which the Hawaiian language maps its local environment, this closing line can also be interpreted as stating that the speaker's language is desensitised because of its disconnection from a 'homeland'. As has been established, Merwin sees the Hawaiian language as providing a richer insight into the local environment because of its intricate symbolisation of that environment. As 'Losing a Language' states though, this notion of a 'homeland' is 'no longer believed', and the 'young' are taught to use language with 'fewer words' in a manner that allows them to 'be admired somewhere | farther and farther away'. With this in mind, the speaker's claim in 'The Lost Originals' that 'If only you had written our language […] we might have believed | in a homeland', can be read as a critique of the way that the

[268] 'The Lost Originals', p. 666.

English language's estrangement from its original relationship with the environment has led to its speakers becoming desensitised to the violence of the West.

Merwin also presents the hegemony of one dominant ideology as having an environmental impact. The poem 'Thanks' shows how a language with 'fewer words' has made modern people complicit with an ideology which justifies the advancement of urban development at the expense of non-human nature. The closing lines of the poem are as follows:

> with the animals dying around us
> taking our feelings we are saying thank you
> with the forests falling faster than the minutes
> of our lives we are saying thank you
> with the words going out like cells of a brain
> with the cities growing over us
> we are saying thank you faster and faster
> with nobody listening we are saying thank you
> thank you we are saying and waving
> dark though it is[269]

This stanza describes how the animals around us are decreasing in number, the 'forests' are being destroyed, and the words are falling from our languages, and we are only able to reply to such developments with a helpless and unmindful 'thank you'. As with 'The Lost Originals', 'Thanks' links the loss of words in a language to the 'taking' of 'feelings' and suggests that this makes us unconsciously complicit pawns in a project of globalist development. Furthermore, the poem tells us that this project proceeds in the interest of short term financial reward and at the expense of ordinary people who live in a stupefied state under the 'dark' shadow of the expanding 'cities' and, certainly, at the expense of the non-human nature which is destroyed to make way for such a project.

This section has shown that whilst Merwin has severe concerns about language in *The Rain in the Trees*, these concerns relate to a specific use of language. Merwin recognises that, in the case of a former colony like Hawaii, the English language has been imported at the expense of a native language which had a remarkable capacity for

[269] Merwin, 'Thanks', *Merwin: Collected Poems*, 648-649 (p. 649).

enriching perception of the native environment. This collection is thus more pragmatic than the earlier Merwin poems described by Frazier, Altieri, and Bryson in the sense that it recognises that whilst language is unable to fully capture the essence of its objects, the manner in which we use language is hugely important given the way it can establish a variety of courses of human action. Like Ammons and Bernstein, Merwin's approach to language and, in turn, epistemology is reminiscent of James in the sense that he appreciates the limitations of language as a tool for clarifying and understanding the environment but is also very conscious of the fact that the way we use language influences our actions in the world.

It is important ahead of the next section of this chapter to emphasise that in critiquing the enforced adoption of the English language in Hawaii, Merwin is more concerned about the way a specific *approach* to language has been enforced on the Hawaiian people than he is about the basic fact that they are using a different language. In a reply to a question about the meaning of 'Losing a Language', Sara Tekula, writing for *The Merwin Conservancy* website, cites Peter Ladefoged's assertion that whilst 'Hawaiian is on its way to being restored', it remains to be seen 'whether the Hawaiian that's being taught is the same as the Hawaiian that's spoken by the remnant population that has always spoken it as a native language'.[270] Tekula captures a key point of Merwin's poem here, namely that *The Rain in the Trees* is lamenting the loss of Hawaiian because of the way that language provided such an intricate, rich perspective on the local environment rather than solely because it was the native language. This is significant because Merwin writes his poetry in English, the hegemonic language in a globalised world and the language used by Hawaii's colonisers. Merwin sees poetry as something of a remedy to the West's insensitivity to non-human nature because it can sharpen our perception of reality by releasing a 'wildness' that lies dormant in modern language. In this section I have argued that *The Rain in the Trees* is pragmatic in recognising that whilst our language cannot make absolute sense of the world, the way we use language has implications for ours and our planet's future. In Section Two I will demonstrate how Merwin pragmatically works language in order to rekindle a saving sense of 'wildness' in language.

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[270] Sara Tekula, 'Poetry Lab: On "Losing a Language"', *The Merwin Conservancy* (11 March 2014) < https://merwinconservancy.org/2014/03/poetry-lab-on-losing-a-language/> [accessed 20 July 2018]

Section Two

In the introduction I examined how Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin all compare the poetic process to ecological processes in order to clarify my concept of poetic work. I then argued that, in establishing these comparisons between the writing of poetry and ecological processes, it was apparent that these poets all believed that the poetic process should be used as a means of finding ideas or meanings rather than as a vehicle for expressing pre-established ideas in a novel way. This is partly to say that, in the case of Bernstein, for instance, the comparison of language to a compost heap is a means to an end in the sense that he uses this analogy as a way of clarifying his position on poetry. In the case of Merwin, however, it was suggested that this poet actually believes that there is a legitimate connection between poetic and ecological processes. I briefly explained Merwin's perception of this connection in the introduction by referring to Merwin's admiration for Thoreau's claim that '[i]n wildness is the preservation of the world'.[271] The introduction clarified that Merwin sees poetry as a means of channelling 'wildness' and thus assisting in the 'preservation of the world'. In this way, Merwin connects his poetic work to his work as conservation which is also motivated by a desire to help preserve 'wildness'.

By referring in the introduction to Rasula's notion of a 'composting sensibility' and picking up on the connotations between the working of language and the agricultural working of a plant or crop, I demonstrated that the similarities between poetic and ecological processes can be helpful in clarifying what exactly it means to work language. It is on this basis that this section will use Merwin's sense of a connection between writing and conservation as a useful entry point for establishing the unique way in which he sees his poetry as working language. This section will burrow further into this element of Merwin's poetry to show why he sees this connection between his work as a poet and conservationist, and furthermore, how his specific approach to working language mirrors his approach to conserving the wildlife in his Maui garden.

'For the Writer's Hoe, the Earth is a Page'

Cavell's *The Senses of Walden* is a helpful resource for this chapter because of the way it connects Thoreau's activity as a writer to his physical labours at Walden Pond. The

[271] Thoreau, p. 239.

central argument in *The Senses of Walden* is that 'however else one understands Thoreau's topics and projects' in *Walden*, 'it is as a writer that he is finally to be known'. Cavell admits that, in light of the fact that we find the 'hero' of *Walden* 'doing everything under the sun but, except very infrequently, writing', readers may initially doubt that Thoreau's primary concern in the book is the act of writing. Cavell's justification for this argument is that 'every word in which [Thoreau] identifies himself or describes his work and his world is the identification and description of what he understands his literary enterprise to require'. Thoreau's description of the 'building of his habitation', for instance, Cavell reads as a metaphor for 'the writing of his book'.[272] Ultimately, Cavell argues, such metaphors show writing to be a form of labour in which the writer works language to gain a keener sense of the meaning of words:

> The heroic books, even if printed in the character of our mother tongue, will always be in a language dead to degenerate times; and we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have[273]

Cavell's sense that 'language' can become 'dead to degenerate times' is linked to his later claim that '[t]here are words with our names on them […] but their existence is only probable to us, because we are not in a position to bring them home'. Such lines suggest that language can become stagnant and dull if it remains unworked. This state of language is described in *The Senses of Walden* as the 'mother tongue', this being the 'first level' of language on which 'words […] make literal or historical sense, present the brutest of fact'. Whilst, as Cavell explains, '[a] son of man is born of woman', he states that 'rebirth, according to our Bible, is the business of the father'. Cavell advocates a '[fathering]' of language which is akin to a 'rebirth', and in *Walden* this 'rebirth' occurs through the book's 'puns and paradoxes, its fracturing of idiom and twisting of quotations, its drones of fact and flights of impersonation'. This approach to language is endorsed by Cavell because it '[keeps] faith at once with the mother and the father, to unite them,' which subsequently allows for the 'word' to be 'born in us'. Cavell's ruminations on the 'mother' and 'father tongue' thus imply that language achieves a resonance and fullness when the foundational layer of 'literal or historical sense' in

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[272] *The Senses of Walden*, p. 3, p. 5, p. 10.

[273] Ibid., p. 4.

language is rejuvenated as a writer uses such language figuratively or metaphorically.[274] With this in mind, Cavell's cryptic descriptions of the way that the 'fathering' of language allows us to 'bring [words] home', the way it allows the word to be 'born in us', or allows us to '[conjecture] a larger sense than common use permits', all suggest that words achieve a fuller resonance as a result of this process.[275]

Cavell's exploration of writing as a form of literary labour in *Walden* is especially revealing in his discussion of 'The Bean-Field', a chapter in which Thoreau describes his process of planting and cultivating beans. Hoeing, Cavell observes, becomes a metaphor for writing in this chapter, with Thoreau's method for cultivating his bean-field holding a lesson for writers and readers that 'laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line' in a 'heroic book'. Quoting from *Walden*, Cavell writes that '[f]or the writer's hoe, the earth is a page; with it, the tiller "[makes] the yellow soil express its summer thought in bean leaves and blossoms rather than in wormwood and piper and millet grass, making the earth say beans instead of grass"'.[276] Thoreau is demonstrating, Cavell argues, that just as one makes decisions as to how to cultivate a bean-field with a hoe, decisions intended to promote the growth of beans and quell the growth of weeds, for instance, so a writer makes decisions through the inscriptions he makes on the literary page, through her cultivation of certain words or ideas at the expense of others.

The limitations of the writer's 'power of definition' is evident in Cavell's use of the verb 'inflect' in his description of how Thoreau allows words to 'come to him from their own region,' before 'taking that occasion for inflecting them one way instead of another then and there, or for refraining from them then and there', just as 'one may inflect the earth toward beans instead of grass, or let it alone'.[277] Elsewhere, Cavell describes the selection of 'words or phrase or lines' as a process by which the writer takes words, in Thoreau's words, 'out of the trivialness of the street', and 'raising them to us, by writing them down' which 'is only literally, or etymologically, a matter of style, scratching them in'. This writer's 'raising' of the words 'to the light' is, Cavell emphasises, 'the whole thing he does, not the adornment of it'. In other words, the writer is not creating meaning in the words he raises, rather he experiments and

[274] Ibid, p. 16

[275] Ibid, p. 16.

[276] *The Senses of Walden*, p. 26.

[277] *The Senses of Walden*, p. 28.

investigates how the potential for meaning in a word can be realised when it is 'inflected' in a particular direction. Words are, for Cavell, objects of depth and he suggests that, just as '[w]e do not know what the bottom of a pond is if we do not know, e.g., what it is to sound the bottom, vaguely imagining that it is abysmally deep', neither do we realise the possibilities for meaning in words until they are 'inflected' by a writer.[278]

The Senses of Walden is an illuminating text to consider in relation to *The Rain in the Trees* because Merwin is, like Thoreau, a writer whose literary ambitions are intertwined with an environmental mission. Dunning emphasises the interconnections between Merwin's approach to writing and his approach to conservation in her essay 'Environmental Poetry to Ecopoetry' in a manner which evokes comparisons with Cavell's Thoreau:

> Living on his farm in France clearly influenced Merwin's writing during the 60s, and when he moved to Hawaii in the late 70s, the former pineapple plantation that became his home also became a major influence on and reflection of his poetic practice[279]

Dunning observes that whilst Merwin's poetry initially tended to present 'humans and nature as being distinct characters', after the poet moved to Hawaii his poetry became more focused on the interconnections between humans and nature. For instance, in an analysis of 'The Old Tree on the Hill', a poem from *The Shadow of Sirius* (2009), Dunning argues that the poet presents 'the trees and the human figures' as having 'a reciprocal origin, a shared existence and a potentially simultaneous end' between 'the trees and the human figures'. The 'realizations' that Merwin reaches, Dunning suggests, are 'the result of his own life and his own orchards. They are the culmination of more than half a century of poetic and personal exploration in which Merwin searched not only for "a good way to live" but for a poetic way to share it'. For Dunning, Merwin is a model ecopoet due to the way that these 'realizations' have been achieved through Merwin's interconnection of poetic and 'real life praxis'.[280]

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[278] *The Senses of Walden,* p. 28, p. 64.

[279] Dunning, p. 89.

[280] Dunning, p. 87, p. 94, p. 90.

Dunning's work evidences the potential for Merwin's poetry to be subjected to the kind of reading that Cavell performs on *Walden* in *The Senses of Walden.* Dunning provides the foundation for such a reading by demonstrating how Merwin's poetry and conservation work are intertwined practices, however this chapter will push this reading further by demonstrating that Merwin's descriptions of his approach to conservation work in *The Rain in the Trees* can be read as a metaphor for his approach to writing poetry. More specifically, Cavell's argument that Thoreau's cultivation of his bean-field can be read as a metaphor for the writer's cultivation of language can be adapted to *The Rain in the Trees* to show how Merwin's cultivation of plants and trees can be read as a metaphor for his cultivation of language.

Raising Trees and Raising Words

To get to the heart of Merwin's sense of a confluence between his work as a poet and his work as a conservationist, it is useful to first establish comparisons between the raising of trees and the raising of words in *The Rain in the Trees*. In the poems 'Rain at Night', 'Utterance', and 'Native', Merwin presents words and trees as entities which can both help humans attain a better sense of nature. The first of these poems, for instance, suggests that 'trees' and 'words' can sound nature in a way that sharpens human attention to nature. The poem opens with literal descriptions of the sounds of a storm, it then provides some brief historical insight into the land in which the storm is taking place which, subsequently, establishes a context for a more metaphorical description of the sounds of the storm in the final stanza. The poem opens with the following lines:

> This is what I have heard
>
> at last the wind in December
> lashing the old trees with rain
> unseen rain racing along the tiles
> under the moon
> wind rising and falling
> wind with many clouds
> trees in the night wind[281]

[281] Merwin, 'Rain at Night', in *Merwin: Collected Poems,* p. 635.

Merwin's poetry is known for its lack of punctuation, but if 'Rain at Night' were to be punctuated, it would be in keeping with the direct tone of the section if a colon was used at the end of the first line and the following lines were numbered or bullet pointed in the style of a list.[282] Indeed, this excerpt reads almost like a write-up of a scientific investigation of the sounds of the storm because of its direct tone, with the first line serving as a report headline under which the speaker lists her immediate present tense observations. Adding to the objective, scientific quality of the second stanza is the accuracy with which the speaker presents her observations. The speaker does not describe the wind as a unified force, rather she describes the storm as it presents itself to her ears: as different winds making different sounds, whether they be the sounds of 'wind rising and falling' or the sound of 'trees in the night wind'.

In the third stanza, the speaker provides some historical information on the land described in the first stanza:

> after an age of leaves and feathers
> someone dead
> thought of this mountain as money
> and cut the trees
> that were here in the wind
> and rain at night
> it is hard to say it
> but they cut the sacred 'ohias then
> the sacred koas then
> the sandalwood and the halas[283]

The second and third lines of this excerpt link back to Merwin's critique of the commodification of Hawaii. As with 'Chord', these lines from 'Rain at Night' suggest that Western colonists primarily valued foreign environments according to their potential for exchange on a market. The malign influence of colonialism led to the degradation of the Hawaiian environment and, as was demonstrated in Section One, Merwin believes that the degradation of the environment catalysed the degradation of the Hawaiian language. In 'Hearing the Names of the Valleys', the speaker is amazed at the

[282] Dunning, p. 83.

[283] 'Rain at Night', p. 635.

potency that the Hawaiian language achieves through its attentiveness to the local environment. As a result, Merwin believes that the damage inflicted on the Hawaiian environment by colonists has subsequently damaged the linguistic potency of the native language.

This excerpt revisits these ideas in its description of a Western, capitalist ideology in which a 'mountain' is seen as 'money' and in the pun on the phrase 'it is hard to say it'. This pun allows the speaker to emphasise the tragedy of these plants being cut down, whilst also suggesting that these actions, which would lead to the endangerment of indigenous Hawaiian plants, would damage the language through which Natives refer to those plants, thus literally making the names of these plants 'hard to say'. The poem thus suggests, in a manner similar to 'Hearing the Names of the Valley', that there are deep connections between the Hawaiian language and the Hawaiian environment, and that the endangerment of a particular plant subsequently makes the name of that plant less powerful as a referent.

Having established this historical context, when the poem returns to the present in the final stanza, the reader is in a better position to appreciate the significance of the sounds documented in the first stanza. Indeed, the speaker's description of the sounds of the storm are more revealing and evocative in this final stanza:

> but the trees have risen one more time
> and the night wind makes them sound
> like the sea that is yet unknown
> the black clouds race over the moon
> the rain is falling on the last place[284]

In contrast to the objective, scientific language of the first stanza, the language of the final stanza flirts with the figurative in its descriptions of natural entities. On a literal level, the statement that 'the trees have risen one more time' describes how the area has become reforested with trees which, of course, '[rise]' from the ground. However, the line is also presenting the trees as Christ-like entities which have 'risen one more time' in the face of adversity. Similarly, the use of the verb 'makes', in the statement that 'the night wind makes them sound', hints that the 'wind' is intentionally producing a 'sound', as if it were a force which has some agency in this action. The simile

[284] 'Rain at Night', p. 635.

comparing the 'sound' of the 'night wind' in the 'trees' to 'the sea that is yet unknown' suggests not only that there is a similarity between these two noises, but also hints that there is potential for this sound to become known. We can thus see that, whereas in the context of the first two stanzas of the poem, the opening line 'This is what I have heard' reads like a heading in a report, following the supernatural undertones of the last stanza this line now seems like the words of a prophet relating the experience of hearing from a higher power. 'Rain at Night' thus portrays nature as a kind of higher power which, in this case, can be experienced through sounds made by 'trees'. As the poem tells us, the forest the speaker hears was once cut down, meaning that there was a time when these sounds were not made, but now that the land is reforested, the 'trees' again make these significant noises by catching the wind.

By connecting the degradation of the local environment to the language used to describe that environment in the poem's second stanza, Merwin reveals something about his literary enterprise, namely that just as the erection of trees has enabled nature to make these meaningful sounds, so there is a need for words to be erected that allow us to better catch nature in our language. This idea is broached again in the poem 'Utterance', which uses a simile comparing 'words' to the sound of 'night wind in pines' that indicates that the two sounds are connected:

> Sitting over words
> very late I have heard a kind of whispered sighing
> not far
> like a night wind in pines or like the sea in the dark
> the echo of everything that has ever
> been spoken
> still spinning its one syllable
> between the earth and silence[285]

This poem provides a final piece that was missing from 'Rain at Night'. In 'Rain at Night', Merwin's conflation of the degradations of environment and language hints that language can emulate the kind of resurgence achieved by the trees described in the second and fourth stanzas. 'Utterance' makes this argument more explicitly because of its implication that the described 'whispered sighing' is coming from the 'words'

[285] Merwin, 'Utterance', in *Merwin: Collected Poems,* p. 647.

themselves. Whether the speaker is literally hearing a noise, or whether this hearing refers to words' stimulation of thought, this experience is described similarly to the experience of hearing the 'old trees' in 'Rain at Night' in its quasi-supernatural undertones. This similarity is underscored by the fact that the sound of this 'whispered sighing' reminds the speaker of 'a night wind in pines'.

This observation about Merwin's twinning of trees and words as objects that sound nature complements Dunning's analysis of the interconnections between Merwin's conservationist and poetic practices. Merwin's commitment to this sounding of nature is borne out in both his work protecting and cultivating endangered indigenous plants in his Maui garden and in his poetry. In establishing the argument that Merwin's literary work presents a connection between the planting of trees and the writing of poetry, the next question we must ask is how exactly Merwin's writing process emulates his process for planting trees. If, as Cavell argues, Thoreau uses the hoeing of the bean field as a metaphor for the way his writing attempts to rejuvenate literal language by subjecting such language to a metaphorical and figurative treatment, we must ask what type of writing is the metaphorical equivalent to the planting of trees in Merwin's poetry.

Probing with 'Plainness'

The remainder of this chapter will draw a comparison between Merwin's use of 'plainness' as a tool for stimulating the emergence of meaning in poetic writing and his conditioning of the soil in his Maui garden to facilitate the growth of plants.

Merwin's concept of 'plainness' emerges from a discussion about Thoreau in an interview with Ed Folsom and Cary Nelson. Whilst explaining this idea of poetry as unpremeditated writing, Merwin praises the way that Thoreau 'even in a paragraph takes his own perception and develops it into a deeper and deeper way of seeing something'. This is a quality of Thoreau's writing that, according to Merwin, sets the writer of *Walden* apart from Walt Whitman, whose writing Merwin believes to be 'rhetorical […] in the sense of rhetoric as public speech: you decide on a stance and then you bring in material to flesh out that stance'. Merwin suggests that, unlike Thoreau, who used writing as a 'a program for confronting existence', Whitman's 'stance is basically *there*; and much of the poetry simply adds detail to it'.[286]

[286] W.S. Merwin, Ed Folsom and Cary Nelson, '"Fact Has Two Faces": An Interview with W.S. Merwin', *The Iowa Review,* 13.1 (winter, 1982), 30-66 (pp. 32-33).

Later in the interview with Folsom and Nelson, Merwin returns to Whitman's 'rhetorical' style to clarify an 'impulse in the direction of plainness' in his own poetry

> I've seen some critical commentary confusing plainness and what's been called the *quietness* of the poems. I don't know if they really are quiet or not. They don't seem quiet to *me* obviously. But there are not so many decibels as there are in Whitman, though Whitman has moments of another kind of power. A line like "A woman waits for me" seems to me to have at least as much emotional power as "I hear America singing" – you know, I don't care if he hears America singing; I *do* care when he says "A woman waits for me."[287]

In terms of Merwin's comparison of the two Whitman lines in this excerpt, it seems that a characteristic of this 'plainness' that Merwin recognises in his own writing and in the line 'A woman waits for me' is its unassumingness. The line 'A woman waits for me' is more unassuming than the line 'I hear America singing' in the sense that whereas in the latter line the speaker confidently claims to hear the cohesive song of an entire nation, the former line offers a very modest assertion. However, if writing is to provide 'a program for confronting existence', it is necessary for there to be a level of unassumingness in the writing; if writing is to be a process we engage to *discover* meaning, it is important for the poem to give the writer and reader something to discover. Both of the lines to which Merwin refers in the excerpt name and provide the opening lines for their respective poems. In the case of 'I hear America singing', the bombastic metaphor employed in this opening line gives the poem nowhere to go in terms of a discovery. The line offers a master metaphor for the poem, it expresses an epiphany of its writer from the outset of the piece so that the remainder of the poem can clarify this epiphany. In contrast, the opening line from 'A Woman Waits for Me' is so easily understood as a piece of information that the poetry of the line remains concealed, meaning that it is has somewhere to go in terms of establishing the significance of this information.

'Plainness' is an essential characteristic of Merwin's own poetry because it facilitates his poetic investigation into meaningful experiences in nature. The nature poems in *The Rain in the Trees* describe a particular experience that Merwin has had in nature. The descriptions of these experiences often open with lines that provide basic

[287] Ibid., p. 37.

descriptions of their speaker's movements and limited observations of nature before building up to a moment of affirmation in nature. Consider, for instance, the middle section of 'Pastures' in which Merwin plots the movements which led him to the sublime scene of an 'open | pasture':

> one day my mother
> and the woman we were visiting
> wanted to talk about things
> they did not want me to hear
>
> so I walked out past the pig pen
> under the apple trees
> and the first pigs I had seen
> alive
> crowded to the corner
> to look at me
>
> I passed the barn
> where bands of light
> reached between the boards
> to touch the back of sheep
> standing and doing
> nothing in the shadow
>
> and went up the green track
> to the top of the ridge
> and saw the open
> pasture sloping
> away to the woods
> it was another sky
> a day of its own
> it was the night pasture[288]

[288] Merwin, 'Pastures', in *Merwin: Collected Poems,* pp. 630-632 (pp. 630-631).

The *OED* describes poetry as '[c]omposition in verse or some comparable patterned arrangement of language in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm'.[289] When analysing the first three stanzas of this section of 'Pastures' individually, it is difficult to find evidence of poetic 'intensity'. The first stanza, for instance, provides the basic detail of why the young Merwin was sent away from the company of his 'mother' and her 'friend'. We might want to project certain feelings on to the young Merwin, feelings of rejection perhaps, but the stanza itself has no 'ideas' or 'feelings' about the subject. When read in isolation, the second stanza is also unpoetic in terms of the *OED* definition. Again, there is a feeling of neutrality in this stanza in the sense that it provides only the safest details. All we can garner from the first two lines is that the speaker 'walked' beyond a 'pig pen' and 'under' some 'apple trees'. The speaker does not convey his feelings or ideas about this, we simply get the facts. Whilst we might want to read into the significance of the speaker's statement that these were 'the first pigs I had seen', we can draw no certain conclusions about why, or the extent to which, this experience was significant to him. Similarly, whilst the stanza describes the 'pigs' themselves '[crowding] to the corner | to look at' the young Merwin, the speaker does not convey any feelings or ideas about the 'pigs' or their actions.

The poetry in these stanzas comes not from the expression of this information, however, but rather from the process by which such details are stitched together. By the time of reading the second stanza, and with the reason for Merwin's 'mother' sending him away established, we recognise that the described experience is developing a certain texture. We wonder, for instance, if the poem is setting up a metaphorical equivalence between Merwin and the 'pigs' on the basis that they are both regimented by their overseers. Moreover, the fact that the 'pigs' move towards Merwin out of curiosity also hints that there is some sort of kinship between Merwin and these animals. The thematic resonance of the poem further develops in the third stanza. The 'sheep' are also regimented by being kept in a 'barn' but, unlike the 'pigs', they stand in the 'shadow' of the barn facing away from Merwin. The mysteriousness of the 'sheep' is further emphasised through the eerie description of them 'doing | nothing in the shadow'. Whilst, then, there were suggestions of kinship between

[289] 'poetry, n.', *OED Online* <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/146552?redirectedFrom=poetry> [accessed 02 September 2017]

Merwin and the 'pigs', the 'sheep' are more comparable to Merwin's 'mother' through their secretive and exclusionary actions.

The tensions built up by these developing thematic resonances are relieved in the final stanza. In its own understated way, this stanza presents this discovery of the 'open | pasture' as something of a wondrous moment through the lines 'it was another sky | a day of its own'. Until the last excerpted stanza, the speaker of the poem is reluctant to read into the meaning of his observations and, instead, the poem encourages us to read between the lines of these details, which subsequently makes these confident, awestruck statements especially striking. It would be false to say, however, that these descriptions of 'another sky' and 'a day of its own' are metaphorical. These stanzas describe the experience of a young person discovering the environment for one of the first times on his own, and the poem is stating that to his uneducated eyes it literally seems as if this 'open | pasture' lies beneath 'another sky' and exists' in a 'day of its own'. Of course, Merwin knows that he did not actually see 'another sky' or another 'day', at least not in the way we would understand these things scientifically, however, this sublime vision of the 'open pasture' is not proposing an alternative scientific theory to the 'pasture', rather it suggests that nature *evades* our scientific explanations and categorisations. In this way, Merwin returns to the idea that human intelligence is never able to fully grasp the experience of nature, as is expressed in 'Sky in September' when he claims that 'in spite of months of knowing | and the years | autumn comes with astonishment'.

In light of the tensions built up through the first three stanzas of this section of 'Pastures', the affirmation that Merwin describes in the fourth stanza suggests that this cathartic moment is, at least partly, catalysed by the speaker's realisation that he will better understand the world by escaping the structure of society and immersing himself in nature. The 'pasture', the vastness of which is emphasised by the description of it having 'a sky of its own', is juxtaposed with the regimentation of the farm, where the 'pigs' and 'sheep' are confined and where Merwin himself has been excluded from the society of his 'mother' and her 'friend'. In establishing these tensions in the first three stanzas of this section of 'Pastures', the awestruck description of the 'open | pasture', in which the speaker proclaims with a newfound descriptive certainty that 'it was another a sky| a day of its own', brings about a sense of relief to this section of the poem. The regimented society of the farm troubles Merwin and he is evidently more comfortable with the '[openness]' of the 'pasture'. Moreover, the speaker's description of the 'open | pasture sloping | away to the woods' suggests that this 'open | pasture' is

tempting him even further away from society and into the concealed world of the 'woods'.

As Section One demonstrated, Merwin is very wary of the way humans impose systems of classification on nature with a misguided sense of authority and control and it is thus significant that the tension created in the first three stanzas of this excerpted section is relieved through the discovery of an 'open | pasture' that '[slopes] | away to the woods'. By the time of writing *The Rain in the Trees,* Merwin had chosen a path in his poetry and his personal life that took him away from the regimentation of Western society, and towards a remote area of Maui, Hawaii. Knowing this, we can read this section of 'Pastures' as describing a formative experience in a life that has embraced the nourishing openness of nature.

On the basis of this analysis, it is clear that Merwin has a Thoreauvian interpretation of poetic writing. The reason why we find the 'poetry' of this section of 'Pastures' in its building of thematic resonance rather than in the 'intensity' of its descriptions is because Merwin's nature poems attempt to investigate the meaning of natural experiences rather than present pre-established ideas about natural experiences. Far from seeing himself as a 'transparent eye-ball' in nature, as did Emerson in 'Nature', Merwin believes that moments of affirmation in nature arrive through a process of engagement.[290] Many of the nature poems in *The Rain in the Trees* describe experiences of Merwin's in which he has immersed himself in nature and has, as the result of his attention and patience, been rewarded by a cathartic glimpse of its beauty. Through the narrative structure of his poems, then, Merwin suggests to his reader that we cannot step into nature and expect to immediately enjoy a transcendental relationship with the natural world, rather we must pay attention and appreciate moments of affirmation when they come.

However, the 'plain' detailing of the young Merwin's movements on the farm in the first three stanzas of this section from 'Pastures' is not merely intended to model Merwin's perception of the human experience in nature. Just as Merwin thinks that affirmative moments arrive from engagement in nature, so he believes that poems that try to elucidate the meaning of natural experiences must also engage their subject to yield meaning. If we are to clarify how Merwin's poetry conducts such an engagement, an obvious point must first be established, namely that Merwin does not know what exactly a poem is going to say before he puts pen to paper. In other words, rather than

[290] 'Nature', p. 6.

establishing what idea or argument a poem will present prior to writing, the writing of a nature poem is, for Merwin, a process through which he establishes an idea or argument. In this section of 'Pastures', Merwin is attempting to make sense of a sublime experience that he had as a boy. In this sense, Merwin's 'plain' observations and recollections provided in 'Pastures' find him reviewing the events that led up to this sublime moment. The descriptions in these opening three stanzas are not conventionally poetic because Merwin is, at this point in the poem, still trying to make sense of the poetry of the event in question. Nevertheless, over the course of writing these three stanzas, certain tensions build which leads Merwin to clarify the meaning of this experience in the final excerpted stanza.

'The Duck' is another nature poem from *The Rain in the Trees* that demonstrates Merwin's Thoreauvian approach to probing the experience of nature in poetry. The first four stanzas of the poem read:

> The first time that I
> was allowed to take out
> the white canoe
>
> because the lake was so still
> in the evening
> I slipped out on the long sky
>
> of midsummer across the light
> coming through the overturned
> dark trees
>
> I saw the duck catching
> the colors of fire
> as she moved over the bright glass[291]

The poem documents this experience in 'plain' language, but the poem itself shows that language is not necessarily objective or neutral because it is 'plain'. On a literal level, the first five lines of 'The Duck' set the scene for the poem by providing clear

[291] Merwin, 'The Duck', in *Merwin: Collected Poems,* p. 659.

information, specifically that Merwin was first allowed, presumably by his parents, to go canoeing on the 'lake' because the 'lake' was 'still' on that 'evening' and less hazardous to an inexperienced canoer. However, these details also betray the fact that this experience holds great significance for Merwin and these ostensibly basic and straightforward pieces of information hint at further meaning. The sense of excitement he felt at the prospect of canoeing on the 'lake' is particularly perceptible. That Merwin specifically remembers being permitted to 'take out | the white canoe', rather than 'a canoe' or even 'the canoe', suggests that he had imagined taking to the lake in *that* specific canoe prior to this moment. Similarly, whilst the use adverb 'so' in the description of the 'lake' being 'so still' implies that Merwin's parents gave him permission to canoe because the 'lake' was particularly 'still', the sense of wonder instilled in the speaker by the stillness of the 'lake' later in the poem suggests that the speaker's conveyance of his parents' reasoning for letting him use the canoe is mixed with his feelings of awe in regard to the 'lake'.

Of course, Merwin is not oblivious to the way his feelings come through in the communication of these details, but neither are these details set up to be clues through which the reader uncovers the poem's hidden meaning. Merwin realises that the significance of the experience described in the poem is personal to him and, as such, these lines evidence that the poet is embracing the way that his memories are shaped by the feelings which he attaches to the event in question. The ambition of the poem is to investigate how the described experience was significant to him and, for that reason, he *wants* the language he uses to betray the subjective significance of the event. Merwin knows that he will be able to learn about the experience's significance to him by making sense of the event through the writing of a poem.

Merwin continues to keep this commitment to his original memories in 'The Duck' through the descriptions of '[slipping] out on the long sky | of midsummer' and '[seeing] the duck catching | the colors of fire'. Merwin knows that he was not literally canoeing on the sky and that the colours of the '[duck's]' coat did not actually take on the properties of 'the colors of fire', but such descriptions are accurate in conveying how the 'lake' and the 'duck' looked to him at those moments. As with the description of 'the open | pasture' existing under 'another sky' and in 'a day of its own' in 'Pastures', it is questionable whether these statements from 'The Duck' are even metaphorical, given that they describe how Merwin saw that scene at the time. The experience described in the poem was itself sublime, a moment in which Merwin saw something in nature that defied human logic and, in turn, the language he uses to explain such an

experience lapses into what we would think of as metaphor. The fact that the line between metaphorical and literal language becomes so blurred in 'The Duck' attests to the inability of language, as a human concept, to capture with any sense of literality the immensity of nature.

The sublime vision of 'the duck' described in the poem demonstrates the limitations of human understanding of nature, however, as with 'Pastures', this does not mean that Merwin did not find truth in this experience. The ending of the 'The Duck' implies that, such was the power of the experience described in the poem, that Merwin was compelled to follow 'the duck' down the river and, subsequently, attentively observe nature for the rest of his life:

> and I glided after
> until she dove
> and I followed with the white canoe
>
> and look what I find
> long afterwards
> the world of the living[292]

The truth which Merwin established as a result of his experience was that the beauty of nature could be a guiding force in his life and the final three lines suggest that Merwin feels he has been rewarded in holding this belief by since being able to 'find […] the world of the living'. In these final two stanzas, then, 'The Duck' suggests that, whilst nature's truths are beyond human perception, through first-hand experience of nature we can establish beliefs that will help guide us in our actions.

The poem's epistemological outlook is, in this sense, compatible with the epistemological outlook of pragmatism. In my introduction, I explained the pragmatic approach to truth by showing how James and, to some extent, Peirce are sceptical of the human ability to comprehend absolute truth and, instead, propose that we judge the integrity of our beliefs according to the agreeableness of the consequences that occur because of our subscription to those beliefs. Such a position is reflected in James' argument in *Pragmatism* that 'the possession of true thoughts means everywhere the

[292] 'The Duck', p. 659.

possession of invaluable instruments of action'.[293] The epistemological outlook of 'The Duck' reflects this Jamesian argument in its assertion of Merwin's belief in the beauty of nature as a guiding force, as this belief leads him to establish a mode of action that eventually results in him '[finding] | long afterwards | the world of the living'. This belief might not be true in any absolute sense, however; Merwin knows that these absolute truths about nature are always beyond us. For this reason, Merwin believes that our best course of action is to establish beliefs on the basis of attentive first-hand experience of nature as, whilst we can never claim that these are absolute truths, they will help us better navigate our relationship with nature.

W.S. Merwin's Working of Language in W.S. Merwin

We learn from 'The House and Garden' that the greatest difficulty that Merwin faced in restoring his land in Maui was not raising plants and trees, it was planting seeds. Little grew on the soil on the 'wasteland' that Merwin bought, so he had to work out, through a process of trial and error, what plants and trees would grow. Over time, the trees and plants he successfully planted enriched the soil, meaning that the soil could accommodate a wider variety of seeds, and thus the trial and error process continued.[294] Merwin engages with poetry in a similar way to conservation in the sense that the meanings of his poems emerge during the process of writing the poem. At the beginning of the poem Merwin may well have in mind what subject the poem will engage but he does not know *how* the poem will engage that subject or what the poem will glean from that subject. My analyses of 'Pastures' and 'The Duck' shows that Merwin's use of 'plain' language allows him to probe for meaning in a poem as such language allows his poetry to organically establish its own thematic and metaphorical resonances. To return to the metaphorical equivalence between the planting of trees and the writing of poetry in *The Rain in the Trees,* this equivalence is established on the basis that, firstly, both enterprises require a commitment to a trial and error process, and secondly, that language is akin to soil in the sense that the writer must work it in order to yield some kind of meaning, with 'plainness' being the particular tool which Merwin uses to engage language in this way.

It is important to clarify, however, exactly what these meanings represent to Merwin. The speaker's reverential descriptions in both 'Pastures' and 'The Duck'

[293] James, p. 89.

[294] 'The House and Garden', pp. 21-23.

demonstrate that language is inferior to nature. Merwin does not lament this, in fact these two poems revel in the sublime beauty of nature when it confounds our established understanding. The discovered meanings of the nature poems in *The Rain in the Trees*, then, are not nature's meanings, rather they are the meanings of Merwin's specific experience of nature. Whilst the analysis of the excerpted section of 'Pastures', for instance, demonstrated that Merwin finds a truth through his experience of 'the open | pasture', this truth belongs to him rather than the 'pasture'. This section of 'Pastures' acknowledges that the 'pasture' itself is unknowable in the absolute and we therefore cannot know its truths, but it also suggests that, if we immerse ourselves in nature, we can establish an understanding which better guides us in our relationship with nature. Whilst we are unable to absolutely know nature, then, the poem suggests that we can attain a more pragmatic sense of it when we properly engage with it. It is because of this epistemological outlook that Merwin poems are able to argue for the benefits of moments of original perception in nature without, in Scigaj's words '[reverting] to romanticism', because the poems emphasise that such experiences are 'momentary, relational, grounded in the limits of human perception' (pp. 185-186).

To return to my notion of a poetic work, Merwin's poetry fulfils the three criteria for poetry which performs a working in language. Merwin's preference for Thoreau over Whitman demonstrated that Merwin values poetry which commits to a process of discovery, a process which he himself commits to in the nature poems studied in this section. Moreover, the fact that Merwin presents poetry as a means of reconnecting writers and readers to the natural world at a time of environmental crisis suggests that poetry can perform a culturally significant task by rejuvenating and sharpening our perception of nature. However, in foregrounding the insurmountable limitations in the human understanding of nature, Merwin also acknowledges that the work of the poet is never complete. As the analysis of 'Pastures' and 'The Duck' demonstrated, Merwin does not think poetry can help bridge the gap between word and world, rather he suggests that the poetic engagement of the natural world can help us find affirmative glimpses of reality which will help us better navigate this gap. This point is important because it emphasises that, like Ammons, Merwin believes that we must continually reengage with the natural world to remain attuned to our environment. The introduction referenced a *PBS* interview in which Merwin compares his poetic process to his trial and error process of conservation on the basis that 'a real

poem always, always […] takes you by surprise'.[295] For Merwin, it is poetry's capacity for discovering new perspectives, for facilitating 'surprise', that marks it out as a medium which can help us rejuvenate our perception of the natural world.

[295] 'How poet W.S. Merwin found paradise by planting palm trees' <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/poet-w-s-merwin-found-paradise-planting-palm-trees/> [accessed 02 September 2017]

'If History Is a Record of Survivors, Poetry Shelters Other Voices': Susan Howe's Poetic Work of Rescue

Section One

Susan Howe is, like Charles Bernstein, a writer who explores areas of overlap between poetry and literary criticism. Indeed, whilst the Howe publications discussed in this chapter, *The Birth-Mark* (1993) and *Singularities* (1990), are considered works of literary criticism and poetry respectively, Howe's poetic style of writing in the former publication and her engagement with archived material in the latter, demonstrates the extent to which her scholarly and poetic ambitions are intertwined. With this in mind, one can read the following lines from the introduction to *The Birth-Mark* as a statement of intent for both Howe's critical and poetic writings:

> Voices I am following lead me to the margins. Anne Hutchinson's verbal expression is barely audible in the scanty second- or thirdhand records of her two trials. Dorothy Talbye, Mrs. Hopkins, Mary Dyer, Thomas Shepard, Mrs. Sparhawk, Brother Crackbone's wife, Mary Rowlandson, Barbary Cutter, Cotton Mather may have been searching for grace in the wilderness of the world. They express to me a sense of unrevealedness.[296]

As this chapter will show, these lines speak to Howe's ambition to read between the lines of texts found in archives and libraries in order to find the '[v]oices' of figures whose modes of expression were marginalised in their own time and have, furthermore, neither been permitted to contribute to the official records of American history nor been fully appreciated in the field of literary criticism. Howe's ambition in both her literary criticism and her poetry is to explore the 'sense of unrevealedness' in the edited, censored accounts of figures such as Mary Dyer, Thomas Shepard, and Mary Rowlandson in order to rescue their '[v]oices' from the 'margins' of American history and literary criticism. Howe does not exclusively look to rescue puritan '[v]oices', as the above extract implies, but she does see this period in American history as being formative in establishing a hegemonic impulse in American culture.

Section One of this chapter will analyse *The Birth-Mark* in order to establish why Howe detects an 'unrevealedness' in the texts which make up American archives and

[296] *The Birth-Mark*, p. 4.

libraries. In this piece of literary criticism Howe interrogates several definitions of the term 'enthusiasm' in order to expose the presence of a certain pernicious impulse in American culture which silences the '[v]oices' of 'enthusiasts'. Ultimately, Howe argues, the dismissive treatment of 'enthusiasts' conceals a deeply rooted American cultural tendency to protect an unfounded sense of epistemological certainty. The section will conclude by clarifying why Howe echoes Julia Kristeva in presenting poetic language as an especially powerful tool for disrupting the hegemonic tendencies of American culture and exposing the illusion of epistemological certainty.

Section Two will build on these ideas about poetic language by demonstrating how Howe attempts to give voice to marginalised figures through the poetic working of formative American historical texts. In the introduction I cited lines from *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007) in which Howe declares her intention to poetically engage historical texts found in Yale University's Sterling Memorial Library in such a way as to release meanings which are concealed beneath the surface, or, to use Howe's term from the above excerpt, to explore 'a sense of unrevealedness' in these texts (p. 14). Section Two will examine Howe's specific attempt to poetically work passages from George Sheldon's *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts* (1895) in 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time', a poem from *Singularities*. Howe specifically remixes words and phrases from Sheldon's record of The Battle of Turner's Falls (1676) in order to recreate a sense of the experience of being a participant in this conflict. In performing this poeticising of Sheldon's text, Howe thus attempts to cut beneath the official, polished records of events such as The Battle of Turner's Falls which, she believes, consolidate the master narratives of American history.

The 'Inadequate Grounds' of American 'Enthusiasm'

In the opening chapters of *The Birth-Mark*, Howe describes a tension that exists in American culture between 'enthusiasm' and positivism. As with Bernstein's 'Artifice of Absorption', Howe deliberately avoids providing clear-cut definitions or interpretations of these two terms, partly because, as will be shown throughout this section's analysis of *The Birth-Mark*, her methodology as a critic is to probe the claims and perspectives of formative American texts in order to uncover revealing areas of slippage. However, broadly speaking, Howe implies that the label of 'enthusiast' has, historically, been applied to someone who is considered to overly rely on the faculty of imagination when making sense of the world, whereas the positivist is considered to be a person who defers to common sense and fact. Of course, this idea that someone

can defer to common sense in order to establish an objective picture of the world is a contentious one, and Howe calls this side of positivist epistemology into question over the course of *The-Birth Mark*.

In utilising definitions of an 'enthusiast' from Noah Webster and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Howe characterises the 'enthusiast' as a person who revels in feelings such as 'imagination', '[excitement]', '[fancifulness]', and 'intensity' which are catalysed by 'the pursuit' of, or 'absorption' in, an object. Additionally, Webster's description of the 'enthusiast' as possessing a sense of 'elevated fancy' and 'exalted ideals' and Coleridge's description of the 'enthusiast' as being in a state of 'absorption' hints that the 'enthusiast' overindulges in, or becomes overwhelmed by, such emotions (pp. 11-12).

The negative undertones of Webster and Coleridge's definitions of 'enthusiasm' are brought to the surface by Howe through references to their definitions of a synonym of 'enthusiasm', 'fancy'. For Coleridge, 'fancy' is 'the faculty of bringing together images dissimilar in the main by some one point or more of likeness distinguished' and he praises Shakespeare's possession of 'fancy', which he feels is evident in the 'power by which one image or feeling is made to modify many others, and by a sort of *fusion to force many into one*' in the playwright's work. Despite this description of 'fancy' as a powerful type of imaginative force, Howe points out that Coleridge was disparaging of 'fancy' in the sense that he believed it to be 'the lower aggregating and associative power of the mind' in relation to 'imagination' (p. 11). Indeed, when considered in relation to Coleridge's description of 'enthusiasm', the '[fanciful]' writer appears to be, for Coleridge, a person of creativity and talent, but whose work is also burdened by flightiness and insubstantiality. Webster also emphasises the insubstantiality of 'fancy' when he states that the word is 'contracted from *fantasy.* Fancy: false notion, caprice, whim' (p. 12). Like Coleridge, then, Webster too presents 'fancy' as an imaginative force which is devoid of grounding and rationality.

Howe is conscious of the way that this notion of 'fancy' as a creative but flighty type of 'imagination' demonstrates the extent to which the quality of 'fancy' has been gendered. Indeed, she states that 'fancy' is 'an irredeemably feminine word for most Americans. In our democratic culture men are not encouraged to display elevated fancy or exalted ideals' (p. 12). Whilst such gender stereotyping might be implicitly rather than explicitly present in Coleridge and Webster's definitions of 'enthusiasm' and 'fancy', Howe cites the nineteenth century Reverend Walter Birch's scathing review of 'enthusiasm' in order to draw out the gendered backdrop of these definitions. For

Birch, 'fancy' is 'a presumption' which is the 'highest and most perilous *in kind* to conceive' because of the way it 'is essential to *her* [Howe's italics] nature to assume the fact, upon inadequate grounds, of an extraordinary communication of notions, figures, powers, or authority from above'. The danger of this notion of 'extraordinary communication', Birch argues, is that it prevents an 'enthusiast' from 'submitting *her* opinion […] to the rule of Scripture' (p. 12). Clearly, then, Birch's issue with the 'enthusiast' is that she believes she has a special power of communication with God, and thus bypasses scripture, even though the grounds upon which she justifies this power are 'inadequate'.

Howe presents positivism as a philosophical theory that is considered by its proponents to provide the grounding and rationality from which the 'enthusiast' deviates. In other words, Howe implies that if the 'enthusiast' has historically been thought of as a person who indulges in flights of fancy, then the positivist has been thought of as a person who relies on fact and objective, scientific truth. Michael Crotty states that modern day adherents of 'positivism' believe that 'what is posited or given in direct experience is what is observed, the observation in question being scientific observation carried out by the way of the scientific method'. Positivism incorporates a foundationalist epistemology in the sense that it believes that scientific knowledge is objective, meaning that, in Crotty's words, science '*discovers* meaning for it is able to grasp objective meaning, that is, meaning already inherent in the objects it considers'.[297] One can thus understand why the positivist, who believes that science allows us to completely comprehend the essence of an object, might make similar accusations against the 'enthusiast' as do Coleridge and Webster. Howe cites Coleridge's argument that 'enthusiasm' involves 'the absorption of the individual in the object contemplated from the vividness and or intensity of his conceptions and convictions' (p. 12), meaning that the 'enthusiast' becomes overwhelmed by the object they are contemplating. One can see, therefore, that the positivist who believes that science can fully comprehend the nature of a particular object might be wary of 'enthusiasm' and its propensity for clouding one's judgment.

As has been well established at this point in the thesis, however, many prominent philosophers object to the idea that scientific discovery can claim to be objective. Numerous philosophers share James' view that '[m]an engenders truth' and,

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[297] Michael Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (St Leonards: SAGE Publications, 1998), p. 20, p. 27.

as Crotty acknowledges, many scientists have demonstrated the inevitable fallibility of science.[298] For these reasons, critics of positivism such as Max Horkheimer argue that '[i]n view of the fact that the ruling economic powers use science as well as the whole of society for their special ends, this ideology, this identification of thought with the special sciences, must lead to the perpetuation of the *status quo*'.[299] Horkheimer thus suggests that positivism's claims to objectivity are dangerous in the sense that it attempts to pass off its findings about the world as natural and scientific when these findings are inevitably shaped by a particular ideology.

Howe echoes Horkheimer's concerns about positivism when she writes in *The Birth-Mark* that '[w]hen we move through the positivism of literary canons and master narratives, we consign ourselves to the legitimation of power, chains of inertia, an apparatus of capture' (p. 46). In connecting the 'positivism of literary canons and master narratives' to the consolidation of systems of power in *The Birth-Mark*, Howe implies that positivism is a philosophy that disguises forces of control and subjugation under the pretence of objective knowledge. Similarly, in 'Thorow' Howe warns of how '[i]n paternal colonial systems a positivist efficiency appropriates primal indeterminacy'.[300] Not only does Howe suggest here that positivism has been a 'paternal colonial' tool of '[appropriation]', but she also hints that 'indeterminacy' is intolerable in these 'systems'. In this way, Howe implies that, in embracing positivism, the powers that be in American history have been able to conceal a particular agenda for consolidating power under the guise of neutrality, whilst also hinting that American culture has historically preferred to protect epistemological certainty over indeterminacy. The implication here is, therefore, that in order to avoid 'indeterminacy' the ruling forces in America have chosen to embrace certain contentious notions or ideas as absolute truth.

We can thus see that in echoing Birch's warning about 'enthusiasts' expressing themselves on 'inadequate grounds', Coleridge and Webster are implicated in Howe's criticism of the positivism and its misguided and manipulative sense of objectivity.

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[298] James, p. 112.

[299] Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. by Matthew J. O'Connell and others (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 179.

[300] Susan Howe, 'Thorow', in *Singularities* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), pp. 39-59 (p. 40). Further references to this poem are given after quotations in the text.

Both Coleridge and Webster implicitly embrace Birch's idea that the work of 'enthusiasts' lacks rigour or grounding, but the question at this point is what exactly this type of grounding entails. All three definers of 'enthusiasm' criticise 'enthusiasts' for their lack of intellectual rigour and rationality, but Howe believes that these notions of intellectuality and reason are a façade behind which American culture protects a manipulative, and markedly irrational, agenda.

Puritanism to Positivism

In showing how Coleridge's and Webster's definitions of 'enthusiasm' and 'fancy' implicitly consolidate the authoritarian and misogynistic undertones which are found in Birch's definition of an 'enthusiast', Howe draws an intriguing connection between the influences of religion and positivism in America. Coleridge, Webster, and Birch all suggest that the 'enthusiast' lacks a certain grounding and rigour in her patterns of thought, but given Howe's scepticism of epistemological certitude, Birch's assertion that the 'enthusiast' blasphemously evades 'the rule of Scripture' is revealing. Howe extensively explores the significance of this connection between religion and positivism through her analysis of Anne Hutchinson's role in the Antinomian Controversy which took place in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the seventeenth century. For Howe, this event reveals the legacy that the Puritans would have in embedding an unfounded sense of epistemological certitude in American culture.

Hutchinson is arguably the archetypal 'enthusiast' for Howe due to the way her actions during the Antinomian Controversy, which were highly '[presumptuous]' on Birch's terms, challenged the strict order and epistemological structures of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The Antinomian Controversy began in 1636 as a result of conflict between, on the one side, colony ministers and magistrates, and on the other side, John Cotton and adherents of his theology of 'free grace'. Hutchinson, a devoted follower of Cotton, disagreed with ministers' endorsement of a 'covenant of works' which according to David D. Hall involved the taking of 'outward evidence of "sanctification" -- leading a righteous life -- to mean that Christ had redeemed, or justified, a person's soul'.[301] Hall states that, in keeping with Cotton's 'covenant of grace', Hutchinson believed that 'those who received the Spirit never had to doubt their estate again', meaning that ministers' encouragement for colony members to '[strive]

[301] David D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 6.

after "signs" of grace was a sure sign that grace had not been granted'.[302] Hutchinson was not the only person to be tried during the Antinomian Controversy but she has become the emblematic figure of this event because of the extent of her criticisms against colony ministers and the severity of her punishment. Having been banished and excommunicated from the colony in 1638, Hutchinson settled in New Netherland where in 1643 she was killed by Siwanoy warriors during Kieft's War.

Hutchinson is thus the definitive 'enthusiast' in relation to Birch's description in the sense that she claimed to have an 'extraordinary communication' with God whilst neglecting 'the rule of Scripture'. However, Howe believes that Hutchinson's harsh treatment by ministers and magistrates attests to the colony authority figures' wider anxieties about the potential for disruption in their strictly ordered society as much is it does about their belief in a 'covenant of works'. Hall explains that Hutchinson felt '[empowered] as teacher and prophet' by her claims about the 'the direct witness of the Holy Spirit' and, in adopting this theological position, she 'openly [defied] the hierarchical authority that men derived from their gender, and from gender-restricted learning'.[303] The extent to which this threat to 'hierarchical authority' was felt by ministers was evidenced, Hall argues, in the development of

> a rhetoric of "heresy" that rested on assumptions about gender, learnedness, and order. This rhetoric entailed a sharply dualistic understanding of the good and the bad: orthodoxy and heresy, the forces of God on the one side, the forces of Satan on the other.[304]

From Hall's perspective, then, the threat of Hutchinson's criticism of a 'covenant of works' concerned colony ministers on two levels. Firstly, the 'covenant of grace' promoted by Hutchinson, in which citizens were encouraged to focus on establishing an individual relationship with God rather than defining their relationship with God according to their actions within a community, represented a threat to the strict governance of the community by colony ministers. Secondly, Hutchinson felt empowered by the 'covenant of grace' to the extent that she was openly challenging and criticising authority figures within the colony. Given that, as Hall states in the

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[302] Ibid., p. 18.

[303] Hall, p. xi.

[304] Ibid., p. xii.

extracted passage above, authority figures in the colony reacted to Cotton and followers such as Hutchinson by establishing a 'rhetoric of "heresy"' which was embedded in a 'dualistic understanding of the good and the bad', it is clear that Hutchinson represented a threat to order and social convention.

Hall thus suggests that colony ministers were concerned as much, if not more, with the threat that Hutchinson presented to their authority and the established order of the community than the threat she presented to the religious wellbeing of their community. Howe takes this idea a step further in the following quotations from *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-Mark* respectively when she suggests that ministers' determination to protect convention arose from the precariousness of their life in the New World:

> A struggling community at the edge of mapped earth, whose citizens too often witnessed the malevolent power in nature, couldn't at first tolerate the chaos of a mystical vision of grace as free imaginative force. To quell real terror, they must discipline nature, smother the arbitrary power of Jehovah with a Covenant.[305]

> From the first, Divinity was knotted in Place. If the Place was found wanting, and it was by many, a rhetoric had to be double-knotted to hold perishing absolutism safe.[306]

The environment of New England challenged inhabitants of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in several ways. In describing the community as existing on 'the edge of mapped earth', Howe is alluding to the fact that Puritan settlers were attempting to establish communities in a place that was, for them, unknown and unmapped. The uncertainty of life in New England was compounded by an extreme climate and poor soil. Moreover, whilst the colony initially enjoyed relatively peaceful relationships with Native Americans, disputes over territory boundaries led to hostility, violence, and war in New

[305] Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (New York: New Directions Books, 2007), p. 46.

[306] *The Birth*-Mark, p. 49.

England.[307] All of these factors contributed to what John Winthrop called the 'wilderness troubles in our first plantings' (*The Birth*-Mark, p. 48).

Howe's perception of these 'wilderness troubles' is supported by Roderick Frazier Nash who explains the 'formidable threat' that the wilderness presented to seventeenth century settlers. Nash argues that whilst '[t]he discovery of the New World rekindled the traditional European notion than an earthly paradise lay somewhere to the west', such hopes were dispelled when 'frontiersmen had to contend with wilderness as uncontrolled and terrifying as that which primitive man confronted', a wilderness in which 'the forest's darkness hid savage men, wild beasts, and still stranger creatures of the imagination'. Furthermore, Nash states that, due to the way that the American frontiersmen 'shared the long Western tradition of imagining wild country as moral vacuum', they 'acutely sensed that they battled wild country not only for personal survival but in the name of nation, race, and God'. In '[acquiring] significance as a dark and sinister symbol' in this way, Nash asserts, a 'morality play of westward expansion' emerged in which 'wilderness was the villain, and the pioneer, as hero, relished its destruction'. Like Howe, Nash suggests that this 'Christian conception of wilderness' resonated especially with the Puritans, who 'associated their migration with the Exodus'.[308]

In the extracted quotations from Howe above, she specifically focuses on how the fear of wilderness led Puritan settlers to thoroughly embrace the epistemological certainty of scripture and moral absolutism in order, firstly, to find solace in an alien land and, secondly, to preserve religious commitment at a testing time. Of course, Howe has Hutchinson and her 'covenant of grace' in mind when she describes how these settlers would not tolerate the notion of 'grace as free imaginative force'. We understand therefore that, from Howe's perspective, the extent of the friction between Hutchinson and colony ministers can be partly explained by the community's desperate need to stick to a conventionalised order in light of the uncertainty of daily life in the New England environment.

Birch's comments align him with the side of the magistrates and ministers who tried Hutchinson during the Antinomian Controversy in the sense that those parties also strictly recommended that individuals develop their relationship with God

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[307] Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness & the American Mind*, 4th edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 28.

[308] Ibid., pp. 24, 34, 35.

through 'the rule of Scripture', which for figures like Hutchinson meant through the 'rule' of the community's verified readers and interpreters of 'Scripture'. By contextualising Birch's comments about the dangers of women deviating from the authority of the 'rule of Scripture' in this way, Howe calls into question the criticisms of 'fancy' and 'enthusiasm' on the basis that they are rooted in a cultural imperative to adhere to established rules and convention which was borne out of anxiety and fear of the unknown rather than rationality and scientific investigation. In this sense, Howe is encouraging her reader to consider the fact that the work of 'enthusiasts' is not disparaged because they deviate from scientific or rational thinking about the world, but rather because American culture has an especial aversity to people, especially women, making sense of the world for themselves or on their own terms.

America as Text

Howe believes that the hegemonic, controlling impulse which brought about the banishment of Hutchinson from the Massachusetts Bay Colony has reverberated throughout American history and, indeed, throughout the records which document that history. Howe's sense of the pervasiveness of this impulse is evident when she describes being 'drawn toward the disciplines of history and literary criticism' but recognising that a 'dark wall of rule supports the structure of every letter, record, transcript: every proof of authority and power' (p. 4). Howe thus sees this controlling impulse as suppressing 'enthusiasts' in a variety of ways, and this can be demonstrated by considering how Hutchinson's 'enthusiasm' led to her being subjected to several types of banishment. When Howe writes that 'Anne Hutchinson was banished by the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, then murdered in the natural wilderness by history' (p. 4), she emphasises that Hutchinson was not only literally banished from her community, but also figuratively banished from the records of American history. Howe strongly believes that the authority figures in the Massachusetts Bay Colony were influential in establishing an American culture. For this reason, she recognises that these ministers' and magistrates' intolerance of Hutchinson's religious expression would manifest itself in the records of history in the sense that the story of the Antinomian Controversy would be told from their side.

In suggesting that the controlling impulse in American culture is present in the 'disciplines of history and literary criticism', Howe advances the idea that the very nature of literary expression in print is regulated in American culture. Indeed, it is for this very reason that Howe detects a 'sense of 'unrevealedness' in the texts she analyses

in *The Birth-Mark*. It is with this point in mind that Howe states that '[t]he antinomian controversy was the primordial struggle of North American literary expression'. Emily Dickinson and F. O. Matthiessen are two writers who Howe claims were censored by the policing of literary expression. In the case of Matthiessen, Howe explains that the esteemed literary critic felt a need to suppress in his published work an 'enthusiasm' which he exhibited in his letters to his partner, Russell Cheney. In these letters, Matthiessen celebrates 'Shelley's youthful idealism' and indicates that Whitman encouraged him to 'accept his sexuality in bold and romantic terms' (p. 14, p. 16). However, in his published work the critic finds issue with both poets on exactly these points. Howe states that Matthiessen, under the influence of an Eliotic interest in 'impersonality', 'deplored [Shelley's influence] on Hawthorne' in *American Renaissance* on the basis that it took Hawthorne away 'from what was actually seen and grasped' (p. 14). Howe also suggests that the 'public, critical Matthiessen divorced himself from the immediacy of Whitman the maternal enthusiast' when he criticised the way that Whitman 'breaks down all mature barriers […] to declare that he is "maternal" as well as paternal, a child as well as a man' (pp. 16-17). For Howe, these are pieces of writing in which Matthiessen's true appreciation of 'enthusiasm' in American literature could be hidden as he felt that it could not be expressed in his published work.

Howe's analysis of Matthiessen creates the picture of a conflicted man who found it difficult to reconcile his private 'enthusiasm' with his public role as literary scholar. Dickinson, who is presented as the prime successor to Hutchinson in *The Birth-Mark*, is another figure whose 'enthusiastic' writing interests Howe. Unlike Matthiessen, however, Howe presents Dickinson as a writer who was confident in the idiosyncrasy of her work, but whose 'enthusiasm' has been concealed by the 'manhandling' of her poetry by editors following the poet's death. Howe draws out this side of Dickinson by instigating a comparison between the poet and Hutchinson in the following lines:

> The antinomian controversy continues in the form, often called formlessness, of Dickinson's letters and poems during and after her crisis years of 1858-60. It continues with this nineteenth-century antinomian poet's gesture of infinite patience in preferring not to publish. Her demurral was a covenant of grace. The

> antinomian controversy continues in the first reordering and revision of her manuscripts according to a covenant of works.[309]

In describing Dickinson's decision not to publish her poems as a 'gesture of infinite patience', Howe is returning to a key argument from her earlier work of criticism, *My Emily Dickinson*, which asserts that a 'great writer's working process' is neglected in studies of Dickinson's work because the image of a 'poet-scholar in full possession of *her* voice won't fit the legend of deprivation and emotional disturbance'. Howe is particularly keen to contest the 'reductive portrait' of Dickinson as a 'spinster genius clothed in white *à* la Miss Haversham [*sic*]'. Of Dickinson's decision not to publish her poems, for instance, Howe states that '[f]ar from being the misguided modesty of an oppressed female ego', this decision was 'a consummate Calvinist gesture of self-assertion by a poet with faith to fling election loose across the incandescent shadows of futurity'.[310] By describing Dickinson's refusal to publish as a 'gesture of infinite patience' in this excerpt, Howe is again advancing the idea that this decision was a mark of the poet's confidence in the value of her work and her canny awareness that her unique poetic voice would be suppressed through publication in her own time. Given the way that Dickinson's poetry has, in Howe's opinion, been poorly edited since the poet's death, Dickinson's decision not to publish would seem to have been a perceptive one.

Dickinson is an 'enthusiast' for Howe because of her commitment to writing poetry as a 'physical event of immediate revelation' (p. 1). This poet, Howe proposes, believed that '[i]n the precinct of Poetry, a word, the space around a word, each letter, every mark, silence, or sound volatizes an inner law of form' (p. 145). In stating that each poem runs according to its own 'inner law of form', Howe is suggesting that, for Dickinson, a poem makes sense on its own terms rather than on the terms set by literary convention. Of course, an upshot of Dickinson's employment of a diverse set of rules over the course of her poetry is that Dickinson's poems are often very idiosyncratic, which is, in this case, tantamount to saying that there is a strangeness to her poetry. Established typographic and formal rules have traditionally been considered to facilitate communication between writer and reader. Coleridge, for example, suggests that the sonnet can distil the essence of a writer's emotions when he

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[309] *The Birth-Mark*, pp. 1-2.

[310] *My Emily Dickinson,* p. 24, p. x, p. 49.

describes this traditional form as producing 'a small poem, in which some lonely [i.e. single and coherent] feeling is developed'.[311] Michael O'Neill concurs with this idea that the sonnet facilitates the connection of the writer to the reader when he argues that John Milton's ability to 'blow "Soul-animating strains" reveals […] that the sonnet is equally valuable for what it offers the reader. If it unlocks the poet's heart, it animates the reader's soul'.[312] Both Coleridge and O'Neill thus show how established forms are considered to provide a familiar context for a reader to understand the intentions and meanings of a poem. With this in mind, Dickinson's deviation from typographic and formal conventions adds to the ambiguity of her work. Among the many idiosyncratic features of Dickinson's poetry that Howe identifies in *The Birth-Mark* are her irregular line endings. Howe uses the example of these irregular line endings to demonstrate the way that the idiosyncrasies of Dickinson's poems have been ridden roughshod by editors when she describes how '[b]y choosing a sovereign system for her line endings -- *his* preappointed Plan', Dickinson's posthumous editor Thomas H. Johnson 'established the constraints of a strained positivity' (p. 135). Howe's description of a 'strained positivity' suggests that a 'sovereign system', in other words an authoritative, consistent, and conventional format for line endings, has been forcefully employed by Johnson to mitigate the ambiguity of Dickinson's poetry. For Howe, such an editorial decision betrays the 'inner law form' that Dickinson developed in each of her poems.

Whilst Hutchinson received a much harsher punishment than Dickinson for transgressing, in Hall's words, the 'sharply dualistic understanding of the good and the bad' established within her community, Howe suggests that Dickinson was the victim of conventions in literary publication that are also 'sharply dualistic'. Indeed, this idea of the 'dualistic' nature of literary conventions is emphasised when Howe acknowledges that critics and editors have often detected a 'formlessness' in Dickinson's poetry. As the quotation from *The Birth-Mark* about the 'precinct of poetry' demonstrated, Howe believes that a poem generates its own 'law of form'. For Dickinson's editors on the other hand, Howe suggests, a poem that deviates from official formal conventions is without form. It is in this sense that Howe suggests that

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[311] 'Sonnet.', in *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, ed. by Dominic Head, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 1050

[312] Michael O'Neill, 'The Romantic Sonnet', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet,* ed. by A.D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 185-203 (pp. 185-186).

the 'manhandling' of Dickinson's poetry shows the poet to be the victim of, to use Hall's description of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, a 'sharply dualistic' patriarchal American culture in a manner reminiscent of Hutchinson. From Howe's perspective, the 'rhetoric of heresy', which Hall argues was used to demonise and outlaw Hutchinson, led to the perceived 'formlessness' of Dickinson's poetry and its subsequent regulation and censoring following the poet's death.

The Subversive Power of Poetic Language

Howe presents the Massachusetts Bay Colony's fear of the wilderness as being influential in establishing a conflict in American culture between, on the one side, exhibiters of 'fancy', 'enthusiasm', and 'antinomianism', and on the other, authority figures who dismiss 'enthusiasm' in order to consolidate conventional order and an absolutist epistemological outlook. In this way, *The Birth-Mark* proposes that a pervasive dichotomy exists between wilderness and territory in American culture. Howe argues that, in reaction to their difficulty in adapting to, negotiating, and establishing territory within the New England environment, Puritan settlers established a strict code for making sense of their experience in the New World and keeping their anxieties about the wilderness at bay. With this established, Howe suggests that Hutchinson's literal expulsion from the Puritan community was connected to her refusal to conform to the established territory of religious practice and expression. When Howe writes that 'Emily Dickinson's textual production is still being tamed for aesthetic consumption' she prompts her reader to think of Dickinson's poetry as something which has been brought in from the wilderness and 'tamed' in order to remain in the American literary canon. Furthermore, due to the way that Howe focuses on editors' meddling with the visual aspects of Dickinson's poetry, specifically the form and typography of her poetry, such connections encourage us to think of the conventional poetic page as an entity which is gridded in the same way as the mapped American land. By this analogy, Dickinson's editors have conformed her poetry's typography and form to the territory of the conventional poetic page. Indeed, Howe invokes this metaphor of the literary page as a territorialised space when she writes in *The Birth-Mark* that '[e]diting is sensible partitioning' (p. 8).

Whilst Howe gives us a particularly easy read on the American land-literary page connection by focusing so extensively on the visual 'margins' which Dickinson's poetry explores, she presents poetry as a literary form which can challenge the 'dark wall of rule' in American culture on many levels. In a typically enigmatic paragraph

from *The Birth-Mark* following on from a description of the differences between the spoken and written word, which concludes with Dickinson's quotation 'Moving on in the Dark like Loaded Boats at Night, though there is no Course, there is Boundlessness', Howe writes 'Strange translucencies: letters, phonemes, syllables, rhymes, shorthand segments, alliteration, assonance, meter, form a ladder to an outside state outside of States' (p. 46). Whilst a variety of forms of writing could indulge in these vehicles of 'Strange [translucency]', it is in the literary form of poetry that we expect to play with these formal, structural, and literary devices. In referring to 'an outside state outside of States', Howe is proposing that poetry could remedy the hegemonic tendencies of American culture.

To understand how poetic writing could be considered to present this challenge to dominant powers in American culture, we can explore how Howe's position on language mirrors to some degree Kristeva's view that poetic language evades repressive forces which govern systems of language. Jon Cook explains that Kristeva, in establishing how systems of language develop, distinguishes between the 'semiotic', which is constituted by the 'mobile patterning of instinctual drives within the infant prior to the acquisition of language proper', and the 'symbolic', which is 'the domain of articulate language, discriminating between subjects and objects, signifiers and signifieds, and concerned with propositions and judgements'.[313] Kristeva argues that the 'semiotic' is essentially maternal because of the way the 'mother's body is […] what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*'.[314] For this reason, Cook argues that Kristeva's ideas about the relationship between the 'semiotic' and 'symbolic' has 'gendered connotations' in the sense that the former 'is maternal and prior to law' whilst the 'symbolic is paternal and associated with the law and judgement'.[315]

Due to the way that the 'symbolic' regulates and orders the 'semiotic' in the development of linguistic systems, Kristeva presents poetry as a literary form that stimulates the 'instinctual drives' of 'semiotic'. In Kristeva's own words, 'when poetic language -- especially modern poetic language -- transgresses grammatical rules, the

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[313] Jon Cook, *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology 1900-2000* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 437.

[314] Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language', in *The Kristeva Reader,* ed. by Toil Moi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), pp. 89-136 (p. 95).

[315] Cook, p. 437.

positing of the symbolic [...] finds itself subverted, not only in its possibilities of *Bedeutung* or denotation […], but also as a processor of *meaning*'.[316] Cook's explanation of Kristeva's notion of 'poetic language' as '[marking] the return of the repressed elements of the semiotic within the realm of the symbolic, notably by way of rhythm, mimesis, intertextuality, and linguistic play' shows how Kristeva's sense of 'poetic language' connects to Howe's perception of the literary form's '[s]trange translucencies'.[317] In referring to '[s]trange translucencies' that 'form a ladder to an outside state outside of States', Howe is emphasising the way poetic features blur and play with structure. In the case of Dickinson, for instance, Howe demonstrates that her use of poetic features 'volatizes an inner law of form' in a manner that calls into question, firstly, established structure in American poetry, and secondly, the epistemological procedures of a markedly dualistic, patriarchal American culture.

The 'Rupture and Shift' of Relativism

In this section I have demonstrated that *The Birth-Mark* presents poetry as a medium which is especially compatible with 'enthusiasm' and its challenge to the 'dualistic', absolutist tendencies of American culture. By joining these dots, it has become apparent that Howe endorses a relativistic approach to epistemology in the sense that she both calls into question an absolutist approach to truth that is embedded in American culture and commends the efforts of 'enthusiasts' who embrace the slippage involved in making sense of reality. Earlier in this section it was established that Coleridge's and Webster's definitions of 'enthusiasm' and 'fancy' imply that exhibiters of these qualities are flawed because of the way they become overwhelmed or absorbed in objects or emotions. However, in showing that these criticisms are built on fallacious cultural assumptions of rationality and intellect, *The Birth-Mark* suggests that the sense of absorption in the work of 'enthusiasts' is reflective of the fact that we are never fully able to grasp the fundamental truths of reality. In other words, Howe endorses the work of 'enthusiasts' because, in recognising the slippage involved in making sense of the world, they subsequently attempt to find meaning in the world on their own terms rather than on the manipulative and unjust terms set for them by American culture.

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[316] Kristeva, p. 109.

[317] Cook, p. 427.

Crucially, in terms of this thesis' ambition to demonstrate the pragmatic poetic practice of its four writers, it is also apparent that the relativism of these 'enthusiasts' leads them to challenge and shift the naturalised structures of American culture. This point can be clarified by briefly looking at Howe's essay 'The Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson' which, as its title suggests, investigates Mary Rowlandson's account of her eleven weeks in captivity during King Philip's War (1675-78). In this essay Howe returns to the subject of the uncertainty of life for the 17th Century Puritan settlers in America when she states that '[a] harsh climate, a wilderness, tomahawks, powwows, quickhatch and wampumpeag confronted the immigrant children of the Morning' (p. 90). When Howe follows this description with the assertion that '[b]leak necessity caused millenarian affirmations of destiny to thrive on misery' (p. 90), she is referring back to her idea that the Puritan settlers sought out signs of assurance that they were destined to prosper in America in spite of these dangers. Howe believes that Rowlandson, on her description of the day her village was attacked, realises the fallacy of this narrative:

> At sun-rising, on a day of calamity, at the inverted point of antitypical history, Mary Rowlandson looks out at the absence of Authority and sees we are all alone. Spite is the direction of creation. In a minute death can and will come. All collectivities scattered to corners.[318]

In this extract Howe suggests that Rowlandson realises during the massacre in her village that her community is not privileged by God's providence. In terms of the comment about 'collectivities' being 'scattered to corners', Howe is suggesting that Rowlandson's revelation about the 'absence of Authority' exposed to her the error of her community's sense of epistemological certitude. Howe observes that Rowlandson names her chapters 'Removes', with each 'Remove' chapter documenting her journey away from the Puritan community. As Rowlandson ventures deeper into the American wilderness, Howe argues, she '[marches] away from Western rationalism, deep and deeper into Limitlessness, where all illusion of volition, all individual identity may be transformed -- assimilated' (p. 96). Howe is thus proposing that the 'collectivities' which previously structured Rowlandson's experience in the New World,

[318] *The Birth-Mark*, p. 94.

'collectivities' which are a product of 'Western rationalism', are revealed to be arbitrary as she journeys with her Native captors.

Howe proposes that despite Rowlandson's revelatory experience in captivity, on her return to her community it was necessary for her to consolidate the narratives of her culture in the account of her captivity by '[assuring] herself and her community that she was a woman who feared God and eschewed evil' (p. 123). In light of Nash's argument that Puritan settlers strongly believed that this dichotomy of good and evil was manifested in the divide between settlement and wilderness, it is clear that it would have been dangerous for Rowlandson to have described her time in captivity as a remotely educational experience. Furthermore, Howe recognises that as a woman, Rowlandson was 'vulnerable to ambivalent charges ranging from pride (she had set a high price on her own head) to sexual promiscuity, even to sorcery' (p. 123). It is for this reason, Howe argues, that when Rowlandson tells of one of her Native captors giving her a Bible, for instance, it is necessary for her to follow this description of kindness by telling of how she selected 'a vengeful chapter from Deuteronomy'.

However, Howe suggests that in such moments in Rowlandson's narrative, '[m]emory of anonymous thoughtfulness bites the mind that thought it' (p. 99). In other words, in spite of Rowlandson's attempts to censor her experiences, she is unable to fully repress the memory of her experiences in her account. Such moments, then, are for Howe evidence of the extent to which '[p]ositivist systems of psychological protection have disintegrated' for Rowlandson and the way that 'Indentities and configurations rupture and shift' (p. 100). In indulging the slippage between the words 'identities' and 'indent', Howe conveys the idea that, having been removed from these 'systems of psychological protection', the established 'identities' of Rowlandson's self and her community are warped out of shape. In this way, Howe implies that it is impossible for Rowlandson to fully suppress her knowledge about the essential arbitrariness of 'Indentities and configurations' in her writing.

It is poetic language's capacity for 'rupture and shift' that Howe identifies in the 'enthusiasts' she discusses throughout *The Birth-Mark*. Howe admires the way Dickinson's poetry organically generates its own 'inner law of form' rather than conforming to the laws laid down by poetic convention, she shows through her analysis of Matthiessen that the critic publicly criticised but privately admired the way Whitman's poetry 'breaks down all mature barriers', and she comments favourably on the way the 'idiosyncratic syntax of Mary Rowlandson's closed structure refuses closure' (p. 126). Furthermore, even if the archetypal 'antinomian', Anne Hutchinson,

is not known to us as a writer, she is presented as a poetic presence in *The Birth-Mark* by virtue of the fact that she deviated from conventional, official modes of expression. Indeed, the lineage that Howe establishes between Hutchinson and Dickinson emphasises that the latter's sense of poetry's 'inner law of form' extends an antinomian tradition that begins with Hutchinson.

The next section will return to Cavell's reading of *Walden* in order to show how Howe attempts to participate in the 'rupture and shift' of 'enthusiasm' through a poetic working of wildness. With this in mind, before leaving Section One and *The Birth-Mark* it is helpful to explain how Howe's critique of American culture supports critical distinctions that have been made between conceptions of 'wilderness' and 'wildness'. Mandy Bloomfield explains this dichotomy when she suggests that 'wilderness' has come to represent 'an objectified state of nature "out there" beyond the text, (problematically) imagined as separate from human activity', whereas 'wildness' is 'a quality attributable equally to ontologically autonomous dimensions of material reality and to "othernesses" present within textual representation'.[319] In other words, for Bloomfield, the concept of 'wilderness' presents nature as something which exists outside of the text, and which can therefore be 'objectified' by the text. 'Wildness', according to Bloomfield, presents nature as something in which the text is inextricably entangled.

A key aspect of this distinction between 'wilderness' and 'wildness' is that the notion of nature as 'wilderness' suggests that humans occupy some position outside of nature from which nature can be objectively assessed and comprehended. Bloomfield acknowledges the element of control in conceptions of 'wilderness' when she explains that 'Early Puritan settlers' biblically framed and contradictory understandings of the American landscape as a hostile wilderness of exile, but also Edenic promise, constructed "wilderness" as a domain to be subdued'.[320] Like Nash, then, Bloomfield understands 'wilderness' as a concept that emerged from European settlers' ambitions to conquer the strange and unknown environment that lay outside their settlements. On the other hand, the notion of nature as 'wildness' suggests that we are inextricably entangled in nature and therefore cannot claim an outside position from which to objectively assess nature. With this in mind, we can see why the conception of nature as 'wilderness' has often reinforced assumptions of human control over nature

[319] 'Palimtextual Tracts', p. 680.

[320] 'Palimtextual Tracts', p. 679.

whereas the conception of nature as 'wildness' implicitly suggests that humans are always constituents of nature and, therefore, cannot make claims to dominion over nature.

This difference between conceptions of 'wilderness' and 'wildness' is relevant to *The Birth-Mark* in the sense that Howe traces the positivist epistemological outlook of American culture back to Puritan settlers' fear of the wilderness and thus shows how its sense of objectivity and epistemological certainty is built on false grounds. The 'antinomian' figures Howe describes, on the other hand, embrace the slippage involved in our understanding of the world and are therefore more accommodating of conceptions of 'wildness'. The next section in this chapter will demonstrate that Howe sees her poetry as a means of working wildness in the manner of an 'enthusiast'.

Section Two

The previous section demonstrated how and why Howe believes that poetry can participate in the identifiably 'antinomian' 'rupture and shift' of ideologically manipulative cultural structures. This section will, firstly, demonstrate how Howe envisages her own poetry as participating in this 'rupture and shift' and, secondly, how this poetic project is a form of pragmatic work. Howe is a pragmatic poet in the sense that she critiques conceptions of epistemological certainty but also endorses poetry as a medium through which we can perpetually investigate and refine the way we make sense of the world. This section will draw out this pragmatic element of Howe's poetic project by showing how, like Merwin, she approaches poetry as a means of reinvigorating a saving sense of wildness.

Howe's Thoreauvian Working of Wildness

Whilst Thoreau is quoted several times in *The Birth-Mark* and *My Emily Dickinson,* the extent of his influence on Howe's *Singularities* is explained in particular detail by Howe in 'Personal Narrative'. In this essay, which opens *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, the poet reflects on the writing process of her poem 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time' (hereafter shortened to 'Articulation'). In *The Birth-Mark,* Howe describes her activity in the Widener Library as being akin to a Thoreauvian pursuit of wildness*.* In 'Personal Narrative', Howe continues this theme by stating that whilst writing 'Articulation' in the 1980s she 'wished to speak a word for libraries as places of freedom and wildness', a statement that alludes to Thoreau's stated ambition in the opening words of 'Walking' to 'speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness'.[321]

As Bloomfield acknowledges, there has been some contention in terms of where to place Thoreau in relation to conceptions of nature as 'wildness' and 'wilderness'. Bloomfield cites William Cronon as a critic who argues that Thoreau is implicated in consolidating conceptions of nature as 'wilderness'.[322] Cronon does indeed suggest in his essay 'The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting back to the Wrong Nature' that Thoreau's sense of 'stern loneliness' in nature contributed to the 'myth' of 'the mountain as cathedral', a 'myth' that participated in 'freighting [wilderness] with moral

[321] 'Personal Narrative', p. 16; Thoreau, p. 225.

[322] 'Palimtextual Tracts', pp. 679-680.

values and cultural symbols that it carries to this day'.[323] Cronon's argument is that whilst Thoreau's admiration for nonhuman nature distances him from the European settlers described by Nash and Howe, who viewed unsettled American land with hostility, Thoreau did participate in an objectification of nature by projecting the quality of sacredness in a manner that consolidated anthropocentric values. Bloomfield suggests that Howe's appreciation for this argument about Thoreau is evident in the fact that while 'Howe signals the extent to which Thoreau guides her poetic encounter with the land' in her poem 'Thorow', 'she follows ambivalently in his footsteps' because '[f]or all his respect for the natural world, Thoreau unavoidably shared his culture's ideological lenses'.[324]

Bloomfield cites Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* in order to reinforce this argument regarding some of the problematic elements of Thoreau's attitude towards the environment, but a key objective of this text is actually to defend Thoreau against such criticisms.[325] Buell contests the idea that Thoreau consolidated anthropocentric values when he writes that Thoreau 'moved gradually, partially, and self-conflictedly beyond the program Emerson outlined in *Nature,* which sacralised nature as humankind's mystic counterpart' and 'became increasingly interested in defining nature's structure, both spiritual and material, for its own sake, as against how nature might subserve humanity, which was Emerson's primary consideration'.[326] Buell further describes how 'Thoreau took common pastoral mystifications […] and subjected them to such refinement and intensification as to reinforce within himself and transmit to his reader a will to transform the tame back into the wild and to preserve such wildness as presently exists'.[327] On the basis of the way Howe plays off Thoreau's statements about 'wildness' in 'Personal Narrative', it would seem that Howe's view on Thoreau has more in common with Buell's than Cronon's and that, subsequently, she is less sceptical of Thoreau's presentation of nature than Bloomfield suggests. The influence of Thoreau on Howe will be established by returning to Cavell's

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[323] William Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting back to the Wrong Nature', in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. by William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), pp. 69-90 (p. 75, p. 72).

[324] 'Palimtextual Tracts', p. 685.

[325] Ibid., p. 685.

[326] Buell, p. 117.

[327] Ibid, p. 138.

Senses of Walden and showing how Howe, like Merwin, presents poetry as a form of Thoreauvian work.

Howe's move to include 'libraries' in the natural places of 'freedom and wildness' referred to by Thoreau is developed in 'Personal Narrative' when Howe describes how

> During the 1980s I wanted to transplant words onto paper with soil sticking to their roots -- to go to meet a narrative's fate by immediate access to its concrete totality of singular interjections, crucified spellings, abbreviations, irrational apprehensions, collective identities, palavers, kicks, cordials, comforts. I wanted jerky and tedious details to oratically bloom and bear fruit as if they had been set at liberty or ransomed by angels.[328]

Howe's descriptions of 'jerky and tedious details' reminds us of the 'strange translucencies' that 'form a ladder to an outside state outside of States' which she describes in *The Birth-Mark*. Indeed, Howe's pursuit of clumsy, awkward, and 'irrational' words harks back to her sense of the subversive slippage of poetic language. With this in mind, it appears that Howe sought to become the creator of this 'ladder to an outside state outside of States' in the sense that she intended to facilitate the blossoming of these 'jerky and tedious details'. Howe's ambition to 'transplant' library texts to her poetic page 'with soil sticking to their roots' evidences the tenderness of her approach to the 'wildness' of these texts but, nevertheless, the extract suggests that it is through this labour of 'transplant[ing]' that the planted words will 'oratically bloom and bear fruit'. The extent to which Howe saw herself as the catalyst in this 'bloom[ing]' while writing 'Articulation' is evident in her description of how whilst '[s]auntering toward the holy land of poetry' (another allusion to 'Walking') in Yale's Sterling Memorial Library, '[she] compared the trial of choosing a text to the sifting of wheat, half wild, half saved' (pp. 16-17). We understand, therefore, that whilst Howe presents the process by which words 'bloom and bear fruit' as a natural process, she thought that her labour as a '[sifter] of texts and worker of 'jerky and tedious detail' would help facilitate this process. The analogy that Howe explicitly establishes in 'Personal Narrative' between the labour involved in helping words and plants 'bloom' bears strong similarities to the analogy that Cavell reads Thoreau as implicitly

[328] 'Personal Narrative', p. 16.

establishing between his work at Walden Pond and his 'literary enterprise'. Cavell's interpretation of Thoreau's description of 'the tiller […] making the earth say beans instead of grass' as an allusion for the way a literary 'tiller' equipped with a 'writer's hoe' can 'inflect' words in a certain direction in order to release their hidden potential rings true for Howe.[329]

The verb 'inflect' is especially applicable to Howe's poetic labour because of her poetry's ambition to participate in, rather than cultivate, wildness. Cavell describes Thoreau's '[tilling]' of language as an act of 'inflection' in the sense that words 'come to him from their own region', at which point he 'take[s] that occasion for inflecting them one way instead of another then and there, or for refraining from them there and there; as one may inflect the earth toward beans instead of grass, or let it alone, as it is before you are there'[330]. Howe emphasises the extent to which her labour as '[sifter]' releases a dormant dimension in texts when she explains that 'So many fruits, some looked firm in spring and seemed to be promising, now amassed according to an impervious classification system' (p. 16). To return to a point made in the introduction about the fruitful similarity between this thesis' chosen poets' working of language and the agriculturalist's working of a natural resource, Howe is not positioning herself as a cultivator of these texts, rather she suggests that her work 'inflects' a text in a manner that helps release a dimension of that text which has been frozen in time by an 'impervious classification system'. Elsewhere in 'Personal Narrative', Howe quotes Thoreau's statement that 'Hope and the future … [is] not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious shaking swamps' (p. 16). Like Thoreau, Howe does not want to cultivate the wildness of the library in the same way that her ancestors tamed and cultivated the American wilderness. After all, Section One established Howe's sense of the correlation between the urge to tame wilderness and the regulation of the 'disciplines of history and literary criticism'; instead, Howe seeks to assist in the proliferation of wildness through her 'sifting' of texts.

An important difference to establish between Thoreau's pursuit of wildness as interpreted by Cavell and Howe's pursuit of wildness is that Howe would not see her working of wildness in library texts as a 'fathering' of language. As was established in the previous chapter, Cavell sees the bedrock on which the 'writer's words […] make literal or historical sense, present the brutest of fact' as the maternal side of language,

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[329] *The Senses of Walden*, p. 5, p. 28.

[330] Ibid, p. 28.

and he states that 'if we are to hear significantly', language must be 'rebirthed' or 'fathered'. The previous section demonstrated that, for Howe, the stagnancy of American culture, and the inequalities that are bound up in this stagnant culture, stems from its equation of '[l]awlessness' and 'negligence' which, subsequently, leads to such acts of '[l]awlessness' being 'at first feminized and then restricted or banished' (p. 1). In other words, *The Birth-Mark* argues that the conservative values of American culture are consolidated by a patriarchal society that actively seeks to prevent 're-birth' or cultural renewal rather than facilitating it. Moreover, Howe's embrace of maternal 'poetic language' as a means of disrupting, what Kristeva would call, the paternal 'symbolic' structuring of language shows that, for this poet, linguistic 'rebirth' in American culture is 'the business' of the mother far more than the father.

Assuming Hope Atherton

Howe's retelling in 'Articulation' of accounts of The Battle of Turner's Falls as found in George Sheldon's *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts* (1895) can be read as an enactment of the kind of poetic 'sifting' that Howe describes in 'Personal Narrative'. In order to understand this form of poetic work, however, it is first necessary to clarify the relationship between 'Articulation' and Sheldon's text. In both of these texts, The Battle of Turner's Falls is referred to as the 'Falls Fight' and, indeed, this provides the title for the opening section of Howe's 'Articulation'. In this opening section of the poem, Howe relays the events which led seventeenth century minister Hope Atherton to wander in the New England woods following his separation from the colonial army he had been accompanying. In the May of 1676, European settlers in Deerfield, Massachusetts, Howe tells us, 'felt threatened by a gathering of tribes' nearby and 'appealed to Boston for soldiers'. The settlers' request was granted, 160 men set out from nearby Hatfield and, subsequently, ambushed and massacred an 'unguarded Nipmunk, Squakeag, Pokomtuck, or Mahican camp'. The majority of the dead, Howe adds, were women and children. In response to the attack 'Indian survivors soon rallied neighboring bands […] and harassed the victorious retreating army' who, being out of ammunition, suffered heavy casualties. Eventually the main body of the militia managed to retreat to safety, apart from seven or eight soldiers who, having become

lost, hid in the forest and then gave themselves up to the Natives who burned them to death.[331]

Howe's poem heavily relies on two texts found in Sheldon's *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts,* namely Atherton's account of his time in the woods following the 'Falls Fight' and, predominantly, the second-hand account of soldier Jonathan Wells' experience retreating from natives following the massacre, which Sheldon explains was documented by Reverend Stephen Williams.[332] Howe relies on these two accounts to the extent that the first section of 'Articulation' takes most of its words from this text in order to reword and subsequently re-tell the story. However, whilst the first section of the poem's focus on Atherton and the second section's title 'Hope Atherton's Wanderings' might suggest that this poem is exclusively based around Atherton's account, the poet actually uses far more words from Williams' text than Atherton's. For this reason, if we can read this poem as attempting to dig beneath 'the dark wall of rule' in the 'disciplines of history and literary criticism', the poem is evidently not attempting to give us a more accurate account of the exact details of Atherton's wanderings. It is in light of this fact that Howe's description of her poetic process for writing the poem in 'Personal Narrative' is so useful as it allows us to understand how she sees herself as channelling Atherton in some way despite the fact that she uses words describing the experience of a different person during the 'Falls Fight'.

The section of 'Articulation' titled 'The Falls Fight' suggests that Howe sees 'Articulation' as poetic labour similar to Thoreau's. Howe frames the impending poem as an investigation in the opening section's final lines:

> Hope's literal attributes. Effaced background dissolves remotest foreground.
> Putative author, premodern condition, presently present what future clamors for release?
> Hope's epicene name draws its predetermined poem in.
> I assume Hope Atherton's excursion for an emblem foreshadowing a Poet's abolished limitations in our demythologized fantasy of Manifest Destiny.[333]

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[331] Howe, 'Articulation', *Singularities*, pp. 1-38 (pp. 1-2). Further references to this poem are given after quotations in the text.

[332] Sheldon, p. 161.

[333] Howe, 'Articulation', p. 4.

Howe writes these three closing sentences like a research question, hypothesis, and statement of method. In light of the rather convoluted layers of authorship in Sheldon's text, Howe's reference to a 'putative author' may well link to her suspicions that Williams and Atherton's accounts have been subjected to mediation in a similar manner to the way Rowlandson's and Dickinson's texts have been treated. Howe wonders whether the official texts in the 'disciplines of history' contain a suppressed, more authentic dimension which can be released by a poet; she wonders whether these words can be worked in order to yield further meanings or a new semantic 'future'.

Howe expands on this idea that *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts* possesses a dormant semantic layer that can be released through some form of poetic work when she proposes that the text contains a 'predetermined poem'. This description of the 'poem' as 'predetermined' suggests that a 'poem' exists within Atherton and Williams' texts, as found in Sheldon's book, but that it is yet to be articulated. In this sense, there is a similarity between the work performed by Howe and that performed by Cavell's Thoreau as Howe intends to 'inflect' Williams and Atherton's words in a bid to yield meanings which currently lie dormant within the text. This point can be clarified by thinking again of Cavell's argument that Thoreau attempts to address the problem that 'we have put nature in bondage, bound it to our uses and to our hurried capacities for sensing, rather than learning of its autonomy', a problem that Cavell states leads to our current inability to 'know what the bottom of a pond is' as 'we do not know, e.g., what it is to sound the bottom, vaguely imagining that it is abysmally deep'.[334] Cavell is referring to a problem with the words in our entire 'nomenclature', Howe is engaging with the suppressed dimensions of words found in a specific text, but the task she sets herself is similar to Thoreau's in that she wants to open up meanings in Sheldon's book which lie hidden beneath the text's surface.[335] The depths of the pond to which Cavell refers exist regardless of whether they are comprehended in language, and, by Cavell's view, it was for this reason that Thoreau's aim was to rework language so that its words could convey a fuller sense of the objects that pre-exist those words. For Howe, a hidden truth is concealed within *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts* and her job is to poetically work the words of that text in order to more fully convey the experiences of Wells and Atherton.

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[334] *The Senses of Walden,* p. 64.

[335] Ibid., p. 16.

Howe's hypothesis is that Hope Atherton's 'epicene name' could be the catalyst for releasing the poetic dimension of the accounts of the aftermath of the 'Falls Fight' found in Sheldon's books. In this sense, Howe appears to be acting on a desire stated in *My Emily Dickinson* to 'pull SHE from all the myriad symbols and sightings of HE', a desire which is connected to her Kristevean ambition to deviate from paternal systems through poetic language.[336] In the case of 'Articulation', Howe is proposing that Atherton's gender-neutral forename will provide a gateway into the poetry of Sheldon's text, which for Howe means finding a gateway into, to return to a Howe phrase cited in the opening of this chapter, the 'unrevealedness' of the texts in Sterling Memorial Library.

Howe's statement that she will 'assume Hope Atherton's excursion for an emblem foreshadowing a Poet's abolished limitations in our demythologized fantasy of Manifest Destiny' has a double meaning that hinges on two definitions of 'assume'. Firstly, we can comprehend this use of 'assume' as stating that Howe understands Atherton's 'excursion' as an 'emblem' for the potentially transgressive power of poetry. Given the way Howe affiliates the American land and the literary page as spaces that have been regimented according to a hegemonic impulse in American culture, Howe is, in this sense, suggesting that Atherton's journey outside of European territory and culture could be read as something of a poetic venture. However, in stating that she will 'assume' Atherton's 'excursion for' such 'an emblem', Howe is also hoping that the poem that follows 'The Falls Fight' section of 'Articulation' will actually channel Atherton's 'excursion' in some way. By this reading, Howe's poem is the 'emblem' that scopes out the 'Poet's abolished limitations' by taking control over Atherton's 'excursion'. This use of the verb 'assume' demonstrates that when Howe explains that she 'compared the trial of choosing a text to the sifting of wheat', the process of 'choosing a text' represents more than simply the selection of a text from the shelf of Sterling Memorial Library. The poetic 'assumption' that Howe describes in the closing lines of 'The Falls Fight' section of 'Articulation' is bound up in this process of 'choosing a text'. In 'Articulation', the act of 'sifting' involves both the selection of Sheldon's *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts* from the shelves of Sterling Memorial Library and the subsequent working of that text that Howe performs in the poem. This chapter will now analyse how and why Howe rewords the accounts found in Sheldon's text in order

[336] *My Emily Dickinson*, pp. 17-18.

to establish exactly how Howe sees her poems as channelling Atherton through the act of poetic 'sifting' and what she hopes to achieve from it.

'Walking is Hard Labor'

Peter Nicholls points out that whilst Howe's extensive quoting from Williams' description of Jonathan Wells' account under the title 'Hope Atherton's Wanderings' demonstrates that 'Howe has no desire to send us back to her sources, or, indeed, to encourage us to read them in tandem', we do 'gain a particular insight into Howe's mode of composition' by looking at Sheldon's book.[337] In order to clarify what kind of re-telling Howe aims to perform it is indeed useful to compare the narrative of her poem with the narratives of Williams and Atherton included in Sheldon's *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts*. The first stanza of Howe's 'Articulation' uses words from Williams' transcription of Wells' narrative and reads thus:

> Prest try to set after grandmother
> revived by and laid down left ly
> little distant each other and fro
> Saw digression hobbling driftwood
> Forage two rotted beans & etc.
> Redy to faint slaughter story so
> Gone and signal through deep water
> Mr. Atherton's story Hope Atherton[338]

In terms of the original use of the words found in this stanza, we can start with Williams' description of how 'once when ye Indians *prest* [Wells], he was near fainting away, but by eating a nutmeg, (which his *grandmother* gave him as he was going out) he was *revivd*' (my italics, unless stated otherwise, used to highlight words which Howe uses in the first stanza of 'Articulation'). Soon afterwards, and after actually fainting, Williams states that Wells 'tyed his horse and *laid down* again'. The next day, Williams describes how Wells evaded capture by 'finding two great trees yt had been *left by* ye flood lying at a *little distance from each other* & covered over wth rubbish, [Wells] crept

[337] Peter Nicholls, 'Unsettling the Wilderness: Susan Howe and American History', *Contemporary Literature,* 37.4 (1996), 586-601 (p. 596).

[338] 'Articulation', p. 6.

in betwixt them & within a little while heard a running to & *fro* in ye swamp, but *saw* nothing'.[339]

At this point Sheldon interrupts Williams' account and announces that he will take a '*digression*' from the story in order to acknowledge that Wells might have exaggerated his story because it would have been very difficult for him to convincingly hide his tracks. Sheldon remarks that '[a]ny one closely observing a pile of *drift wood* (my emphasis) *in situ* (Sheldon's emphasis), will see how difficult it must be for the most careful hand to remove any part of it without leaving unmistakable evidence of the disturbance' and that, furthermore, the 'trail of the *hobbling* boy […] must have been patent to the most casual eye, let alone an Indian on the trail of an enemy'. Once Sheldon's 'digression' is complete, we return to Williams' transcription where he explains that Wells was able to leave the area and 'found *two rotted beans*' in 'Deerfield Meadows'. When Wells continued his journey, Williams describes how 'upon ye road to H'f'd [Wells] was (like Samson after the *slaughter* of ye Philistines) distressd for want of drink, & many times *ready to faint*, yet got no water till he came to Clay Gully'. Howe will return to Well's story throughout the poem but the penultimate line from the first stanza draws from Atherton's ostensibly first-hand account which comes under the title '*MR ATHERTON'S STORY*'. Atherton opens this account by stating that he will convey 'A particular relation of extreme sufferings that I have under*gone, & signal* escapes that the Lord hath made way for' and later he gives thanks to God for the fact that he 'passed through *deep waters* and they overflowed me not'.[340]

Whilst by remixing Williams and Atherton's words in this way Howe is clearly not sticking to the details of the original account, the developments in her poem can be read as roughly corresponding with the narrative of Jonathan Wells' account. The opening prose section's description of the events which led to the retreating army to be pursued by natives provides us with a context in which we can understand the opening line of the second section, 'Prest try to set after grandmother', as perhaps detailing the way that Atherton was 'Prest' by natives whilst desiring to return to his 'grandmother', who might embody home, community, or perhaps, in light of Nash and Howe's critique of the conception of 'wilderness', a place of security where his European roots secure him from the New World 'wilderness'. In terms of the second line in Howe's stanza, in Williams' account Wells is 'revived' by his 'grandmother' in

[339] Sheldon, p. 162, p. 164.

[340] Sheldon, pp. 164-167.

the sense that she gave him the 'nutmeg' which energised him. Whilst Howe does not mention the 'nutmeg' in the second line of the stanza, her description does imply that Atherton was 'revived by' his 'grandmother', even if we are more likely to interpret this as a 'revival' of the spirit with the lost minister being 'revived by' his refreshed determination to 'set after grandmother'. Williams often describes how Wells lay down and rested and Howe's description of how Atherton 'laid down left ly' suggests that either Howe is coining a new adverb, 'leftly', to specifically state that Atherton was lying down on his left side, or that Atherton was 'left' to 'ly', as he was not found, and therefore undisturbed, during his period of rest. This interpretation would fit in with the following line, 'little distant each other and fro', which could refer to the increased distance between Atherton and his pursuers which allowed him to rest without being found, a distance which is in a constant state of fluctuation, or 'toing and froing', as each party moves through the forest.

We thus see that there is a degree of compatibility between Howe's vague version of Atherton's time in the woods and Williams' reiteration of Wells' account in that, firstly, the first stanza of 'Articulation' roughly uses words in the same order as they occur in Williams' narrative, and secondly, Howe's rough description of someone being 'Prest', 'revived', 'laid down', 'hobbling', '[foraging], 'Redy to faint' and going 'through deep water', matches up with the order of events in Williams' narrative. However, if it was not already clear from the fact that Howe uses words from Wells' account to describe Atherton's experiences, Howe's unconventional syntax suggests that the poet's objective is not merely to tell the same story as Williams whilst reassembling the words he includes in his narrative. This stanza is primarily ordered in accordance with poetic features rather than conventional syntax. Howe wants her poem to be 'an emblem foreshadowing a Poet's abolished limitations in our demythologized fantasy of Manifest Destiny' and, for this reason, Howe chooses to privilege poetic devices over narrative exposition in her re-telling of Williams' narrative.

Line four of the extracted stanza is a useful place to start when commenting on Howe's poetic reordering of Williams' words in 'Articulation' because of the loose connotations between the words 'digression', 'hobbling', and 'driftwood'. A 'digression' is specifically speech or writing which deviates from a main subject or argument. The words 'hobbling', and 'driftwood' are vaguely synonymous to 'digression' in the sense that all three words imply deviation from a set course or course of action. The action of 'hobbling' is a visible sign of deviation from what would generally be considered a

healthy gait. As its name suggests, the noun 'driftwood' refers to wood which has drifted and washed ashore, and which has usually been worn away through the process of this drifting. A digression, then, takes a piece of writing or speech on a detour from a set course or direction, 'hobbling' impairs the act of walking, and 'driftwood' is wood that has been drifted by, and then ejected from, a current. In writing this line, Howe allows the rough sense of connotation between these words to trump conventional syntax.

Howe also brings these words together in the fourth line of the stanza because of the way they conform to the trochaic tetrameter. This metre works especially well in this line because of the way the last three trochees of the line are made up of a particularly hard consonant sound, followed by a soft consonant sound. The verb 'hobbling', for example, combines a punchy stop consonant at the end of the first syllable with a soft nasal consonant at the end of the second syllable. This gives the word an off-kilter sound that mirrors the off-kilter nature of the action to which the verb refers. As a whole, these especially accentuated trochees give the line an offbeat rhythm which complements the subtle semantic field of aberrancy established in the words 'digression', 'hobbling', and 'driftwood'.

Howe also prioritises prosody in the first two lines of the poem. The first line, 'Prest try to set after grandmother', employs dactylic trimeter. By using the words 'Prest' and 'set' in this line, which are monosyllabic, end with a stop consonant, and have assonant vowels, Howe accentuates the first two stresses of the dactylic trimeter. The softer sounds of 'to', 'try', 'after', and 'mother' fall on the unstressed syllables. By employing a metre for this line which accentuates the monosyllabic words which end on a consonant stop, Howe gives the line an aggressive and dynamic rhythm which fits in with the line's description of an intense situation in which someone is being 'Prest' whilst attempting to 'set after' the mysterious 'grandmother'. The relief experienced by Atherton in the second line when he is 'revived by and laid down left ly' is emphasised by Howe's use of iambic tetrameter and the alliteration in 'laid', 'left', 'ly'. In contrast with the opening line of the stanza, these prosodic features give the line a softness that reflects the brief moment of rest and respite from being 'Prest' that Atherton is described as experiencing. By using these diverse metres for different lines in the poem, Howe emphasises the unpredictability of Atherton's experience in the woods, with the minister being forced into action when 'Prest' by natives or taking rest in a moment of respite.

Prosody and Epistemology

In ordering Williams' words according to their prosodic compatibility, Howe may not be providing a clear description of what she imagines to be Atherton's actions within the forest, but this privileging of poetic language adds a unique palpability to Howe's version of events. The introductory section of 'Articulation' establishes that Atherton underwent an alienating and disorientating experience whilst lost in the strange and unknown environment of the forest, and that his attempts to evade potential captors and return to the safety of his settlement were clumsy and wayward. By reassembling Williams' text according to the mirrored rhythms of and connotations between individual words, Howe reiterates Williams' narrative in a more visceral manner. The account Howe provides in her poem is half-told via an unfolding narrative and half-told via the collection of words whose sounds and semantic resonances register on a more textural linguistic level.

This notion of Howe playing with the texture of language again returns us to the philosophical similarities between her work and Kristeva's. In the following extract, Ruth Robbins explains how Kristeva's notion of poetic language encourages us to think of language as a material through which we try to conceptualise reality rather than a transparent medium through which we absolutely know reality:

> [Poetic language] draws attention to itself *as* language, a language of materiality, rather than the apparent transparency of ordinary speech in which the reader/hearer is encouraged to forget the words and to move straight to the world to which the words are supposed to refer. Poetic language advertises the writer/speaker's efforts to encase concepts or objects in sounds and rhythms. The recipient of such a language is therefore encouraged to notice language in use, rather than moving directly to the 'reality' or the abstraction to which the words are supposed to refer.[341]

Robbins' description of how poetic language foregrounds the process by which a writer attempts to 'encase concepts or objects in sounds and rhythms' is especially relevant to Howe's privileging of poetic language in 'Articulation' because of the way it relates to the dynamics of control and, subsequently, to the distinction between 'wilderness' and 'wildness'. Robbins' reference to a 'language of materiality' links back to the

[341] Ruth Robbins, *Literary Feminisms* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000), p. 126.

analogy of the poet as sculptor used in Chapter One of this thesis as she is discussing the way that language is a material we manipulate in order to conceptualise our experience rather than a transparent medium for absolutely capturing the essence of reality. In the same way as a sculptor might use a particular material to *express* her impression of an object, so we use 'sounds and rhythms' to express our sense of 'concepts or objects'. In foregrounding the process of 'language in use', poetic language, Robbins argues, reminds us that our languages were not gifts bestowed upon humans which automatically allowed them to objectively comprehend reality, rather our languages emerge and develop through a process by which 'sounds and rhythms' are tailored to objects.

Robbins' description of poetic language helps clarify the epistemological argument that Howe is implicitly making in poeticising Wells' account. Whilst on the one hand, Howe is clearly not interested providing an accurate, coherent summary of Wells' movements within the forest, 'Articulation' arguably does convey a more accurate sense of how a person such as Wells would have perceived the forest in which he was lost. If Howe presents Rowlandson's captivity as a 'march away from Western rationalism, deep and deeper into Limitlessness', then she would no doubt expect that Wells too would have experienced a similar 'rupture and shift' of 'indentities and configurations' to Rowlandson. The speaker in Howe's poem is a maker of meaning in language, someone who is attempting to make sense of an alien environment and, therefore, participating in the aforementioned process by which language is tailored to the world or, in Robbins' words, the process by which language 'encase[s] concepts or objects in sounds and rhythms'. Perloff suggests that Howe's poetry exhibits a 'felt need to remake a language that, in its ordinary, which is to say formulaic, state […] cannot approximate the difficulties of what the postmodern poet and her/his readers perceive to be a multitrack experience'.[342] The first section of this chapter demonstrated that Howe is indeed acutely aware of the 'multitrack' nature of 'experience', and 'Articulation' thus models the process by which humans make sense of a world that is, ultimately, unknowable in the absolute.

With this in mind, Howe's foregrounding of the process by which humans *make* sense of the world, can be read as an attempt to confront the unfounded epistemological certitude of '[p]ositivist systems' in American culture. Howe's

[342] Marjorie Perloff, '"Collision or Collusion with History": The Narrative Lyric of Susan Howe', *Contemporary Literature,* 30.4 (1989), 518-533 (p. 528).

poeticised version of Wells' account is intended to cut beneath the ideologically constructed view of unsettled land as 'wilderness' that was described in Section One. With the Kristevean view of language in mind, Sheldon's *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts* can be considered to reinforce this conception of 'wilderness' in the sense that the extensive mediation of Wells' experience helps produce a highly controlled and sanitised account of Wells' experience of unsettled American land. We can firstly say that Wells' experience has been mediated because it, supposedly, came from the mouth of Wells some time after the event, was transcribed by Williams, and then included with editorial notes in Sheldon's book. On top of this, we might question the veracity of Wells' original, retrospective account in light of the way Sheldon's 'digression' throws doubt onto some of Wells' claims. Given Howe's scepticism about the discipline of historical study, it is unsurprising that she might question whether these layers of authorship have saturated Wells' original experience.

Aside from the layers of authorship in Wells' supposed account, with Robbins' elucidation of Kristeva's sense of the differences between poetic language and the 'transparency of ordinary speech' in mind, Wells' experience is also mediated by the emotionally detached, controlled style of narrative exposition that surely belies the feelings of uncertainty and helplessness that Wells must have experienced. Robbins writes that poetic language calls into question 'the apparent transparency of ordinary speech in which the reader/hearer is encouraged to forget the words and to move straight to the world to which the words are supposed to refer'. From this perspective, the clarity and coherency of the grammatically and syntactically standard narrative exposition of Wells' time in retreat reinforces the notion of the unsettled American environment as an objectifiable 'wilderness'. Given Howe's awareness of the difficulty seventeenth century European settlers had in adapting to and understanding their New World environment, we can see why she might think that this style of narrative belies the feelings of uncertainty and security that marked settlers' experiences in an alien land. By poeticising the accounts of The Falls Fight found in Sheldon's text, then, Howe utilises' poetic language's capacity for exposing the inescapable slippage that is involved in the linguistic signification of reality and, in turn, the inescapable slippage involved in making sense of the world entirely.

'Mr. Atherton's Story Hope Atherton'

This analysis of the implicit epistemological argument in 'Articulation' aligns Howe with other Language poets such as Bernstein who attempt to undercut naturalised

ideologies by foregrounding the extent to which one makes sense of the world *in* language rather than *through* language. This is an element of Language poetry which Perloff highlights when she states that the emergence of 'Language theory reminded us that poetry is a *making* [*poien*], a construction using language, rhythm, sound, and visual image'.[343] Indeed, Howe's exploration of sound and semantics in her remixing of Wells' narrative provides a good example of the kind of poetry which Bernstein believes attains a musical 'resonance' by pushing the 'threshold at which noise becomes phonically | significant' (*A Poetics*, p. 12).

However, to end on this argument about the epistemological ramifications of Howe's poetic working of Sheldon's text in 'Articulation' would be to ignore the sincerity of Howe's claim that '[v]oices I am following lead me to the margins'. This is to say that Howe's ambition in 'Articulation' is not just to explore the poem as a sense-making device and, in the process, contradict the claims to objectivity made by a positivist American culture, rather her desire to follow such '[v]oices' to 'the margins' marks a genuine hope that she can channel these suppressed '[v]oices' from American history in her work. This demonstrates that, in Susan M. Schultz's words, 'Howe believes in history (what she terms in *Singularities* "narrative in non-narrative") and furthermore she believes, unfashionably, in the possibility that history […] can be transcended through art'. For this reason, Schultz claims that '[u]nlike her colleague Charles Bernstein, also on the faculty of SUNY-Buffalo, she has faith that poems exist in order to communicate meaning; the radical nature of her texts reflect nothing so much as the difficulty of communicating new meanings, new histories'.[344] Whilst Chapter One demonstrated that such claims about Bernstein not being interested in communicating meaning in his poetry are reductive, Schultz hits on a key point about Howe's faith in history setting her apart from many Language poets. This thesis has extensively established the grounds on which Language poets criticised the assumptions surrounding 'voice' in poetry. As Chapter Two showed, a key part of Language's influence as a postmodern poetry stems from its incorporation of theoretical ideas about the mediating layers that complicate self-expression in writing. There is much to suggest in 'Personal Narrative' that Howe genuinely strives to channel Atherton in her

[343] *Differentials*, p. 161.

[344] Susan M. Schultz, 'Exaggerated History', *Postmodern Culture*, 4.2 (1994), in *Project Muse* <https://muse.jhu.edu/> [accessed 31 July 2018]

poetry, a move which supports Schultz's argument that Howe deviates somewhat from the postmodern tendencies of Language poetry.

Howe states in 'Personal Narrative' that she 'discovered in Hope Atherton's wandering story the authority of a prior life for my own writing voice'. Even if Howe takes words predominantly from Wells' account rather than Atherton's, we can understand why Atherton's narrative would appeal to her. Compared to Wells' account, an air of mystery and doubt hangs around Atherton's first-hand account of The Battle of Turner's Falls in Sheldon's text in a way that aligns Atherton with 'enthusiasts' identified by Howe. Sheldon states that Atherton's account came to him via a copy produced by Williams, who in a 'meagre abstract' explained that Atherton's 'account would be too long to insert in this extract'. Following an extract from Atherton's narrative, Sheldon explains the mysterious circumstances surrounding the locating of the original manuscript of Atherton's when he writes 'Mr. Williams made a copy of [Atherton's manuscript], and doubtless sent back the original to the owner, according to the conditions of the loan. Who among the Athertons has the *original*?' (Sheldon's emphasis). This is not the only mystery surrounding Atherton's account for Sheldon. Whilst Sheldon clearly has reservations about the veracity of Wells' account, he ultimately gives Wells the benefit of the doubt when he concludes that his story demonstrates 'traits of the noblest character, in a lad ripened to self-reliance by the exigencies of frontier life. It is with great satisfaction that the writer is able to dissipate the faint shadow resting upon the narrative'. In contrast, a 'shadow' looms over Atherton's story for Williams, who in a letter Howe quotes in 'Articulation, writes:

> In the fight, upon their retreat, Mr. Atherton was unhorsed and separated from the company, wandered in the woods some days and then got into Hadley,* which is on the east side of Connecticut River. But the fight was on the west side. Mr. Atherton gave account that he had offered to surrender himself to the enemy, but they would not receive him. Many people were not willing to give credit to this account, suggesting that he was beside himself.[345]

Sheldon himself joins in with this interrogation of Atherton's story when he writes

[345] Sheldon, p. 166, p. 168, p. 165, p. 168.

> 'The "deep waters" above mentioned were probably the Deerfield river, which he must have crossed. Atherton was on the Hatfield side Saturday night; the spies he saw, Sunday morning, would naturally be on the west side. Why should he cross the river that was such a "good guide unto" him and would lead him directly home to Hatfield?[346]

Howe alludes to this scepticism from Sheldon, Williams, and indeed, the community that doubted Atherton's account on his return, in the fourth stanza of 'Articulation' when she writes 'hobbling boy | laid no whining trace no footstep clue | "Deep water" he *must* have crossed over' (Howe's emphasis). The 'hobbling boy' is Wells, the 'lad ripened to self-reliance by the exigencies of frontier life' and whose acclaimed strength and courage is alluded to by Howe in the reference to his leaving 'no whining trace'. Howe emphasises the contrast between the way Wells and Atherton are treated by Williams and Sheldon by italicising the 'must' from Sheldon's assertion that Atherton 'must have crossed' the Deerfield river. Howe draws attention to this specific line to imply that the querying of this detail in Atherton's narrative reflects broader suspicions that Atherton had 'crossed over' in a figurative sense having perhaps undergone some kind of malign transformation during his time in the woods.

Furthermore, if, as has been established, Wells' emotional detachment in his account helps tell a story of cool-headed stealth and 'self-reliance', Atherton's is a far more poetic piece. For a start, the events in Atherton's narrative are far more curious than those in Wells'; Atherton was discovered by Natives but he states with incredulity that 'They accepted not the tender which I made, when I spake, they answered not, when I moved toward them they moved away from me'. This peculiar reaction begets a peculiar explanation in the form of a letter written by Williams in which he again acts as Wells' transcriber: 'the *Indians* told [Wells] that after the fall fight, a little man with a black coat and without any hat, came toward them, but they were afraid and ran from him, thinking it was the Englishman's God'. In contrast to Wells' story then, which, as Sheldon argues, would be 'worthy of Leatherstocking', there is indeed something rather eerie about this image of a 'little man with a black coat' shocking Natives into thinking he 'was the Englishman's God'.[347]

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[346] Ibid, p. 169.

[347] Sheldon, p. 167, p. 169, p. 165.

Secondly, Atherton tells his story in a more poetic manner than Wells'; his brief account is laden with metaphors, similes, and imagery that pay tribute to God's role in protecting him during his peculiar sojourn in the forest. He opens his account, for instance, by reciting the 23rd Psalm 'I have passed through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and both the rod and staff of God delivered me' and closes by defending himself from accusations of verboseness by stating

> I am not conscious to myself that I have exceeded in speech. If I have spoken beyond what is convenient, I' know it not. I leave these lines as an orphan, and shall rejoice to hear that it finds foster Father's & Mother's. However it fare amongst men, yet if it find acceptance with God thro' Christ Jesus, I shall have cause to be abundantly satisfied.[348]

In these lines Atherton could be compared to an adherent of a 'covenant of grace' such as Hutchinson in the sense that he defends his impassioned interpretation of God's role in protecting him and plays down the importance of how his interpretation will 'fare amongst men'. Moreover, if we think of Webster's definition of an 'enthusiast' as one who revels in 'imagination', '[excitement]', '[fancifulness]', and 'intensity', then Atherton's tendency towards the poetic in his account marks him out as an 'enthusiast'.

These aspects of Atherton's narrative were no doubt attractive to Howe. In 'Captivity and Restoration', Howe recognises Rowlandson's talent for mitigating the truths of her experience so as not to challenge the beliefs of her community when she states that 'The trick of [Rowlandson's] text is in its mix' (p. 127). One suspects this is not something that could be said of Atherton, whose account of the 'Falls Fight' was treated with suspicion by parishioners, and is also questioned by Sheldon and Williams.[349] The manuscript containing Atherton's account has itself been mysteriously lost from history having been copied by the chronicler of the 'Falls Fight', Williams. Although Howe does not explicitly say so, the reader familiar with *The Birth-Mark* will suspect that she means to include Atherton in the list of 'antinomian' 'enthusiasts' who have been marginalised from American history.

Howe's assertion in 'Personal Narrative' that whilst writing 'Articulation' she 'discovered in Hope Atherton's wandering story the authority of a prior life for my own

[348] Sheldon, p. 166, p. 168.

[349] Sheldon, pp. 168-169.

writing voice' (p. 13) suggests that she believes that by poeticising *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts* she could channel the marginalised Atherton in 'Articulation'. This idea is reinforced elsewhere in 'Personal Narrative' when she admits that her poetic invigoration by the 'raw material paper afterlife […] may suggest vampirism because while I like to think I write for the dead, I also take my life as a poet from their lips, their vocalisms, their breath' (p. 16). It is in the final stanza of the 'Hope Atherton's Wanderings' section of the poem (the section in which Howe remixes the words from Sheldon's text) that Howe is at her most vampiric:

> Loving Friends and Kindred: --
> When I look back
> So short in charity and good works
> We are a small remnant
> Of signal escapes wonderful in themselves
> We march from our camp a little
> And come home
> Lost the beaten track and so
> River section dark all this time
> We must not worry
> How few we are and fall from each other
> More than language can express
> Hope for the artist in America & etc
> This is my birthday
> These are the old home trees[350]

In these lines Howe finds the 'predetermined poem' that she proposed was hidden in 'Hope's epicene name' in the opening prose section of 'Articulation'. Fragments of phrases from various parts of Sheldon's text still make an appearance in these lines ('signal escapes' is from Atherton's account) but these fragments are clearly pieced together to form a more syntactically coherent stanza.[351] The speaker of these lines is undeniably Atherton, who Howe described as receiving a 'baptism of fire' in the opening section of 'Articulation' and now declares 'This is my birthday'. It is Hope's

[350] 'Articulation', p. 16.

[351] Sheldon, p. 166.

birthday because he is both reborn through his lifechanging 'baptism of fire' (p. 4) in the forest and born into Howe's poem as a speaker. Having been marginalised by his community, Howe gives Atherton the 'enthusiast' the opportunity to sermonise in her poem about 'Hope for the artist in America'. Howe, after all, states in the opening to 'Articulation' that she will 'assume Hope Atherton's excursion for an emblem foreshadowing a Poet's abolished limitations in our demythologized fantasy of Manifest Destiny' (p. 4). Howe believes that Atherton, like Rowlandson, was awakened by the experience of 'abolished limitations' when he was stranded from the structure and security of his settlement, and he is thus well positioned to sermonise in a piece of writing that also explores these 'abolished limitations' by indulging the slippages in poetic language.

In finding Atherton's voice, 'Articulation' demonstrates that Schultz is correct in claiming that '[d]espite her distinctly avant-garde surfaces', Howe exhibits the tendencies of a modernist in the sense that '[h]er fragments are every bit as artful as Eliot's and her desire to make them cohere (in literary and religious terms) is equal to that of Eliot, Pound, or Hart Crane'.[352] It is for this reason that Schultz states that Howe 'believes in history' as she feels that a poem has the potential to fragment and reassemble a historical text like Sheldon's in order to articulate a voice which lies dormant with that text. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that Howe sees herself as channelling a 'predetermined poem' in the process of this working of historical texts. Although the stanza above achieves a coherency that is unprecedented at this point in 'Articulation' – a coherency which demonstrates her success in her poetic project of working Sheldon's text -- the poetic qualities of this stanza show that Howe does not see her poetic work as a means of overcoming the limitations in human perception. Indeed, this stanza can be read as a statement of Howe/Atherton's awareness of these limitations in its contemplation of an environment which is 'More than language can express'. Furthermore, the speaker in the stanza evidently makes peace with the fearful situation in which the puritans found themselves in the New World by describing this community of emigrants as a 'a small remnant | Of signal escapes wonderful in themselves'. Furthermore, the speaker suggests that even if 'the beaten track' is 'Lost' and the 'River section' is dark', 'We must not worry', a sentiment that seems to echo Howe's argument in *The Birth-Mark* that the Massachusetts Bay Colony's doubling down on epistemological certainty in the face of the unknown

[352] Susan M. Schultz.

wilderness established a pernicious hegemonic impulse in American culture. Whilst Howe may, therefore, build the fragments she finds in Sheldon's text into some kind of coherent whole in 'Articulation', she remains vigilant in relation to the inherent slippage in our perception of reality and, furthermore, suggests that it is by making peace with this inescapable condition of our existence that we are able to navigate the gap between word and world more ethically and harmoniously. To return to the distinction between 'wilderness' and 'wildness', although Howe, as Shultz argues, believes that 'history […] can be transcended' through the poem, she is certainly not arguing that the epistemological limitations human face can be transcended through the poem.

This chapter has demonstrated that whilst the concept of a poetic form of 'work' can be applied to Howe's criticism and poetry very fruitfully, she takes a very unique approach to 'working' language by attempting to specifically engage the words found in American texts to release dormant layers of meaning. In clarifying Thoreau's influence on Howe's sense of libraries and archives being places of 'wildness', the chapter has also shown how the ecological connotations of my use of the term 'work' correspond to Howe's sense of her work proliferating wildness. Like Merwin, Howe sees this proliferation of wildness in the undercutting of the hegemonic epistemological structures of American culture to be a means of establishing a more ethical and harmonious relationship between humans and their environments.

Conclusion

Poetic Work

In the introduction I stated that I would identify three aspects of Ammons', Bernstein's, Howe's, and Merwin's poetry which demonstrate their commitment to the writing of poetry as a form of work. I argued that these writers, firstly, engage in poetry as a means for discovering new meanings or ideas, secondly, they see the writing of poetry as a significant avenue for cultural change, and thirdly, they incorporate the working of language and ideology as an impulse in their work.

Chapter One explored Bernstein's 'insistence | that poetry be understood as epistemological | inquiry' (*A Poetics*, pp. 17-18). Although this chapter examined a transition in Bernstein's work away from the deconstructive politics of early Language poetry essays, it showed that he continues to argue in his work from the early 1990s that human perception of reality is ideologically mediated through language. However, my key argument in this chapter was that rather than trying to break free of the rules of our language, which frame our view of the world, Bernstein aims to experiment with those rules in his poetry in order to open up new perspectives within that an ideology. Bernstein is less concerned in *A Poetics* with an all-pervading capitalist ideology and instead warns against 'restricted | epistemological economies' in general, which enforce strict limits on the way we use language. Poetry, Bernstein suggests, can prevent the naturalisation of a particular ideology by utilising its 'power' to 'reconnect us | with modes of meaning given in language | but precluded by the hegemony of restricted | epistemological economies' (*A Poetics*, p. 18). The project for poetry outlined by Bernstein in these lines involves the poet continually exploring possibilities for meaning within our languages in order to, subsequently, explore the multiplicity of ways in which we can know the world. This is the type of poetry which Bernstein praises in the opening to 'State of the Art' for exploring the 'incompatible musics' and 'clashes of sentience' which produce 'the magnificent cacophony of different bodies making different sounds, as different as the hum of Hester Street from the gush of Grand Coulee, the buzz of Central Park' (*A Poetics*, p. 1).

Bernstein thus sees the poet in a similar manner to Rorty, who describes the poet as 'the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species'.[353] Indeed, this similarity with Rorty evidences the degree to which Bernstein

[353] *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 17.

is a worker of language in his poetry. If poetry is a form of 'epistemological | inquiry' that continually opens up new realms of possible meaning, it follows that the poet engages in an ongoing process of discovery when attempting to rejuvenate the language. Furthermore, by establishing Wittgenstein's influence on Bernstein's philosophy on meaning in language, Chapter One showed that, like the agriculturalist who facilitates an organic process in working the land, Bernstein wants to engage language in such a way as to stimulate the unreleased potential for new meaning which exists within the established rules of a particular language. Moreover, Bernstein's aim to explore epistemology rather than ontology speaks to the fact that he embraces the rejuvenation of language as an impulse rather than as a means to an end. If the aim of this poetry is to explore epistemology, this means that it seeks to explore the range of ways in which we know the world rather than exploring *what* we know about the world. In other words, the poet's job, Bernstein argues, is to constantly work the ideological rules by which we make sense of the world through language in order to perpetually explore *how* we can know the world.

The importance of process and motion is the key theme in Ammons' *Garbage*. Chapter Two established that there is a Jamesian side and an Emersonian side to Ammons' endorsement of a poetic process which involves committing to a moment of thought or a process of engagement in a subject through writing. The comparison with James arises through Ammons' assertion that the poetic process allows us to consciously make sense of the world in a more constructive way. The fact that Ammons attributes proliferating environmental problems to the sedimentation of a particular worldview evidences that the poem can, for Ammons, perform an important cultural task in facilitating a thinking through of the West's unsustainable exploitation of the environment. As Ammons himself writes in the closing section of *Garbage*, poetry 'can in seeking | ease deal with more substance than a clanking bore can (p. 120). The Emersonian side to Ammons' belief in poetry's powers of rejuvenation is seen in his argument that the poetic process has an immediate effect in synchronising the writer and reader in the universal circulation of energy and, subsequently, naturally sharpening their perceptions of the external world. In the conclusion to that chapter, I used Retallack's idea of a 'swerve' in Western philosophy to show how both Bernstein and Ammons incorporate a swerving tendency as an absolute rule of their poetry.[354] Ammons' faith in this tendency clarified that whilst he believes that the poem is a useful

[354] Retallack, p. 1.

medium for processing ideas about a particular subject, he also feels that the very act of writing a poem is beneficial in connecting humans to their environments.

Thoreau's influence on Merwin provided a starting point in Chapter Three for investigating Merwin's use of poetry as a means of discovering new perspectives on non-human nature. This chapter used Cavell's *The Senses of Walden* to show how Thoreau's influence on Merwin helps connect his work as a poet to his work as a conservationist. I then argued that there is a similarity between Merwin's trial and error approach to conservation and his use of plain language to probe for meaning when reflecting on a particular experience in nature, as in the poems 'Pastures' and 'The Duck'. By emphasising Merwin's awareness of the human limitations in understanding nature in Section One of the chapter, I demonstrated that whilst Merwin does not believe that the meanings he finds in these poems are absolute or universal, these meanings are valued by Merwin because they help sharpen his perception of the environment. Merwin does not think that the poetic process can help humans fully comprehend their environment, however he does think that they are able to live more harmoniously with non-human nature if they find meaning through this process of poetic engagement. Merwin's claims about poetry's power to rejuvenate cultural attitudes are less grand than Ammons' and Bernstein's, however, given his concerns about the environmental and humanitarian issues that stem from the West's linguistic disconnection from its environment, it is clear that Merwin values poetry for its potential to reattune humans to the natural world.

Chapter Four's analysis of 'Personal Narrative' demonstrated that Howe seeks to channel voices which are hidden in historical records through poetry. Howe's voicing of Hope Atherton in 'Articulation' is only achieved, Howe believes, through poeticising accounts found in Sheldon's *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts*. The fact that Howe sees herself as working Sheldon's text to facilitate the release of a hidden dimension in that text also justifies my comparison of the poetic working of language to the working of farmland. Howe's style of working language is somewhat different from the other three poets studied in this thesis because she appears to fulfil her objective of channelling Atherton in 'Articulation'. This is to say that the poem is more of a means to an end for Howe than it is for Ammons, Bernstein, and Merwin because she completes her task of making Atherton present in the poem by reassembling fragments from Sheldon's text. At the same time, the chapter acknowledged that, although Howe believes that a poem can transcend history, a key point of her poetry and literary criticism is that there is an inescapable slippage in our comprehension of

reality. Indeed, Howe endorses the view of 'enthusiast' over the 'positivist' precisely because the former appreciates humanity's limitations in understanding the world and is, subsequently, open to exploring different ways in which the world can be interpreted (*The Birth-Mark*, pp. 11-12, p. 46).

'A Present Step into [the] Future'

In applying this criteria for poetic work to Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin I have shown that these poets take up a pragmatic middle ground between the more extreme side of postmodern scepticism and the naivety of foundationalism. The introduction established that pragmatism occupies this space because it accepts the limitations of human knowledge whilst recognising that, in James' words, '[w]e live in a world of realities that can be infinitely useful or infinitely harmful'.[355] James envisaged that the 'pragmatic method' could assist in weighing up which 'realities' would be 'infinitely useful' to accept and which 'infinitely harmful'. However, according to Cavell, Emerson differed from the classical pragmatists in that rather than treating writing as a 'wager' in which one could perform the 'necessary intellectual preparation for a better future', he saw writing 'itself a present step into that future'.[356] The introduction explained that it is on this basis that critics connecting poetry to pragmatism such as Poirier and Magee argue that Emerson's pragmatism dictates that humans can better navigate a world which is unknowable in the absolute by constantly reattuning to their environments and reformulating their conceptions of reality to the current moment. Such a philosophy is at the heart of my idea of a poetic working of language in the sense that the poets I analyse attempt to use the writing of poetry as a 'present step into [the] future' like Emerson. Moreover, each of these poets share Emerson's wariness of the sedimentation of one particular ideology and thus see it as imperative that we constantly look to adapt our language (and the ideology contained within it) to a changing world.

In order to summarise the relevance of this research on the shared poetic work in Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin to ecocriticism and the Culture Wars it is helpful to explore how this thesis has applied a pragmatic rather than postmodern conception of ideology. The relevance of ideology to the tension between postmodern theory and ecopoetry is that it acknowledges the gap between human thought and

[355] James, p. 89.

[356] 'What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist', p. 179.

reality. The introduction established that founding ecocritics such as Scigaj and Buell complain about American poetry's investment in postmodern discourse such as ideology critique because it distracts poets and readers from the fact that, even if language cannot comprehend the external world, the world beyond language still exists and, moreover, our actions within it impact both human and non-human nature.[357] Indeed, it is on the basis of the ecocritical condemnation of postmodern theorists that Selby questions whether 'ecopoetry and postmodernism are inimical (with the former asserting, ultimately, that the earth we inhabit is always already a reality we ignore at our peril, and the latter asserting that even something so seemingly solid as the land we inhabit is, ultimately, an ideological construct)'.[358] By identifying the existence of a pragmatic impulse towards the working of language in the poetry of my chosen writers, I have shown that Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin cannot be so easily polarised in terms of their attitude to human agency in language. Instead, I argue that their work is relatively flexible in terms of the way it straddles the divide between the postmodern and the ecopoetic. This surprising flexibility in the four poets' work can be clarified through a brief discussion of how, ultimately, this thesis has shown its four poets to embrace Rorty's rather than Althusser's approach to ideology.

In the introduction I used Althusser's definition of 'ideology' as that which 'represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'.[359] Whilst this basic of definition is useful as a shorthand for acknowledging that Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin are aware that the relationship between humans and reality is mediated, Althusser's wider conceptualisation of 'ideology' is not reflective of these poets' take on ideology at the turn of the 1990s. Althusser's essay argues that in order for capitalism to consolidate a hierarchy of power, it is important that the 'existing relations of production' are maintained. On this basis, Althusser describes 'ideological state apparatus' that help manipulate the worldview of capitalist subjects in a manner that consolidates the 'relations of production'. For instance, in the case of the school, Althusser argues that students are given an 'apprenticeship in a variety of know-how wrapped up in the massive inculcation of the ideology of the ruling class' so that 'the *relations of production* in a capitalist social formation […] are

[357] Scigaj, p. 27; Buell, p. 62, p. 96, p. 102.

[358] Selby, p. 128.

[359] Althusser, p. 105.

largely reproduced'.[360] In the case of the school, then, Althusser is arguing that pupils are ideologically manipulated into understanding reality on the terms set for them by a ruling elite. Evidently, Althusser is attempting to draw his reader's attention to the sinister side of ideology by showing how capitalism manipulates its subjects in order to maintain an unequal and unfair hierarchy of power and, for this reason, he suggests that 'we have to outline a discourse which tries to break with ideology, in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific […] discourse on ideology'.[361]

Philosophers and critics have continued to use Althusser's basic definition of 'ideology' but many have dispensed of the wider critique which accompanied this definition. Indeed, my analysis of Poirier, Magee, Bartczak, and Rorty in the introduction demonstrated that an individual's perception of reality is necessarily mediated through culturally established agreements and assumptions about that reality. Rorty advances this argument particularly succinctly by endorsing Davidson's instruction to 'think of the history of language, and thus of culture, as Darwin taught us to think of the history of a coral reef. Old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors'.[362] Whilst Althusser expresses a desire to escape the dominant ideology, Rorty believes our ideologically mediated worldview naturally shifts over time and can be rejuvenated from within that ideology. Richard Bernstein is also informative on this point:

> A false picture is suggested when we think that our task is to leap out of our own linguistic horizon, bracket all our preunderstandings, and enter into a radically different world. Rather the task is always to find the resources within our own horizon, linguistic practices, and experiences that can enable us to understand what confronts us as alien.[363]

Althusser is precisely the kind of philosopher who argues that we must strive to 'leap out of our own linguistic horizon' in order to escape a particular ideology. Crucially in terms of the research questions of this thesis, this is also symptomatic of the argument

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[360] Althusser, p. 86, p. 105.

[361] Althusser, p. 117.

[362] *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 16.

[363] Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 173.

made by Silliman, Bernstein, McCafferey, Davidson, and Andrews in *The Language Book*. In this book, these poets propose that poetry must foreground the limitations of language in order to expose and break free of capitalist ideology.[364] Indeed, it is on this point that Andrews argues that the truly political poet must approach 'writing *as* politics' rather than 'writing *about* politics', as to make sense on the terms set by capitalist ideology and, subsequently, help consolidate that ideology (*Paradise and Method*, p. 50). As the introduction clarified, such an argument implicates these poets in ecocritical complaints that postmodern theory has disparaged poets from taking the environment as a subject of engagement.

In identifying Ammons', Charles Bernstein's, Howe's, and Merwin's commitment to a shared form of poetic, I have shown that these poets approach ideology on terms similar to Rorty and Richard Bernstein rather than Althusser. These poets do not attempt to escape a particular ideology, nor do they attempt to deconstruct a particular ideological perspective, rather they align themselves with Richard Bernstein in attempting to 'find the resources within our own horizon, linguistic practices, and experiences that can enable us to understand what confronts us as alien'. Rather than attempting to deconstruct the rules of conventional language in order to escape a capitalist ideological perspective, the two Language poets studied in this thesis explore the limits of conventional language in order open up our ideological perspectives on reality. Moreover, whilst Silliman's 'Disappearance of the Word' suggests that the ambition of political poetry should be to dismantle the language of capitalist ideology and replace it with 'a post-referential language', this thesis has demonstrated that its chosen poets see the re-symbolisation of language as ongoing process.[365] The poets I have analysed do have specific concerns about the specific nature of Western ideology but their belief in rejuvenating cultural values illustrates that they are wary of the naturalisation of ideology in general. For this reason, the political projects outlined in the key texts studied in this thesis involve rejuvenating and exploring the dominant ideology rather than dismantling it and building a utopian alternative ideology.

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[364] Silliman, pp. 121-132; Andrews, 'Writing Social Work & Political Practice', pp. 133-136; Bernstein, 'The Dollar Value of Poetry', *The Language Book*, pp. 138-140; Steve McCaffery, 'Intraview', p. 189; Michael Davidson, pp. 149-150.

[365] Silliman, p. 131.

Once we recognise that the poets studied in this thesis share a pragmatic approach to ideology, we realise that the two Language poets are more flexible that we might expect in their view of political poetry. Indeed, an essential argument of Charles Bernstein's 'Artifice of Absorption' is that there is no black and white line between sense and nonsense, rather he suggests that there is a 'threshold' for the 'phonically | significant'. Chapter One showed that Bernstein's own poems explore this 'threshold' in the sense that he produces opaque poems such as 'Dodgem', which create a 'greater resonance' in language at the expense of clarity by working at the extremes of the 'threshold' of the 'phonically | significant', whilst also writing poems like 'Of Time and the Line', which mix 'writing *about* politics' and 'writing *as* politics' (*A Poetics,* p. 12). In this sense, Bernstein's interest in exploring the *process* by which language effects our view of the world is reflective of his particular poetic focus rather than evidence of a prescriptive attitude about what a poem should or should not do. Indeed, given that Ammons believes that the very act of poetic writing serves a purpose in connecting writers and readers to their environments, it would seem that he is also interested in exploring the sense making process of poetry. As Chapter Two acknowledged, there are certainly some irreconcilable differences between Ammons and Bernstein in terms of their engagement with postmodern literary theory but, in light of this evidence of Bernstein's flexibility in matters relating to political poetry, accusations about his unwillingness to address subjects in a direct manner could also, in theory, be levelled at Ammons. This is not to suggest that an ecocritic such as Scigaj, Buell, or Garrard *would* make such an accusation, rather I am arguing that these critics would have little quarrel with postmodern poets like Bernstein if they appreciated this flexibility in his approach to poetry in the early 1990s.

Howe is unique in the way she navigates between expressing arguments and ideas in her poems and exploring the process by which such ideas are made. On the one hand, she engages in poetry as an activity in 'Articulation' by poeticising Sheldon's text, however, in giving voice to Atherton in the final stanza of the 'Hope Atherton's Wanderings' section of the poem, Howe produces a stanza which expresses a particular attitude towards life in the wilderness of New England. Whilst, then, the process by which Howe's poem makes sense of the environment is rather convoluted, the poem ultimately engages with non-human nature as a subject in a manner which can be considered oddly direct in the basic sense that it expresses an attitude about non-human nature. With this in mind, although 'Articulation' was analysed in Chapter Four due to my interest in Howe's description of her poetic process in 'Personal Narrative',

it is not surprising that Bloomfield has used Howe's poem 'Thorow' to explore the crossover between ecopoetry and postmodern poetries. Like 'Articulation', 'Thorow' borrows words from a record of a seventeenth century battle in New England but the poem is particularly remarkable for its scattered typography in two pages towards the poem's end which give the visual impression of a map.[366] For Bloomfield, 'Thorow' thus demonstrates the way that Howe explores the fruitful overlap between ecopoetry and experimental poetry by '[bringing] visual experimentation together with historical and ecological questions'.[367] Such pages in Howe's work evidence her pragmatic intention to engage in an ongoing plotting of the relationship between world and word despite her awareness of the inevitable slippage involved in human comprehension of non-human nature. As Chapter Four established, Howe is highly conscious of a 'positivist' tendency at the roots of American culture and she thus attempts to perform a more attentive and ethical negotiation of the gap between humans and the environment in her poetry.

'The Meaning of America'

In *The Culture Wars* (1991), Hunter describes 'a struggle over national identity – *over the meaning of America*' (his emphasis) in the 'contemporary culture'. The Culture Wars certainly provides an interesting contextual backdrop for this thesis given the way Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin pursue new '*meaning*' through their poetic work. In the introduction I stated that the pragmatic epistemological outlook modelled by Ammons, Bernstein, Howe, and Merwin in their working of language aligns them with 'progressives' in the Culture Wars who exhibited, according to Hunter, a '*tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life*' (Hunter's emphasis).[368] To start with the obvious, the poets studied in this thesis share this 'progressive' tendency in the sense that they recognise that their relationship with reality is ideologically mediated and thus constantly reassess their conceptions of reality to stay attuned to a changing world. Moreover, in expressing their wariness at the prospect of one dominant ideology becoming naturalised in American culture, these poets oppose the 'orthodox' '*commitment* […] *to an external,*

[366] 'Thorow', pp. 56-57.

[367] 'Palimtextual Tracts', p. 632.

[368] Hunter, p.50, p. 40.

definable, and transcendent authority' (Hunter's emphasis).[369] Not only would these poets reject the very premise of the 'orthodox' position on absolute truth due to their belief that our perception of the world is ideologically mediated, but they are also aware of the injustices and damage that are caused by one particular cultural group declaring that its interpretation of the world is authoritative. Indeed, some of the specific political critiques performed by these poets are intertwined with their broader scepticism of absolute truth.

Ammons' and Merwin's environmental concerns implicate them in Pat Buchanan's criticisms of 'environmental extremists who put insects, rats and birds ahead of families, workers and jobs' in his 1992 'Culture Wars Speech' at the Republication National Convention.'[370] The 'orthodox' scepticism of environmentalism stems partly from the environmental movement's challenge to big business and the creationism of the Religious Right.[371] These 'orthodox' concerns bring to mind the passage from *Garbage* referenced in Chapter Two in which Ammons acknowledges that there is a comfort in staying within the familiar social 'structure | of protection, caring, warmth, numbers' (p. 26), but that 'the safe | world of community, not safe, still needs | feelers sent out to test the environment, to | bring back news or no news' (p. 26). Ammons thus understands that we feel a sense of safety by sticking to our established rules and conventions but reminds his reader that we must 'deprive ourselves of, renounce, safety to seek | greater safety' (p. 26) when it comes to environmental issues.

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[369] Hunter, p. 44.

[370] Patrick Buchanan, 'Patrick Buchanan's Speech, Delivered at the 1992 Republican National Convention in Houston, Texas, on 17 August 1992.'. in *Encyclopedia of Religion and the Law in America*, ed. by Grey House Publishing, 2nd edn (Armenia: Grey House Publishing, 2009), in *Credo Reference* database <https://search-credoreference-com.ueaezproxy.uea.ac.uk:2443/content/entry/greyrala/patrick_buchanan_s_speech_delivered_at_the_1992_republican_national_convention_in_houston_texas_on_17_august_1992/0?institutionId=1278> [accessed 09 August 2018]

[371] William E. Burns, 'Science Wars,', in *Culture Wars in America: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*, edited by Roger Chapman and James Ciment, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2013), in *Credo Reference* database <https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/sharpecw/science_wars/0?institutionId=1278> [accessed 05 August 2018]

Such advice resonates with *Garbage*'s wider argument that we must pay attention to developments in non-human nature to prevent the kinds of environmental issues which were emerging at the end of the twentieth century.

Given the bitterness of Merwin poems like 'Thanks' and 'The Lost Originals', which suggest that language has been a tool for universalising Western ideology, one suspects that Merwin might not be as understanding as Ammons on this matter. Drew A. Swanson writes that during the 1980s and 1990s, environmentalists' growing concerns 'with issues such as vanishing wilderness, pollution, and human health concerns' were given short shrift by conservatives who 'accused environmentalists of stifling free enterprise and trammeling personal property rights, going so far in some cases as to label direct-action environmentalism as domestic terrorism'.[372] Merwin's critique of globalisation in *The Rain in the Trees* suggests that the poet would be sceptical of such claims about environmentalism hampering 'free enterprise'. On the basis of readings of 'Chord' and 'Losing a Language', Chapter Three argued that Merwin views globalisation as a legacy of colonialism because it preserves the economic and ideological hegemony of certain Western cultures. In this sense, Merwin would question whether international relations within a globalised free market economy are truly equitable; he would certainly contest whether the health of non-human nature is worth sacrificing for this questionably-named 'free enterprise'.

Howe's critique of a hegemonic impulse in 'the disciplines of history and literary criticism' (*The Birth-Mark,* p. 4) that censors dissident voices and, particularly, female voices sets her apart from Allan Bloom. Hunter suggests that Bloom's touchstone 'orthodox' text, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 'provided intellectual legitimation for a populist and conservative critique of progressive change in the university'.[373] As Graham Thompson explains (citing Bloom), '[t]he target of Bloom's attack is liberal and multicultural university education that no longer has any concern for the "permanent concerns of mankind" and is instead obsessed with the "spirit of the times"'.[374] Given

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[372] Drew A. Swanson, 'Environmental Movement', in *Culture Wars in America: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*, in *Credo Reference* database <https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/sharpecw/environmental_movement/0?institutionId=1278> [accessed 05 August 2018]

[373] Hunter, p. 220.

[374] Graham Thompson, *American Culture in the 1980s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 34.

Howe's complaint in 'Thorow' that [i]n paternal colonial systems a positivist efficiency appropriates primal indeterminacy', and her subsequent suggestion that there are 'traces of blood in a fairy tale', it is likely she would object to Bloom's claim that university engagement with multiculturalism betrays the 'permanent concerns of mankind'.[375] Bernstein and Howe both took teaching positions at the University at Buffalo in the early 1990s where, unsurprisingly given their poetic styles of literary criticism, they confronted the academic conventions that Bloom sought to protect. Shultz explains that Howe's intermingling of critical thinking and creativity in her writing blurred the distinction between poetry and criticism in the Poetics Program at Buffalo in the 1990s.[376]

Bernstein's attitude to teaching is reflective of his argument in 'State of the Art' that cultural institutions should acknowledge the different perspectives of a multicultural America. Bernstein broaches this issue in *Attack of the Difficult Poems* (2011) when he proposes that 'the controversies that rage around standardized language go to the heart of the ideology of education and the kinds of language practices sanctioned by the academic profession'. '[T]he most visible form of the conflict', Bernstein suggests, comes in polarised reactions to 'black English', which is 'reviled by the conservative mainstream as deformed English and celebrated by Afrocentrics as the mother tongue'. For Bernstein, such a 'conflict' arises because 'there is no one ordinary language, but many ordinary languages. All language are social constructions – black English as much as standard English'.[377] In other words, conservatives' unwillingness to respect 'black English', Bernstein argues, stems from their failure to recognise that their language provides just one ideological outlook on the world rather than the authoritative outlook. In making this point, Bernstein returns to the argument he makes in 'State of the Art' that '[t]o pretend to be nonpartisan, above the fray, sorting the "best" from the "weak" without "ideological grudges" […] is an all too common form of mystification and bad faith aimed at bolstering the authority of one's own pronouncements' (*A Poetics*, p. 2). Bernstein aligns himself with the 'progressive' side of the Culture Wars debate over multiculturalism in making these

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[375] 'Thorow', p. 40, p. 44.

[376] Schultz, Susan M., 'Poetics at Buffalo', *Jacket2,* 1 (October 1997) <http://jacketmagazine.com/01/schultzbuffalo.html> [accessed 05 August 2018]

[377] Charles Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems: Essays and Interventions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 24.

points, however, it is significant that his position on these matters is connected to his wider ambition to open America to new ideological horizons by utilising poetry's potential as a tool of 'epistemological | inquiry'.

In writing this thesis I have largely chosen to investigate the approaches to language taken by these poets rather than the subjects they address in their work in order to contradict ecocritics who exaggerate the degree to which postmodern poets like Bernstein and Howe devalue the referential relationship between word and world. However, even this brief look at the 'progressive' politics of the poets studied, which are manifested in both their specific political critiques and their broader epistemological outlook, it is clear that there is much potential for exploring the influence of the Culture Wars on American poetry. Furthermore, given Roger Gilbert's suggestion that the 'the return to history, politics, and the social as vital concerns' in 'American poetry during the eighties' can partly be attributed to 'Reagan and the horrors he personified', it would be fascinating to explore whether there is a correlation between Language poets becoming more pragmatic, in the basic sense of the word, in their political critiques and the changing face of Reagan's America in the 1980s.[378]

Although this Culture Wars context has been lurking in the background of the thesis rather than taking centre stage, it helps draw out how the pragmatic epistemological outlook which Ammons, Bernstein, Merwin, and Howe adopt in the period studied allows them to shuttle between wider ambitions to rejuvenate language and more practical entry points into topical debates. Indeed, it is partly these poets' relative flexibility that has made the writing of this thesis such an enjoyable venture. Whilst I am not completely convinced by Howe's poetic attempt to transcend history, for example, when I consider *The Birth-Mark* in relation to a work like *The Closing of the American Mind* it is especially clear to me that Howe performs an important task in probing the shadowy archives of American libraries. Indeed, Howe's unique method of interweaving definitions of 'enthusiasm' by Webster, Birch, and Coleridge is not only enlightening but also engages the reader on a visceral level which makes Howe's interrogation of history feel almost palpable. Similarly, I admire Bernstein's dexterity with Wittgenstein's philosophy in outlining a project for experimenting with the socially constituted rules which frame our language, but such ideas are more

[378] Roger Gilbert, 'Textured Information: Politics, Pleasure, and Poetry in the Eighties' in *Contemporary Literature*, 33.2 (Summer, 1992), 243-274 (pp. 247-248).

convincing when connected to his argument that poetry can provide a truly open space for expression in a multicultural America. This flexibility in these two poets' work demonstrates the extent to which founding ecocritics were wrong to suggest that postmodern poets alienated American poetry from the true arena of political action at the turn of the 1990s.

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