Textual Practice

Charles Bernstein's Shadowtime and faithful interpretation

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'With the legalization of gay marriage, faith has been violated and we've been forced to respond', says Charles McVety, the president of Canada Christian College in Toronto.[1] Following the logic of McVety's statement – quoted in a *New York Times* article on religious conservatives' opposition to same-sex marriage in Canada – demonstrates well why arguments from faith often appear to dispense with reasoned debate. What the word 'faith' refers to in McVety's sentence is unclear, or more precisely, it seems to refer both to Christians' belief in God and to heterosexual marriage. With their differences collapsed into the single word *faith*, the opposition to same-sex marriage and the act of believing in the Christian God become synonymous – they occupy the same cultural and intellectual turf. A specific moral proposition that might otherwise be up for debate is located inside a sphere that cannot be reasonably contested, namely, the Divine. Christian conservatives are hardly alone in holding some beliefs sacred, for on some level all religious and secular philosophies begin with a prior commitment (even if that prior commitment is a dedication to cultural pluralism and open debate). What is remarkable about the above example is how the sentence turns faith into a noun with demarcated borders able to be 'violated'. Here faith becomes a specific conviction held outside the reach of intellectual discussion; faith means grasping the obvious, not negotiating the uncertain. McVety's words are not, however, alone in their formulation of 'faith'. They do not, for one, express a view of faith much different than the one held within many secular, liberal worldviews where faith equally stands in stark contrast to reasoned debate. As Stanley Fish explains, 'For the modern liberal, beliefs are what the mind scrutinizes and judges by rational criteria that are themselves hostage to no belief in particular'.[2] To the liberal mind, any conviction, such as an opposition to same-sex marriage, that does not put itself into doubt is antithetical to intellectual investigation (Fish goes on to discuss, in part, the 'belief system' of liberalism). The understanding that faith and critical inquiry occupy different logical systems

appears to be one of only a few ideas that people of faith and modern liberals can agree about. And yet, removing faith from the field of critical inquiry runs counter to an older, perhaps even more orthodox conception of faith.

In *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas, following Augustine, writes, 'believing . . . is giving assent to something one is still thinking about. Strictly speaking, we think about what we cannot yet fully see to be true. . . . Believing . . . means putting faith in something, and this resembles knowing in giving firm assent, but resembles doubting, suspecting and holding opinions in having no finished vision of the truth'.[3] For Aquinas, God, as the object of faith, is not known with complete certainty. He remains a mystery. But by involving oneself with God, by affirming an understanding of him, Aquinas says that people come to know God more fully, even as their vision of him continues to change. In Aquinas's understanding, faith allows rather than hinders critical inquiry. We do not arrive at our reasons for believing one thing instead of another by way of objective observation or intuition; our evidence is itself an interpretation and arrangement of the cultural and literary texts at our disposal. Without a finished 'vision of the truth', we study what we believe, refashioning it as new events and ideas protrude into our deliberations.[4] Holding an idea in faith permits us to persistently develop our understanding of those beliefs that are most crucial to us: faith is not a noun, but a verb – it is something one does, not something one possesses.

In the current moment when the language of faith and the language of progressive politics or intellectual sophistication are so often pitted against one another, Aquinas's understanding of faith reminds us of a different intellectual strategy, one that holds onto debate and critical inquiry and still locates knowledge in the fluid, difficult-to-pin-down sphere of uncertainty, conjecture, and association. Here, Aquinas's faith, understood as a critical method, is well suited for answering the questions that permeate our contemporary environment, questions that speak to the anxieties of conservative Christians and secular liberals alike: 'how can we live in a world without certainty; on what can we ground understanding and knowledge?'

While the prospect might at first appear unlikely, Aquinas's faithful method of critical inquiry runs through much recent innovative poetry, in particular the work of Charles Bernstein, whose faithfulness draws on the thinking of Emerson, Wittgenstein, and Stanley Cavell, Bernstein's onetime teacher. Referencing Cavell's reading of Emerson in *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, Bernstein, in 'Optimism and Critical Excess', argues for the usefulness of non-conventional poetry that grounds its meaningfulness on investigation and haphazard reading practices. In his essay Bernstein demonstrates his trust in knowledge that is

unproven and incomplete; he writes, 'Yet, without the expectation of correctness or the assurance of closure, what ground do we have for going on, for taking positions, for speaking with assurance or conviction? . . . Optimism is my Emersonian answer, at least today, as my mood allows (or else, more blackly disposed, I fall silent): a willingness to try, to speak up for, to propose, to make claims; enthusiasm versus the cautiousness and passivity of never advancing what is not already known'.[5] In Emersonian fashion, optimism for Bernstein here works as an intellectual and emotional response to the uncertainty and tenuousness of meaning; the very fact that we do not know where our words will take us when we try to make sense with them gives Bernstein hope. Reinforcing his optimism in a recent interview with David Caplan, Bernstein says, 'I share that Emersonian concept of moral perfectionism in which prosody, like poetry, is a process where we don't know where we're going to end up. It's all about being attentive to what is happening along the way'.[6] As Aquinas holds to a vision of the truth while letting it evolve along previously undetermined lines, Bernstein proceeds with the gaps in meaning, and with his words' slipping. Both Aquinas and Bernstein join uncertainty and belief. Following Aquinas, Emerson, Cavell, and Wittgenstein, Bernstein – most notably in his recent libretto *Shadowtime* – practices a faith in language: he helps demonstrate that what seems mysterious about our words – that is, their tendency to slip, digress and become uncertain – is that which sustains their meaningfulness.[7]

Its Synopsis tells us that *Shadowtime* is 'a "thought opera" based on the work of and life of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940)', who 'died on the Spanish border while trying to escape the fate that awaited most of his fellow Central European Jews'.[8] The opera 'explores some of the major themes of Benjamin's work, including the intertwined natures of history, time, transience, timelessness, language, and melancholy; the possibilities for a transformative leftist politics; the interconnectivity of language, things, and cosmos; and the role of dialectical materiality, aura, interpretation, and translation in art', (*SH*, p. 13). Beginning on the night before Benjamin died, '*Shadowtime* projects an alternative course for what happened on that fateful night. Opening onto a world of shades, of ghosts, of the dead, *Shadowtime* inhabits a period in human history in which the light flickered and then failed' (*SH*, p. 13). After Scene One where Benjamin is on the Spanish border, he descends into the underworld and moves through a series of dialogues and encounters with figures from history, myth, and his own life.

Although a libretto for Brian Ferneyhough's opera, Bernstein's poem is in its own right, at Ferneyhough's request, 'an independent poetic text'.[9] In an interview with Eric Denut, Bernstein says, 'I remember once asking Brian what the relation of my own performance of the libretto of

Shadowtime – I had sent him a tape of a reading I gave from the libretto – would be to that of the text as performed in the opera. He answered: none'.[10] Bernstein's poem does maintain a dynamic relationship with Ferneyhough's composition, but, in his interview, Bernstein speaks to the way his text 'becomes absorbed, subsumed into the music of the opera' and reminds readers that 'the setting of a poem is always also a translation of the poem'.[11] Ferneyhough's and Bernstein's tendency to discuss the libretto as a poem, a practice strengthened by the fact that Bernstein regularly reads *Shadowtime* as an independent piece, allows us, I think, to consider Bernstein's text as a singular literary work. Given its clearly vital relationship to Ferneyhough's opera, however, I will on occasion read the libretto in light of the London Coliseum production of the opera in July of 2005, particularly when that reading will help advance our understanding of Bernstein's poem.[12] But, following Ferneyhough and Bernstein, I primarily want to recognize the independence of the libretto so that I may consider it as a crucial instance of Bernstein's poetic and philosophical project, as I think we must.

In his readings of *Shadowtime* at Kelly Writers House on 13 October 2000, and at Harvard University on 21 February 2001, Bernstein speaks the parts of Walter Benjamin in a slow, quiet, even rabbinical fashion.[13] He stretches the words out, inserts moments of silence into lines and extends the pauses of line breaks. The rhythm of Benjamin's speech carries the sound of a person thinking, working to get the words just right. The tone is reassuring; his voice sounds like one we can trust, as if Benjamin knows something we do not. Alternatively, the voices of Benjamin's interlocutors tend to be shrill; even Benjamin's longtime friend, and scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem, sounds strident (at the Harvard reading). Only when reading the part of Hölderlin in Scene I (at both readings) does Bernstein give the voices of Benjamin and his partner the same slow pace and thoughtful character. The voices of Karl Marx, Groucho Marx, Kerberus, Pope Pius XII, Joan of Arc, the Baal Shem Tov Disguised as Vampire, Adolf Hitler, and Albert Einstein, each with varying degrees of speed and intensity, push against Benjamin's, moving at a much faster pace, giving their conversation a dissonant, humourous quality.

Scholem in particular sounds frustrated and angry with Benjamin. In the middle of their dialogue Benjamin and Scholem discuss literary criticism and the philosophy of language:

> WB: Language as such, that is the text / That we interpret / And that interprets us
> SCHOLEM: Are you ready to be the new Rashi / Raising commentary to new heights / So that the art of criticism / Becomes a sacred

process / Releasing the sparks inside the words?
WB: Critique cannot confine itself to letters / But must also
confront / That which animates the letters
SCHOLEM: And how can we grasp / What animates the letters?
WB: It is never enough to grasp / But also to grapple
SCHOLEM: Do you mean to put divinity on trial? (*SH*, pp. 50, 51).

In Bernstein's performance the emotional resonances we normally associate
with philosophy and Jewish mysticism shift; the effect is a particularly
spiritual reading of the libretto's concern for what we can know and say,
and how. Scholem's quick, irritated voice conveys his dissatisfaction with
Benjamin's elliptical account of criticism's goal and process. Scholem
sounds not shocked or worried, but combative; he sounds as if he finds
his old friend ridiculous. If Scholem spoke more slowly, or with a more
melancholy air, it would create the sense that Benjamin's words confused
Scholem, or gave him cause for foreboding. But Scholem's frustration
makes it sound as if he thinks Benjamin is missing the obvious, which
for Scholem has to do with the practical limits of what can and should
be done with God and criticism. His question 'Do you mean to put
divinity on trial?' is incredulous, not fearful or horrified (*SH*, p. 51). His
question 'And how can we grasp / What animates the letters?' is, in
Bernstein's mouth, rhetorical, meant to point out the misguided purpose
of Benjamin's aim (*SH*, p. 50).

Although Scholem – the man, and perhaps the character – believed in
the ability of language to convey mystical reality, he sounds frustrated here
with Benjamin's Kabbalah-like approach for secular purposes. Scholem's
own project explored what 'animates the letters', but in *Shadowtime*
he appears less sympathetic to Benjamin's secular linguistic and materialist
philosophy, his interest in the study of language for non-religious reasons
(*SH*, p. 50). As Scholem says to Benjamin, 'Metaphysics and materialism /
Are the peas in your shell game / And you are the Adventurer King / Of
Ambiguity and Obscurity / Skimming the textual profits / From the frag-
ments you have gleaned' (*SH*, p. 53). The meditative response Benjamin
makes to Scholem takes on the tone one might expect Scholem to
assume when unfolding the complexities of the Talmud. If Benjamin's
voice were faster, more sharp, it would give his words an intellectually
aggressive, scientific character. Instead Benjamin's linguistic materialism
sounds emotionally and spiritual focused; he is mystical about language
and representation whereas Scholem strangely becomes the skeptic.
Where Scholem sounds as if theological objectives are his only concern,
what he must defend in the face of Benjamin's method and purpose of
engagement, Benjamin's mysticism emphasizes the way he investigates.
And by inflecting his speech with wonderment it lays bare language's

incongruity. Both how we think in language and what we think about it become central to *Shadowtime* through the figure of Benjamin.[14]

Not that Bernstein's reading of Benjamin's voice makes it religious, exactly, and yet it does complicate what we take to count as a materialist understanding of the world and language. Bernstein's delivery of Benjamin's lines, and what Benjamin's words mean as he says them, open up what falls into the realm of the corporeal. In the libretto Benjamin does not limit the material to *things*, what can be grasped by rational understanding – he includes hesitations, moods, and memories. Demonstrating how meaning occurs with the way words are said, Benjamin's intensely subdued and indirect manner locates the libretto's concern for comprehension and representation in the realm of emotion and cognitive leaps. The skepticism toward the spiritual and expressive spheres we might take as a hallmark of a materialist, linguistic understanding of the world gives way in Benjamin's mystical sounding of language to a concern for the initial ambiguity of the material world, an ambiguity heightened by, and including, the mysterious.

The quiet, contemplative mood in which Benjamin says 'Language as such, that is the text / That we interpret / And that interprets us' and 'Critique cannot confine itself to letters / But must also confront / That which animates the letters', for example, figures language as an active agent (*SH*, p. 50). Language does not stay put in *Shadowtime* but 'interprets' its users just as its readers act on it. Alive but not human, language is a kind of monster, and we cannot understand it simply as material; the way it sounds and looks, and its signifying function, cannot completely explain language's meaningfulness. Confronting 'that which animates the letters' means looking for its soul, or its God, or its Dr. Frankenstein (*SH*, p. 50). Benjamin does not say explicitly who or what gives words their life, but circles around his subject. He says, 'It is never enough to grasp / But also to grapple' (*SH*, p. 50). With an eye toward linguistic struggle, noting the way words and people twist back on one another, Benjamin's concern for 'critique' seems to reckon with how words at times elude us – how in the slips of meaning they often seem ephemeral despite their materiality. Benjamin does not, however, sound troubled by his observation. In fact, his faithful search for the animator who stays just out of reach, who 'interprets' you as you read, that search itself appears to be Benjamin's animator: the need to pursue words because their meaning remains unsteady makes words meaningful. In pursuit, Benjamin tells us, we know our words, if only for a moment. Benjamin is a ghost hunter, and the mysteriousness of his business comforts him; he is not anxious or cynical. His elliptical response – a response that emphasizes language's ghostliness, its elusive quality – shows us how and why Benjamin reacts to language as he does. Engaging indirect language to sound reassuring

and careful about our words' obliqueness, and making a readable point about language by way of this cryptic tone, lets Benjamin turn the slipperiness and uncertainty of words into that which makes his words useful. In their exchange Scholem is practical about mystical realities, acting as if we clearly know the limits of God, words, and ourselves. Countering Scholem, Benjamin's rabbinical materialism makes clear that an investigation of language focused on where words begin to fail – where we come to the edge of their utility – is paradoxically uninterested in the incongruity of language, for if words have clear limits then their specific qualities can be taken for granted, which Benjamin does not do. His response puts a great deal of pressure on what we can say about what we don't know, and the manner in which we can put our critical faculties into practice.

The way Bernstein performs Einstein's interrogation of Benjamin in Scene V intensifies the libretto's spiritually charged refiguring of what it means to concern one's self with representation. In the Kelly Writers House reading Bernstein adds or repeats words and stresses words other than the italicized 'now' of the text. As he reads, the repeated line 'what time is it *now*' becomes a series of lines like 'wa, what time is it now? / what, whattimeisitnow? What TIME is it now? WHAT TIME IS IT NOW?! / what time is it NOW?' After a few lines Bernstein starts to play a prerecorded tape of him reading the same poem, as well as a female computer voice saying 'it's 9:10 pm' and then 'it's 9:11 pm' every two to three seconds. His recorded voice is quieter for the most part, and more contemplative, but as the live Bernstein reads he becomes increasingly distressed. At several points he breaks to answer his own question with 'it's 11:04'. The sound of chimes also runs through the reading, and at the end you hear an electronic novelty gift-like voice saying 'stop it, st st stop it, stop it' over and over again.[15]

Layered as it is, Bernstein's performance changes what on the page comes across primarily as a joke on the impossibility of saying what time it is into an account of the hell of understanding time and using language effectively – a philosophical and scientific demonstration transforms into a moment of frenzy. Bernstein's reading of Einstein's interrogation is still very funny, but its humour is also taxing. The overlapping of Bernstein's voice, the clanging of chimes, and the anxiety of his question, present an Einstein who is experiencing the uncertainty his science demonstrates as a highly distressed emotional state. The crisis of representation, here the impossibility of being able to say and know what time it is, is a crisis of comprehension. In his anxiety Einstein's frustration does not rise from an abstraction; Einstein does not appear troubled by the idea of language's or time's unknowableness in themselves. He sounds consumed by the practical impossibility of understanding either exactly. He cannot speak

a specific idea that he or anyone who is listening will fully understand. The intensity of Einstein's angst makes his disturbance over what he can say and know appear existential. And Benjamin does not answer, and his silence stresses Einstein's material, spiritual dilemma. He is in the kind of circumstance you cannot address adequately, like the death of somebody who is loved by somebody you love, and Benjamin knows better than to attempt a consolation. Einstein's predicament we could say is the failure of the direct approach. The impossibility of understanding where we are, and when we are, in a world where time and space and language bend and are never on target makes it impossible to know anything with the adverb *completely*, or understand a word because it is fixed or an object because it is simply what it is.

Unlike Ferneyhough's setting of Scholem's and Benjamin's conversation in Scene One – where the performers regularly shift between singing and occasionally speaking their lines, and listeners move between clearly hearing specific lines and hearing lines obscured by characters singing their multiple parts at the same time – Einstein's interrogation in the opera parallels Bernstein's reading more closely. In the London performance several male voices speak the first four words of Einstein's question, 'what time is it' and the female voices of the chorus sing the final word 'now'. The singers, like Bernstein, alter their speed and inflection. The 'now', however, is most often louder and at a higher pitch, and the slower, slightly stretched voices singing the first half of the question stand in contrast to the voices at the end.[16] The resulting discord makes the question sound urgent; it emphasizes the question's recognition of, and anxiety about, the flexibility and uncertainty of time, just as Bernstein's shifting speed and tone do.

If we ignore the singers and Bernstein's reading, or hear them too one-dimensionally, we might give in to the temptation to take Einstein's interrogation as an example of language's inability to do its job. Bernstein's performance wants us to resist that impulse; it asks us to read with a bit more care, or at least hear Einstein's words in more than one way. When we do – when we comprehend why Einstein's question is philosophical, funny, and full of angst – we remember that despite Einstein's impasse we still know what Einstein is talking about, whether we are reading the libretto or hearing it sung or read. Einstein does make a claim about how time works, maybe even despite himself. And we understand him. Einstein might not know the exact time, but he does express something exactly *about* time. He recognizes and demonstrates to us the vast complexity of how time moves and affects how we live. His words do not convey a specific piece of information even as they create the conditions for knowledge, which *Shadowtime* values more. In his frustration Einstein displays the surprising truth that language does its job when it

fails to communicate in a linear fashion. Moving between *Shadowtime*'s conversations and characters, listening to the various ways we hear what they say, readers find themselves asked to forget what they thought they knew about words. The libretto directs its request as much at those who take words' representation of the world as the world's creation as it does at those who still think words merely stand in for things. Hearing Bernstein's performance or the opera, and reading the text in isolation, considering all at once the anxiety, frustration, and mystery of trying to understand another's words, makes plain that *Shadowtime* does not simply hope to restate how words, as material, fluid objects, shape our experience (as if its readers did not already know). It wants to teach us to trust our perpetual estrangement from our words. *Shadowtime* asks us to find words meaningful when they circle and slip instead of heading straight for their objective.

Turning to non-linear forms as it does, *Shadowtime* continues in the vein of much 20th-century opera, that, as Patrick Smith describes it, threw off narrative guideposts and included the disjunctive musical and linguistic elements that came to define the age.[17] Discussing *The Mother of Us All*, a libretto by Gertrude Stein, Smith writes, 'Stein characteristically destroys the concept of time in her pageant, so that many American historical figures of different periods coexist, moving in and out of the frame of the stage. ... The structure here is an elaborate mosaic of parts'.[18] When discussing a debate between Daniel Webster and Susan Anthony in Scene One, Act Two in particular, Smith claims, 'Stein emphasizes the historicity of the characters by conducting the debate entirely in a pastiche of snippets from speeches made by Webster and rejoinders by Anthony. Yet the total non-sequitur of the snippets underlines the total non-understanding of the two'.[19] The parallels in subject and formal strategy that *Shadowtime* has to *The Mother of Us All* are suggestive, specifically when Smith argues that Stein 'created a positive approach to a redefining of language and play structure out of an essentially negative, or at best only immediately pleasing, tradition, which was DaDa'.[20] Although I can hardly agree with Smith's account of Dada, his sense that Stein's experiments did not destroy meaning, but heightened 'the mythic and pageantic qualities of the libretto', points ahead to Bernstein's own formal practice.[21] Smith does not go as far as to say that Stein's textual play enhanced the opera's coherent, referential components, or even constituted them differently; and yet his perception that narrative interruption in early 20th-century opera is not necessarily an interruption of meaning itself, allows us to read Stein's libretto as a touchstone for Bernstein's: in Stein's text (as with her poetry) we see the beginnings of Bernstein's belief that disjunction and uncertainty create the conditions for understanding.[22]

The divergence of meaning

Reading Bernstein's libretto inside the context of modernism and Wittgensteinian language philosophy does not tell the whole story of *Shadowtime*'s philosophical fixation. In 'The Objects of Meaning: Reading Cavell Reading Wittgenstein', Bernstein writes 'What Derrida ends up transforming to 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*'.[23] In large part, Bernstein is in *Shadowtime* working out his own reply to Wittgenstein's and Cavell's claims about language, much of which he explores in poetic form. But the libretto goes beyond an explanation of a given theory of language, and even past a theory in practice, by pushing into an ethical consideration of how we respond to our situation in language: *Shadowtime* is a place where Bernstein and his readers can begin to work out how they might negotiate their place in the world knowing what they do about language after Wittgenstein and Cavell. It's one thing to recognize that we cannot reach a final, fully realized understanding of our own words, the words of others, or the words of any specific text, and to say that meaning happens in the slips of these words. It is quite another matter to practice this theory with enough confidence to make it part of an ethical-aesthetic occupation of the world, which is what *Shadowtime* is after.

Benjamin's final interrogator in Scene V is Golem, who in Jewish folklore is an artificially created human supernaturally endowed with life. In *Shadowtime* Golem's questions are incomprehensible; he asks 'Infantibicia oag reboo nebullia sob expleanur / gendithany?' and 'Fogum, fogum are be gridit etsey?' (*SH*, pp. 98, 99). Benjamin for his part still answers. He responds 'If not by running then by walking if not by / walking then by climbing if not by climbing then by sliding if not by sliding then by stalling' and 'First you know it, then not. That's when you begin to find out' (*SH*, pp. 98, 99). Like Golem himself, Golem's language is artificial, but it is not gibberish. It has grammar – punctuation, vowels, and a pattern of letter arrangement. Next to it, with the same syntax and characters, Benjamin's English looks no more natural; it is as made up as Golem's. Mixing together, their sentences both look strange and liable to come up short of meaning in their aberrant structures, an experience emphasized by Benjamin's own abstruse words, whose ideas, without clear subjects, are also difficult to grasp (although they do reflect in some part the idea that meaning occurs where words become unmoored). Benjamin's apparent comprehension of Golem's

questions makes Benjamin's English even more unfamiliar to us, for if Benjamin in his language understands and is understood by Golem then it is a language we do not fully share. What communication takes place between them sounds supernatural, a part of the shadow world Benjamin and Golem live in: we might say meaning itself, like Golem, occurs for abnormal reasons. The otherworldly figure of Golem makes it impossible for readers to understand completely what is going on; with Benjamin's answers they get the drift of the conversation, but they cannot be certain. The clear meaning of the words on the page slip by readers; they find the sentences before them insecure and strange.

In the final line of his interrogation by Golem, Benjamin says 'Keine Kaddish wird man sagen' (*SH*, p. 100). The note to Scene V tells us that the line comes from a poem by Heinrich Heine, and translates as 'No one to say Kaddish for me'.[24] It also describe the line as 'the lament of a secular, or assimilated, Jew' (*SH*, p. 100). The Kaddish itself does not reference death; instead the prayer is a public sanctification of God's name and expresses a longing for God to establish his kingdom on earth. I take the note, and the final line, to point out that without a belief in God there is no name to praise and so there is no reason to say Kaddish – there is no kingdom to come. In the context of Golem's interrogation that is indecipherable to us, Benjamin's lament sounds like a crisis of self-knowledge: it is the loss of prayer, the act of representation that gives Jews some understanding of God, who in turn gives them some understanding of themselves as God's chosen people. When Jews cannot speak or grasp the words of the Kaddish because those words have no direction, no way or hope of becoming materialized, assimilation is a struggle with identity, which in *Shadowtime* resembles a struggle with language. With Benjamin in the Underworld, God's Kingdom does not seem as if it is about to be realized on earth, a fact emphasized by the unspoken presence of the Holocaust running through the libretto. Here the Messiah who fails to appear is not only the disappearance of God but the abandonment of a confident relationship to the world and the words with which we understand it. In his dialogue with Scholem, Benjamin says 'I am the prosecutor / Who will put divinity on trial / For breach of contract. / For God promised a Messiah / But no Messiah comes' (*SH*, p. 51). The word of God, his promise, is not achieved, and the failure of his words to realize themselves is the potential failure of all words to become interpretable. In the absence of the Messiah, each word spoken can now escape our grasp: with only the name of the 'new David' and no person – that is, without a connection between the Messiah's name and the Messiah as a referent – God's word is in doubt. And with God's words disconnected from the world, no words appear reliable.

In epistemological terms, we could say that the crisis of comprehension *Shadowtime* presents its readers with is the understanding that if we

cannot fully grasp our words, and our world is made of language, then we cannot fully grasp our world – meaning we are not fully in it, meaning, we are ghosts. Where every other hero who descends into the Underworld comes back out – Ulysses, Dante, Orpheus, Aeneas – Benjamin stays there. Not surprisingly, the people he meets are all haunting figures, but recalling the *Inferno*, several of these ghosts are still in the material world in 1940 – Hitler, Einstein, and Pope Pius XII, to name three. From the outset, the libretto unmakes the clear distinction between Benjamin's Underworld and the world of our own turmoil. Remembering the Synopsis, *Shadowtime* begins 'on the last evening of Benjamin's life' and 'projects an alternative course for what happened on that fateful night. Opening onto a world of shades, of ghosts, of the dead, *Shadowtime* inhabits a period in human history in which the light flickered and then failed' (*SH*, p. 13). As an 'alternative' account of what happened to Benjamin, the libretto does not clearly establish his death in a way that removes him from us. Whatever Benjamin's shadowy condition is, we share it, a point Fabrice Fitch emphasizes when he, in the liner notes of NMC recording, quotes Ferneyhough's hope that what the opera suggests about Benjamin 'will be seen to apply to each of us'.[25] *Shadowtime* occupies a time in *our own history* when human life, the 'light', goes out on a massive scale. We are all like Benjamin, living in a shadowtime after the extinguishing of that light, and his experience is an account of our own. Like him we are ghosts haunting our words. We cannot approach words directly, or the ideas we hope to create with them; the linguistic condition we know ourselves to occupy remains uncertain and mysterious; our words, even when we use them, or hear them, do not strike us as entirely ours, and so they and we continue in ambiguity. Here the burden of meaning lies largely with readers, not with an abstract notion of language as such, or even with the text before them, however much it must create a productive context for meaning. Here *Shadowtime* revises what we might otherwise take our linguistic crisis to be: it is not our words that have failed us; it is ourselves and our use of words that appear questionable, or out of joint. Our understanding of how we make meaning is a spiritual quandary, a moment to perpetually contend with what we thought we understood.

In his interview with Eric Denut, Bernstein explains why he is so attracted to Benjamin's work, which is, for Bernstein,

> a good example of multipolar, rather than linear, thinking. Benjamin's form of reflective writing suggests a poetics of multiple layers or figures. A line of thought may seem to go off into one direction then drops back to follow another trajectory, only this new direction is not a non-sequitur but rather echoes or refracts both the antecedent motifs and – this is the uncanny part – the eventual

ones. I mean this as a way of rethinking what is often called fragmentation or disjunction. Think of fragments not as discontinuous but as overlays, pleats, folds: a chordal poetics in which synchronic notes meld into diachronic tones.[26]

Bernstein shares his attraction to Benjamin's work with a wide range of artists, theorists, and literary critics who see Benjamin's style and philosophical critique as a crucial moment in modern thought. Benjamin's attention to language as a subject and inescapable 'misreading' in 'The Task of the Translator', for one, ties the linguistic attention of 20th-century philosophy to questions of politics and cultural 'texts' and it points ahead to thinkers like Derrida.[27]

Interestingly, Bernstein's reading of Benjamin's prose shares an affinity with Gershom Scholem's reading of the same. Largely concerned with what he sees as the irreconcilable tension in Benjamin's writing between mysticism and Marxist 'materialism', Scholem emphasizes Benjamin's 'discursive thinking' in which 'strict conceptual exposition takes second place to a descriptive method by which he seeks to let his experience speak'.[28] As Benjamin proceeds in this manner 'he is liable without warning to switch from the profane to the theological approach. ... [But] [f]or all his renunciation of system, his thought, presented as that of a fragmentarian, yet retains a systematic tendency. He used to say that each great work needed its own epistemology just as it had its own metaphysics. This constructive tendency in his mode of thinking ... also conditions his style'.[29] In Scholem's reading, Benjamin's tendency to stress technique produces 'authoritative sentences' that 'lend themselves to quotation and interpretation. What is illuminating in them is meshed with the thoroughly enigmatic'.[30] Despite the fact that Bernstein celebrates what Scholem finds in turn breathtaking and frustrating, Scholem's sense that Benjamin's prose proceeds in fragments and with an element of the unfathomable reinforces Bernstein's depiction of it as moving through a series of overlays, pleats, and folds. Even Bernstein's description of Benjamin's thinking as 'multipolar' reflects Scholem's proposition that Benjamin shifts between a profane and theological stance.[31] And when Bernstein suggests that the new 'directions'[32] generated in Benjamin's writing are not non-sequiturs but echoes of antecedent and eventual motifs he speaks as well to Scholem's insistence on the 'systematic tendency' that remains in Benjamin's essays.[33] In these respects, Bernstein's poetic reading and use of Benjamin appears to appropriate rather than exclude Scholem's mystical and aesthetic portrayal of his friend's writing.

Given the strangeness of our words, and the spiritual disorder they impose on us, and keeping in mind the picture Bernstein, Benjamin, and Scholem show us of them, it is not surprising that, just as there are

those who do not believe in ghosts, there are those who do not believe in sustainable meaning. For those who despair over language's condition, language appears fractured beyond repair; the possibility that it can connect us to one another and to the world seems as unlikely as the prospect of consulting Abraham Lincoln on what to do about the degeneration of American politics. From a position of despair, the hopefulness of Bernstein's performance of Benjamin's speeches – the claim we hear that language works – sounds far-fetched. Even so, I want to suggest that rather than countering the text of *Shadowtime*, or the opera, Bernstein's readings serve to emphasize what we may too easily overlook: where those already committed to the idea of language's brokenness find their evidence, *Shadowtime* sees the conditions in which meaning becomes reliable enough to ground ethical thinking and behaviour. As Bernstein's performances create alternative versions of his poems these new texts make the collective argument that the signifying, cognitive function of words survives when we take an expansive view of how representation operates. In our spectral world, as we have seen, the libretto trusts language's tendency to slip, it takes words' lack of a necessary connection to a material world of referents as the fact that allows us to fulfil our duty to our words and enable understanding. The trust that *Shadowtime* here puts in language despite its obvious limitations proposes an ethical way of reading and responding to the subjects of our linguistic attention. The libretto is not interested in moral teachings or lists of ethical behaviours. It aims to locate ethics in the attempt to read carefully, to interpret our texts and each other well. The ability to use the whole range of our linguistic situation, with all its troubles and uncertainties, is for *Shadowtime* the foundation of all the individual ethical decisions people make each day. Rather than suppress its doubt or abandon a concern for what is or is not true, Bernstein's libretto participates in the kind of ethical, aesthetic attention that it hopes will permit readers to respond thoughtfully to the multifarious and changing texts, ideas and bodies with which we live.

The use *Shadowtime* makes of words' unfixednesss for its thinking about readerly ethics finds its most crucial employment in the thread of grief and lamentation weaving through the libretto, for the poem takes the impossibility of saying the inexpressible as a way to make the inexpressible interpretable. Poem 7, 'Sometimes', in Scene III presents the possibility of burning a book and reading a book both 'to stay warm', and then makes clear that its proposal is not a 'theory of reading', but is about 'staying alive in a particular place and / a particular time' (*SH*, p. 69). The poem continues, 'This is not / because / you are weary of learning / but what it means to die / in a particular moment and / a particular place' (*SH*, p. 70). The lines in the first half of the poem are not especially disruptive; however, they are not particularly direct or descriptive

either. No identifiable person emerges in the poem to become the subject of its desperate circumstances; nor do we get an account of what might lead to such a trying situation – the poem remains in the subjunctive and does not attempt to express what the suffering at its centre is, or is like. And, despite its profession not to be a theory of reading, 'Sometimes' does trouble the difference between reading and living. Without a clear object at the poem's centre, readers focus on the one substantial connection it provides: how reading and burning books both provide warmth. In that association reading becomes a practical necessity rather than something you do only after your livelihood is secure – something more theoretical and therefore secondary. Because reading keeps you warm like a fire does it is an act of desperation, what you do on the run, or when you are homeless – you use books to generate heat. 'Sometimes' is not instructing readers on the limited worth of books; the poem is not sequestering imagination and intellectual stimulus. The libretto tells us that books and our engagement with them are central to bodily survival. Tied to what it means to die in a 'particular moment and / a particular place', the *heat* of books is a response to the specific instances of intellectual impoverishment we witness around us each day, losses that put us on the run, and make us feel as if we have no place to live or think (*SH*, p. 70).

Those who turn books into energy for other reasons hide just out of view as the counterpoint to the heat of books in 'Sometimes'. The unspoken figures in the poem are the Nazi Students at the University of Berlin burning books in May of 1933 to destroy the warmth they might produce for other readers. The specter looking ahead to this moment is Heinrich Heine who wrote in his play *Almansor* that 'When one burns books, one will, in the end, burn people'.[34] The intellectual exhaustion, a weariness 'of learning', suggested in the poem occurs in this context as a reminder of the tenuousness of our words, the way they, too, diverge from us and their referents, the way they remain liable to break away from us in a puff of smoke (*SH*, p. 70). Rather than cause despair, 'Sometimes''s reminder heightens the crucial importance of reading well even in disparate circumstances, which, given the poem's invocation of particulars as an idea, it seems we presently occupy. As books burn in our minds we recognize what books make possible and what they are useful for – our lives and the lives of those around us. The uncertain and lyric beauty of these lines uses the vague context of the loss it implies to reinforce the desperate tone of the poem. The necessary heat of books that 'Sometimes' focuses readers on appears both more bodily and more elusive, more spectral than we might have imagined, and therefore more in need of nurture.

The second section of the poem is a variant of the first; it has the exact same lines but in a different order. It reads, 'you are weary of learning / a particular time / a particular space / it is cold / this is about staying alive / you

read a / in a particular place and / this is not a theory of reading / but what it means to die / and you need the fire / book for the same reason / in a particular moment and / This is not / to keep warm / because / sometimes / you burn a book because / and / sometimes' (*SH*, pp. 70, 71). Reordering the lines opens gaps in the poem, like 'you read a / in a particular place' and 'you burn a book because / and' (*SH*, pp. 70, 71); it also gives rise to awkward parataxis, as in 'and you need the fire / book for the same reason' and 'a particular space / it is cold' (*SH*, p. 70). These gaps, fragments, and strange juxtapositions rework readers' relationship to the poem. When readers come across 'you read a / in a particular place' they still hear the word 'book' – their memory of the first section makes the word present in the poem (*SH*, p. 70). The same happens in 'you burn a book because' and 'you need the fire / book for the same reason' (*SH*, pp. 70, 71); readers hear 'it is cold' and remember the need to 'keep warm' (*SH*, p. 69). Rearranging the lines while leaving the lines themselves the same gives the resulting gaps in the poem an active presence; as readers hear what is missing the gaps stand out; readers then hear these absences as part of the poem even as they recall the now-overlapping words of the previous section.

As the first section haunts the second the tension created in the first becomes more resonant in the very act of leaving it behind. Hearing the first section in its absence charges the physical and still ghostly connection between living and reading with emotional urgency. In the broken spaces of the second half of 'Sometimes' readers draw together thoughts of books, fires, dying in the cold, and managing to live through the cold. Depending on the particular movements of their imagination, individual readers might very well think of the books that keep them warm, or, remembering Benjamin, think of refugees fleeing the Nazis. At the same time, the gaps in the poem lend these thoughts a sense of increasing anxiety and desperation – reading reads like a matter of life and death, a matter of stumbling through the crises we perpetually face, a matter of fear, hope, and survival. Without the gaps of the second section the desperate tone of the first risks becoming mute; as a general civic virtue endorsed by the First Lady, reading, as a cultural activity, remains in constant danger of turning into something merely important. The gaps of 'Sometimes' fight our tendency to turn reading into an abstraction alone. In its insistence on reading's crucial presence in our lives, a presence made material by the strange relation between the two sections, 'Sometimes' grounds its intelligibility: the poem's argument comes about through its divergence from direct explanation. In bearing witness to its own failure to provide us with a theory of reading, or explain exactly how reading books keeps us warm as a fire would, the poem, like a lament, points to what it can't do as a way of making its subject comprehensible. In its inability to offer an overarching picture of

reading, and in its gaps and moments of cognitive and emotional intensity, 'Sometimes' conveys the sense that reading is involved with our very survival. The poem does not reduce reading's importance to a series of bullet points; it moves readers past explanation and into a visceral reading experience. From the inside, in the act of interpretation itself, reading's necessary function in our lives becomes manifest and understandable.

By finding *Shadowtime* meaningful in its digressions from its own sub-jects, readers begin to understand that they need the company of ghosts (the texts of those authors we will never know) to make sense of themselves and their circumstances. Departing from straightforward language prac-tices in the service of direct communication, the libretto pulls readers through a series of appropriated translations, absurdly funny encounters, fragmented poetic lines, and tragic histories. Moving from scene to scene in Bernstein's poem feels like being a specter. In it we haunt the words and experiences of others; we discover a house to possess instead of a world secured by our ownership of its language. The libretto does shove to the foreground the grief we find in the world of ghosts and in the slips of meaning that happen there – it is impossible to read *Shadowtime* without become lost and uncertain at times and without becoming acutely aware of the violence of our own history. Pushed together, our uncertain words and the terror of living with our past become metaphors of one another; in symbiotic relationship they create the emotional and intellectual frameworks readers need to give each critical attention. The loss of understanding in the line 'and you need the fire / book for the same reason' (*SH*, p. 70) makes more sense of the Holocaust than the sen-tence 'Hitler killed 6 million Jews and 6 million other ethnic and cultural minorities'. It is a sentence impossible to get your head around. The emotionally-loaded cognitive uncertainty of *Shadowtime* begins to move readers closer to if never fully to, comprehension. The cultural knowledge derived from holding the indefiniteness of our words and lives in tandem argues for our ability to create meaning in the most troubled occasions. If our words were necessarily connected to referents then our discovery of their disconnection would be the end of us. But knowing we have no way to live naturally in the world, and knowing that we can talk as, and with, ghosts, allows us to make our individual readerly experiences the site of interpretation, an act near enough to what we once thought of as understanding to be nearly indistinguishable from it.

Humourous faithfulness

In the midst of its ethical attention *Shadowtime* is still a startlingly funny poem, and we must not lose sight of the libretto's humour for the reason

that in making a joke about what it laments, *Shadowtime* fulfils the purpose of that mourning – it gives us a way to keep reading. Like most of Bernstein's poetry, *Shadowtime* revels in the comic and the absurd, a tendency that, on the one hand, provides a form of relief (like pointing out the elephant in the corner) and, on the other, works to expose and scrutinize the cracks in our cultural and personal facades. Scene V, 'Pools of Darkness', is particularly comical: Three Giant Mouths who question Benjamin about memory and the future, a Headless Ghoul who asks his question in a Medieval musical form, the heads of Karl Marx and Groucho Marx occupying one body, all come at readers as if from a carnival. Even Pope Pius XII becomes a stand-up with his questions 'Why didn't you take a gun and blast them out / of this world?'; 'Why didn't you swing and shoot and go down / in a flame of transcendent immolation?' (*SH*, p. 87). The discordance created by a man of God celebrating violence (recalling, in part, questions about the Pope's relationship with Germany before the Second World War) is funny because it performs a kind of puppetry, but one that remains acute, like cutting the mouth out of a picture of the President and saying silly or scary things through it with your own lips. At the start of the libretto the Innkeeper's excessively polite repetition of Henny Gurland's and Walter Benjamin's names strikes us similarly as ridiculous, and so the cruelty of his actions appears toothless despite their outcome.

One of the most bizarre and hilarious moments of *Shadowtime* occurs when it manages to make Adolf Hitler introspective and funny. As an interrogator in Scene V he becomes reflective. He asks,

> Can you go nowhere? Be no place? Come into
> nothing? Can you hold air? Can you be trans-
> fixed by transitions alone? Can you embrace
> the aimless? Embody ether? Lose yourself
> without finding another? Can you be numb to
> necessity and insensible to sobriety? Wander
> and not be alone? Be alone and not wonder? (*SH*, p. 94).

Hitler, it seems, can consider but not accept the usefulness of nothing, a nothing in which we hear the echoes of Adorno's negative dialectics. Adorno's attempt to ground thought on differentiation, paradox, and ruse rather than on the mastery of the object of inquiry aimed at undercutting a dialectical understanding of history, for Adorno, the centre of fascism and other totalitarian ideologies. If the individual subject did not need to fit into a larger rational system in the name of progress, then the individual subject could remain unconsumed. In his reading at Kelly Writers House, Bernstein plays up what sounds like Hitler's persistent curiosity about the force of irrationality and inaction.[35] Where

Ferneyhough takes a more dramatic tone and slightly obscures the words by overlaying them (a move that emphasizes the musical aspects of the opera),[36] Bernstein plays up Hitler's earnestness, which lays the groundwork for his silliness. Bernstein raises his voice, keeps it in the same intense pitch, and takes only slight pauses between questions. His voice, while quick, is not rushed. He pronounces each word clearly and gives the word its own space. The weight of Bernstein's performances falls squarely on the specific *negative* possibilities Hitler puts forward.

The potential answer of 'yes' to Hitler's query as to the possibility of a negative dialectics gives his interrogation a haunting seriousness; the millions he killed hover around the edges of his questions, and the Holocaust itself appears as the end result of history thought of as a teleology, and as the outcome of Hitler's philosophical deliberations. Readers can't help but think of the history that did not happen; they can't help but wish somebody had convinced Hitler he could go nowhere and be no place. At the same time, the way Hitler carries out his inquiry makes us laugh. The image of Hitler asking if it is possible to 'embrace / the aimless' or 'embody ether' makes him sound poetic in the way early Greek philosophers like Heraclitus where, with their concern for what kind of fluid the earth floats in, or their interest in the directionlessness of the flux determining the world (*SH*, p. 94). The idea of Hitler asking if it is possible to 'Wander / and not be alone? Be alone and not wonder' makes him appear isolated and lonely as well, and a forlorn, poetic, and philosophical monster is non-sensical, and humourous for that reason (SH, p. 94). Hitler's questions in *Shadowtime* estrange him from the horror he caused. The discord set up between the history we know and the picture of Hitler we see in the libretto steals the formidability of his terror away, leaving him a peculiar, neurotic little man, as he probably was, which is also funny. The fact that *Shadowtime* would answer 'yes' to Hitler's questions where he answers 'no' suggests, too, that the humour of the libretto is not ironic distance; if *Shadowtime*'s and Hitler's answers are different, their questions are the same – the amusement Hitler provides does not remove his situation from our own. There is a disquieting sympathy at work, or at least the strange sense of a shared anxiety. As we laugh at Hitler we come to the uncomfortable realization that the difference between us and him is not entirely clear.

In a funny and sympathetic Hitler, *Shadowtime* presents the comic as a philosophical approach to the tragic – humour makes the burden of lamentation bearable. As a performer Bernstein is often hilarious; nevertheless, for all his antics, Bernstein regularly reads in a somber, emotionally inflected voice; at times it seems tongue-in-check and at others more sincere. His tone's shifting affect gives his poems an unsettling effect. Moving between saying funny things in a serious way, serious things in

a serious way, serious things in a funny way, and funny things in a funny way, Bernstein's performances let the comical and heartbreaking take turns framing one another for interpretation. The use Bernstein makes in *Shadowtime* of words' malleability changes our relationship to their tendency to digress; the difficulty of learning to trust the perpetual shifting of our words is sustained by laughing at their shifting. Humour gives us a perspective on our lamentations and ethical attention; taking even our sorrow to be funny allows us to perceive our grief and worry as conditions open to change, or alternative readings, rather than as final states. To tempt the cliché, it creates a space between us and our grief from which we can see our daily tragedies as not the world's final ruin; more philosophically, recalling Adorno, humour breaks us away from history's blind plunge and the self-deceit that comes with identifying oneself as part of history. Jokes, in other words, turn slips of meaning to understanding, and they provide relief from the strain of not admitting to our words' constant retreat from us. For these reasons *Shadowtime* suggests we keep our gags and our lamentations together; otherwise, without a sense of humour, seeing the world in all its incongruity becomes too overwhelming to bear. We can only live with the knowledge of our lives' indeterminacy, and make that knowledge a source for finding the world meaningful, when we make jokes at our own expense. When we find our own absurd condition of living in an impossible world amusing we rejuvenate our minds' and our hearts' ability to persistently resituate us in relation to others, our environments, and ourselves.

Responding with hope and jokes to the radical disconnection of our experience in the world, *Shadowtime* merges humour and lamentation as an act of faith. Seeing our uncertain condition in language as something to laugh at evidences a belief in our ability to find that condition reliably meaningful; the breaks between our words and our world provide the room we need to negotiate with ourselves as beings who think, and disagree, get confused, and laugh. It is the space we need for self-awareness, without which nothing would be funny. And that this space is funny means it is readable. *Shadowtime* is no prison house of language, nor does it make possible a self-congratulatory nihilism. The aesthetics *Shadowtime* values work more like religious conviction than science or philosophy, no matter how different their particular objects of devotion appear: the faith Bernstein's work puts in humour, discordance, and the constant slip of words sustains ethical and linguistic interpretation much like believers' faith in God makes their own circumstances decipherable. *Shadowtime*, like a faithful individual, depends on the belief that texts can talk, and that readers can understand them – even when the evidence is far from incontrovertible. When we trust ourselves to a literary work's authority in view of its literariness, we have good reason to do so. We can trust a

poem, a novel, or a letter because we can read them, and we can read them because we do not take these texts to represent *the world as it is*, but know the world *in* our words' departures. Their wobbling marks them as objects in need of interpretation, and an interpretation offered up provides us with an idea to which we may respond – an idea others can interrogate and we can modify. Reading reckons a literary work as meaningful.

We do get close to a tautology here, but we avoid one in the end because understanding our relationship to literary works as dependent on the ambiguity of language embraces the broken logic that tautologies attempt to hide. Benjamin's response to Karl Marx's interrogation in Scene V captures best the understanding of understanding that I want to call faithfulness. Benjamin says 'I made my way and my way made / me', which I read as Benjamin returning us Aquinas's instance on submitting one's understanding to one's flexible circumstance (*SH*, p. 84). Benjamin reminds us that how we frame and carry out our actions and interpretations makes them what they are; but crucially, too, whatever our words and actions become defines us in turn. If the way we speak to a friend sounds cruel, we are cruel in that moment. If our actions appear well considered they are so functionally. The meanings we arrive at in relation to our words and actions do not stay fixed, and they might not correspond to our intentions as we understand them afterward. Nor do the readings we give what we do and say remain the same as more factors come into play. Our readings do however provide us with a way to interpret our intentions and bring our words and actions in line with them, or vice versa. They do give us a way to alter what we say and do as more considerations impose themselves upon us. We give up meaning's relationship to a fixed deeper truth without giving up on truth in everyday experience. As our moments of cruelty and thoughtfulness pile up we amass larger and larger readable records, which are records that construct us as we are in the world. To make your way as your way makes you, these are the movements of authorship and they happen at the same time as one act of reading: I read my book and my book reads me; I say my words and my words say me. Understood as a moment of mutual production, reading, undertaken in faith, makes readers and literary works responsive, and hence responsible, to one another.

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Notes

1 Christopher Mason, 'Gay Marriage Galvanizes Canada's Right', *New York Times*, 19 Nov. 2006, late ed., sec 1: 3.

2 Stanley Fish, 'Why We Can't All Just Get Along', *First Things* (February 1996), para 14, <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9602/fish.html>, accessed 26 November 2006.

3 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ed. Timothy McDermott (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1991), p. 331.

4 Ibid., p. 331.

5 Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 160.

6 David Caplan, 'A Conversation with Charles Bernstein', *The Antioch Review*, 62.1 (Winter 2004), p. 141.

7 Even though Vincent Pecora, in *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*, argues that secular modernity's move toward 'universally acceptable moral truths' may 'provide the only ethical ground we possess within a non-theological (and non-teleological) intellectual framework', his discussion of a secular, or political faith is particularly relevant to my account of Bernstein's intersection with Aquinas (*Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 22, 23). In his study Pecora traces the philosophical attempt within secular modernity (from its early manifestations up through the work of Emile Durkheim), to reconcile reason and faith, effectively filling in the gap between Aquinas and Bernstein. Specifically, Pecora explores the way faith lingers in a secularized form in the work of writers like Walter Benjamin and Virginia Woolf. As he explains, the process of 'secularization through which magic or myth is eliminated by reason may never in fact be complete', a state of affairs that is 'not simply a function of language or geography but is perhaps something to be acknowledged as the result of an irreducible set of needs in human and group psychology' (*Secularization and Cultural Criticism*, p. 22). Pecora goes on to suggest that one 'might then conclude that the society that produces Enlightenment never fully outgrows its desire for religious sources of coherence, solidarity, and historical purpose, and continually translates, or transposes, them into ever more refined and immanent, but also distorted and distorting, versions of its religious inheritance' (*Secularization and Cultural Criticism*, p. 22). Against the historical background Pecora outlines, my argument that faith is a mode central to our learning to negotiate uncertainty appears less a befuddling claim than an alternative, and even affirmative account of faith's persistence in the philosophical development of 20 h- and 21st-century thought.

8 Charles Bernstein, *Shadowtime* (Los Angeles: Green Interger, 2005), p. 13. Subsequent references will be given in the text with the abreviation *SH*.

9 Brian Ferneyhough, 'Words and Music', *The Argonist Online*, para. 10, <http://www.argotistonline.co.uk/Ferneyhough%20essay.htm>, accessed 15 May 2005.

10 Eric Denut, 'Charles Bernstein Interview', *The Argonist Online*, para. 20, <http://www.argotistonline.co.uk/Bernstein%20interview.htm>, accessed 16 November 2006.

11 Denut, 'Charles Bernstein Interview', para. 16.

12 The London Coliseum production was released on CD by NMC in 2006, after being recorded in collaboration with BBC Radio 3 and English National Opera.

13 For sound files of these readings go to PennSound: <http://www.writing. upenn.edu/pennsound/>.

14 The scope of this essay precludes a detailed discussion of Charles Bernstein's relationship to pragmatism and to contemporary American philosophers like Robert Brandom and John McDowell who write about language; however, we do need to keep them in mind as part of *Shadowtime*'s philosophical heritage and context. Where Brandom and McDowell look back to pragmatism through Richard Rorty and Wilfrid Sellars, Bernstein, as already indicated, looks back to Emerson through Stanley Cavell. While Cavell is hardly a neo-pragmatist, his work still allows Bernstein to occupy a broader American philosophical tradition emerging from the 19th century, of which pragmatism and ordinary language criticism are central elements. Understood in part as a response to European thought (Continental philosophy most recently), this larger American tradition becomes more clear when read through Wittgenstein, for it is Wittgenstein – from our current perspective and despite his nationality – who centres the line of language philosophy running from pragmatism to Stanley Cavell. In this regard, Bernstein's contemporary company is as much with philosophers like Brandom and McDowell as it is with Susan Howe, Ron Silliman or Tom Raworth.

15 See Note 13.

16 See Note 12.

17 See Patrick J. Smith, *The Tenth Muse: A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, inc., 1970), pp. 400, 401.

18 Ibid., p 400.

19 Ibid., p. 400.

20 Ibid., p. 401.

21 Ibid., p. 401.

22 For those listeners more familiar with *Shadowtime*'s literary company, Fabrice Fitch, in the CD notes, helpfully places the libretto in its musical context: 'Ferneyhough's attitude to [opera] is not iconoclastic, let alone disrespectful, but speculative. ... In each scene, Bernstein's libretto creatively reinterprets aspects of Benjamin's ideas. In this connection, Ferneyhough cites Mozart's *Magic Flute*, and also the tradition of the early oratorio. ... More explicitly, the adventures of Benjamin's "shade" have distinct echoes of Greek myth, particularly the Orpheus legend. ... To be sure, these references reflect Ferneyhough's abiding affection for Italian music of the early Baroque; but they also allow him to speculate on the paths that the genre *might* have taken during the early stages of its development, when its definition and conventions ... were yet to become fixed or standardized. Seen in this broader historical context, *Shadowtime* begins to make more sense: neither "anti-opera" ... nor "anti-anti-opera", but "ante-opera"'(Fabrice Fitch, 'Liner notes', pp. 7, 8, Brian Ferneyhough, *Shadowtime* (NMC, 2006), [CD]). Fitch then goes on to discuss *Shadowtime*'s debt to modern scores like Stockhausen's *Licht* and Berg's *Lulu*.

23 Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), p. 181.
24 See Bernstein, *Shadowtime*, p. 100. In the Note to Scene V Bernstein gives a brief account of Heine's place in the libretto and his relationship to Benjamin.
25 Fitch, 'Liner notes', p. 9.
26 Denut, 'Charles Bernstein Interview', Para 7.
27 See Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1988), pp. 69–82. Equally relevant to our discussion of Charles Bernstein's poetics is the place Benjamin's work holds for those writers influenced by the Frankfurt School who are working on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. For a philosopher like J. M. Bernstein, for example, Benjamin is a crucial touchstone for joining these various discourses so that the ethical, aesthetic, linguistic, and political realms become lenses for thinking about all the others. In this regard, J. M. Bernstein's work – in *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (2002), *Beyond Representation* (1996), and *The Fate of Art* (1992), among others – provides a useful context for reading *Shadowtime* as well.
28 Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 179.
29 Ibid., p. 182.
30 Ibid., p. 199.
31 Denut, 'Charles Bernstein Interview', para 7.
32 Ibid., para 7.
33 Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, p. 182.
34 For Heine's line see Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), p. 25.
35 See Note 13.
36 See Note 12.