What Theory can Learn from New Directions in Contemporary American Poetry

“We rest on deep rhetorics” (Lisa Robertson, The Weather)

I begin with ten assertions so that I can give the overall shape of the argument and make clear from the start what obligations I incur if I am to make a convincing case.

I. Some important younger contemporary poets trained in what we lamely call “experimental” or “innovative” traditions seem to be turning to rhetorical traditions to find traction for their lyrical voices—either in opposition to aesthetic frameworks for poetry or in the search for a more expansive aesthetics.¹

II. These poets must be reacting to some sense of blockage or inadequacy in the tradition in which they were trained. I identify that blockage as the inherited beliefs, ironically shared completely with more conservative poets presumed to lack “innovation,” that the poem is first of all an aesthetic object and that “aesthetic” is to be understood with roughly the sense given to the term by late nineteenth and early twentieth century Symboliste writers. That sense had two basic properties. Aesthetics was defined positively as that dimension of works of art that achieved an expressive sensuousness capable of serving as an end in itself, apart from any cognitive or moral function. And aesthetics was defined negatively as the power of concrete signification that separated art from the abstractness and righteousness of rhetoric had become in democratic society.

III. That way of understanding aesthetics marked a major shift from the ambitions of the idealist aesthetics best represented by Kant and by Hegel. Hegel introduced the importance of sensuousness, but he also shared Kant’s understanding that what mattered in art was what the expressive spirit could do with sensuousness. He thought the language arts the most advanced because of their powers to use sensuousness while preserving an ideal and idealizing dimension of spiritual activity.

IV. The most important and most influential modernist poets subscribed to this emphasis on sensuousness and its correlate ideal of “presence in order to expand poetry into structures and strategies used by the visual and aural arts. But they were trained primarily in a very different aesthetic with the focus on the poet rather than on the object. And as they developed their fidelity to their own enabling principles waned considerably. Four Quartets is not a modernist poem in the same way that The Waste Land is; nor are much of the later Cantos much like Imagist or Vorticist texts.

V. A conjunction of four stylistic traits is distinctive to this self-consciously modernist poetry--an insistence on the primacy of how the work concretely develops the material properties of its medium, an emphasis on the disruption of standard syntactic conventional “meaning,” a celebration of experience as the domain in which a presentational art takes on significance.² I will argue that these four emphases constrain poetics in the modernist vein to limit itself to a positive set of claims that poetry somehow refers to conditions of experience that cannot take discursive form without suffering severe displacement and disfiguration.

VI This account authorizes at least two kinds of historical stories—a Nietzschean one celebrating the power of these artists and writers to burn with a hard gem-like flame
consuming what poetry can make of the formal principles of the other arts and so leaving very little to their successors, or a Hegelian one that finds a path for sublating the conflicts between this new aesthetic and the kind of rhetoric it rejects.

VII I will argue that we best perform this Hegelian task by beginning with the possibility of a new approach to rhetoric that we find in these younger poets and then trying to establish how this rhetoric might fit with a refurbished distinctively literary aesthetic grounded in expectations about the cultural work poets do rather than in the objects they compose.

VIII At its core this new approach to rhetoric will not emphasize the art of persuasion. Rather it will focus on how rhetoric affords means of staging poetry as mode of witnessing to historical forces and an effort to find speaking positions that implicate audiences in ways that invite them to take responsibility for those historical situations. The cognitive role of poetry then is not to embody non-discursive truths but to provide precise, intricate, and affectively charged ways of engaging experience that function as examples forming a repertoire that we use for sorting out differences and similarities in events providing analogues to real world experiences. These analogues need not offer representations of such experiences because they can focus on what the writing makes present in our capacities to deal with what our attention is directed to.

IX We can develop a rhetorical framework attuned to the efforts of these younger poets by showing how what I call a “demonstrative speech act” enables us to foreground the ways that poems establish ethos and produce exemplary mental states as their means of engaging the world. The demonstrative is the pendant to J.L. Austin’s analysis of the performative. Where Austin stresses the work language can do regardless of intention, I forms, the call for ideogrammic method or other juxtapositional modes that replace conceptual connections with structures organized by the play of feeling, and, as a consequence of this undoing of

VI. will concentrate on linking the demonstrative to what Wittgenstein treats as the functions of language that do not pursue the work of description but rather content themselves with tasks of expressing or displaying various states: a cry of pain is not a description saying something about one’s pain.

VII. X Because an emphasis on display calls attention to differences in the direction of fit between language and the world I will link the demonstrative to Nelson’s Goodman’s arguments about examples, and so make the case that the cognitive functions of poetry considered as an extension of rhetoric involve developing ways language sorts the world rather than provides a picture of facts. Ultimately all the arts cultivate a seeing in that enriches our capacities for seeing as.

There are two basic versions of this turn by contemporary poets to the resources of our rhetorical traditions. The first concentrates on bringing to poetry the emphasis rhetoric puts on the ethos of the speaker and its capacity to develop straightforward argument, albeit with a strong sense of dramatic occasion and a pointed challenge to their contemporaries concerns for lyric finish or what I will call “artefactuality.” A second offers a more complicated and quasi-ironic investment in the rhetorical construction of experiences that simultaneously reward our interest in intricate precise particular phrasing and withdraw the possibility that language has the terms needed to make sense of the overall states of feeling explored in the poem. I find Ben Lerner, Karen
Volkmann, Lisa Robertson, and Joshua Clover offering brilliant versions of this second mode. Here I have only the space and the skill to develop my first type, and only to the extent that I cite a brief passage from Juliana Spahr and then a poem by Jennifer Moxley flirting with the danger of losing the poetic to the prosaic because of the urgency for direct statement. Spahr’s version of rhetoric is intensely political. But it engages the political not as efforts at persuasion but rather as possible extensions of the first person into the second and the third because that first person can be content with a quite elemental sense of its own powers. This passage from Julianna Spahr’s “We” in *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You* builds Whitmanian expansiveness out of Steinian repetition:

> … WE are bathed in the light of the prism, all over the room. We are bathed in the light of waking up. This is awareness. This light bathes we who are concerned because we have to make room for we who are lost or leaving other places, we who claim land, we who came from somewhere else, we who are famous … we who are large with food … we, we who are I, we who want to claim an independence and superiority of our we, we who live in a certain place in a certain time and are confused about history. (81-82)

The line breaks on syllables of words offer an emphatic way of staging how the elemental invites recombination into larger social units without losing its direct hold on experience.

Moxley for most of her career rejected any direct social orientation in poetry because her obsession was getting straight on what self-consciousness might be able to own and own up to (within a world of commodified simulacra of responsibility). But her two most recent volumes of poetry, *The Sense Record* and *Clampdown* seek to break down barriers between these first-person quests and their audience by refusing to allow the subject anything but a self-consciously awkward mode of sincerity that depends on audience agreement for its implied force. These poems typically allow no role for authorial mastery or any self-righteous moral stance, so there can no demand that an audience do something, and no reliance on practical argument. Instead Moxely’s recent work tends to develop as ethos an almost prosaic act of witnessing that expresses a shareable sense of pain opening possibilities also for a shared hopefulness. The new sense of demands on the aesthetic, in short, requires projecting aspects of what might become a new sense of what a poet’s rhetoric might model.

The best example that requires no additional commentary is Moxley’s “On The Face of It” from *Clampdown*. Notice that the energy here does not emerge in the overt quest for collectivity based on almost religious invocation but in the willingness to risk the awkwardness of the prosaic to capture a shareable emotional condition that is fundamental for how we treat our own conative orientations:

> It is not the complex trick
or vivid spools of thought
we’d miss, were this all to be
ruined, were all this to be
shattered by foolish executive
verdicts. The difficulty of saying
something vaguely profound,
and the small triumph of
actually doing so, would be
dim memories indeed, were
everything to change, were,
in a second, every assumption
drowned beneath the waves.
The complicated game of wits
We play with our credulous
lovers would seem rather silly
in retrospect, were they
to be obliterated. As would
the smug contentment we feel
when making vacuous overtures
to people we don’t actually respect.
In the end none of this will matter.
We’ll be made of none of those things,
nor of the larger sum, not
in the moment when,
body pavement bound,
downed by a slight dizziness,
disoriented, dignity lost,
the world we assumed to rule
suddenly changed and odd,
we turn our eyes, our fearful eyes,
like those of a displaced animal
endangered by outdated instincts,
and give ourselves over with gratitude
to the care of anyone who’s there. (Clampdown 70-71)

II

These examples could be mere deviations from a historical mainstream or they
could be feasible forerunners of the issues with which poets will grapple in the next
decade and perhaps longer. Obviously I lean toward the second view because I find
implicit in such work a sharp and capacious critique of Modernism’s hatred of rhetoric,
and indeed of the ideas shaping that critique. And I find this work implicitly addressing a
concern that has only recently taken shape for me—that Modernism left us a magisterial
set of poems along with several problematic principles of poetics.

And many ambitious contemporary poets have tended to follow the poetics rather than
the poems, with less than satisfying results. Perhaps modernist poets developed
alliances with the other arts that do not sufficiently honor the full resources of language but opened up a immense realm of possible analogies to be explored by ambitious poets. Perhaps then the modernists pretty much exhausted this vein—let us call it the possibility of verbal equivalents for the sensuous materials that other arts make basic to their expressive purposes. This exhaustion hypothesis would make sense of two features of my literary experience at least—that poetry in the Modernist “experimental” tradition has to become more radical in its refusals of ordinary ways of making sense for what seem less for the most part less striking results,\textsuperscript{v} and that these younger poets trained in those experimental traditions seem to be expressing their dissatisfaction in efforts to develop a rhetorical tradition for their art with which they can affiliate.\textsuperscript{vi} But the hypothesis puts two corresponding burdens on my argument. I have to show what is limited about modernist poetics; and I should show if possible how those limitations are closely connected to the modernists’ widespread attacks on anything that even smacked of emerging from those rhetorical traditions. Then I can speculate on how we might best imagine rhetorical principles worth the poets’ affiliations.

I have suggested that this return to rhetoric must derive from some feeling that poetry needs a new direction. Of course there are many possible reasons for such changes. But the shared nature of the new orientation suggests a shared aspect of the need. And that is where the possible failure of the modernist heritages comes in. I intend no criticism of individual modernist writers. Quite the contrary: the more I understand the limitations of their poetics the more I admire what they made of it and despite it. Nor do I will argue that the return to rhetoric suggests that several younger poets now share this judgment so we have to ask how that judgment might tell us something about the situation they have inherited. And since the return to rhetoric strikes at the heart of what the modernists hated and used as a contrast to justify their presentational poetics, this judgment probably involves the specific history of some central aspects of that poetics. Perhaps then these contemporaries think they are paying the price for the fact that this inherited poetics used its hatred of rhetoric to define what has proven to be a fairly narrow set of assumptions about poems as aesthetic objects.

Modernism’s projections about poetry seem on their face substantially less capacious than the values shaping classical canonical statements of poetics like Wordsworth’s or Coleridge’s or Sydney’s. The classical canon in poetics does not stress the aesthetic object at all. All the emphasis is on the character of the poet’s imagination as a force for influencing how audiences pay attention to the world and project paths through it. But if we turn to the writing on poetics by twentieth century poets from Eliot and Pound to Oppen and Hejinian, we will find a pervasive embarrassment in talking about the poet, so the theory has to concentrate on how objects can possess a presentational power sustained by formal choices that produce an internal complexity provoking the audience’s experience. The classical canon stresses the work the poets do within society; twentieth century poetics calls attention to the powers of objects to remake what counts as significant experience otherwise not available within society’s commodified modes of cultural exchange.

Despite the poetics they popularized early in their careers, the Modernists had the advantage of their forming their tastes on work that conformed to these classical ideals.
That meant in practice they could take advantage of both worlds: imaginations formed on the resources of what rhetoric could take as its content were set free to explore the capacities of this presentational aesthetic to resist all that was routinized and abstract in social life, and to explore identifications with all that seemed exciting innovations in the other arts. Read in Nietzschean terms, we can say in retrospect that the modernists burned with such a gem-like flame that they exhausted all the energies available from their aesthetics and left very little undeveloped for their heirs to explore.

If we accept the notion that this creativity was purchased at the price of submitting to an unnecessarily confined aesthetic, we can also understand how that commitment to innovation within a range of emphases on primarily aesthetic orientations may sign contemporary poetry’s death warrant because there is simply not much rich continuous innovation possible when the verbal instrument is largely reduced in principle to its non-discursive resources. Read in Hegelian terms, that question of heritage takes on more nuance, and perhaps opens into a domain of possibility not available to the Nietzschean story. For we can postulate a dialectical process based on the interplay between rhetoric and aesthetics. The first step in that process is to recognize how completely modernist aesthetics are tied to their version of the rhetoric that they had come to despise. Verlaine’s desire “to wring the neck of rhetoric was not a casual remark. His generation of poets all demonized the rhetorical. They despised rhetoric to such an extent that the positive poetics they offered derived largely from their need to posit modes of resistance to the cultural vices for which they saw rhetoric responsible. Hence Yeats’s assertion “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry. Unlike the rhetoricians, who get a confident voice from remembering the crowd they have won or may win, we sing amid our uncertainty” (“Per Amica Silentia Lunae,” 331). T.E. Hulme offered a more philosophically acute contrast between typical writing that used language as if it were attuned to pre-formed models architects used and the artist’s ideal of engaging the experience by means of a precisely contoured spring mechanism. And then there was Pound’s lively historical account fleshing out his statement that that rhetoric was the art of the “advertising agent for a new soap” (LE 144):

— Whistler and Kandinsky and some Cubists were set to getting extraneous matter out of their art; they were ousting literary values. The Flaubertians talk a good deal about ‘constation’. The nineties saw a move against rhetoric …

— I think all of these move together, although they do not, of course, move in step. (GB found in Svarny 36)

The best alternative to rhetoric seemed rejecting every trace of discursive statement or trust in the mind’s abstracting powers based on semantic constructs. As I argued in my Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry, this refusal ultimately meant turning as much as possible from the semantic level of poetry for the internal structure of the work. Structure would rely on syntax, on how the artist combined elemental features of the medium like aural effects, imagistic textures, and the foregrounding of elemental grammatical properties. Think of the difference between Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” and William Carlos Williams’ “By the Road to the Contagious Hospital.” The later poem rejects eloquence for attention to concrete details, then makes up for the lack of eloquence or responsiveness to argumentative
pressures by basing the poem on a contrast between the lack of active verbs in the first sixteen lines and springs emerging through the relations between active verbs and participles in the poem’s final moments.

I did not recognize in my book how this reliance on syntax established a much more narrow frame of reference for literary art than did the work of nineteenth century idealist aestheticians like Kant and Hegel. In theory at least there was no longer a place for the Hegelian celebration of poetry as the most spiritual of the arts because it could sublate its sensuous dimension into articulate states of self-consciousness. Nor could this poetics grant the importance of Kant’s account of authorial purposiveness as the capacity to put many ideas into play without subsuming its materials under one Idea. Instead it would become crucial to put in play many sensations that made the force of the poem free from domination by “ideas.” So the poetics worked out by early Modernists stressed non-discursive presentational powers concentrated in the medium that would find its affinities with Croce’s ideal of art as intuition, with Clive Bell’s principle of “significant form,” and with Roman Jacobson’s subsuming all meaning into the capacities of poetic function to establish dense internal patterns replacing referential sense with self-contained context. And because the modernist revolution was so thorough, this turn to more constricting notions of the aesthetic as the ground for poetics affects almost all subsequent poets. “Conservative” understandings of poetry were largely shaped by how the New Critics mediated Eliot into the universities. These understandings emphasized the “poem as an independent structure” (Krieger, New Apologists for Poetry, 123) focusing on a fear of abstraction that insisted on concrete formal complexity as the driving force for imaginative intensity. Poets committed to the spirit of “innovation,” turned instead to variants of the Objectivist model of a concrete presentational art driven by elaborate juxtapositional musicality that was the ultimate measure of compositional power.

Now we have two sides of the story—the modernist reduction of rhetoric to something contemptible, despite the fact that it informed much of the literature they idealized, and the restricted domain that the aesthetic becomes in order to drive that rhetoric out of art. So we have to ask what can a roughly Hegelian account do to re-orient the distressing implications of this story? This account can show that treating aesthetics as the negation of rhetoric and rhetoric as incompatible with poetics is understandable historically but not inevitable conceptually. A more generous account may be possible enabling poets to use the resources rhetoric offers and align themselves with its orientation toward constructing a sense of community. And that might in turn afford a poetics based on the kind of intellectual and emotional gestures poets make rather than on the fine details of how they compose objects characterized by complex internal dynamics. It is not as if classical poets did not worry about beauty or insist that poems had a distinctive role in social life that could not be equated with historical or philosophical orientations. They simply did not base those claims on a close attention to the working of the poem as aesthetic object. So this more generous account can try to place a historical frame around modernist poetics and thereby encourage its audience to listen more carefully to the dissenting poetic voices with which we began. It may be becoming possible in the work of younger poets to respond to the modernist critiques of rhetoric while developing both a less imperious view of the
the rhetorician’s role and a more generous model of the part the sensuous can play in fostering a continuing wariness of the rhetoric one finds oneself relying on. Ultimately this effort at recuperation may make it possible to turn from the insistence on constructing poems from non-discursive elements analogous to the building blocks in paintings and musical compositions to elaborating possible uses for the full communicative potential of discursive elements for not quite discursive presentational ends.

[[I fear that I have been too general about modernist poetics. I need to offer more specifics about what I am calling a narrowing of aesthetics. In my introduction I asserted that there were five tendencies that have ultimately created the impasse for poetry that I think is now becoming difficult to avoid noticing. But because my literary focus is on contemporary poetry, I will illustrate these tendencies by examining their effects on those who are now most dominant in shaping the frameworks of “innovative” poetics. (More conservative poets have much less difficulty with that aspect of rhetoric that involves the control to produce desired effects in an audience, but they in fact share in more quiet ways the ideal of the poem as aesthetic object emphasizing and gathering relationships among the details and organized primarily by aspects of feeling). [Then I will try to push the project a little by proposing my own view of a distinctive speech act that can go a long way toward reconciling the aesthetics of Kant and Hegel with a new sense of rhetoric and so accommodate discursive means to non-discursive ends. Attending to what I call “demonstrative speech acts” can explain how there can be distinctive cognitive power for the “content” of works even though they refuse to serve discursive ends and instead pursue powers closely aligned to the demonstrative roles ethos plays in rhetoric.]

1,2,3) My second and third traits, the resistance to typical syntax and to the order of concepts can be considered aspects of my first claim—that modernist poetics left as its primary heritage the idea that the poem is first of all an aesthetic object capable of engaging audiences in the concrete sensuously charged “presentation” of non-discursive states. The materials afforded by the medium, primarily rhythmic and vocalic effects, are joined under pressure with the force of the poet’s images to produce what we see Charles Bernstein proposing as anti-absorptive effects. And the poet is not Wordsworth’s man speaking to other men but the lonely exile from public language trying to redeem aspects of experience for the solitary reader by rendering a sense of the world into an objective structure. As Bernstein puts it, quoting Nicholas Luhman, poetry like visual art forms “a perceptual system distinct from a social system” (Dworkin, ed. 90)—this from the poet who has obviously gone furthest among the contemporaries in developing Wordsworths’ ideal of a poet speaking to other people in a common language.

4) Because poets cannot trust discursive understanding and because the poem is primarily an object gathering imaginative forces, the primary modality of reception for the audience is not understanding an object held in common as a structure of meanings but experiencing one’s own subjective intensities that are sparked by the object. These intensities take on coherence as one finds a way to participate in the energies elicited by the text. Here the best contemporary spokesperson is Lyn Hejinian, who relies on resistance to rhetoric to ground her emphases on readerly experience. The epitome of the rhetorical is the closed, “coercive, epiphanic mode … with its smug pretension to
universality and its tendency to cast the poet as guardian to Truth” (Language of Inquiry 4).  The open text, on the other hand, strives to bring all the elements of the work to maximum excitement and so “invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader” by relinquishing “total control” and challenging “authority as a principle and control as a motive” (43).  “Poetry … takes as its premise that language is a medium for experiencing experience.”  Its focus is on the movement of thinking as it forges linkages and its goal is bringing an audience to discover “the reality of being in time, of taking one’s chance, of becoming another, all with the implicit understanding that this is happening” (3).ix  As in much contemporary visual art, the complex of happening and experiencing drives out ideals of responsiveness to authorial purposiveness.

5) Hejinian’s stress on experience is one way that contemporaries imagine answering the all important question—does poetry fit into a world that it is not content to picture or describe?  Her model denies any authority or exemplary quality to the work as an authorial act.  It locates the impact of the work in the states of experience it elicits in a reader as the reader invests in what the text seems to make possible.  Ironically, it is just at her most radical that Hejinian’s claims come closest to a parallel claim from the conservative tradition.  Their Eliotic and New Critical stress on embodiment also needs a way to distinguish incarnation from anything reducible to communication and so generates an emphasis on what we might call a “this is happening effect”: poems do not convince us so much as move us in unpredictable ways.  Then honoring the aesthetic power of the work becomes a matter of talking about the states of being that are produced rather than about “meaningfulness” in any way that might smack of argument or Ransom’s concept of “logical structure.”  The ideal that “a poem should not mean but be” still affords a plausible figure for what poetry does in the world.

I find Wayne Dodd’s formulation of this goal especially eloquent.  In his view poetry strives “to make something present” that is and that “participates in being so that this participation in presence becomes what is “experienced” (86-87):

The fact that a poem does not ‘refer’ to a reality outside itself, that it does not “point,” does not mean that, its gaze being fixed clearly on the page, it is about Itself instead of about the world.  Rather it means that the physical fact of the poem—the words as physical events, the lines and the grouping of lines, the shapes and patterns both visible and auditory, which develop on the page—all this is inextricably entangled in the reality that the poem both explores and is.

(Toward the End of the Century, 50)]]

These are plausible accounts of possible ends for poetry.  But one might be worried by how in such formulations the poet gives way to the poem, meaning to experience, and the domain of historical being to sheer ontology or states of immediate presentation that pretty much ignore the terms of interpersonal social and psychological relations.  In fact this narrowing of the field may in part account for why John Ashbery and then Language poetry attracted so much interest.  While propounding their fealty to aesthetics, these poets promised to address all that was missing in the aestheticization of poetry, both in poems stressing immediacy of experience and those pursuing the affects of the well-made lyric devoted to working out manifestly coherent emotional attitudes.
This new work reminded poets of how much of our linguistic lives consist in performing traditional rhetorical tasks by which we negotiate social space. Yet none of this work has gotten free from the contradictions that I think run deep in Language poetics, and that the younger poets are trying to resolve. Language poetry then proves a threshold or paradigmatic transitional moment for the emergence of this new poetics and therefore merits some attention for its recognizing a problem that it then takes great pains to defer. Especially in the work of Bernstein and Bob Perelman, there seem two incompatible quests—to embody prevailing rhetorical practices in a way that the poet can still retain distance from them, and to dramatize the difficulties of finding for the poet an imaginative stance that can almost successfully resist the irony imposed by the poems on those bound by conventional rhetorical roles. Bernstein typically acknowledges the place of the rhetorical in experience while satirizing the particular tendencies of the speech acts themselves to absorb even their speakers into the delusion that they are the masters of their own textual properties. And at times, as in “Let's Just Say” (Girly Man, 10-12) there are strikingly complex relations between the pain of incomplete expressiveness and the satisfaction of having opened possible routes for feeling even in that failure. Therefore Bernstein can do a brilliant job of getting his audience to hear rhetorical gestures and to indicate the fault lines where they are likely to come apart. What he cannot do consistently within his poetic, although he often succeeds in his recent practice, is transpose the satiric deconstruction of absorbed rhetoric into something that can take seriously not only the ideas in the rhetorical processes but the idea of what is at stake for the processes themselves. I will argue that only an explicit sense of purposive activity can fully engage the world in way that engages the density of our sense of the eventuality that makes for history. We need a rhetoric that sponsors the poetic, without being absorbed into what remains in Bernstein the dominant logic of the aesthetic.

[ Bernstein shares with Hejinian the distinction between poems that trust to closed intentions and "formally active" work that does not defer or deny meaning but embodies it in a way that is not transferable to any other code or rhetoric" (A Poetics 18). But the only way to assure that form is active is to oppose it continually to the kind of meaning that has a "recuperable intention or purpose" (17) Thus he needs Bataille’s differences between restricted and general economies in order to establish the text as this phenomenon beyond rhetoric because he can project the text then as having “destabilizing elements … that will erode any proposed accumulation that does not account for them” (16.) Kant’s purposiveness gets located entirely in the text, eventually generating for Bernstein the figure of anti-absorption as his metaphor for submitting author to text and meaning to the play of signification: “Think of the text as a spongy substance absorbing vocabulary, syntax, and reference” (22) so that these properties lose their capacity to absorb the reader into a fictive world and take on the power to define the work’s own mode of meaningfulness:

… While in the incomplete closed sentence, attention is deflected to an abstracted, or accompanying, “meaning” that is being “conveyed”, in the imploded sentence the reader stays plugged into the wave-like pulse of the writing. In other words, you keep
moving through the writing without having to come up for ideational air: the ideas are all inside the process. (60)

This sense of ideas makes it possible that antiabsorptive techniques are used toward absorptive ends; or in satiric writing (it's a put-on, get it?), absorptive means are used toward antiabsorptive ends" (30). Therefore this "utopian" form of both focused and disruptive aesthetic energies is not a refusal of history but an envisionment of the indwelling potentialities of history that must be envisioned—audibly embodied—in order to occur" “(75).

Here Bernstein turns to verse for the expression of prose ideas so he can demonstrate what the aesthetic can do for our understanding of the rhetorical, a task close to what I idealize here but still its polar opposite. On the most general level Bernstein is simply asking the audience to notice what differences occur (and do not occur) when the distinction between prose and verse (or perhaps between rhetoric and poetry) is challenged. Why should an argument about poetry not attempt to use the resources of attention to the medium relied on by poets? This passage plays on an orientation toward absorption in what the passage is saying and an orientation toward anti-absorption in what the artist is doing with the medium as complicating prosaic sense. That tension in turn somewhat modifies the force of the argument. The versing of the first paragraph produces several enjambments that make the passage more difficult to read than the corresponding prose passage might be. Yet that difficulty might in fact be important for grasping the limitations of prose attempting to deal with such inherently ambiguous and unstable notions. The versing can at least gesture toward that difficulty and the provisional nature of Bernstein's own distinctions. In the same spirit, the second passage defends the prose against piety by attempting actually to provide the thought a kind of body. At the least the demonstration here offers an awareness of the difficulties of the task of writing about poetry and an honoring of the medium as resistance to simple abstraction. (We should also notice that demonstration can be cruel because it produces an objectivity that often does not quite conform to one's purposes, although in the case of someone as clever as Bernstein one cannot be sure of what the intentions are. The efforts to put prose in verse makes strikingly clear the difference between verse and rhythm. Bernstein produces in verse a body that complicates the effects of prose, but this body emerges as a less than adequate one for demonstrating what poetry can do with the resources and the energies of rhetoric.)

How are we to establish those resources? It is clear that we cannot simply go back to classical rhetoric because that requires a willingness to grant authority and submit to the mastery of craft that simply seems impossible because of our deeply ingrained sense of democratic privilege. But there are two basic ways to think about rhetoric—the now conventional view of it as the art of persuasion, and the view that rhetoric is the domain for studying the resources language makes available for a variety of purposes, among which is the art of persuasion. I think we can dramatize the significance of this second view by turning to a remarkable passage by Allen Tate in the 1940's concerned with the question of how poetics can continue to honor rhetoric while decrying rhetoricians:

How can rhetoric, or the arts of language, be taught today? We are not likely to
begin teaching something in which we do not believe: we do not believe in the uses of rhetoric because we do not believe that the full language of the human situation can be the vehicle of truth. (Essays of Four Decades 39).

Thematically Tate is uttering old song: science has replaced faith in god with a disenchanted world where truth consistently opposes “the full language of the human situation.” But suppose we can locate the importance of this full language in a way that need not at all engage traditional questions about truth. Tate is right in the sense that a world bound to science will always be in an ironic relation to what seems to satisfy human imaginations. Yet there are other locales, other domains of experience, where this full language of the human situation remains crucial even for cognitive purposes, so long as we distinguish among modes of cognition and do not let ideals of scientific description and hypothesis testing completely dominate our discussion. If we can establish cognitive forms consistent with this commitment to the fullness of language, we can also provide goals for poetics consistent with Tate’s vision of human possibility.

I will then ask what would constitute “a full language of the human situation” compatible with secular culture, appropriate for addressing contemporary values, and capable of motivating a significant range of poetic projects. In order to elaborate this model of rhetoric we need redefinitions of the authorial stance we adapt, of the nature of the objects poets produce, and of the relations that textual object might establish for the audience’s engagements in the world beyond the text. I am not certain of much, but I am certain that the idea of the text submitting to the audience’s experience without making specific demands on it is not sufficient to sustain over a significant time the ambitions that make for major works of literature. So we have to restore and elaborate afresh some way of talking about literary texts as having modeling functions in relation to how we might deploy attention and take up attitudes toward the situations in which we engage that attention. Against the pressure of this narrowing of the aesthetic, we have to figure out how classical rhetoric and classical aesthetics can be correlated to provide adequate accounts of how poetry might engage the actual world.

In modifying our concept of authorial roles we have to develop images of the rhetorician that do not demand authority but identify with a range of common needs for articulation and for direction in responding to aspects of this “human situation.” This can be done by elaborating two quite general roles that poets then can vary in myriad ways. The first involves redoing the Romantic ideal of expression. Poets certainly will continue to express their psychological states. But in theory we can posit a more general model of expressive behavior that demands only that we attribute the implied author with a mode of relationship to experience such that the roles of reporting on or describing seem insufficient. The author role has to project the possibility of an imagined audience participating in what makes the rendering of experience sufficiently distinctive in its intensity and focus and sense of imaginative import to warrant an artifice impossible to correlate with sheer description. Then we can imagine poetry as defined by a capacity to put pressure on experiences or situations so the writing can press out a literalness and sense of uniqueness that defines the object as rewarding attention in its particularity and in the resonance established by this particularity.

Second, we have to combine the role of expression with the conditions of labor that give the expression the capacity to delight, move, and instruct the audience. The author role can be attributed to the power to display a particular understanding of the
techne that seems necessary for marking the distinction between mere description and what Pound called “Presentation.” Thereby we preserve the significance of making even as we try to recast the aesthetic emphasis on the object in terms of the rhetorical emphasis on choices available to the author. Poets will seek beauty or enargia or shifts in perspective or intricate aural effects or integrative form not because these are aesthetic values but because they are aspects of the work poets do in rendering distinctive particulars.

Of course then we need a language for what motivates poets to do this work and why that work seems the richer the more the techne fits the expressive purpose. Therefore I want to respond to my last two demands—for an account of the literary object and of its relation to the world beyond the text—by proposing a new kind of speech act capable of characterizing most literary ambitions. I will call this new speech act “the demonstrative” and show how it can be used to provide substantial contrasts with Austin’s version of the performative. The demonstrative links aesthetics and rhetoric because it provides a cogent account of all discourse that eschews descriptive or epistemic ends in order to stress the powers of exemplification. And the demonstrative provides a distinctive way of engaging the world because it emphasizes the roles of literary texts as acts of exemplification. So we can develop tight links with Nelson Goodman’s distinctions between cognition as a process of testing proposed denotations (which art in general does not do well) and cognition by virtue of the roles articulate examples can play in how we characterize and sort experiences. Exemplification can matter because it has the power to affect how agents sort the world into degrees of relevance and possibility. And rhetoric becomes the art that tries to engage and modify what will attribute urgency and relevance to our sorting of the world by aesthetic means. Poetry might be that rhetorical art that makes the pleasure of imaginative engagement its basic condition for determining those degrees of relevance—in part because such pleasure is not reducible to aesthetic judgment.

III

If I am even half-right about the problem, we have to develop a theory of how we can restore to poetics the basic resources rhetoric has traditionally appealed to while showing that commitments to rhetoric need not necessarily produce the stances the modernists excoriated. This entails two basic challenges—separating those resources from the openings they give for manipulating audiences, and showing how they are compatible with a view of the cognitive force of poetry that is not content with Dodd’s typical claim that “a poem does not ‘refer’ to a reality outside itself, that it does not point.” We would not get far in the study of poetry if we limited it to the roles of description and argument that could point and make stable arguments about such pointing. But the cognitive powers of language extend well beyond the task of pointing. While disciplinary science has emphasized issues of reference, philosophers like Wittgenstein and Nelson Goodman offer us ways of preserving Tate’s concern for the fullness of language as in fact a cognitive resource, and hence as a workable foundation for poetic ambition. And, for those who still care, Wittgenstein and Goodman provide a route to cognition that avoids the perils of reference and of presence that were the foundations of deconstructionist theory.

Traditionally poets thought that they could bring the fullness of language into the world of human practices by distinguishing poetry from history and philosophy—two
paradigmatic disciplines bound to pointing and to arguing. Now I think we need to engage speech act theory as our ground for at least partially linking the rhetorical sense of the fullness of language with the poet’s commitment to concrete particularity as the vehicle for eloquence. For speech act theory has the task of exploring the performative functions by which we manage to make our activities in language a significant force in social life. With speech act theory we can sustain the view that poetry differs from other uses of language not because it has any special relationship to non-discursive realities but simply because it adapts all modes of language to purposes that are not primarily descriptive or argumentative. “Non-descriptive” (in the technical sense of description is a much more capacious category than “non-discursive.” Poetry elicits other cognitive powers making it possible to sort features of the world that depend on intricate verbal articulation and imaginatively sensuous engagement. Just as rhetoric stresses ethos and typically makes argument largely a matter of appeals to the audience’s sense of the person they become by certain paths of action, poetry stresses various aspects of provisional identification with what can be accomplished by exemplary linguistic acts. Once we sanction this emphasis on exemplification, we can also stabilize what we can claim for the kinds of cognition performed by our engagement in poems.

The first step is to differentiate the possible cognitive functions of literary experience from the experience itself. The experience is fundamentally a condition of awareness, a seeing-in to imagined actions and events that animates details and engages emotions. There is also in our experience an immediate sense of the self’s own powers to make those engagements. Questions of cognition involve the possible use value of those literary experiences. We can abstract from them to make references to the world—Wessex is really like Hardy’s descriptions of it. Or we can make what we reconstruct serve as an example of how language can make appropriate and memorable distinctions in the world. This is the logic of applying literary quotations to our own experiences. But the uses of example extend far beyond quotation. Once we have experienced the text we can use our imaginations for sorting the world into possible states which become available as we try to appreciate what we can do with what we remember engaging or with what we might desire as possible because of the example rendered. As I will develop in a few moments, we cannot be sure Shakespeare’s play gives us an accurate picture of any actual Hamlet, but we can use a Hamlet-picture developed from the play in order to speculate on who agents become in certain melancholic states. Or we can use the example to make refined distinctions about how a case is different from Hamlet's situation. Then the richer the reading of *Hamlet*, the richer the seeing-in, the greater the range of the exemplification—from simple equations with melancholy to intricate images of what it involves to have to live in a world mastered by Claudius.

Unfortunately we cannot simply carry over for rhetorical purposes the work that philosophers have done clarifying these performative functions. There have emerged contradictory readings of the performative that make it fraught with confusion. On the one hand, there is the foundational work of J.L. Austin’s attempting to show how language performs tasks beyond referring and in so doing accomplishes social tasks independently of the psychological states of the speakers. On the other hand, there has emerged in the humanities a Nietzschean view of the performative that honors precisely
what Austin tried to avoid—that is the subjective dimension of doing things in language for expressive effects, either deliberately or symptomatically. This view then developed significant critical power when Judith Butler turned the Deconstructionist idealizations of the performative located primarily in works of art into a concept with significant social force. In her work the performative becomes the dramatic principle by which agents both take on and grapple with the powers of subjection.

One sees immediately that Austin’s view of the performative will not help much in clarifying how poets see their work acting on the world—they do not want simply to exercise conventions but to manipulate conventions so as to elicit a sense of distinctive purposiveness within the work. But the inverse is also true, Austin’s view does not need or want to address poetry: indeed it is quite productive when it is left to the analysis of how agents insert themselves into social conventions and accomplish tasks like promising and binding themselves to contracts. On the other hand, while the more subjectivist views of the performative are quite tempting as models of poetry, they seem torn between the celebration of singularity—or the continuing primacy of the aesthetic given a new name—and intense suspicion of anything like an achievement of singularity that might be able on any regular basis to withstand the powers of interpellation and subjection.

Therefore I think we need to develop the conceptual case for a new speech act that can be the counterpart of Austin’s performative. If we can postulate a general model for how subjects perform expressive tasks in language, we can also stop asking Austin’s model to deal with subjective states, and therefore can preserve his account of how speech acts meet felicity conditions that do not depend at all on intentions. And we might also find a name for this expressive activity that gives a much more social and less narcissistic cast for that activity than can the idea of “Performativity.” This is all too obvious when we think of Nietzschean contexts, but even Butler’s performative has its closest affinities with theater (hence her interest in mime). Butler is haunted by the call “Who goes there” because that is the primary locus for what Althusser showed was the apparently positive power that secures the work of interpellation: we take on society’s patterns of naming so we can answer this question without arousing the suspicions or the hostilities of the authorities who pose it. Perhaps there is no more dramatic situation than the need to respond to such calls; indeed this is the birth as well of meta-theatrical doubts about the adequacy of the repertoire providing our answers.

I propose the rubric of “the demonstrative” as my candidate for this category of speech acts that invite attention to what the specific agent is doing in linguistic modes that do not primarily offer descriptions, arguments, or rationalizations about decisions. I do this in part because the idea of demonstration has connotative affinities with desires for distinctive kinds of communication—for teaching, for expressing feelings to others, and for the ways logic can directly display causal force without having to rely on empirical evidence. But since affording comfortable connotations does not count as making persuasive arguments, I will have also to give an account of how demonstratives work and of the difference such a concept can make in our awareness of what can be involved in our practices for producing and consuming poetry.

There are three basic kinds of demonstrative speech acts. The first is closest to the Nietzschean performative. It occurs when speakers try to make the speaking a display of various stylistic or psychological traits with which they want to be identified by
an audience. Here we can locate the domain of ethos central to classical rhetoric. The second type is also fundamentally expressive, but with a very different valence. These call attention to affective states intended to solicit or engage the affective engagements of others—as statements of care or as bids for sympathy. We try to find verbal equivalents for what we seem to be feeling or attending to, in order to invite an audience into our own intimate spaces. At times our exclamations of pain or joy go so far as to utter onomatopoeic grunts or sighs or laughs that are clear indices of our affective states. So one must be aware that these indices at times are under the control of the agent while at other times, like all expressive activity, betray forces working on subject which the subjects repress or of which they are not aware. Finally there is pedagogical demonstrative with refreshing disinterest in subjective states but no less central for characterizing what we do with language. I refer to our efforts to show concretely how something can be done even though it is difficult or impossible to describe the principles involved. The most basic example is teaching someone how to ride a bicycle—very difficult to explain but fairly simple to show, especially if the showing fully intervenes in how the tutee feels his or her body and develops ways of maintaining balance. I think it evident that there is a wide range of such cases—from the intimate processes by which a spouse teaches the partner to pick up cues by exhibiting behaviors, to learning to wield the now current art form of the public apology.

Each of these types involves something like a grammar of display rather than a logic of description. All these actions seem to me to have in common the fact that they do not only describe mental states but embody them or possess (literally or metaphorically) basic aspects of the conditions they characterize: cries of pain are not cries about pain. So there can be various interconnections among the appeal to ethos, the attempt to engage the other, and the effort at pedagogy. And in the background the audience will note the influence of the two philosophers I know who are most sensitive to the difference between description and display—Wittgenstein for his range of appropriate cases and Nelson Goodman for his specific accounts of what this difference entails for our understanding of cultural practices.

Let me begin by listing a range of representative general sentences that I think indicate kinds of demonstrative speech acts:

“The task can be done like this,”
“Try to recite the poem by emphasizing these variations in pacing.”
“Why do you want to make me as worried as I am evidently becoming”
“This is what I can do when I get a chance to speak in public,”
“It hurts here not there,” or, more generally, “this is how I feel,”
“This is how a good husband would deal with my anger.”

All these sentences reflect the fact that in appropriate cases we often find ourselves relying on modes of display because what we feel or what we want to accomplish is much easier to show than to characterize in discursive terms. And that showing is not merely a pointing to some factor or force that can be said to shape the situation. Affectively one demonstrates what one is feeling; semantically one provides a model for how some aspect of the language can operate; and stylistically one exemplifies possible powers of a medium for intensifying how the agent can participate in the object of his or her attention. And hovering on the margin of these sentences is the possibility of further discourse where the speaker might take degrees of
responsibility for choosing this particular mode of display. Display in general both avoids explanation and presents second order possibilities of fleshing out one’s investments, by contextualizing them if not by offering explanations for them. One asks of the agents what place the displays have in the lives from which they issue.xviii

Let me use two poems by Robert Creeley to show what is involved in reading for the demonstrative (literal and metaphoric) and letting its capacities to marshal linguistic resources be the ground of one’s poetics. I chose Creeley simply because his poems are short and his work is now acknowledged as important by most younger poets with a variety of ideological stances. But as I began working with the poems I came to think the idea of the demonstrative actually captures distinctive qualities of Creeley’s imagination (and because it works so well for Creeley it makes me more suspicious than I would like to be about its general scope.)

Consider for example what we might call one of Creeley’ s “signature” texts from For Love (1962), “A Song”:

I had wanted a quiet testament
and I had wanted, among other things,
a song.

That was to be
of a like monotony.

(A grace
Simply. Very very quiet.

A murmur of some lost
Thrush, though I have never seen one.
Which was you then. Sitting
and so, at peace, so very much this same quiet.

A song.

And of you the sign now of a gross
Perpetuity

(which is not reluctant, or if it is,
It is no longer important.

A song

Which one sings, if he sings it,
with care. (CP 112)

My first concern is with what Creeley demonstrates as an artist that can provide an example for other writers (as it acknowledges W.C Williams’s poetry as making possible this further development). Here Creeley manages a homage to traditional “song” while wresting its elemental structuring devices away from how what Charles Bernstein calls the “official verse culture” envisions the obligations of craft. To this act
Creeley binds an intricate psychological drama. The poem seems nervous, moving out of a past into an uncertain present which affords a possibility of quiet, but haunted by a self-conscious disgust at his own efforts to provide a name for that quiet which would inevitably displace it. The effect of this self-consciousness is to turn typical formal devices like rhyme into figures of dissatisfaction, such as parenthesis. This leads the reader to seek satisfaction in how the sense of the author's breath units becomes the driving force of the lineation. We have then embodied in the form this relation between unhappy self-consciousness and fundamental rhythms where rest and quiet become active possibilities. In fact as we attend to these rhythms of breathing we also recognize how much we become caught up in other temporal factors that all establish attention to the poem's pacing. Every element emphasizes movement, except for the repetition of "A song" that figuratively becomes the space demanding to be mobilized. It is as if the poem had to find through repetition a version of song that could carry or possess the fullness of care—not a minor resource for the mind to have when it sorts for possible attitudes that might honor the complexity of psychological life.

If we are to become articulate about that fullness we must attend to another aspect of the demonstrative—the expressive working out or realizing of an attitude reconciling the competing pulls in the poem. If this were a typical practical scenario we could assume that the attitude would be named and could be put to immediate practical work. Poets tend to want their attitudes more complex and more perspicuous than that. They want a sense that the poem realizes something by having its naming process produce a fresh twist on our standard cultural repertoire. Here Creeley composes an attitude displaying a synthetic capacity to reconcile three states of mind—an uneasy care not to embarrass the self by trusting language, the wary care not to expose too much vulnerability ("if he sings it"), and the invested care that allows one to sing the song and participate in the desires it offers for the quiet she can bring. The desire for quiet inspires the song, and the song can celebrate the quiet if one can also take responsibility for the interference that is self-consciousness. Ultimately that taking of responsibility requires simultaneously acknowledging desire and accepting warily the fact that one often has little control over one's feelings. If he sings it, it had better be with the multiple forms of care that the poem comes to exemplify.

There seems to be two levels of demonstration taking place here—one as the presentation of a complex state of mind, and another presenting the satisfaction possible when one can envision and will this successful demonstration. I raise this issue of second order because I suspect this is what we engage when we talk about aesthetic emotion in literature. It is not a primary emotion but a reflective one concerning the state of satisfaction in our engagement with the affects displayed in the work. And I indulge in this speculation because of the degree of self-reflection, explicit and implicit, that occurs in my second example from Creeley. Notice how his "Something" crosses expressive and pedagogical aspects of the demonstrative:

I approach with such
a careful tremor, always
I feel the finally foolish

question of how it is,
then, supposed to be felt,
and by whom. I remember

once in a rented room on
27th street, the woman I loved,
then, literally, after we

had made love on the large
bed sitting across from
a basin with two faucets, she

had to pee but was nervous,
embarrassed I suppose I
would watch her who had but

a moment ago been completely
open to me, naked, on
the same bed. Squatting, her

head reflected in the mirror,
the hair dark there, the
full of her face, the shoulders,

sat spread-legged, turned on
one faucet and shyly pissed. What
love might learn from such a sight. (CP

Criticism might learn from such a sight to tread lightly and honor the primacy of
the narrated scene. But the poet's demonstration of skills that complement and deepen
the "lesson" compels me to offer a critical supplement. It is probably too simple to
speak of enjambment in Creeley because that suggests a distanced controlling
intelligence rather than what seems the sheer wary care of a breathing that does not
want to rest, even in this sexual scene, until the mind can be satisfied that there is
learning taking place. For most of the poem there is an expression of tenderness that
seems inseparable from a strange sense of instability. Notice the momentary confusion
in interpreting the sense of the two "I"s in the fifth stanza. "I suppose" renders the
narrator's need to explain "embarrassed," and the second "I" is the object of the
embarrassment. Then most readers would expect the "who" clause that follows to refer
to that "I." But Creeley shifts perspective to move from watching the woman to
attributing to her a subjective sense of complete openness. This shift in perspective
then entirely erases the "me" to focus marvelously on the act and the surrounding
details—her using only one faucet is especially touching. Logically it is by erasing the
"me" and so attending to detail that there can be a final perspective shift to Love itself as
potential agent capable of taking all the internal "I" rhymes into something that extends
far beyond the scene. How we learn from this sight to appreciate intimacy is
inseparable from this way of telling.

IV
Why can’t these poems be sufficiently characterized if we remain within a fundamentally aesthetic approach to the poet’s craft? Certainly I dwelled on Creeley’s use of his medium, and I emphasized the relationship between what could be presented concretely and what might be imagined as a kind of learning not compatible with how knowledge claims are typically adjudicated. And certainly any decent reading must attend to aesthetically charged details and to the implicit purposiveness that generates them. My quarrel is not with what an aesthetic focus sees but with its limited capacity to develop the possible significance of what it sees. Because the demonstrative puts a rhetorical frame on how we read, it is capable of establishing richer and more precise connections between poems and the world beyond the poems than are possible only within the language of aesthetics, especially within the language of aesthetics in the forms it has taken since the late nineteenth century.

There are two specific advantages to treating demonstrative as the basis for a rhetorical approach to poetry. First, it affords a dynamic and dramatic sense of the authorial activity—as making and as emotionally engaged thinking. This emphasis provides an alternative account of the labor that brings into play predicates like beauty, form, and intricacy of internal relationships. Now we can acknowledge that these predicates mattered for poets’ sense of the well-made object long before they defined their task in aesthetic terms. Style is less an aspect of objects than of what projected agents produce—often because they simply enjoy the kind of responsibility that control of the artifice produces. Literary history then becomes in part the tracing of how authors establish styles as examples by modifying previous examples and trusting to their own technical innovations as taking a place in what I am calling cultural repertoires. Creeley, for example, invites our seeing that he is transforming the objective, swift-moving and concrete notational style of William Carlos Williams into an instrument that is available for dealing with complicated states of self-consciousness.

An ancillary advantage to emphasizing creation as a mode of labor is that it foregrounds the importance of attributing possible motives for doing the relevant work. And those motives need not involve the standard notions of rhetorical persuasion. The resources of rhetoric might be used for acts conceived primarily as modes of witnessing or modes of seeking to have one’s feelings understood as distinctive. In this respect Creeley presents an uneasy and needy openess that is quite far from a pursuit of mastery demanding submission or seducing submission on the part of the audience. And his pedagogical orientation is so deeply woven into ironic self-consciousness that it beggars any summary—the labor is the sharpening for an audience of how a sense of potential embarrassment contributes to feelings of sexual intimacy.

My second basic argument concerns how treating texts as demonstratives allows us to describe the differences poems can make in our understanding of experience even though they cannot regularly satisfy any of the epistemic demands we usually adapt for cognitive claims. The demonstrative must be appreciated for what has been accomplished in the singular performance, and the demonstrative must serve as an example of what can be accomplished as a result of attending to the performance. When we ask what we have experienced, we tend to characterize the poem as providing exemplary authorial and dramatic attitudes. Authorial attitudes give shapes to possible motives in the writing; dramatic attitudes give shape to expressive features whereby the poem develops affective stances in relation to its subject matter. Poems
realize what language can do in making certain states articulate, and that realization in turn gives the imagination access to provisional identifications we can try to adapt to our own circumstances—not as the condition of experiencing the text but as the condition of adapting that experience to the world by testing for the similarities and differences it allows us to specify.

To clarify my case I must be as clear as I can in developing and then putting to somewhat different use Nelson Goodman’s connection between expression and exemplification. Basically Goodman sees expression as the possession of properties that the particular also refers to. Expression is not primarily a statement about objects but a statement that displays some condition offered for an audience. The display is literal if the properties are actually possessed by the object, for example the speaker weeping as he cries out in pain. The display is metaphorical if we see in to the object by imaginatively developing some physical feature: a sad painting literally possesses certain attributes that we imaginatively transform into the display of emotional qualities.

Then Goodman’s brilliant move is to see that such expressions can function as examples and so have the power to maintain denotive relations with the practical world. But examples do not denote by providing pictures that refer to the world. Rather they refer by providing possibilities for sorting out what might matter in projecting elements from one situation onto others. Examples do not express the belief that something is true but invite a belief that something can be useful because it denotes a category that can be adapted in sorting what might matter in experience. For this distinction Goodman uses the example of a contrast between the use of a color sample as a possible picture of the color of a sweater and the use of a color sample as a means of finding all the sweaters of the same hue in a department store (Languages of Art). My claim is that demonstratives function as versions of the color samples that help us in sorting sweaters by the colors they exhibit. Because this activity concerns what properties are displayed rather than pictured, there would be problems if one used a sample to say what can be known about the colors in any actual situation. But one can clearly establish how the sample helps sort what we confront as we experience the sweaters.

When Goodman turns to art he makes essentially the same point by distinguishing between the two-place predicates we might develop into claims about reference and the one-place predicates that are appropriate for the task of sorting possible experiences. With the two-place predicate the only necessity is that there be sufficient information to decide whether the sign successfully represents the figure involved. The play Hamlet could be used as a picture of someone who actually lived and had problems with his parents, was friendly with Horatio, and was killed by being poisoned. But if we treat the picture and the referent as forming a one-place predicate we establish a very different direction of fit between the text and the world. Now all the linguistic resources it calls upon become means of sorting the world into what might fit a “Hamlet-picture” and what might be better treated with other predicates. The one-place predicate allows emphasis on what the picture displays. Analogously, Creeley’s poems offer realizations of what might go into care or into understandings of what intimacy can be. Because the examples are concrete displays, they offer the flexibility of all analogue constructions to allow different degrees of attention to detail that we then use for our models. At one pole, if the reader wants to use every detail of the poem the
sorting involved with apply only to a very limited number of cases. Typically such demands will involve the recognition of differences more than the recognition of similarities. At the other pole, the picture will collapse into pious identifications with vague thoughts of intimacy. The important point for poetics is the substantial range between those poles.

V

Rhetoric is the art of exemplification. Rhetors typically ask audiences to try joining with how they think through a problem or perform the work of praising or blaming. Rhetors can ask this because of their control of ethos, which is essentially the shaping of attitudes of concern making it possible to identify without the usual suspicions and hesitations, even if the identification is asked to hold only for a particular effort at sorting what is to be done. Poetry is that aspect of rhetorical practice that calls attention to how what might become exemplary stances can be deployed as particular modes of articulating and so realizing dense and resonant particular actions. Poetry cultivates in its readers the capacity to see responsively into the minute particulars that stage stylistic choices constituting concrete acts of attention so that they ultimately function as significant modes of seeing-as—that is, as ways of imagining who one can be in various domains of experience. The concerns of rhetoric help us to focus this seeing-in on how concerns for purpose and for purposiveness function in order to flesh out what becomes objective through the powers of language. Conversely a concern with poetry can substantially modify the range of expressive and pedagogical purposes that we realize can take place as aspects of rhetoric. The rhetorical perspective invites us to recognize that we pursue possible practical implications for the powers of seeing-in cultivated by poetry. The practical implications take place through poems’ capacities to function as examples and so to make supple and dense our sense of our repertoires for engaging, understanding, and shaping experience in the world beyond the text. Education into seeing-in enriches our possibilities for seeing-as.
I have written an essay elaborating how Julianna Spahr and Jennifer Moxley develop the case both for returning poetry to an emphasis on rhetoric and for redefining the ends of rhetoric by exemplifying new versions of an ethos of sincerity and a poetics stressing fusion between the I, the I, and the We.

The importance of the second and the third points was brought home to me by Robert von Hallberg’s fine book, Lyric Powers, pp. 129-141, 219. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.] I also want here to acknowledge two extraordinary readings of this essay by two extraordinary friends. Geoffrey O’Brien held my brain to the fire issued by the best young contemporary poets and Ayon Roy challenged my core arguments with great vigor and insight.

Oren Eisenberg brilliantly traces the extent to which contemporary poets will go to escape the artefactual in.

Here are two self-referential passages from Lerner’s Mean Free Path (Port Townsend Copper Canyon, 2010):

… The goal is to fail
Synchronically until description yields
Interference rippling across faces (52)

… These are the little
Floating signatures that interest me
Collisions along the path of reference
This time with feeling. What I cannot say is
Is at the vertex. (44)

I do not deny that there has been interesting poetry written by poets who affiliate with experimental modernism—from Zukosky to Bernstein. That work, however, fails for me to produce the magisterial intensity and what I can only call spiritual scope of its predecessors. And recognizing this leads one to search for what is problematic in modernist poetry’s founding principles.

Spahr was a student of Charles Bernstein and Moxley of Keith and Rosemary Waldrop so their pedigree as innovative poets is unquestionable.


Dee Reynolds’ Symbolist Aesthetics and Early Abstract Art. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) offers a very good account of how “the most crucial link” between the poetics of symbolism and early abstract painting “is the emphasis on the medium of the art work itself as the object of imaginary and aesthetic transformation” (4).

This is a good place to acknowledge the significance of Walter Michael’s argument in his The Shape of the Signifier that modernist poetics inspired an emphasis on experience rather than meaning. That argument is then subsumed under a claim that logically the cult of experience has to align itself with identity politics. The fact that this view of experience
separates itself from the objectivity available as “meaning” leaves the force of the work as manifest only through the sense of realizing further who one is. And in a world distrustful of idealization, who one is is a matter of the identity shaped by race, class, and location. So Michael’s would find considerable support in Hejinian’s claims. But her view of experience does not devolve into identity politics, largely because she retains the modernist ideal of transpersonality: the art object allows all of us to experience something about the world that need not reinforce abstractions about personal identity. I think we can use principles of rhetoric to defend this modernist value and extend it by linking it to the objective grammar of language, which extends well beyond judgments about meaning. Michael’s relies on a binary opposition that has “meaning” determined by attributing intentions while “experience” depends on the empirical factors that invite speaking about cultural identities. From what I am calling a grammatical perspective there is no such thing as “experience” in itself. There are only modes of “experience as” that situate the experience in relation to some kind of activity, and the activity is in principle open to imaginative participation by a range of identity positions. (The only “as” is not the “as” of race, class and location.” The “as” can involve roles: experience as a bandleader or as a critic. Or “as” can modify conditions in which states of being become manifest: experience as seeing a sunset from this particular position or experience as engaging these specific words. The force of the “as” then also suggests that meaning need not be opposed to experience, as intention is opposed to event. Even traditional rhetoric idealizes work that can make the audience feel they become participants who complete in their imaginations the world the author sketches. Some intentions are only visible by means of the event, and some intentional states, notably Kant’s purposiveness, become manifest not as separable meanings but as forces that produce complex meaningfulness within experience. Meanings can themselves take on properties of events that are experienced because they become articulate under specific conditions. Think for example of how we develop coherent attitudes as we read so that we can identify with texts rather than force on them our ideas about our identity. And think of how eloquence itself becomes a vehicle for experience in a poem like “Tintern Abbey as the mind registers the expansive potential of spirit embedded in how it builds on nature”


I am indebted to Richard Wollheim’s Painting as an Art for the notion of ‘seeing-in.”

Hence Jonathan Culler’s very interesting essay, “ even though it fundamentally accepts Derrida’s problematic reading of Austen.

The foundational text here is Jacques Derrida’s misguided but humanly persuasive reading of Austin in “Structure, Event, Context,”

Because of my ignorance I can only suggest the link between demonstratives and demonstration in logic, but I cannot pursue that link. I would like to be able to argue that logical validity is not a matter of assertions about the world but a demonstration that directly carries a formal condition for making sense. For Wittgenstein logic maps conditions of assertion but does not provide reasons for its own efficacy. And this seems in the spirit of Aristotle’s Prior Analytics because Aristotle distinguishes between a demonstration of the reasoned fact that can be given in the assertion and the simple fact” that has to be dialectically established. “The former roughly corresponds to an a priori demonstration, e.g. from cause to effect; the latter gives no cause or prior reason why such a fact occurs but only why we know the fact to be the case.” ( I quote from foot notes to Duns Scotus, “On the Existence of God” in Medieval Philosophy, John F. Wippel and Allan B. Wolter, eds. (New York: the Free Press, 1969, p. 420.)

Goodman makes a distinction between literal and metaphoric aspects of expression that I think also applies to the demonstrative. Goodman shows that a painting can express sadness
even if we know that the painter was quite happy in creating this image of unhappiness? For while the qualities of the landscape only display literally what the eye can render, that rendering develops metaphoric force as the attributes the painting possesses take on figurative status (like its somber grays). We don’t invent these properties but we allow the figurative possibilities to come into focus as aspects of what we see in the work. Similarly we can take what a writer displays to become metaphoric to the extent that the particular seeks generalized resonance. We will see in the examples mercifully soon to come that calling attention to traits emphasized in a text can point both to the text and beyond it. Evoking a metaphoric demonstrative provides a general sense of the purposive framework that indicates how most art works find their affinities with practical experience. And rhetoric becomes the art of managing what can be displayed and of projecting the many roles examples play in the grammars by which we sort what matters in our lives. In fact rhetoric persuades less by the truth values sustaining its arguments than because the audience takes the ethos of the speaker as a metaphorical demonstration of who accepting the argument enables us to become in our own eyes.

In making these attributions about the demonstrative I am trying to work out a way to elaborate one of Wittgenstein’s central concerns—that a great deal of discourse does not take the form of a language game for making observations and forming propositions but is focused on elaborating samples supplying means of judging what language makes available as instruments for our various practices.

My Dean Janet Broughton gave me the example of her daughter’s complaint that she feels “Blurgh!” It is the central place such discourses have in practical situations that make me think Ayon Roy’s objection to my argument here is not fatal. He points out that I need “this” is my examples because the language is not strictly performing the task. Rather the language is pointing to the task that is being realized. In Austin’s speech act the language does perform the task—that is how he can separate the effects of the performative from any psychological conditions. But recognizing this difference need not entail that the feature of direct linguistic action is the necessary condition for something being treated as a distinctive speech act. I claim that the feature making the demonstrative a category of speech act is the capacity of relevant sentences to emphasize how they are not locutionary acts. Some of the properties possessed by the sentence block its going through to reference. These sentences invite uses as examples for sorting rather than as the utterance of beliefs that something is the case. So it is reasonable that they project attitudes toward situations rather than establish performative power simply in terms of the form of the utterance in appropriate contexts.

Here I think there are substantial analogues between my arguments and Henry Staten’s work on “techne,” for example in “Art as Techne, or the Intentional Fallacy and the Unfinished Project of Formalism,” in Hageberg and Jost, eds,420-35, because for Staten techne involves a much broader category than modern aesthetics and provides the basis for reading the authorial presence in the constant decision-making that produces significant imaginative writing.