

Book Review

“Entanglement of Echoes in *Near/Miss*”

Bernstein, Charles. *Near/Miss*
Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2018.

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Near / Miss, the poetry collection of Charles Bernstein, abounds with antics, queerness, idiosyncratic riffs and it echoes his personal loss, American trauma, political discontent and the holocaust. Following *Pitch of Poetry* (2016), Bernstein takes his readers to the matrix of his echopoetics. As he claims in *Pitch of Poetry*, echopoetics is “the nonlinear resonance of one motif bouncing off another within an aesthetics of constellation,” and the echo is “a blank: a shadow of an absent source.” “A tangle of truths” in the postmodern world, the book keeps generating flickering echoes while showcasing the motif of “nothingness” that is launched in echopoetics. *Near / Miss* collects Bernstein’s poems from the past five years, with poems in the poets’ latest styles echoing his previous poems, and paired with paintings by visual artists such as Amy Sillman and Jill Moser, along with transcreations / translations from other poets such as Norbert Lange and Reinaldo Ferreira, with poems by ancient and contemporary poets such as Catullus and Norman Fischer, with rabbis and Jewish philosophers, and with contemporary American musicians. The book offers an apotheosis of echopoetics.

Near / Miss starts with a provocative poem entitled “Thank you For Saying You’re Welcome,” a variant on an earlier poem “Thank You For Saying Thank You.” Swerving between antiphrasis and repetition, between sarcasm and humor, the poem is a cranky rewriting that keeps on varying its definitions of poetry. This is demonstrated by the poet’s verbal dexterity in twisting meanings with fragmented words and poignant irony. Pointing out that “poetry’s / boogeyman will have / trapped you in her /

lair with its “insidious charms” and “dark mysteries,” the poem ends with disturbing and intriguing lines: “It’s / unreal.” These two poems evoke entangled particles or quanta that are spinningly correlated to leave readers in a dizzy vertigo of a multiplied reality. The French epigraph, from Rimbaud, “Un bateau frêle comme un papillon de mai” (a boat as fragile as a butterfly in May) accounts for a lot of the insidious charm of this poem, which links the truth in poetry to the fate of the Mayflower, the boat being a metonymy for America. This intricately points out the motif of the whole book, melting and shifting of loss, sorrow, melancholy, dispossession and trauma at multiple levels.

The “echo” in echopoetics not only displays its variance, but also cre-ates a Möbius effect that turns the book into an “installation” rather than a “collection,” (243) as in Bernstein’s *All the Whiskey in Heaven* (2010). Following is “In Utopia,” with a different style and a divergent aura from the first one. Here is the threshold of a queer and distinctive poetic Utopia in which “they don’t got no rules,” and “love goes for the ride but Eros at the wheel” dominate. After this poem is “High Tide at Race Point” which brings us back to a dystopian reality. Repeating “without,” this poem dis-plays an intense sense of loss from the perspective of racial issues. Echoing the former poem in its title and motif, “Don’t Tell me about the Tide. I’ve Been There and Back, My Friend” shows the loss of the origi-nal meaning in language. Another example is “This Poem is a Decoy” (159). This one-line poem guilefully leads the reader to a previous poem, “This Poem is Hostage” (41). This rediscovering reading experience is not only frolic and hilarious, but also seems to indicate soberly that the loss of “pitch” should be reclaimed. The Möbius rhythm, and the multiplicity in echopoetics, is predominant and it manifestly shows the endless and resounding echoes that Bernstein seeks.

The multiplicity and Möbius effects are powerfully demonstrated in Bernstein’s “icononophrastic” poems, (a coined word by Bernstein, meaning a poem which is written for an image and the reverse), his collaborations with many visual artists, such as Amy Sillman, Jill Moser, Francie Shaw, Bill Jensen, Etel Adnan, and Marina Adams among others. In the poem “Wild Turning,” written for Moser’s painting “While Turning,” Bernstein demonstrates the dynamic emergence of images out of the blank canvas by juxtaposition and implosion:

You go and come again
as if without noticing

or I find myself
 motionless, remembering
 how in one moment
 all that was unsaid
 burst, like
 the sky on the 4th
 of July, or just
 after. (144)

This poem is both allusive and evocative in a multi-dimensional Möbius effect. The words “unsaid” and “motionless” create a powerful tension in one dimension which is reflected by the restraint of the frenzy colors from the blank of the canvas. When the “unsaid burst,” the firework is ignited and simultaneously it echoes with the riotous colors in the painting in another dimension. At the end of the poem, “just after” connects the end to the beginning with its blankness, and suddenly the canvas seems to be turned into blank in another space. “Wild Turning” swerves in the reader’s imagination, so as to allow the readers to travel across a diverse ambiance in the melding of the painting and the poem. “Pinky’s Rule” is another brilliant example of the use of Möbius effect. Drastically and elaborately, the poem written for Amy Sillman’s animation, is the maximization of the essence of the rabbit / duck illusion which has been made well-known by Wittgenstein. With the veer of the dynamic multi-plicity of images and words, the poem is about a variety of issues ranging from sexuality and political dissent to the obscurity of language and the philosophy of being. As Sillman reads “Pinky’s Rule” in the animation, multiple perspectives shown by different images are emerging, and simultaneously the fragmented, obscure and uncanny verbal messages are flickered like “shadows on the wall” (109).

The estrangement of language and the revision of the cliché, shown by numerous malaprops, mondegreens, non-sequiturs and fragmentations, form the most elusive and significant part of echopoetics. They signify the “blank” or “nothingness” in echopoetics, as the metonymy of “the poetic Other.” Bernstein writes: “I always / hear echoes and reverses / when I am listening to languages. It’s / the field of my consciousness” (81). The poet reiterates the significance of blank or nothingness, “Poetry should be in the service of nothing” (78) and “nothing / ties me to / the actual (/ Nothing tires / me as / the actual.)” (69). “Nothing” in echopoetics has multiple layers of entangled meanings. Nothing can refer

to the loss of the origin, as the poem "Before Time" so explicitly shows: poets "are bereft of images, of stories, of illusion" and "poets have no memory even of the loss of the ancient songs; their words ring hollow against an indifferent universe" (169). This bears out the chaotic and fragmented state of the postmodern world and resonates with Adorno in his most famous comment, "after Auschwitz, poetry is barbarous." Yet, as the poem goes on, bestowed with "dark mysteries," poetry can be "sublimely daemonic—world defining, world defying" (169). As a tool to defy the barbarous, "nothingness" in echopoetics is also the protest and defiance against the unfairness, a sarcastic, poignant and witty counterpunch with tyranny. Both homonym and polysemy create a blank, a blindness, which shatters the fixation of cliché in language. As "the blank" is "where the meaning hides," "nothing" can be regarded as the metonymy of the queer, the uncanny, the invisible, the disable, the dispossessed, the silenced, the poetic Other, as opposed to official verse culture and elite and well-recognized poetry. As is in "Wild Turning," the climax lies in the "blank" sky, as it is the progenitor of transforming and reversing. As a prominent and essential poet and a leading voice in innovative poetry, Bernstein's stance is palpable. He not only wants to reveal "the poetic Other," but also pitches in with it, and sublimates it by discovering cutting-edge innovative poetry in it. As Bernstein devastatingly claims in the poem "Correction," "say what you hate. That's poetry" (29).

The Otherness in the blank or "nothing" is greatly reflected in "Concentration (An Elegy)." The poem is made up of a great number of variants of the phrase "Polish death camps." In 2016, the Polish government has made the phrase illegal to use, insisting that "Nazi" or "German" replace "Polish" (the death camps, located in Poland, where operated by the Nazis). Like drops of tears, shedding of blood, shouts of protests, fragmented inscriptions on millions of gravestones of Jewish people who died in Auschwitz and other death camps during the WWII, the striking fragments of "Polish death camps" are the traumatic, forbidden and haunting "nothing," which are willfully shown in a repetitive manner to make the tyranny bare and the law nothing. The repetition of "nothing" in the poem makes itself happen and haunt the tyranny, conspicuously healing the trauma. In this sense, "nothing" can be seen as a poetic power to turn poetry from a "negative economy" into a sense of healing and charming-away, as "the mourning falls away / And when morning comes" (177). "Nothingness" also denotes the sublimity of the Other. In "Seldom Splendor,"

a fine cold mist descends
 on Carroll Park
 The swing swings empty
 benches bare (166)

Just as the “nothingness” in the cosmos before time has been the glorious beauty in its obscurity and unfilled void, the poem makes the “empty” swing and the “bare” benches in a common neighborhood park splendid. The emptiness, the obscurity as well as the space between the lines seem to indicate a sense of loss or absence. By “seldom,” the Otherness of “nothing” is suggested, while the splendor of “nothing” is sublimely shown. The sublimity of “nothing” resonates with Dickinson’s poem: “the gorgeous / nothings / which / compose / the / sunset / keeps,” quoted in *Pitch of Poetry* (277). What is worthwhile noting is that echopoetics resonates with Zen back in its dazzling and sublime “nothingness,” as nothingness in Zen refers to the infinite emptiness, “the very progenitor of all things in / the world” (*Tao Te Ching*, 9).

The book ends with “Fare Thee Well,” an outrageous and poignant poem of synthetic sensations on loss, regret and misfortune, bringing the readers closer to the central motif of the book. Echoing “Before You Go” as a poem of farewell, and “All the Whiskey in Heaven” as a poem about love and separation, the poem is different from both poems in its dark charms, hidden in its cynicism and irony. The poem defies melancholy, sorrow, and misery audaciously, and achieves dramatic catharsis and expresses courageous transcendence from the loss and grief. The poem also echoes “Thank you for Saying You’re Welcome,” the very first poem of the book. Saying farewell to his readers in a half and paxy way, the poem swerves back and bounces off “Thank You For Saying You are Welcome” on the same motif of “what poetry really is.” With laconic and thought-provoking imperatives such as “Find you way, make it swell / Give what you got, not what sells,” “Fare Thee Well” and “Thank You for Saying You’re Welcome” are both proclamations for the poetic Other. The book is all reverberations and entanglement of truth, a glittering “infinite constellation” which echoes with ancient and contemporary poets such as Catullus and Norman Fischer, American melting culture, and current political dissatisfaction in the “dark mysteries . . . amidst dazzling emptiness” (169). The book is a reflection of echopoetics and the healing and transcendence from the loss and trauma in the latest styles and the original dimension of Charles Bernstein’s *ars poetica*. As Bernstein is mumbling and

chiming, “did I come to you / Or lose you” by “my own / Wild stumbling” (154) and “I Want a Thinkership not a Readership” (165). In *Near / Miss*, Bernstein is ardently seeking an intimate “Thinkership” as to echo with him in the entanglement of truth in the sublime “nothingness.”

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Work Cited

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Page citations from *Near/Miss* have been corrected after initial publication.

Abstract

Near / Miss, Charles Bernstein's poetry collection, is replete with poems of distinctive styles and pluralistic forms in his idiosyncratic and artistic cosmos. With poetic antics, queerness, sarcasm, irony, and humor, the book showcases the motif of loss, chaos and trauma in postmodern America and the world. The multiplicity and multi-dimensional Möbius effect in *Near / Miss* echo earlier Bernstein's poems, as well as poems by ancient and contemporary poets, with visual artists and musicians, and rabbis and Jewish philosophers. I argue that *Near / Miss* offers an apotheosis of echopoetics, which has been launched in his previous book *Pitch of Poetry*. Poems in the book reveal the dark and thick "pitch," namely the queer, the uncanny, the invisible, the disabled, the dispossessed, and the silenced poetic Other and make it explicit. The estrangement and alienation of cliché through diverse malaprops, mondegreens, non-sequiturs and fragmentations in *Near / Miss* aim at deconstructing the fixation of language so as to display the poetic Other. The motif of "nothingness" in echopoetics significantly multiplies its meanings. Nothingness mainly refers to the loss of origin, the defiance of tyranny, and the sublimity of the universe and the poetic Other. Melding his personal loss and misfortune, the current political discontent and the postmodern chaos in America and the world, nothingness in echopoetics resonates with American literary tradition and Zen with a healing and transforming power.

Key Words: Echopoetics, Charles Bernstein, *Near / Miss*, Möbius effect, postmodern poetry

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