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Abstract: Charles Bernstein's poems are rebellious against conventions in theme, diction, imagery and prosody. He intentionally abandons the poetic rules and aesthetics always abided by conventional poets and puts emphasis on his own aesthetic principles. The features of his poetry include the trivialization of subjects, derangement of the language, fracture of syntactical structure, illogical expression in grammar, irrationalization of lines, lack of feeling in lyric and semantical ambiguity. Nevertheless, in his poems there are some rules though hard to grasp. "MY God Has an Attitude Problem" is an example of those abstruse, difficult poems. This article provides an analysis and interpretation of the meanings, meter and rhyme of this poem from the perspective of a non-English speaking reader with an attempt to explore its aesthetic rules.

Key words: Charles Bernstein Language poetry "MY God Has an Attitude Problem" Being Author: Nie Zhenzhao is professor of English literature and comparative literature at Central China Normal University (Wuhan 430079, China). He is also vice president of The Chinese/American Association for Poetry and Poetics (CAAP), chief editor of Foreign Literature Studies, vice president of China Foreign Literature Association, and fellow of China National Funds for Philosophy and Social Sciences. Email: niezhenzhao@163.com

标题: 解读伯恩斯坦的语言诗“我的上帝有个态度问题”

内容提要: 查尔斯·伯恩斯坦的诗学在其主题、措辞、意象等方面都具有反传统的性质。伯恩斯坦摒弃了传统诗人的诗歌与美学传统，强调其自身的诗歌创作美学。诗歌的特点体现在主题选材为细小琐碎之事、语言全局的非正常排列、句子结构的破裂、语法表述的无逻辑性、诗节内诗行的非理性化、抒情的空缺、意义理解的困难等。即便如此，他的诗歌里面依然有规则可寻，尽管非常隐蔽。“我的上帝有个态度问题”就是伯恩斯坦的艰涩难懂诗歌之一例。本文从不以英语为母语的读者视角对该诗的意义、格律、音韵等方面进行了分析与解读，力图探讨该诗所蕴涵的美学规则。

关键词: 查尔斯·伯恩斯坦 语言诗 “我的上帝有个态度问题” 存在

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Language poets and their abstruse, difficult poems became known to Chinese readers, and introductory comments on them could not be rarely seen in some historical books of American literature and on literary website since the first anthology of Selected Language Poems by Charles Bernstein, Hank Lazer and James Sherry translated by Zifeng Zhang and Yun'e Huang, was published in 1993 by Sichuan Literature and Art Publishing House. Among those avant garde

writers so called in China. Bernstein is a remarkable one who caught Chinese scholars' attention and whose poems kindled their interest. In the 21st century, he became a focus of attention in China especially after Marjorie's article "Avant-Garde Community and the Individual Talent: The Case of Language Poetry" appeared in the second issue of *Foreign Literature Studies* (FLS) in 2006. The article dealing with Avant-Garde Poets like Susan Howe, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian and Steve McCaffery outlines the evolution of Language Poetry for those who do not know so much about it. It is also this article that guides Chinese readers and scholars how to understand language poetry by following her interpretation and to read Bernstein with intense interest and curiosity aroused by the poem "Every Lake" she cited as the example of her analysis. My interview with Charles Bernstein published in the second issue of FLS together with two articles, "Charles Bernstein against the Idea of Poetry" by Leevi Lehto and "Poetics of Charles Bernstein and American Language Poetry" by Lin Yupeng, shows the growing attention in Language Poetry in China. Therefore, the International Conference on the 20th Century American Poetry held in Wuhan in July 2007 is the witness of the growing interest in Language Poetry as well as other schools.

Charles Bernstein, the leading poet and theorist of Language Poetry which Marjorie argues "the most prominent American poetic avant-garde of the '80s and '90s" (Perloff 25), is anti-traditional. His poems are rebellious against conventions in theme, diction, imagery and prosody. His poetry is not only remarkably different from those we take as conventional but from the previous modernist schools such as Symbolism, Imagism and Beat Generation. Bernstein intentionally abandons the poetic rules and aesthetics followed by traditional poets who are now the focus of Chinese scholars in their studies. Just as he says, Bernstein is "especially interested in extreme forms of poetry: odd and eccentric forms, constructed procedures and procedural constructions" (Nie 12). He puts emphasis on his own aesthetics in composing poetry: "I never assume that the words I use represent a given world. I make the work anew with each word. Poetry is as much a product of delusion as illumination, illusion as reality" (Nie 12). Therefore, the major features of the poems created by this so-called "a practitioner" of Language Poetry are the trivialization of subjects in composition, derangement of language systematically, fracture of semantical structure, illogical expression, irrationalization of lines, lack of feeling in lyric and semantical ambiguity. Generally, just like Marjorie's comment, "the constructivist aesthetic of Language poetry insisted on the making process itself in all its anti-closure, incompleteness and indeterminacy." Bernstein's poems cannot be understood and interpreted by traditional critical way such as scansion, analysis of genre, the speaker, the subject, the structure, setting, imagery, the poem's historical placement and ideology or world-view and so on. An anti-traditional criticism could be a possible approach to their interpretation. That is to read and interpret those poems without clear paradigm but from different perspectives of readers themselves.

Everybody may have his own opinion of poetry and compose poems in his own way, but different from others, Bernstein using language as the medium and poem as the form is always trying to collect and reflect information of our society and world that is transformed into poetic codes in fractured words and lines. By decoding those poetic codes, though it is so hard to understand his composition, we could at least find a way to get some message of the poems he wants to transmit and some meaning of what he wants to convey. Here is a short poem, "MY God Has an Attitude Problem," collected in the anthology of *With Strings* and published in 2001, which acts as a sample to be analyzed for understanding. It writes:

1. Being splits

2. it being hard

3. being Being
4. going on being
5. Being
6. being face to
7. face with Itself
8. rendering It
9. rent replicants
10. rootless
11. writhing in
12. incontinence

What can we get from this poem? What is the speaker, the subject, the setting, the imagery and the meter? Factually I don't know them at my first reading. I don't know because I couldn't perceive and comprehend this poem from an ordinary reader's perspective, especially from the perspective of a non-English speaking reader.

From the traditional reading of poetry, it seems to readers from the title "MY God Has an Attitude Problem" that the poet intends to stress the attitude problem. On the contrary, the poem has nothing to do with any attitude problem. I asked Bernstein why he chose this title for the poem, and he told me the title he got refers to a common expression meaning that a child is disrespectful to his parent and from that a famous slogan on T-shirts that says "MY Mom Has an Attitude Problem". In fact, we could find out that it is only a title that is not necessary for the poem. However, we couldn't determine who has an attitude problem in the poem, and don't know why his attitude problem appears. If "MY God Has an Attitude Problem" were the topic of the poem that the poet intends to express, the problem doesn't clearly appear in the stanza. Actually, it is hard to be accessible to the topic of this poem only from the reading.

Therefore, the title as topic is in fact separated from this poem. The same situation occurs on many poems of Bernstein's, such as "Stigma", "Mao Tse Tung Wore Khakis", "All the Tea in China", "The Inevitable Flow of Material Things through the Pores of the Years", and poems on month such as "March", "April May". We could see from the reading that the titles of those poems are not quite often relevant to the topics. In fact, the title serves as a line of the poem, but not the topics at all. We thus can conclude that there are no clear subjects for many poems of Bernstein's, and "MY God Has an Attitude Problem" is one of them.

Though "MY God Has an Attitude Problem" is an instance of being imperfectly known or difficult to understand, there's very little doubt in my mind that this is a true poem full of ambiguities. There is no subject of this poem for discussion or analysis. If there is no clear subject of the poem "MY God Has an Attitude Problem", what on earth does this poem mean? Is it a lyric one, philosophical one, ambitious one or one we call as a poem? The conclusion only depends on our respective interpretation.

Concerning the meaning of this poem, we each have a different point of view from our reading. The distinction of understanding and interpretation exists greatly especially when it is translated into Chinese. Here is a Chinese translation taken literally from English version but clearly there is considerable variability in two versions:

作为夹板	Being splints
一直僵硬	it being hard
一种存在	being Being
继续作为	going on being
存在	Being
要面对面	being face to
面对自我	face with Itself
促使它的	rendering Its
租赁的答复者	rent replicants
无所寄托	rootless
在失禁中	writhing in
扭曲挣扎	incontinence

Those scholars who don't know both English and Chinese could not get idea of the difference of the above version in Chinese translation. For example, the translation of the title is quite different from the English one. Besides, some key words in the poem are also different from the original. The word "splints" is another example. In the above translation, it is understood as mechanical device in medicine to fix the position of a joint or fractured limb, and it is also as "Being" in the poem. Therefore, the poem is beyond our comprehension while Chinese version is read by Chinese readers from Chinese translation. Is it about ailment or wound or experience in hospital? We can't determine from Chinese translation. However, it is not surprising in divergence of understanding as the different reading is the basic feature of language poetry.

It is the distinctive feature of polysmy that we could get another Chinese translation of this language poetry. I translate it from my understanding into Chinese as the other version as below:

1. Being splints	存在已经碎裂
2. it being hard	很难说它
3. being Being	还是存在
4. going on being	它还得是
5. Being	存在
6. being face to	要面对面地
7. face with Itself	看着自己
8. rendering Its	处理自己的
9. rent replicants	被撕裂成的碎片
10. rootless	无限地
11. writhing in	痛苦挣扎
12. incontinence	难以自制

From the above, we find it is still difficult to understand in Chinese what the poem means. That is to say, it is hard to get clear meaning of this language poem by translation because of different interpretations in Chinese. The reason lies in how to interpret this poem. In order to understand this poem, we could try reconstructing it for a new version as below:

1. Being splints
2. so it is hard
3. to be Being
4. It is going on to be
5. Being
6. and Being must face to
7. face with Itself
8. which is rendering Its
9. tom replicants
10. It is rootless
11. and writhing in
12. incontinence

A firm reconstruction it seems that we could approach to the meaning of the poem though it couldn't be the only apprehension by any manner of means. From the key words in the poem such as "Being" "splints" "Itself" "replicants" "writhing" and "incontinence" we have a basic idea of what the poem could be possible—about Being and interpretation of Being. Among the above key words "Being" is in fact a philosophical focus or a code of all the information in the poem. Therefore to understand this poem is to decode the codes of the lines of it and the Being is the key.

What is "Being"? To the poet "Being here refers to the cosmic Being as in existentialism (or in particular Heidegger), that is being as existence."^① We also could take it as an existing thing or things. The things come from Being or from its splinting or replicants. From the being and its splinting we could conclude the dialectic topic and idea of this poem, and dialectic understanding of Being by the poet himself.

What could be the meaning of those codes consisting of key words? From the decoding of them we could make a synthetical judgment that the poem is related to (author's) philosophical understanding of world and life of people. Being splints and it is hard to be Being because of its splinting. In spite of that it is going to be Being but it must deal with its splinting and face its tom replicants. It is tom completely into pieces and feels bitter anguish. As Being splints it causes the anxiety, uneasiness, mental or emotional unbalance or disorder which could be the author's or everyone's.

Though language poetry is always composed without any norms of meter, there is an obvious rhythm in "MY God Has an Attitude Problem". It is an unrhymed verse without a consistent metrical pattern, but it still reads well. Just as what Leevi Lehto says, it could call "a certain peculiarly Bemsteinian sound" (Lehto 22).

Certainly we can't scan it and analyze its meter, rhythm and rhyme in conventional way. Nevertheless we could find some features of poetic form such as visual representation of its metrical pattern and elements of its meter. Possibly my understanding of the meter of this poem is only a first try but we should do.

However it is necessary to explore the characteristics and laws of its meter for understanding of its poetic form. After we scan this poem, we can analyze the meter in unconventional way and reconstruct its meter. Now let's determine which syllable is an accent or unaccent by reading which is the basis for analysis. In fact we could feel the strong rhythm of the poem from the read-

ing, which I will analyse later.

In the scansion, the slash (/) stands for an accented syllable and (x) for an unaccented one. After scansion, the pattern of accented and unaccented syllables of the poem can be found as below:

1. Being splits	1. / x /
2. it being hard	2. x / x /
3. being Being	3. / x / x
4. going on being	4. / x x / x
5. Being	5. / x
6. being face to	6. / x / x
7. face with Itself	7. / x x /
8. rendering Its	8. / x x /
9. rent replicants	9. / / x /
10. rootless	10. / x
11. writhing in	11. / x /
12. incontinence	12. x / x /

We could rearrange the metrical marks to get its pattern as below:

1. Being splits	/ x /
2. it being hard	x / x /
3. being Being	/ x / x
4. going on being	/ x x / x
5. Being	/ x
6. being face to	/ x / x
7. face with Itself	/ x x /
8. rendering Its	/ x x /
9. rent replicants	/ / x /
10. rootless	/ x
11. writhing in	/ x /
12. incontinence	x / x /

From the above table, we could discover the basic law governing the meter of all the lines of the poem, which is a trisyllabic metrical foot with an unaccented or short syllable between two ac-

cented or long syllables. This meter is amphimacer, the basic meter of this short poem. Meanwhile, there is a secondary meter in it which is choriambic meter, a metrical foot consisting of a trochee followed by an iamb, much used in Greek and Latin poetry. It is a kind of foot used in lyric poetry with two unstressed syllables flanked by the two rhythmic stresses marking the first and last syllables of the foot. However, it is this meter used in the poem that forms the basic metrical feature of its art.

For the visual perceptual convenience, I omit the marks of scratch comma and x, but highlight accented syllables in black for metrical analysis. The following is the highlighted table after the scansion.

1.	Being splits
2.	it being hard
3.	being Being
4.	going on being
5.	Being
6.	being face to
7.	face with Itself
8.	rendering Its
9.	rent replicants
10.	rootless
11.	writhing in
12.	incontinence

From the above, the regular accent and unaccented syllables are clearly in the lines which lead us to the amphimacer of meter with choriambic meter. Therefore, we could conclude that the meter of this poem is the amphimacer and choriambic.

Certainly, the meter is not regular. For example, one extra syllable is added at the beginning of line 9 and 12, while one accented syllable is missing from the end of regular amphimacer line 5 and 10. Apart from these, the variety of accents in lines will not change the amphimacer with choriambic meter as basic one.

Obviously, the lines of some poems by Bernstein could be scanned and analysed by the law of meter, though they are freely aimlessly fractured and deranged when he wrote them. Then, what could the rhyme of "MY God Has an Attitude Problem" be? Compared to its meaning, the rhyme is much easier to determine. As long as we read this poem, we could clearly find that there is basic law of a repetition of identical or similar sounds in most lines or the whole poem, though it doesn't appear in the end of the line. This is its rhyme. What rhyme is this? I will try to conclude some rhyme scheme.

If we carefully analyze this poem, we could find that there are several kinds of rhymes in it. The first kind is alliteration which consists of consonants "[h]" and "[j]" (Fig. 1).

1. Being splints
2. it being hard
3. being Being
4. going on being
5. Being
6. being face to
7. face with Itself
8. rendering Its
9. rent replicants
10. rootless
11. writhing in
12. incontinence

Generally speaking, alliteration, which is a frequently used poetic device, is repetition of consonant sounds in two or more neighbouring words or syllables in a line. It is also widely used in Bernstein's poems, though he never intends to compose his poems according to any metrical rule. In this poem, the consonant [b] is used as alliteration from the first line to the sixth line, and [f] from the eighth line to the twelfth line. Nevertheless, the distinctive feature of his alliteration does not only appear in one line but also goes through several lines as a thread.

The second kind is consonance consisting of [nts], [ng], [c] and [ts] which appears in the end of lines (Fig. 2).

1. Being splints
2. It being hard
3. being Being
4. going on being
5. Being
6. being face to
7. face with Itself
8. rendering Its
9. rent replicants
10. rootless
11. writhing in
12. incontinence

The consonance used in the poem is the repetition of consonants or consonant patterns as a rhyming device in one line or in several lines. From the third line to the sixth line, [ng] appearing in the end of words is consonant rhyme.

The third one is internal rhyme. It is also called middle rhyme occurring within the line. The rhyme may be with words within the line but not at the line end or with a word at the line end and a word within the line. In the poem the internal rhyme consisting of consonants in a line such as "incontinence" could be called the internal consonance. Internal rhyme is widely used as a poetic device unintentionally by Bemstein when he is composing poems, which is helpful to artistic quality of Language Poetry. If we carefully scan "MY God Has an Attitude Problem," we could find another kind of internal rhyme: internal double rhyme consisting of the key word "being." Being repeats its sound in the poem and forms internal rhyme, but it is not a good rhyme because there is not any change in sound, spelling or meaning.

In the foreword of Finnish Anthology of Poems and Essays by Bemstein, Leevi Lehto brilliantly sums up his view of meter and says: "Voice and sound, as such even though (or rather because) an attraction to unexpected or difficult to pronounce sound combination is a constant feature of Bemstein's prosody. I wouldn't hesitate to speak, at the level of the work, of a certain peculiarly Bemsteinian sound" (Lehto 22). From the analysis of the meaning of the poem and the scansion of its meter and rhyme, we find that "MY God Has an Attitude Problem" by Bemstein could be understood and paraphrased, though it is not exactly done. The poem is really hard to understand, and I think his other poems are also hard work for readers, but we could approach to language poetry by him. Kevin McGuirk says: "Bemstein's role has been, like others, but recently more than others, not just that of a poet (i.e. someone who writes poems) but as a cultural worker. It is because of his cultural work that his is the name most closely associated with Language poetry" (McGuirk 207). I agree with him.

【Notes】

- ① See Charles Bemstein, Email to Nie Zhenzhao, 15 July 2007.

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