

第2卷 第2期

Vol.2, No.2

主 管：上海市教育委员会

Governing Unit: Shanghai Municipal Education Committee

主 办：上海师范大学 复旦大学出版社

Hosts: Shanghai Normal University (SHNU)

Fudan University Press

承 办：国家重点学科——比较文学与世界文学研究中心

Sponsor: National Key Discipline of Comparative Literature  
and World Literature at SHNU

主 编：刘耘华 姚 申

Editors-in-Chief: LIU Yunhua YAO Shen

编 辑：《国际比较文学（中英文）》编辑部

Editorial Department: *International Comparative Literature* Editorial Office

地 址：上海市桂林路100号，200234

Address: No. 100, Guilin Road, Shanghai, 200234

# 国际比较文学 2019.2

## International Comparative Literature

出 版：复旦大学出版社

Publisher: Fudan University Press

地 址：上海市国权路579号，200433

Address: No. 579, Guoquan Road, Shanghai, 200433

印 刷：上海师范大学印刷厂

Printing Unit: Shanghai Normal University Printing Factory

国内发行：上海市报刊发行局

Domestic Distributor: Shanghai Newspaper  
and Journal Distribution Bureau

国外发行：中国国际图书贸易总公司

Overseas Distributor: China International  
Book Trading Corporation

出版日期：2019年5月28日

Publication Date: May 28, 2019

ISSN 2096-4897

CN 31-2148/I

邮发代号：4-953

国内定价：50.00元



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# 2019 02

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论 文



International  
Comparative  
Literature



## The Negative Economy of Nothingness in Charles Bernstein's Poetics\*

### 查尔斯·伯恩斯坦诗学中虚无的否定经济

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**Abstract:** In his book *Pitch of Poetry*, Charles Bernstein writes that his motto has long been Emily Dickinson's "Don't you know that 'No' is the wildest word we consign to Language?", indicating that his poetry resonates with the paradoxical meanings of "No" endowed by Dickinson. Bernstein's poetry has a negative economy which is often simply interpreted as purely negative and misinterpreted. Zen and Taoism spread to America in the 1950s. Dr. D. T. Suzuki states that nothingness in Zen denotes not only negativity but also multiple possibilities. Similarly, in Taoism, nothingness is called the Tao, which can engender multiple particular entities and fullness in the universe. Bernstein claims that nothingness serves as a major and pivotal theme in his poetics. Nothingness in Zen-Taoism plays an indispensable role in understanding fully Bernstein's poetics and aesthetics. By interpreting some of Bernstein's representative poems, I argue that the poetic nothingness in Bernstein's poetry serves as not only an elegiac and negative force but also a positive force and a void for "pataquerical struggles" to be engendered in order to make poetics and aesthetics expand to the infinity. Moreover, Bernstein's poetic nothingness is the amalgamation of American literary tradition, American post-conceptual ideas, as well as the nothingness in Zen-Taoism. What is the most significant is that the poetic nothingness in Bernstein's poetry expands the notion of "art for art's sake" and showcases Bernstein's transcendence of the paradox of art.

**Key Words:** Charles Bernstein; nothingness; American poetry; Zen-Taoism; post-conceptual poetry

**Notes on Author:** FENG Yi, associate professor in Foreign Studies College, Northeastern University, P.R. China. Her research interests include American literature and American poetry.

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\* Submitted Date: Oct. 24, 2018; Accepted Date: Dec. 26, 2018.

The idea of nothingness recurs in Charles Bernstein's poetry, which provides a paramount impetus in perceiving his poetics and aesthetics. Through the notion of nothingness or emptiness, Bernstein resolves to showcase that this word "No" has not only a single negative meaning but also profound, multiple and sophisticated representations and connotations. Nothingness generally is regarded as equal to no meaning and being agnostic in traditional Western Philosophy. For instance, Hegel puts emphasis on "being" and thinks that "nothingness" is a denial to the existence of the world in his *Lecture of the History of Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup> Yet, nothingness is essential and indispensable in Zen and Taoism.

In an interview, Bernstein indicates that it is a well-known fact that Chinese classical poetry and philosophy have influenced profoundly American poetry from the 19th century onward.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, he says that he is "devoted habitué" of every show of Chinese calligraphy and poetry/painting in New York and has been affected by them.<sup>3</sup> It was not until 1968 that Bernstein began to read the works on Zen Buddhism by Dr. Suzuki who is a Japanese Zen Buddhism scholar and teacher, and *Tao Te Jing*《道德经》(The Book of the Way) by Lao Tzu. The influence of Zen and Taoism is subtly and implicitly demonstrated in his poetics. What is worth noting is that in traditional Chinese philosophy, Taoism and Zen have obvious distinctions. The origin of Zen can be traced back to Ancient India in 6 BCE as a life-long practice of Buddhism, while Zen in China can be regarded as a unique pattern of thinking. After Zen was spread to China from India, Zen has been greatly influenced by Taoism. Zen absorbed the notion of "nothingness" and "emptiness" in Taoism. To a large extent, Zen and Taoism influenced each other, and jointly form the philosophy of Zen-Taoism, a fundamental and pivotal part in Chinese culture and philosophy. The amalgamation of Zen and Taoism are the reasons why American Zen poets, such as Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, don't show the distinctions between the two in their poetry. Rather than borrowing from traditional Chinese philosophical thoughts, Bernstein's poetry reveals the amalgamation of American post-conceptualism and Zen-Taoism. In this paper, I argue that the idea of nothingness (emptiness or blank) has three connotations in Bernstein's poetics. First, nothingness plays a significant role as an elegiac force. Nothingness represents the demise of aesthetics and poetics, and it shows Bernstein's resolve to depart from "the official verse culture."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, nothingness is a void of artistic renovation and revival, in which "pataquerical struggles"<sup>5</sup> is engendered to make "new forms of correctness"

<sup>1</sup> 毛宣国:《中国古代“无”的哲学美学智慧及启示》,《求索》2006年第4期,第127页。[MAO Xuanguo, "Zhongguo gudai 'Wu' de zhexue meixue zhihui jiqishi" (The Philosophical and Aesthetic Wisdom and Insights in Chinese Traditional "Nothingness"), *Qiusuo (Seeker)* 4 (2006): 127.]

<sup>2</sup> Charles Bernstein, interview by NIE Zhenzhao, *Foreign Literature Studies* 2 (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Official verse culture is strongly challenged and criticized in *Pitch of Poetry*. As Bernstein claims in *Pitch of Poetry*, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine, edited by Bernstein and Bruce Andrews is a site of conversation which was radically distinct from the values of the official verse culture of the time, not only in terms of what poetry is, what it does, and how it works, but also in terms of the commitment to group and community formation through conversation. Bernstein claims that together with his poetry comrades such as Bruce Andrews, Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe among others, he has dissatisfactions with the official verse culture of the 1970s and early 1980s, with its blandness and conformity, and with its high-handed rejection of the historical and contemporary particulars in poetry that most motivated language poets to write. There are more discussion on American official verse culture in his interview with Daniel Benjamin in *Chicago Weekly* and the chapter of Bent Studies in *Pitch of Poetry*. See Charles Bernstein, *Pitch of Poetry* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 61.

<sup>5</sup> In "Expanded Field of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" in *Pitch of Poetry*, "the pataquerical" is defined and talked about. The word "Pataquerical" is coined by Bernstein "by combining inquiry with 'pataphysics,' French proto-modernist Alfred Jarry's 'science' of exceptions, imaginary solutions and swerves." "The Pataquerical Imagination: Midrashic Antinomianism and the Promise of Bent Studies" in *Pitch of Poetry* further discusses the pataquerical struggle.



take the place of “the old ones.”<sup>6</sup> Last but not the least, Bernstein’s poetics is an amalgamation of American post-conceptual ideas and the nothingness in Zen-Taoism. Through this achievement, Bernstein not only rebels against the authority of “the official verse culture,” but also to a large extent, combines both the intrinsic and ulterior values of art with the reverse power of nothingness to expand and enrich the debatable “Art for art’s sake” and go beyond it.

## I: Nothingness in Zen-Taoism and Bernstein’s Poetics

Zen is known and practiced in the US through the teaching of Dr. D. T. Suzuki. He “is widely known as an exponent of Zen in the West” and “it was Suzuki who was responsible for making Zen penetrate into various aspects of Western learning and culture.”<sup>7</sup> Fader claims that D. T. Suzuki was a towering figure during the period of the discovery of Buddhism and Zen in the West. In fact, he is described as the man who introduced Zen to the West to rehearse a truism.<sup>8</sup> In his collected works, Suzuki discusses and interprets the wisdom of Emptiness. “All the moral values and social practice come out of this life of suchness which is Emptiness,” writes Suzuki.<sup>9</sup> In his sense, it is only in a heart thoroughly cleansed of all impurities issuing from “Knowledge,” which we acquired by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree that the state of Emptiness can be achieved. He claims that the truth of Emptiness is achieved as zero state which doesn’t equal to a mathematical symbol but the infinite storehouse or womb of all possible values. Hence, “Emptiness is not sheer emptiness or passivity or Innocence. It is and at the same time it is not. It is being; it is becoming,”<sup>10</sup> and it leads to the multiplicity of possibilities and openness. Additionally, Zen can be traced back to Chinese Taoism. In Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Jing*, Emptiness or nothingness is also of the most significance.

*Tao Te Jing* says: “The Tao is empty, and when it is made use of, it still does not become full. What an abyss! It resembles the ancestor of the ten thousand things.”<sup>11</sup> Hegel has a good interpretation of Taoism. In his lectures, he indicates that “To the Chinese what is the highest, the origin of things, is nothingness, emptiness, the altogether undetermined, the abstract universal, and this is also called Tao.”<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the essence of Taoism, namely the nothingness or emptiness, is learned and interpreted precisely by Hegel, who later claims the demise of philosophy and art in the Western world. Hans-Georg Moeller argues that the Tao is permanent and empty but its emptiness cannot be used up since it is like a gate which does not lose its efficacy when used.<sup>13</sup> “Ten thousand things” in *Tao Te Jing* appears frequently to mean “all the kind of beings in the world,” namely infinity and multiplicity in the Nothingness of Zen. As is manifested, the idea of Nothingness in Taoism also means a negative dialectics with its connotation of both

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>7</sup> Masao Abe and John Weatherhill, “Editor’s Note,” in *A Zen Life: D. T. Suzuki Remembered*, eds. Masao Abe and John Weatherhill (Boston: Weatherhill, 1986), XV.

<sup>8</sup> L. A. Fader, “D. T. Suzuki’s Contribution to the West,” in *A Zen Life: D. T. Suzuki Remembered*, eds. Masao Abe and John Weatherhill (Boston: Weatherhill, 1986), 95.

<sup>9</sup> D. T. Suzuki, “Wisdom in Emptiness,” in *Selected Works of D. T. Suzuki*, Volume III, eds. Jeff Wilson and Tomoe Moriya (California: University of California Press, 2016), 205.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>11</sup> Hans-Georg Moeller and Laozi, *Taodejing (Laozi): A Complete Translation and Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2007), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Chung-yuan Chang, *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy Art and Poetry* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1970), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Moeller and Laozi, *Taodejing (Laozi): A Complete Translation and Commentary*, 10.

negativity and positivity. Mario Wenning also argues that nothingness (emptiness, or *wu* 无 in Chinese) means not being there and it has at least three different senses. Nothingness refers to the empty part of an object; the state before or after something exist; and most importantly, the enabling principle of the origination of the multiple particular entities as well as actions in the world.<sup>14</sup>

The Way, or *tao* 道 in Chinese, is operated in the principle of *Yin* and *Yang*. In Taoism, "Heaven follows the Tao as a rule. The Tao follows its self-so as a rule"<sup>15</sup> and the Tao is Gate of multiple subtleties.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in both Zen and Taoism, emptiness or nothingness is not sheer negative but denotes the infinity and the multiplicity.

In *Pitch of Poetry*, Bernstein responds to a question on the negative economy in his poetics by interpreting his understanding on Dickinson's poem: "Nothing is the force / That renovates the World." (*Pitch of Poetry*, 276) He deciphers Dickinson's nothingness by saying that:

I read Dickinson's poem as close to negative dialectics. Nothing in the sense of not one thing: variants around a blank center. To be told about nothing is to come face to face with loss, despair, grief: the irreparable. Nothing repairs the world. Renovates is something else again: making new again, making new now. The revolution of the word is the force of nothing. (*Pitch of Poetry*, 278)

He further asserts that his motto has long been Dickinson's "Don't you know that 'No' is the wildest word we consign to Language?" (*Pitch of Poetry*, 278), indicating that his poetry resonates with Dickinson's instinctive but paradoxical answer "No" in the reply to her love, Judge Otis Lord. Dickinson successfully endows the word "No" or "Nothing" with multiple possibilities by claiming it with the hybrid possibilities and she denies the solely negative meaning of the word. Moreover, she writes to her aunt in her letter<sup>17</sup> "Saying nothing... sometimes says the most," in which she chooses to "articulate the inadequacy of words for the situation — or more precisely, the efficacy of choosing not to speak."<sup>18</sup> In other words, for Dickinson, no or nothing has two connotations. For one thing, it showcases the inadequacy and inefficacy of language and expresses the impossibility of language; for another, "no" or "nothing" is also heralded with more than its superficial meanings, designating the variety of possibilities behind its superficiality. "Variants around a blank center" makes a perfect resemblance of the symbol of Taoism which depicts the dynamic transformation of *Yin* and *Yang*, representing the transformation between emptiness and fullness, and resulting in the origination of multiplicity and hybridity. I would argue that Bernstein indicates that nothingness in Dickinson's poetics is a force that exerts itself in a renovation of poetics and aesthetics, which resonates with nothingness in Zen and Taoism. It is a force of negativity but also simultaneously a positive impetus of multiple possibilities and openness. "It makes new" and "repairs the world" by renovating, which just reverberates with Emptiness in Zen and Taoism generating fullness, and non-presence originating presence, and in Zen nothingness denoting "being and becoming." In this sense, the negative economy in Bernstein's motto is not

<sup>14</sup> Mario Menning, "Kant and Taoism on Nothingness," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38, no. 4 (2011): 556.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>17</sup> Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), 408.

<sup>18</sup> Karen Dandurand, "Saying nothing...sometimes says the Most," in *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters: Critical Essays*, eds. Jane Donahue Eberwein and Cindy MacKenzie (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 80.

so much a solely negative economy but also a positive economy. Consciously or unconsciously, Bernstein resonates with the paradox of nothingness in Taoism and Zen, though it is not exactly the same as in Zen as he himself claims. (*Pitch of Poetry*, 278)

What is noteworthy is that Bernstein illustrates his idea on bent studies in his latest book *Pitch of Poetry*, which embodies thoroughly his poetic principle. Rooted in the poetic principle and aesthetics of Dickinson, Poe, Emerson and Blake among others, bent studies refers to a study with an aim to “move beyond the ‘experimental’ to the untried, necessary, newly forming, provisional, inventive,” rejecting the historical avant-garde’s high culture and also departing from “the official verse culture” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 297) of poetic invention. Bernstein argues that “the history of all hitherto existing poetry is the history of the pataquerical struggle” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 295), with the normal versus the perverse, the highbred rivaling the vernacular and the metered competing the unmetered and so forth. The poetics of assimilation and accommodation, argued Bernstein, which is very much in accordance with traditional values of American poetry and poetry criticism of the Cold War essentially, kills aesthetic challenges, erases “contradiction” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 297), “difference” or “dialectic” and results in a poetry of “capitulation,” a compromise, and leads to the hegemony in poetics and aesthetics. What bent studies do is to eliminate the dominant normalcy by shedding light on the poetic Other in order to establish “new hybrids, new conditions of normalcy, new forms of correctness in the place of the old ones” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 295). I would argue that for Bernstein, American poetics and aesthetics should not be permanent but adjusting constantly with multiple recalculations, amendments and refinement.

What is significant is that bent studies have a close relationship with the spirit of Nothingness in Zen and Taoism. Wei-Lim Yip argues that the most fundamental spiritual pursuit of Taoism is to call in question the internalized conventions, and the institutionalization of political system and language, so that people can jump out of the constraints of various limitations (such as social rankings and hierarchy) to reach the state of no-self.<sup>19</sup> The struggles for new possibilities for freedom from political and artistic restrictions are the common ground for Taoism and the pataquerical struggles in bent studies.

What is more, the poetic principle of Bernstein has its genesis in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of ordinary language in multiple perspectives, which also resonates Taoism’s paradox of nothingness. Bernstein admits that Wittgenstein is fundamental to him as a poet of the pataquerulous. Wittgenstein’s famous rabbit/duck graph shows vividly Bernstein’s aesthetic paradigm. Acutely and markedly, Wittgenstein captures the crucial moments when ordinary language appears different and goes from unremarkable to odd with the familiar become “alienated or skeptical” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 317). The perceived issue of language which is assumed to be perceived, however, is given birth to the interpretation of multiple “dialogic” possibilities and openness in Wittgenstein’s philosophy, in which Bernstein finds his pataquerulous endeavor a grand stage for performance. Wittgenstein regards the inability to see things without contextual cues as not having “perfect pitch” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 320) or dependence of meaning in an ordinary feature of language or frames as “stigma” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 310). Similarly, Bernstein’s poetry is to debunk the fixed stigmas and make other possibilities occur and happen to find the lost or unheard pitch of poetry. Interestingly, the transformation between the ordinary and the alienated, as well as the familiar and the unfamiliar, resembles the transformation of the emptiness and fullness in Taoism and Zen. In the commentary on Chapter one of *Tao Te Jing*, Moeller quotes Wittgenstein’s

<sup>19</sup> 叶维廉：《道家美学与西方文化》，北京：北京大学出版社，2002年，第2页。[ YIP Wai-Lim, *Daojia meixue yu xifang wenhua* (Daoism Aesthetics and Western Culture), Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2002, 2. ]

rabbit/duck graph to illustrate the paradox of the Tao, the emptiness, which resonates with Wittgenstein's change of perspective. The linguistic parallel is essentially the same as the lines used for drawing the duck or the rabbit, Moeller argued, as we can interpret the same structure differently by reversing the front and the back.<sup>20</sup> By this, Moeller asserts that the paradox of the Tao is essentially the same as the change of perspectives in Wittgenstein's philosophy on language. It is noted that Bernstein intends to make the fixed conventional frame/stigma alienated to render it strange and unfamiliar, so that new frames may emerge and expand the paradigm of poetics and aesthetics. This is closely linked to the truth of nothingness in Zen and Taoism.

## II: Nothingness as a Negative and Paradoxical Force

As in either Zen or Taoism, nothingness is empty and negative on the one hand, positive on the other, this idea of nothingness in Bernstein's poetics firstly brings strong negative connotations, which aims at interrogating the aesthetics and poetics.

In the poem "Recalculating," it says: "[p]oetry should be silent, unready, invisible, inconceivable. The true poem can never be written or heard,"<sup>21</sup> which articulates a strong negativity of the current poetry and poetics. Additionally, "beauty lies, I have always thought; a wonderful deception while it lasts,"<sup>22</sup> which seemingly implies that aesthetics deceives people due to its assumed everlasting feature and it dies for its ephemerality. In the poem "The Truth in Pudding," it says: "A thing of beauty is annoyed forever,"<sup>23</sup> to estrange the aesthetics of classical Romantics by parodying Keats' line "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever" from "Endymion." Bernstein implicitly criticizes "the official verse culture" and indicates wittily his dissatisfaction with romantic aesthetics and "the poetics of assimilation and accommodation." The poem goes on and seems to indicate that "the official-verse culture" dominates aesthetics and poetics which is like "these haunted and haunting" photographs of Emma,<sup>24</sup> presenting her superficially but deviating from the reality of her death. A white lie of invalid aesthetics or being less beauty, the photograph of Emma offers a powerful metaphor; When discussing this poem on Emma, Hazel Smith contends that Bernstein's interjections about Emma are personal and yet diffused within a broader context, which are realized within a disjunctive, discursive approach to writing that is familiar from his previous oeuvre.<sup>25</sup> The metaphor can be regarded as a comparison between looking at Emma's photos after her death by a grievous father and appreciating art and poetry within "the official verse culture." Nothingness represented by invalid aesthetics may show a father's grief, anger, and elegy for his lost daughter, but more importantly, it is a negative articulation to express the dissatisfaction to "the official verse culture" in a broader sense in order to recalculate and to look for the exact pitch of poetry. Bernstein reveals the wrongness of current aesthetics and poetics in "The Truth in Pudding": "I have several names for what went wrong: tone constrained, ending boned, syntax pulled thin over box-like frame, then teaspoon used for

<sup>20</sup> Moeller and Laozi, *Taodejing (Laozi): A Complete Translation and Commentary*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Recalculating* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 174.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Emma Bee Bernstein (1985—2008) was a photographer and visual artist. She was born in New York City to Charles Bernstein and Susan Bee. She committed suicide in 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Hazel Smith, "Experimental Confessionalism: The Personal Turn in American Post-Conceptual Poetry," in *Cordite Poetry Review*, online ed., 2018,

<http://cordite.org.ar/essays/experimental-confessionalism/2/>, [February 2, 2019].

stirring in feeling.”<sup>26</sup> For the purpose of recalculating, he writes “poetry should be the silent, the unread, the invisible, and the inconceivable.”<sup>27</sup> Namely, the non-present is poised, suspended, and flaunted for the need of recalculating. Furthermore, only by striking against the present atmosphere in poetry and aesthetics, can new normalcy in poetry be achieved. As Bernstein points out, “the field around L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E as a contemporary constellation aims at opening up different reading and writing practices with the most powerful dynamics was revisionist, pushing for a history of poetry that went against the dominant one” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 285). The notion of nothingness is in accordance with this powerful and dynamic contemporary poetry writing, and of the most crucial dynamics in Bernstein’s language poetry.

Nothingness is not only negative but also a positive power, a reverse and returning force which can bring multiplicity of possibilities. In the poem “Great Moments in Taches Blanches,”<sup>28</sup> blank spots or nothingness is the motif of the poem and nothingness is given a great significance. The poem is Bernstein’s response to Emmanuel Hocquard’s “blank spots” game in 1997. In *Le Gam*, Hocquard gives comments on the French translation of contemporary American poetry, and he writes: “despite my efforts, I couldn’t follow this idea, this image, to the end. Language itself, it seems to me, acknowledges its incapacity to describe such a nothing, such a void, as if we could only speak of what is full and functional.”<sup>29</sup> Hocquard acknowledges that the “a nothing” in language exists and claims that the nothingness in language is a void which cannot be expressed or spoken. However, a new translation of poetry can break the nothingness. I argue that for Hocquard, poetry writing is like an expedition to a world known on a well-designated map with a clear destination, whereas the foreign language translators, through their translations, seem to break the thousand years’ frozen land in this expedition to lancinate “rips” or “holes” or “blank spots” on this colored map so as to offer the blankness of new possibilities for language. “Blank spots” mean new possibilities and hybridity outside of the designated convention and aesthetics in poetry. What is more, Hocquard is also famous for his poetics of negative modernity, which “provides impetus for artistic engagements that operate outside of accepted dichotomous models of poetry.”<sup>30</sup> Negative modernity “signals multiple stagings of language that are associated with a certain era but are not limited to any one historical moment.”<sup>31</sup> Hence, resonating with the notion of nothingness in Zen-Taoism, in the sense of Hocquard’s negative modernity, negativity is endowed with multiple possibilities with the poet’s “understanding of negative modernity informed by the awareness of language ‘in motion’.”<sup>32</sup> The poem “Great Moments in Taches Blanches” enumerates all the possibilities of blankness in everyday life and ordinary language. Firstly, the poem stresses that nothingness is not totally nothingness but also multiple implications as well. For instance, Line 6 and Line 7, “Don’t Blink/Blink,” exemplify the uncertainty and ambiguity of language in sequence movement. So does Line 8, “She shot me point blank. / She got me at point blank range. / I got shot at point blank range.” It plays with the intriguing and changing meanings of “point

<sup>26</sup> Bernstein, *Recalculating*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>28</sup> Bernstein, *Recalculating*, 95. For a commentary on this poem given by Franklin Winslow, please visit this site: *Poem of the Month (blog)*, WordPress, <https://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/poemofthemonth/2012/11/05/great-moments-in-taches-blanches-by-charles-bernstein/>, [January 29, 2019].

<sup>29</sup> Glenn W. Fetzer, *Emmanuel Hocquard and the Poetics of Negative Modernity* (Alabama: Birmingham, Summa Publication, Inc., 2004), 136.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.



blank.” In particular, Line 14 is a drawing of a blank rectangular with this line “DRAWING A BLANK IT’S NO LONGER BLANK” following it.<sup>33</sup> This illustrates that the transformation of nothingness and fullness to arouse people’s consciousness that blank or nothingness is paradoxical and negatively dialectical. The poem goes on to intensify the significance of blank in everyday life and shows there are more meanings of blankness than it seems. Finally, Lines 29, 20 and 31 bring the poem back to the issue of translation poetry and indicate that blank spots assert multiplicity and hybridity rather than emptiness, resonating with what is suggested by Hocquard. “All problems of language are problems of translation. / ‘Running on empty.’ / [...] Waldrop’s paradox: The only one who can judge the translation knows both languages and so can’t judge it.”<sup>34</sup> These lines give “blank spots” or “rip” or “hole” in Hocquard’s words created by translation multiple possibilities. “31. DU CALME: / Poetry makes nothing happen” / (Rogelio Lopez Cuenca) / Poetry takes nothing actually / 31. / 31.” conclude the poem, with “poetry makes nothing happen” quoting W. H. Auden. But definitely, nothing here means something. The last two lines are empty lines without words, which significantly embodies Bernstein’s desire to explore “blank spots” / nothingness of the non-designated, the unclaimed, the undiscovered or the unexplored in poetry writing.

Bernstein heralds a sense of positivity and power of action in nothingness in the paradox of nothingness. Through the idea of nothingness, Bernstein wants to arouse “*dun wu* 顿悟,” the transcendental wisdom in the truth of nothingness in Zen and Taoism,<sup>35</sup> which is people’s intuition at the highest level. Only with this transcendental wisdom of nothingness as a negative and positive force can Bernstein’s negativity in poetics be understood as also a positivity in poetics and aesthetics. It is undeniable that loss and negativity can intensify the tension between the past and the contemporary. As he claims, in poetry’s negative economy, loss prolongs intensification. (*Pitch of Poetry*, 314) I argue that through the nothingness in poetics and aesthetics, Bernstein indicates that it is high time that poetry come to the state of nothingness or the emptiness by cleansing all impurities issuing from the current and dominant poetics and aesthetics in an attempt to await the fullness of poetics and aesthetics. He strengthens this poetics of nothingness by claiming “[m]y poems are a prologue to nothing / Nothing without youse” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 279), indicating that there will be a multiplicity of performances in poetry after nothingness and “without youse” can be viewed as negative but also as the opposite of nothing or uselessness. The paradox of nothingness shows the reversal and returning power of it.

### III: Pataquerical Struggle as a Force of Nothingness: Defamiliarization and Alienation

Through defamiliarization and alienation, in his pataquerical struggle, Bernstein endeavors to reverse the dominant official verse culture to “desublime” the familiar and the straight in an attempt to provoke the unfamiliar and the queer to achieve hybridity and multiplicity in aesthetics and poetics. Nothingness in his poem functions as a void in order to rip off the authoritative stigmas to create possibilities and multiplicities in pataquerical practice.

In “The Truth In Pudding,” it says: “Something there is that doesn’t love a frame / that want it laid bare. / before I made a frame I’d ask to know / What I was framing in or framing out. / [...] Does the work frame the interpretation or the interpretation frame the text? Or is a text a work

<sup>33</sup> Bernstein, *Recalculating*, 96.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 97-98.

<sup>35</sup> Moeller and Laozi, *Taodejing (Laozi): A Complete Translation and Commentary*, 209.

without a frame?”<sup>36</sup> The lines interrogate the question of what should be framed, the content of the framed, or the work itself or the interpretation or the text, showing that poems want to be free of frames in order to be fully represented. In *Pitch of Poetry*, Bernstein argues:

[T]he history of all hitherto existing poetry is the history of pataquerical struggle. Normal and perverse, highbred and vernacular, metered and unmetered, versed and averse, national and barbaric, couth and uncouth, proper and wrong, manly and unmanly, [...] stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of poetry at large or in the triumph of the mediocracy. The modern necrohumane society that has sprouted from the ruins of the poetry wars has not done away with these antagonisms. It has established new hybrids, new conditions of normalcy, new forms of correctness in place of the old ones. (*Pitch of Poetry*, 295)

In this quotation, Bernstein points out that “the official verse culture” which is haunted by the legacy of romanticism and the historical avant-garde on the land of “high culture” has become hegemonic in aesthetics and poetics, which have not created an environment for pataquerical struggles but have assimilated and accommodated the other poetics and aesthetics, or “sublimed (absorbed) in perception” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 319), which have formed a poetry of reconciliation and capitulation, turning the “queer” and the “bent” into invisibility in “the official verse culture.” The dominant official verse culture is “the desire for absorption” which is to “overcome, or counter, animalady (alienation or estrangement, irremediation)” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 319). However, “an event, or work of art, like a dream, may elicit multiple—incommensurable or discrepant—frames” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 310) with some frames “sticky,” becoming “stigma” whereas some frames different or queer, becoming visible or losing its functions. Hence, bent studies are to counter the hegemony of “the official verse culture” and historical avant-garde high culture to defamiliarize the stigmas and to estrange the straight and create the possibility of acquiring more new “frames” for poetry and aesthetics. By acquiring new frames for poetry, the familiar can be reconsidered and reviewed, the estranged can emerge under the eyes of public and the “perfect pitch” of poetry can be found.

The poem “How Empty Is My Bread Pudding” says:

I embrace a poetics of bewilderment. I don’t know where I am going and never have, just try to grapple as best as I can with where I am. The poetry that most engages me is not theoretically perspicacious, indeed it has a poetics and an aesthetics but not a predetermining theory; it is multiform and chaotic, always reformulating and regrouping. Competence is less important to me than responsiveness, mobility; ingenuity and invention more important than solutions to predefined problems.<sup>37</sup>

We can deduce that Bernstein looks for a poetics which does not have any limitation or fixed boundary. It seems that it can be as multiform and chaotic as the beginning of the universe, which has reformulating and regrouping and is still transforming, originating and changing constantly. Since it is persistently “reformulating and regrouping,” the poetics has a strong desire of being born again, a desire to go to the origin when there is no hegemony and no dominance with everything in an open, possible and hybrid state, though the desire is not a desire for a returning to

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 83.

the past or going back to some predefined idealized state. Rather, it is a rebirth of new poetics and a defiance to the current poetics of “indefinite cessation.” The poem shows a determined moving forward to a transformation between nothingness and fullness, emptiness and multiplicity in the universe of poetics and aesthetics.

Nothingness provides a void of transformation for verses to be set free from the boundary of the dominant, and it is a battlefield for poetry to perform and to achieve its new aesthetics with freedom or random. In his poetics, Bernstein endeavors to seek for ways for words to be heralded either with a new life, or a unique concept, or an original sound, to perform itself and articulate itself in an unfamiliar and experimental way, which constitutes his unremitting pataquerical struggle on the way of ripping off stigmas to make the most familiar estranged and to reveal the most alienated and the unfamiliar. In the poem “Breathtails,” the “breathtails” means the tails of breath, which helps human beings to create the pronunciations of words with blooming meanings, but also can break words into fragments of letters, and destroy the substance of words. It is regarded to be a door between life and death in the poem, and thus can be considered as the metaphor of the Tao to indicate the fusion and transformation of nothingness and fullness, as well as the emptiness and multiplicity. “Breath is the door / from life to death / on the border of / hearing I hear not hearing / on the border of / death and life / hear not hearing.”<sup>38</sup> These lines create a sense of boundary crossing between life and death with the poet’s breathing in and breathing out. The poem continues to represent multiple practices of breathing such as “breathing in long,” “breathing out long,” “breathing in short,” “breathing out short,” “breathe inconstantly,” “breathe in without hope” and so on, in order to further create a multiple senses of border-crossings between death and life, nothingness and fullness, and emptiness and becoming. Due to the different practices of breathtails, word or sentence uttered are changed, broken, regrouped, and fragmented. The last part of the poem indicates the concept of the poetics in “Breathtails” as the breath is out and in short and long, inconstantly and constant, the words formed by different breath uttered out in different order which provides blooming new meanings in incomplete and split words and new possible perspectives reflected in the readers’ mind, forming an estrangement of the complete words and a pointed desire to re-scan the complete words’ meanings. In the last verse, it says:

Everything we are  
the air, the  
sky that falls  
into our mouths  
the passing of  
days into sobs  
of night belies  
the fact in

the name of  
substance, motion, rhythmic  
erasure, as if  
the food we  
eat replaces the  
fools we are  
the air, the

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 112.



everything we take  
as fake, as

real, gains substance  
in its absence  
the air the  
relocates rhythmic erasure  
into mouth passing  
falls, fooled as we are by  
the care we  
are, or will.

become, in the  
name of sky  
that falls as  
if name of  
night sobs in  
its absence, the  
fool believes, or  
will become, the  
name of, sobs.<sup>39</sup>

It is subtly suggested that the breath of air from people's mouth, the utterance of words, gives meaning and names to different things, the air, the sky and everything, which is fake and belying. The meanings due to the multiple possibilities in word forming and regrouping are blooming after the changing of breath practice, the "substance," "motion" and rhythm of language which we are familiar with become not solely authoritative or familiar but unfamiliar and queer. The poem seems to suggest that while the breath ends and the word is articulated, it loses its clearance and accuracy in both sound and meaning; the lost meaning of the word is compared to the passing of the day which indicates the loss of light / clearance; the meaning of the word is lost as the darkness of the night sobs. I would argue that the sobs of night represent the instability and the ambivalence of language. The word "belie" in the poem is crucially significant, which directs the poem to the lie of the word. In the third stanza, the poem reverses itself as it proposes that everything we take for granted to name with authority can only gain its substance in its absence or nothingness, when the air or the breath relocates rhythmic erasure to rip off the authoritative name of everything. Thus, providing "absence" or nothingness with fullness and presence, the poem retrieves the meaning of the word by denoting nothingness as a positive power. The third stanza, "real, gains substance / in its absence / the air the / relocates rhythmic erasure / into mouths passing" suggest that the new birth of the meaning out of its own absence and the relocation of rhythmic erasure eliminates the old normalcy. What is worth noting is the air we breathe is called *qi* 气 in Chinese, and "Qi," which is to move through the nature and human body, is to blend *Yin* 阴 and *Yang* 阳 to create harmony in *Tao De Jing*.<sup>40</sup> Hence, the poem uses the power of "Qi" to "relocate rhythmic erasure" and to disclose the assumed meanings of words to be ambiguous and deluding. The forgotten and invisible vicious circle of how the other poetics is erased or pressed into "the sobs of night" is displayed when a reader reads to the end of the poem. It resonates with Zen-Taoism in which everything around us is associated with "the air," "Qi."

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 118–19.

<sup>40</sup> Moeller and Laozi, *Taodejing (Laozi): A Complete Translation and Commentary*, 103.

Furthermore, through “Qi” and the notion of “absence,” the deluding fact in the name of “substance, motion, rhythmic” is glimpsed through and the transcendence beyond the existent normalcy can be possibly achieved. The performance of the poem is crucial and significant. It is suggested that only when the stigma is ripped off can the other poetic and aesthetic go under the air and the sky but not remain in the darkness of “the sobs of night.” In this sense, the new meanings and new normalcy is realized in the truth of nothingness and absence.

Another poem “Before You Go” also exemplifies greatly the truth in nothingness by estranging the common notion that meaning is in the presence of words. The poem is about the description of how “I” feel before “you” go, and with the most repetitive phrase “before you go” begin to vanish its presence, into “before you g,” “before you,” “before yo” to “before y” and “b” and “,” the phrase vanishes and is ripped off to be non-present in its performance, but the meaning is born and is further intensified in both its own literary and physical absence, just as Bernstein argues “loss prolong intensification” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 314). Moreover, it also generates openness, gaining and meaning. By this loss of letters, the meaning is emerged and strengthened, and the sticky stigma of language is ripped off gradually and the “openness” is present. As the poem “The Truth in Pudding” says, “If reading poetry is not directed to the goal of deciphering a fixed, graspable meaning, but rather encourages performing and responding to overlapping meanings, then difficulty is transformed from obstacle to opening.”<sup>41</sup> Through performance of nothingness, openness and presence come into being, and with defamiliarization and alienation of the framed familiar, new senses and meanings become possible and alive.

#### IV: Bernstein's Nothingness in the Sense of Conceptual and Post-Conceptual Art

Although the truth of nothingness in Zen-Taoism in Bernstein's poetics is rooted and plays a significant role, his poetics also has its profound Americanness. As discussed above, when talking about his poetic principle, Bernstein quotes many American poets, such as Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickson and Ralph Waldo Emerson. As the poem “How Empty is My Bread Pudding” says,

[T]he question for American poetry—and it has been a question for a long time—is what are the terms of the common? Emerson imagines an America that is in process, where the commonness is an aspiration, not something that is a given social fact. Langston Hughes says we are a ‘people in transition.’ The ‘point’ is not to hurry through this going because we never arrive. Get used to it! Perhaps this is what we have in common, the particularities that we cultivate within the same space: our simultaneous presence to, and difference from, one another. [...] I want a poetry that incorporates those interruptions without losing its own newly foundering rhythms.<sup>42</sup>

Hybridity and multiplicity as social and cultural characteristics are deeply imprinted in American society and culture, and as a result, the question of American poetry composed by people from this diverse culture is naturally with variety and multiplicity. One can understand the nothingness which creates hybridity and multiplicity in poetic pataquerical struggles.

Moreover, I argue that Bernstein's nothingness also shows the nature of conceptual and post-

<sup>41</sup> Bernstein, *Recalculating*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

conceptual art, though language poetry in general has been regarded as post-structuralism. Hazel Smith in her essay on post-conceptual poetry compares Charles's poetry with Felix Bernstein's<sup>43</sup> post-conceptual poetry and states that "Felix does the only thing he can do, which is to topple some of language poetry's verities while also displaying continuity with them."<sup>44</sup> The comparison between Charles and Felix, father and son, language poetry and post-conceptual poetry, already show the affinity and the genealogy of language poetry and post-conceptual poetry. Elisabeth Schellekens argues that one aspect of conceptual art leads it to alienate aesthetics in the first place, and the second objective of conceptual art is the representation of ideas and the bearing of cognitive value.<sup>45</sup> Conceptual art is "self-reflexive," "a critique of the purpose of art" and "the role of artist."<sup>46</sup> Margaret A. Boden illustrates as many as 20 alterations that conceptual art offered to the conventions of art. Briefly, these alterations are cases of "combinational creativity,"<sup>47</sup> argued by Boden, by juxtaposing the unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas and defining and elevating the unfamiliar. In Bernstein's poetic world, "defining the unfamiliar" is to "sublime" the queer and rip off the frame to make the familiar alienated. In this way, conceptual art expands and widens the paradigm of traditional aesthetics and so is Bernstein's poetry. Camiel Van Winkel defines contemporary art as "post-conceptual in the double sense of *coming after* and *permeated* by conceptual art."<sup>48</sup> Cyrus Manasseh claims that:

For today's post-conceptual artists like their predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s would continue to attempt to demystify and demythologise art's previous ideologies and take their inspiration from an ever-increasing range of sources, materials and philosophies, including graffiti, geometry, painting and music. Though this process, they would critique and transgress much modernist and traditional aesthetic criteria.<sup>49</sup>

The transgressive practices of post-conceptual art would help "re-shape and remake the meaning of art and the critical discourse that it would continue to engender, its institutionalisation and the art institutions."<sup>50</sup> Bernstein's endeavors in his poetic pursuit and bent studies have, I would argue, the same objective as that of the post-conceptual art. The "attempt to demystify and demythologise art's previous ideologies" of the post-conceptual art is the resolution to separate from the high-culture of historical avant-garde art in bent studies, while to "take their inspiration from an ever-increasing range of sources, materials and philosophies" of the post-conceptual art is Bernstein's endeavor to expand poetics and aesthetics by estranging the familiar and ripping off the stigma. As he claims in his poem, "[t]he crucial distinction, in our poetics, is not only between presenting and representing, enacting and expressing, but also grasping and pointing."<sup>51</sup> Bernstein's poetics obviously put emphasis on the latter, representing, expressing

<sup>43</sup> Felix Bernstein (1992—) is a performance artist, video artist, writer, and cultural critic. He was born in New York City to Charles Bernstein and Susan Bee.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, "Experimental Confessionalism: The Personal Turn in American Post-Conceptual Poetry," <http://cordite.org.ar/essays/experimental-confessionalism/2/>, [ February 2, 2019 ].

<sup>45</sup> Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens, *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 72.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 72–73.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>48</sup> Camiel van Winkel, *During the Exhibition the Gallery Will Be Closed: Contemporary Art and the Paradoxes of Conceptualism* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2012), 13.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>50</sup> Cyrus Amasseh, "Art with the Aesthetics: Defining Conceptual and Post-Conceptual Art Practices," *Anistoriton* 12, no. 1 (2010): 6.

<sup>51</sup> Bernstein, *Recalculating*, 9.

and pointing. The performance of poetry in Bernstein points to the importance of a concept with an invention as more important than a solution, and an idea more crucial than the meanings of words themselves. As the poem "Manifest Aversions, Conceptual Conundrums, & Implausibly Deniable Links" states, "Conceptual poetry is poetry pregnant with thought," manifesting that a thought or idea is paramount in poetry rather than any other.<sup>52</sup> The listed fragments of daily life languages about blank in the poem "Great Moments in Taches Blanches" are not crucial in its own specific meanings or perspectives, but the paramount in its conception of blankness/nothingness. Nothingness constitutes the aesthetics of blank space—the new possibilities. As Bernstein points out about bent studies in *Attack of the Difficult Poems*, "that empty center or blank space is the possibility of freedom."<sup>53</sup> Combining different and sometimes opposed expressions and representations, either "normal or perverse," "highbred or vernacular," "metered or unmetered" etc., with equally significant conceptions endowed, the poetry incorporates all forms or styles or schools but is not verges to be tagged to any of them in order to make verses struggle and perform themselves on the same arena.

Most importantly, as the modernist and traditional aesthetic and poetic criteria are critiqued and transgressed with defamiliarization and alienation in the sense of nothingness, the authority is removed from the holy throne. The idea of nothingness casts beautiful reflections with Bernstein's conceptual and post-conceptual artistic spectrum. "But poetry's 'disappeared,' as Ron Silliman once called them, haunt us, less from a fear for ourselves than a dread that the context that imparts meaning to our work is so fragile. *I* is not an *other* but many others, fellow travelers among the dead, near dead, and just about alive."<sup>54</sup> These lines from "How Empty is My bread Pudding" display that the disappearance of poetry will bring opportunities for "many others," namely the queer, the bent and the unfamiliar, coming out from their demise to be "alive."

With this negative poetic principle and the aesthetics of nothingness, Bernstein's poems have been misjudged and misunderstood. The negative economy has often been misinterpreted as purely negative. Bernstein resolutely and staunchly pushes aesthetics and poetics against the tides of dominant currency to a degree in which aesthetics is in a permanent dynamics, a state of being and becoming sublime and extraordinary. With the poet's idiosyncrasy and creativity, the dynamics of poetics and aesthetics is located and created. By this, Bernstein evolves from American literary tradition, and he expands and enriches it with the notion of nothingness in traditional Zen-Taoism. Words in his poetry present a proclivity for a vital and dynamic new life so as to reverse and alienate to its origins, getting ready for the rebirth of aesthetics and poetics. The dynamic poetics demonstrates its hybrid, ironic, self-reflexive, transgressive, performative and philosophical characteristics and in general, it seems to be born from the paradox of conceptual art and evolves from the blooming of post-conceptual art. Bernstein's "nothingness" is an amalgamation of American post-conceptualism and the philosophy of Zen-Taoism, which is one of his great achievements.

What is astounding and extraordinary is that with the notion of nothingness in Zen-Taoism, Bernstein enriches the "art for art's sake" by going beyond the paradox of art and poetry. I would argue that post-conceptual poetry is to a large extent the aftermath of the death of the author and the death of the text in "Art for art's sake." As Felix Bernstein claims in *Notes on Post-Conceptual*

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 129.

<sup>54</sup> Bernstein, *Recalculating*, 83.

*Poetry*, post-conceptual work “is so exhaustively inclusive that it reorganizes the boundaries that separate work from play, art from life, and therefore trap the art in a place it cannot be seen at all.”<sup>55</sup> I would contend that to a large degree, the “invisibility” of post-conceptual artwork and poetry lies on the automation of art as an object, a topic heatedly debated ever since the slogan “art for art’s sake” has been formed. “Art for art’s sake” is generally believed to emphasize the automation of art, which originates from German classic philosophy, Kant’s philosophy in particular. But as time goes on, the slogan is endowed with new and paradoxical meanings. The slogan apparently indicates the separation of art from life, or from its ulterior purpose, but the literary meanings actually conceals the other connotation in the slogan, art for life’s sake.<sup>56</sup> The slogan is controversial and debatable, in that “as was recognized by its protagonists and its enemies, aesthetics was not ultimately a view about art, but a view about life.”<sup>57</sup> “Art for art’s sake” itself shows the paradox of art itself, as the slogan reveals the contrast and the paradox between the usefulness of art, namely the ulterior purposes, and the uselessness of art, namely the intrinsic feature of art as an object.<sup>58</sup> There have been a lot of debates on how to value art from these two sides, but in fact, the two camps, though seem distinct and divergent greatly, are not so far apart after all.<sup>59</sup>

Bernstein greatly achieves the transformation of the uselessness of art and the ulterior purpose in nothingness. In his representative piece “The Pataquerical Imagination” on bent studies, quoting Williams C. Williams, Gertrude Stein, Emily Dickinson, and Allen Poe, Bernstein staunchly claims that poetry should be cleansed of all impurities issuing from morality, since it is for the sake of art. He quotes Poe’s paragraph on “a poem simply for the poem’s sake” and claims:

“This poem which is a poem and nothing more”; “Only this and nothing more” is Poe’s better-known pronouncement, from a poem that wraps, rap, raps itself in kitsch to cast an indelible aesthetic spell. [...] It is the motto, as Poe insists, of art for art’s sake, art without ulterior purpose, in and as its presence in sound, its immediate, present (gift) of rhythm and “nevermore” echo. Nothing/never: an echoic negation of all but the event of sound and rime as sublime and blank, full and empty, here/not here. The thing itself: “Nameless here for evermore”? A present absence, now/not now... (*Pitch of Poetry*, 302)

In this quotation, Bernstein explicitly maintains that “a poem is a poem and nothing more,” which sets poems free from ulterior purpose; on the other hand, his argument also reveals the multiple possibilities of nothingness, as he continues his assertion on Poe by ending this part with Dickinson’s “Nothing is the force / That renovates the World” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 302). What is most significant is that he goes on in his major argument with a line from a poem by Guillaume of Aquitaine, “Will make a poem of pure nothingness,” and his words “Poetry is weak thing and that is its strength” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 302-3). If we put these assertions of Bernstein under the light of nothingness in Zen-Taoism, it becomes clear and definite that the “nevermore” echo in the poetics of Bernstein is not a mere negative echo, but an echo of aesthetics both negative and positive, “useless” and “useful.” Bernstein stresses that

<sup>55</sup> Felix Bernstein, *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry* (Los Angeles: Insert Blanc Press, 2015), 26.

<sup>56</sup> 宋世明:《为艺术而艺术:一场审美现代性的扩容运动》,《求是学刊》2006年第三期,第123页。[SONG Shiming, “Weiyishu eryishu: yichang shenmeixiandaixingde kuorongyundong” (Art for Art’s Sake: An Expanding Movement for Aesthetics Modernism), *Qiushi xuekan (Seeking Truth)* 3 (2006): 123.]

<sup>57</sup> Peter Lamarque, “The Uselessness of Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 3 (2010): 205.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 208.

“nothing / never” is an event of sound and rhyme, connoting that with sound articulating and rime achieved, the sublime is generated from the blank, fullness comes out of the empty and the presence emerges from the non-presence. Through these arguments, Bernstein explicitly expresses “poetry is for poetry’s sake,” implying that the poetic Other represented by the pataquerical in bent studies is the uselessness of the poetics, or **the poetic nothingness**. As Bernstein claims, “I’m always looking for the useless—to make poetry less functional, or simply more purely aesthetic” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 266). The uselessness is useless but also useful in its pure aesthetics. Definitely, the poetic nothingness brings multiple possibilities and after poetry’s mark of “an indefinite cessation” represented by “nevermore echo,” there are a lot to be expected and anticipated. Bernstein claims that “poetry has no purpose, but that is not its purpose. It’s a kind of a conundrum: poetry has no function and that is not its function.” (*Pitch of Poetry*, 266) Some of Bernstein’s poems are great examples to show how the uselessness of art is made “useful” through his artistic and poetic creativity, such as “The Beauty of Useless Things: A Kantian Tale,”<sup>60</sup> “High Tide at Race Point”<sup>61</sup> and “Dea%r Fr~ien%d.”<sup>62</sup> Through the poetic nothingness, Bernstein successfully achieves the constant transformation from the intrinsic values into the ulterior purpose of art and vice versa, which shows a Möbius effect<sup>63</sup> or creates echoes of multiplicity and hybridity.<sup>64</sup> In this Möbius effect or multiple echoes, nothingness is revealed as constant transformation between the uselessness of art and the usefulness of art. Through this achievement, Bernstein dexterously and greatly transcends the paradox of art in the debatable “art for art’s sake” by greatly revealing the aesthetics of both the uselessness and the usefulness of poetry in his own way. All of these would only happen in the *dun wu* 顿悟, the transcendental wisdom in the nothingness in Zen-Taoism, of the readers in their reading experience. In *Pitch of Poetry*, Bernstein first proposes his poetics as echopoetics, which is “the nonlinear resonance of one motif bouncing off another within an aesthetics of constellation. Even more, it’s the sensation of allusion in the absence of allusion. In other words, the echo I’m after is a blank: a shadow of an absent source” (*Pitch of Poetry*, X). The “blank” is the poetic nothingness in Bernstein’s echopoetics, which is definitely a fundamental and significant theme and it deserves further and more studies.

When awarding 2019’s Bollingen Prize to Bernstein, the judges Ange Mlinko, Claudia Rankine, and Evie Shockley claim that: “Throughout his career Bernstein has facilitated a vibrant dialogue between lyric and anti-lyric tendencies in the poetic tradition we have inherited; in so doing, he has shaped and questioned, defined and dismantled ideas and assumptions in order to reveal poetry’s widest and most profound capabilities.”<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Bernstein rips off Romanticism’s banality, moves beyond the experimental of the historical avant-garde, and transcends the paradox of poetry in “poetry for poetry’s sake.” With the sublimity of nothingness, the profound understanding of the importance of language and the ardent belief in poetry, Bernstein brilliantly creates new possibilities for the advent of the new poetics and the rebirth of aesthetics in the

<sup>60</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Girly Man* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 170.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Near/Miss* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 19.

<sup>62</sup> Bernstein, *Recalculating*, 39.

<sup>63</sup> Möbius effect refers to the effect created by a Möbius strip. An example of a Möbius strip can be created by taking a paper strip and giving it a half-twist, and then joining the ends of the strip to form a loop. It is a surface with only one side (when embedded in three-dimensional Euclidean space) and only one boundary. The Möbius strip can create an effect of infinite circulation or circle.

<sup>64</sup> A book review on *Near/Miss* by me discusses the Möbius effect and multiple echoes in Bernstein’s poetry in this latest poetry collection. Website for this review: [http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/bernstein/reviews/Feng-Yi\\_Near-Miss.pdf](http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/bernstein/reviews/Feng-Yi_Near-Miss.pdf), [ February 2, 2019 ].

<sup>65</sup> <http://bollingen.yale.edu/charles-bernstein-wins-2019-bollingen-prize>, [ January 29, 2019 ].



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**摘要:** 查尔斯·伯恩斯坦在他的《诗歌的暗音》一书中写道,他的座右铭一直是艾米莉·狄金森的一句话:“难道你不知道‘不’是我们赋予语言的最炽烈的词?”这表明他的诗歌与狄金森赋予“不”的矛盾悖论意义具有共鸣。伯恩斯坦的诗歌具有否定经济,这一点往往被简单地解读为纯粹的否定,因此常常被一些批评家误解。禅宗和道教在20世纪50年代传播到美国。D. T. 铃木大拙博士是一位极具

影响力的人物,他使禅宗在西方广为人知。他表明,禅宗哲学的虚无,不仅表示消极性,还表示多种可能性。同样地,在道教中,虚空/虚无被称为道,虚无可以在宇宙中引发多种转化,变为充盈。伯恩斯坦声称,虚无是他诗学中的一个重要而关键的主题。要理解伯恩斯坦的诗学和美学,道禅的虚无起着不可或缺的作用。通过分析伯恩斯坦的一些代表性的诗歌,在伯恩斯坦的诗学中,虚无是一种挽歌力量,也是引发“荒诞玄学探究”发生的空白,旨在扩容诗学和美学至无限。伯恩斯坦的虚无是继承了艾伦·坡和迪金森所代表的美国文学传统,同时与美国后概念诗学思想以及禅宗道教的虚无的融合。最重要的是,伯恩斯坦诗歌对道禅哲学的虚无丰富了“为艺术而艺术”,体现了诗人伯恩斯坦对“为诗歌而诗歌”中诗歌悖论的超越。

**关键词:** 查尔斯·伯恩斯坦; 虚无; 美国诗歌; 道禅; 后概念诗歌

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