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Reflections of Charles Bernstein's Avant-garde Poetics on Basis of *Pitch of Poetry*^①

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Abstract: This essay explicates three principles of Charles Bernstein's avant-garde poetics while reflecting on his new book of *Pitch of Poetry*, highlighting the contribution of Bernstein, as a leading figure of language poetry, to avant-garde poetics in the West. The first of the three principles is non-stop exploration. Bernstein is now a well-established figure. However, he insists "Our journeys don't end, our business is unfinished", and has been consistently carrying out exploration in the field of avant-garde poetics. The second is poetics of organization. Bernstein considers that "organizing is a poetic practice", and has served as a strong "connective tissue" for the circle of avant-garde poets by taking up many organizing activities and offering assistance to many poets. The third is ever-expanding L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E family. Bernstein is considered as a founder of language poetry and has been urging its development. Paradoxically, Bernstein himself suggests that "Language Poetry does not exist". It is because Bernstein has never attempted to force upon others of his poetics, allowing all poets of the group to have complete freedom to carry out their own exploration. Thus each poet of this group is writing poetry of their own individual characters, though they share a certain family resemblance. The three principles of Charles Bernstein's avant-garde poetics could shed great light for pushing forward the development of avant-garde poetry in China.

Key words: Charles Bernstein; avant-garde poetry; language poetry; principles of poetics

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标题: 论《诗歌的黑音》中伯恩斯坦的先锋诗学

内容摘要: 本文以对伯恩斯坦的新著《诗歌的黑音》的评论为契机, 反思并总结了作为美国语言诗派领头羊的伯恩斯坦的三大先锋诗学原则, 分析了其对于西方先锋诗学之重大贡献。本人认为伯恩斯坦的三大先锋诗学原则是: 其一、永不停息的探索; 伯恩斯坦在诗坛已经功成名就, 不过他不改初衷, 指出先锋诗歌的旅程“没有终点”, 仍然继续着自己的诗学探索。其二、重视组织诗学; 伯恩斯坦认为组织是一种“诗学实践”, 在其一生中, 他花了大量时间从事诗歌组织工作, 帮助其他诗人, 充当了先锋诗人群体的“粘合剂”, 切实地促进了先锋诗歌队伍的壮大。其三、不断扩大语言诗派家族体系; 伯恩斯坦被公认为语言诗派的奠基人, 一路陪伴语言诗派的发展壮大。有趣的是, 他自己甚至并不认为自己在所谓“语言诗”, 原因在于他并没有将自己的诗歌主张强加于其他诗人, 而是赋予了其

他人充分的创作自由,从而使语言诗派呈现出一种异彩纷呈的生动局面。伯恩斯坦的这三大先锋诗学原则对于中国现代诗歌的发展具有重大借鉴意义。

关键词: 查尔斯·伯恩斯坦; 先锋诗; 语言诗; 诗学原则

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In the first essay in *Pitch of Poetry*, “In Unum Pluribus: Toward a More Perfect Invention”, Charles Bernstein’s attention is drawn by the two phrases “more perfect” and “curve continuously”, the former from a speech by Barack Obama and the latter a roadside sign posted in China. His interest in the two phrases is itself an obvious demonstration of his well-cultivated intellectual sensitivity and as aesthetic taste for the beauty of the language. In the common sense of the language, being “perfect” denotes the ultimate point with nothing else beyond. However, “more” breaks the common sense, opening up endless space beyond. The effect of this linguistic break itself is amazing. Yet the more amazing is the spirit behind that would never rest at a certain point. It is indeed such an insatiable thirst for knowledge and beauty that has been constantly pushing forwards the development of humanity.

“Curve continuously” is a mistranslation of the Chinese road sign “连续弯道”, which would usually be translated in to English as “Caution: Road Curves”. Bernstein explains in his essay that he is interested in the term “curve continuously” because such “accented” translations are “poetically striking” and are revealing “points of contact” between cultures (Bernstein 11)^②. He is also interested in the term because it fits in with his concept of an “aversive poetics” (11). Besides, much more power is presented in the word “continuously” in the road sign of “curve continuously”. What is a road like that “curves continuously”? It should be a road that spirals from the foot of a mountain right until the very top. Indeed, Bernstein found the road sign at the foot of Wudang Mountain.

But for poetry and poetics, the road will never stop, even at the very top of the mountain, as there is no ultimate point for Bernstein who is always “on the road” for “more perfection”. Here we have touched Bernstein’s spirit that motivates all his innovative poetry and poetics, and in particular his recently published *Pitch of Poetry*. Thus we have got the main body of the title: Cut continuously for more perfection. “Curve” is replaced by “cut” because Bernstein “cuts” more than “curves” in his poetry and poetics, which is explicated in this essay.

I. Non-Stop Exploration

Charles Bernstein declares in *Pitch of Poetry*: “Our journeys don’t end, our business is unfinished, our poems open upon ever new poems. More perfect is a direction, a movement, not a final state of idealized perfection” (3). It is without doubt that Bernstein will never stop in his search for even newer and more innovative poetry and poetics.

Though Bernstein does not want to follow any rules, we could at least detect one “rule” for

of beauty. For some, it is only in renouncing the beautiful that the possibility of beauty opens. And those of you who lament this turn away from beauty of emotion, compulsively proclaiming its return, do not and perhaps cannot understand what it is to be outside the script, dead as you are to sensation, oblivious to beauties that cannot be dreamt of in your moralities. (312)

It is no surprise that people who have stereotyped concepts of beauty take Bernstein as crazy. However, if one would get oneself unbound and open one's eyes and minds, one would surely be awakened to see the fact that there are many different kinds of beauty, of which many are not conventionally mild and sweet. When one starts to appreciate different poetic beauty, one's taste is being cultivated and one's outlook broadened.

II. Poetics of Organization

In an interview with Daniel Benjamin in *Pitch of Poetry*, Bernstein writes, "But for me — and this takes me through the rest of my life — organizing is a poetic practice" (241). This is a line that might be easily neglected by readers, although it has vital importance for the survival and development of avant-garde innovative poetry and poetics.

In an essay on Robert Creeley, Bernstein mentions that "A few days after Creeley's death, Charles Alexander spoke of Robert Creeley as our poetic 'connective tissue' (135). Bernstein too might also be described as "our poetic connective tissue", which is demonstrated by the numerous works he has reviewed, journals he has edited, programs and organizations he has founded. It is indeed difficult to find anyone else who has done more than Bernstein in this respect. Ezra Pound encouraged some brilliant poets and helped them attract the attention of the public, yet he shifted his attention to serving the Fascist cause which severely hurts his role as a poetic connective tissue.

In the field of official verse culture, those who serve as "connective tissue" are merely organizers who bring people together. However, in the field of avant-garde poetry and poetics, they are doing life-saving work: saving good poets from being discouraged and giving up, and saving good poetry from being ignored and lost forever. Bernstein declares that: "I don't believe that the best work surfaces over time. On the contrary, I think a lot of work is lost or buried, a lot of work is destroyed, a lot of the best artists give up out of discouragement. Critical intervention doesn't produce them, but it does, at its best, create space for poems to be written, to be heard" (195). I have been wondering whether Walt Whitman would have given up poetic creation if he had not been encouraged by Emerson at the right moment, when he was so bitterly treated by other critics. Similarly, we may not today be so familiar with the works of John Donne and the other metaphysical poets, if they had not been recommended by T. S. Eliot. T. S. Eliot meanwhile may not have grown into such a successful poet if he had not been assisted and encouraged by Ezra Pound.

It is true when Bernstein says that "It is and remains difficult for individual poets to survive, for poets to get their work published, for poets to have an audience" (202). In *Pitch of Poetry*,

Bernstein includes eighteen essays, occupying almost one third of the whole book, which introduce the works of avant-garde poets, some of whom are completely unknown. He has been ardently promoting lesser-known poets in this way throughout his life. It is particularly interesting to have Bernstein talk of the works he discovered because he has an established, special risk-taking taste that is different from that of many others.

It is ridiculous that people, in an affluent modern society, are eager to embrace all sorts of cheap merchandise while taking no interest in the challenge of avant-garde poetry. Indeed, human beings are lazy by nature, and they tend to take whatever is served right at hand. The capitalist elites have well detected the weakness of human beings and have made good use of it. The modern consumers have been turned into passive receptors who tend to avoid the challenge involved in reading of a poem, especially in the case of avant-garde poetry. It is this situation, paradoxically, that grants poetry, especially avant-garde poetry, crucial significance to society, since it challenges and activates people's minds and helps them become more intellectually independent. Only in this light can we fully appreciate Bernstein's role as a poetic organizer who has fought for the cause he stands for all his life.

While talking of Language Poetry, Paul Hoover says that "much of the critical theory and organizational energy have been the work of Charles Bernstein, whose numerous books of essays including *A Poetics* (1992) and *My Way* (1999) most effectively express the group's thinking" (Hoover xlv). Indeed, thanks to connective figures such as Charles Bernstein, Robert Creeley and many others, the field of avant-garde poetry and poetics has been doing extremely well, as Paul Hoover proudly declares: "With the rise of creative writing graduate programs and the increasing professionalization of what academics call 'the discipline,' even the outsiders and vanguardists find teaching positions available" (xxxiii).

III. Ever-Expanding L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Family

Charles Bernstein's best-known organizational efforts are connected with his co-editing of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine with Bruce Andrews between 1978 and 1982. The title of the magazine itself is a marvelous demonstration of Bernstein's poetics then and now. By inserting seven equal signs into the eight letters of the word "language", it seems as if the iron chains that have locked up the life of the word for thousands of years have been broken, as if equal signs were the powerful arms and legs of a giant, opening up endless new linguistic possibilities. Magic power turns a dead symbol into an expanding being that is like a pregnant woman ready to deliver a new life. This one-word visual poetics has much expanded the horizon of modern poetry and poetics. In a certain sense, it represents a turning point in Western poetics. After that, whoever does not pay due respect to the poetic potentiality of the words themselves in a poetic work would very likely be considered outdated.

Many factors have contributed to the huge success of the poets associated with the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine. But the three most important are perhaps: 1. The total freedom of the group; 2. Their ardent spirit of exploration into new horizons of avant-garde poetry and poetics; 3. The talents of many individual poets and critics involved.

In the essay "The Expanded Field of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" (60-77), Bernstein gives a detailed retrospective and prospective for the cause of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E group. Bernstein has never stopped. He has been constantly expanding the field of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and has even pushed its boundaries to include some poets in China. This has surely created a much better situation for new poetics to be discovered or invented than the age when Pound worked on Chinese poetry. After decades, it seems that "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" has become even more open, growing into "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E".

Though putting forward many good principles, Bernstein insists that he does not want any invariant principles. He says: "My work is without principle, though not without its peculiar aesthetic, palpable sensibility, and patented ideological blinders. The absence of principle is a principle. My poetics is contingent and inductive; based on a stubborn desire to put one thing after another to create as powerful an aesthetic experience as I can within verbal language" (234). He says again later on: "I don't like to follow rules – not even my own rules" (268). How to explain this apparent contradiction? Probably we could say that Bernstein wants "rules" or "principles" at the tactical level, while he wants total freedom at the strategic level. In his poetics, freedom always overrides principles or rules, although the latter are necessary in certain situations.

While talking of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Bernstein repeatedly states that "Language Poetry does not exist ... I keep saying it: Language poetry doesn't exist. ... Or then again: Language poetry is a social construction; a performance, not an essence. Collective and collaborative" (224, 240). In "The Expanded Field of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E", Bernstein gives a more detailed explanation to this issue: "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E was a site of conversation about a set of marked issues, a place to air differences but not necessarily to settle them" (61).

It is best for avant-garde poets to have a family, providing they do not have to submit their freedom to a father at the same time. In such a family, the poet can have total freedom as well as warm support while they are exploring innovative poetics and their own talents in pursuit of a "more perfect" poetry.

If rules and principles are the body, freedom is the very soul. We need the body, yet we need the soul more. While meditating on what I shall do in the present situation in China, I myself always take complete freedom: I shall help to set up some rules and principles, such as the fundamental cultural principles of freedom, equality, democracy, the rule of the law and so on, given that society is now in a pretty morally confused situation. This is while I am working in the cultural field as a scholar. However, while composing poems, I would like either to assist or question and challenge any principles or rules ever set up.

Conclusion

While reading *Pitch of Poetry*, one does not have to fight to understand everything, or agree with whatever Bernstein says, to appreciate it. Bernstein occasionally goes a great lengths to make a point in the most powerful manner, sometimes at the cost of being readily accessible, just as he does in his poems. Indeed, Bernstein's essays have a unique style, and share many qualities with his poems. It seems that Bernstein wants to blend the essay form's power of intellectual clarity

with poetry's power of sensational intensity, rather than to separate the two.

Bernstein sometimes deliberately confuses his ideas or leaves blank spaces in his essays, which makes it impossible for a reader to see the full picture. To Bernstein, a full and complete picture probably does not exist. While answering questions in interviews, Bernstein never sets out to give a complete answer to any question. On the contrary, he allows his answers to conjure up more questions. As he says, "I don't answer questions in interviews; I take the form as an opportunity to create a series of short dialogic works. But then I create a problem: explanations are needed for my explanations" (284). Thus one shall feel relaxed and apply John Keats's negative capability and just push on when one gets a question, to leave it to be answered in the future when it is time. But one does need to read the book closely and reflect on these questions constantly. Otherwise one would not be able to ask important questions, and one would not be qualified for the application of negative capability.

Despite some small obstacles in *Pitch of Poetry*, it would be difficult for any reader to miss the inspiring elements of this text and the witty ways in which they are presented, which serves as a good illustration of Bernstein's poetics. We could appreciate it more if applied with an appropriate philosophy in mind, which is in fact implied in the passage where Bernstein talks of the difference between morality and ethics: "Morality tells you what to think, what's right to think; ethics asks what makes us think it's right, and right for whom? Right in what way?" (249) We do not really need to stuff our minds by memorizing all the viewpoints encompassed in this book. However, we do need constantly to ask ourselves such questions as "what makes us think it's right, and right for whom? Right in what way?" and so on to understand Bernstein's philosophy of avant-garde poetry and poetics, of which the key is: Cut continuously for more perfection!

Never stop!

【Notes】

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② All quotations from this book will be indicated only by the page number in the rest of the essay.

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