Deconstructing the Language Poetry in Some Selected Poems of Charles Bernstein From a Derridaian Perspective

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Abstract

This paper investigates the language poetry and its practice in some poems of the American poet Charles Bernstein. The study will examine several poems for Bernstein, like "April" and "March" from Stigma, "Locks without Doors" from Dark City, "Slowed Reason" from Rough Trades, "Lift off", and "The next Available Place". It argues that the Derridaian perspective plays a prominent role in the way Bernstein visualizes meaning in his poetry. According to Jacques Derrida (1993), the divergence of indicative communication by making intentional gaps between expression and indication creates the signification to difference, deviation, and departure. The gaps for Derrida are gaps of space which become gaps of time and those of time become gaps of space, adding that the gaps of difference are in themselves gaps as difference. The gap itself works for the auto production and the auto-determination of meaning which will keep on travelling.

The study will analyse the language of Bernstein in the above mentioned poems to prove that meaning emerges through interpretation and that even authors do not control the text interpretation, and that texts, like language itself, have no outside referents or transcendental signified.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Language Poetry, Indicative System of Communication, Jacques Derrida, Gaps of Space and Time, Gaps of Difference.

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تفكيك شعر اللغة في قصائد مختارة لتشارلز بيرنستاين من منظور دريدا

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ملّخص

يقوم هذا البحث على مناقشة قضية شعر اللغة وتطبيقاتها(language poetry) لدى الشاعر الأمريكي تشارلز بيرنستاين من خلال دراسةعددمن قصائده،هي: "أبريل" و"مارس" من وصمة، و"أقفال بلا أبواب" من المدينة المظلمة، و"السبب البطيء" من الصفقات الخشنة، و"مغادرة"، و"المكان المتاح التالي". كما وتجادل الدراسة بأن للنظرية، ومن منظور دريدا، دورًا بارزًا في الطريقة التي يقوم بها برنستاين بتصوير المعنى في شعره. ووفقًا لجاك دريدا (1993)، فإن التباين في التواصل الدلالي،والذي يمكن إيجاده من خلال إحداث فجوات متعمّدة فيما بين التعبير والإشارة،يقوم على خلق مضموناً ومعنى لِ الاختلاف والانحراف والمغادرة. فالفجوات عند دريدا هي فجوات مكانية والتي يمكن لها أن تتحول لاحقاً إلى فجوات زمنية، وكذلك الفجوات الزمنية يمكن لها أن تصبح فجوات مكانية، مضيفاً بأن فجوات الاختلاف تصبح هي في حد ذاتها اختلاف. فالفجوة نفسها تعمل على الإنتاج التلقائي للمعنى بشكل محدد وذاتي والذي بدوره سيستمر في التنقل والترحال.

وتحلل الدراسة لغة برنستاين في القصائد المذكورة أعلاه لإثبات أن المعنى يظهر من خلال التفسير وأنه لا حكم ولا سلطة للمؤلفين في كيفية تفسير النص. وأن النصوص، مثلها مثل اللغة نفسها، لا مرجعية لها خارج حدودها.

الكلمات الدلالية: التفكيك، شعر اللغة، نظام التواصل الدلالي، جاك دريدا، فجوات المكان والزمان، فجوات الاختلاف.

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Introduction

In Speech and Phenomenon (1993), Derrida, explaining communication in the context of Husserl (1989), pointed out that "meaning is always involved, always caught up in an indicative system" (P.20). Though Husserl made a distinction between expression and indication, Derrida believed that it was purely phenomenological and any gap between the two was only intentional because there could be no meaning and no signification without a gap (an unfilled space, interval or the inescapable horizontal extension of both space and time). Derrida believed that the divergence of indicative communication means opening the signification to difference, deviation, and departure. This opening of a gap leads to expatriation to wandering to mourning. (Derrida, 1990: 39)

Derrida accepts that it is impossible to escape the differential nature of the language and that meaning can travel so far apart that any semblance to the whole is indistinguishable both in space and in time. The priority for the poets of this school is to escape the dominance of meaning and to write not for communication, but rather for showing how all intended systems of communication can be disrupted to move into difference and gaps of space and time. That is, they do not intend to shape 'limits' with their poetry but to set in motion 'conversations' that violate, linguistically speaking, the basic requirements of acceptable syntax, plausible morphology, relevant and consistent discourse, as well as adequate semantics. If one can pin down a meaning, it results in the death of meaning. The gaps that Derrida talks about are gaps of space which become gaps of time and those of time become gaps of space, and he adds that the gaps of difference are in themselves gaps as difference (Derrida, 1990).

These gaps for Derrida are connected with the term Différance, which is a French term that is central to his deconstruction. This term mainly means difference and deferral of meaning. It could also take different forms, like "deviation, distance, digression, separation, expulsion" (Peter Miscall, 2006: 53). Derrida argues that these gaps must remain open, but they cannot be preceded by a gap. The gap itself works for the auto-production and the auto-determination of meaning which will keep on travelling. However, the origin or the pre does not travel but any travel takes the origin away from it. Derrida attests to the fact that there is no simple origin and the difference or the gap that it precedes gradually becomes ungraspable because of its continuous shift. If meaning in literature is related to tradition or a 'whole', then writing transforms the whole or origin into a 'part' and works in such a

way that the part within and without the whole becomes incommensurate with the whole. It travels so far apart that any semblance to the whole is indistinguishable both in space and in time. If this is the fate of meaning, then aporia, "state of puzzlement", or the essence is indeed hard to deconstruct for any attempt will make it travel further away opening more gaps of difference and therefore, more points of departure (Derrida, 1993).

The language poetry of Charles Bernstein

Language has always been defined as a medium of communication and it is a medium through which we convey meaning about the world and our experiences. Literature relies heavily on creative and stylistic way of using language that makes it different from other discourses. Poetry, as one genre of literature, exploits language in a unique way that differentiates it from other genres of literature. Poetry, thus, uses highly artistic and pleasurable language in a distinctive way. Language poetry as a pioneer movement in poetry emerged in the late 1960's and early 1970's as a response to mainstream American poetry. It takes its name from the magazine edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews (L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E). Instead of emphasizing the traditional poetic techniques, language poetry tends to focus on the uses of language in a poem that contribute to the creation of meaning (Glossary of poetic terms). Many other theories were associated with language poetry, like deconstruction, post-structuralism, and the objectivist tradition. Thus, in the case of language poetry, the focus will be not on the content of the poem, but rather on the poem's form, or on the distinctive way the words are arranged together in order to construct meaning.

In this context, the study will consider the tenets of language poetry of Charles Bernstein, "the most influential of the language poets" through discerning the Derredaian hypothesis which plays a distinct role in the way he conceives the meaning. Poets of this school wrench themselves clear of the tyranny of meaning and write not for communication but for the purpose of showing how all intended systems of communication can be disrupted to move into difference and the gaps of space and time. Such gaps include the broken syntax, the shards of sentences, the play of metaphors and ambiguity, and the lack of correlatives. It is a site where a thought feels and a feeling thinks, and it is poetics of negation and of reconstruction through demolition (Wortham, 2007).

Language poets, working in consonance with Derrida's views, do not intend to shape 'limits' with their poetry but to set in motion 'conversations'. Their originality might be a subject, but, while giving expression to it, they move beyond the 'about' of the subject into unknown realms of signification where prohibitions (representations, monologism) and their transgressions (dream, body and dialogism) coexist forming perhaps a typically Bakhtinian ambivalent text. To further make their writing anti-representative, the language poets use different sign systems – verbal, visual, musical, tactile, olfactory, gestural – and allow for a play between their component semiotic orders. Although all the poems might do the same, the language poems lay more emphasis on the reader's role in bringing meaning out of a work. The language poets play down expression, seeing the poem as a construction in and of language itself. These poets favor prose poetry, especially in longer and non-narrative forms.

The language poets believe that the concept of synesthetic writing (The writing that expresses a subjective sensation or image of a sense (as of color) other than the one (as of sound) being stimulated) can help them to connect with their thought of a subject and be useful in translating it into meaning. This is the reason why language poetry is a picto-ideo–phono–graphic notation that effectively carnivalizes all appropriating images and recontextualises them, frequently for parodic purposes. According to Lola Tostevin (1985):

> Writing as reading (the past?) would only be writing without breathing a word while writing as re-reading doubles back to recall to hear again the resonance as re tears from the rest reenters the mount with quick motions of tongue rolls, liquid trills laps one syllable to the next. (Tostevin, 1985: n.p)

The main thrust is to manipulate language that manipulates us in such a way that our present meanings are reduced to absence and we try to look for their logics in a play of irrationality.

Charles Bernstein, the most fervent advocate of language poetry, in voicing his own beliefs, says, "There is no escape in writing from structures/ forms, they are ever present- 'de' forming and 're' forming. To see them, to hear them – as inseparable from 'content'."   (Content's dream, 72) Elsewhere, he maintains that:

> All writing is a demonstration of method; it can assume a method or investigate it. In this sense, style and mode are always at issue, for all styles are socially mediated conventions open to reconvening at any time.. a "Constructive" mode would suggest that the mode itself is explored as content, its possibilities of meaning are investigated and presented, and that this process is itself recognized as a method. (Content's dream, 2001: 226-227).

One of Bernstein's most commonly cited poem, "Lift off" is a befitting example of his language poetry:

HH, ie,s ob Vrsxr; atjrn dugh seineocpcy I

          iibalfmgmMw

  er,, me "ius ieigorcy jeuvine + pee.) a/ nat" ihl" n,s

Apparently, the poem is not made up of recognizable words and it has no formal principles or clear structure, such as rhyme or metre. Darryl Jones and Stephen Matterson (2000) argue that the poem "appears to communicate nothing to us, to contain no apparent meaning. It is not even musical or readable in the sense that a number poem is, nor even primarily visual in the way that a concrete poem is" (162).

"Lift off" can only be 'seen' as a visual clutter. Reading it, one hears a cacophony and it begs the question of how it happened to be, perhaps the mindless intervention of a self correcting typewriter. The radical deconstruction – HH, a diminutive of HRH; seineocpcy, the Seine river; me"ivs, a parody of Latin: Jeuvine + pee, juvenile plus urination (Conte, 1996). Linguistically, "Lift off" is nothing but a pile of meaningless fragments that neither an ordinary reader nor a professional listener can decode or understand, because it does not follow a logical structure or meaningful phrases.

Another poem, "April" for example begins with:

      Webbed space

      akin to almost ash

gathered at entrance

a sadness

basically projected

all this

haecceity but not

one thing discerned from another[.] (From Stigma, 1981)

The flow of juxtaposed words and phrases in the 'webbed space' of the poem is neither logical nor predictable both syntactically and semantically. For example, 'projected' breaks down until 'haecceity' is invoked. It also should be pointed out that vagueness and fragmentation dominate the whole context, since using scattered words such as "space", "ash", "sadness", "haecceity", and "thing" is neither coherent nor consistent or even relevant. (Conte, 1996). Douglas Messerli (2018) states that Bernstein often transforms an accessible language into "a visual puzzle that risks turning off readers who prefer not to move their eyes all over the page to make meaning" (n.p). Messerli believes that Bernstein in his poems shifts meaning through the placement of language in a way which suggests that most of his poems are written for "an audience of poets — or at least an audience that appreciates a certain level of complexity" (2018, n.p).

According to Joseph Conte (1996), the title of the collection in which this poem lies (Stigma) carries the senses of both a mark and a stain. He asserts that in this collection, the words themselves appear to stain the text; in a way that they are not words but rather faults. This is another example from Stigma collection, "March":

Convene, argue plans, yet point

At any loss, so much, erasing

Our undoing, greatest wildness Continuous

Focus – shift, blur, become transparent, persists. (From Stigma, 1981)

The above text argues clearly that neither syntactic acceptability (Radford, 2004) nor morphological plausibility (Katamba, 1994) are satisfied, leaving this cited work as an ambiguous juxtaposition of words that lack semantic content (Kearns, 2000).

Perhaps, one of the reasons that make Bernstein's poems difficult to read or understand is the way that he uses the language in his poems, which can be sometimes described as being ungrammatical. James Sherry comments on Bernstein's attempt to reshape thoughts in language, saying that:

> Sentences reflect the constant intrusion of the world on the mind and the impossibility of meditation / mediation... Bernstein is not concerned with grammar and sentences as correct... [but with]... patterns of thought in the patterns of [his] phrases rather than given standards of the shape of the thought, as in the grammatically oriented notion of the sentences. (Quoted in Conte, 1996: 20)

Craig Watson also points out that in Bernstein's work:

> The apprehension of meaning is not conditioned by substance or continuity alone, but by the constitution of relations in a network of possibilities, the object is mediated and named by our whole experience with it. Cognition is made up of a vast circuitry within which language is gestural and continually subjective. Through these circuits we conduct and create ourselves, a reality. (Quoted in Conte, 1996: 21)

Other poems for Bernstein, like *The Next Available Place* and *Standing Target* can be read as paradigms for the extensive use of alliteration, onomatopoeia, aural and visual punning, syntactic fragmentariness, enjambment and outright glossolalia that characterize much of Language writing (Messerli, 1982) in such passages:

> Dread, scuzzy. Perhaps Polish (polish). I
>
> feel rearranged, mandate a macaroon. Cuba,
>
> Taiwan, Indubitable dauntress fraudulent as ever
>
> attempting a view: binary, bissected, by the seaside,
>
> beside myself...
>
> (The Next Available Place, p.32)

In explaining the above argument, Messerli adds that Bernstein proves his commitment to poetry of thinking in process and demonstrates the

controlling interests of a literary mode that permits the "leaps, jumps, fissures, repetitions, bridges, schisms, colloquialisms, trains of associations, and memory" that are integral to the music and rhythm of contemplation, "as it is being lived in a body." Messerli continues that "In these poems, there is an enigmatic, charm – like effect, an almost cabalistic quality which is alien and even frightening to a society that still believes that reading a poem is related to an explication de texte." (1982: n.p)

Bernstein appears to be a quite skilled at taking a common phrase or proverb and deforming it. For instance, in his poem, "Locks without doors" from Dark City , the phrase "the quality of mercy" becomes "the quality of Hershey's is not / too great although I always preferred / skippy's smooth to crunch" (55) and "Then again the quality of Jersey is not / much to wriggle your teeth about" (56). More substantive transformations occur in the same poem; such as "not for you / the hullabaloo" (54), "Books can be deceiving" (57), and "I can't but make it can / fluesce" (52) (Lazer, 1996:134).

If Bernstein's writing is to be called a new kind of realism, as it is often, then that realism will be premised not upon closure and thematic unification, but upon resistance to these particular over-used-poetic devices. However, this resistance is made on the account of basic linguistic requirements of syntax, morphology, and semantics.

The analysis in this paper reveals one particular register in Bernstein's compositional arsenal. In addition to a wide ranging vocabulary, there is the recurrence of a peculiarly clotted sound effect, a kind of line and sound that is deliberately but interestingly difficult to say, a kind of anti mellifluousness. For example,

> Slump not lest slip, slumber, swagger into / indelicacy, delirious indolence.

and

> Sustenance evaporates in subsequent / slumber. Amulets emit armatures.

(Dark City)

When Richard Kostelanetz, in his Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes (1996), laments the lack of a signature to Bernstein's poem, his lamentation is countered with this peculiar sound quality in Bernstein's work. In fact, this feature of sound "is not established with the consistency or reductiveness to constitute Bernstein's 'personal voice', but it is a

recurring idiosyncratic marker in his work. As is his odd inhabitation of a late nineteenth – century iambic Swinburnian mellifluousness." (Lazer, 1995: 40):

> For long have I entombed my love
>
> less fleck than flayed upon
>
> Who quaint and wary worry swarms
>
> In tides lament nor laminations are
>
> As stare compares a bellys tumble
>
> Have I awaited by the slope
>
> of lumined ledgers lumbering links
>
> Foregone though never bent.

(Dark City)

Lazer maintains that Bernstein clarifies the mode or form of construction for a given passage of his writing. Such a mode indicates clearly that Bernstein is talented in manipulating morphological structures, without considering its side effects on syntax or semantics. This is obvious in the following example from "Dark city" poem, where a process of word association, based on a word at the end of one sentence and its derivative form in the following sentence, is used with a different meaning. At the beginning of the next sentence, the display of conscious construction is questioned to be the only content of the passage:

> Not that I mean to startle just
>
> unsettle. The settlers pitched their tents
>
> into foreign ground. All ground is
>
> foreign ground when you get to know
>
> it as well as I do. Well I wouldn't agree.
>
> No agreement like egregious
>
> refusal to hypostatize a suspension.
>
> Suspension bridges like so many
>
> drummers at bat, swatting flies in

the hot Carolina sun. No, son, it

Wasn't like that – we only learned we

had to be proud not what's worth taking

pride in.

(Dark City)

Indeed, Bernstein's poetry and poetics has a substantial resonance: "Not that I mean to startle just / unsettle." Lzaer comments on that example:

> Such a process of isolation amounts to a repetition or reapplication of New Critical methods of reading-as-thematizing. But what such a method fails to take into account is the deliberately ambiguous status of the authoritative proverbial pronouncement in Bernstein's writing… each self assured pronouncement is immediately undone or at least made dubious by the next sentence, which stands as a literal counter to its partner sentence. (Lazer, 1995: 41)

As Derrida maintains that "metaphysical reappropriations" are 'ineluctable' (1987: 58) and cannot be contained. This is what Bernstein seems to put into practice using "average everydayness" where there is nothing new. He weaves into its difference which makes it strange, uncanny so that the everydayness becomes an enigma, an almost bewildering phenomenon. His temporality is further disrupted by an unsyntagmatic spatial ordering of words that take away from the sameness of the everyday occurrences and impart to them an in authenticity. As Martin Heidegger would say, "it is a making present" that always runs away from the future possibilities that would bring itself back to itself as an authentic 'moment of vision' (Derrida, 1982: 347).

The present, the everydayness is merely a transition point, is beyond his meaning which is again only provisional since it opens 'itself to the hospitality of a difference from itself or of a difference with itself' (Derrida, 1993: 10). Derrida, quoting from Heidegger, says that difference cannot appear as such, "There is no essence of difference; it is that which not only could never be appropriated in the as such of its name or its appearing, but also which threatens the authority of the as such in general, of the presence of the thing itself in its essence" (Derrida, 1982: 25-26). In addition, no one can read Bernstein as such without taking into account the different strata through which his meaning travels. His poetry attests to what Derrida says in 'ET cetera...' (2000),

> There is addition or seriality (and.... and.... and), there is supplementarity only when discrete units are hollowed out, in some sense, or rather indicate negatively the possibility of being alive and of being singular, of separation, of distinction, and also of an unbinding, a relation without relation. (288-9)

Supplementing this, Bernstein writes in Rough Trades:

> The reader crowds the page with the rush
>
> of ideas: a portable
>
> altar strapped to his back, weaving fables
>
> and faces and maneuvering
>
> between points, holes in clouds, condensing into
>
> a stream of
>
> ink.

and in the very next moment, he concludes, "Ice cream man slaughters icecream, i's dream/eye's dream."

In his book *A Poetics*, Bernstein makes his stand clear, "[I]n its counterconventional investigations, poetry engages public language as its roots, in that it tests the limits of its conventionality while forging other alternative conventions" (Bernstein, 1992: 219). Such conventions, however, need not seek to replace other conventions in quest of becoming a new standard.

Further, in "Slowed reason", he elaborates this,

> Poetry is sediment
>
> I wipe off the windshield
>
> The mindshield, a process
>
> Of such and such refrain
>
> An original instance +
>
> Of Many writing
>
> The field of shifting.   (From Rough Trades, 1991)

The windshield, a transparent screen, as of glass, that protects the occupants of a vehicle, is replaced with mindshield. This mindshield can be defined as a powerful psychic object, making soldiers completely immune to any negative mental conditions including panic, mind control, traumatic shocks, and confusion. Thus, both words *(w)indshield* and *(m)indshield* suggest protection. On the other hand, the word *sediment* could mean any matter that settles to the bottom of a liquid. This poem can be read on the Derridaian way substituting sediment as history or convention, the pre, the source, the origin which is re-placed in the mindsheild, displacing (wipe off) historicity with difference (many writing) and 'the field of shifting' the gaps to which it has travelled. The mindshield is a "strange mirror that reflects but also displaces and distorts one mimesis into the other." (Derrida, 1981:191)

In an essay on Bernstein's Dark City, Lazer (1995) comments on Bernstein's simple use of "I" as a kind of self-expression, considering his poetry as part of the most significant poetry in this century. See this example:

<center>(I</center>

pride myself on my pleonastic a(r) mour), {ardour}

<center>(Besides)</center>

<center>Love may come and love may go</center>

but uncertainty is here forever.

[profit?}

 (Dark City)

For Lazer, "there are disruptive syntactic forms that undermine any traditionally unified voice or version of stock expressiveness" (P. 41).

Conclusion

According to Derrida, language is irreducibly complex, unstable, or impossible to determine. He asserts that language, as a system of signs and words, only has meaning because of the contrast between these signs, an issue which is connected with the term Différance, as explained above in the discussion. Therefore, *as a consequence*, meaning is never present at the time of its utterance, but rather is deferred to other signs or delayed to interpretation. A concept, thus, must be understood in the context of its

opposite. In Derrida's view, the meaning of a given word can only be found within its context and is delayed until the interpreter crosses the time and space that distinguish this word from the other words in the text which gives it meaning. Derridaian deconstruction emphatically affirms that text can no longer declare on interpretation to be right and the other to be wrong, because, as Derrida argues, meaning in a text is always illusive, dynamic and transitory. This research was an attempt to show that the gaps of Derrida are gaps of space which become gaps of time and those of time become gaps of space, and that the gaps of difference are in themselves gaps as difference.

On the other side, Charles Bressler (2011) states that "If we assert, as does Derrida, that no transcendental signified exists, then there can exist no absolute or pure meaning conveyed supposedly by authorial intent" (P.115). This is exactly applied on the chosen poems of Bernstein where he seemed to offer absolutely an unexpected or unlikely meanings to his texts. The discussion and analysis in this paper argue clearly that the Derridaian perspective plays a prominent role in the way Charles Bernstein visualizes meaning, as the language poetry of Bernstein attempts to escape the dominance of meaning. That is to say, the language poetry of Bernstein is deconstructed on the Derridaian perspective in a way that it is written to prove that all systems of communication can be interrupted to move into difference and gaps of space and time. According to Messerli (2018),

For more than 40 years, Bernstein has been writing poetry that does not always mean what it seems to be saying…that his uses of language might be described as just outside of conventional expression which creates both a lightness and a weightiness in the writing that is odd in American poetry (n.p).

Thus, the research examined the fact that Bernstein does not mean to form 'limits' within his poetry, but rather to set in motion 'conversations' that violate the basic requirements of acceptable syntax, reasonable morphology, constant discourse, and adequate semantics.

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