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Shawn Normandin

"What do you mean by *rashes of ash*?" So begins Charles Bernstein's "A Test of Poetry," which consists of questions about passages from his own poems. He explains that "A Test of Poetry" "is based on a letter from Ziquing [sic] Zhang, who translated poems from *Rough Trades* and *The Sophist* for *Selected Language Poems*," published in Chengdu in 1993 (*My Way* 318). Zhang's 1992 letter is now available through the University of California's Mandeville Special Collections Library. A close comparison of "A Test of Poetry" with its source gives insight into Bernstein's production during an important phase of language writing, when some of its leading figures began to achieve professional academic success. Both haters and lovers of modern poetry often emphasize its self-referential tendencies, and Bernstein finds an ingenious way of having his self-referential cake and eating it too: although "A Test of Poetry" is about Bernstein's poetry, which it quotes, Zhang's letter, a source written by a different person and from a different culture, mediates Bernstein's self-interrogation: ipseity emerges through alterity. But reading the poem in tandem with the letter will show that Bernstein's poetic practice does not always exemplify the values promoted by his critical writings.

Zhang's letter takes the form of an outline with sections devoted to each translated poem; these sections subdivide into specific queries, marked with Arabic numerals or lowercase letters. The most obvious changes Bernstein makes are to abandon the outline format and to lineate the questions as verse. Since he skips over many parts of Zhang's outline, the resulting poem is a collage of sorts, though its sequence of questions matches the sequence of the corresponding questions in the outline.

As one might expect, Bernstein fixes most of Zhang's typos and grammatical errors, but two of Bernstein's stylistic changes are worth dwelling on. English questions usually invert the subject-verb word order of statements, placing an auxiliary *do* or *does* before the subject ("you went to the park" versus "Did you go to the park?"). The questions in Zhang's letter, ending with question marks, often follow the syntax of English statements. Here Zhang aligns English with Chinese, which does not require a change of word order in yes-no questions, only the addition of the particle *ma* (吗) at the end of the sentence. "A Test of Poetry" frequently changes Zhang's nonstandard syntax to make it conform to the verb-subject order of English yes-no questions: by my count, Bernstein makes such changes twenty times.[1] Moreover, in its use of definite and indefinite articles, the poem deviates from Zhang's letter at least twelve times. Articles prove to be one of the most difficult parts of speech for non-native speakers of English to master, and Chinese does not have definite or indefinite articles.

If Bernstein did not disclose that the poem is based on his Chinese translator's questions, no one would have guessed it, since the poem's speaker almost always uses standard academic English to inquire about the strange quotations. Bernstein adapted the letter in a way that eliminated most traces of EFL.[2] Unlike "A Test of Poetry," Zhang's letter was obviously written by a non-native speaker of English, though one who obtained a high level of proficiency. Bernstein's standardization of Zhang's queries may seem innocuous, and publishing a poem that flaunted Zhang's nonstandard English might have been rude.[3] But Bernstein has been a vigorous opponent of linguistic standardization. In *A Poetics*, one of his major critical works, he argues:

> Insofar as English-language poets pursue
> their dialectical differences in a radically de-
> centering way, then all of us will confront
> – more often than some of us now do – "foreign"

> Englishes & no dialect will be held above
> the others as common coin. Such
> a development in English-
> language poetry is welcome: the inherent difficulties
> are more than compensated for by the knowledge
> that comes from respecting differences. (*A Poetics* 59)

"A Test of Poetry," however, forgoes the chance to circulate much of Zhang's "foreign" English: the poem diminishes the Chinese quality of Zhang's questions, making them sound like language produced by an authoritative English speaker, a professor like Charles Bernstein. According to Bob Perelman, "Normative language is the target" of *A Poetics*, yet "dismissing normative writing leaves no other role for poetry than the negative one of reacting against the center. When it comes to positing a public function for poetry, Bernstein is much more tentative . . . " (81). Bernstein recollects

> a profound humiliation and degradation that I had to undergo: a private-school hazing into Grammar, which once mastered I cannot unlearn but which, like many men, I am perennially suspicious of even as it continues to inform the expression of my (most well-founded) beliefs and convictions: the artifice of my authenticity. (*A Poetics* 223)

Normalizing Zhang's English, Bernstein verifies his own inability to "unlearn." Zhang's nonstandard expressions almost never obstruct the meaning of his inquiries; Bernstein's standardization of Zhang erases linguistic differences without obtaining any semantic benefits. Perhaps he wanted to avoid perpetuating the "humiliation" that he suffered, but the avoidance required him to become a tacit enforcer of "Grammar."

The theme of grammar is something both "A Test of Poetry" and Bernstein's comments on it repress. He proposes that "The interesting thing about the translator's questions in *A Test of Poetry* is that the difficulties posed by the poems were not syntactic or grammatic or even structural but rather questions of cultural reference, especially from American popular, local, and mass culture" (*Attack* 250). In another revisiting of the poem, Bernstein argues that "the overriding difficulty is cultural, especially in terms of vernacular, cultural reference, and social context" (*Pitch* 8). It is true that Zhang had difficulty understanding many of the cultural references made by Bernstein's poems. But Zhang's questions sometimes indicate uncertainty about the correct grammatical interpretation of the poet's sentences; indeed, Zhang remarks at least three times that particular passages do not seem grammatical. These remarks sound a bit like complaints, and none of them appears in "A Test of Poetry." Perhaps Bernstein downplays Zhang's legitimate grammatical difficulties because explaining cultural references is part of the project of "respecting differences," while grammar conjures up the disciplinary procedures that cultivate linguistic conformity by purging differences.

The politics of grammar becomes most salient in pedagogical settings, and "A Test of Poetry" is not only about translation and poetry: it is about pedagogy.[4] The title is the first pedagogical symptom: *test* recalls one of the most prominent mechanisms of formal education, and the title alludes to a textbook by Louis Zukofsky, another New York poet-professor.[5] Since the poem's speaker never says he or she is translating, readers need not interpret the questions as a translator's. Indeed, the poem's sentences look like the kind of questions teachers jot on student essays: for example, "who or what has / *stalled*?" (228). Such questions are usually rhetorical: posing a corrective statement in the form of a question is a more polite (or passive-aggressive) way of indicating a student's error; the teacher does not necessarily want to know "who or what has / *stalled*," but seeks to prompt the student to clarify his or her writing. Linguistic studies of rhetorical questions (or reversed polarity questions, RPQs) have noted their prevalence in teaching. Irene Koshik demonstrates that such pedagogical questions often take the form of "a known-information question . . ., one to which the teacher knows the answer, rather than a request for information"; since these questions can convey "a negative assertion about a portion of student text, RPQs can act as veiled criticisms of that text, showing that it is problematic . . . " (76). RPQs are "probably universal," but their specific use in teacher-student relationships "to elicit error correction does not seem to be universal" (147). Though Koshik argues that pedagogical RPQs

are common "in middle-class North American culture" (154), she finds that they are "not characteristic of pedagogical interactions in all cultures, even some sub-cultures within North America, where the preferred manner of learning is through observation rather than performance" (155). The poem's rhetorical questions evoke a culturally specific subject, that of a middle-class, North American educator.

While it would not make much sense for his Chinese translator to ask the poet "known-information questions," it would make sense for a North American professor like Bernstein to ask students such questions, especially in the interest of enhancing the clarity of their writing and its conformity to institutional norms. Yet the pedagogical insistence on norms is something Bernstein has spent much of his career polemicizing against,[6] and many of his poems are exuberantly nonstandard and obscure. We can read "A Test of Poetry" as having two different speakers: a Chinese translator asking real questions and a North American professor asking rhetorical questions. If we read the poem as a series of pedagogical questions, then we may also discover a split between two Bernsteins: the defiantly nonstandard poet who wrote the poems quoted by "A Test of Poetry," and the speaker of that poem, who is a product and an agent of standardization, of "error correction."

Zhang translated poems from two books, *The Sophist* (1987) and *Rough Trades* (1991), between whose publication dates Bernstein acquired a tenure-track job (1990). "A Test of Poetry" thus registers Bernstein's becoming professorial, a metamorphosis that did not escape criticism.[7] Near the beginning of *My Way* (a book in which "A Test of Poetry" also appears), Bernstein responds to his detractors with another array of questions:

> What is a poet-critic, or critic-poet, or professor-poet-critic?; which comes first and how can you tell?; do the administrative and adjudicative roles of a professor mark the sell-out of the poet?; does critical thinking mar creativity, as so many of the articles in the Associated Writing Program newsletter insist? Can poets and scholars share responsibilities for teaching literature and cultural studies or must poets continue to be relegated to, or is it protected by, creative writing workshops, where, alone in the postmodern university, the expressive self survives? (5)

The last of these questions seems sarcastically rhetorical. Bernstein confesses: "I tell the few friends I have left, now that I am poet-professor at the University at Buffalo, I have retreated to an Ivory Tower, removed from the daily contact I used to have, as a poet-office worker in Manhattan, with the broad masses of the American people … " (5–6). It would be obtuse to argue that Bernstein forfeited poetic and political credibility simply by getting an academic job. But "A Test of Poetry" indicates that the problem of Bernstein's becoming professorial is not so easily joked away, that it entails some complicity in standardization. The social nexus of poetry, academic patronage, and late capitalist pedagogy is what Fredric Jameson might consider the content of this poem's self-referential, interrogative form (xvii).

My Way also includes "A Defence of Poetry," a strenuously nonstandard poem whose idiosyncrasies of spelling and punctuation celebrate writing's materiality (1–2). Yet Perelman observes that "such a fixation on the letter connotes an empowered native speaker. A nonnative speaker would want to translate, get the message; the strangeness of the word would not be an uncanny revelation, it would be an all-too-familiar experience" (93). This was precisely Zhang's predicament. The exacting literalism of his questions may amuse readers who know the kind of poems Bernstein writes. But at the end of his letter, Zhang says that he needs clear responses to his questions because the dominant poets of the People's Republic of China are not receptive to avant-garde writing and will harshly criticize him for any perceived errors in his translation. To laugh at Zhang would be provincial. He was suffering under a Chinese version of what Bernstein calls "official verse culture," though Zhang seems to have had much less freedom to protest.

However disappointing we may consider it, Bernstein's complicity in standardization actually enriches "A Test of Poetry." By diminishing the Chinese quality of Zhang's questions and by repressing the problem of grammar, Bernstein prevents readers from reducing "A Test of Poetry" to the representation of a translator persona's utterance. The poem thereby becomes like the duck/rabbit

illustration famously discussed by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*.[8] Just as one can see the illustration either as depicting a duck or a rabbit (but not see both at the same time), so one can read "A Test of Poetry" as emanating from two distinct subject positions. We can also understand the poem's narratorial indeterminacy as a fascinating development of what Bernstein calls *dysraphism*. In a note to his poem "Dysraphism," Bernstein explains that it "is a word used by specialists in congenital disease to mean a dysfunctional fusion of embryonic parts – a birth defect . . . . *Raph* literally means 'seam,' so dysraphism is mis-seaming – a prosodic device! But it has the punch of being the same root as rhapsody (*rhaph*) . . . " (37). Béa Aronson points out that "the mis-seaming" of dysraphism "can also be read as a 'mis-seeming': words do not seem what they seem and seam" (91). "A Test of Poetry" originates from a Chinese translator's questions, but the poem's speaker does not seem (sound) like a Chinese translator; the speaker, who *does* seem like a US professor, is not seamed properly to Professor Bernstein, since why would Bernstein ask such literalistic questions about his own poems? His earlier poems (such as the ones Zhang translated) usually perform dysraphism on the level of the individual line or sentence by stitching words together in indecorous ways – for example, "*shards of bucolic pastry anchored / against cactus cabinets, Nantucket buckets*" ("Test" 228). While "A Test of Poetry" incorporates such local dysraphic disturbances in its italicized quotations, the poem is also dysraphic as a whole, since it projects distinct speakers, neither of which is altogether seemly.

Notes

1. In a few instances, "A Test of Poetry" keeps Zhang's non-inverted syntax: "*Falls* means to descend / from a higher to a lower / or to drop down wounded or dead?" ("Test" 229); "In the phrase *a sideshow freak* – /the *freak* refers to a hippie? *Sideshow* refers to secondary / importance? Or an abnormal actor in the sideshow?" (230); "The stalker / is a witness at first and then a witless witness?" (231).
2. Bernstein preserves the nonstandard plural form "oxes" and Zhang's non-idiomatic phrase "doing shopping" ("Test" 231–32). It is doubtful, however, that readers would assume, on the basis of these examples alone, that the poem's speaker was not a native speaker of English. The term *speaker* is potentially misleading, since the poem's source is a written text, and *speaker* suggests *voice*, a vexed term in language writing. I use *speaker* to describe the human individual who apparently produces the poem's language. As we will see, the poem resists reduction to the coherent utterance of an individual subject, though the poem does project illusions of subjectivity. The series of questions inevitably makes readers imagine a person who wants to know something or who is asking questions to achieve some rhetorical end.
3. The discourtesy might have verged on racism, since the poem, which is hilarious, could have been interpreted by US readers as the mockery of an East Asian foreigner.
4. Megan Swihart Jewell shows how Bernstein's work relates to recent developments in writing pedagogy.
5. Alan Golding discusses the obstacles confronted byZukofsky during the process of assembling *A Test of Poetry*.
6. See, for example, his attack on the "normalizing prose styles" that dominate academic writing (*My Way* 91).
7. For a journalistic account of the controversy caused by the belated academic employment of some language writers, see Epstein.
8. "A Defence of Poetry" mentions "the duck/rabitt [sic]" (*My Way* 2). Bernstein's interest in Wittgenstein is well known.

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