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REVIEW ESSAYS

Radical Artifice.
Marjorie Perloff
University of Chicago Press

Reviewed by Erik Reece

Seemingly since Jacob Epstein’s 1988 polemic, “Who Killed Poetry?” there has been much sectarian ballyhoo over the purpose of poetry in the contemporary, highly mediated American techno-culture. The post-Beat practitioners, trafficking in subversive subject matter, rail against the formulaic lyric that creative writing workshops manufacture in what has to be the worst example of supply-side economics since nobody, so the argument goes, reads poetry anyway. Those cloistered inside university creative writing workshops blame the recondite experiments of the West Coast scholl loosely labelled “the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets”, for making verse incomprehensible to that shadowy figure, the man in the street. The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E apologists riposte that since the world is no longer Wordsworth’s pastoral sanctuary of self, the mawkish solipsism of formal lyric poetry is little more than reactionary drivel.

There are so many schools of poetry and so many genealogies leading to its modern matrix, that to pronounce poetry dead is to profess one’s own ignorance of this protean field - perhaps the only modern art form whose emergence hasn’t been hamstrung by commercial distractions, as is particularly the case with film and painting. The question, then, “Who killed poetry?” must be translated into “Who killed poetry’s audience?” The assumption behind both questions is that if American readers have turned their backs on poetry, the poets themselves must have made a mistake somewhere. Complacent critics who gauge such shifts employ popularity, which then becomes equated with populism (in fact a vastly different political enterprise), as a barometer for an art form’s vitality. And while it is easy to wax nostalgic about a lost oral tradition and the days when poetry appeared on the front pages of daily newspapers, American audiences have never been moved by poetry in the way we are told Vladimir Mayakovsky electrified stadiums-full of the Russian masses. While Carl

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Sandburg, Vachel Lindsey, Longfellow and Langston Hughes accrued admirable grassroots support for their work, America’s truest populist poet and most unflagging champion of democracy, Walt Whitman, would have trouble securing an NEA grant in this the centennial year of his death. Because populism ultimately is debased by self-interest and suspicion of the unfamiliar, poets have almost by definition always set themselves outside of public taste.

The central question concerning American poetry, then, must shift from “Why doesn’t anyone read poetry?” to “What is the role of poetry in our contemporary culture?” Such an inquiry must first be an evaluation of a consumer culture governed by the ecumenical image, perpetuated in a virtual reality where a recent poll showed the majority of Americans believe a fictitious TV character would make a better President than the all-too-real Vice-President. Because all of our experience is mediated in some way by the omni-present cathode ray, the search for a Whitmanesque poetic of “natural speech” becomes superfluous. As anthropologist James Clifford has argued, the “authentic” voice of regional and ethnic diversity is always “staged” in some way that privileges the medium over the message. The medium has itself become so carnivorous that, according to Clifford’s famous allegory, when an English ethnographer quizzed a Mpongwe chief on certain tribal terms, the chief retrieved from his hut an earlier English ethnographer’s compendium of African religious terms.

For many poets, then, it makes no sense to represent an irretrievable voice of authenticity. Before the poet can articulate the landscape, the self, or relationships with others, s/he must first express the complexity of working within a language that has been so paradoxically desensitized by over-exposure and neglect. The poetry that has grown up around this kind of cultural skepticism first became known as Language poetry, or the New Sentence. The field has long since become too diverse for the label to serve more than a nominal distinction between itself and, say, the New Formalism, the New York School, or Deep Image poetry. This paratactic poetic has also come under heavy attack for its supposed aridity, its urbane intellectual exercises, its rejection of “the real world” - in short, its “radical artifice.”

Marjorie Perloff takes up the thorny issue of contemporary poetics at precisely this objection. Radical Artifice (1991), subtitled “Writing Poetry in the Age of Media,” begins with the complaint of one of Perloff’s Stanford students concerning Language poetry: “Why can’t they write like Kafka?” Perloff immediately understands that to mean “that Kafka, no matter how difficult his meanings, how subtle his network of references, how ambiguous his tone, wrote prose whose syntax is perfectly lucid.” If Kafka can evoke such resonant textures from perfectly crafted understatement, why must the contemporary reader be verbally abused by a vocabulary and syntax that seldom allow for any referential footing. Perloff’s answer becomes the basis of the book’s subtitle. “Whereas Kafka positioned himself vis-a-vis the discourses of law, of justice, of business, and of bourgeois respectability... our own contact with these discourses tends to be always already mediated by a third voice, the voice of the media,” writes Perloff. For the remaining 200 pages, she fervently disarms the attackers of Language writing by squeezing water from poems that seem to many readers like the most sterile, impenetrable stones.

Perloff makes no claims to represent all of American poetry, nor does she mask her belief that a very select group of poets have been doing the only work of real importance throughout this century. Though, as I have said, pedigrees abound, the vein of poetry Perloff has mined throughout her career might be reduced to this: IMAGE-OBJECT-TEXT. Ezra Pound introduced Imagism into poetry around 1914, emphasizing the presentation of things over the vacuously impressionistic, “poetic” language of emotionalism. Objectivism grew out of Imagism in the ’30s, celebrating the poem as a thing in itself—part of reality rather than a representation of it. Contemporary poets like John Cage, Clark Coolidge, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Michael Palmer and many others have learned the lessons of both Imagism and Objectivism to emerge as poets primarily concerned with rupturing the illusion that language is somehow a vehicle for romantic transcendence, or a transparent film through which the world can be filtered. One of Perloff’s stunning observations—stunning because it seems so obvious, yet has been ignored by literary critics—is that it took American advertising decades to catch up to the efficiency of Imagism’s presentation over the tedious verbose descriptions that comprised most ads in the early part of the century (the book is plentifully illustrated to prove Perloff’s point). The problem is that once advertising learned the powerful seductiveness of the image, “the image had become a problematic poetry property.” For Perloff, if the image has become the dominant form of commerce under capitalism, the function of a radical poetics must at some
level attack the image. "Such powerful images challenge poetic discourse to deconstruct rather than duplicate them. They prompt what has become an ongoing, indeed a necessary dialectic between the simulacrum and its other, a dialectic no longer between the image and the real, as early Modernists construed it, but between the word and the image," she writes.

Like Frederick Jameson, Martin Jay, Andrew Ross and the battalion of postmodern critics, Perloff is fighting the good fight against the homogenizing forces of capital and technocracy. In one chapter, she cops Jameson's familiar trope, pastiche, to show how two poems by John Ashbery and Charles Bernstein are inevitably influenced by our just-the-FAX preference for impersonal communication, while each poem, in different ways, simultaneously refuses the neat systematization of computerized interface. "[P]oetic discourse defines itself as that which can violate the system, which refuses the formula and the binary opposition between 1 and 2." Because the OVC - "official verse culture" - refused to admit this fundamental schism in representation, Perloff rejects much - one would have to say most - American poetry as so much conventional, lyrical baggage that has been left behind by the more effective visual media. A breath-taking landscape may still be sublime, but it suffers over-exposure. Media events have robbed us of the authentic experience, so poetry must turn to a more radical mode of presentation to push still further Pound's 70-year-old admonition to "make it new."

Yet Perloff's insistence that contemporary poets must marginalize themselves through radical artifice because all of the margins have been commodified by the mainstream is surely an over-simplification, and perhaps a subtle rationalization for devoting her attention to a canon that is mostly white, straight, married with children. Native American poetry, to take one example, remains largely prosaic in its presentation of egregious suffering and resilience at the hands of the federal government and corporate America. Yet the poetry remains politically and emotionally potent. Documentation can be a political as well as a poetic act. Yet for writers who cannot authentically voice the dispossession of the marginalized - and whose respect for "the other" would never allow them to attempt it - the formally antipodal tactic of Language poetry remains a truly revolutionary gesture, and the field is lucky to have a proselytizer as ardent as Perloff.

From beginning to end, she proclaims John Cage the poet "who understood, at least as early as the fifties, that from now on poetry would have to position itself, not vis-a-vis the landscape or the city or this or that political event, but in relation to the media that, like it or not, occupy an increasingly large part of our verbal, visual, and acoustic space." True enough, but Perloff's defense of Cage's propensity to bore - "boredom can be creative" - isn't quite convincing. Finally, a long chapter on numerology-as-a-liberating-constraint simply goes too far afield, leaving us to wonder how it fits in with the subtitle, "Poetry in the Age of Media." Though highly informative as to the numerical sub-structures of Louis Zukofsky's and Georges Perec's work, it would have seemed more appropriate in Perloff's last, often brilliant collection of essays, Poetic License (1990).

Radical Artifice is Perloff's first extended attempt to relate poetry to the contemporary cultural mainstream, and she is careful to keep her distance from the nutty maw of camped-up critical slumming. In fact, Perloff seems content to rely more on cultural happenings than cultural studies in her accumulation of materials which she brings to bear on the poetry - a snatch of dialogue from a soap opera, a promo she picks up on a plane, a bulk-mail postcard she receives (and reproduces: Marjorie Perloff, 1467 Amalfi Drive, Pacific Palisades, CA 90272) advertising Barbara Kruger book-bags. And if she doesn't seem quite as comfortable within the parlance of popular culture as the more-pomo-than-thou, Andrew Ross, Perloff deserves much admiration as a scholar who has consistently expanded and complicated the discussion of contemporary poetry in an academic community that has been largely content to end its study of American poetry with the maudlin confessions of John Berryman and Robert Lowell. While Perloff rejects Pound's formal theories as dated, she retains his dictum that poetry must be operated within history, must offer a dissenting political voice, not an antiquated - however charming - display of poetic sensitivity. For a particular art form to remain vital, it must fulfill a function unique to all other artistic mediums. For Perloff, this means poetry must wage a vigilant attack on the commercial images and the hollowed-out shells of language that insidiously recruit us into Pepsi's somnambulant "Uh-huh!" generation.