

In Memoriam: Critic par excellence of Creative “Unoriginal Genius” & Marjorie Perloff’s Arcades Project of Poetry by “Other Means” (1951-2024)

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Abstract: Wittgenstein reflects on memory, saying that photograph is not reliable, and the memory-image cannot convince us either, since “memory does not show us the past, any more than our senses show us the present,” and “memory is itself conditioned by the specificity of context.” Reading closely the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth’s large art exhibition, called “The Play of the Unsayable,” Marjorie Perloff relates Wittgenstein’s theory of language game to Kosuth’s art text of *Abrided in Ghent*, and argues that the language game initiated by a sentence like “I see us still, sitting at the table” is charged with possibilities for “philosophy” as a “form of poetic composition.” Wittgenstein’s Ladder is an apt figure for Marjorie Perloff’s radical aesthetic which is ethical as well, doing the right thing for the individual poets, moving up the ladder which Gertrude Stein called “beginning again and again,” but with changes with repetition in a spiral way. Later in her preface of *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (2010), Marjorie provides her rationale to update her earlier work, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1991) in terms of a “new citational and often constrained-bound poetry” in an environment of “hyper-information.” Since *Unoriginal Genius* (2010), Perloff traces her poetics of “unoriginal genius” from a Benjaminian Arcades Project, made up of creative citations, discussing the processes of choice, framing, and reconfiguration. It is my contention that Marjorie Perloff as the critic par excellence has been dedicating her own Arcades Project to explore the intriguing development in contemporary poetry, creatively embracing the “unoriginal” writing of uncreative poets.

Keywords: Marjorie Perloff; Wittgensteinian ladder; Walter Benjaminian arcades project; unoriginal genius, critic par excellence

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Introduction

Wittgenstein reflects on memory, saying that photograph is not reliable, and the memory-image cannot convince us either, since “memory does not show us the past, any more than our senses show us the present,” and “memory is itself conditioned by the specificity of context.” Reading closely the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth’s large art exhibition, called “The Play of the Unsayable,” Marjorie Perloff relates Wittgenstein’s theory of language game to Kosuth’s art text of *Abridged in Ghent*, and argues that the language game initiated by a sentence like “I see us still, sitting at the table” is charged with possibilities for “philosophy” as a “form of poetic composition.” Wittgenstein’s Ladder is an apt figure for Marjorie Perloff’s radical aesthetic which is ethical as well, doing the right thing for the individual poets, moving up the ladder which Gertrude Stein called “beginning again and again,” but with changes with repetition in a spiral way. Later in her preface of *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (2010), Marjorie provides her rationale to update her earlier work, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1991) in terms of a “new citational and often constrained-bound poetry” in an environment of “hyper-information.” Since *Unoriginal Genius* (2010), Perloff traces her poetics of “unoriginal genius” from a Benjaminian Arcades Project, made up of creative citations, discussing the processes of choice, framing, and reconfiguration.

The purpose of this essay is to memorialize and celebrate her great achievement during the period of 1951-2024 when Marjorie Perloff as the critic par excellence has been dedicating her own Arcades Project to explore the intriguing development in contemporary poetry, creatively embracing the “unoriginal” writing of uncreative poets.

Critic Par Excellence: Marjorie Perloff’s Arcade Project of Poetry

In a notebook entry of *Zettel*, Ludwig Wittgenstein ponders the role of memory:

650. Memory: “I see us still, sitting at that table.”—But have I really the same visual image—or one of those that I had then? Do I also certainly see the table and my friend from the same point of view as then, and so not see myself?—My memory—image is not evidence for that past situation, like a photograph which was taken then and convinces me now that this was how things were then. The memory-image and the memory-words stand on the same level.” (*Wittgenstein’s Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*, 1996, 241)

Wittgenstein further reflects on memory, saying that photograph is not reliable, and the memory-image cannot convince us either, since “memory does not show us the past, any more than our senses show us the present,” and “memory is itself conditioned by the specificity of context.” Reading closely the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth’s large art exhibition, called “The Play of the Unsayable,” Marjorie Perloff relates Wittgenstein’s theory of language game to Kosuth’s art text of *Abridged in Ghent*, and argues that the language game initiated by a sentence like “I see us still, sitting at the table” is charged with possibilities—possibilities for “philosophy” as a “form of poetic composition.”

Marjorie elaborates this as follows: “In the case of *Abridged at Ghent*, the seemingly simple device of the photograph, placed on the page as a screen that occludes the actual words beneath it, is used, paradoxically, to bring out those words’ latent meanings. It is a language game Wittgenstein himself would have found tantalizing, demonstrating, as it does, the intricate relationship of ‘family resemblance’ to difference. ‘The problem,’ as he put it in the *Philosophical Investigations*, ‘are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always shown.’ Arranging what we have always known”: here is the legacy Wittgenstein has given to artists and poets” (242), says Marjorie, summarizing Kosuth’s particular conceptualism as the lesson that “Ethics and aesthetics are one.”

Wittgenstein’s Ladder is an apt figure for Marjorie Perloff’s radical aesthetic which is ethical as well, doing the right thing for the individual poets, moving up the ladder which Gertrude Stein called “beginning again and again,” but with changes with repetition in a spiral way or “transductive” way in the context or “feedback loops” of the context in which words and sentences define their meanings.

Later in her preface of *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (2010), Marjorie provides her rationale to update her earlier work, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1991) in terms of a “new citational and often constrained-bound poetry” in an environment of “hyper-information.” In *Unoriginal Genius*, Marjorie begins with T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, “Poetry of the Pound Tradition,” and Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*. And further, “From Avant-Garde to Digital: The Legacy of Brazilian Concrete Poetry, with the example of Augusto de Campos’s digital versions of his own poem in 1997 for Casa das Rosas in Sao Paolo; Charles Bernstein’s opera libretto *Shadowtime* and Walter Benjamin’s life, explicitly citing by a literary means linking concrete poetry to the work of Oulipo. Susan Howe’s “lyrical montage” of *The Midnight* in sections of prose and poetry with interwoven photographs of books and pieces of Howe’s family memoir, crossing the borders of genre; “Language in Migration: Multilingualism and Exophonic Writing in the New Poetics” dedicates to the Japanese-born Yoko Tawada’s language games and the French-Norwegian Caroline Bergvall, contrasting them with Eliot and Dante’s and Pound’s *Cantos*; and finally, Kenneth Goldsmith’s uncreative and conceptual writing in his 2007 work *Traffic*, showing and revealing Perloff’s own *Arcades Project*.

The *Arcades* in Paris had been constructed around the beginning of the nineteenth century, and Walter Benjamin linked them to the city street life in which the *flâneur* was strolling or loafing, observing modern urban life, like French poet, Charles Baudelaire. At first, the *Arcades* began as a small article he would finish in a short period time, attempting to use collage techniques in literature. However, Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* grew bigger, like Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos*. It includes sections or *convolutes* on *Arcades*, *Fashion*, *Catacombs*, *iron constructions*, *exhibitions*, *advertising*, *Interior design*, *Baudelaire*, *The Streets of Paris*, *Panoramas and Dioramas*, *Mirrors*, *Painting*, *Modes of Lighting*, *Railroads*, *Marx*, *Photography*, *Mannequins*, *Social movements*, *Literary History*, *the Stock exchange*, *Lithography*, *the Paris Commune*, and what not. The Project’s structure is unique, and the *convolutes* correspond to letters of the alphabet. The individual sections of text in the form of individual lines or multi-paragraph analyses are ordered with square brackets, starting from [A1,1]. This numbering system comes from the pieces of folded paper that Benjamin wrote on, along with Benjamin’s own cross-references at the end of some sections. The sections of text are composed of Benjamin’s own thoughts and consecutive quotations. These two types of textual sections include a large typeface for his writing and a smaller one for citations.

In fact, Marjorie Perloff argues that Benjamin’s “citational material” of

“the endless quotations in the Arcades” took on a life of its own—a life, not of historiography or of philosophical treatise but of poetic construct” of “literary appeal” (28). It is not difficult to see that Benjamin’s inclusion of popular songs, poems, travel-guides, literary narratives, and commentary reminds us a rich and poetic mélange or Deleuzean “assemblage” of text. What’s at stake in Benjaminian citation theory is the act of citing, recycling, mediating other people’s words and sentences, and entire texts, thereby implying Marjorie’s critical texts before and after the conceptualization of “Unoriginal Genius” which has been developed from *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1991) till *Infrathin: An Experiment in Micropoetics* (2021), I dare presume.

Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media. University of Chicago Press, 1991; *Wittgenstein’s Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*. University of Chicago Press, 1996; *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*. Northwestern University Press, 1996; *Poetry On and Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions*. Northwestern University Press, 1998; *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture*, with a New Preface. University of Chicago Press, 2003; *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*. University of Alabama Press, 2004; *The Vienna Paradox: A Memoir*. New Directions Books, 2004; *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. University of Chicago Press, 2010; *Poetics in a New Key: Interviews and Essays*. University of Chicago Press, 2014; *Edge of Irony: Modernism in the Shadow of the Habsburg Empire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2016; *Infrathin: An Experiment in Micropoetics* (2021).

In fact, Perloff traces her poetics of “unoriginal genius” from a Benjaminian Arcades Project, made up of creative citations, discussing the processes of choice, framing, and reconfiguration as in the work of Brazilian Concretism and Oulipo, of such hybrid citational texts as Charles Bernstein’s opera libretto *Shadowtime* and Susan Howe’s documentary lyric sequence *The Midnight*. Perloff also finds that the new syncretism extends to language: for example, to the French-Norwegian Caroline Bergvall writing in English and the Japanese Yoko Tawada, in German. *Unoriginal Genius* concludes with a discussion of Kenneth Goldsmith’s conceptualist book *Traffic*—a seemingly “pure” radio transcript of one holiday weekend’s worth of traffic reports. In these instances and many others, Perloff shows us “poetry by other means” of great creative complexity.

Marjorie Perloff as the critic par excellence has been dedicating to explore the intriguing development in contemporary poetry, creatively embracing the “unoriginal” writing of uncreative poets.

Conclusion in Memoriam

It is interesting to notice that Marjorie began her career with Yeats Dissertation at the Catholic University of America. In an interview with Charles Bernstein, “Futurism and Schism: Close Listening with Marjorie Perloff,” Marjorie talked about William Butler Yeats:

I still think he is a great poet, but I was certainly influenced by the culture of my university years. In the 60s, Yeats was a hot dissertation topic. Gayatri Spivak, for example, wrote her dissertation on Yeats. All kinds of people who you wouldn't expect worked on Yeats because there was so much to do. On Blake as well. You could explicate Blake's late prophetic books like *Jerusalem*. The same thing was true of Yeats, and it just seemed very exciting. But don't forget that I wrote my dissertation on rhyme: it was the formal aspect of Yeats's poetry that interested me, and with respect to sound. I still think Yeats, is an absolutely extraordinary poet, however different he may be from, say, Gertrude Stein. Yeats's work is so rich and complex.¹

In fact, her dissertation was published as *Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats* (as a book in 1970).

Confucius considered life as a process of transformation that moves through different developmental stages, with each stage having its own task and process. Confucius reviewed his own life journey and suggested the following stages of life (*Confucian Analects*, Confucius 1971 [500 B.C.E.]; Cheng, Y. 1988).

In *The Analects*, Confucius provides us with maps of human development. The Master said, at 15, I set my heart upon learning; At 30, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground; At 40, I no longer suffered from perplexities; At 50, I knew what were the biddings of heaven; At 60, I heard them with docile ears; At 70, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right.

1. 志學 : 15; 2. 弱冠 : 20; 3. 而立 : 30; 4. 不惑 : 40; 5. 知天命 : 50; 6. 耳順 :

1 See https://press.uchicago.edu/books/excerpt/2015/Perloff_Poetics_New_Key.html. Accessed 15 May 2024.

60; 7. 古稀 : 70 從心 ; 8. 傘壽 : 80; 9. 卒壽 : 90; 10. 上壽 : 100

At the age of 93 now, she is in heaven. Farewell, Marjorie, till we meet again.

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