

Marjorie Perloff's "Third Path" of Poetry Criticism and Its Reception in China

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Abstract: As a world-renown American critic and theorist in poetry, Marjorie Perloff (1931-2024), with her in-depth exploration into western avant-garde poetry and poetics and her theoretical and methodological reconstruction by means of dialog with the 20th-century American critical theories, made great and unique achievements, which can be labelled as "the third path" in poetry criticism in terms of its transcending New Criticism and Cultural Criticism in the 20th and early 21st centuries. Since her first visit to China in 2007 and her co-founding of the Chinese/American Association for Poetry and Poetics in 2008, Perloff's critical theories and ideas have been translated or introduced into China. This paper presents an examination of Perloff's "third path" of poetry criticism, and its introduction to and influence upon China's poetry creation and criticism.

Keywords: Marjorie Perloff; the third path of poetry criticism; Chinese scholarship

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Marjorie Perloff (1931-2024) is one of the foremost critics of contemporary, modern, and avant-garde poetry and poetics now writing in English. Educated at Oberlin College, Barnard College, and the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C., she became a distinguished scholar and professor at various universities, including Sadie D. Patek Professor of Humanities at Stanford University, Florence Scott Professor Emerita of English at the University of Southern California, and the Weidenfeld Professor of European Literature at Oxford University. Her teaching and research cover a vast range from the 20th- and 21st-century poetry and poetics, both Anglo-American and from a comparativist perspective, to intermedia and the visual arts. As a poetry critic and theorist of world fame, Perloff is the winner of many honors and awards, include fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Huntington Foundation. She was elected as a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and served as President

of the Modern Language Association and the American Philosophical Society. Perloff is also a great influence upon China's scholarship in poetry criticism, especially her original and unique theory and methodology in poetry criticism, which can be labelled as the "third path" of poetry criticism for its transcending New Criticism in the mid-20th century and Cultural Criticism in the late 20th century.

I. "The Third Path": Marjorie's Poetry Criticism and Poetics

As an influential American poetry critic and theorist, Marjorie Perloff has published numerous books, articles, and essays, discussing issues ranging from *digital poetics* to *philosophy*. Her early books dealt with individual poets such as W. B. Yeats in *Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats* (1970), Robert Lowell in *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell* (1973), and Frank O'Hara in *Poet Among Painters* (1977). With the publication of *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (1981), she turned to an extensive exploration of avant-garde art movements. Over 10 books by her such as *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (1986), and *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (2011) examine the politics and aesthetics of the avant-garde as it has gone through modernist and postmodernist variations. In *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1992), she dealt with digital poetics, and in *21st-Century Modernism* (2002) is a manifesto of modernist survival, which is quite rebellious against the mainstream idea that modernism was gone with the rise of postmodernism in the second half of the 20th century. She is also the author of *Poetics in a New Key* (2014), a collection of her major interviews, and *Wittgenstein's Ladder* (1996), a cultural memoir.

Perloff stands out in the international academic arena through his profound exploration of European and American avant-garde poetics and her revolutionary reconstruction of the theory and methodology of poetry criticism from a distinct and far-sighted perspective. She initiated a series of constructive theories on fundamental poetic issues such as aesthetics and its practice, media and form, function and value of poetry, the relationship between traditional poetics and the culture of modern science and technology, and the identity and role of a poet.

Based on this, she developed and practiced a revolutionary methodology of poetry criticism, characteristic of "differential reading," as she put it in her *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (2004). By "differential," Perloff presented her micropoetics about reading the minute difference in similarity or the almost-same. Just as Peter Nicholls comments, "*Differentials* offers readings with a difference, discovering textual difficulty as a source of pleasure and restoring to literary analysis

an excitement we had almost forgotten it might have” (Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*, Backcover). This theory is further explored in her other books and essays. In *Infrathin: An Experiment in Micropoetics* (2021), she claims, poetry might be defined as the art of the infrathin, “the art in which difference is more important than similarity,” and the practice of micropoetics involves a “super-close reading — a reading for the visual and sonic as well as the verbal elements in a text, for the individual phoneme, or letter as well as the larger semantic import”— and in which the context (history, geography, culture) of a poem’s conception and reception plays a crucial role (1-28). Just as Tal Goldfajn said, “Perloff is interested precisely in these smallest of differences [...]. Perloff’s book is an exercise in attention to such difference, to the smallest, subliminal variations that give a particular poetic passage its texture” (web).

In this and other books, Perloff defends her belief in the power of close reading, a strategy often maligned as reactionary to the late-20th-century prevailing critical atmosphere as represented by cultural criticism. Perloff’s theory opens up new readings of particular modernist works by exploring the unexpected verbal, visual, and sonic relationships that create new constructs and new contexts, ranging from T. S. Eliot to Ezra Pound, and to the contemporary avant-garde poets, including those who are usually categorized as LANGUAGE poets like Susan Howe, Charles Bernstein, Rae Armantrout, Ron Silliman, and Kenneth Goldsmith. But Professor Perloff’s critical theory and practice is not confined just to the text itself, but go beyond the text and presents a social and cultural perspective. According to Perloff, the contexts such as history, geography and culture of a poem’s conception and reception are also crucial to poetry reading.

In general, Perloff’s critical theory depends upon the integration of textual analysis and cultural examination, the combination of aesthetic and social attributes of poetry, the linking of tradition with the future, and the fusion of humanities and technology. To a great extent, her critical theory embraces both the aesthetically-oriented nature of new criticism and the culturally-oriented nature of cultural criticism, and can be regarded as the third path of American poetry criticism since the 20th century.

II. The Dissemination of Perloff’s Critical Theory in China

It seems to be destined for Marjorie Perloff’s critical theory to be introduced to and received by Chinese academia. Before her works and ideas were introduced to China, she had made acquainted with many Chinese and Chinese American scholars and guided and supported young Chinese scholars with great care. She had many

long-known friends and scholarly comrades like Zhaoming Qian, Yunte Huang, Timothy Yu, and Er Zhang. She had a special love for China and Chinese culture, probably because of her husband Joseph Perloff, who helped China as a doctor in Shanghai and Chongqing in the years of China's anti-Japanese War. She generously held a family dinner party to welcome about 20 Chinese scholars, including Nie Zhenzhao and Luo Lianggong, during the 5th International Convention of Chinese/American Association for Poetry and Poetics in Los Angeles, November 2016. Her friendship with Chinese and Chinese American scholars contributes to the dissemination of her ideas and works in China.

Perloff's enthusiasm in communicating with Chinese scholars prompted her cooperation with Nie Zhenzhao and Luo Lianggong, Chinese professors in the field of American poetry criticism, in initiating the founding of the Chinese/American Association for Poetry and Poetics (CAAP) in 2008, the following year of her first visit to China. In June-July 2007, Perloff, together with her husband, visited Beijing, Xi'an, Chongqing, Yichang, Wuhan, Hangzhou and Shanghai. During this visit, she took part in the International Conference on the 20th Century American Poetry at Central China Normal University. Her speech and talk about the poetry "on- and off-page" so strikingly impressed Chinese scholars as to cast new light upon Chinese scholarship on poetry and poetics. After the establishment of CAAP, she visited China for 4 more times, respectively in September 2011, May 2014, November 2017, and November 2019, and took part in all CAAP conventions, virtually and physically, and the online International Poetics Symposium in Celebration of Marjorie Perloff's 90th Birthday organized by Chinese scholars in September 2021. During her each visit, Perloff would deliver one or more speeches or lectures, allowing Chinese scholars to know her scholarship in a lively way, and keeping the Chinese audience in pace with the outcome of her new publications.

The first academic introduction to Perloff's critical theory appeared just before her first visit in 2007. Luo Lianggong published his interview with Perloff in *Foreign Literature Studies* 3 (2007). This interview provides a brief introduction to Marjorie Perloff and her academic achievements. In this interview, Perloff gave a summary of her poetics and its evolution, claiming herself as a formalist, a literary historian and an evaluative comparatist critic, expressed her ideas about modern and contemporary American poetry, including LANGUAGE poetry and other avant-garde poetry and ethnic American poetry (1-8). In the same journal, He Huibin published an article reviewing Perloff's *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*. In this article, He claims that differential reading Perloff advocated transcends the limitations of close reading and is more suitable for the analysis of contemporary

poetry, by combining textual reading with cultural context. He Huibin believes that differential reading is quite different from previous close reading that was often divorced from culture, politics, history, etc., which later led to the opposite, resulting in the popularity of cultural studies that attach importance to context, and the close reading gave way to “far-reading,” which made the focus of previous studies—literariness—disappear into the discussion of history. In this article, He Huibin claimed Perloff’s differential reading as a third way of literary reading which takes advantage of while going beyond both New Criticism and cultural criticism (171-173).

This is the very beginning of a wave of dissemination of Perloff’s academic theory and critical practices. Afterward, Perloff visited China 5 times and each time gave speeches and lectures, attracting much attention from Chinese scholars. When the CAAP was established in 2008, it became a very important channel of, among many missions and tasks, disseminating Perloff’s theories and of Perloff’s communication directly with Chinese scholars.

In 2012, the Chinese translation, by Nie Zhenzhao and others, of Marjorie Perloff’s *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* was published by Shanghai Foreign Education Press, as part of the 9-volume American Academy of Arts and Sciences fellows’ books on literary criticism. Nie expressed his reason for choosing this book for translation as below—

She stands at the forefront of contemporary American poetry, scrutinizing poetry creation in the media age with the sharpest eyes, holding the torch of wisdom to lead us into a new academic realm. She guides the development of contemporary poetry academic research with her profound knowledge and critical studies, and critics call her an author who reads with precision and refuses to hand over the authority of art criticism to teachers or theorists. (Nie 4)

This is Perloff’s first book translated into Chinese. And after this, a book of *A Study of Marjorie Perloff’s Poetic Criticism* by Zhang Xin, et al, was published in 2015. It presents a theoretical summary and review of Perloff’s major works ever published, which provides Chinese scholars with a chance of systematically understanding Perloff. Afterward, scholars such as Luo Lianggong, Shang Biwu, Wang Songlin, and Wang Zhuo published a series of articles on Perloff’s newly released collection of interviews and conversations—*Poetics in a New Key* (2014), which provides a variety of perspectives into Perloff’s critical theories and practices. Ever since there have been more articles and papers addressing Perloff’s theories and ideas in China.

III. The Reception of Perloff's Critical Theory in China

The wider and lasting dissemination of Perloff's critical theory and practice has received echoes from Chinese scholars. Perloff was quoted in an increasing number of academic papers and books by scholars such as Luo Lianggong, Ou Rong, Li Zhimin and Jiang Yan, especially in the works on American avant-garde poetry.

A tendency that deserves attention is that Chinese scholars such as Luo Lianggong, Zhang Xin, and Li Zhimin began to integrate Perloff's theory and concepts into their own theoretical discourse or theoretical construction. After He Huibin who translated and introduced Perloff's differential reading as a unique critical pattern, Luo Lianggong views Perloff's differential reading as a third of poetry criticism and attempts to integrate Perloff's theory of differentials and infrathin into his construction of "multi-dimensional text-based poetry criticism theory." According to the multidimensional text-based poetry critical theory, the poetic text is indeed constructed with language, and the grammatical structure, semantic structure and rhetorical devices of poetic language are all meaningful. The tone, attitude, theme and image emphasized by New Criticism are all based on language, and the text constructed by language has been the object of criticism and interpretation for a long time by New Criticism and the poetry criticism circle. However, this kind of poetry study often regards language as a set of symbols, and seldom pays attention to poets' exploitation of language material resources. The emphasis on symbolic characters in literary criticism not only oversets or overshadows the materiality of written language—including its visual and sound properties—and their special meaning generation mechanism, but also suppresses the participation of visual and auditory senses. This theory is deeply rooted in Perloff's theory of differential reading and infrathin.

In some sense, Luo Lianggong and other scholars in China are making efforts to absorb Perloff's unique critical theory, by means of reinterpreting and localizing, to construct a Chinese-style poetry critical theory. This also reflects Chinese scholar's endeavor to construct independent and China-suited theory based on mutual respect and dialogue with the world, which is reflected in Luo Lianggong's series of essays on "multi-dimensional text-based poetry critical theory" published since 2016, such as "The Poetics of Sound in African American Poetry," "Is Poetry an Art of Language?—An Tentative Exploration to the Text of English Poetry," and "Poetics of the Visual in Contemporary American Poetry."

In the past decade since 2010, with the wider translation and dissemination of

Perloff's academic theories and ideas and her influence in China, more Chinese scholars are following Perloff's pattern in criticism and perspective to poetry, demonstrating a transcendence over the legacy of New Criticism and Cultural Criticism and a contribution to China's own theoretical construction. It is convinced that Perloff poetic criticism theory and its academic thought will receive a more extensive and profound response from the future Chinese academia. In some sense, it is secure to say that Marjorie Perloff is the mentor of many scholars from China and the world. She has built a bridge and paved a ladder for the academic exchanges and poets' visits between China and the United States, and has made great contributions to the cultural exchanges between the East and the West with her academic wisdom, personality charm, spiritual horizon, and brilliant leadership as well.

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