
Marjorie Perloff. *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004. 307p.

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Marjorie Perloff's *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*, part of the series *Modern and Contemporary Poetics* by the University of Alabama Press, is a welcome addition to the never-ending controversy of what pedagogical approach to choose in the teaching and learning process of poetic creations in the post-structuralist era, where there is not one "correct" reading of a text since readers can construct the same poetic text in a variety of legitimate ways. As her way out of this dilemma Perloff proposes to go *ad fontes*—back to the roots—of "reading" and "translating," in the original sense of both words. Therefore, Perloff advocates that the only way to get at a poem is by close reading, that is, to read it word for word, line by line. This approach—borrowed from Marcel Duchamp, Gilles Deleuze, and Ludwig Wittgenstein—according to Perloff celebrates readings with a difference, called "Differential Reading" or "Reading Differentially," in which discovering questions and textual difficulties are perceived as pleasurable and exciting. In this sense, in my opinion, each student will be experiencing the process of "rædon" (O.E.), i.e., "figuring it out" by collecting enough textual and other evidence in order to "solve the puzzle" of a poetic text in collaboration with fellow students and the instructor of the class. Furthermore, as far as the early sources of this revived approach are concerned, I detect a close connection to Martin Luther's philosophy of how to translate—i.e., elicit meaning from a source—even though Perloff does not explicitly refer to his work.

Perloff's fourteen essays/articles/lectures—written, according to the author, in the last five years—can be seen together as a long, passionate argumentative manifesto with examples and supporting evidence for the worth of the Humanities and the study of poetry in graduate courses in the United States in the 21st century. Not all contributions in this volume, however, are new: some were previously published in journals or book chapters in collections; others were revised and rewritten by the author, as she states in the Introduction to the book (xxxiii). According to Perloff, "[w]hen I reread the fourteen essays [in the order presented in the book], I was surprised to find that they do in fact have a larger rationale and, I hope, a particular urgency" (xxxiii).

The pivotal essay of the book, Essay 1, "Crisis in the Humanities?: Reconfiguring Literary Study for the Twenty-first Century" (1-19), provides an in-depth look at the current state of the Humanities, which seems to have worsened, according to Robert Weisbuch, the president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation in 1999. As a response, Perloff proposes her way out of this crisis by promoting

the missing spark of excitement taken from Aristotle in his *Poetics*, Chapter 4. For Perloff, the “pleasure of representation” and the “pleasure of recognition” have to be brought back into the study of literary texts including poetry. Contribution 2, the 2002 Annual T.S. Eliot Memorial Lecture for the Eliot Society, titled “Cunning Passages and Contrived Corridors: Rereading Eliot’s ‘Gerontion’” (20-38), takes another look at former critics’ charge against “Gerontion” that it suffers from incoherence. By offering her careful analysis of the poem’s actual language, syntax, and rhythm instead of looking at the genre or external references, Perloff is able to find evidence against the incoherence accusation. The third contribution, the 2001 Plenary Address at the biennial international Ezra Pound Conference in Paris, “The Search for ‘Prime Words: Pound, Duchamp, and the Nominalist Ethos’” (39-59) addresses the fascinating topic of finding the “right” word in another language when translating some of Pound’s poetic texts, all texts that were written by a poet who subscribed to the principle of “collectare/dichten.” Essay 4, “But isn’t the *same* at least the same?: Wittgenstein on Translation” (60-81), evaluates Wittgenstein’s theoretical view on translation, the conceptual as opposed to the textual approach, as the more successful one in the context of literary translation. Next, in her fifth essay, “‘Logocinéma of the Frontiersman’: Eugene Jolas’s Multilingual Poetics and Its Legacies” (82-101), Perloff points out striking parallels between “the linguistic jungle” that this multilingual American/French-German editor of the journal *translation* and the author of texts in *Man from Babel*—edited by Andreas Kramer and Rainer Rumold in 1998—faced in his time and current issues found nowadays in multilingual contemporary poetry. Jolas’ dream of a “new language,” “the super-tongue for intercontinental expression”—that focuses on minorities and promotes a world without borders—seems quite intriguing. Essay 6, “‘The Silence that is not Silence’: Acoustic Art in Samuel Beckett’s Radio Plays” (102-128), explores the connections between both the visual arts and music in Beckett’s radio plays. Next, Perloff revisits in “Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman’s Albany, Susan Howe’s Buffalo” (129-154)—the keynote address on “the new poetics” at the University of Coimbra in 1998—the issue of the subject in the Language Poetics that had rejected all notions of individual “voice” in poetry. The eighth paper, titled “After Language Poetry: Innovation and Its Theoretical Discontents” (155-174), sums up the historical development from early Language Theory to a more experimental poetics that became inclusive of women and minority poets. In this essay, Perloff defines “Differential Poetry” as “poetry that does not exist in a single material state but can vary according to the medium of presentation: printed book, cyberspace, installation, or oral rendition” (173). The next contribution, titled “The Invention of ‘Concrete Prose’: Haroldo de Campos’s Galáxias and After” (175-193),

was written for a symposium in Yale's Department of Spanish and Portuguese on the occasion of the Brazilian poet's seventieth birthday. Therein, Perloff applies de Campos' theoretical work—e.g., *Ideograma: Lógica/Poesia/Linguagem*—to the writings of some U.S.-American authors, such as Rosmarie Waldrop, Steve McCaffery, Joan Retellack or Kenneth Goldsmith. In the next essay, “Songs of the Earth: Ronald Johnson's *Verbicocovisuals*” (194-204), Perloff explores the similarities and differences between Johnson's early examples of Concrete Poetry and de Campos' work. In “The Oulipo Factor: The Procedural Poetics of Christian Bök and Caroline Bergvall” (204-226), the eleventh contribution of the volume, Perloff introduces a French poetic movement called “Oulipo” to her audience. Representative examples in French and English of this procedural (rule-governed) movement that utilizes the “Oulipo Alexandrine” in their poetic creations are given. Perloff also includes an invited review to the Toronto magazine *The Gig* on the poetic writing of Tom Raworth. To Perloff, this poet is “one of the most exciting but also the most difficult of contemporary poets” (227). In the review, titled “Filling the Space with Trace: Tom Raworth's ‘Letters from Yaddo’” (227-242), Perloff tries to make sense of Raworth's epistolary memoir/anti-memoir *Letters from Yaddo*. The last two contributions of the volume are concerned with teaching poetry and writing about poetry vs. writing poetry. Essay 13, “Teaching the ‘New Poetries’: The Case of Rae Armantrout” (243-257), was supposed to be a paper to be read at the conference on “Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary” at Bard College—which Perloff was unable to attend. In this paper, she shares one teaching tip and one teaching strategy that might be replicated by fellow instructors when teaching “good” experimental poetry, such as *The Pretext* by Rae Armantrout, in an academic setting. Her teaching tip is to always pick exciting poetic pieces; the successful teaching strategy is, according to Perloff, to “[t]ake nothing for granted” (257) when closely weighing the various alternatives before us in class discussions and written responses given by our students. In the final contribution, titled “Writing Poetry/Writing about Poetry: Some Problems of Affiliation” (258-268), Perloff shares some scenarios and situations in which she learned from poets in a non-academic setting and experienced conflict with poets as an academic assessing pieces of their work. An extensive section with Notes divided by chapters follows (269-298); an Index (299-307) concludes the volume.

To sum it up, The University of Alabama's series on *Modern and Contemporary Poetics* has produced a challenging volume that keeps the interest of anyone concerned with the teaching and the scholarship of poetic texts. A considerable service to scholars, students, and instructors of Modern and Contemporary Poetics has been performed with the publication of this book. We wish Marjorie Perloff, Sadie

D. Patek Professor Emerita of the Humanities at Stanford well. Maybe, in a future publication we will have a chance to receive more teaching tips, teaching techniques, and learning strategies that worked in Dr. Perloff's classrooms. ✱