

## Editorial

### ***Unoriginal Genius/Conceptual Writing: Recovering Avant-Garde in the Contemporary Poetics***

*"Only the copied text commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened up by the text."* –W. Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

*"The poem which is absolutely original is absolutely bad"* –T. S. Eliot<sup>2</sup>

In her recent book *Unoriginal Genius*, Marjorie Perloff questions the "establishment" tradition in which authenticity is given the highest value and inauthenticity is given the lowest. The mainstream (Anglo-American) tradition rarely asks what can be being original of unoriginal. It tries to keep on pretending to be original in the age of "mechanical reproduction" of everything. Perloff argues that it is still possible to be a genius in the age of simulacra, but one cannot be original in the way romantics wanted to be—to tell something ever unthought and unsaid in their lyric—but rather by way of (re) making different "assemblages" of inter-texts. By avoiding "dependence on earlier poetic models"<sup>3</sup> what we can do is give "semantic density" and "verbal originality" to the poem to be original. In the eighteenth century enlightenment humanist tradition<sup>4</sup>, genius was defined as the most immediate individual that underlies beneath the language and culture. It conceives an individual's mind as an origin of genius. Genius is understood as original, authentic, rare and extraordinary. The history of ideas barely asks about unoriginal genius. In other words, it has rarely been asked if

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "One-way Street," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997), p. 66. With this idea in mind, Benjamin declares that lyric poetry can no longer play the same role in the culture after Baudelaire.

<sup>2</sup> T. S. Eliot, Introduction, in *Selected Poems by Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> "Original genius," by the way, is an 18th-century phrase. Originally, genius was not expected to be original; it was just one's inclination or talent. "Original genius," as popularized by Edward Young, was not thought of as the general nature of genius but as one kind of genius. You are absolutely right to identify original genius with Coleridge and the Romantics, but you might want to acknowledge that no such value was placed on absolute originality for millennia before that

there can be unoriginal genius? What can be the nature of unoriginal genius, and can unoriginal genius contribute to the history of idea?

The question of authenticity/original genius was started to be an issue beginning with the first generation of modernists writing, for example T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* (an extended translation from Homer, Picasso), Marcel Duchamp's "ready-mades" (the urinal turned upside down and titled "Fountain") and Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (unfinished collections of quotations). These modernists are important precursors to the contemporary "unoriginal writing" like of language poets whose writing further radicalizes the question of the originality theory of genius. For example, Charles Bernstein's libretto to the opera *Shadowtime* recasts Benjamin's own texts into strict forms posing a tension with the originality theory. In this scenario, Perloff's book *Unoriginal Genius* is an attempt to fuse avant-garde sensibilities of the past and the present with the new technologies and media of recent days. In other words, she is trying to recover the avant-garde practice of uncreative writing in a new emerging context of information revolution.

The explosion of new medias and digital technologies has not only taken "a new lease on [our] life" but also have influenced the way we think, feel and communicate: "It is a common place that in the world of digital discourse, of the internet, email, cell phone, and Facebook, communication has been radically transformed both temporally and spatially."<sup>5</sup> Everything we thought today is already thought and is passed to us through different copied mediums in several ways. This transformation also has a significant impact on poetic agency, nature and function of poetry and poetics "subverting" the romantic's claim for personal voices in lyric poetry. Christian Bök aptly describes the contemporary situation:

Recent trends in technologies of communication (such as digitized sampling and networked exchange) have already begun to subvert the romantic bastions of "creativity" and "authorship," calling into question the propriety of copyright through strategies of plagiaristic appropriation, computerized reduplication, and programmatic collaboration. Such developments have caused poets to theorize an innovative aesthetics of "conceptual literature" that has begun to question, if not to abandon, the lyrical mandate of originality in order to explore the potentials of the "uncreative" be it automatic, mannerist, aleatoric, or readymade, in its literary practice. Some of the modernist notions of the both accidental and the procedural

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<sup>5</sup> Perloff, p.4. Also see her *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) for further discussion on how technologies and media have influenced on our writings.

have begun increasingly to inform the current writing, by poets who find inspiration in the principles of conceptual art. Such poets have begun to use stolen texts, random words, forced rules, boring ideas, and even cyborg tools, in order to mobilize a variety of anti-expressive, anti-discursive strategies that erase any idiosyncratic demonstration of "lyric style." Such activity has become one of the most radical, if not one of the most popular, limit-cases of the avant-garde at the advent of the millennium.<sup>6</sup>

Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius* pays a new attention to this new reality of technological and cybernetic revolution, and its corollary impact on poetry writing. In this editorial, I am trying to focus on mainly two questions: Where does the idea of unoriginal genius—in terms of its view on poetic subject and nature of poetry—fit in the scheme of "conceptual writing?", and how does Perloff's writing attempt to recover the avant-garde in her book *Unoriginal Genius*?

In keeping view of the emergence and impact of new technologies, Walter Benjamin had already predicted a long time ago that the then existing form of literature was "melting down" and being recast into new technologies. Since then and much in recent years, the unprecedented growth of new medias, communications and technologies has had significant impact on our notion of literature and literary forms. This growth in communication and information technologies has questioned the identity of a poet. On this ground, Perloff boldly claims that new medias and information technologies have also questioned the values of a poetics based on geo-cultural identity in the age of communication revolution when:

neither telephone are codes nor email addresses tell us where caller and recipient are actually located at the moment of communication nor do most email addresses (e.g., AOL or Gmail) provide vital statistics about their possessors: they reveal neither nationality nor ethnicity, race nor religion, age nor even gender.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Annie Guthrie, "Conceptual Poetry/Conceptual," [http://poetrycenter.arizona.edu/enewsletter/April2008/enews0408\\_concpoet\\_read.shtml](http://poetrycenter.arizona.edu/enewsletter/April2008/enews0408_concpoet_read.shtml), (no page # given).

<sup>7</sup> Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius*, p. 4. Perloff also cites Oyvind Fahlstrom from in *Oulipo Compendium*, ed. Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie (London: Atlas, 1998) "Let's say goodbye to all systematic or spontaneous depiction of private psychological, contemporary cultural or universal problems," p. 81. She also adds on next page "the enemy is not only. . . Romantic expressivist lyric but also the poetry of surrealism," p. 8.

Perloff does not mean geo-cultural facts do not exist as some people deliberately try to misread her. She means that geo-cultural reality is insufficient to determine our identity in the cybernetic communication world. Our identities have become so fluid that they are “melting down” to the new reality of cybernetic communication. Then, who is the genius who writes poetry? The hand which writes poetry is not of an individual who possesses specific geo-political identity but is a relation of forces of communication media and digital technologies constantly evolving out. As an evolving process, the poet is constantly arranging or organizing the forces of life (molecular biology i.e. silicon), labor (third-generation machines, cybernetics, information technology) and language (a “strange language within language”: Mallarme, Artaud, Dada collage) in his poetry.<sup>8</sup> The poetic subject who is inspired to write poetry is not guided either by some supernatural power as Coleridge thought was the case nor immediate individualism as in Sylvia Plath. It all depends on how the poet or poetic subject strives to organize different forces of biology (Christian Bök’s poetry on genetic engineering)<sup>9</sup>, technology and language (L+A+N+G+U+A+G+E Poetry) in his life. And a poem is the expression of the poet’s such attempt. Still, there is a poet who organizes or manipulates the forces in his poetry, but that poet is not a “man-form” with cultural essence but he is an event of “nonhuman becomings” of technologies. He is a non-subjective subject.<sup>10</sup> On this ground, Perloff denies expressivist tradition and favors objectivist mode of writing when she says: “Language poetry had as its explicit aim to oppose such [rhyming stanzas, free verse, or rhythmical prose or surreal] ‘natural’ expressivist speech, such individual voicing and accessible syntax.”<sup>11</sup>

This notion of poetic subject as a nonhuman becoming<sup>12</sup> of technologies is at the heart of Perloff’s notion of unoriginal genius. The genius is not a characteristic for Perloff but a technological arrangement we make in a text. The person capable of doing this is still special like Kenneth

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<sup>8</sup> See Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality. Vol 2: The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Random House, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Bök’s *Xenotext* is an instance of absorbing forces of new development in genetic science into poetry. *Xenotext* is a poetry written into genetic code of bacteria. See “The Xenotext Experiment: An Interview with Christian Bök,” *Postmodern Culture*, Vol. 17, No. 2, January 2007.

<sup>10</sup> See footnote # 11 for further clarification.

<sup>11</sup> Perloff, p.11.

<sup>12</sup> By saying author as a nonhuman becoming, I don’t mean, he is not a human, but I mean that the author as an anthropomorphic essence is an obsolete idea. The idea is that human is not a being with certain essence (RENAISSANCE MAN) but becoming (constantly evolving process of technological, biological and linguistic arrangements in life.

Goldsmith. The word “unoriginal” here does not mean inauthentic or trite but the lack of origin as an essence. As it lacks origin, it does not have a main root but some surface or “rhizomes” diffused in its surroundings as tangible planes. If it has any origin, it might have diffused in the rhizomatic fabrications, alterations of cybernetic communications and languages. So this whole thing may be confusing but once we understood its underlying implication, we appreciate the power of Perloff’s avant-gardist sensibility infused with a new notion of genius. Genius possesses a non-subjective subject or subject as an imbrication of molecular biology, cybernetic technology and language. This idea of subject rules out the traditional practices of lyric in which a poet is presented as an all-knower seer endowed with the anthropomorphic quality of the genius. This notion of the poetic subject is problematic because this notion gives us a dogmatic image of the poetic genius. It prevents us from inventing several ways of *becoming* poets in life. It stalemates innovations and experimentations in poetry writing, which are the life-blood of Perloffian conceptual writing. It assumes a poet simply a passive recorder of his “emotion in tranquility” rather than an active innovator who strategically work for organizing forces of language and technologies in poetry. Thus the notion of lyric subject as an essence has to be put to death certainly not to banish poetic voice from poetry but to resurrect a non-anthropomorphic voice in the age of information technology.

Perloff’s sense of a poet is not virtual (even if so, it’s not unreal). It is still a poet who thinks, feels and communicates in this world. It’s still poet’s own expression. But he does not assume to be the origin of his poetry. He uses his power of craftsmanship to create interesting out of seemingly uninteresting. He is more a maker than the origin of his poetry.

Poetic voice is an unactualized possible; it depends for its identity on the way words or signs are organized. It is just like a word processor, which receives, organizes and produces several assemblages of words or signs. Following their metaphors, then the poet has no reflective consciousness therefore he is not tied to history and memory unless history comes up in the form of making a NEW. The poet is an impersonal *machinic* assemblage of technologies and media involved in “how to do things with words.”

And what does poetry mean for Perloff? Her model of poetry is a resurrection of the emotion free poetic subject. We may have seen this first generation modernist T. S. Eliot assumes “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.”<sup>13</sup> According to Perloff, poetry of any kind is

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<sup>13</sup> T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *Selected Essays 1917-1932* (New York, 1932), p. 10.

an impersonal material fact. It demands some objectivist criteria in a poet's mind. The non-emotive materiality is poetry's expressive content. This view of Perloff on poetry falls under the conceptual writing, which emphasizes the physical aspects of the work—rhyme, meter, texture, and enjambment. The conceptual critics like Perloff wants to build an idea in poetry not out of personal emotions but out of the physicality—words, signs and their visual effect in different alterations by the poet in poetry—of poetic fact. Every detail in poetry has been “planned and executed” with “the greatest care.”

In the *Unoriginal Genius*, Perloff shows how conceptual writing candidly takes as its primary material “other people's words.”<sup>14</sup> She argues that the media filters, reprocesses and reproduces thoughts and ideas constantly, “The media world has created an atmosphere where everything one wants to say has already been said, where the display of unique private emotions seems gratuitous, and originality of utterance hence all but impossible. But it is also the case that no work of art is “pure” transcription: current poetry, as I describe it, is no more than the logical fulfillment of Duchamp's decision to purchase a urinal from the JL Mott plumbing fixtures store and then to turn it upside down and give it the name *Fountain by R. Mutt*.”<sup>15</sup> Poetry or any piece of writing is creative make-up out of uncreative “digital replication” and “textual citations” of the “other people's words.” And artistic freedom relies on mastering the freedom of difficulty to be creative out of uncreative poetic resources. Perloff's view, hence, fits in one of the founders of Conceptual Writing, Kenneth Goldsmith:

It's clear that long-cherished notions of creativity are under attack, eroded by file-sharing, media culture, widespread sampling, and digital replication. How does writing respond to this new environment? This workshop will rise to that challenge by employing strategies of appropriation, replication, plagiarism, piracy, sampling, plundering, as compositional methods. Along the way, we'll trace the rich history of forgery, frauds, hoaxes, avatars, and impersonations spanning the arts, with a particular emphasis on how they employ language. We'll see how the modernist notions of chance, procedure, repetition, and the aesthetics of boredom

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<sup>14</sup>We may recall Eliot's dictum that “The poem which is absolutely original is absolutely bad,” but he would never have thought of a poem as straightforwardly a transcription of another text.” See Marjorie Perloff's interview in *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry*, ed., Yubraj Aryal, Vol 6, No 13, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p 62. Perloff's response to Nichols.

dovetail with popular culture to usurp conventional notions of time, place, and identity, all as expressed linguistically.<sup>16</sup>

I then want to answer the second question from which I started this editorial: how does Perloff's writing attempt to recover avant-garde in her book, *Unoriginal Genius*? The question can also be posed in this way: Is avant-garde recoverable? Or does the avant-garde recover anything? I am here, however, not reducing avant-garde to merely "anti-traditional" but by using the term "recovery," I am trying to imply that it is "to reveal [the past], to literalize it, to lay bare its device by the alienating effect of quotations marks,"<sup>17</sup> or to invent pasts in a new way. I agree with Craig Dworkin when he says, "I think it's a mistake to conflate the avant-garde with the new, or the anti-traditional (although both of those have obviously been a part of the rhetoric of certain avant-gardes). Instead, the key to the avant-garde seems to me to be much more about the freedom of choosing your own history, of making your own tradition, rather than just accepting the received canon."<sup>18</sup> Perloff adds, "The *arriere-garde*, then, is neither a throwback to traditional forms—in this case, the first-person lyric or lyric sequence—nor what we used to call *postmodernism*. Rather, it is reliable of the avant-garde model—but with a difference."<sup>19</sup> The recovering here for me is not meant to copy the methods of past avant-garde but is meant to feel its pulse for "difference" or "MAKING IT NEW." I am not using the term avant-garde for avant-garde sake but for lining up with Perloff's sense that artistic engagements are radically different from what they were even ten years ago. Thus, when I say Perloff's notion of conceptual writing is recovering the avant-garde, I mean it is a recovery of past avant-garde movements with new variations. As I said just before, it is not merely "anti traditional." Neither is the conceptual writing a postmodernist variation as some critics misinterpret. I will further explain this claim by comparing and contrasting Perloff's view of the author with and to Roland Barthes in the next paragraph.

Perloff's concept of the writer as an impersonal subject sounds close to Ronald Barthes's view on the author as a script and a text, "a tissue [or fabric] of quotations" emanates from multiple sources rather than from an individual's singular experience. He adds, "Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin," and he further adds, "the voice loses its

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<sup>16</sup>Kenneth Goldsmith,  
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2008/06/conceptual-poetics-kenneth-goldsmith/>. Perloff also cites this source on p. 147.

<sup>17</sup> Qtd. in Perloff, p. 89.

<sup>18</sup> Annie Guthrie, "Conceptual Poetry/Conceptual." (no page #)

<sup>19</sup> Perloff, p. 58.

origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins"<sup>20</sup> Barthes locates meaning in the readers whereas Perloff locates meaning in the author's conceptual capacity to reproduce materials into something NEW.<sup>21</sup> The similarity between them is that both want to banish authorial voice—subjective experience—from the author, and both, though in different ways, endorse Mallarmé who says that, in the writing, it's not "I" which prevails but the language which "performs" and "functions." They also show the verbal condition of literature casting the author's subjectivity into doubt illuminating the "linguistic and accidental" nature of authorial activity in writing, as Paul Valéry does.

The Barthian abolition of the authorial voice from writing reinforces the innovative practices of avant-garde artists opening up for the "textual excess" in (post)modernist poetics, though some postmodernist practitioners interpret otherwise.<sup>22</sup> Perloff wants to recover—the author as a maker with the "textual excess"—from the discussion of postmodernity about poetry and poetics. Perloff understands that the Barthian banishment of the author from the text brings poetry true to D. H. Lawrence's remark "Never trust the author, trust the tale;"<sup>23</sup> or to Foucault's remark that "Writing is primarily concerned with an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears"<sup>24</sup> Certainly the death of author itself cannot be called avant-garde. It is a postmodernist feature. That offers as its opening for the "textual excess," which allows for verbo-visual complexity and semantic density in a text. This "reveals" the continuity of modernist avant-garde in postmodernist ethos, which some recent critics like Fredric Jameson understands otherwise.<sup>25</sup> Perloff cites Augusto De Campos, who hints at such a tendency in postmodernist writings, "There is inside the discussion of post-modernism *a tactic of wanting to put aside swiftly the recovery of*

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<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of an Author," Hazard Admas *Critical Theory Since Plato*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, (Forth Worth: HBJC Publishers, 1992), p. 1131.

<sup>21</sup> Poet's conceptual capacity makes her/him a super poet like Goldsmith, and those who lack this capacity are just boring. This why I am saying Perloff's poet is not virtual. S/he is still a human poet but work with nonhuman materiality in poetry.

<sup>22</sup> Perloff, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Qtd in Perloff, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> Perloff shows her reservation against this tendency when she says "Fredric Jameson is less concerned with the disappearance of the subject in the interstices of a writing that 'speaks' its author than in the contrast between a modernist epoch of Great Authors, of 'demiurges and prophets,' and a postmodernist ethos in which the very concept of 'genius' is irrelevant," p. 19.



*experimental art and to say all this is finished.*"<sup>26</sup> Perloff embraces experimentations and innovations in the form of an idea in an author's mind carefully constructed not out of personal emotion but of materiality of the poetry itself. For her, the death of the author allows us to "avoid dependence" and enjoy the freedom to practice art as a MAKING. This is what she implies when she gives a fascinating account of Goldsmith's *Traffic* animation—copying and pasting text from Goldsmith, making readable a text known for its inertness and unreadability. She tries to render readability to the unreadability claim of Goldsmith's text and show that his work is not arbitrary and inert even though it looks so, thus posing issues about the nature of art. Goldsmith keeps insisting that one can't "read" his work, thus throwing a challenge to the reader. She is trying to show and many readers have now discovered that he has arranged his citations with great care despite the lack of specific cultural perspective. This is what she means by art as a MAKING.

Perloff's conceptual writing is her deep inheritance from Objectivist poetry of the 30s (continued through the 60s). To work with a plan and preset idea is the way objectivist theorists and their inheritors like concrete poets avoid subjectivity. The planned writing eliminates the arbitrary, the capricious, and the subjective experiences at the best. Since conceptual writing is author-centered, carefully constructed out of the materiality of the words and signs, readers may find it "difficult" to understand them. But they are free to understand the texts in any way they can or want.

Conceptual poetry fits with Perloff's call for change, "IT [Poetry] MUST CHANGE." Though she does not say anywhere, the poets she discusses in *Unoriginal Genius* match the great Modernists—say, Yeats and Eliot, Pound and Stein—she is demonstrating that there is a sign of CHANGE in avant-garde practice in poetry in a unique way. And it looks like Perloff is interested in what's going on avant-garde practices in peripheries than in the European centers like Berlin, Rome, Paris, Moscow, etc. That's why she has a whole section in Brazilian concrete poetry in which she also states: "And in the 1930s and '40s, as Socialist Realist writing came to fore, avant-garde innovation was considered suspect. When revival came after World War II, it occurred certainly not in the war capitals, Berlin, Rome, Moscow—but in periphery: in Sweden, Switzerland, Austria, Scotland, and Sao Paulo, Brazil."<sup>27</sup>

On the whole, what I can say here is that Perloff's conceptualism is a dynamic concept as opposed to the static nature of "establishment poetry," whose criteria don't change, for example, what is a lyric poem for them: a short song-like poem in free verse detailing some little incident in the life of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>27</sup> Perloff, p. 61.

a character. Which form of poetry is more appealing? Perloff challenges that concrete poetry can sometimes “be more appealing than elegiac lyric,” she says, “I felt that Vanessa Place’s new *Statement of Fact*, with her ‘documentary’ police and court reports of rape cases, recalls this tradition in a surprising way: it is a portrait of contemporary abjection that is certainly more compelling than the comparable elegiac poems about ‘victims’ that are being produced by mainstream poets like so much confetti.”<sup>28</sup>

We can certainly see some controversial points when Perloff relates poetry to unreadability, a poet to a data processor or information manager, genius to unoriginal or inauthenticity, and our identity to “telephone codes” and “email addresses.” But by bringing these rarely discussed issues in academic discussion, Perloff is (re)-opening up a distinct idea in the history of poetic tradition. Many of us are still trained in conventional tradition in which we love readability, plain expression and consider the poet as a seer and his poem as ambrosia of God. We are trained to be frightened of unreadability, inertness, unoriginality and difficulty of poetic form, and hate “copying,” “simulations,” “reproduction,” and “recycling” in poetry. We never ask: What is most original of being most unoriginal? One cannot simply be unoriginal. One has to know the rules that make one unoriginal. There is a risk involved in this because one may not easily learn how to become a genius of unoriginal. That’s why we avoid unoriginality simply saying these grapes are ‘sour’ and bad! Perloff’s *Unoriginal Genius* in its conceptualist and avant-gardist vein is a crusade against such tendency in contemporary poetics. It is not a frantic jump from modernism to postmodernism or else as some people misinterpret. But it is an attempt of recovering/reinventing avant-garde in the contemporary poetics in the wake of a rapid transformation of our identity, culture and reality itself with the rise of new medias and technologies.

Yubraj Aryal

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<sup>28</sup> Perloff (interview with Peter Nichols), *Journal of Philosophy*, p. 64.