



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## From Écriture to Réécriture

Jeffrey R. Di Leo

American Book Review, Volume 32, Number 4, May/June 2011, p. 8 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2011.0084>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/447508>

# From Écriture to Réécriture

Jeffrey R. Di Leo

**UNORIGINAL GENIUS:  
POETRY BY OTHER MEANS IN  
THE NEW CENTURY**

Marjorie Perloff

The University of Chicago Press  
http://press.uchicago.edu  
232 pages; cloth, \$32.50

Marjorie Perloff’s new book *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* pulls the poetics of citation from the dustbin of twentieth-century comparative literary history and places it on the forefront of contemporary poetic innovation. Perloff begins by reminding us that the primarily negative reception of the most famous twentieth-century poem in English, T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), was in large part based on its extensive use of citation. Critics objected to Eliot’s use of lines borrowed from and notes based on other texts, and to the lack of personal emotion in the poem. One early critic even charged that Eliot suffered from “an indolence of the imagination” while still admiring his “sophistication.”

Beginning with Eliot, Perloff takes the reader on a journey through key figures and texts ranging from twentieth-century giants such as Ezra Pound, Walter Benjamin, Marcel Duchamp, and Eugen Gomringer through early twenty-first-century literary innovators such as Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Toko Tawada. Through close readings of texts by these authors and others, Perloff elegantly demonstrates how citation “has found a new lease on life in our own information age.” Her project not only provides new insight on underappreciated forms such as concrete poetry, and lesser-known theoretical works such as Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* (1927–1940), but also makes a strong case for “citationality” as a key concept in contemporary literary and critical theory.

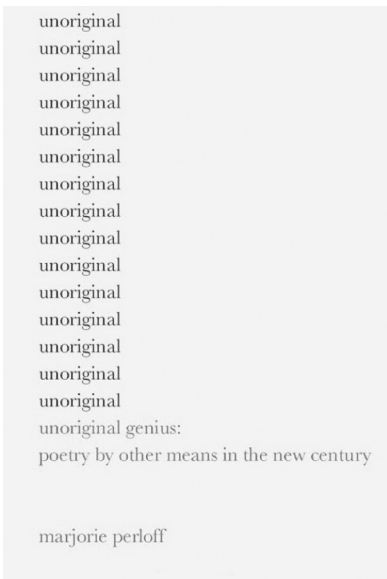
“Citationality,” writes Perloff, “with its dialectic of removal and graft, disjunction and conjunction, its interpenetration of origin and destruction, is central to twenty-first century poetics.” This concept is exemplified in not only the Latin, Greek, Italian,

French, and German foreign-language citations in Eliot’s masterpiece, but also in Pound’s collagist method and multilingual poetics, which Perloff sees as “his anticipation of digital linkage in the creation of narrative assemblage.” Alternately and aptly termed “réécriture” by the contemporary French literary historian Antoine Compagnon, citationality is, in Perloff’s words, “the logical form of ‘writing’ in an age of literally mobile or transferable text—text that can be readily moved from one digital site to another or from print to screen, that can be appropriated, transformed, or hidden by all sorts of means and for all sorts of purposes.”

The power of Perloff’s book, six of the seven chapters of which were delivered as the 2009 Weidenfeld Lectures in European Comparative Literature at Oxford, is not simply its defense of the contemporary significance of the concept of citationality. Rather, its strength is to be found in the way she uses a fluid notion of this concept to open up new dimensions of some of the most complex and difficult texts from twentieth- and early twenty-first-century literary history. For example, her reading of Benjamin’s enigmatic *Arcades Project* as an “ur-hypertext” and paradigmatic work of réécriture is simply brilliant. Not only does she persuasively argue against the view that Benjamin’s “encyclopedic collection of notes the writer made over thirteen years of reflection on the Paris Arcades (Passages)” is merely, in the words of Theodor Adorno, a “wide-eyed presentation of bare facts,” but also that it is arguably the key text to understanding the equally complicated work of contemporary poets such as Susan Howe and Kenneth Goldsmith.

*Perloff’s brilliance in this book is getting us to appreciate the genius of contemporary uncreative writing.*

For Perloff, works like Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Soliloquy* (2001), a poem which transcribes every word he spoke over the course of a week in New York City, and Susan Howe’s *The Midnight* (2003), a book-length poem which includes photographs, paintings, maps, catalogs, facsimiles of tissue interleaves, and enigmatic captions, share with



Benjamin’s masterpiece “intricately appropriated and defamiliarized texts” that serve to “reimagine” their source sites. In Perloff’s hands, poetry by other means, such as montage, collage, recycling, appropriation, citation, plagiarism, and cutting and pasting, is the poetry of the age of hyper-information. The unoriginal genius of its “authors” is not the creativity of its language, but rather the way in which its language can be uniquely regarded as, in the words of Compagnon, “simultaneously representing two operations, one of removal, the other of graft.” Writes Goldsmith, this conceptual or “uncreative” writing “obstinately makes no claim to originality.” “Come to think of it,” comments Goldsmith, it is not even “writing” as “no one’s really written a word of it.” “It’s been grabbed, cut, pasted, processed, machined, honed, flattened, repurposed, regurgitated, and reframed,” writes Goldsmith, “from the great mass of free-floating language out there just begging to be turned into poetry.” Perloff’s brilliance in this book is getting us to appreciate both the genius of contemporary uncreative writing and its connections to the work of early twentieth-century masters such as Eliot, Pound, and Benjamin.

Jeffrey R. Di Leo is editor and publisher of the American Book Review, and Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Houston-Victoria. His recent books include *Federman’s Fictions: Innovation, Theory, and the Holocaust* and *Academia Degree Zero: Reconsidering the Politics of Higher Education*.

## The New Flarf

Laura Mathias

**THE NEW POETICS**

Mathew Timmons  
Introduction by Rodrigo Toscano

Les Figues Press  
http://www.lesfigues.com  
112 pages; paper, \$15.00

In *The New Poetics*, Mathew Timmons’s artistic control is far more evident than it was in his previous conceptual output, *Credit* (2009), and perhaps in consequence the poems are more engrossing, more personal, and, yes, more creative. Whereas Timmons composed *Credit* entirely from notices of overdue

accounts sent to him by Chevron, Visa, etc., *The New Poetics* is sewn together by flarf—a mangled but still somehow smooth mixture of words comprised from Internet search engines. When it comes to conceptual poetry, the popular notion is that readers should take a hint from the word “conceptual” and stick to lauding the author’s methods used before the writing stage even began. Looking for the poem’s “deeper meaning” should be avoided as much as possible.

*Credit* reveled in this comparatively dry approach, the author copying and pasting the details of his financial downfall in a nightmarish, unending stream, every word taken from the coldly dry come-ons and, later, threats sent from credit card companies. The mechanical words, assembled haphazardly but still chronologically, packed a wallop only in the sense that behind the scenes we could picture Timmons ravenously taking revenge on those

very companies by displaying their bile for all to see. But the words themselves were theirs; other than the obvious misspellings and run-together words, the control was entirely in the company’s hands, not his.

Flarf allows Timmons more creative license in *The New Poetics*. Is flarf easy, too easy? Judging from how intricately each piece is put together here, no. The words may sprout from online sources, but the order and structure belong to Timmons. It could be argued that plagiarists work harder than those writing from scratch, since it takes a special brand of pompous ingenuity to modulate writings by multiple authors to imitate one fluid voice. Is modern art too obsessed with its modernity? Is contemporary literature too fixated on revealing the Internet’s artificiality, a façade promising the most extensive information library in the world but with a Faustian

Mathias continued on next page