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The New Flarf

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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.

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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

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catch—with these riches come questionable content, free of any depth? If these are the themes righteous artists feel compelled to trumpet nowadays, maybe conceptual poetry and flarf are the best mediums to capture this preoccupation. And that is basically all Timmons does, piecing together a parodistic jungle of pseudo-intellectualisms and sound bites illustrating the shifting definitions of what constitutes the New in this post-’net society. Transition is the key thread tying his flarf together. Nothing is ever settled, and all that is hep and happenin’ is already morphing into the next new, or The New Next. Everything is passé, including (or especially) what’s hip. We are experiencing “the past of modernity.”

That’s not to say Timmons flirts incessantly with Bob Dylan territory of “Look out, Kid” Subterranean Homesick Poetry. If so, he would start to read like tired slogans. And although admittedly he does come close to that at times (such as “The New Concept”’s in-your-face anti-industrial spin and the most blatantly flarfy “The New Night”), generally Timmons achieves something truly remarkable: subtlety from the Internet. The wonderfully perverse “The New Kitten” rips apart our endless delight in such animal-themed crazes as LOLcats, revealing what’s really at the bottom of such kitschy fads: modern pet-owners displacing their maternal and paternal affections onto creatures pretty much incapable of returning human affection. We are growing increasingly incapable of coping with personal relations, finding in the wide, blank eyes of a numb, newborn critter a comforting substitute. The poem is a mash-up of random instructions gleaned from online cat experts, providing disturbingly cozy tips on how to warm the kitten up to its new environment, and vice-versa.

Remember that people (especially men) who are used to having dogs (not cats) may tend to play a little aggressively with The New Kitten. The best thing to do is to ignore the ruckus, and leave them to work it out on their own. It will take a while, and meanwhile, the worst thing you can do is force the situation.

Though Timmons’s quotes are taken directly from websites centering around feline care, the text here eerily recalls information found on websites for step-parents learning to cope with children from a spouse’s previous marriage. “Pets as replacement progeny” is not a terribly novel concept, but the theory that The New Kitten is also The New Sensitive *Stepchild* aptly captures The New Family Dynamic.

Perhaps most surprising of all is, quite simply, how beautifully the poetry often reads.

The poems tie together in surprisingly knowing—creative—ways. Many of his headings are left empty (all listed alphabetically, like a proper encyclopedia of expanding knowledge), perhaps to capture just how quickly one New skips to the next. However, it might be no coincidence that he writes nothing beneath “The New Label”’s title, but the empty poem quickly transitions to “The New Language.” In “The New New York School,” Timmons assigns Kehinde Wiley the role of “talking about that other contact sport, Flarf....” Wiley is no flarfer, but could be called a *visual* conceptual artist, painting Harlem youths in poses famous in Renaissance art—ultimately, inserting The New into an already established form. Even Timmons’s call-outs serve as tenuous branches in the Conceptual Family Tree. He is creating The New Connect-the-Dots.

Perhaps most surprising of all is, quite simply, how beautifully the poetry often reads. Timmons breaks with the conceptual notion that the words in flarf don’t matter, that emotional responses are irrelevant. He weaves his carefully chosen words together in such well-measured fashion that they result in unexpectedly heartfelt prose. Such pieces as “The New Ideal Reading Experience” and “The New Old” employ deliberately wistful ellipses coupled with brief spurts of emotion, evocations of nostalgia and classic art. And how are we to reconcile the idea that conceptual poetry only touches the mind, never the heart, when we read “The New Physicality?” “The New Physicality will come in the form of Dance, The New Physicality that no

choreographer has explored, as dance, just as Isadora Duncan’s earth-bound movement foretold The New Physicality of Martha Graham.” I was entranced by this section. Partly because Timmons steps back from dry cynicism (which he does do well), in all probability discovering a blog or two earnestly in love with dance, Isadora, and Martha, and he captured the original writer’s isolated passion. Plus, like all great literature, this is written in such a way that’s it’s just a joy to read for the sheer sake of letting the words sink in, without immediately appreciating any overarching meaning. As Mrs. Ramsay reflects in *To the Lighthouse* (1927),

And she opened the book and began reading here and there at random, and as she did so she felt that she was climbing backwards, upwards, shoving her way up under petals that curved over her, so that she only knew this is white, or this is red. She did not know at first what the words meant at all.

Is this purely aesthetic reaction one of the goals behind conceptual writing, fascinating the reader with a work’s style (and creation of that style) without exploring beneath the surface? Or is that the opposite intention, and conceptual poets expect their audience to look at the lines only for their technical virtues, of where the words came from and the mechanics of the process, without necessarily experiencing the incidental beauty of the work’s prose? If the former, Timmons captures the very best of conceptual poetry: he allows the reader’s intellectual gratification, not only with the seamless submersion of memes and ’net lingo, but also with the very sound and feel those words create when meshed together. If the latter, Timmons redefines conceptual poetry by courageously involving both the intellectual and the aesthetic (emotional) reader. He very well might usher in The New Poetic Evolution.

Laura Mathias recently received a bachelor’s degree in English and literary studies from Southern Oregon University. She is currently enrolled in University of Washington’s editing program. In her free time, she blogs about her esoteric interests, such as classic literature and film.

Poetics of Guilt

Anna Moschovakis

TRAGODÍA 1:
STATEMENT OF FACTS

Vanessa Place

Blac Press
http://www.blacpress.com
430 pages; cloth, \$45.00

The distinction between an ethical and a moral approach to guilt, suggests poet and appellate attorney Vanessa Place in *The Guilt Project: Rape, Morality, and Law* (2010), is this: while the ethical “wonders what the collective us is doing” when we do what we do (to “innocent” citizens and convicted criminals alike), the moral “is hot and murky, circling the question of what makes us human.” *The Guilt Project* presents a nuanced argument about criminal law, specifically the counter-intuitive laws concerning rape; it is aimed at the concerned and curious lay reader, whom it leaves bursting with ethical

wonder. By contrast, Place’s *Tragodía 1: Statement of Facts* plunges its reader hard into the murk. There is no evident polemic, no well-deliberated thesis, in *Statement of Facts*, and this is precisely the point: it earns its moral weight in spite of, and because of, its status as conceptual poetry.

Like *The Weather*, Kenneth Goldsmith’s 2005 book of New York City weather reports transcribed from the radio, *Statement of Facts* can be seen as an example of what Goldsmith terms “uncreative writing,” an anti-Romantic methodology that emphasizes the importance of the idea or concept above other literary considerations, producing texts in which “all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.” It is certainly (again like *The Weather*) an example of appropriation, a technique in which language is lifted by the writer directly from another (often non-literary) context with another (often more utilitarian) use. Unavoidably reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp’s readymades—in which an object becomes art by virtue of its placement in an

—————*Moschovakis continued on next page*

