

***Attack of the Difficult Poems: Essays and Inventions.* By Charles Bernstein. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press. 2011. 282 pp.**

***Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life.* By Mark Goble. New York: Columbia Univ. Press. 2010. xiii, 374 pp.**

***Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century.* By Marjorie Perloff. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press. 2010. xv, 201 pp.**

There is no fundamental nature of poetry & it changes over time.—Bernstein (2011, 228)

In this quip from *Attack of the Difficult Poems*, Charles Bernstein executes a classic bait and switch: lulled by the premise of relativism—no essence to this genre we call poetry—we slip on the pronoun “it” into Bernstein’s counter-assertion that there is, nonetheless, something—a tactic, a practice, a function—that carries forward poetry’s volatile and variable mission.

The titles of Marjorie Perloff’s *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* and Mark Goble’s *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* set similar snares. In a corporate, collectivized, postindividualistic age, Perloff’s title suggests, we can safely ditch the cliché of the Great Author—demiurge, prophet, or unacknowledged legislator—but the hook the title conceals is the counter that an “unoriginal genius” is, nevertheless, a genius. Poetry “by other means”—in this case, the practices of citationality, appropriation, mixing, sampling, repurposing, and recycling—retains the genre’s extraordinary capacity for creation, invention, and discovery.

The sleight of hand in Goble’s title splices the radiance, coherence, and emphasis—the beauty—of traditional aesthetics into the technologies through which information circulates. Like Perloff and Bernstein, Goble situates literary texts not in opposition to but within the networks constituted by the telegraph, telephone, phonograph, radio, magnetic tape recordings,

loudspeakers, cinema, television, and—following World War II’s cybernetic revolution—mainframe and desktop computing and the mobile interfaces of laptops, smartphones, GPS units, tablet computers, gaming systems, and RFID tags. In all three books, the bait and switch, the snare, the sleight of hand short-circuits the truism that poetry—putatively, the most conservative of genres—repels and is repelled by the innovations and experiments of mediated life. The nature, the genius, and the circuit of poetry, these books insist, not only mutate with but flourish within the modern and contemporary cybernetic surround.

Although all three critics emphasize the overlap of aesthetics and communication technologies, the scope and stress of their arguments differ. Goble looks at protocols of connection and interpretation at work in the United States between the two world wars in such canonical writers as Henry James, Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Richard Wright, William Carlos Williams, and James Agee; Perloff focuses on configurations of information that run from the international modernist *avant-garde* through midcentury Swiss, Scottish, Swedish, and Brazilian *arrière gardes* to an array of emergent practices that includes documentary collage, multilingual and exophonic poetics, and “uncreative” or conceptualist writing; and Bernstein—whose “essays and inventions” include a “Conversation with Marjorie Perloff” and his contribution to her 2007 MLA Presidential Forum—spotlights a canon of “difficult poems” that overlaps Perloff’s in its opposition to Official Verse Culture but is identified less as an array of aesthetic strategies than a constellation of social events at play in classrooms, workshops, conferences, journals, websites, performance halls, and museum installations.

Unlike Goble, Bernstein and Perloff look beyond modernism—for Bernstein, “the outbreak of 1912, one of the best-known epidemics of difficult poetry” (3)—through a series of midcentury consolidations and corrections to the eruption of a poetics of the present. Represented here by “A foin lass boddors,” Louis Zukofsky’s “noisy, disruptive, brilliant, and unacceptable” dialect translation of Cavalcanti’s “Donna mi prega” (135), Bernstein’s “Second Wave Modernism” resembles the Concrete poetics of Perloff’s midcentury *arrière garde* in its drive not just to question and refine but to expand the advances of first-wave modernism: without letting go of Cavalcanti’s formal brilliance, Zukofsky’s Brooklynese salutes immigrant, ethnic, folk, and popular culture, just as, for Perloff, the concrete poetics of Eugen Gomringer, Decio Pignatari, Haraldo and Augusto de Campos, and Ian Hamilton Finlay honor the icons and typography of commercial signage without abandoning the advances of the Poundian ideogram. Like Cole Porter and the other Tin Pan Alley songwriters, blues singers, and vaudeville performers Bernstein gathers into a capacious “Poetries of the Americas,” these midcentury writers rhyme Dante with Durante, link the National Gallery to Garbo’s salary, and consume Mahatma Gandhi with Napoleon Brandy.

Although these accounts of a simultaneous send-up and sending forward of first-wave modernism are, like Bernstein’s and Perloff’s many previous

interpretative forays, deft and perceptive, what gives these two books their punch is less the specific lineages they draw than their recognition of a matrix of information, speed, and knowledge at the root of both the technologies and the aesthetics of twentieth- and twenty-first-century communications.

Like the predigital story Perloff recounts in *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1991), the crux of *Attack of the Difficult Poems* and *Unoriginal Genius* is not an assertion of causality, much less an account of progress, but rather, in Bernstein's words, "a series of overlays creating the web in which our language is enmeshed" (101). For Perloff, this continuity manifests as a cascade of appropriation, reframing, and recycling that runs from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos* through Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and Susan Howe's *Midnight* to Kenneth Goldsmith's *Traffic* and Vanessa Place's *Statement of Fact*. For Bernstein, it is a stream of language reproduction technologies—oral, print, electronic, digital, and performative—that increasingly foregrounds the information clusters—"catalogs, directories, dictionaries, indexes, concordances, and phone books"—so important to the compositions of unoriginal genius (103).

Bernstein's essay "The Art of Immemorability," composed for Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay's *Book of the Book* (2000), traces the paradigm shift that began in the 1960s to position print as an episode or interlude in a succession of overlapping compendiums of cultural information. Returning to, refining, and extending this story, Goble's introduction to *Beautiful Circuits* draws not only on the theories of Marshall McLuhan, Walter J. Ong, and Eric A. Havelock Jr., but also on more recent digital, cybernetic, and information theorists including Friedrich Kittler, Lev Manovich, Alan Liu, Brian Massumi, N. Katherine Hayles, and Mark B. N. Hansen.

Goble's return to modernism from a twenty-first-century cybernetic perspective generates a series of exhilarating readings of the knowledge work performed by aesthetic documents within technologized information circuits. Looking back through the ontology, epistemology, and pragmatics of contemporary media theories, he sees the late novels of Henry James at work within the coded languages, practices, and cultural iconographies of the telegraph; the autobiographies of Gertrude Stein shaped by and shaping the feedback loops of cinematic celebrity culture; and the configurations of race inscribed through channels Ralph Ellison considered the "lower frequencies" of recording technologies. The upshot of these readings is a glimpse of something Goble calls "the content of the form" (86)—not the message, not the medium, not the massage, but the ongoing dynamic of continual co-construction.

"I am especially interested," Goble writes, "in what happens when we think about modernism as a moment of 'ubiquitous communication'" (13). Although he does not develop this allusion, Goble here refers to the difference between the computer as a discrete machine—a terminal, a keyboard, a processing unit with which we can choose to interact or not—and the pervasive mobile devices, embedded chips, and prototyped glasses so seam-

lessly integrated with the environment, the body, and the mind they become altogether invisible.

In this world of ubiquitous communication technologies, as Bernstein, Perloff, and Goble demonstrate, literature can no longer be captured in language developed to comprehend print documents. The old language becomes a trigger for antic wit—"I love originality so much," Bernstein says elsewhere, "I keep copying it" ("Manifest Aversions, Conceptual Conundrums, & Implausibly Deniable Links," [www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/182837](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/182837))—but it also motivates a consequential redefinition of literary discourse. If poetry is a way of registering how the world is organized at a particular moment in a particular place, the fundamental nature it does not have changes over time. Criticism, as these three books demonstrate, must change along with it.

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