

# Poetry in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Marjorie Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius*, and Charles Bernstein's *Attack of the Difficult Poems*

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Marjorie Perloff. *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010. xv, 201 pp. \$32.50 cloth.

Charles Bernstein. *Attack of the Difficult Poems: Essays and Inventions*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011. 282 pp. \$95.00 cloth; \$26.00 paper; \$7.00 to \$26.00 e-book.

*For more than three decades, Marjorie Perloff and Charles Bernstein have been our foremost champions of poetic invention. This review looks at their new books: Unoriginal Genius and Attack of the Difficult Poems, asking the question, how can poetry be original in the twenty-first century?*

*Basing her investigation in the established modernisms of Eliot, Pound and Benjamin, Marjorie Perloff suggests answers through a series of close readings of texts by poets including Yoko Tawada, Caroline Bergvall, Susan Howe and Kenneth Goldsmith. These writers, claims Perloff, represent a contemporary shift from poetics of confession or creation to poetics of reinvention, citation and translation. While addressing the same shift, Charles Bernstein's collection of "essays and inventions," takes a less traditional critical approach. His speeches, reviews, satirical prose-poems and essays range in subject from Tin-Pan-Alley and PennSound to the Yasusada hoax and Yiddish shtick. At times comic, at times earnest and always highly idiosyncratic, Bernstein's Attack of the Difficult Poems has something for everyone. Together, these two books blaze a trail into a new century of poetry, boldly going where, it seems, we have gone before.*

**Keywords:** contemporary poetry and poetics / conceptual writing / pedagogy / citation / intertextuality / originality / translation

There is a melancholy suspicion haunting literary studies that everything worth saying has already been said—including of course, that everything has already been said. Jean de la Bruyère summed it up neatly in the opening sentence of his *Caractères*: “*Tout est dit, et l’on vient trop tard depuis plus de sept mille ans qu’il y a des hommes et qui pensent*” ‘Everything is said, and we arrive too late after more than seven thousand years in which men have lived and thought’ (82, my translation). That was in 1688.

These days, this suspicion is, if anything, more insistent. Thanks to Google’s reminders of how many websites and books share the same permutation of words (about 1,739,000 sites and 66,000 books for “*tout est dit*”), it is becoming harder to maintain a belief that anything one writes is ever wholly original. For poets, who labor under centuries of pressure to come up with something new, this is especially troublesome. What can they do? Resign themselves like Bouvard and Pécuchet to “copying as before”? Follow Coleridge in a career of plagiarism? Or, like Pierre Menard, set themselves the task of rewriting *Don Quixote*?

When all is said and nothing is done, a more practical solution than any of these might be to look at either or both of two recent books on experimental poetry: Marjorie Perloff’s *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, and Charles Bernstein’s *Attack of the Difficult Poems: Essays and Inventions*. Both deal with the question of contemporary originality: Perloff’s predominantly within books of “citational verse”; Bernstein’s more-or-less everywhere, but predominantly in the poetry classroom. Both challenge our fundamental assumptions regarding literary production and literary criticism, and both, I hope to show, offer ways of thinking outside the impasse of everything having been said. There are also many more explicit points of intersection between these books, as well as some crucial differences in approach. Before discussing these however, I would like first simply to introduce each text individually.

## FROM WASTE LAND TO BQE: MARJORIE PERLOFF’S UNORIGINAL GENIUS

*Unoriginal Genius* (referred to parenthetically as *UG*) is an attractive and ambitious book. Its contents page boasts chapters ranging from Walter Benjamin to Yoko Tawada and Kenneth Goldsmith, and its more than forty figures and color plates seem calculated to seduce the reader. Concrete poems in Russian, Portuguese and German; vintage photographs; sketches by Duchamp; and prints by Grandville promise an induction into the modern, beautiful, and arcane. Indeed, so diverse is the range of esoteric subjects covered by this book that certain timid persons may feel skeptical about its ability to make good on that promise. Rest assured however; we are in the hands of Marjorie Perloff, and turning the abstruse and new into a straightforward critical argument is—as Stein might say—her *métier*.

Hence, even though in her preface Perloff explains that her rationale for writing *Unoriginal Genius* was to update her earlier work, *Radical Artifice: Writing*

*Poetry in the Age of Media*, to encompass the “revolution” of “media,” that is, “writing in an environment of hyperinformation”—a “new citational and often constraint-bound poetry” (UG xi)—the first chapter opens not with Caroline Bergvall or Christian Bök, but with a work with which we are all familiar: *The Waste Land*. Perloff begins by rooting her investigation in the canonical work of Pound and Eliot (in the first chapter) and Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* (in the second). The third chapter on Brazilian concrete poetry then forms something of a bridge between the heavily-theorized prewar era and that of our current moment. By the time we get to the case studies of contemporary poets in chapters four to seven, we have seen ample demonstration that in the twentieth and twenty-first century, as Eliot put it, “immature poets imitate, mature poets steal” (*Selected Essays* 206).

Opening with the *The Waste Land* also serves Perloff with another function beside the propaedeutic, and that of historical grounding. *The Waste Land*, contends Perloff, “remains Eliot’s most celebrated poem, the poem that has given most readers ‘the satisfaction that we ask from poetry.’” Why? Because of the “immediacy” of its “‘borrowed’ lines” (UG 3):

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Goodnight Bill. Goodnight Lou. Goodnight May. Goodnight—

(Eliot, *Waste Land* 62, qtd. in UG 3)

What is particularly enduring about the *The Waste Land* is that it affords a special textual pleasure on account of its citational quality. It is this pleasure, Perloff implies, that we can find in contemporary appropriation works: a kind of literary affect that is neither confessional (because not entirely personal) nor dry like that of Language poetry.

So far Perloff has been on fairly well-trodden ground. We are still more or less in what she called, in the subtitle to her 1985 work *The Dance of the Intellect*, the “Poetry of the Pound Tradition.” Into this milieu, Walter Benjamin arrives in chapter two, as something of a surprise. After all, the *Arcades Project*, as Perloff herself mildly notes, “is not, strictly speaking, a poem, certainly not a lyric one” (23). How then can Benjamin’s assemblage be seen as a “paradigm for the poetry of ‘unoriginal genius’ to come” (23)? And why do we want to read it as such?

Perloff’s notion here, building on an argument Richard Sieburth made in his seminal essay, “Benjamin the Scrivener,” is that for too long the *Arcades* have been read solely within the optic of Frankfurt School dialectical materialism. Both Theodor Adorno and his student Rolf Tiedemann (editor of the *Passagen-Werk*), expressed difficulties appreciating Benjamin’s “wide-eyed presentation of the bare facts” (Adorno, qtd. in UG 27) or his “oppressive chunks of quotations” (Tiedemann, qtd. in UG 27). Evidently, argues Perloff, this is not the most appropriate rubric for reading the *Arcades*. Rather, she claims, during its composition “[Benjamin’s] citational material took on a life of its own—a life, not of historiography or of philosophical treatise but of poetic construct”:

There is now a whole library on the philosophical/political perspective of the *Arcades Project*, but its *literary* appeal—an appeal evident in the response of its avid readers over the past few decades—remains less clearly understood. (28)

We read the endless quotations in the *Arcades* not primarily because we believe what Benjamin tells us about their political function, but because there is again, a little-understood pleasure to be taken from this form of literature. Benjamin's inclusion on a single page of popular songs, poems, travel-guides, literary narratives and authorial commentary offers us a rich and poetic *mélange* of textual pickings.

Benjamin's *Arcades* are useful then, to the understanding of contemporary poetry both as an assemblage *in se*, and as a theorization of all such works. (And appropriate quotations of Benjamin's theories of citation are liberally scattered through Perloff's pages.) Moreover, the authorial cross-references between fragments in the *Arcades*, claims Perloff, anticipate uncannily the electronic circumstances of our own literary moment. Hence such statements as: "the project is best understood as an ur-hypertext" (31); "its hypertextual mode looks ahead to such filing projects as Cia Rinne's *archives zaroum for nyposesi*"; and "Benjamin's Passages become the digital passages we take through websites and Youtube videos, navigating our way from one Google link to another and over the bridges provided by our favorite search engines and web pages" (49). While Benjamin buffs may bristle at this newfangled distortion of Benjamin's *magnum opus*, one has to concede that Perloff's version sounds entertaining. As elsewhere in *Unoriginal Genius*, her lively style and informal, modern approach (quoting her Facebook correspondence for instance) is calculated to engage students. Here is one way to make a stuffy and often stagnant culture of citation exciting.

Perloff's third chapter is titled "From Avant-Garde to Digital: The Legacy of Brazilian Concrete Poetry." At first sight, this appears to be something of a digression and again a return to the concerns of her earlier work, such as the 1998 *Poetry on & off the Page*. The precise connection between concrete poetry and "unoriginal genius" remains obscure. However, as I have suggested, the chapter is also a temporal transition between pre-war modernism and contemporary poetry. It opens with a quotation from Kenneth Goldsmith: "For many years, concrete poetry has been in limbo: it's been a displaced genre in search of a new medium. And now it's found one" ("Command," qtd. in *UG* 50). The argument is one of double reprise. Firstly concrete poetry, which has been unjustly marginalized in academia as more like "graphic design" than literature, can now be seen in a medium truly appropriate to it. (Perloff gives the example of Augusto de Campos's digital versions of his own poems made in 1997 for the Casa das Rosas in São Paulo.) Secondly, Brazilian concrete poetry was itself a recovery project of an earlier avant-garde that other post-war literature distanced itself from. Thus Perloff compares the work of the Campos brothers, Oyvind Fahlström and Eugen Gomringer, to that of Velimir Khlebnikov, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and James Joyce, drawing out lines of influence and continuities. This also has a geographical valence. Through her

analysis of the socio-historical pressures leading Gomringer, for instance, to write the way he did, Perloff shows us not only how we can see modernism as a global phenomenon encompassing the last century, but also how we can (and ought to) regard the concrete poets not as epigones of their Anglo-Saxon masters but as (un-)original modernists of the same ilk. This is categorically not—and Perloff’s book in general is not—an argument about art or poetry’s progress/improvement, but about the changing applications of the avant-garde in a changing world.

We have arrived at the section of Perloff’s book dedicated to contemporary poets. Yet history is never far behind. Where chapter three dealt with the double reprise of Concretism and the early avant-garde, chapter four returns, via Charles Bernstein’s opera libretto *Shadowtime*, to Walter Benjamin. (The opera, composed by Brian Ferneyhough and produced in 2005, is “about” the life of Walter Benjamin.) At the same time, the chapter also returns to a more explicit treatment of citation as a literary means by linking concrete poetry to the work of Oulipo. This may seem to be something of a stretch. There are obvious differences between these movements: in Oulipo “visual format does not necessarily play a central role” (79), nor do members of Oulipo write “in isolation,” nor is it a “product of what Deleuze and Guattari called a ‘minor literature’” (80). Yet, claims Perloff, “behind these obvious differences there is a common thread” (80). Both reject what Rosemarie Waldrop called “the ‘transparency of the word’”; both use constraints such as that of foreign language composition; and “in both Oulipo and Concretism the recovery of the past—both as source material and foundational text—is central” (83).

Out of this alloy of Concretism and Oulipo then, arises *Shadowtime*, a bizarre and wonderful text, full of citations, constraints, visual motifs, repetitions and even a free translation—or “transcreation”—of Ernst Jandl’s concrete poem “Der und Die.” While “[s]trictly speaking, *Shadowtime* is not an Oulipo work,” (UG 9), Perloff argues that its creative use of many constraints makes this an appropriate optic. “The Oulipo axiom, ‘A text written according to a constraint describes the constraint,’ could hardly be more applicable than it is here” because Bernstein uses a “Benjaminian ethos” of “spatialization” and citation to describe Benjamin (97). “Bernstein uses citation to measure, evaluate, and critique the all-consuming citationality of his protagonist” (97):

*Shadowtime*, at one level a libretto, whose performance as opera provides visual and musical complementarity for the verbal text, is, from another angle, a long lyric-dramatic poem that follows Benjamin’s own aphorism: to write history is to cite history. (90)

Like the *Arcades*, Bernstein’s work is at once “lyric and critical essay” (98). Citation is both the primary text and the reprise. Poetry recapitulates history. Bernstein becomes Benjamin, Benjamin becomes Bernjastein.

This confusion between the critical (or biographical/documentary) act and creative act characterizes a number of the texts that Perloff studies. The next chapter for instance, turns to Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*. Made up of alternate

sections of prose and poetry, with numerous interleaved photographs of other books and pieces of Howe's family memorabilia, this book is a memoir of the poet's mother, Mary Manning. The objects in it are mostly quotidian, as is Howe's highly documentary or factual style. Howe, claims Perloff, uses facts—or pieces of “factual” texts—both critically and creatively. Hers is the mode of the “lyrical montage-essay” (100). (Here we might recall Benjamin's assertion about the *Arcades*: “Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. [AP 460].) While documentary, claims Perloff, “has generally been taken as the antithesis of the modernist artwork with its obliquity, difficulty, and heightened self-consciousness,” Howe's work complicates this binary, bringing the two into the same orbit by moving between prose of perfect clarity and “flat statement” to obscurity, fragmentary personal recollection and glowing “lyric fantasy” (112). It seems that in the era of unoriginal genius, traditional genre boundaries no longer obtain.

Chapter six is titled “Language in Migration: Multilingualism and Exophonic Writing in the New Poetics,” and is dedicated to two poets: the Japanese-born Yoko Tawada and the French-Norwegian Caroline Bergvall. Neither writes in their first language. Rather, for each, translation and “exophonic writing” are themselves quintessential creative acts. (Unsurprisingly the chapter has an epigraph from Benjamin's “Task of the Translator.”) While writing in a language not one's own is nothing new in poetry, Perloff explains that Tawada and Bergvall's work has a specific relevance to contemporary global culture. She contrasts them to Eliot who included foreign lines for the sake of “exoticism” and in order “to heighten the authenticity,” and to Pound whose *Cantos* are nothing if not multilingual. As Perloff notes, however, Pound's multilingual fragments always rely on the figure of the author, the *ego scriptor*, to bring them together.

But what happens when there is no more commanding voice to assess those “fragments”? In a world of relentless global communication, poetry has begun to concern itself with the processing and absorption of the “foreign” itself, given the vagaries of travel and migration or of speech samples and forms of writing. (129)

Rather than using quotations from foreign languages as props to an English end-text, Bergvall and Tawada's work occupies a realm outside of the prescriptions of any one given language. Bergvall's *Via* for instance, is made up simply from alphabetically-arranged citations of forty-seven English translations of the first tercet of Canto 1 of Dante's *Inferno*. It is a project that shows the impossibility of arriving at any authoritative version—a striking statement about our current poetic climate in which we have only translations and more or less self-similar copies. Likewise, Yoko Tawada's descriptions in *Sprachpolizei und Spielpolyglotte* of learning German through immersion—relating words to things on the model of her often ideogrammatic native Japanese—destabilizes our ingrained sense of a word's “natural” meaning.

Suppose, the poet wonders, you were to separate the two words in the compound *Radfahren* (to ride a bike). Would the break suggest that there were two bikes in use? (143)

Tawada's language games, "the stubborn literalism of [her] logic—a literalism that makes it impossible to read *through* the words in question—raises the stakes of poetic possibility" (143). (Here we recall the subject of another of Perloff's books about experimental verse: *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*.) In order to correspond to our multilingual environment, twenty-first century poetry needs to embrace the possibilities of foreign citations, translations and "transcreations" of other languages.

Perloff's last chapter returns to the subject of unoriginal genius and its supreme proponent, Kenneth Goldsmith. Goldsmith, of course, is the man most closely associated with the terms "uncreative writing" and "conceptual writing"—as defined in the manifesto he wrote for the Poetry Foundation of America:

Conceptual writing obstinately makes no claims on originality. On the contrary, it employs intentionally self and ego effacing tactics using uncreativity, unoriginality, illegibility, appropriation, plagiarism, fraud, theft, and falsification as its precepts; information management word processing, databasing, and extreme process as its methodologies; and boredom . . . as its ethos. ("Manifesto" qtd. in *UG* 147)

Perhaps surprisingly, considering how apposite Goldsmith's work is for Perloff's project, this chapter is the most polemical. Where the preceding chapters focused on explanation, celebration and exploration of poetry which too rarely sees the light of criticism, here Perloff falls back onto a hermeneutics of suspicion. Where Goldsmith claims that "I am the most boring writer that has ever lived" and that "You really don't need to read my books to get the idea of what they're like; you just need to know the general concepts," Perloff argues that *au contraire*, reading his books is precisely what we should be doing. (Here she quotes Benjamin again from the *Arcades*—"Never trust what writers say about their own work" [*AP* 203; qtd. in *UG* 149].) To this end, she opens up Goldsmith's 2007 work, *Traffic*—which Goldsmith claims to be a straightforward transcription of twenty-four hours' worth of WINS radio traffic reports on an unspecified big holiday in New York—with the aim of reading it "as a book about traffic" (*UG* 151).

Off we go then, but not too quickly. Inching, "bumper-to-bumper" across the Brooklyn Bridge, "absolutely crawling" through Midtown, at a "snail's pace" across the GW Bridge, "getting clobbered" on the BQE, and "in for a rough ride" out of town:

Whoa! What a backup lining up to the tolls here at the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels. . . . And if you're in Manhattan coming downtown, it has improved a bit on the West Side Highway and the FDR Drive, especially the FDR Drive in the 90s. But what has gotten worse is Broadway. Don't get involved in Broadway at all. (Goldsmith, *Traffic* 53, qtd. in *UG* 157)

One begins, in this detailed investigation, to understand Perloff's point. This is not boring reading at all. Moreover, there are issues raised by the text that don't seem to correspond to Goldsmith's description. Certain reports contradict each other. It is not clear what day it is. One report claims that "alternate side of the street parking rules are in effect for tomorrow" (*Traffic* 115, qtd. in *UG* 159), while another claims the opposite. And indeed, like all good readable books, this one has a triumphant ending. Hence the midnight report:

We're over the hump and into the official holiday weekend. I want to wish everybody out there a safe and happy holiday, especially when traveling on the road this weekend. If you're trying to get out of town now, you're in for an easy time of it. . . . Looking down to Williamsburg, Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges, it's one big green light. And over in Jersey, it's never been better. . . . (*Traffic* 115, qtd. in *UG* 159)

"One big green light," quotes Perloff, "can life really be so beautiful?" (160). Probably not. It is too reminiscent of the green light at the end of the dock in the F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*. "Goldsmith's 'transcription' is thus hardly passive recycling" (161).

So what is going on? Perloff's book concludes by returning to Duchamp and his ceaseless attempts to escape from "retinal art" (163). His final recourse in this fight, was to "turn to the reproduction in miniature of his earlier work in the boxes and *boîtes en valise* rather than the making of new ready-mades or paintings" (163). Perloff finds the same passion for conceptualism in Goldsmith's background in visual art that she finds in Duchamp. "Why call oneself boring or indifferent or uncreative when one obviously has a passionate desire to *create* something new?" Because that is precisely what is needed to make us read any text afresh:

Ergo, the poetry that doesn't look like any poetry we've seen, presented as "unreadable" so as to challenge us to read it. Its premise, Goldsmith has suggested, is that in a digital environment, language, once "locked onto a page," has become "completely fluid; it's lifted off the page and therefore able to be poured into so many different forms and take so many different shapes and really be molded and sculpted in a way that wasn't possible before." (164)

In a world where we can copy and paste texts at will, remarkable applications are needed to make us still see the writing before our eyes. The moral is that of Borges and Bioy-Casares's story, "Homage to César Paladión" in *Chronicles of Bustos Domecq*. Paladión, taking the use of quotation we see in Pound and Eliot to its illogical extreme decides to begin quoting not just lines, sentences, or paragraphs of great authors, but entire books. Long overlooked by the literary community, Borges's narrator cites a critic, who in turn cites another critic, arguing that Paladión's work is an act of signal genius. Deceived by its apparent similarity to the texts quoted, the literary community has overlooked the fact that aside from the entire prose content, these works could not be more different.



## BERNSTEIN VS. MOTHER GOOSE: ATTACK OF THE DIFFICULT POEMS

I turn now to a book which, aside from its entire prose content, could not be more similar to *Unoriginal Genius*: Charles Bernstein's *Attack of the Difficult Poems* (abbreviated parenthetically as *ADP*). This unruly constellation of twenty-nine pieces (essays, speeches, "inventions," reviews and other unclassifiable texts) doesn't appear at first glance to have a unifying topic. Certainly, one might see this book simply as updating and filling in Bernstein's former collections: *Content's Dream: Essays 1975–1984*, *A Poetics*, and *My Way: Speeches and Poems*. For all this, however, there is, on careful inspection, a surprising coherence to the work. One piece leads to the next, developing and digressing always in surprising directions. What emerges is by no means an indiscriminate attack, but a carefully confabulated symphony of ideas. To see this clearly, however, it is necessary to look at each of its four sections in turn.

The first of these sections is nicely titled "Professing Poetics," and focuses on the state of current poetry pedagogies. This section opens in a deceptively gentle manner, drawing us in with the reassurance that "All of us from time to time encounter a difficult poem" (*ADP* 3), and going on to give some basic survival tactics in the face of such an eventuality. (The ones you need to remember are "Don't let the poem intimidate you!" and "*Smoothing over the difficulties is not the solution!*" [*ADP* 5].) If this seems uncharacteristically saccharine, nothing could do more to convince the reader of Bernstein's irony than his second essay: "A Blow is Like an Instrument: The Poetic Imaginary and Curricular Practices." Here Bernstein's affable mask makes way for a manifesto, as eloquent as it is angry, inveighing against the state of current academia, preprofessionalization in graduate programs, academic publishing, the increase of non-tenured labor, close-minded disciplinarity and funding. It ends with a highly rhetorical plea on behalf of mass education:

Will we spend billions on defense while begrudging any money spent on what we are defending? The great experiment in mass education is not even a hundred years old: it has had virtually no downside. That we teeter on abandoning this commitment now is a testament to a smallness, to a lack of generosity, and to a contempt for noncommercial values that can only make us poorer—not only culturally, but economically. (26)

The essay's position early in Bernstein's book is important, as at the heart of what the difficult poems seem to be attacking are not only aesthetic preferences for the easy, but also linked institutional and political problems arising from a view of education as a means to an end. Published in an early version for the first time in 1997, the essay retains its force, reminding us of a continuing—if anything exacerbated—need to resist certain malevolent trends in academia.

Bernstein's grumpy recriminations, grim predictions, and slaps in the face of public taste, however, are neither without a light at the end of the tunnel (his description of setting up the Poetics Program at Buffalo with Robert Creeley),

nor without comic relief. Half-way through the essay, he pauses his diatribe to describe his attempts to publish an essay in *PMLA*. Rejected on several fronts by the review panel, Bernstein concludes:

I feel like a dance-hall performer in *Gunsmoke* being thrown out of town by Marshal Dillon. “That may be awright for Patee or SoHo, but we don’t cotton to that around here.”—“But, Marshal, I have as much right to be in this territory as you and so maybe I just won’t mosey along!” (20)

We haven’t seen the last of this Charles Bernstein.

No indeed, in the next essay, he returns, guns pointed this time at the Academy of American Poets’ “National Poetry Month.” National Poetry Month, the argument goes, is “the best prophylactic against aesthetic experience” (28): it not only ignores the need for the “making of a poetry for our time,” but in fact damages this cause by accepting sponsorship from “the major institutions that work actively against the wider distribution of poetry” (29). As part of an alternative to National Poetry Month, therefore, Bernstein perversely proposes “that we have an International Anti-Poetry Month,” a month in which, among other activities, “all verse in public places will be covered over—from the Statue of Liberty to the friezes on many of our government buildings,” when “[p]arents will be asked not to read Mother Goose and other rimes to their children,” and when “*Cats* will be closed for the month by order of the Anti-Poetry Commission . . .” (30). Here, as at many, many other moments in *Attack of the Difficult Poems*, Bernstein’s irony is so thick that it is difficult to work out precisely where he stands. The last section of the book, occupied solely by the prose-poem-essay, “Recantorium,” is the culmination of his method. It is a long, beautiful, witty and strangely touching list of things Bernstein “takes back,” including ultimately, the act of recantation.

I was wrong, I apologize, I recant. I altogether abandon the false opinion that National Poetry Month is not good for poetry and for poets . . .

I was wrong, I apologize, I recant. I altogether reject, abjure, and denounce the sarcasm that has just now undercut the sincerity of my confession. . . .

I was wrong, I apologize, I recant. I totally and absolutely with shame and guilt, abandon the false doctrine that social and cultural history might include poetry in its field of study or use poetry as models for thinking about society and culture. . . .

I recant and cant my recantation. . . . (271–78)

Like the Whitman of “*Repondez*,” Bernstein engages in an agitational negative dialectics, forcing us to reconsider our own position on each issue. We can never be sure if he means what he is saying, whether it is the authentic Bernstein speaking. In fact, in his essay on poetic hoaxes, “*Fraud’s Phantoms: A Brief Yet Unreliable Account of Fighting Fraud with Fraud*,” Bernstein poses as a man called Nick Gallansky, in turn posing as Bernstein, who then ultimately exposes Gallansky himself as a fraud (225). Stay on your toes. Or as Bernstein’s pedagogic motto has it: “Be ready, but not prepared” (57).

On one or two issues, however, we may be fairly sure that Bernstein is sincere. It is safe to say, for example, that he believes in the value of invention alongside—rather than in opposition to—the value of the aesthetic. Everything in Bernstein’s book attests to this: from his description of how to teach difficult poems through “writing experiments” (52) to his own constant reinventions of the essay form (reinvention being, perhaps, the most appropriate form in which to discuss inventive poetry). Most explicitly it is a notion addressed in the lecture “Invention Follies.” Bernstein’s take on the issue of originality here is comparable to that of Marjorie Perloff, although it has a Marxist twist. While he agrees that “innovation, the new, ingenuity, and originality” are “vexed terms” in the “immediate present” (33), he also argues that they are indispensable to society. Innovation corresponds to the need “to break out of the obsessive repetition-compulsion that we see all around us” (34). It creates a space for expression that is always being tied up and becoming a parody of itself: “Even lamentation must be reinvented lest the dead be mocked and the living become ghost walkers, zombies of the tried and no longer true” (35).

Bernstein believes in the need for “a transvaluation of the concept of innovation” (36), not in a linear concept of progress, but, as in Perloff’s chapter on concrete poetry or as for Benjamin in the *Arcades Project*, in a going back over the sites of the past to move into the future. “Poetry,” he writes, “doesn’t improve nor do new modes of poetry replace existing modes; indeed, the new may bring back into play previous and even apparently outmoded styles, forms, contents and dictions” (39). Bernstein’s model for this development comes from Henry Petroski’s book, *The Evolution of Useful Things*. New poetics are like new competing commercial technologies—telephones or mp3 players for instance. Instead of simply updating the current model, both inventive poetics and new technologies seek to make some other missing feature more desirable. They create possible futures by reinterpreting and revaluing or transvaluing their present. Poetic invention is “a necessary probe of perception for grappling not only with things as they are but also things as they might be” (39–40).

What is fundamental to understanding this perspective is that poetry itself, or rather writing in general, is for Bernstein a technology, a *techné*. Writing, as a material practice is a historical phenomenon, something that changes over time. The way we use it creates the possibilities for what it may become. In this sense, one of the stakes of *Attack of the Difficult Poems* (and also, in fact, of *Unoriginal Genius*) is, ambitiously, to reinvent writing itself.

The history of writing is the subject of the second section of Bernstein’s book, titled, “The Art of Immemorability.” The first essay in this section, “Every Which Way but Loose,” is an explicit meditation on the questions posed by electronic text. “I am writing in Word for Windows 95,” begins Bernstein (betraying the age of his essay), “the 12-point Times New Roman letters are white dropout against a blue background” (83). Quickly unsatisfied with his blue background, however, Bernstein moves on to contemplate a more extravagant possibility: writing on a “blowup of the holograph text of Blake’s *Jerusalem*” (83). In turn, this leads to

contemplation of the difference between digital text and image. If he makes a single graphic file of the layers, “flattening” it, “the text loses many of its unique user-friendly digital features: the reader/viewer can’t change the font or size or color, can’t copy it and paste it into another document — can’t, that is, treat the text as we have come to expect texts to be treatable in an electronic environment” (84).

The lesson? The materiality—or rather, one materiality—of writing is being replaced by electronic composition. For some critics this is bad news, threatening to engender “inauthenticity,” a “substitution to the mechanical,” and a “substitution of quantity for quality” (87). Benjamin’s terms come to mind again. Is the age of digital reproduction to be feared because of the loss of the “aura” of the printed page? Bernstein, like Perloff, and Perloff’s Kenneth Goldsmith says no. For him, digital reproduction is another call to imagine that there is no “original” text of a poem, whether Blake’s or Dickinson’s:

that works of poetry always exist as versions, that there is no singular original but an array of realizations. . . . Versions become translations in the sense that all works of poetry are translations, which is to say that writing itself is a form of translation and transformation, spinning and respinning, positioning and repositioning, transcribing and eliding. (88)

The transformation of writing in the digital sphere proves to be remarkably liberating for poetry. The hierarchy of right text and wrong text, of original and copy breaks down into a reciprocity. Rather than dismiss the digital text, we ought to think of it as another version on the same plane.

This applies also to sound recording. In other essays from this section of *Attack of the Difficult Poems*, Bernstein argues that recordings of poems should be considered under the same rubric of alternate version. In his talk from 2003, “Making Audio Visible: Poetry’s Coming Digital Presence” for instance, we read the prophecy that in the “coming digital environment of a poet’s work” (117) sound files will be included with online publications and critical articles used in classrooms: “since the recordings would be able to be assigned in much the same manner as the visual or alphabetic text . . . , the sound file would become, *ipso facto*, a text for study” (114). Moreover, “the experience of listening to poetry would be far more mobile and portable than it has been, rivaling, though not exceeding, the portability of the book.” (114). As anyone who has taken or taught a twentieth-century poetry class in the past few years will recognize, these predictions have—largely thanks to Professor Bernstein and his initiative in the development of the online archive for recorded poetry, PennSound—come true.

In the world that Bernstein imagines there are no “lost original” or “ideal” texts (167). All we have are more or less distant mutual copies. It is a space in which the dynamic of “translation” becomes more central than that of original creation. Expanding on some of the ideas found in Marjorie Perloff’s chapter on Caroline Bergvall and Yoko Tawada, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* offers numerous directions in which to take translation as a poetic practice, or poetry as a translation practice. Describing his undergraduate writing seminar for instance, in

the essay “Wreading, Writing, Wresponding,” Bernstein offers a list of possible (markedly Oulipean) “transformations,” “metamorphoses,” “substitutions” and “deformations” that can be applied to the base text. These include “homolinguistic translation,” and “Homophonic & dialect translation” (52). For these, any source text can be used, even, as Bernstein notes, his own prompts. Hence, as one of his students described homolinguistic translation:

§ Homolinguistic transduction: Take a pretense (someone else’s or your own) and traverse/rewrite/rate it by substituting warp for word, phase for phrase, load for line, or “free” troupe as repose to each phantom or sentence. . . . (52)

The potentials for further translation are endless.

These methods, of course, are not new. Perhaps it is telling that having passed through a homolinguistic translation, Bernstein’s initial prompt is already beginning to sound a little like *Finnegans Wake*. Those familiar with the work of Louis Zukofsky will also immediately recognize “homophonic & dialect translation” as the dynamic of “A”-9, and his Catullus Poems. The point, however, as I have emphasized, is not so much to make new work, but to create alternatives. As one of the epigraphs to *Unoriginal Genius* has it (a quotation from none other than Charles Bernstein): “I love originality so much I keep copying it” (Bernstein, “Manifest Aversions”; qtd. in *UG 1*). This is explained more fully by Bernstein in an essay on Zukofsky in the third section of his book: “Breaking the Translation Curtain: The Homophonic Sublime.”

Inescapable, it seems, Walter Benjamin is waiting for us here too. His essay, “The Task of the Translator”—specifically his argument that in Bernstein’s words “the mark of the translator should not be made invisible, or inaudible, in the translation” (*ADP* 199)—provides the launching-pad for Bernstein’s theoretical reflections. Like Benjamin, Bernstein believes that “a certain strangeness from the original must necessarily be embodied in the new poem” (199). Thus, rather than translate for ease of reading, Bernstein advocates keeping “as much of the syntax of the original as possible, especially if it goes against colloquial English” (199). As with a poem, the sense of the translation is not given in advance, but waiting to be discovered. For this reason, “[l]etting the sound lead is crucial, or often crucial, for the sound may lead to the sense” (200). Again following Benjamin, Bernstein writes that translation is “its own medium, not merely a genre of poetry” (200). The great virtue of homophonic translations, such as Celia and Louis Zukofsky’s Catullus poems or David Melnick’s *Men in Aida* (a version of the *Iliad*), is that they make us aware of this fact. They “symbolize the revenge of the translator.” Bernstein ends with a series of provocative and lyrical questions:

What is valuable, the original or the reproduction . . . : the source or the transfiguration of it, the product or the activity, the accuracy or the exchange? Or is what is valuable the relation of the original to the reproduction? Or the first on its own, but not the second on its own . . . ?

. . . Can there be a translation without an original? Interpretation without its object or subject? A beloved without a lover? Child without parent?  
 What is poetry? (201–02)

What indeed? It is through Bernstein's book that we realize the poverty of our customary definitions.

## THE SHOWDOWN: BERNSTEIN MEETS PERLOFF

The time has come for a more general discussion of *Unoriginal Genius* alongside *Attack of the Difficult Poems*. Clearly Perloff's and Bernstein's projects are similar, sharing concerns for the same kinds of poetry, with translation, digital media and questions of originality. But how do these works and their authors talk to each other?

Fortunately, we need look no further for suggestions than the end of *Attack of the Difficult Poems*. Included here, under the forbidding banner "Poetry Scene Investigation," is an email interview conducted between Charles Bernstein and Marjorie Perloff in November 2002. Perloff begins:

Charles, almost twenty years have gone by since that fateful MLA when you delivered the lecture "The Academy in Peril: William Carlos Williams Meets the MLA" (1983). I still remember what a tempest you caused and how furious the old timers like M.L. Rosenthal were at your demolition job. You were, in those days, a great fighter against "official verse culture." How does the "situation in poetry" today relate to that earlier moment? Do you feel the fight against official verse culture has been won? Can it ever be won? How would you describe the current scene *vis-à-vis* that of 1983? (*ADP* 239)

Many of the central concerns of Perloff's work can be identified here. How has the history of poetry changed in the last two decades? What is the fate of poetic modernism? How is the poetry written now different? These are questions that we are unlikely to learn the answer to from reading Bernstein. Instead, Bernstein—always a poet first—offers us a digression about how Ginsberg told him in 1983 that he should "talk more slowly and breathe between phrases" (239). This is not entirely flippant, however. As Bernstein's famous quotation goes: "the shortest distance between two points is a digression" (254) and talking slowly does bring him round eventually to the subject of official verse culture. While he admits that "the radical modernism I was putting forward in that address—poets and poetics—has received much greater acknowledgment since that time," he also states that "modern and contemporary poetry is, if anything, becoming more peripheral to literary studies, in the universities but also in elementary and high schools" (240).

Partially responsible are "publications-with-wide-circulation" or PWCs, and their refusal in general to print or support the kind of new verse Bernstein admires. On this, Perloff is in perfect agreement. Indeed, once the conversation

gets going, it becomes difficult to keep Bernstein and Perloff separate. The interview starts to read like a continuous essay by one author, and it if were not for the idiosyncratic enthusiasms of each interlocutor (old television shows in Bernstein's case; Duchamp in Perloff's), one might be tempted in a fit of paranoia to suggest that Perloff was another avatar of Nick Gallansky.

A major distinction is reasserted however, when Perloff turns to Bernstein's poem "The Manufacture of Negative Experience" from *With Strings* (2001), asking him to "describe for our readers how the composition took place" (ADP 246). Here again Perloff betrays a mode of interrogating poetry that we see dominant in *Unoriginal Genius*: a concern with a text's genetics, with the meaning and source of each line, with composition. As Perloff concedes, "in the end, nothing substitutes for 'close reading'" (ADP 254). While Bernstein agrees that close reading is a key mode of "searching for something not yet defined" in both criticism and poetry—hence his eponymous suggestion that it "would get a better rap if we called it PSI: Poetry Scene Investigation" (254)—this is not, in fact (on close reading), a mode that we ever see him using in *Attack of the Difficult Poems*.

Perloff's approach, then, is a more traditional one. And certainly, for all the novelty of its topic, *Unoriginal Genius* is written in a familiar mold. It opens with a proposition (the paradox of the title), proceeds logically to identify the issues surrounding this proposition in canonical literature and critical discussions, and then explores its ramifications through close readings of several contemporary works. This direct approach has several advantages over Bernstein's tangents, indications, poetic logic and more distant theorizations. Firstly, *Unoriginal Genius* offers us a narrative which makes sense of aesthetics in our current moment. Where too many historical studies of modernist verse end with Language poetry or before, Perloff does not shy away from explaining how we find ourselves where we are. Secondly, through Perloff's book, we become familiar with poems that few of us knew before. *Unoriginal Genius* is, in this sense, like a well curated gallery for the obscure. Perloff's own brand of unoriginal genius is in defending poetry from charges of being incomprehensible and irrelevant. *Unoriginal Genius* is thus a *Defense of Poesy* for the twenty-first century. And Perloff herself is surely the most perceptive and eloquent champion any new poem could wish for when placed before the tribunal of English literary criticism.

The fact that Perloff always succeeds in finding points of interest in a text, leading to a more or less coherent understanding, and that this understanding is accessible through close-reading and traditional academic structures of thought, however, is very slightly troubling. While criticism never seems more purposeful than in Perloff's books, one still wonders: can the resistant essence of contemporary experimental poetry really be contained in this way? Surely not exhaustively? Are we not doing it an injustice by deriving its formal features from *The Waste Land*? What if Kenneth Goldsmith's *Traffic* didn't have any hidden hooks on which to hang a close reading? What if it was in fact just a set of traffic announcements? Could any text ultimately be made to yield the same lessons?

These are questions Perloff does not broach, and rightly so. They are beyond the scope of her study, and might muddy the crystalline waters. By contrast, however, Bernstein's book never suggests that literary critical modes of interpretation are adequate to poetry. These modes stand to be constantly rethought as ways into poetry. Instead of defending poetry, he weaponizes that poetry against its enemies: stale pedagogy, National Poetry Month, education-bashing economics. Critique is itself turned into a kind of poetry, a negative capability or bottomless irony. "Poetry Bailout" he declares in the penultimate piece, "Will Restore Confidence of Readers":

Cultural leaders have come together to announce a massive poetry buy-out: leveraged and unsecured poems, poetry derivatives, delinquent poems, and subprime poems will be removed from circulation in the biggest poetry bailout since the Victorian era. (267)

Or as Bernstein quipped in a recent manifesto for *Poetry* magazine (of all places): "*Immature poets borrow. Mature poets invest*" ("Manifest Aversions"). What do we do with this wry—often painfully unfunny—humor? The comedy of applying dubious economic solutions to the state of poetry makes no claims beyond deriding its own absurdity. It is discomforting. It agitates, inspires and slips, by its own poetic logic, beyond reach. Rather than leading to any final understanding of a work, Bernstein embraces an anarchic unresolvable pluralism. Unsummarizable, uncontainable, unabashed, his is truly an *Attack of the Difficult Poems*.

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