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 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 the work of early twentieth-century masters such as Eliot, Pound, and Benjamin. To 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 “wided-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.”

The New Flarf

Laura Mathias

In *The New Poetics*, Mathew Timmons’ artisitic control is far more evident than it was in his prevous 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 reading 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* revealed in this comparatively dry approach, the author copying and pasting the details of his financial downfall in a nightmarish, unendable 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

**American Book Review**

**From Écriture to Récriture**

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

112 pages; paper, $15.00

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Introduction by Rodrigo Toscano

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