Marjorie Perloff’s new book Unoriginal Geniuses: 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 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 collageist method and multilingual poetics, which Perloff sees as “his anticipation of digital linkage in the creation of narrative assembly.” Alternately and aptly termed “réciture” by the contemporary French literary historian Antoine Compagnon, citationality in Perloff’s words, “the logical form of ‘writing’ in an age of literally mobile or transferable text—that text 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 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 réciture 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.

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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 interleave, 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.”

“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 refraamed,” 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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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 pandoric jumble 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 passing, 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 admitted he does come close to that at times (such as “The New Concept”’s in-your-face anti-industrial spin and the most bluntly flarly “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 affection 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 aggravatingly with The New Kitten. The best thing to do is to ignore the nukes, 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.

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 on “The New Flannel” or “The New Poetry” and 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 flarer, 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 art not only too often is embraced only by 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 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, fascinates 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.

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