The Voice We Need to Listen to: A Comment on Perloff's Poetic License

Hu Quansheng
School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University
800 Dongchuan Road, Shanghai 200240, China
Email: jamesonhu@sjtu.edu.cn

Abstract In the voice Perloff added when she made comparative studies on Modernist and Postmodernist lyric in *Poetic License*, we hear three things: her understanding of poetic license, her view on modernism and postmodernism, and her critical formula formalism + cultural studies. It is this voice that we need to listen to as it is distinctive and remarkable, particularly today when we are puzzled about what's going on "after theory".
Key words Marjorie Perloff; poetic license; postmodernism; critical formula

I. The Sense of *Poetic License*

Marjorie Perloff's *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (1990) consists of 15 essays which "were written between 1984 and 1989; all but three have been published previously" (2). Though a collection of essays, it can be taken to be a monograph that deals with poetic license.

Right at the very beginning of the "Introduction", Perloff discusses the word *license* etymologically: "*License* as permit, as permission from an outside authority; *license* as defiance of authority, as failure to obtain a permit — the poetry of our time has navigated with difficulty between these options" (1). Her introductory remarks about the sense of poetic license are 1) that "For all the recent talk of *opening up the canon*, … in practice *opening* rarely means more than the replacement of an X by a Y" (1-2), and 2) that Ginsberg's "Howl" is "a poem very much rooted in its late-fifties cold war moment — a poem … that, I submit, no one, not even Ginsberg himself, would write in the late eighties" as it "can be (and has been) viewed primarily as a cultural and historical artifact" (3). The message these remarks convey is that "poetic license", which is obviously connected to the formation of canon, is inseparable from its culture and "moment".

II. Perloff's View on Modernism and Postmodernism

In the collection Perloff offers "rereadings and reframings of some notable modernists" and "takes up problematics of contemporary poetry and poetics" (4). She even reads writers outside USA and UK such as Khlebnikov and Barthes. Just as T. L. Cooksey puts it, "While focusing on British and American poetry, Perloff crosses linguistic

boundaries to examine the larger context, including the work of Khlebnikov and French translations of American poets." From these rereadings and reframings, we can see her attitude towards modernism and postmodernism. In this collection as well as in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (1981), *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (1985), *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (1986), *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1991) and *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* (2002), Perloff seems to say (and she does say in an interview) that "the distinction many of us made between modernism and postmodernism no longer seems as valid" (Luo 6) and that there are "deep-level connections and affinities between modernism and postmodernism" (Barry).

Take Essay 11 for example. In the essay, Perloff points out that "[t]wo things were safely ignored". First, although Merwin's free verse "may have seemed" enormously innovative, it "was nowhere as explosive as the free verse Pound and Williams were writing by 1916" (238). Second, what "should have struck the critics as slightly odd" should not be such seemingly explosive poems as *The Drunk of Furnace* but "that a poetry so seemingly explosive … was routinely published in the *New Yorker*, *Poetry*, the *Hudson Review*, and *Harper's* — hardly organs of the avant-garde" (238). Perloff's argument is twofold here: first, if Merwin's poem is explosive, its explosiveness does not go beyond Pound's and Williams's; and second, Merwin's poem may have been explosive but was published in the traditional magazines, and so it follows that what is "odd" is not Merwin's poem but the critics who think Merwin's poem is odd. In other words, Merwin's poem's explosiveness, if any, derives from such notable modernists as Pound and Williams.

Another example is Essay 12 where, when she discusses Blackburn's poetry, Perloff comments: "Blackburn is a poet I personally feel I should admire. He carried on the Pound-Williams tradition" (252). Obviously, Perloff traces Blackburn's postmodernity to Pound-Williams tradition in the same way.

Perloff's argument for the "deep-level connections and affinities between modernism and postmodernism" is more manifest and stronger in her *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* where she "critiques the most commonly held assumptions about postmodern poetry, assumptions which she proves to be hazy, contradictory, and historically ill-informed," and "debunks" "the two most popular lines of thinking about postmodern poetry" (Lazer 182). Perloff thinks that postmodernist poets such as Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery "were indeed a breath of fresh air", "[b]ut from the hindsight of the twenty-first century, their fabled 'opening of the field' was less revolution than restoration: a carrying-on, in somewhat a diluted form, of the avant-garde project that had been at the very heart of early modernism" (Perloff 2002: 2 – 3). She says: "Now that the long twentieth century is finally behind us, perhaps we can begin to see this embryonic phase with new eyes. Far from being irrelevant and obsolete, the aesthetic of early modernism has provided the seeds of the materialist poetic which is increasingly our own" (ibid.: 3). All these remarks show that, in Perloff's view, postmodernism is deeply rooted in modernism, and is nothing more than the "second wave of modernism".

Upon this view of Perloff's, Materer comments in his "Review of *Twenty-First-Century Modernism: The 'New' Poetics*": "Marjorie Perloff is one of the few critics who is essential to our understanding of contemporary American poetry. Without her we could not trace its roots in twentieth-century modernism so clearly or distinguish the innovative from the imitative poets" (Materer 628). Materer particularly mentions the functions of the quotation marks in the subtitle of the book and in the title of the last chapter. He says that "[t]he challenge of experimental modernism has been taken up by avant-garde poets such as Bernstein, Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, and Steve McCaffery" (ibid.), and that the "quotation marks [again] signal Perloff's skepticism about our understanding of 'modernism' and 'postmodernism'" (ibid.: 630). Materer's analysis is convincing, for indeed Perloff's use of quotation marks simply implies that the so-called "New" Poetics in the Twenty-First-Century is actually rooted in the Modernism in the early 20th century, and that the so-called "Modernism" at the Millennium can be traced to the Modernism in the early decades of the last century. In an interview Perloff herself made her view quite clear: "From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, the distinction many of us made between modernism and postmodernism no longer seems as valid. Obviously, the world has changed enormously since the early 20th century, but I have come to believe that the real revolution, so far as the arts are concerned, occurred in the tumultuous years before World War I" (Luo 6). No doubt, this is to say "that unless we reappraise modernism, we cannot understand postmodernism" (Barry).

III. Perloff's Critical Formula: Formalism + Cultural Studies

Perloff got her PhD in 1965, and this indicates that she was taught New Criticism and trained as a New Critic. "I was trained as a 'close reader,'" she admits (Luo 4). After 1965, America entered its so-called Poststructuralist Period. In the year of 1966 Derrida published his influential paper "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", blowing a storm of poststructuralism in the United States. In the 1970s the "School of Yale" was established, and in 1979 they published *Deconstruction and Criticism* which is "taken to be the manifesto of the school" (Takahashi 29).

Perloff is always a close reader. She is so, as Miller observes, not only in her early works such as *Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats* (1970) and *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell* (1973), but also in her later books in which "often she employs the same tools of formal and metrical analysis" (Miller 155).

But Perloff is definitely not confined to close reading. Somehow, just in her *Frank O'Hara: Poet among Painters* published in 1977 there is a change which might result from the storm of deconstruction. In the book Perloff reads O'Hara's work "as part of a matrix of related cultural and artistic activity, rather than isolating it, in the New Critical fashion, as a uniquely supercharged variety known as 'literature'". Her "[p]lacing poetry within a cultural continuum in this way quickly becomes the keynote of her approach. Instead of reading the 'words on the page' she reads the words (as she has said) off the page and into the immensely active urban and technological cultures from which innovative poetries invariably arise" (Barry).

However, Perloff is not totally open to deconstruction and poststructuralism; she is careful with and even resistant to them to some extent. For example, in the second essay in *Poetic License*, she says: "In the wake of deconstruction, one would think it no longer necessary to repeat the truism that the verbal signifier is not equivalent to its signifieds. But the current wave of ideologically motivated criticism has ushered in a curious form of backsliding. When, on the one hand, we talk theory, we continue to talk of 'difference' and 'erasure,' of 'decenteredness' and 'supplementarity.' When, on the other, we engage in practical criticism, whether of poetry or of prose, we read texts as if language were a mere conduit to a truth beyond it. X is a poem 'about' finding one's sexual identity, Y is 'about' the horror of rape, Z is 'about' exchange value or commodity fetish. And so on" (51). Here Perloff tries to make us aware that although we theoretically talk about the gliding of signifiers when we read poetry, in the end we will talk about the signifieds and make a study into what the poem is "about".

As to what kind of critic she is, Perloff herself has the following description:

> I would describe myself as a formalist, a literary historian, and an evaluative comparatist critic. It is my conviction that the poetry or fiction that matters is always of its moment, that formal, structural, metrical, and even thematic choices are determined, to an appreciable extent, by the poet's culture and place in history. At the same time, I believe that individual poets can transcend (a loaded verb, I know!) their culture, producing great work that acts not only as an index to their culture but also as a diagnosis and critique of it. (Luo 2)

Obviously, in these words and in her practical criticisms we hear Perloff's distinctive voice: Formalism + Cultural Studies. Actually, a close reading of her *Poetic License* will confirm Perloff's self description. In the collection, Perloff's approach to poetry is New Criticism or Formalism, but she is definitely not confined to formalism. She does analyze and comment on form, structure, rhyme scheme, and theme of a poem, but unlike the New Critics, she does not simply stop there. Instead, she goes on to explore the poet's culture and place in history which is behind the poem. And for this purpose she is varied in critical approach: apart from formalism there are other literary theories at her disposal. She says: "Mine, in any case, is a syncretist position. I draw, for example, on the Marxist criticism of Terry Eagleton but also on the poststructuralist insights of Roland Barthes, my favorite among the French theorists of his generation. Poetry, for Barthes and Eagleton as for Jakobson, cannot be understood thematically—what is it about—rather, the role of sound, visual patterning, syntax, and genre are central to our understanding" (Luo 3).

Although most of the essays in *Poetic License* "were written for specific occasions or commissions" (2), "[t]hose who have followed her work for many years know how important these 'occasions' of criticism and commentary have been for her voluminous published works" (Miller 153). Although the fifteen essays were written between 1984 – 1989, it is a very commendable effort she made to remind us, with these essays, that poetic license and canon formation are influenced and even deter-

mined by the culture and age they are in, and that there are "deep-level connections and affinities between modernism and postmodernism". Although in the British and American academia in the 1980s, structuralism and poststructuralism were so privileged and prevalent that few critics would stick to New Criticism in their practice, as is described in David Lodge's novel *Small World*, "[o]ne of Perloff's great strengths as a critic and theorist, then, is that … her work retains its independence and is not swept along with it" (Barry). "We need her distinctive voice more than ever as literary theory (which was instigated by Aristotle) enters its third millennium" (ibid.).

Yes, indeed we do need her unique critical formula Formalism + Cultural Studies, just because it sees not only the form of a poem and but also the culture the poem reflects. Particularly today when we are puzzled about what's going on "after theory", isn't it necessary for us to remember Perloff's words: "there is no way of understanding poetry without close reading as well as comparison and contrast"? (Luo 3)

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