

# “Poetry Is the Discourse that Could Only Be Re-read”: An Interview with Professor Marjorie Perloff

**Wang Songlin & Liu Xuelan & Marjorie Perloff**

**Abstract:** This interview covers extensive topics about poetry and poetics, ranging from the language of poetry to the principles of formalism, from performance poetry to visual poetry, from digital humanities to cognitive poetics in the age of data, from the problems of “theory” to the conditions of humanities in American universities, and above all from Marjorie Perloff’s own insightful understanding of the essence of poetry to her endorsement of the ethical literary criticism initiated by Nie Zhenzao. According to Marjorie Perloff, poetry is “the art of relationship” as well as “the discourse that could only be Re-read, because you notice other things when you read it again.” In this interview, Marjorie Perloff cited modern and contemporary poets like Ezra Pound, Alan Ginsburg, Charles Bernstein, and the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein to demonstrate her opinions on poetry and poetics.

**Keywords:** Marjorie Perloff; poetics; art of re-reading; ethical criticism

**Authors:** **Wang Songlin** is Professor of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ningbo University (Ningbo 315211, China). His academic interests are 19<sup>th</sup> century English literature, comparative literature and ethical literary criticism (Email: wang-songlin@nbu.edu.cn). **Liu Xuelan** is Research Professor of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Beijing 100732, China). Her research is mainly focused on literature in English, intellectual history of English literature and the pedagogy of literature (Email: liuxuelan@hotmail.com). **Marjorie Perloff** (1931-2024) was the Sadie Dernham Patek Professor of Humanities, Emerita, in the Stanford School of Humanities and Sciences, a world-renowned scholar of contemporary poetry and champion of experimental poetry.

**Wang Songlin (hereafter Wang for short):** Professor Marjorie Perloff, welcome to Ningbo University and thank you for giving us the chance to have an interview with you. As we all know, you are a great critic of contemporary poetry and poetics. In many places of your writings, you speak highly of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who considered poetry as “the neighbor of philosophy.” In your book *Wittgenstein’s Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (1996), you illustrate how Wittgenstein’s philosophy greatly influenced the Avant-garde po-

ets like Stein, Becket, Ingeborg Bachmann, specifically in terms of their awareness of the significance of ordinary language in writing poetry. I am wondering why you stress so much the “strangeness of the ordinary” in writing poetry and in what way you would disclose the “poetics” of ordinary language?

**Marjorie Perloff (hereafter Perloff for short):** Thank you. Well, I became interested in Wittgenstein, he is such a wonderful writer, and he himself said: Philosophy should really be written as poetry; philosophy should only be written as poetry. Now what does that mean? He meant that he didn’t have a systematic philosophy. There wasn’t any theory, and he hated theory, no theory to be learned, but there is a method, and the method is in a way of poetic method. What he said is that ordinary languages are alright. What he meant was that how strange the languages that we use every day and in a way that poets and other ones who deal with. So, Wittgenstein developed that elaborate theory, and all it really means. And here he is similar to the Russian formalists. I think this is the most important thing. He said: do not forget that although poetry is written in the language of information, it is not used in the language game of giving information. In other words, you don’t write a poem to give information, but the language you may use may be exactly the same. You may use perfectly ordinary language in a way, but it would be used in a way so that it is interesting in its own right and important in its own right. That is the reason why I was interested in ordinary language and looked at writers like Wittgenstein and Becket whose ordinary language is so much made by the metaphor in poetry, imagery in poetry. You don’t have to have metaphor or imagery, you often do, but you don’t have to, but you do have to have language used in a special way, language that is extraordinary. Wittgenstein was one of the first to say that the language itself can be perfectly normal.

**Liu Xuelan (hereafter Liu for short):** Oh, yes, “the strangeness of ordinary language” is closely related to the Russian formalists, whose principal founder was Roman Jakobson. Jakobson extended the theoretical and practical concerns of the Prague School into the areas of poetic study. The Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky coined a very important term called “defamiliarization,” which means almost the same with “the strangeness of ordinary language.”

**Perloff:** Yes, Jakobson is certainly one of my heroes. The idea of “defamiliarization,” making strange (you know, Viktor Shklovsky, who first said), means what a poet can do is “to make the stone stony,” to make a stone seems stony, to make a tree seem like a tree, so that you have to think twice and look at it, and so the “defamiliarization” is the most ordinary things. The writer that the Russians talked

about was Tolstoy. So, as a prose writer, Tolstoy has the ability to take the most ordinary scene and describe it, so you see it as if you've never seen that before, and that is a wonderful thing.

**Liu:** It seems that people sometimes put you in the range of Formalists.

**Perloff:** I AM a formalist critic. I consider myself a formalist critic. That is a bad word today. Consider the dirty words today: formalist, close reader. But I am indeed a formalist. I would be the first to say so. The only difference I would say is that I am also a historian. I believe literary history is very important. And so, I think, I think of myself as a literary historian which the formalists don't on the whole. So, I always like to look at things in their historical context, which to me is very important, and intertextuality is very important.

**Wang:** Would it be somewhat too simplified if you are merely included in the formalist circle. Do you totally agree you are a formalist? What about the relationship between the sound and meanings or values of poetry?

**Perloff:** I do, I do. I mean, it's considered today there is a huge difference between the so-called new critics, the American new critics in the 1950s and 1960s. I don't consider myself one of the new critics. They were always looking for meanings beyond meaning. I'm much closer to Roman Jakobson. The basic argument of his was that sound equivalence always means meaning equivalence. In other words, if you change your sound, even slightly, it will change the meaning, sound and syntax too. The way something you said is crucial, and you'll have to look both sound and syntax and these things very closely, and that is the only way you can read poetry, instead of just going through and saying: it's about this, or it's about that, and so on. That really isn't criticism much at all. So, I do think about sound, I work a lot on sound, and I'm writing on sound now. I've just given a talk in Hangzhou on the sound of Ezra Pound. Sound is so important and would make all the difference, you know, to hear how something is said. I realize it very difficult to hear a foreign language. It is very difficult to understand how sound works, you know, it's hard for me, for French and so on. It is difficult, but you can try to do it and the best way to do it is to listen to recordings. We now have the Internet, so many recordings of poets reading, PennSound, for example. It is a wonderful website at the University of Pennsylvania where you can pick any poem here to read, so that you can listen to what it would sound like, and now we could do that with poets of all languages. I am sure there are good Chinese recordings.

**Wang:** Yes, this reminds me of what Alexander Pope said: “The sound must seem an echo to the sense.” You also mentioned in one of your interviews about the performance of sound in poetry. Charles Bernstein, for example, would suggest that sound has the value of performance. Can you further illustrate the meaning of performance poetry?

**Perloff:** Of course, you have Charles Bernstein, a wonderful performer of his own poetry. The way he reads it is very special. That is not true of every poet, though. There are some poetry that are very good when you hear it read, and other poetry may be less so. But even then, Wallace Stevens is a poet who, I wouldn’t say rehearsing it, is all that important, but if you look at it closely, and you look at what words go together, sound is a way of relating, so that I just talked in Hangzhou about why we should have poems in front of us. But I’ve talked about Pound’s poem, “The coming of war: Actaeon,” where goes “the image of Lethe” and “fields,” and also visual process is very important:

#### THE COMING OF WAR: ACTAEON

An image of Lethe,  
                                    and the fields  
Full of faint light  
                                    but golden,  
Gray cliffs,  
and beneath them  
A sea  
Harsher than granite,  
                                    unstill, never ceasing;

So that you only see it as you go along. So that lineation must always mean something, there’s no use lineating a text if it isn’t going to mean something, as Ezra Pound said, “Do not retell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose.” And I think it is one of the truest things, I always think of it when I see people’s poems. You know, what’s the point? There is no point in writing a poem, and that is going to be somehow better than the prose version or newspaper article, right? So, this is the trick and it is not easy to do.

**Wang:** As we know, Ezra Pound was greatly influenced by ancient Chinese poetry, specifically the poetry of Tang Dynasty. Do you think his principles of Imagism are still meaningful for writing poetry in the age of media?

**Perloff:** Yes. Professor Wang, you are referring to Ezra Pound's manifesto of Imagism, where there were three principles: first, direct treat of the thing; What is the second one? Yes, use no word that doesn't contribute to the presentation; and the third one is to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome. Yes, I think these principles ARE very important, because as Pound says, poetry is "news that stays news." You can't really make that definition better, it's "news that stays news," think about that. There are many things we read, and that a year later you wouldn't want to read it again. Let's say you are reading an article, an essay or something, and you read it for the information, and once you have read it, and you don't want to reread it. Poetry, though, is the art of relationships. So, there was a very good thing that was said by the Brazilian poet Augusto de Campos who said now in natural, in normal speech, there is no relationship between (this would be the two French words) "Estra étoiles" and "désastreux." The first word means "star" in English, and the second word means "disaster." Now for most ordinary people, there's no relationship between star and disaster. There might be a star; you might say this was a disaster. But for the poet, those words go together because they sound alike and the fact is that they do go together, because the stars used to predict disasters. So, the poet is the person who can take things that sound similar and show how they are somehow related, and if they rhyme, for instance, if two words rhyme, then they should be related. Yeats was the great master of that: how to do, how to write poetry. He can really achieve that. So, there is a kind of vertical relationship, as well as horizontal relationship. You don't just read like this, you read down and see what things relate, and that's just a wonderful thing.

**Liu:** Now we have learned much more from you about the relation between sound and meaning of poetic language. As I remember, while commenting the musicality of poetic language, you once said that "good poetry is not good enough to be read only once." Can you further illustrate this statement?

**Perloff:** Poetry, I think, is the discourse that could only be Re-read, because you don't see the first time. That is why I don't like poetry readings very much. I don't go to many poetry readings because you just hear them once, you know, and it's fine, and they tell a little joke, and so on, but I don't really like that very much, because it's true, that is the art that could only be Re-read, because you notice other things when you read it again. And so, in the best poetry, that is very striking: how that works. For any period, whether it is a Renaissance sonnet or whatever the Victorian poems, you know how that works in poetry.

**Liu:** “Poetry is the discourse that could only be Re-read.” Yes, this is indeed a very thought-provoking observation. I remember in your dialogue years ago at Yunnan Normal University (China) with the Chinese poet Yu Jian from Yunnan, you mentioned there is nearly no love poetry in the United States now.

**Perloff:** That’s true, well, I think it’s hard to write love poetry today because we are so swarmed with all the phrases. You know everybody has them. So that just writing a straightforward love poem seems not a very likely thing to do. That’s been true for maybe 100 years by now in certain ways. Of course, it could be a kind of poetic version. In that way, you mentioned Charles Bernstein before when we were in Hangzhou. Professor Nie wanted him to write a poem about the West Lake. He is collecting poems about the West Lake. So, Charles said I can do that. I may have the poem on the West Lake. It is more of a joke. So, I said: “I don’t walk well. My walk is very bad now because of old age.” So, I said when we were going:” I can swim better than I can walk.” Let’s see. I think I may have it here. Wait a minute. Oh, yes, here it is: “On West Lake: A Pastoral.” I said: “I can swim better than I can walk.” He made it a kind of parody of Pastoral: “I Can Swim Better Than Talk”: “I can swim better than talk, / And walking is just the same if I remember how. / Swim against tide, tire quicker. / When you let tide rule at your paws under, / The echo of the mountains on the lake, just like for oodles of years, /But at your back, the lake is bound by metro /Anywhere, it is local versus universal/ to belabor the shape of it. / A few blocks away, shirts blowing in ten minutes’ line, / Just like the home I thought I imagined.” And it ended with: “No one will understand why this is of great importance to the nation.” That’s a line from William Carlos Williams.

**Liu:** Very interesting! I remember the dialogue you had with Mr. Yu Jian who mentioned to you that love poem writing has a long tradition in China. But in your dialogue, you also questioned why Chinese poetry describe less about darkness or sadness.

**Perloff:** Yes, I think you have the great Chinese tradition of classical Chinese poetry, which of course was love poetry, so beautiful, and I think that tradition is wonderful. I’ve always said that Chinese poetry is really great, while the American poetry is always sarcastic in that way. And Allen Ginsburg once said to me when I asked why there is little love poetry, but there is a lot of gay love poetry? He said because there is so much sublimation, so therefore it goes to poetry. Maybe today that’s no longer true.

**Wang:** Prof. Perloff, you have rich experience of writing poetry, teaching

literary criticism in many universities around the world. I am just wondering whether you have always in your mind the same philosophy of poetry. Or any change in your view of literary criticism, specifically poetic criticism?

**Perloff:** I have a new book now. A new book just came out in two volumes which collected my book reviews from 1969 to 2019. So, when I was reading the early ones, I mostly haven't changed my mind or changed my philosophy. But there are some things that I have, that I no longer like what I liked in the past. In *Radical Artifice*, for instance, Johanna Drucker has this in the visual poetry. I don't think she is so good anymore.

**Wang:** Johanna Drucker is a writer and scholar who has published many volumes of creative and critical work on visual poetry, writing, and contemporary art. She is Professor of English, Robertson Chair of Media Studies, and Director of Media Studies at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. But I am sorry up to now I have not found many Chinese translation of her books.

**Perloff:** Yes, she is a good critic on visual poetry. I am not so crazy about it anymore. I don't think it's so interesting anymore. So, I have changed my mind to some extent, but on the whole not, but I get very upset, what makes me very unhappy and upset is that today in the United States it is as if the poets have forgotten everything that they have ever learned, which is an art, and it always is about, a poem about Donald Trump, a poem about complaining about this, a poem against that, and most of it, I don't think they are poets at all. I just don't think it's poetry, and so I think you know you are not allowed to say that or criticize that, especially if it is a poem written by any minority group. You are not allowed to criticize it, and so, there are a lot of materials coming up. It's just really pretty bad, you know, badly written and about very trivial subjects.

**Wang:** We had the sad news that Harold Bloom died on Oct. 14<sup>th</sup>, which I think is an enormous loss for the academia of literary criticism. Harold Bloom was born in 1930. He might have witnessed the same phenomenon of literary criticism as you did in America. So, I think you are the most suitable scholar to comment on Harold Bloom. Can I know your comments on Bloom and his contribution to literary criticism?

**Liu:** Harold Bloom was once a professor in Yale and Harvard, and he is a well-known critic in the Chinese academia. We know that he wrote and edited numerous books for the study of literary classics, books like *Western Canon*, *How to Read and Why*, and *The Anxiety of Influence*, his early influential work. Unfortunately,

he passed away a month ago. Critics in China have published many articles in remembrance of him.

**Perloff:** Well, I have a terrible incident with him. Back in 1985 when I was young, I was invited to Washington, DC. to the Shakespeare Library to have a conference called “After the Flood” and I was the only woman invited [...] (a long passage omitted here) But over the years, I felt that I got to like his work better, I got to like his criticism better. I don’t know whether he even cared about me at all. But he was always complaining about what he called “the school of resentment,” which he meant Feminists and anybody looking at poetry differently. I think that is a misunderstanding on his part, because he himself, from my point of view, never looked at poetry from a literary point of view, it was always Freud, Psychoanalytic, and if it was not psychoanalytic, it is theosophy, religious things, all kinds of symbols, invented all this language, so it isn’t as if he was so literary till later in his life, then he was talking about Shakespeare and all that. But he was very embattled, very angry, and now everybody seems to love him, and when he died now, everybody wrote these incredible things about him, but they are all men, a hundred percent men. There’s not a woman that ever said that. Only men, I notice it on website. They have at least thirty eulogies for Harold Bloom, but does anybody notice they are all by men? There is not one by a woman. That wouldn’t be, because he was awful to women.

**Wang:** I guess Harold Bloom hated theories, especially those of “politically correct,” theories that he would call “the school of resentments,” as you have just mentioned.

**Perloff:** That is true, I don’t like that either, but he was very exaggerated about it, and very didactic. Then, also, by the way, Harold Bloom had no use for Eliot and Pound, my favorite poets, at all, and he would say things like “There is no good, and Wallace Stevens is the great poet, and Emerson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, I don’t love Emerson as a poet, I don’t think he is an interesting poet particularly.” He would just say these things and then he also said, this is interesting, that you cannot be influenced by a foreign poet. Now, I don’t believe it. That is what he says. You cannot be influenced by poets in another language, only by somebody in your own language, because it’s impossible. Well, I said, how about Charles Baudelaire, the French poet and Edgar Allan Poe? He said, oh, my dear, you know, you can’t be influenced by it.

**Liu:** How about Dante and his *Divine Comedy*? Professor Bloom have read a



lot such classics.

**Perloff:** That's right. I mean, why can't you be influenced by somebody in another language?

**Liu:** So, as you have mentioned, it seems your literary views remain almost unchanged for about half a century. But things changed, like it or not, like about ten years ago, Andrew Delbanco from Columbia University, who is well known, among other works, for his humanistic exploration in *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* and also William Chace from Stanford who published in 1990 an essay "The Decline of the English Department." Both of them have shown deep worries about the position of humanities. So, what is the condition now in American universities?

**Perloff:** Well, it's very complicated, I think we're guilty, everybody says it's only because students just want to earn money, so they don't want to take literature to get jobs. And so, they're going to become engineers or lawyers, so everybody blames STEM, the subject of science. I think that's really only partly true. I think we are to blame, the literary people, the professors are to blame because they're so scared of somehow nothing relevant. They stopped teaching students how wonderful literature is, how important literature is, even if it doesn't help you get a job and it never helps to get a job. When I went to college, it was true even then, it would never help you to get a job, it just helps you think, you learn how to think. And then if you go to law school or medical school or whatever, maybe you know, you will be better in that way, too. So, I think that they started, you know, not teaching literature, only doing cultural studies. And cultural studies then get very boring. So instead of studying literature, you study highways and road signs or things like that, or shopping malls. I directed a dissertation (I didn't direct it but I was on this committee for dissertation) on teenagers in shopping malls, and it was all about what books they buy in shopping malls or don't, teen romances and all that. Now we don't even have shopping malls anymore because people buy things online. So that's really dated. You see how quickly that is dated. So now who wants to write or read about shopping malls? Or you write about video games. You know there are all these things about, you know, no novels but video games. I think it is very silly. My husband, who was a cardiologist physician, but he has been an English major as an undergraduate and he always thought that was ridiculous. He loved literature and thought literature was very important and should be studied. But in the United States now, we've come almost to rock bottom that in many universities they partly don't teach any literature at all. They are all about race. Race is the big topic, race, gender, queer theory. But what the effect of all that has been that people just don't take any

literature courses and I know it from my own grandchildren. My granddaughter, who came to China with me twice, is an art history major at Harvard. She managed to graduate without having any English course. She didn't want to because she tried to take a few but didn't seem to be very good. You don't really learn anything. So, we have succeeded in kind of killing the field. And sooner or later, it will get better again, but I think it is much better in China, but this is what has happened. It is that they have diluted it to the extent that you don't read any important writers, and you only read neglected writers. As I said in Hangzhou, sometimes people are neglected for a reason, maybe they shouldn't be neglected. So, you don't always have to teach neglected writers. Now it is true that it is hard today to get people to read long novels.

**Wang:** Our mutual friend Professor Claude Rawson wrote me a letter last week from Cambridge. He is going to make a written Presidential Address to the Hangzhou Ethical Conference. And I am glad I will have the privilege to read this Presidential Address on behalf of him. In his letter he also complains that nowadays readers and critics don't read the text, saying that people are (I quote) "in pursuit of diversionary disciplines which bypass the text in favour of abstract political, or economic or psychological, or other systems, in which the literary scholar is often unlikely to possess specialist expertise, while evading the specialist challenge of the discipline of reading books in which he or she is presumed to be expert."

**Perloff:** They just look for something in the text, they don't know how to read. How to read is the hardest thing you can do. It's very hard to learn how to read. And by that, I mean that most people just sort of read for something. But they don't really pay attention that much. So, when I went to college, I thought I knew how to read, but I really didn't. That is, what English Department can do is to teach people how to read, it doesn't even matter so much which things you cover. But you have to also cover some things historically, because if not, you always think that things were invented last week. You know everybody thinks this is so new, what was done in the seventeenth century or what was done much earlier. So, I think I have very little to defend in the United States, I mean I am retired now, but I think it is really terrible. The way we have sort of stopped teaching things, and I can catch the moment when it all happens, for instance, it used to be true, in the United States, that everybody studied the romantic poets, Blake (Everybody loved Blake), Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelly, Byron, Keats...they are all men, Okay? So, the next step was to say: we can't study men, and those poets, by the way, were all studied by Paul de Man, you know, all the theorists, the romantic poets. Then the next step

was to say: we are going to, instead, read Ms. Humphry Ward. Someone may say that she is not interesting, they are not very good poets, and I remember being at a meeting where a girl raised her hand, and she said, why are we supposed to? I don't like these poets. And the third step is that they didn't want to do romantics at all, you see that's what happens. If you don't do good literature, now what upsets people is that literature is not like science, you can't measure it. You can't measure taste. You can't say, absolutely, this is good and this isn't good. And we should do this, we should do that, there are many possibilities. Even so, there are some once you graduate from school, when you finish your graduate work, and if you get a PhD, and you have an expertise that other people don't have. And the problem with what we do today is that we pretend there is no expertise. In the United States now, athletes have expertise in sports. In sports, everybody agrees that it takes expertise to be a great tennis player, nobody would deny that there is an expertise, but when it comes to literary study, people think there is no expertise. It is like that anything goes. And that has a very bad effect, and I hope it will change again. I think it's different here. First of all, you are working in a foreign language, and it is itself making it much harder and much better. My former student Bryan Reed, who is a dean in the University of Washington, he thinks the English Department there is terrible. I said which department is good, he said East Asian Studies, because you have to know something. If you learn Chinese, you have to know something. And so just the very fact of doing a foreign literature is already a big thing because you are learning something that you didn't know before.

**Wang:** This weekend we will go to Hangzhou to attend the International Conference on Ethical Literary Criticism. As I understand, there will be over 500 participants from home and abroad gathering in Hangzhou for this big event. Do you think there is a growing ethical turn of literary criticism? You mentioned yesterday while we were having dinner that China has a great tradition of ethical literary criticism, which could be traced far back to Confucius and many other ancient philosophers. In what way do you think the West and the East can have a better dialogue, especially in the field of ethical literary criticism?

**Perloff:** Well, I think it is great to have this new Ethical Society, because you could use Confucius, you could refer to your philosophers, and not always refer to western theorists like Derrida. But I noticed (I hate to say it), I noticed when looking at the conference program there are lots of things on Derrida. I don't know. I think ethics is a very difficult thing to talk about. When the Society first began, I think the papers were rather simple, so they might be on the ethics of the characters

in the novels. And I don't think you can talk about that so readily, because after all they are just characters, they are not real people, and so talk about did they do the right thing, that sort of extra literary kind of thing, which I don't like so much, but there are issues that are very important. And I think at least Prof. Nie felt it: what is the ethical effect of literature itself? What is the ethics of reading? I am skeptical about it in many ways, because literature does not make you a better person ever. Think of the Nazis, they were very interested in all the best of literature, and writers are often very nasty people. It is rare to find writers who are nice people. You know most examples of most writers. They were very self-centered and did things that weren't very good. The best one, I think, is Samuel Beckett, a writer who was very admirable, because in WWII he didn't have to do anything, he could have stayed in Ireland. He went to France and worked with the resistance. He was a very ethical person. I have said to somebody, but he treated women very badly. He wasn't so ethical that way, you see.

**Liu:** Is there also a kind of ethical turn for literary criticism in the United States in recent years?

**Perloff:** No really. They all said to me what ethical criticism is. I don't think so. Everything is political. We have, you see, we have so much more politics so that all that has been politicized. As the very first question is, who is allowed to say something? If a poet says something, are you allowed as a white man? Are you allowed to say this or that? Can a man speak for women? Can a male novelist create a female character? Could Jane Austen create male characters? I mean, it is ridiculous. Everything is so politicized that I don't think ethics comes up so much. It is always social, just talk of social justice. Of course, you can say that is ethical in a way, but I tend to agree with Wittgenstein who said that, there are no ethical ideas, there are only ethical actions. That sounds very illuminated, which is really true, he meant that we intuitively know certain things. So, he gives this example, if I say I don't play tennis well, but I don't really care to play any better, OK. That is a reasonable statement, perhaps, but if you say I don't treat people well, but I don't care to treat them any better. That's a very different kind of statement, and sort of unethical statement, so we know in a way that ethics is something that's very hard to define, of course, and yet we intuitively sense many things about it; on the other hand, in novels, for instance, by Henry James, it's very interesting to try to think, how sometimes the ethics of the characters the novelist thought they would be, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, where you're supposed to believe that Isabel Archer is disillusioned, and her stepdaughter Pansy, you can also argue she is a kind of

wicked stepmother to Pansy, because she really hurts her rather than helps her, and so on. So, there are many very interesting issues, and I think it's wonderful for what is going on here.

**Wang:** Nowadays it's getting very popular to talk about the issue of digital humanity in the age of data and posthumanism. Again, I would like to know your opinions of whether the changing idea of humanity will affect the philosophy of poetry and /or poetics in the age of posthumanism?

**Perloff:** I don't think the basic things do change. And the age of data does mean we are buried under overwhelming information and we are already in the age of data. Knowledge is not the same thing as information. We now have tons of information, but that's not knowledge, that's just information. And if you are just buried up in the information, you can't do very much, you can say that humanity can sort out what's important and what isn't, so that you know what to pay attention to, and not just anything, everything doesn't have equal weight. One thing that I think is interesting is much more attention is paid now, I think not so much in history, but geography. Geography is very important, to say, literature and poetry, where something comes from, how is something related to something else. In geographical terms, which we now see is so important, what came to whom, how did things travel, I find that very fascinating to try to think of how that works. You know, how it works in particular ways that every period is different, for instance, when you study Asian American, you study it across the United States. Asian American poetry has certain characteristics, and I would argue that there may be, of course, subject matter, these different subject matters, but I have not seen that, either the poetry or Asian American fiction is different in kind from any other American fictions. I don't know why it would be, either. It's just a subject matter, and subject matter is never really the central thing in literature. It has to be how, the how not the what. So as far as being in an age of data, if it is a total age of data, we don't need the humanity at all, we don't need literature and we have science. But science can only answer so many questions, and the interesting thing is now people are beginning to say: yes, we can define exactly what anything is made out of, or we can do neurological criticism of the brain, but it only goes so far, it doesn't take very much. I think cognitive poetics is interesting, but it can only go so far. It never explains the mystery of consciousness itself and thinking itself. My husband used to be very excited when these things first started with a diagram in the brain, if you're sophisticated in music, if you have studied music, the brain waves will be very different from people who haven't studied music. And so, you can show that, okay, so you've shown that, but

that still doesn't show how or what makes the music, what is this, how does it work. There are so much that you can't show and remains mysterious, and the basic literary things, or philosophical issues or art issues remain very mysterious. How is that and how does it work, and I don't think we can ever answer those questions. And data, I'm not so interested in big data.

**Wang:** So many thanks for this interview, Prof. Perloff. Your talk covers a wide range of topics, from the language of poetry to the poetics of formalism, from the performance poetry to visual poetry, from the problems of "theory" to the condition of humanities in American universities, from digital humanities to cognitive poetics in the age of data, and above all from your understanding on the essence of poetry to your endorsement of ethical literary criticism in China. I am sure the audience have already greatly benefited from your view on poetry and poetics. Once again, on behalf of Ningbo University and the audience here, thank you for this wonderful interview.

**Liu:** Thank you, Professor Perloff, for this informative and insightful interview.

**Perloff:** You are welcome. Thank you all, thank you for your questions.