

# From Paradigm Shift to Scientific Construction: The Interdisciplinarity of Marjorie Perloff's Poetic Theory

**Yang Gexin**

**Abstract:** Marjorie Perloff is a towering figure in contemporary literary criticism, known for her incisive analyses and groundbreaking theories on modern and contemporary poetry. Her work traverses the rich terrains of modernism, postmodernism, and media ecology, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of poetic expression in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. This essay, in memory of Marjorie Perloff, examines her significant literary contributions, and the critical reception of her poetic theories, underlining the interdisciplinary nature of her work.

**Keywords:** Marjorie Perloff; indeterminacy; radical artifice; unoriginal genius; infrathin

**Author:** **Yang Gexin**, Ph.D., is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the School of International Studies, Zhejiang University and Director of Institute for Interdisciplinary Studie of World Literature, Zhejiang University (Hangzhou 310058, China). He is also Secretary General of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism, Associate Editor-in-Chief of *Forum for World Literature Studies* (ESCI indexed) and *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* (A&HCI indexed), Chief Expert of the Major Project of the National Social Science Fund, "The Compilation, Translation and Research of Literatures on Contemporary Western Ethical Criticism" (Project No. 19ZDA292). His research interests are ethical literary criticism and Western literary theory (Email: ygx80080@163.com).<sup>1</sup>

Marjorie Perloff was born in Vienna, Austria, on September 28, 1931. The rise of Nazism forced her family to flee to the United States in 1938, where they settled in Riverdale, New York. This profound experience of displacement and resettlement during her early years may have influenced her subsequent interest in themes of fragmentation and alienation in literature. Marjorie pursued her undergraduate education at Oberlin College, receiving her Bachelor's degree in 1953. She then

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<sup>1</sup> This work is sponsored by the project of the National Social Science Fund of China, "The Compilation, Translation and Research of Literatures on Contemporary Western Ethical Criticism" (Project No. 19ZDA292).

earned her Ph.D. from the Catholic University of America in 1965, completing a dissertation on W.B. Yeats and his relationship with the visual arts. Her academic career flourished at several institutions, most prominently at Stanford University, where she served as the Sadie Dernham Patek Professor of Humanities. Even after her retirement, she remains an active scholar-in-residence at the University of Southern California. Her prolific career has been adorned with numerous accolades, including fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Marjorie Perloff's oeuvre is marked by a series of influential works that have reshaped the landscape of literary criticism. Among her most notable texts are "Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters" (1977), "The Poetics of Indeterminacy" (1981), "The Dance of the Intellect" (1985), "Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media" (1991), and "Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century" (2010), "Infrathin: An Experiment in Micropoetics" (2021).

She gained prominence in the 1970s through the publication of influential works such as "Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats" (1970), "The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell" (1973), and "The Poet Among Painters: Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters" (1977). Her writings demonstrate a primary focus on individual poets, adherence to academic tradition, emphasis on meticulous analysis of literary works within diverse cultural contexts, and a critical stance towards the prevalent deconstruction movement in the United States at that time.

As one of her seminal works, "The Poetics of Indeterminacy," examines the transition in 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry from the clarity and precision of modernism to a more open-ended, indeterminate form of poetic expression. She delves into the works of avant-garde poets, emphasizing how these poets challenge conventional forms and meanings. By doing so, Marjorie highlights the ways in which modern poetry resists fixed interpretations, inviting readers to engage with texts more interactively and fluidly. In this book, Marjorie explores the works of poets such as John Ashbery and Samuel Beckett, among others. She argues that these poets embrace ambiguity and multiplicity, rejecting the notion that poetry should offer clear, unambiguous messages. Instead, they create texts that demand active engagement from readers, who must navigate the layers of meaning and interpretative possibilities.

In "The Dance of the Intellect," Marjorie investigates how modernist poets grappled with the fragmentation of language and meaning. She focuses on how poets like William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot used innovative techniques to reinvigorate poetic expression. By examining their use of collage,

juxtaposition, and other experimental forms, Marjorie reveals the intellectual rigor and creativity that define modernist poetry. This work underscores Marjorie's belief that modernist poets were not simply breaking away from tradition for the sake of novelty but were deeply engaged in a critical rethinking of language and its capabilities. Their experiments with form and structure were efforts to capture the complexities and uncertainties of the modern world.

"Radical Artifice" represents a significant development in Marjorie's critical thought. In this book, she explores how contemporary poetry has been influenced by media technologies and cultural shifts. Marjorie argues that poets have increasingly incorporated elements of media and popular culture into their work, leading to new forms of poetic expression. Focusing on poets like John Cage and Susan Howe, Marjorie examines how media and technological advancements have transformed the landscape of poetry. She argues that these poets use techniques of appropriation, collage, and sampling—methods more commonly associated with visual and digital art—to create innovative poetic works. By doing so, they challenge traditional notions of authorship and originality, reflecting the media-saturated world in which we live.

In "Unoriginal Genius," Marjorie continues to explore how contemporary poets use techniques closely associated with visual and digital art to create new poetic forms. This book represents a culmination of her interest in the intersections between literature and other art forms, as well as her engagement with postmodern theories of authorship and originality. Marjorie examines the works of poets like Kenneth Goldsmith and Caroline Bergvall, who challenge the notion of the poet as an original creator. Instead, they view poetry as a collaborative, intertextual practice that draws on existing texts and cultural materials. By doing so, they reflect the complexities and pluralities of the contemporary world.

Marjorie Perloff's "Infrathin: An Experiment in Micropoetics" is an insightful exploration into the subtle nuances and minute distinctions that often escape traditional literary analysis. The book delves into the concept of the "infrathin," a term originally coined by the artist Marcel Duchamp to describe the barely perceptible, infinitesimal differences between similar phenomena. Marjorie adapts this term to examine its relevance and application in contemporary poetry, aiming to highlight and celebrate the delicate intricacies that define the micropoetics of modern literary works. Marjorie advocates for a refined, meticulous reading strategy that appreciates small-scale poetic elements. This approach enriches the reader's engagement with the text, unveiling layers of meaning that might otherwise remain obscured. By highlighting the potential of infrathin elements, Marjorie inspires

contemporary poets to experiment with new forms and techniques. Her insights promote a deeper exploration of the subtle aspects that can profoundly shape poetic expression.

Marjorie Perloff is an esteemed scholar renowned for her profound wisdom. She has consistently demonstrated a tireless commitment to pushing the boundaries of knowledge and challenging established epistemic frameworks. Her exceptional accomplishments and significant influence, cultivated through her unwavering pursuit of poetic theory and critical paradigm, are widely revered by the academic community.

One of the most influential paradigms in Marjorie's poetic criticism is the concept of indeterminacy. This idea suggests that modern and contemporary poetry often resists fixed or singular interpretations, encouraging multiple readings and interpretative possibilities. In her book, "The Poetics of Indeterminacy," Marjorie argues that contemporary and avant-garde poetry often creates "open texts" that do not have one fixed meaning. Instead, they invite readers to engage with them in unique and personal ways. The texts that Marjorie champions often embrace fragmentation, discontinuity, and ambiguity. This can be seen in the use of techniques such as juxtaposition, which brings disparate elements together without necessarily reconciling them into a coherent whole. For example, in Ashbery's poetry, collage and pastiche techniques create a landscape where meaning is continually deferred. According to Marjorie, this approach reflects the complexities and uncertainties of the modern world, challenging readers to navigate layers of meaning actively.

In her book "Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media," Marjorie introduces another significant paradigm that reshapes our understanding of contemporary poetry. This paradigm centers on the impact of media technologies and popular culture on poetic forms and practices. Marjorie argues that the saturation of media in contemporary culture has fundamentally altered how poets create and readers perceive poetry. Techniques such as appropriation, collage, and sampling are seen as responses to living in a media-saturated environment. Marjorie uses the term "artifice" to highlight how contemporary poets self-consciously engage with the constructed nature of their work. This acknowledgment of artifice distinguishes their work from earlier, more naturalistic approaches to poetry. The engagement with radical artifice is not limited to the written word but extends to digital and multimedia expressions. Marjorie's criticism frequently addresses how contemporary poets incorporate elements such as text formatting, visual design, and other media into their work, creating a multisensory experience that reflects the

complexity of modern life.

Marjorie's work is notable for its interdisciplinary approach, which is evident in several of her critical studies, including "Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters," "Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century," and "Infrathin: An Experiment in Micropoetics," etc. Marjorie frequently examines the interactions between poetry and other art forms, particularly visual art and music. By analyzing poets in the context of their relationships with painters, musicians, and other artists, she reveals how these interdisciplinary connections influence and enrich poetic practices. Beyond specific art forms, Marjorie's interdisciplinary paradigm includes a willingness to cross traditional boundaries between genres and media. For example, her discourse on infrathin and micropoetics resonates across disciplines, fostering a dialogue between literary studies, visual arts, and auditory analysis. This interdisciplinary approach enhances our understanding of how minute elements function in various artistic contexts. This allows her to provide a more holistic understanding of poetic works, considering their diverse influences and the various contexts in which they operate.

The interdisciplinary approach in Marjorie's criticism also encompasses the broader cultural and technological contexts in which poetry is produced and consumed. This includes examining how technological advancements from the printing press to the digital age have impacted poetic form and the nature of literary dissemination. According to her, technological advancements not only expand the toolkit available to poets but also reshape audience expectations and modes of engagement. Marjorie particularly highlights the emergence of conceptual writing, where the idea or concept behind the work takes precedence over traditional concerns with expressive content. This shift is best exemplified in the works of poets like Kenneth Goldsmith, whose practice of "uncreative writing" involves presenting found texts as poetry. Conceptual writing dissolves the boundaries between creation and appropriation, challenging our understanding of what constitutes poetic art.

Marjorie Perloff is an equally significant humanistic scientist in the field of poetry studies. She has systematically observed, comprehended, and elucidated poetry and poetic theories from a scientific perspective. Her remarkable foresight and profound insights into the evolution of American poetry are evident in her scientific construction of poetic theory. As early as 1992, in "Radical Artifice," Marjorie astutely examined the challenges faced by poetry in the digital age, shedding light on how the convergence of art and science has revolutionized our conventional understanding of poetic expression. This paradigm shift, exemplified by renowned language poets like Susan Howe and Charles Bernstein, has expanded

the boundaries of poetic forms and modes of creation. In today's era, we not only consume words on printed pages but also delve into vast electronic repositories containing gigabytes of literary content.

Obviously, Marjorie is the first to discover this key issue that has been a concern of American avant-garde poetry since the 1980s: that is, the connection between poetic creation and the media in an age featured by unprecedented development in science and technology. This idea has posed a huge challenge to traditional literary criticism and has significantly enlightened the development of literary concepts since the 1990s. Through her analysis and dissections of American poetry, especially those of language poetry, Marjorie has shown that we must define the relationship between poetry and the media in this very different new era, because, whether we like it or not, the media has been integrated itself with not only the ways poets write poems but also the ways we read, appreciate and criticize them.

Marjorie also reinterpreted visual poetics. Almost thirty years ago, she made attempts to answer such difficult questions as "Will electronic technology change literature fundamentally, namely, will it change the very conception of literature? Are the existing literary theories effective to be applied to interpret contemporary and past literary works?" Her anatomy of avant-garde poetry provided a forward-looking vision of the influence of science on literature, and showed a keen insight into the development of literature; she also discovered the new character of literature in the age of information. Though it hardly needs to be stated, it is worth repeating that that she has always been at the forefront of literary studies, leading the world of literary criticism.

"Paging the Screen: Digital Poetics and the Differential Text" is an article included in the book, *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories* co-edited by Adelaide Morris and Thomas Swiss in 2006. In this article, Marjorie explores the definition and characteristics of digital poetry, emphasizing that it transcends being a mere electronic rendition of traditional poetry but rather represents a novel poetic form reliant on digital technology and multimedia environments. Digital poetry amalgamates diverse elements such as text, imagery, sound, and animation to create an immersive multi-sensory experience often characterized by its multimodal nature. According to Marjorie, technologies like hyperlinks, interactive interfaces, and multimedia integration unlock new possibilities for the creation of poetry. The textual composition of digital poetry is not fixed but dynamically evolves through reader interaction, algorithmic changes, and other factors resulting in various versions, consequently transforming readers from passive recipients into active

participants.

Marjorie particularly emphasizes the impact of technology on poetry's form, asserting that digital technology has not only provided novel creative tools and platforms but also revolutionized the modes of communication and reception in poetry. She introduces the concept of "differential text" to elucidate the dynamic and interactive nature of digital poetry, effectively merging literature, art, and digital technology to forge a new realm for poetics research. Marjorie discovers the revolutionary impact of media on poetry and reinterpreted visual poetics from the perspective of modern science. In the era of scientific advancements, computers intervene in the lives of poets and readers, not only transforming the form of poetic texts but also prompting poets to create poems and engaging readers in interactive textual experiences.

We are now in the AI era, artificial intelligence not only revolutionizes poetry creation but also transforms our approach to reading poetry, consequently influencing theories and criticisms. Will it reshape our perception of literature? Can our existing literary theories effectively elucidate present as well as past literature? These are among the most challenging questions that Marjorie addressed two decades ago. Her remarkable foresight regarding the influence of science on literature, her subtle understanding of literary development trends, and her discovery of new characteristics inherent in literature of information age are all substantiated by contemporary literary practices. Marjorie Perloff, an ever-youthful scholar, esteemed professor, and discerning poetry critic, exhibited an unwavering ardor for the art form that not only withstood the test of time but flourished. Even in her nineties, she relentlessly pursues poetic research and annually unveils groundbreaking discoveries. Such unwavering determination is not only admirable but also serves as an everlasting source of inspiration for future generations of scholars.

I first got to know the name "Marjorie Perloff" in 2008 when she was elected as the president of the Chinese/American Association for Poetry and Poetics. It wasn't until 2011, during the first Convention of Chinese/American Association for Poetry and Poetics at Central China Normal University in Wuhan, that I had the opportunity to meet Marjorie and her husband Joe. Prior to the convention, I was invited to meet them in Guangzhou where Marjorie delivered a speech at Sun Yatsen University. During our city tour, I was impressed by Marjorie and Joe's humor and kindness, which complemented her eloquence and academic wit displayed during her speech.

After leaving Guangzhou, we traveled to Xiangyang where Joe delivered a

speech for Cardiothoracic surgeons from all the hospitals in the city. Following this, Marjorie, her granddaughter Lexie, and I embarked on a climb up Wudang Mountain, one of the Sacred Sites of Taoism in China. During this ascent, I was deeply impressed by Marjorie's resilience and optimism. It is no small feat for anyone, let alone a lady in her 80s, to scale a mountain over 1500 meters high. After a brief stay in Xiangyang city, Marjorie, Joe and I departed for Wuhan to attend the first convention of the Chinese/American Association for Poetry and Poetics. While in Wuhan, we celebrated Marjorie's 80th birthday.

Since then, I have maintained regular communication with Marjorie and her family, drawing inspiration from her academic accomplishments. Regrettably, I missed the opportunity to visit her in Los Angeles during my 2014 visit to America as a visiting scholar due to unforeseen circumstances. As Marjorie predicted, technological advancements continue to reshape our daily lives. The rapid progress of technology has bridged geographical gaps through convenient online interactions. Despite living on opposite sides of the globe, we frequently connect virtually and even gathered for a Zoom Meeting to celebrate Marjorie's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday during the Covid pandemic. Time flies by quickly, yet those cherished moments remain vivid in my memory. However, our esteemed poetry critic and theorist has departed for the world where she rightfully belongs.

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