

N I C K L O L O R D O

Multiplying Modernisms

Marjorie Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics*. Blackwell Manifestos ser. Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. ix + 222 pp. \$54.95; \$19.95 paper.

Lorenzo Thomas, *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Modern and Contemporary Poetics ser. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2000. xiv + 271 pp. \$39.95; \$19.95 paper.

The nature of poetic modernism and the name of its successor remain in question. Over some fifty years of definitional struggle, modernist poetics has been taken to be the legitimating source of contemporary practice, even as everything about their relation remains disputed. "From the modernism you want," suggests David Antin epigrammatically, "you get the postmodernism you deserve." Stronger versions of the same claim take artistic modernism to be the opening of what Jürgen Habermas—in a different context—called an "incomplete project."¹ In recent books, Marjorie Perloff and Lorenzo Thomas take up the topic of modernism in poetry. Both, as their titles suggest, write "as modernists"; both argue that current poetic practice

1. David Antin, cited in Marjorie Perloff, "Modernist Studies," *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: MLA, 1992) 169; Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay, 1983) 3.

is best understood as aligned with (or fulfilling the potential of) modernist innovation. Yet the considerable differences between the two studies suggest a multiplicity of plausibly modernist traditions, even a fundamental overdetermination. One might go so far as to propose that “modernism” (particularly poetic modernism) has by now become a symptom: the signifier, to borrow Lacan’s phrasing, symbolizes “a conflict long dead over and above its function in a *no less symbolic* present conflict.”²

The present conflict that Marjorie Perloff enters into is forthrightly set out in the title of her *21st-Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics*, a statement which reads as a riposte to Charles Altieri’s recent *Postmodernisms Now*.³ The scare quotes are not meant to imply a failure to achieve genuine novelty; rather, Perloff argues that contemporary North American innovative (experimental; avant-garde; radical) poetry is best understood as a return to, and a fulfillment of, the potential of pre–World War I avant-garde achievements.

In the interests of this claim, various received notions come under attack, straw men and brick houses alike. Perloff opens her book with a dismissive gesture toward the “tired dichotomy” between modernism and postmodernism “that has governed our discussion of twentieth-century poetics for much too long” (1). Any knight’s leap from early modernist to contemporary poetics, of course, will have the consequence of diminishing the significance of Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry 1945–1960*, long seen as the opening shot in the revolution against ossified academic modernism. Indeed, Perloff argues that this particular packaged story—in

2. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973) 293.

3. Charles Altieri, *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1998). For Altieri, postmodernisms in the arts stemmed from “the need to confront a modernism that they represented as far too committed to stressing art’s formal capacities to unify and concentrate experience for a contemplative audience and far too dismissive of the domains of process, social conflict, and popular culture” (11). Although Altieri suggests that postmodernism, as a vital theoretical mode, is likely to be finished, he nevertheless regards modernism as inadequate to the understanding of much contemporary experimental practice (see “Some Problems with Agency in the Theories of Radical Poetics,” 166–92); Perloff, by contrast, implies that postmodernism, in the case of poetry, never really happened.

which open-form Beat / New York school / Black Mountain poetries confront New Critical hegemony—is past its shelf life: the event “was less revolution than restoration,” no more than “a carrying-on, in somewhat diluted form, of the avant-garde project . . . of early modernism” (2–3). From this assertion follows her thesis: “the real fate of first-stage modernism was one of deferral, its radical and utopian aspirations being cut off by the catastrophe, first of the Great War, and then of the series of crises produced by the two great totalitarianisms that dominated the first half of the century. . . . the aesthetic of early modernism has provided the seeds of the materialist poetic which is increasingly our own” (3). The book that follows attempts to situate Perloff’s long-running polemic with mainstream contemporary verse culture (“the predominance of a tepid and unambitious Establishment poetry” [4]) posing against it an experimental modernist tradition identified by its concern for “the materiality of the text” (6).

Perloff chooses to let her particular synthetic modernist tradition carry the weight of the argument. The book’s first four chapters treat T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Marcel Duchamp, and Velimir Khlebnikov; its final chapter glances at a group of contemporary “modernists”: Susan Howe, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, and Steve McCaffery. In picking individual writers whose actual relations were tangential at best, Perloff brackets the avant-garde idea of alternative writerly communities; at the same time, her particular grouping of figures usefully violates the disciplinary lines that circumscribe “poetry” or “American literature.” The account implies that the most vital poetry in English (North American experimental writing) has long been nourished by work that falls outside such generic and literary-historical categories. Here Perloff’s writerly affiliations—and her utter lack of interest in currently influential critical master-tropes such as the Emersonian, pragmatist tradition of American poetry—serve her well.

Obviously, Eliot is the surprise figure among this list of historical modernists (though of the four figures covered here, Perloff has written extensively only about Stein to this point). The “avant-garde Eliot” is the author of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and other poems, poems written before the death of Jean Verdenal, which Perloff takes as the most important among a group of events

that pushed Eliot away from avant-garde modernism toward the royalist, Anglo-Catholic, classicist stance from which he would preside over poetry for some three decades. Perloff introduces Duchamp as a semiotic innovator, working to place “visual and verbal language” in signifying relationships; the relations between word and image, described by a variety of Duchampian terms—“delay,” “deferment,” “infrathin”—are then associated with Stein’s critique of identity. Duchamp’s “delay” comes to stand as the defining quality of poetic language: in the next chapter Perloff compares this to the focus on individual phonemic difference that constitutes Khlebnikov’s poetics, in which “etym” of meaning—material linguistic roots—become the source of wild, speculative exfoliations of content.

It is when Perloff considers poetic theory that the vigorous strokes of her (intentionally counterintuitive) polemic tend to obscure real differences—as in her linkage of Eliot with Stein, most persuasively on the grounds of a shared antipsychologism or “impersonality.” Perloff offers a bouquet of once-famous early Eliot citations in an attempt to associate this figure with the constructivist poetics of contemporaries such as Rosmarie Waldrop and Michael Davidson, and to oppose all the aforementioned writers to “the expressivist paradigm of the 1960s” (10). It’s eminently plausible to use Eliot’s early critical work in such a reading (although Louis Menand has brilliantly shown that Eliot’s early critical work may be plausibly used to defend virtually *any* critical stance, articulating as it does principles that are protean in their changeability).⁴ At the same time, the Eliot of the early essays (those collected in 1928’s *The Sacred Wood*) is a more dangerous ally than the Eliot of the prewar poetry; Eliot’s tactical sallies gained an immense influence within English departments (more quickly than did his poetry) and came to be seen as the opening moves in the New Critical campaign.

Perloff repeatedly cites a passage in which Eliot maintains that the difference between “art and the event” is “always absolute” (9, 89; qtd. from “Tradition and the Individual Talent”); but I would

4. Louis Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T. S. Eliot and His Context* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987).

argue that for Eliot this difference was one between a *given* work of art and any *particular* historical event, rather than a radical critique of representation. (One might also note that a writer as “expressivist” as Robert Lowell once observed, “A poem is an event and makes no attempt to record an event.”)⁵ Eliot was no realist; but neither was he willing—as was Stein—to sever poetic *language* from the claims of speech.⁶ In her effort to stress that the two writers shared a modernist antirhetorical poetics, Perloff collapses the distinction between meaning and representation (between, let’s say, the claims of realism to depict the *actual world* and what Charles Altieri has called “abstraction”: to abstract from the realist world while maintaining syntactical coherence).

Perloff’s study is most convincing in its attempts to show *formal* connections: her readings are, as always, exemplary. Her chosen examples of twentieth-century modernism are, of course, not wholly representative: notably absent from her treatment is any exemplar of the Marxist avant-garde. Here I refer to poets whose interest in Russian formalism—one shared by Perloff—is inflected by M. M. Bakhtin and P. N. Medvedev’s critique of that movement; poets who are concerned above all with the *socially purposive* aspect of the (estranging) formal device. (Contemporary examples—to name two of many—include Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten.) A consequence of this decision is that though three of the four poets she discusses in this chapter were associated from the beginning of their careers with language writing (and Susan Howe was certainly not seen in *opposition* to it), the signifier “language poetry” and its many cognates are absent from Perloff’s account. While this

5. Qtd. in Eric B. Williams, *The Mirror and the Word: Modernism, Literary Theory, and George Trakl* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1993) 283.

6. An aside in Eliot’s Clark lectures, delivered in early 1926, suggests his own reading of Stein: he remarked that the verses of “Miss Gertrude Stein . . . can, for anyone whose taste has already been disciplined elsewhere, provide an extremely valuable exercise for unused parts of the mind” (qtd. in Ronald Schuchard, ed., *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, by T. S. Eliot [New York: Harcourt, 1996] 137). A year later, writing in the *Nation and Athenaeum*, he reversed fields: “her work . . . is not good for one’s mind” (“Charleston, Hey! Hey!” [Schuchard 137–39]). In both cases, Eliot places Stein outside the literary / artistic domain, the sphere in which value judgments are governed by the faculty of *taste*.

decision is understandable in an account directed at “the broadest range of readers” (back cover), its presence in a “revisionist narrative” (front inner flap) should be noted as precisely that: revisionist. Given that no recent avant-garde has made such extensive claims for the collective as has this movement, to ignore it altogether, while at the same time being anything but inattentive to particular individuals, risks seeming a considered decision to recapitulate the traditional logic of literary history.⁷

Which leads to my final caveat. Perloff concludes by asserting that “‘Prufrock’ and *Tender Buttons*, *With Hidden Noise* and Khlebnikov’s manifestos . . . oddly strike us as more immediate and ‘contemporary’ than the fabled postmodern ‘breakthrough’ of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* or Charles Olson’s *Maximus*” (164). Fair enough (though one might notice the Eliotic insinuations of that “us”)—but her subsumption of these latter poets under “the expressivist paradigm of the 1960s” (10) is, I think, to take polemical simplification too far, issuing as it does in the claim that San Francisco Renaissance, Black Mountain, and related poetries (such as Black Arts writing) shared a poetics with confessionalism. Indeed, one could argue that the deep concern for poetics *as a topic* (even before any consideration of doctrinal particulars) and the concern for the avant-garde as a resistant collective—both characteristics exemplified in, say, the Creeley-Olson correspondence—separated poets in this (various) lineage from those of the “Age of Lowell.”⁸ However unpalatable the macho rhetoric that came to be associated with the figure of Maximus, Olson’s attacks

7. Benjamin Friedlander’s recent experimental account of language-centered writing (“A Short History of Language Poetry / According To ‘Hecuba Whimsy,’” *Qui Parle* 12.2 [2001]: 107–42) is instructive in its playful but not unserious negotiations of the fact that naming individuals as “representative”—while perhaps unavoidable—is itself a canonizing gesture. Such struggles with this problem themselves have a history going back to Ron Silliman’s introduction to *In the American Tree* (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1986), in which Silliman scrupulously catalogs a group of the excluded, the members of which he specifies as being equal in number and merit to those he chose to include.

8. A powerful account of Lowell as symptomatic figure of the “age” is Jed Rasula’s *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940–1990* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996); see especially 247–68.

on Western humanism and lyric monoglossia are, in my view, difficult if not impossible to reconcile with such a simply conceived “expressivism.”

Perloff’s avant-garde modernism is composed of poetic languages that take on the status (to paraphrase Wittgenstein) of “forms of life”; the modernism of Lorenzo Thomas’s *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* moves the other way, consciously privileging a particular “Afrocentric” culture and its vernacular—a racially marked form of life—as ideally (that is to say, poetically) inseparable. The difference is between a formal/linguistic and a culturalist approach; to the extent that these are both approaches “to” modernism, the contrast is instructive. Perloff’s concern for textual materiality, for instance, leads to a concern for sound at the linguistic level of phonemic possibilities; Thomas, equally involved with the musicality of poetry, situates this musicality within a particular cultural matrix, reading the Black Arts text as the transcription of music (218). The former is concerned with sound, the latter with orality. In his introduction, Thomas announces his intent to explore occasions when African American writers’ shared commitment to modernist aesthetics and social justice becomes problematic; it is this shared commitment that defines “Afrocentric modernism.” From the “absolute” difference between art and the event that Perloff seeks to establish as definitive of modernist aesthetics, then, we move to an uneasy continuum of social relations along which the difference between political rhetoric and the Black Arts poetic of, say, Amiri Baraka’s “Black People!” is anything but self-evident. An interesting consequence of this is that the 1960s—a decade depreciated by Perloff’s counternarrative—is seen by Thomas as particularly important. Thomas argues that the central theoretical influence on Black Arts poetry, in its formative stages, may have been Olson’s “Projective Verse” essay—a model that theorized the relation between the poet’s physical self and the poem in a way that arguably sought to move beyond any simply expressivist doctrine.

Individual chapters take the form of particular case studies, focusing on topics such as the quarrel over “New” poetry between

William Stanley Braithwaite and Harriet Monroe, the place of the Black Arts movement in 1960s New York City, Melvin B. Tolson's untimely modernism, and the role of poetry readings in constructing the Afrocentric tradition. Thomas's subject, ultimately, is the relation between African American identity and the poetic career in the twentieth century. His argument generally remains implicit, though at moments criteria of value surface, as in the discussion of Fenton Johnson (a precursor of the Harlem Renaissance, born in 1888, the same year as T. S. Eliot) whose "influence is a matter of both style and content—Johnson's ability to transmit an Afrocentric message in a poetic vocabulary that is both stylistically current and indisputably connected to the vernacular of the African American community" (31). These, one gathers, are the terms of (Afrocentric) modernism; but later, in a chapter on Tolson, Thomas offers an explicit definition of modernism as "precisely the opposite of the . . . still current belief in the efficacy of science. . . . Modernism actually represents an attempt to survey the new twentieth-century landscape and, by a radical reinterpretation of myth and tradition, to rescue the classical values of so-called Western civilization" (95–96). Here we have modernism *tout court* taken as precisely the weak, postwar academic straw man Perloff regards as distorting current debates. Thomas's "so-called," of course, marks the spot, suggesting as it does the possibility of quite another tradition equally in need of restoration. This allows him to pose Tolson and Amiri Baraka as exemplary Afrocentric modernists; at the same time, the risk of reducing modernism to a merely culturalist (albeit oppositional) movement is to open it to radically antiformalist agendas—to the essentially realist lyric that operates in the service of social identity.

Thomas rarely falls into this trap—although he does have something of a weakness for what he at one point calls "soft-spoken wisdom" (230), what a modernist of Perloff's ilk (or mine) might call the sort of well-meant truism that violates every one of Pound's famous "Don't"s simultaneously. His opening sentence (referring to Phillis Wheatley) is representative both in perspective and in tone: "The subtle analytical powers that enable a poet to comment on life seldom guide her ambition—which, presentation copy in hand, hastens toward any presumably literate being" (1). The

book is animated by this engagingly dry perspective; nevertheless, Thomas sustains the sense of a man moved to speak by his passions throughout. The other side of this admirable freedom is a common-sense attitude toward matters theoretical and technical which is occasionally less than satisfying. Individual chapters vary widely in tone; nor are they consistently integrated with Thomas's larger claims (thus, for example, he praises Margaret Walker's *For My People* as a "classic" [93] without ever indicating to what extent he reads Walker as a modernist); the danger is that "Afrocentric modernism" threatens to become simply the synonym for the poetry Thomas admires. Anecdotes (often marvelous) go unfootnoted; critics are referred to without a trace in the bibliography for those who wish to pursue.

Ultimately, I think, Thomas's interest in his particular protagonists considerably exceeds his involvement with categories such as "modernism"; his larger pronouncements—as when he tells us that the quarrel between Braithwaite and Monroe "foregrounds important issues of artistic innovation, literary politics, editorial influence, and the mechanisms of cultural change" (48)—at times seem no more than justifications for close readings or the details of literary history. And it is in these two latter procedures that the considerable strength of Thomas's book lies: in the juxtaposition of close readings and sociobiographical commentary, particularly as these coalesce in depicting the (representative) Afrocentric literary career. Explorations of the contradictions that mark any such career give his study its energy. To give just one example, an anecdote depicting a sudden encounter with Baraka reading in a community center—the climax of a Christmas evening bar-hopping in Newark with Ishmael Reed—introduces an analysis in which Thomas maps out the complex cultural position of Baraka's poetry with fine economy: "Baraka . . . is best as a poet of intense personal reflection, which is exactly why he always appears to us in the prophet's sackcloth of social activism. Literally, he does not have time to be himself" (159).

Thomas's final chapter, entitled "At the Edge of the Twenty-first Century," is directly analogous to Perloff's. Erica Hunt, Paul Beatty, Willie Perdomo, Kevin Young, Thomas Sayers Ellis, Patricia Jones Spears, and Harryette Mullen each receive some consider-

ation; Thomas argues that while various “strong communities” of Afrocentric poets have recently appeared, “[u]nlike the nationwide artistic activity inspired by the ‘New Negro’ Renaissance in the 1920s, all of this talent and energy has not been either a directed movement or a unified one” (222). For Thomas such activity is the norm, as is its “invisibility to academic critics”; the exception is when poetry becomes associated with “an aesthetic or political program.” (This statement might be a clue about Thomas’s decision to leave the Harlem Renaissance as an absence—framed, as it were, by precursors, 1830s poets, and Black Arts figures—a decision which, unfortunately, contributes to the study’s theoretical thinness.) In this sense, Thomas is enumerating rather than canonizing, simply pointing at some fraction of an available wealth of work. Indeed, Thomas’s choices lack even the aesthetic unity that Perloff seeks to establish among her poets, although many share a close engagement with Afrocentric musical history, which marks their work at levels ranging from the thematic to diction and sound.

Yet if “Afrocentric modernism” in the end fails to stand for a particular poetic project, Thomas’s project retains considerable literary-historical merit—and his quietly challenging observation that “[a]n Afrocentric perspective, natural to some Americans, remains a possible alternative for others” (5) is exemplary. The various strengths of these two books do much to enhance our already dizzying, multiperspectival vision of modernism.

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