

Modernists, Avant-Gardists,
Contemporaries

Essays of the First Three Decades, 1964–94

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Introduction

The first time I submitted an essay to a scholarly journal was in 1963. I was a second-year PhD student at the Catholic University in Washington, D.C. For a course on Modern Poetry with a very brilliant young professor, James Hafley, I had written an essay on irony in the late Wallace Stevens and, intrepid as I was in those days, decided to send it to *American Literature*, then known to be the leading journal in the field. I waited and waited for a reply and when none came I finally wrote to the editor Louis J. Budd to ask what had happened. After many more weeks, Budd wrote back to say, yes, they had accepted the article but somehow the returned manuscript had gotten lost in the mail. When it finally arrived, there was a note in a corner of the envelope—one I obviously wasn't meant to see, for it was the report of one of the two readers and contained the sentence, "This is not very impressive but perhaps the best we can get on the subject: let's take it." It wasn't quite the response I hoped for, but, with some revision, "Irony in Wallace Stevens's *The Rock*" appeared in the 1964 summer issue of *American Literature* and I felt that, even though it was a fledgling piece, my life as a scholar was launched.

Within the next few years, I published four or five essays on Yeats—my dissertation subject—although these pieces were not taken from the thesis itself, which was called *Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats*, but were attempts to deal with problems of form, tone, and genre in the poetry. One, "Spatial Form in the Poetry of Yeats: the two Lissadell Poems," was accepted by

one of my heroes, Richard Ellmann, for *PMLA*. And between 1964–94, the cut-off date for this collection, I published dozens of essays on subjects ranging from Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady* to Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. Some became part of books, some were included in earlier collections beginning with *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (1985). But many remained uncollected as did the hundreds of reviews I wrote. I have chosen the year 1994 as cut-off date because it marks the turn to the digital. From 1995 on, everything is in my computer, and if someone asks me for a copy of an uncollected article or review, I can readily put my hands on it. But the writing of the pre-1995 period, floppy disks notwithstanding, remains largely inaccessible: I have a hard time finding individual items myself! Accordingly, I decided to publish a group of uncollected essays and a number of reviews, including ones I wrote for *The New Republic* in the 1970s.

A number of presses had expressed interest in such a collection but I declined their offers for three reasons. First, I didn’t want to go through the charade of pretending the essays all “cohered” and made for some sort of unified book. The unity thesis in such cases is usually *ex post facto* and I didn’t want to strain to impose it. Second, I didn’t want readers in the internet age to have to buy a book of essays written forty years ago, some which are easily available for downloading from JSTOR or other data bases. And third, I didn’t want to have to obtain permissions for citations or images in the works cited. One publisher suggested that permission for all the Stevens poems quoted in Essay 1 would have to be renegotiated. Another wanted me to pay to reproduce Marcel Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel*, an image now the logo on the Museum of Modern Art brochure and available in hundreds of versions on Google. The John Cage estate wanted \$500 for five lines of John Cage. And so on. It seemed excessive to engage in the permissions process and to pay high fees for a “book” like this one, containing already published material from so long ago.

And so I decided to put this book on my personal website <http://marjorieperloff.com> instead. That website, designed for me some ten years ago by two brilliant students at the University of

Southern California—Amaranth Borsuck and Marie Smart, both of them now themselves publishing professionals—already has many of my essays online. *Essays from the First Three Decades* complements these. It gives interested readers a chance to track my arguments and critiques from early on and to see how my views have evolved or changed.

I couldn't have done any of the collecting and editing without the help of David Jonathan Bayot, my friend at the DLSU Press in Manila, who collected my interviews, first for his own press and then for Chicago. After he and I worked on my *Poetics in a New Key* (2014) and *Perloff in Conversation* (2016), a volume in his *Critics in Conversation* series, we discussed doing a volume of essays and considered various possibilities. In the end, we settled on “the first three decades” and chose representative essays. David then set about to scan, digitize, reproduce, and otherwise improve the materiality of the text of the pieces in question. Especially in the case of the *New Republic* reviews, whose pages had yellowed and largely deteriorated, not to mention that about one quarter of each page was taken up with ads, there was a lot to be done.

As they stand, the essays range from Goethe and Yeats to Philip Larkin, via Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Sylvia Plath and some others. “Charles Olson and the ‘Inferior Predecessors’: ‘Projective Verse’ Revisited” (*ELH*) and “The Linear Fallacy” (*Georgia Review*) were essays I never reprinted because their severity aroused some anger in the poetry community: forty years later, they no longer seem so extreme. The reviews, especially those in *The New Republic* serve a slightly different function: as I reread them, I feel nostalgia for a time when one could write in a leading weekly political magazine about Ed Dorn's *Slinger* and David Antin's *talking at the boundaries*, when critical books like William Chace's *The Political Identities of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot* were discussed by a wide intellectual audience. And it was the review of Frank O'Hara's *Art Chronicles* that brought my work to the attention of Michael Braziller, who soon asked me to write a book on O'Hara for Braziller Publishers. Doris Grumbach, now 100+ and living in Maine, was the book editor who made this possible.

I take *Modernists, Avant-Gardists, Contemporaries: Essays of the First Three Decades* to be a provisional “book,” as is appropriate for the twenty-first century. It can be adjusted in time, whether by addition or subtraction. It is, in any case, an experiment in communication, a move toward more open access of scholarly/critical material, whose presence I shall signal on the Social Media. And I look forward to feedback from readers.

MARJORIE PERLOFF
Pacific Palisades, July 2016

An Experiment in Publication: Digitizing the Archive

1. This collection of essays started out as quite a different book. My original proposal to the author (as early as 2012) was for us to come up with a “Marjorie Perloff Reader.” I had in mind a volume that would bring together key selections from Perloff’s work (mainly her books). And such a collection, I thought, would make her ideas accessible to readers, especially those who would like an introduction to her important writings and to see her critical project as a whole. But the plan didn’t work out for one main reason: “interested” publishers surmised that it would be quite costly to publish a book like this, which is essentially a collection of chapters from previously published books (copyrighted by major university presses).
2. In 2015, when I was made general editor of the *Critical Voices* series of Sussex Academic Press, I wanted to revive the project aborted earlier due to complications caused by too much assertion of rights and ownerships over words and other possessions. I wanted it to be a Reader with a twist, so to speak. My intention was still pretty much the same: to introduce the readers to the configurations of Perloff’s critical ideas by presenting her essays on key poets and thinkers, specifically those who have made defining marks in the development of her poetics over five decades. The “twist” lies in the fact that this New Reader would consist entirely of essays that haven’t been previously collected and included in any of Perloff’s books. Part of the plan was for us to include works that haven’t been published earlier. I still hope to publish such a book one day soon.

3. Unfortunately, in the course of the preparation of the New Reader, I was made to realize that my understanding of the Word (and the world that OWNS it!) was terribly naïve. The new format of the Reader didn't spare Marjorie and me from the tough demands of the Law concerning the reproduction of copyrighted materials, be they in the form of artistic image, or poetry, or even statements—critical or otherwise—made by so-and-so on such-and-such that appeared in this-and-that publication. (Since Marjorie has already cited a few of these problematic instances in her Preface, I'll leave the case at that and move on.)
4. The current collection—quite a different book—has been assembled in view of current copyright issues so as to put Marjorie's early critical work back out into the world. Marjorie thought that it might be a good idea to come up with an unprecedented format for doing a book, namely, to “publish” and make her early essays accessible (without monetary demands on her readers), that is, on her own website. And for this endeavor (which I would like to consider to be a first in a series of them), Marjorie wanted us to focus on the uncollected essays and reviews she published during the pre-digital period from 1964 to 1994.
5. The book has twenty-six chapters and is divided into two sections: Essays and Reviews. Except for chapter 16—“What to Make of a Diminished Thing (On Philip Larkin)” —which was repackaged based on a freely formatted version of the paper provided by EBSCO, all the essays are presented as they appeared in their first instance of publication. We thought that this format would be most helpful to readers, especially those who'll be citing from this corpus of Perloff's essays in their own works. In the case of the Reviews, unfortunately, we have to re-encode the texts and reformat them since scanned images of them (whose pages had yellowed and deteriorated) came out badly. Nevertheless, scaled-down images of the review essays (as

they were printed originally) have been appended at the bottom of the chapters for the readers' reference. Also, each page has been given a book pagination, so that guided by the Table of Contents, the readers can navigate their way through the book with ease. And the bibliographical details of each essay are provided in the Contents.

6. For my own small part in the book's preparation, I would like to thank, Riddick Matthew "Doc" Recoter, Joanne Castañares, Joanna Marie "JM" Cabantog, and Louise Jezareth "Reith" Antipala for saving me, a true heir of the Flintstones, from the endless "returns" of technology. Doc, like myself, is a Perloff fan, and thus was a great sounding board in various courses and at different stages in the preparation of this "different" book.
7. "I was thinking of using as a motto for my book a quotation from *King Lear*: 'I'll teach you differences.' ... The remark 'You'd be surprised' wouldn't be a bad motto either...." Thus says Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose life and ideas have, over the years, been a key inspiration to Perloff in the "framing" of her differential poetics. Working with Marjorie (luckily again) on this project has surely taught me the critical lesson of differences. And indeed, what a great pleasure it is for me to find in this different space of texts from a different time, an occasion to re-frame one's motto, to unhinge (from) one's self, again and again.
8. For *Modernists, Avant-Gardists, Contemporaries: Essays of the First Three Decades, 1964-94*, and to all its readers as well, I would think "the remark 'You'd be surprised' wouldn't be a bad motto either...."

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