

*Infrathin*, Marjorie Perloff (University of Chicago Press)

Marjorie Perloff continues to write theoretical and critical books that are both perceptive and highly readable. *Infrathin*, her most recent, takes its title from Duchamp's idea that things (and words) that are seemingly the same are always different, even if that difference is 'ultrathin'. Perloff takes this as the basis and working method for her seven chapters, although there is also a lot of close reading.

Perloff, it has to be said, had me worried at first, as she talked about discussing the context of poetry rather than focussing on the texts themselves, but this 'context' is what I would think of as intertextuality, that is how work relates to other work: of the time, previously as influence, and how it has affected poetry since. Some of this 'context' (if we stick with Perloff's term) produces some surprising groupings and discussion.

She starts with a chapter considering ultrathin in relation to Gertrude Stein's playful experiments, as well as her writerly relationship to Duchamp. Chapter 2 is where the surprises start to happen, where Perloff undertakes a superb analysis of the textual musicality, structure and effect of T.S. Eliot's 'Little Gidding', and then makes an unexpected but coherent case for Eliot as a forerunner to concrete poetry, such as that produced by Ian Hamilton Finlay.

Perloff then pans out to consider how Ezra Pound uses the page, or invents a specific kind of page, for his *Cantos*. Her close reading here includes the visual element as well as the text, noting the differences, as Pound did not read aloud the ideograms and other visual components of his sequences. Charles Olson and Zukofsky get short shrift in relation to the complexities and structure of the *Cantos*, Perloff preferring to consider Brazilian concrete poets such as Augusto de Campos.

Next up is a fascinating discussion of Susan Howe's *Quarry* in relation to Wallace Steven's *Rock*, titled 'Word Frequencies and Zero Zones'. This consideration of repetition, slippage and what is left unsaid is astonishingly original, unlike the next chapter which considers the work of John Ashbery, Charles Bernstein and Rae Armantout. It feels slightly expected and a revisiting of some of Perloff's previous work.

The book ends with a detailed chapter about 'Poeticity' in Samuel Beckett's work, followed by another featuring Beckett, but this time considering how he came to engage with and be influenced by the poetry of Yeats, with an overarching theme of 'The Paragrammatic Potential of "Traditional" Verse'.

If at times this book feels like the seven conference papers or essays they previously were, reworked into chapters, and if at times Perloff makes some rather personal, associative and conjectural leaps when undertaking her poetic deconstructions, it can be forgiven in the light of surprise, intelligence and originality. I haven't enjoyed a serious and challenging critical book like this for a long time.

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