

Though the magazine has ended, I consider Jesse to be one of poetry's saints, certainly a warm and positive force in my own experience of poetry. I first heard of *Antennae* in 2002 when I was a student in Buffalo's Poetics Program, puzzling out a thesis on Lorine Niedecker and writing some poems. Patrick Durgin forwarded an email to the Poetics List, advertising that *Antennae* sought contributors. My eyebrows popped when I saw that the magazine was located in Madison, where I'd soon be moving, and I forwarded Jesse some of my work, hoping for my own future company. And I found it. My first published poem appeared in issue 4 (later, I'd contribute to issue 9 as well). Like the best "little magazines" still in publication—such as the *Cultural Society* or *Damn the Caesars*—*Antennae* created a home, and the home will be missed.

David Pavelich

§

Marjorie Perloff, *Avant-Garde Poetics*, and *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*

The new fourth edition of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* should be commended on many fronts, not least for its addition of essays on numerous "Third-World" ethnic and national poetics, relegated in previous editions (especially the first two, improved somewhat in the third) to brief discussions within schematic entries devoted to whole continents.

It's therefore strange and disconcerting that the entry titled "Avant-Garde Poetics," authored by the justly esteemed critic Marjorie Perloff, should echo the lamentable biases of past editions. The stunning omissions in Perloff's entry fly directly in face of the more capacious, internationalist gestures of the new *Princeton*.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the entry's myopic purview is in dramatic contradiction with the internationalist outlook that the avant-garde itself (even on its minority right wing!) has long maintained at its ideational core.

"Avant-Garde Poetics" is substantial—as long, in fact, as most of the entries given to national poetics, save the ones reserved for the United States and England, which are, *Ut Imperium Poesis*, multiply longer than any others. It names dozens of poets (and other artists) and a large number of tendencies and movements, from the era of Rimbaud up to the US "post-avant" present. And with exception of a passing reference to the Brazilian brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and their *Concretista* moment, not a single poet or group outside the Anglo-American/European experience is acknowledged.<sup>2</sup> The entire Iberian Peninsula, even, goes missing!

How could such a skewed summation have made its way into the new, more globally minded *Princeton*? I wonder if Perloff might explain her focus

on what the state forms dub “Caucasian [non-Hispanic]” writers by saying that the strict concern of her entry is the “historical avant-garde,” the European movements that Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger cover in their classic studies of same title, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as noted above, this is clearly not the case: she brings in any number of Western-Caucasian figures and groups emerging after the initial epoch-making explosions—many of them less influential, historically speaking, than key actors she leaves out. Among the many indispensable authors of the radical tradition absent from Perloff’s culturally crimped account, here are a baker’s half-dozen whose works and thought, in intimate conversation with the avant-garde’s very origins or later legacy, have altered the course of world poetry. I’m cognizant that much of the information will not be new to many readers of this journal. But given the somewhat confounding case at issue, some kind of anecdotal emphasis seems in order.

Is the passing over by Perloff of a giant vanguard poet like Vicente Huidobro perchance an innocent cut-and-paste glitch? His announcement of *Creacionismo* appears in Chile even before he arrives in Paris in 1916 to drink and argue with Apollinaire, Breton, Reverdy, Gris, Picasso, et al. He is writing and publishing calligrams as early as 1912–13, prior to Apollinaire. He was a central figure in the development of *Nord-Sud*, the key Paris journal of the time. He knew everyone in the Parisian avant-garde, and everyone knew him—he, Reverdy, and Tzara, in particular, become close collaborators. His *Creacionista* program is sui generis—it precedes Dada, even, by a few years, and anticipates principles later elaborated by Surrealism and various other expressions of radical Modernism, not least in its calls for poetry’s status as a fully organic reality, not mimetic of nature’s outer appearances, but ontologically projective of its dynamical forces and operations: “Why sing of roses, oh poets?” he writes. “Make them flower in the poem.” He goes on to enact his ideas by literally painting his poems. And then, beginning in 1919, he sets out to write *Altazor*, one of the greatest epics of all Modernism. Indeed, *Ultraísmo*, the key early a-g literary movement in the Hispanic world and a frontal reaction against late-Romantic *Modernismo*, is directly inspired by Huidobro’s thought. It has its beginnings in Spain, in 1918, with the young Jorge Luis Borges at its manifesto-driven heart. In Latin America, the principles of this short-lived current, brought back in 1921 to South America by Borges, spark a varied cosmology of avant-garde theory and experiment that is still in complex, tributaried evolution and much more closely relevant to broader social discourse than current poetic neo-avants in the “North.”

And is it necessary to point out the near-comedy of Perloff’s failure to mention Fernando Pessoa? In the growing estimation of many poets and critics he is the strangest avant-garde poet of the twentieth century. Pessoa

invented a whole new way of writing—and conceiving of—poetry: one that takes the page as canvas of formal performance (linked in conventional, linear reference to the performer) and inflates its epistemic boundaries into a Klein-like manifold space. He was the leader of one of the most high-theoried and fascinating national avant-garde movements anywhere, that of early-century Portugal. Not to name the many-named and -personed Pessoa in an overview of avant-garde poetics is something like not naming Wilt Chamberlain in an overview history of the NBA.

And what of César Vallejo? Truly? *Trilce*, nothing like it before or since, widely revered as one of the century's tour de force poetic sequences, appears in the same annus mirabilis (1922) as *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, and is as shocking and inimitable. Vallejo—not yet to Paris from Peru, largely alone in the hinterlands and with no precedent, digging down into his indigenous roots—detonates words, syntax, sound, and image into something totally new and still totally fresh; fresh, that is, in ways that so much Euro-avant period text no longer remains. No other writer of experiment, true to the principle of joining art and life, worked harder to conjoin the creative vocation with the struggle against looming fascism. During the Spanish Civil War, the presses of the Republican Army were printing Vallejo's iconoclastic, visionary poems, certainly one of the most memorable enactments, ever, of the avant-garde's insurrectionary aim.

Or what about Aimé Césaire, of Martinique?<sup>4</sup> Breton referred to Césaire's *Cahier* as “nothing less than the greatest lyric monument of this time.” Césaire's surrealist works have had a huge impact upon innovative writers around the planet. Would it not have been in the interests of a true and comprehensive synopsis of the avant-garde to note the leading writer of the anti-colonial *Négritude* wing of experiment? Is the fact that Surrealist aesthetics proved to be one of the main modalities for the promulgation of twentieth-century revolutionary writing, theory, and resistance by leading-edge black intellectuals not worth a few words in an entry covering “Avant-Garde Poetics”? Frank O'Hara, about whom Perloff has written so incisively, and who so memorably revered Césaire, would not be pleased.

As well, what of Asia, and a poet like Kitasono Katue? Heralded by Pound as one of the vital poets of the century, Kitasono is the key figure of Japanese Surrealism, a movement flourishing during the late 20s through the 30s. Vigorously radical, the movement was by 1941 destroyed through military bans of its journals, along with imprisonment and forced conscription of many of its members. In fact, except for Russian and Chilean examples, no avant-garde literary movement was so fiercely targeted as a danger to the State than the Japanese Surrealists of the 1930s. Regardless of his later capitulation to war pressures, Kitasono is by any estimation one of the magnificent poets of the world a-g. In his often deperated work, Surrealist

ideals, Zen, and the repurposing of traditional Japanese prosodic forms interpenetrate in startling ways. The founder of “Ideoplastic poetry,” he wrote odes to Malevich and Stein. In his later career, he moves poetry into the arena of photography proper, a conceptual move far ahead of its time. The momentous Gutai movement of the 50s doesn’t happen without him; neither does Fluxus, probably.

Is Perloff aware of Alejandra Pizarnik, from Argentina? Though there has been some English translation and commentary, the absence of a full consideration of her oeuvre is a yawning gap in our understanding of the Latin American *vanguardia*. She died, a suicide, in 1972; her often disturbing, avant la lettre intertextual/appropriative works, in sophisticated dialogue with Continental theory (she lived in Paris for many years, where she was Julio Cortázar’s dear friend), along with a fierce, self-reflexive deconstruction of authorial self and signification—including employment of New Sentence-like procedures—beats the Language poets by a good decade. Various critics have written of how uncannily her work enacts proposals only later elaborated by Julia Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Black Sun*; others have claimed her as Latin America’s answer to Artaud and Bataille. Her poetry, now Verlainesque in its cut transparencies, now Celanesque in its harsh lyricism, now abject, manic, and shocking, is among the most astonishing products of postwar world writing.

And may we consider a more recent poet like the Chilean Raúl Zurita, still living and making work of daring experiment and vision? He is, aside from searing, internationally renowned books like *Purgatorio*, *INRI*, and *Anteparadiso*, the “author” of the most monumentally scaled poems in human history, bigger than the Nazca Plain hieroglyphs—written (literally) in the sky, in the desert, and (forthcoming) on cliff-faces that fall to the sea. In the late 70s and early 80s, Zurita was one of the leading activists of the CADA (*Colectivo Acciones de Arte*), an underground cell of innovative artists and intellectuals whose courage defies belief. Their guerrilla actions involved auto-mutilation in downtown spaces, public masturbation and defecation in National Museums (they’d speed off in cars after doing their thing), and the flying of a fleet of six small aircraft—all the core CADA members were aboard, with imminent likelihood of being shot down—to make massive leaflet drops (around half a million) of diverse anti-Pinochet poetic thoughts, e.g., “Each individual who works for the expansion of the space of his or her life (even if mental) is an artist.” Their concretist emblem, “No +” (the remainder to be filled by the populace), dropped as a banner over the Mapoche, the great sewer-river traversing Santiago, riveted the populace and became the enacting cry of the final mobilizations that toppled the CIA-installed dictatorship.<sup>5</sup>

In the fifth, concluding section of her article, Perloff dismisses Peter Bürger's critique of the avant-garde's methodical integration and accommodation. She writes that "Bürger's theory... was fashionable throughout the cold-war years, and it is still, somewhat surprisingly, the starting point for all theorizing on the avant-garde. But its argument is surely flawed." She goes on to sharply criticize Bürger's "many successors," including Fredric Jameson, for holding its later "neo" manifestations "under suspicion." She won't have any of it. She avers, summing up, that the a-g's "staying power is evident."

This claim, in the context of our US situation, is rather startling in its heedlessness of what no longer "stays." For surely, if there is one constant value that has guided real oppositional poetic praxis it is the ethos of rejecting what Bürger pithily called the Institution Art—the collusions, comforts, rituals, and mediating ranks of authorizing Culture. True to that propelling principle, nearly all avant-garde American poets—from the early Modernists, to New American poets of various stripes, to those writing in the first (now dead and filed) years of the Language formation—have staunchly rejected the Academy's dynamics of insider privilege and diversionary careerism as inimical to any vibrantly confrontational poetics. Bürger's study, at base, exhibits how institutional forces quickly deracinated the classical a-g's sovereign impulse, transplanting its once-radical "negative aesthetic" within an overarching hothouse of High Art protocol and progressively consensual legitimation. However open to amendment some of Bürger's attendant conclusions may be, on that basic fact there is little dissent.

As the saying goes, "poetry is fifty years behind art," and in terms of a presently near-complete recuperation into sanctioned activity, it did take approximately that long for American poetry's vanguard elements to catch up.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one can safely say that not since the era of the New Criticism has a poetic constellation—ex-Language writing, its "post-avant" offshoots, and hybrid satellites—found itself so solidly and successfully ensconced within the upper echelons of Academia. Its Ivy League-led coalition (Penn our new Kenyon) has "arrived" to the station of a loyal reform wing in the Official Verse Parliament, still trumpeting, if much more faintly now, its oppositional genealogy. Even the White House approves. We've traveled a long way and with great velocity from the proud, insurgent days of the *New American Poetry*, and it's time to simply say it: the "avant-garde" is now utterly at College—poetry's Museum—and with all the perks.<sup>7</sup>

Perloff's total inattention to the field-shift symptomizes, I'd submit, the ideological mood that's come to suffuse the American post-avant's late-stage trade: an amorphous "autonomy of art" creed that is, of necessity, blithely oblivious to the institutional habitus that generates its very assumptions and operations. The formation wants both its "autonomous" social critique

and the official, legitimating patronage that now makes its poetic function thoroughly heteronomous. But there is no such Adornian cake, alas, that can be had and eaten too. And the layered irony of the dialectic is deepening.

"It must change," concludes Perloff, quoting Wallace Stevens. She means something completely other than the subcultural condition I note above, of course. But, yes, change it must, and change it surely will. As history keeps reminding us, it often changes more rapidly than can be foreseen. Who knows: insofar as "Avant-Garde Poetics" is concerned, some current comforts may even be shaken in time for the next edition of the *Princeton*.

Kent Johnson

1/ There are still conspicuous absences among national literary traditions, some of them quite puzzling. There are no country entries, for example, for the Arab Middle East or sub-Saharan Africa (except for Egypt and South Africa). One might think, really, that an entry on Iraq, which harbors a poetic tradition older than any other, would have been deemed timely. Or that, given the editors' earnestly stated efforts to focus on cases of diasporic poetics, an entry on Palestine might have made it in, too. There is a separate one, after all, within the essay "Hebrew Poetry," covering the six-decade history of the "Poetry of Israel."

2/ In relation to the international "primacy" the current US avant clearly has for Perloff (and for others, of course!), the following is also worthy of note. After tying the relative lack of early-century avant activity in Britain to its culture's tradition of "continuity," she remarks that "even in postcolonial Britain today, the avant-garde is under suspicion." This would seem to explain why so many North American vanguard poets, old and new, are named in her essay, while no British writers, except for Wyndham Lewis and D. H. Lawrence, make it in. In fact, though, it's quite obvious that Left experimental poetry in the UK (J. H. Prynne and Tom Raworth being inspirational touchstones) is more radical by far, ideologically and aesthetically, than is the US post-avant. That numerous of these poets, including Prynne, have been pointedly critical of Language poetics and its late-stage cultural recuperation makes Perloff's "Brit-dismissal" especially intriguing.

3/ A highlight of Perloff's entry is the second-class rank she gives to Surrealism vis-à-vis Futurism and Dada. She asserts that "despite its extravagant claims and worldwide influence, [Surrealism represents] less a rupture than a return to the concern with identity of the romantics and hence a far cry from the early futurist desire to found a mass movement." The claim that Surrealism had little desire to "found a mass movement" is manifestly ridiculous, as any reading of its various documents makes apparent, not least the "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art," authored by Breton and Leon Trotsky, which explicitly instantiates Surrealism's longstanding relations to mass Communist politics. Likewise, it is extraordinary to claim, as Perloff does, that "surrealism was opposed to war in all its manifestations." As is plainly on the record, the leading figures of the movement (Stalinist, Trotskyist, or anarchist) were avid partisans of class war.

4/ I know, of course, that Perloff, a former contributing editor to the late, great *Sulfur*, is fully aware of Vallejo and Césaire, both presented in magnificent translations by *Sulfur*'s editor, Clayton Eshleman. Which deepens the puzzle of their "non-entity" status, really.

5/ That the Flarf group (a faddish coterie of US writers whose labors famously involve the appropriation and mockery of "less intelligent" discourse than their own) would be suggested by Perloff at the end of her essay as the tradition's climax, while the profoundly inspiring art-to-life, revolutionary example of the CADA is passed over, is something akin to a tasteless joke.

6/ In the case of the Conceptual Poetry formation (which Perloff industriously champions), the desire to be legitimated by dominant institutions is bluntly up front. The desire has been amply and variously requited. In January of this year, the Museum of Modern Art in NYC named Kenneth Goldsmith its first ever "Poet Laureate." Goldsmith quickly announced a series of "guerrilla readings" at the museum, in which writers such as Charles Bernstein and Rick Moody are signed up as apparently subversive participants. Goldsmith's appointment is scheduled to be officially launched on March 20 with a keynote address by him titled: "My Career in Poetry, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Institution."

7/ In his largely valuable entry on "Language Poetry" for the *Princeton*, Oren Izenberg, like Perloff, skirts the issue of the US avant's rapid institutionalization, though he does give the matter this double-take nod, at his conclusion: "Language poetry's durable triumph may be seen in the increasing avant-gardism of the American mainstream." Which, yes, fairly raises the compounded query: For whom, why, and how is the mainstreaming of the avant-garde a "triumph?" And just how "durable" should one wish such a triumph to remain? We must stay tuned.