

Transforming our sense of contemporary poetry

By R.D. POHL
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Before the Internet became the driving force it is today, Marjorie Perloff predicted how technology would transform our sense of what contemporary poetry is or can be.

"There is today no landscape uncontaminated by sound bytes and computer blips, no mountain peak or lonely valley beyond the reach of the cellular phone ... Increasingly, then, the poet's area is the electronic world," she wrote in "Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media" (1991).

Such observations are the stock in trade for Perloff, who will read from her new memoir "The Vienna Paradox" at 4 p.m. March 19 in the Screening Room of the University at Buffalo's Center for the Arts.

Over the past quarter century, Perloff, who is Sadie Derham Patek Professor of the Humanities Emerita at Stanford University, has been recognized as one of contemporary American literature's most insightful and readable critics, and perhaps its leading advocate for innovation and experimentalism. Perloff sees her role as a participant in an ongoing cultural and aesthetic dialogue with the poets, writers and artists that her work focuses on.

It would be difficult, for instance, to imagine the continuing influence of Language Poetry and other so-called "oppositional" and "alternative" poetics on the contemporary literary mainstream if it were not for the early and consistent support of an established critic of Perloff's stature.

In her book, "21st-Century Modernism: The 'New' Poetics," Perloff argues that the new "constructivist" poetics associated with the Language Movement represents less of an outgrowth of "post-modernism"

than a return to the radical aesthetics of early modernism: most notably, that of the early "avant-garde" work of T.S. Eliot - especially "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" written in the summer of 1911 when Eliot was just 22.

In much of her work, Perloff borrows freely from the entire canon of 20th century art and literary experimentalism for its analogues. A chapter in "21st-Century Modernism," on Gertrude Stein's "Differential Syntax" is followed by a discussion of artist Marcel Duchamp's "Conceptual Poetics," which introduces the notion of the "ready made" and its challenge to art as an object of personal expression.

"The Vienna Paradox," from which she will read at UB later this month, is her memoir of growing up as a girl named Gabriele in post World War I Vienna, the German Anschluss of Austria, and the flight of her upper middle class family to the Bronx in 1938.

As both a personal and an intellectual memoir, it serves as an analogue to what is perhaps her most engaging and speculative piece of writing - her 1996 volume "Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary."

In this fascinating study, Perloff attempts to chart the influence of the 20th century's most enigmatically brilliant and paradoxical thinker - philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

"Philosophy ought to be written only as a form of poetry," Wittgenstein once observed and perhaps demonstrated in 1922 by writing (at age 33) a slim volume of logical propositions ("Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus") on the nature of language, value and knowledge, which turned the 2,500 years of western philosophy upside down.

Perloff's book is not an assessment of Wittgenstein's legacy as a philosopher, but rather his unlikely status as the patron saint of innovation in poetry and the arts - a

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status conferred on him despite his aversion to the art and poetry of his own time.

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