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Poetics

Josh Robinson

This chapter discusses three works published in the field of poetics (broadly conceived) during 2015, exploring their commonalities, mutual implications, compatibilities and tensions. It begins with a discussion of Marjorie Perloff's *Poetics in a New Key: Interviews and Essays*, focusing in particular on the author's programmatic (and frequently polemical) declaration of her principles in the book's preface. It discusses the implications of her evaluative and prescriptive approach, and brings to light some of the tensions that it involves, with particular relation to her instructions concerning theory and its relationship to the study of poetry. It then turns to Reginald Gibbons's account of *How Poems Think*, analysing the implications both of his conceptual optic of 'working against the grain'—a way of thinking developed in dialogue with Donald Davie and Hélène Cixous—and of the way in which it both illuminates and is illuminated by the engagement with poems. Focusing on Gibbons's analyses of rhyme, it examines the resources offered by his comparative approach, drawing on readings of French, German, Greek and Russian poetry as well as that written in English, and considers the ways in which poetics learns from and comes to resemble poetry in its ambitious attempt to formulate a prose account of the thinking of verse technique. It ends by discussing Rebecca Sanchez's *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature*, and in doing so considers both the resonances of Gibbons's account of the resources of language for poetics of non-spoken languages, and Sanchez's account of the implications and potential resources of the analysis of American Sign Language poetry for literary studies more generally.

In her preface to *Poetics in a New Key: Interviews and Essays*, Marjorie Perloff sets out a programmatic statement of her poetics that both reflects on her writings—those collected in the book, and her broader œuvre—and sets out what she considers its most urgent implications. This volume—edited by David Jonathan Y. Bayot, first published by De La Salle University Publishing House in 2013, and now republished by the University of Chicago Press to extend its distribution ‘in the Americas and in Europe’ (p. xviii)—collects fourteen twenty-first-century dialogues and interviews between Perloff and a range of scholars and poets from the United States and Europe on the concerns and current state of poetry, alongside three essays—on her own academic biography, on bilingualism and pedagogy of poetry in translation, and (the only piece collected in the book originally to have been published before 2000) on the intellectual in the twenty-first century, her programmatic account of the contemporary tasks and challenges faced by poets and critics as set out in a contribution to a roundtable on ‘Intellectuals’ in the September 1997 issue of *PMLA*.

Perloff closes the preface with what she terms five ‘further Don’ts’ extrapolated from and written to mark the centenary of Pound’s ‘A Few Don’ts’, and presents them as ‘squarely in the Pound tradition but also, I hope, apropos in 2013’. The fifth and last of these is a programmatic injunction pertaining to the ways in which poetry and theory are brought together:

Don’t forget that, whether consciously or unconsciously, all poems are written with an eye (and ear) to earlier poetry and that to write poetry at all, one must first *read* a lot of it. And of course one reads poetry and writes about it in the light of theory—but it should, to my mind, be *literary* theory. So I would say put down

thy Agamben and pick up Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis*, and, turning to poetry itself, pick up thy Auden, thy Ashbery, thy Rae Armantrout. Put down thy Badiou and read Beckett, Bernhard, Bachmann, Christian Bök. Put down the latest Žižek (at this writing, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, 2012) and read Chaucer through the lens of Caroline Bergvall's *Muddle English*, Charles Peirce through the lens of Susan Howe's *Pierce Arrow* and *That This*, and Goethe's 'Erlkönig' side by side with Charles Bernstein's 'Elf King.' (p. xvii)

The somewhat overblown character of this both contentious and polemical instruction finds its echo in the jocular and self-mocking repetition of archaic second-person singular possessive determiners of the third and fourth sentences. Indeed, this represents an abrupt switch from the use of 'you' in Perloff's first four don'ts, a you which is much closer to the I in which she makes her injunctions, as is clear in the entreaty 'let us reread Swift and Pope' (p. xvi), in the question as to whether 'you and I' are 'really not complicit' in the capitalist system (pp. xvi–xvii), and in the reminder of what 'we read' in Stein (p. xvii). The shift to the wry parody of a biblical commandment apes the voice of a deity that at once addresses a multitude as a unified singular addressee and singles out every individual within it, as if to insure against the possibility of being taken too literally (for who would make the mistake of taking Marjorie Perloff to be god, even a god whose commands are only expressed within indirect speech, prefaced as they are by the further deflating 'I would say'?). That is to say, what presents itself in the language of the divine, personal address to each individual reader at the same time, by virtue of this somewhat over-inflated archaism, purports to be an address to nobody at all.

It is nonetheless worth dwelling for a moment on Perloff's command, however

much it subverts its own force by couching itself in a pastiche of biblical cadence. For there are two distinct elements to it, which nonetheless relate closely to one another. The first, the more apparent and the most obviously contentious, is the instruction to stop reading theory—or at least to stop reading a certain kind of theory, or to stop reading it in a certain way. For the proper names Žižek, Agamben and Badiou serve as figures not I think for theory *tout court*, but rather for the waves within which certain kinds of intellectual trend seem to establish themselves only to recede as they give way to the next flavour of the month. Perloff's objection seems to be—or, perhaps, a less polemical and abbreviated version of it might be—that the work of these and analogous figures is being read and brought into conjunction with poetry without adequate reflection as to its appropriateness—and, perhaps, without adequate examination of the critical-theoretical traditions from which it emerges, and with which it is in dialogue. As such it would be a plea for more careful and attentive reading of poetry (and, indeed, not incompatible with a plea for more careful and attentive reading of theory)—and in particular, for closer and more careful attention to the relationship between theory and poetry, and to the ways in which they are brought together.

Even this relatively generous interpretation, however, raises multiple questions, the most pressing (if at the same time also perhaps the cheapest) of which is that of its implications for her own writing. For if poetry is most appropriately read (or even, depending on the temporal scope of the injunction to 'put down', only to be read) alongside poetic responses to it, what is the place for writing such as Perloff's? Why read Perloff when one can instead read Caroline Bergvall, Susan Howe and Charles Bernstein? Moreover, it is striking that the one example of acceptably literary theory is Auerbach's *mimesis*, almost as if to suggest that the sixty years since the publication of its translation into English (and seventy since the first German edition) have not resulted in the writing of literary-theoretical work worthy of the attention of scholars of poetry.

What, one wonders, are in Perloff's view the more recent and contemporary equivalents of Auerbach? And if there are none, what conditions would aspiring contenders to this legacy have to fulfil? How does Perloff's own work relate both to this legacy and to the poets whose work she champions? Indeed, is she willing to recommend her own work to readers as strongly as she recommends the work of the contemporary poets she finds most interesting?

Of course, she acknowledges that the choice she presents between poetry and theory is something of a false dichotomy, and that all engagement with poetry takes place 'in the light of theory'. But the nature of this engagement as it is set out within this fifth don't is somewhat diffuse. For the second of the two elements I identify within Perloff's command is a certain conflation between the reading and the writing of poetry, as evidenced by the slippage from the initial proclamation that 'to write poetry at all, one must first *read* a lot of it' to the concession that 'of course one reads poetry and writes about it in the light of theory' and its associated exhortation as to which theory to read (and which not to read). So what seems to begin as an instruction about writing poetry becomes a set of instructions about reading poetry, and then in turn about writing about poetry. As a result, the prescriptive nature of Perloff's don'ts (which they share with their Poundian forebears) seems to be caught between the demands of advice to poets and advice to students and scholars of poetry.

Indeed, this tension between the demands of writing poetry and those of reading and writing about it is encapsulated within her description of Pound's 'A Few Don'ts' as 'still the best road map we have for the understanding of how poetry works' (p. xvii): that is to say, the prescriptive instructions given to a poet as to how to write better poetry also serve as resources that aid the scholar in the study of poetry. And the first of Perloff's don'ts are explicitly toward this end, its opening sentence — 'Don't assume that "free" verse, now the default mode of poetry [*sic*] is equivalent to the mere practice

of lineation' (p. xvi)—not so much extrapolated as paraphrased from the phrase she cites two sentences later: “‘Don’t imagine that a thing will ‘go’ in verse just because it’s too dull to go in prose” (Pound)’. Similarly, still in Perloff’s first don’t, the reader is instructed to ‘remember that “A rhyme must have in it some slight element of surprise if it is to give pleasure” (Pound)’, as Pound’s indicative statement of necessity is transposed into the imperative, again directed toward writers who use rhyme rather than critics and theorists of it—although the instruction to remember does perhaps also admit the possibility that rhyme might interestingly or productively be used for purposes other than to give pleasure.

Perloff’s bringing together of the prescriptive advice to the poet with resources for the understanding of poetry is of course by no means necessarily an inappropriate conflation, since a set of instructions as to how to write a good (or better) poem is at the very least founded on a theoretical account, however implicit, of how poetry works. Indeed, her preface explicitly defends the making of such judgements—against a background in which she claims that ‘[i]n most academic circles today, as I know only too well, the very reference to value is taboo’ (p. xii)—while also contending that such judgements are more widespread than their makers might admit:

Yet, as I have often noted, we all make value judgments, if not of the poetic texts themselves, then in our choices of the theorists we cite or cultural paradigms we apply to the work. ‘As Agamben says....,’ ‘as Badiou notes’: these stock phrases immediately impose particular values. Again, the very choice of subject is always already a value judgment. (p. xii)

Here the slippage between (plural) values, in the sense of a set of principles or standards that inform an account of a poem, and value judgements, in the sense of the

attribution of absolute or relative merit according to a particular set of principles or standards, is not crucial to the argument, which is that the choice to pay attention (of whatever kind) to one thing rather than to another is itself a judgement (however implicit and unacknowledged) as to its value, to its worthiness of our attention—this applies as much to choices of poets and poems as to theorists and theoretical paradigms. What becomes clear is the kind of engagement with theory to which Perloff is objecting, and against which she is counselling. For these ‘as ...’ sentences represent not merely a reading of poetry with and in the light of theory, but rather a reading of poetry according to a theoretical paradigm that is established as authoritative, whether in advance or during the course of analysis.

That is to say, the endorsement of or appeal to the work of a particular theorist who is set up as an authority represents an abrogation of the critical judgement that is for Perloff (and not only for Perloff) so central both to the experience and to the account of the poem—although whether this judgement is strictly speaking a judgement of value is by no means a simple, let alone an already resolved question. The appeal to the theorist as authority is thus an abrogation of critical reading—and where Perloff’s polemic weakens her argument is in her mistaking of this appeal to a theoretical authority for all possible ways of reading and writing about poetry alongside any theory that is not (or not only or not obviously) literary. For the appeal to a theoretical authority forecloses the possibility of critical engagement not only with the poem (which in the version she rejects is presented as merely exemplary of the pre-existing theoretical framework), but also with the theory under discussion. Perloff thus rejects a model in which poetry serves only to exemplify the cognitions and contentions of eminent and fashionable theorists, but in doing so she throws out the theoretical baby along with the uncritically theoretical bathwater: her rejection of the reading of poetry alongside theory that is not obviously literary also forecloses the possibility that in the

confrontation between theory and poetry, both might learn from one another.

This foreclosure sets up something of an over-simplified schema, in which the only choices are to appeal to a theoretical authority and to trust in one's own judgement:

For better or worse, in any case, I have increasingly come to drop the 'as ...' clause and rely on my own judgment, informed, as I hope that judgment is, by years of reading and studying poetry. Then, too, I have come to realize that each of us has his or her own preconceptions and predilections—preconceptions often highly personal, and culturally as well as biographically grounded. (p. xii)

Perloff chooses (and backs) her own critical judgement in preference to abrogation of judgement in favour of reliance on an authority figure, but she seems to do so at the cost of accounting for this judgement and her trust in it, instead proceeding as if her preferences, because they are bound up with her own history, can be acknowledged but need no discussion: 'I myself; for example, have never shared my colleagues' admiration for Charles Olson; for me he fails on two counts: his language does not have the density I look for in poetry, and his rhetoric is insistently and overtly masculinist in ways I find irritating.' (pp. xii–xiii) On the one hand she has subjected her preferences to a sufficiently rigorous examination as to have uncovered the underlying principles that inform and unite them—that she considers density desirable in poetry, and masculinist rhetoric less so. On the other hand, these preferences are presented as grounded in nothing more than the fact of their existence: any particular preference might be historically and socially contingent, but even if so, it just is.

This is of course one way of dealing with aesthetic and poetic dissensus, and Perloff's 'take it or leave it' approach has a certain attraction to it. At the same time, there is something a little dissatisfying about it, a dissatisfaction that results less from

the fact that the question as to why these particular preferences rather than those of anyone else remains unasked, and more from the fact that the implications of the plurality of critical judgements (and of her response to this plurality) remain unexamined. This is one of the areas in which Perloff's aversion to doing theory the wrong way means that its consequences are not formulated to as full an extent as might be possible. Indeed, it is as if this aversion is precisely the same kind of personal preference as her preference for poetic density and her dislike of masculinist rhetoric—with the result that the aversion to theory is itself no more than a preference with its own foundation in her personal, biographical and cultural experiences.

This in turn has implications for the status of Perloff's don'ts—for if they are simply one set of possible prescriptions among many, then the question arises as to who should follow them, and why. This is I think reflected in the way in which the focus of their concern shifts between the writing of poetry and that of criticism. The prescriptions concerning theory of the fifth of her don'ts do not obviously pertain either to the writing or to the theorizing of poetry, but rather to reading poetry, and more particularly to the ways in which this reading is made visible in writing, whether that of students for assessment or of critics for publication. Here theory refers to something that is done by other people, something that is in a sense prior to poetry, and that is sometimes used by people who write about poetry. Perloff's commandments are not addressed to the writers of this theory—either because their theory is already adequately literary, such that they have no need of it (if, indeed, any such adequately literary theorists remain alive), or because they are by definition insufficiently interested in poetry to be of proper use to Perloff's addressees—but rather to people who might be tempted to make use of it.

That is to say, the writing to which Perloff exhorts her readers does not fit obviously into the categories she uses—or to put it the other way around, she does not

offer an explicit account of that writing which she demands of her readers, or indeed of her own writing. The injunction not to use theory (or, not to use insufficiently literary theory) in order to account for and analyse poetry, but rather to use poetry (poetry that is aware of and explicitly responds to its history) for this purpose is less a plea not to read and think about poetry with theory, and more only to write about poetry with a particular kind of theory. But the questions as to what precisely this writing is and why it should be so desirable remain largely unanswered—and even unraised. The implication of her prescription seems to be that by refraining from the appeal to theory (determined in advance) aspiring critics of poetry will be able to refine and develop their judgements, perhaps in order better to be able to understand and account for poetry. But the unwillingness to offer a defence of these critical judgements except on the basis that they are no more arbitrary than those of anybody else calls into question the cogency—and indeed the value—of any such resulting account.

Reginald Gibbons's account of *How Poems Think* takes a fundamentally different approach, offering an exploration of 'a few of the many modes and devices of poetic thinking' which is carried out 'not comprehensively but illustratively' (p. 1). Its concern is with the ways of thinking that are specific to poetry, but because these ways depend on the configuration of poems' relationships toward the world outside their bounds, the 'stances that poets take toward everything *outside* poetry', this thinking is not divorced from but rather intimately entwined with and indeed necessarily dependent 'on thinking *outside* poetry' (p. 1). The thinking with which Gibbons's study is concerned is thus not confined to the interior of the poem, but rather comes about at the interface between the world of the poem and the world of its readers, in their encounters with it, and in their implications and ramifications. 'Poetic thinking has technical, structural, and psychical aspects, and these encompass both the poet's process of composition and the reader's responsive process of understanding and experiencing the movement of a poem.' (p. 1)

Gibbons shares with Perloff an awareness of the roles played by the history—sometimes felicitous, sometimes the result of deliberate choices—of his experiences and training in the development of his conception and account of poetic thinking. But rather than offering a positivist account of his choices and their consequences for his thinking out of his biographical history as if to place them beyond consideration, Gibbons offers a reflective and sophisticated account of how this history both enables and hinders his work, and of how what appears to be a barrier often turns out to be a resource, while what seems to be the most natural and given—‘the grain of the poet’s own linguistic and artistic being—mind, culture, and textures of writerly traditions’ (p. 8)—so frequently ends up getting in the way. Indeed, this is precisely the concern of his first chapter, which offers an account of what he terms ‘a personal, individual, aspect of writing poems: the poet’s relationship to what seems to be in the way’ (p. 8).

He offers an account of the intellectual and personal influences on his theorization of these processes, focusing in particular on the striking combination (‘the oddest couple ever’ (p. 8), he concedes) of figures whose teaching and writing has informed and shaped the development of his interest in and conception of poetic thinking—namely Donald Davie and Hélène Cixous. In their thinking and writing he finds ‘a self-divided inner process of translation back and forth between opposed impulses’ (p. 7):

They both wrestled with and wrestled free of some portion of what was given in the temperament and linguistic formation of each, in a process of becoming. That thought leads me to a poetic line that we might read as merely a temporal exaggeration of the life-long development of the poet’s *technē* and thinking, which becomes itself only through its changes. (p. 7)

These opposed impulses find their manifestations in pointedly different ways.

Gibbons draws attention to how in writing Davie ‘could be acerbic, even caustic, yet might also express his partial admiration for that which he attacked’ (p. 27): here the wrestling consists in learning from those with whom one disagrees (or perhaps, conversely, in robustly criticizing those with whom one agrees, albeit not to the fullest extent). Similarly, he is presented as ‘a poet who worked very hard to open up his own work to himself, or to try to know capabilities in himself that he didn’t feel were the most natural to him but which he wanted to have and to use’ (p. 21): the act of coming to know these capabilities involves firstly a recognition that there is something within him that is at the same time alien to him—something that is not fully known or mastered—and secondly a process of learning how this unfamiliar and potentially threatening capacity can be used.

Meanwhile, the tensions and self-divisions Gibbons identifies within Cixous’s work consists less in her relationships to her interlocutors than in the complex ways in which she ‘has brought a bodily specificity into her writing’ (p. 32) by means of ‘the plasticity, richness, and startling meaning-making possibilities of the sounds of language’ (p. 32). He draws attention to the ways in which her thought and writing have ‘especially emphasized the value of linguistic play, of yielding to the inventiveness of language itself’ (p. 32)—that is to say, the playfulness that is frequently taken to be characteristic of deconstructive writing is here presented not as (or not solely as) a subjective act of wilful or even assertive invention, but rather as a giving way to an inventiveness that is already present within language, as a responsiveness to the properties and the potentials of linguistic material. Indeed, this involves a fundamental reconfiguration of the relationship between subject and object: the yielding is neither the imposition of an active subject onto a passive object nor the simple inversion of these poles according to which the subject becomes subservient. This, rather, is not a relationship in which one has priority over other, but in which the rewards are to the

benefit of both, 'in order to give not only language but also one's own psyche more freedom of discovery and articulation' (p. 32).

This freedom of discovery is free not in the sense of unrestricted in its choice of action, but rather of the possibility of enabling or realizing a potential that could not otherwise be realized. And this potential realization is not that of an externalizable and fungible human achievement that is celebrated for its own sake or for the sake of the difficulty or intricacy of the effort involved, but rather precisely because of its lasting effects on the relationship between humans and language. So when Gibbons argues that Cixous 'wants to create a palpability of language and of what language names and describes, a materialization of the physical world' (pp. 32–33), he is referring not simply to this palpability for its own sake, but to its potential to transform both language and our relationship to it, what we can do with it—and what it can do with us. And this transformation by means of conceptual and phonetic play disrupts 'the smoothness, the spherical idealization' that 'Cixous regards as an imprisoning of thought' (p. 33).

Gibbons distinguishes the constraints and restrictions with which Cixous works from those of Davie's writing (and indeed of his own) in that they are to a much greater extent external to and imposed upon her:

But Cixous does not have to go against her own grain in order to champion and exemplify writing that opens a way for the language to play. She lifts into view an aspect of writing, or an experience of writing, and offers it in opposition to writing that is constrained by the typical use of rationality, by the limits imposed on women in patriarchic societies, and by the individual aversion to reading as an encounter with profound potential reversals of received ideas and received modes of articulation. For her, the writer begins from awareness of having committed a crime—like Augustine's childhood theft of pears—and writing is the exuberant,

even if agonized (as in Kafka), fulfillment rather than redemption of that crime.
(p. 33)

For Cixous, unlike for Davie, the process of going against the grain involves not so much coming to terms with potentially unpleasant or threatening capacities within her as much as the development of a kind of writing that distinguishes itself from, rejects and ultimately comes to oppose the writing that exemplifies ‘the typical use of rationality’. Whereas Davie’s working against the grain starts with the recognition of an uncomfortable, unknown, perhaps even potentially dangerous capacity within him, a capacity which is then to be mastered or tamed in order that it can be used without transgression, Cixous’s begins from the recognition, after the fact, that a transgression has taken place, and seeks not to rectify it but to complete it. Writing is thus an act of rebellion, a challenge to the patriarchal order—which is at the same time a condition of the possibility of this very resistance to it.

Gibbons admits that the way in which the account of working against the grain that he develops from his own sustained encounters—one as a student, one much later in life—with these two very different figures brings together a perhaps somewhat uncomfortably wide range of different phenomena and responses, acknowledging the very different ways ‘in which Davie and Cixous have helped me to try to open up poetic thinking for myself’ (p. 40). And the grain against and within which he himself works is different once again:

At any rate, I am in the grain of the English language, with its copious lexicon of words for the material, palpable, visible, audible, tasteable, world. And I am aware now that the knots in the wood that divert that grain, obstructing it and swirling it off this way and that, are themselves part of the grain. (p. 40)

What appears as a break in the grain in the form of a knot is revealed as not other to the grain but part of it, an interruption or diversion that the grain performs on itself. And similarly, the resources of the language with which Gibbons is most familiar, within which he resides, with which he works, along with many of the other poets whose work he discusses, frequently contain interruptions or breaks—breaks that themselves are often if not always part of the very fabric of that language rather than imposed upon it by something from the outside. This is what he theorizes as ‘the necessary and productive self-alienation of the poet, who must work in words so closely, and with such openness to language, that only by coming to see the words on the page, and to hear them in the ear, as belonging as much to themselves and to the language as to the poet who composes them, can the poet discover *how* to think *with* them and *through* them, beyond the artistic limits of the ingrained individual habits of language and poetic thinking, and beyond the limits imposed by the poet’s self-positioning within culture’ (p. 9).

Gibbons’s investigation of this self-alienation proceeds on the basis that ‘[a]s we read a text, we may be read by it’ (p. 45); the work (he seems to use the terms text and work interchangeably) as it enables us to notice and respond to what we had not previously noticed. And at the same time, in a process that ‘is not merely self-reflexive’ but that ‘also brings to our awareness our unconscious understanding of words and the world, and this allows us to enlarge that understanding’ (p. 46), the writing of a poem or a novel can emerge from such an experience, and at the same time have the effect of bringing about new ways of thinking within its readers. This reciprocity is what is at stake in the exploration of the idea that not only the reader’s but also ‘the writer’s experience of language is sometimes that of another’ (p. 42)—more specifically, it is frequently the experience of externalization or alienation, of transforming something

internal into the something that can be experienced as other not only by readers, but also by ourselves. ‘The act of writing, and the result of it, is to place something that was “inside” oneself outside oneself, where we are free to regard it as “alien” and then inquire of it what it is saying back to us—through our word choice, its evocation of our memories and states of feeling, its energy or inertness, its bluntness or subtleties, as language.’ (pp. 49–50). And this is the alienation not simply of something that one has made, but of an intimate part of the self, the implications of which are that ‘[t]he art of writing and the art of reading, as I see them, are in part a dividing or perhaps a circulating of the psyche’ (p. 36).

Gibbons’s account of this process of externalization—which is at the same time a defence both of compositional practices that use it and of the readerly appreciation of its results—‘runs against the dominant *mode* (in many different *forms*) of modern and contemporary American poetry’ (p. 9). As a counterpoint both to these dominant modes and to the constraints and resources of his being in the grain of the English language, Gibbons offers a comparative account informed not only by the different ways in which poetry thinks in languages other than English—including French, German, Greek and Russian—and in which modes of thinking from the verse of the ancient world have persisted, but also by reflection on the process of translating and commenting on a poem in one language into and in another. In his account of rhyme, for example, discussion of George Herbert and John Keats sits alongside that of Ilya Kutik and Paul Celan to illuminate some of the different resources presented by rhyme for the development and analysis of the thinking of poetry, resources which appear very differently in the examination of poetry in multiple languages together from the conclusions that might be drawn from consideration of English-language poems alone.

Gibbons addresses the question of how rhyme might think, of the kinds of thinking it might be able to carry out. Fundamental to this conception of rhyme as

thinking is the sense that rhyme creates relationships between the rhymed words that are not those of the poem's syntax:

When we read or hear a poem, a potent rhyme-pair sets us thinking and feeling on a short path that creates a conceptual and even an implied syntactic relationship between the two words, apart from the phrases and sentences of the poem. The thought created by the rhyme accompanies and supplements for just a moment what the poem articulates. That is, the rhyme may give us supplementary meanings and even phantom statements that the poem does not present explicitly. (pp. 62–3)

He remarks on the 'infrequent showing in English-language poetry' of this kind of rhyme relative to his contention that 'most of the rhyming in any anthology of canonical poetry in English is ornamental' (p. 63), observing that Herbert 'could exceed the merely ornamental' by means of 'an intricate weaving of repeated sounds all through the lines, so that the end-rhymes do not need to think very much' (p. 63). Here there seems to be an interesting and implicit tension at work between thought and mere ornament, decoration or pleasure. Discussing the density of internal rhymes and vowel echoes in Herbert's 'Virtue', Gibbons contends that '[a]t the very least, all this gives us pleasures of the ear' (p. 63): thinking is at once more than, in excess of pleasure, and hard work, which the end-rhymes are only able to escape because so much of it has been carried out by the 'intricate weaving' of complex sound patterns throughout the rest of the poem's lines.

This configuration of the relationship between thought and pleasure suggests an implicit underlying conception of both—and thinking in particular—as additive or supplementary. Herbert, we are told, 'does add ideas'—the periphrastic verb form perhaps betraying an unease with the formulation—'by means of the acoustic equivalency of "bright" and "tonight" (this phantom statement is of a sharp contradiction) and the acoustic equivalency of "sky" and "die" (that is, in the

paradoxical idea of the death of something that does not, cannot, die)’ (p. 63). While this account persuasively locates the thinking that is specific to poetry within the manifestations of poetic and compositional technique, it seems to me to run the danger of undermining Gibbons’s conception of how poems think by presenting thought as something superimposed on top of the poem that would otherwise be merely pleasurable, its rhymes merely decorative. While the distinction between ornamental rhyme and rhyme that thinks seems conceptually important, the account of it is thus not as compelling as it might be—and could I think be made more so by closer examination of both the pleasure and the thought of rhyme (and the complex relationships between the two) through the lens of Gibbons’s concept of working against the grain, particularly given the apparent conception of thinking as obstruction (or obstructed), particularly in comparison with the relative ease of pleasure.

This is all the more the case given his comparative approach that is highly astute to the different resources and the different resistances offered by different languages. He draws attention in ‘Virtue’ to a ‘density of repeated phonemes’ that ‘reminds us that the English language is an excellent medium for sound repetition that is short of full rhyme, and we hear this marker (in the basic indexical sense) of poetic language in poetry without end-rhyme, too’ (p. 64). This contrasts with his discussion of ‘a kind of poetic thinking, based partly on rhyme, that few poets writing in English have pursued’ (p. 69)—a discussion that develops out of a process of ‘working for several years with [Ilya] Kutik on translations of his own poems’ (p. 69) and those of several other Russian poets, out of which he began ‘to understand why translations of Russian poems do not show us what is marvelous about *how* thought and feeling, eye and ear, move in the originals’ (p. 69)—a movement that, in a manner that resounds with the discussion of the poetic externalization of language, involves language listening to itself.

Gibbons’s characterization of the difference is that ‘Russian poetry prizes making

the absent, the spiritual, and the inconceivable seem palpable, English poetry mostly prizes making what is concrete and palpable and visible, thingy, touchable, seem present' (p. 70), and I find myself at once struck by the admission of 'mostly' and asking whether this is truly the case—it is not so much that I wish to disagree as that I would appreciate an account of how this conclusion was drawn. And something similar happens in his discussion of the differences in which the two poetries think:

Hoping I have understood well the translation lessons I have received from Kutik, I will say that Russian poetry can think 'synthetically' by *unifying* simultaneous *discrepant* connotations, gathering them together in the mind as one overall idea or impression from the simultaneous possibilities of, say, a poetic image. English, meanwhile, as we know, tends to think 'analytically' by *discriminating* among the connotations of that image, ruling one or two in and all the others out. (p. 69)

On the one hand this seems to be an account that includes a refreshingly honest admission of the limits of its author's expertise. On the other hand, this admission seems at the same time to be a way of avoiding the process of thinking with and about poetry, in favour of a presentation of its result. That is to say, rather than working through the details of an example of this unification to offer an account of the way in which a given Russian poem attains synthesis by means of images, we are presented with the conclusion but with little way of assessing how compelling it might be, a sense exacerbated by the implicit deferral of an element of the responsibility for that conclusion by means of the admission of fallibility. Meanwhile, the 'as we know' exerts a similar effect by means of the assertion of expertise, placing the conclusion beyond discussion by appealing to a shared body of knowledge as if it has been established. This is perhaps testimony to the difficulty in setting out a fully formulated account of

how poems think in prose: indeed, if the thinking of poetry could easily be set out in prose then it could hardly claim to be a specific kind of thinking, so it is perhaps the case that a certain aporetic character is only to be expected. It would nonetheless I think have been more persuasive if these moments had contained at the very least an acknowledgement of the difficulty involved, perhaps even an account of it.

A much more persuasive and satisfying account of the ways in which poetry thinks, and a more clearly articulated point of comparison between English and Russian (and German) is set out within the discussion of what Gibbons, following Kutik, terms ‘centrifugal’ rhyme—‘when one word attracts the unexpected rhyme word for itself, this second word of the rhyme-pair throws the poem *outward* from itself as it exists so far, throws it off what had seemed its course’ (p. 78). He sets out the distinction between Russian- and English-language rhyme practice:

In English, the first word of a possible rhyme-pair is tested by the poet for the balance between the necessity it enforces that the second word have a certain sound and the opportunity it offers that the second word be different in other ways. Kutik’s Russian version of this is that the first word invites another word with a similar sound, or attracts it by a kind of phonetic magnetism, or the first word discovers the second word for itself, out of love—almost without needing the poet. (p. 75)

The attraction of the second word turns into a moment of surprise, of diversion, of self-diversion: ‘With this rhyme, the poem throws itself off a path that is safe, with a motion that is justified, created, vouched for, by the rhyme.’ (p. 78) What is key here is that the second word of the rhyme pair ‘changes the poem’s direction’ (p. 78) after it has itself been launched by the first: that is to say, the first word of the rhyme pair

seems to bring about a change in direction that alters the course that it has itself set. The discussion of centrifugal rhyme thus subtly alters Gibbons's conception of poetic movement according to which a poem moves 'by means of a series of images evoked by words whose similarity of sound (phonetic repetition alone or also morphological repetition, which is a drawing out of one word the next one [*sic*]) creates an image' (p. 73): in centrifugal rhyme the second word is not so much drawn out of the first as launched by it, but in such a way that it is not merely a projectile on a course that has been set, but rather can itself alter not only its own course, but also that of the poem from and within which it was launched.

But despite this unpredictability, the launching of a rhyme in order that it might deviate does not involve a careering out of control. Centrifugal 'does not mean incoherent'; what it sets in motion 'achieves an authoritative coherence of sound and idea, feeling and image, that compels a reader's exhilarated trust' (p. 78). Gibbons draws the contrast between centrifugal and centripetal movement, which 'keeps everything within the poem, closer to what is expected—emotionally or linguistically, by poet and by reader—and to what is knowable or already known, closer to ideas already shared by poet and reader, consensual' (p. 78), but the opposition to the containment of the regular and harmonious centripetal movement that remains internal to the poem is not a random, uncontrolled or arbitrary movement, but rather a movement 'outward toward that which almost cannot yet be imagined or grasped' (p. 78). The primary difference, that is, is in its orientation beyond what has already been set in motion before it—toward something that is unpredictable, and yet always possible.

What is equally important here is that the unpredictable trajectory of centrifugal rhyme is set in motion by an impulse already present within the resources of language, even if that impulse is not obviously visible. The thinking of centrifugal rhyme is not

something imposed onto language, but rather works with what is already there—this too poses a challenge to the additive conception of rhyme that seems to be at work in the discussion of Herbert. Referring to the etymology of symbol, a throwing together, Gibbons draws attention to one of the ways in which language can remember—and poetry can remind us—of things that have previously been forgotten. ‘The idea—which our language itself remembers, even if we do not—of a word that *throws* meaning or image does not seem out of place here.’ (p. 79) That is to say, what language remembers even if we have forgotten it is pertinent as much to the theorizing of poetry as to the thinking that takes place within poems themselves. This is the implication of the claim that language does not simply think, but, more specifically, thinks about itself, in a manner that is sufficiently difficult that it is described in the terms of a dense and complex simile:

Let’s say that metaphor vivifies visible things as they are, and that ‘meta’ (the car seeing its own way in the dark) ‘thinks’ about something that is real, somewhere, somehow, but can only be ‘seen’ if illuminated in and by the imagination.

And let’s say that language thinks about *itself* in this way and makes its own discoveries, by means of sound. (p. 76)

The complexity of this multi-part and multi-layered simile (in which the multiple sets of scare quotes serve as a further reminder that the verbs in particular—everyday, familiar verbs—are being used in senses that are not only unfamiliar but also not interchangeable with or explicable by means of a more technical term) is such that rather than serving to explain, it itself invites and requires further elucidation. The thinking of language through sound is presented as comparable with the illumination of

something that was always present but not previously visible—only with the further complication that language, in directing its sonorous ‘illumination’ toward itself, is both knower and known.

Gibbons’s intellectual framework of working against the grain is developed not only in response to his work’s engagement with the influence exerted, in different ways, by Davie and Cixous, but also in sensitive dialogue with the poems and techniques he considers such that they never appear as mere examples for the theory, which in turn is doubly responsive and responsible to the poems under discussion. Firstly, the theory is there to illuminate and to begin to formulate an account of the complex ways in which these poems think. And secondly it not only respects, with attentiveness, the particularity of each individual poem and even line, but also depends on it, for it develops its own thinking in a similar way, by illuminating or otherwise bringing to presence the previously hidden ways of thinking. This relationship of the theoretical paradigm to the poetry shows, contra Perloff’s claim, that it is not merely the case that that an engagement with theory need not take place at the expense of attending to the most specifically poetic details of poems, but can enable reflection on this engagement that both begins to set out its wider implications and pushes it deeper, enabling the engagement itself to become more sophisticated and more compelling.

This notion of working against the grain, in its broadest sense of exploring the potential resources presented by what on first encounter seem to be detours, interruptions, hindrances and resistances, is, in a very different way, pertinent to the concerns of Rebecca Sanchez’s *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature*. Sanchez shares with Gibbons a deep concern with the palpable, material world and with the configuration of literature’s relationship to it, particularly through the individual encounter, which she conceptualizes through the optic of embodiment. Her approach to the encounter with the poem, however, differs

from that of Gibbons (and by no means from that of Gibbons alone) in that this embodiment is not configured in relation to the giving voice to a poem in sonorous language, but rather to the performance of poetry in American Sign Language, developing a model of what she terms ‘embodied impersonality—a self-shattering that nevertheless refuses the disavowal of the embodied subject’ (p. 31)—out of her engagement with the work of the ASL poets Peter Cook, Kenny Lerner and Debbie Rennie.

Sanchez traces the lineage of her concern with embodiment back to Whitman, for whom ‘the idea of language in bodies was a way to ground language in the personal rather than the abstract’ (p. 26). And she argues that ASL has a particularly close relationship to this specificity, because ‘both spoken and written language can be separated from the body, whereas there can be no disembodiment of ASL’ (p. 25). She identifies a shift in this disembodiment in the early twentieth century with the development and increasingly widespread use of the typewriter, with the result that externalizable language in the form of writing no longer bore the trace of the individual human hand, and with the development of recording technologies which enable voices to be heard far away from their speakers. ‘It is out of this historical moment, which also saw the rise of first audio and then visual recording technology that allowed the separation of humans from their voices and images, that we get formalism, an approach to reading texts that detaches them from the external world.’ (p. 25)

Her study is concerned with the relationship of ASL both to changing policies and debates as to its acceptability and appropriateness, debates which she sites in the wider context of the decrease in tolerance for linguistic diversity in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and to the poetic, literary and cultural traditions and legacies of modernism. Indeed, she explicitly relates the innovations of modernism to the changing political, technological, social and industrial context:

Modernist experimentations with the interaction of words and bodies on the printed page were also distinguished from earlier efforts by the concurrent rise in discourses surrounding bodily measurement, classification, and normatization. This merging of normative attitudes, as well as the development of the term ‘norm’ itself, led to new crackdowns on individuals who either could not or would not conform. (p. 26)

Sanchez links this to processes of linguistic exclusion, arguing that ‘[a]s with fears over linguistic diversity, this deviance was perceived as not only undesirable but threatening to what was popularly described as a brave new world in which science could improve humanity’ (p. 26). She relates the process whereby norms are developed and established to the more familiar accounts (such as Michael North’s *The Dialect of Modernism*) of the ways in which several modernist writers referenced and incorporated ‘precisely the kind of language movements that standard English tried to repress’, and in doing so ‘called attention to the bodies that employed such language, bodies most likely to face discrimination in the push toward standardization’ (p. 27). She observes how the way in which they did so was not to ‘insert it into existing forms of literature as a kind of inclusive practice but rather to employ it as a means to shatter form itself, to produce new hybrid forms’ (p. 27)—among them her principal concerns of embodied and visual language. In response, she seeks to ‘tease out how and why the marginalization of Deaf culture and bodies, as well as of Deaf studies as a field, has occurred parallel to (but too frequently not in conversation with) the ongoing fascination with issues of embodied and visual language within modernist studies’ (p. 34)—and to begin to rectify this situation.

The potential resources offered by this approach are developed most persuasively

in her account of Peter Cook's ASL poem 'Poetry', which 'begins with Cook repeatedly and rhythmically signing the word POETRY (or, more precisely, ASL POETRY which is distinct from the musically focused sign for nonmanual verse)', a concept on which the poem—and its performing author—carry out layers of reflection:

The sign ASL POETRY is etymologically linked to the signs for 'expression' and 'inspire' and moves outward from the chest—an offering up of the body, poetry as the expression of the self. The poem goes on to interrogate this link between the embodied production of the words and their semantic meaning through language play designed to highlight the way in which the words (like the sign ASL POETRY) emerge from and encircle Cook's body.

(p. 46)

This bodily emergence of the words also emphasizes the links and relationships between them, as for example in her discussion of how in a section in which 'the poem's narrator paints a picture, the signs for both the canvas and the brush emerging organically from the repeated sign POETRY' (p. 46). At this point, in an account that chimes with Dobbins's account of language's interaction with itself within written poetry, 'the narrator—Cook—becomes both painter and painting' (p. 46), a duality that results from the particular relationship of body to language in ASL. 'Role shifting, a key feature of ASL grammar, enables him both to spread the paint on the canvas and then to embody the image created by that spread paint, to become the work of art within the work of art.' (p. 46)

As in Dobbins's conception of poetic thinking, Sanchez's account of the procedures of Cook's poem and their implications is one in which he is using resources that are already present within language: so when she argues that 'ASL literature

fundamentally problematizes the separation between authorial body and text' (p. 48), it is able to do so in part as a result of the way in which this relationship between the narrating body and the words it narrates is configured within ASL—and in particular, the fact that 'one cannot point to "Poetry" as an aesthetic object distinct from Cook's body' (p. 48). Using the resources that this configuration provides, Sanchez shows how Cook's poem 'offers an alternative variety of impersonality, one based on a literal interpenetration of authorial and textual bodies' (p. 48). She offers a persuasive and challenging account of how the implications of this blurring of the conceptual separation between authorial body and text not only provide a corrective to the marginalization of Deaf culture and bodies, but also an enriched resource with which to work on poetry and poetics more broadly, as they not only, in her words, 'usefully illuminate the engagement with these issues within written modernist texts' (p. 48), but also, by calling into question some of the assumptions into which the concentration on verbal and written poetry makes it easy to fall, both present a challenge and—working against the grain—in doing so help us open up new ways of encountering, reflecting on and theorizing the thinking of poetic technique.

Books Reviewed

Reginald Gibbons, *How Poems Think*, U of Chicago P [2015]. pp. vi + 239. hb \$90 ISBN 9 7802 2627 7950, pb \$25 ISBN 9 7802 2627 8001.

Marjorie Perloff, *Poetics in a New Key: Interviews and Essays*, ed. by David Jonathan Y. Bayot, U of Chicago P [2015]. pp. xviii + 242. pb \$20 ISBN 9 7802 2619 9412.

Rebecca Sanchez, *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature*, NYUP [2015]. pp. viii + 200. pb \$25 ISBN 9 7814 7980

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