

FRONT PORCH

An Interview with Marjorie Perloff

FP: What is the future of publishing? Will we see more and more electronic journals and books? Will the book, as we know it, change?

MP: There is no doubt that the internet has revolutionized publishing. I agree with Kenneth Goldsmith's axiom that "If it isn't on the internet, it doesn't exist." But that doesn't spell the end of the printed book. On the contrary! Surfers of the internet, discovering an electronic journal or website, then often want to own the book in question. I know in my own case, my book *Wittgenstein's Ladder* (University of Chicago Press, 1996) has sold especially well (some 6,000 copies, in both hard and paperback, which is very good for a scholarly book) and at least three of its six chapters are available on my website and the Chicago website. But I do think the electronic journals will replace the print ones. Print journals are very expensive, and people don't always keep them, as they keep books. Electronic journals have the advantage of being much timelier. Books can be reviewed immediately; lectures can go on line right away. I want especially to mention John Tranter's *Jacket*, with its astonishing variety of poems, essays, reviews, and verbal-visual works. Then, too, the websites of Salt Books or Ugly Duckling Presse and other such small presses have served to disseminate the work of these presses and gain the books a much bigger audience! So it's a reciprocal project.

I do, however, worry about the sheer information glut. Too many poets, fiction writers, reviewers, critics—it's too easy to get published somehow.

FP: It seems with the advent of online journals, everyone and anyone can be published somewhere. In your opinion, how is the literary world damaged by this?

MP: Having a book of poems published used to mean something. But what with small press and desktop publishing, anyone who wants to can have dozens of books. What does it all mean? Who vets these books? More important: who edits and improves them and helps the author take out the slack?

FP: If electronic journals replace print journals, as you say they will, how can e-journals rise to the occasion? That is, should e-journals simply be print journals online, or should they take advantage of all the opportunities that an electronic space can provide?

MP: The latter. An e-journal like *Jacket* does things a print journal can't do; it contains much more material, many images, a wider variety of kinds of material, and so on. Also the turn-around time is much faster and so reviews of books are published almost immediately and have relevance whereas in the old print days, the process could take two to three years!

FP: Writers still seem to want a book published. We still feel that print is better than online. How can we change this perception? Should we? Can we?

MP: I think this is changing now that some electronic publishers do use peer review. The objection to electronic publication, and especially to blogs, is that there is no editorial control. Hence the essays and even electronic books don't seem to count. But there is no reason why electronic publishers can't use peer review and be just as stringent as are print journals. But as for books, yes, the actual book one can hold in one's hands still counts for more for most people. It's an object that can be touched and looked at rather than accessed electronically.

The best way to gain academic acceptance is for electronic journals (and book publishers) to have stringent review, demand stylistic changes, and choose their editorial boards carefully. Articles should be rejected when they do not measure up to standards. Once this has happened, there is no reason why electronic publishing should not be respected.

FP: What trends are you seeing in the literary work that has crossed your path lately?

MP: Well, I think there's a great deal of energy in the new poetry that comes across my desk (or screen) but much of it isn't quite "finished" and could have used a few rewrites. Writers turn out books too quickly and publish any old thing. And unfortunately it disappears again just as quickly! I look back with some nostalgia at the great modernists and what an event it was when a book came out. And how sparingly they produced books. Think of Wallace Stevens or, in the art world, Marcel Duchamp. I also think there are too many readings. One can spend one's life going to readings—most of them substandard. It's a form of social life and a way of having fun and being part of a community, and that's all to the good, but it does little to make poetry better. And the poetry (or fiction) glut goes hand in hand with a new eclecticism. One can attend a reading by Michael Palmer on Monday and Billy Collins on Tuesday. Not much discrimination.

FP: What is it about readings that fails poetry?

MP: In New York and on many university campuses, one can now go to a poetry reading almost every afternoon or evening. It's a nice social occasion: short readings and then a glass of wine or whatever. But the habit of going to constant readings can interfere with the actual practice of writing poetry, which is, after all, a solitary practice. The social situation takes over, and I also find the pairings increasingly meaningless, as readings pair people whose aesthetic is diametrically opposed.

FP: What writers should we keep an eye on?

MP: Some of the most interesting poetry being written is conceptual. I refer you to Craig Dworkin's *Anthology of Conceptual Poetry* on ubuweb.com. Dworkin is himself a very interesting young poet, and his work is closely related to that of Christian Bök, Kenneth Goldsmith, Caroline Bergvall and other poets who have been influenced by OuLiPo,

performance, and concrete poetry. I am a great fan of OuLiPo and related movements that use procedural devices, because it provides a form of discipline.

Marjorie Perloff is the author of many books on modernism, the avant-garde, and contemporary poetry/poetics, including *The Futurist Moment*, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, *Radical Artifice*, and, most recently, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*. She is the Sadie D. Patek Professor Emerita of Humanities at Stanford University and current Scholar-in-Residence at the University of Southern California. She was the 2006 President of the Modern Language Association.

“I’m a city girl: I grew up in an apartment in Vienna, Austria and then in another apartment in New York, so my only memory of a front porch is of magazine illustrations in *LIFE* or *TIME*. I’ve never lived in a house that had a front porch and I can’t say it’s something I aspire to. I like privacy: a big wall or hedge in front of the house!”