

BOSTON REVIEW

Online: <http://new.bostonreview.net/BR22.5/voris.html>

Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary

Marjorie Perloff

University of Chicago Press, \$27.95

by Linda Voris

“What is the ‘right’ poetry game to be played today?” Marjorie Perloff asks. Her answer--”contemporary experimental poetry”--will come as no surprise to readers of Perloff’s own prolific, energetic literary criticism,¹ which has done much to broaden the audience for such poetry. With Wittgenstein’s Ladder she pushes the case further, expressing her hope that the dominance of lyrical poetry will gradually give way to an “ordinary language poetics”--a constructivist experimental poetry that criticizes cultural linguistic practices through a Wittgensteinian “distrust of grammar.”

Perloff begins with a review of Wittgenstein’s own shift from the metaphysics of his early *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to the language games of *Philosophical Investigations*, and then traces a Wittgensteinian poetics in the work of Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, the Viennese postwar writers Ingeborg Bachmann and Thomas Bernhard, contemporary poet Robert Creeley, and Language writers Ron Silliman, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Lyn Hejinian. She concludes with a brief coda on the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth’s “writing through” experiments. Such a discussion of Wittgenstein and avant-garde poetry is long overdue; and, as ever, Perloff’s questions will provoke exciting new connections. Unlike her scholarly books, however, *Wittgenstein’s Ladder* is addressed to a general audience, so it seems fair to ask what kind of introduction readers will get to Wittgenstein, Gertrude Stein, and the Language poets. On this score, the book disappoints. Precisely because I agree with Perloff about the potential cultural force of a poetics that directs its inquiry along language surfaces and textuality, I wish her account of Wittgenstein were richer and the reading strategies she recommends more convincing.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein rejected theories of meaning founded on metaphysical ideas about the correspondence of language to the world (the correspondence of words to objects and sentences to facts), and urged instead that all language, including philosophical discourse, takes its meaning from use. What links together the writers Perloff explores--indeed, what makes Wittgenstein himself an avant-garde “poet” for Perloff--is a tactic of “interrogating language” to investigate the grammars of a word’s use, as well as an open-minded stance toward that interrogation. For the certitudes of analytical philosophy, Wittgenstein substituted a provisional, revisionary, descriptive method of testing the “limits of language.” Perloff argues convincingly that many contemporary experimental writers practice a Wittgensteinian “process of investigation [that] is of necessity tentative, self-canceling and self-correcting, even as it deals with the most ordinary aspects of everyday life.”

Although Perloff doesn't promise a complete analysis of Wittgenstein's philosophical method, her account may be too limited even for her own purposes. Perloff's quotations from his work can be mystifying--often no more than repeated citations of Wittgenstein's aphoristic exercises and enigmatic propositions. Given their inviting, anecdotal form, one can easily miss the point of his disingenuously simple examples and metaphors--merely noting, for example, that Wittgenstein observed that the "same" word has different meanings in different contexts, rather than asking why he made so much of this observation. When Perloff analyzes Gertrude Stein's method as the enactment of "language games," the yield is a flat listing of the "many intriguing semantic possibilities" of the line "Roast potatoes for" from *Tender Buttons*. "Roast potatoes" are "for" what or whom exactly? Why do we cook and eat them? Or are the potatoes an example, "Roast potatoes, for instance"? Perloff has little to say about the real work of the line--its preoccupation with "grammar and potatoes."

POTATOES Real potatoes cut in between.

POTATOES In the preparation of cheese, in the preparation of crackers, in the preparation of butter, in it.

ROAST POTATOES Roast potatoes for.

Like Wittgenstein, Stein undercuts the idea that we define terms ostensibly--by pointing to something to which the term applies. What we "see" in her still life *verbal* portrait are the "grammatical movements"--the operations of the phrases *in between*, *in the*, and *in it*. Stein's innovation in *Tender Buttons* was to foreground the verbal activity in the compositional arrangement of things seen. This is indeed applied Wittgenstein: "You have a new conception and interpret it as seeing a new object. You interpret a grammatical movement made by yourself as a quasi-physical phenomenon which you are observing." (PI §401)

But which Wittgenstein have I applied? Precisely because Wittgenstein's approach was fragmentary, contradictory, and non-systematic, there are many interpretations--Charles Altieri's, Stanley Cavell's, and Rosemarie Waldrop's among them. Perloff's is a decidedly pragmatic, cultural constructivist Wittgenstein; this emphasis on cultural engagement is central to her argument about the "right poetry game" for today. She dismisses contemporary lyrical poetry ("official verse culture") as naively oblivious to cultural inroads on individual expression, originality, and the "unique voice." Correspondingly, she advocates "ordinary language poetics" *because* it performs a critique of the grammars of cultural practices.

Given this emphasis on experimental poetry as cultural critique, it is troubling that Perloff omits discussion of the specific historical and cultural context of the American Language movement(s), and is silent about the aspects of contemporary culture she thinks deserve critique. Though Perloff fills in the historical context for Wittgenstein with great narrative draw, her readings of Creeley, Silliman, Waldrop, and Hejinián provide a meticulous critique of tiny excerpts detached from socio-political context. Yet, as Ron Silliman asserts in "The Age of Huts" (in a line that Perloff does not quote), "Language is, first of all, a political question." Perloff omits the historical context for poetry which emerged fifteen years ago in response to the debasement of public discourse during the Vietnam War, and as a Marxist analysis *in practice* of the capitalist and normative assumptions reproduced in lyrical and narrative forms of representation.

Originally immersed in Marxist and structuralist theory (including Adorno, Althusser, Barthes, and Russian Formalism), more recently influenced by Derrida, Lyotard, and Deleuze, the Language poets follow in a literary lineage of Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, Jackson Mac Low, and the intellectual and avant-garde traditions of William James, Futurism, Dada and Russian Cubofuturism. The “movement” began as a serious, utopian effort to recoup the possibility of truthful discussion about current cultural events by examining dominant and marginalized language practices. And its continuing vitality is suggested by recent, public excoriations given by practitioners that language writers should persist in criticizing the cultural production of meaning in the realms of popular culture, historiography, gender boundaries, transnational exchanges, and models of the subject and agency.

Some of these poets have recently reappraised their original utopianism--their idea that changes in language practice would lead to changes in political realities--as earnest but naive. Still, the historical context and political mindfulness of this poetics is inseparable from its “language-centered” approach: the focus on the materiality and operations of language is an effort to generate meaning through compositional differentiation and reassembly, rather than representing existing meanings. Is this a Wittgensteinian poetics? Maybe so. But readers who rely on Perloff’s recommended reading strategies may miss the connections. For instance, she cites the following lines as the opening of Lyn Hejinian’s poem “Composition of the Cell”:

- 1.1 It is the writer’s object to supply.
- 1.6 Rocks are emitted by sentences to the eye.
- 2.13 Circumstances rest between rocks.
- 2.14 The person of which I speak is between clocks.
- 3.1 Exploration takes extra words.
- 3.4 The words anticipate an immoderate time and place.
- 3.5 Reality circulates making objects appear as if they belong where they are.
- 4.2 Exactly!
- 5.8 The sky pours shape into intervals.
- 5.10 Those between seeing and believing.

Perloff then advises that, “[t]he task of the reader is to construct a context that might make sense of these riddling references. Suppose X and Y are out sailing and X says to Y, who is steering the boat, ‘Watch out! We’re about to hit some rocks!’ In that case, ‘Rocks *are* emitted by sentences to the eye,’ which immediately starts to scan the visual field.” Why, we might ask, is supplying context the right poetry reading game? Reading this way one would miss the pleasure of hearing meanings form, miss, overlap, emerge, regroup, and extend *across* the composition much as anyone does when actively thinking, rather than repeating what one already knows. Nothing in Wittgenstein’s method necessitates a reading practice of providing context, especially for a poetry that often deliberately makes language strange with defamiliarizing devices.

How, then, might one read Language poetry together with Wittgenstein? “A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words.--Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connexions’” (*PI* B122). A compositional assembly,

which makes problems “surveyable by rearrangement,” has much in common with Language poetry practices of redistributing the “same” word in multiple series, redeploying language from various cultural contexts, and “mixing” textual sources. So, to return to Hejinian’s poem, a useful reading strategy might ask: what question or problems does the text survey?

Hejinian wrote “The Composition of the Cell” when asked by Leslie Scalapino to contribute to an issue of *O Books* on writing methods. Without knowing this, it’s clear that the poem’s enigmatic lines investigate “composition” in various senses--biological, writerly, empirically, and socially--in lines like, “A poem which is to language what a person is to society.” What’s striking about the opening lines quoted by Perloff is the repetition of the word “between” and the number of metonyms staged for “betweenness.” We’re reminded that the state of “betweenness” may occur as temporal or spatial “intervals” (between “clocks” or “rocks”), that, in a structural sense, sentences are intervals (with spaces in between, or exchanges between), and that concepts of reality depend in large part on the boundaries (“rocks”) of perceptual grammar. As Perloff notes, the numbered lines of “The Composition of the Cell” refer to lines of Hejinian’s poetic sequence, *The Cell*, published two years earlier. The effect of this notation is to keep the reader moving *between* the two texts, in such a way that we notice how abstraction leaves out, changes, or abridges the in-between lines of the first poem. This practice should prompt us to think about the operation of selection in composition.

Perloff’s readings of individual poems are, then, disappointing at times. Still, she has brilliantly adapted Wittgenstein’s conception of meaning and use to an analysis of contemporary language poetry. Perloff’s advice that we read experimental poetry “literally and contextually” is compelling, even if her own readings do not fully deliver on the promise of that insight.

1 Most recently, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) and *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

Originally published in the October/ November 1997 issue of Boston Review