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## Stamatina Dimakopoulou on Ming-Qian Ma's Poetry as Re-Reading

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<sup>1</sup> Ming-Qian Ma. *Poetry as Re-Reading: American Avant-Garde Poetry and the Poetics of Counter-Method*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008. Pp. 301. ISBN 978-0810124851

<sup>2</sup> In the Preface to the 1979 *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s* <sup>i</sup>– Charles Altieri formulated a re-alignment that defined much criticism of postwar and contemporary American poetry to come. Altieri set “the work of Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein,”<sup>ii</sup> in resonance with the “immanentist” poetics that came to be seen as the expression of a cultural and artistic postmodernity in America. Altieri wrote: “The poets share the decade’s general distrust of the values of Western humanism, but the alternatives they imagine are in my view more interesting as explorations of new sources of value and new definitions of the relationship between mind and world and clearly more typical of the ways of thinking that produced the decade’s political turmoil and pursuit of alternative life-styles.”<sup>iii</sup> Indeed, Altieri’s book marked a significant turn in the practice of reading American poetry: Altieri’s readings invited re-readings that charted affinities between the poststructuralist critique of Western humanism, and aesthetic and poetic possibilities of resistance and opposition in the novel order of late capitalism. Reframing the foundational figures of modernism and the historical avant-gardes, in the “Introduction” to *21<sup>st</sup> Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics*,<sup>iv</sup> Marjorie Perloff programmatically resumes

another significant shift in the practice of reading modernist and postmodernist American poetry. Inviting re-readings beyond established ways of understanding postmodernism's break from modernism, Perloff posits the "aesthetic of early modernism" as containing "the seeds of the materialistic poetic which is increasingly our own,"<sup>v</sup> resuming and at the same time reconfiguring the genealogies put forward in her 1981 *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*.<sup>vi</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ming-Qian Ma's timely study re-turns to poets who come in the wake of the "aesthetic of presence,"<sup>vii</sup> and probes a postmodern and contemporary "poetics of counter-method" that is genealogically affiliated to Stein to Cage. In *Poetry as Rereading: American Avant-Garde Poetry and the Poetics of Counter-Method*, Ma sets this lineage in dialogue with phenomenology, deconstruction, and the genealogical work of continental philosophers from Foucault to Serres. Ma approaches contemporary American poetics beyond the individual poets' involvement with the legacies of the historical avant-gardes, and their affiliations with the generations of the 1950s and 1960s. Probing epistemological questions and the ontological components within American poetics from Zukofsky and Cage to contemporary Language poetry, Ma rethinks what 'it means to be avant-garde' in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and claims the timeliness of the philosophical critique that was initiated by poststructuralism.

<sup>4</sup> Ma's study comprises eight chapters on individual poets, framed by an introduction where method is reconsidered as the "mediator" (3) of the philosopher's and the poet's way into the world, a mechanism that reproduces and imposes pre-existing or already conceived patterns of knowledge onto the world. Ma offers an impressive mapping of the question of method weaving together modern philosophy, Stein's and Pound's distinct and opposing uses of 'method,' and the contemporary critique of the complicity of 'method' with certain modalities of knowledge. Michel Serres's critique, in particular, offers a point of entry into "later-generation postmodernists" who seem to be parting ways with the "genuine postmodernism" of poets who "no longer need[ed] to justify themselves by opposing and subverting modernist values."<sup>viii</sup> In fact, following on Perloff's recent work, and *contra* Altieri's positing "a loss of philosophical depth and resonance" as "the price of this freedom,"<sup>ix</sup> Ma posits a paradigmatic shift in the genealogies of American

post-postmodern poetics, by examining works that incorporate a dialogue with philosophy and contemporary critical theory. Ma's own revisionism, as well as the revisionist poetics he methodically examines, navigate the complex mediations of their cultural situatedness and rescue an intensely self-aware attitude vis-à-vis their embeddedness. A 'counter-methodical' phenomenology and approach to language and poetry unifies otherwise distinct poetic works that contemplate possibilities of new forms of textual dissidence.

<sup>5</sup> In the first chapter, "A No Man's Land: Postmodern Citationality in Zukofsky's "Poem beginning "The,"" Ma approaches Zukofsky as inaugurating an "ontological treatment of quotations" (46); Ma observes Zukofsky salvaging quotations from a teleological view of history, and reincorporating them in the more complex temporality and a/synchronicity of experience. Zukofsky's 'postmodern citationality' is pitted against Pound's "context-dependent" or "context-sensitive" citations (51). In the Poundian paradigm, Ma argues, citations end up de-historicised and reintegrated in modernism's own representational economy. Zukofsky instead seems to be "collaps[ing]" the "established text-context dichotomy" (55) altogether, thereby turning the self-referentiality of the cited fragments into a vehicle of existence. Zukofsky's use of citations, rather than constructing a paradigm of approaching existing texts, exposes contexts as subjectively constructed.

<sup>6</sup> In the following two chapters Ma explores how Oppen and Rakosi divert the poet's 'gaze' from the seen and implicate it in the very process of seeing. In "A "Seeing" Through Refraction: The Rear-View Mirror Image in George Oppen's *Collected Poems*," Ma revisits Oppen's involvement with the "act of seeing" (60), and his scepticism about the privileging of the subjective, perceiving eye. Oppen foregrounds an "intransitive" seeing (65) that resists confining objects in a predicative scheme, without at the same time locating them in a seamless text. In subtle readings of individual poems, Ma illustrates how the modality of an "indirect seeing rear-view mirror image" (68) refracts Oppen's engagement with experience. *Contra* imagism, rather than aiming at appropriating and transforming experience through "apodeitic seeing *into* an object," Rakosi's poems involve "the assertoric seeing *onto* it" (105), thereby seeking to be co-extensive with the world,

to be *of* and not *about* the world. In “Be Aware of “the Medusa’s Glance”: The Objectivist Lens and Carl Rakosi’s Poetics of Strabismal Seeing in “Adventures of the Head,”” Ma examines how Rakosi confronts the “predatory,” “medusa-like gaze” of language, and sets Rakosi in resonance with Adorno’s critique of Husserl’s phenomenology. Rakosi demythologises the ontology and the epistemology of Romanticism, with a “strabismal seeing” that resists reconfiguring the ‘seen’ and instead involves a “two-way seeing that enables the poet to see Medusa’s hair fossilized without being turned into a stone” (105). Put forward with theoretical consistency, Ma’s discussion of the critique of “referential viscosity” somewhat curiously omits Martin Jay’s genealogical history of viscosity.<sup>7</sup> In the chapter on Cage’s methodical undoing of ‘method’ – “The Politics of Critical Parody: Chance Operation and the Mesostic Method in John Cage,” Ma returns to Roland Barthes’s reflection on the ‘meta-linguistic’ function of language: a function that can be turned against itself, as a language which is too intensely aware of its own workings may expose its ‘predatory’ intent. Cage’s poetics employ and undermine method by dissociating knowledge from method as a means of attaining it. As Rakosi ‘sees’ without subsuming the seen into existing modalities of perception, Cage ‘demethodises’ knowledge by assuming the position of “a decentred subject” “in his relation to the world” (113). As Rakosi’s and Oppen’s poetics complicate seeing, so does Cage’s method involve the “generative mechanism itself” rather than “what can be generated” (129). Just as knowledge of an object through seeing is a form of domination, so is purposeful knowledge and method. In this chapter too, Ma’s own revisionism is consistently deployed: American postmodern poetics operate in a manner similar to a deconstructive critical project that revisits the Western metaphysical tradition. Cage’s “depsychologising” of sound parodically reverses “culture’s self-reflecting gaze as a form of counter-gaze conscious of itself, critically and satirically, being implicated therein” (118).

<sup>7</sup> Resonating with Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern work, the chapter on Susan Howe, “Articulating the Inarticulate: Singularities and the Counter-Method in Susan Howe” is reminiscent of inquiries into forms of art that resists presentation and instead seek to become bearers of the unrepresentable. The resistance to representation is

taken up by Howe as a resistance to the regulating mechanisms of language, in a manner that follows on from Cage's enacting "language's controlling mechanism" in his mesostic poems (132). Howe's texts are committed to mapping "uncharted or undiscovered (unarticulated)-worlds within language," as Charles Bernstein put it (135), re-connecting the written with the process of writing. Just as Rakosi's poetics counters language's 'predatory' intent, Howe's and Heijinian "demilitarise" words. In the "wilful incompleteness" of her texts, Howe recoups the chaotic contingency of the singular—a concept reminiscent of Derridean *différance* and Adorno's concept of non-identity. Howe's poetry, Ma contends, seems to be gesturing towards a "catastrophic" moment where singularity emerges in contingent chaotic moments (144). Language is intended to be concurrently written and read: Howe rewrites so as to reach an "enunciative clearing" (139) and recoup the 'indexical' value of text. In this instance, revisionist readings of modernism and the avant-garde in the field of American art theory come to mind; we may remember Rosalind Krauss's "Notes on the Index in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*."<sup>xi</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In "Reflection upon My [Unreflected] *Life*:" M. Merleau-Ponty and Lyn Heijinian's Poetics of "Genetic Phenomenology," Ma examines Heijinian's phenomenology in dialogue with Adorno's critique of Husserl. Heijinian's text seem to be taking on the tension between a reflective and a reflexive attitude towards the interaction between text and subjective experience. Like Howe's jumble of contingencies, Heijinian's text is a "nonlinear "field work"" (154) where she attempts to eschew the ideological framing of perception and memory, and transform the autobiographical reflexive act into a two-way process. Not only exposing the sociocultural conditioning of perception and language, Heijinian also stakes her writing on the possibility of reconfiguring the given in an "antepredicative" manner (157), to remember Ma's dialogue with Merleau-Ponty. Again, the text's embeddedness is at stake: this exposure is the fundamental responsibility of a poetry that is a field of the radical disjunction between work and world, a perspective reminiscent of Adorno's reflection on the aesthetic experience.

<sup>9</sup> In "Nonsense Bargains": Inversely Proportional Writing and the Poetics of "Expenditure without Reserve," Ma approaches Andrews's "inversely proportional writing" in

dialogue with Derrida's reading of "expenditure" in Georges Bataille's "general economy." Andrews ironically and inconclusively suspends meaning, in a manner reminiscent of Bataille's positing a "general economy" as disruptive of a the restricted economy of exchange. As Ma states: "the risk of losing meaning as such, to the extent that it is a critique of meaning has to be absolute or irreversible" (175). Andrews deflects meaning and resists consensus through rewriting, in a manner reminiscent of Serres's critique of the dialectic as essentially a process whereby two interlocutors seek to arrive at the same truth. Andrews' poetry is, as Ma argues, a work of "de-conditioning dialogue from comprehension" through a systematic foregrounding of "incomprehension," "noise," and "redundancy."

<sup>10</sup> In the final chapter on Charles Bernstein—"Slowed Reason" as "Idling Language": Postmodern Counter-Speed and the Poetics of Sediment in Charles Bernstein," Ma examines how Bernstein complicates the "social grounding" (196) and the cohesive character of method. Like Heijinian's poetry, Bernstein's writing resists en/de-coding and seeks to cancel out the methodological grounds of a poet's individual style. Bernstein counters the speed of communication through "sediment" and "deceleration," to remember Baudrillard, in an 'idle,' non-instrumental language, in order to undermine the standardization and legitimisation of certain kinds of meaning. It is significant that Ma's study concludes with Bernstein who had formulated the critical and political project of the poetics of counter-method: the new poetics expose how philosophy and poetry get implicated in structures of power, and call for "alternatives" and "instruments" of critique (197). The alternative is an "impermeable" and "antiabsorptive" poetics (202). Ma also underscores Bernstein's "passion" to move poetry "beyond the twentieth century, beyond the modern and postmodern" (197) and this involves a political ethos too: Ma's remark on Andrews's distrust towards "the narrowing down of politics...to specific struggle towards change" (182) underpins the politics of the poetics of counter-method. These poets's "passion" to move beyond the 20<sup>th</sup> century is also to be understood, as Ma states in the chapter on Bernstein, as a will-to-"difficulty," as Jerome McGann has noted, (195), in an attempt to "[hold] [the] ground against the powerful arsenal of contemporary critical theory" (195). Indeed, the very 'arsenal' that Ma

mobilises in his study, an arsenal which also becomes the ground of affinities that informs Ma's own re-readings.

<sup>11</sup> In the "Coda. The Postmodern Poetics of Counter-Method: Towards a Poetry Yet to Come," Ma reflects on how a poet can be avant-garde in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in a manner that follows on Perloff's stressing the imperative to rethink the legacy of avant-gardism and the break between the first and the second 'wave' of postmodernism. Ma's notion of being 'avant-garde' does not address, but in very few instances, the legacies of the historical avant-gardes, legacies that were central in the revisionist and genealogical work within much contemporary art theory in America. Ma seems to imply that the historical avant-garde too like its modernist counterpart, was ultimately motivated by the will-to-knowledge that certain strands in contemporary American poetics' counter-methodically deconstruct. Ma's poets re-imagine the responsibility of poetry, by breaking equally from the historical avant-garde's intent of intervention, and from early postmodernism's immanentism. What informs the poetics of counter-method is a claim for contingency, descriptiveness, unpredictability and arbitrariness, and in this regard the affiliation with the first wave of postmodernism is yet again at stake. How is the possibility of change, and a theory of agency to be re-inscribed in our practices of re-reading, if, as Ma puts it in the chapter on Cage, "for any theory of change, to the extent that it is already a form of cultural artefact, is but change methodized into a formula and rationalised into a discourse" (116)?

<sup>12</sup> In the introduction to her manifesto, Perloff sees contemporary poetry taking up "the unfulfilled promise of the revolutionary impulse" initiated in modernism and, remembering Wittgenstein, devotes her manifesto to "imaginings" of forms of life at the millennium.<sup>xii</sup> In *Enlarging the Temple*, Altieri saw philosophy as a "descriptive" activity.<sup>xiii</sup> Ma sees the 'poetics of counter-method' operating in a manner reminiscent of such an activity, in opposition to a poetry that aspires to intervene and shape rather than merely describe the world.<sup>xiv</sup> The counter-methods that Ma probes mark a departure from the first generation of American postmodern poets in that although they self-consciously alert us to contemporary culture's ability to include and assimilate, unlike the immanentist poetics of Bly, Olson, O'Hara or Levertov, do

not seem to be “proposing new models of value and of the meaning of culture.”<sup>xv</sup> In fact the ‘poetics of counter-method’ turn to “energies manifest in acts of intense perception” and self-consciousness, yet resist and refrain from “locating the sources of personal value and dignity in the field of energies where subject and object can be seen as interpenetrating one another.”<sup>xvi</sup> Positioning re-writing and re-reading as interconnected practices, Ma’s readings invite us to rethink postmodernist orthodoxies, and salvage deconstructive critical strategies; readings that invite reflection on the ethics of the post-postmodernist poetics-to-come, as well as theoretically-informed, materialist and contextual re-framings of contemporary American poetics.

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## NOTES

i. Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s*. London: Associated University Presses, 1979.

ii. Altieri, p. 21.

iii. Altieri, p. 9.

iv. Marjorie Perloff, *21<sup>st</sup> Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.

v. Perloff, p. 3.

vi. Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

vii. Altieri, p. 9.

viii. Altieri, p. 16.

ix. Altieri, p. 16.

x. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993.

xi. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1985.

xii. Perloff, *21<sup>st</sup> Century Modernism*, p. 5, 6.

xiii. Altieri, p.

xiv. Altieri, p. 22.

xv. Altieri, p.16

xvi. *Altieri, p. 18.*