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soap

Orchid Tierney

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Orchid Tierney
 responding to
 “soap poem” by Hannah Klemkow

soap

Reading Hannah Klemkow’s “soap poem” in the first issue of *The Woodward Review* was a timely reminder for me to revisit Francis Ponge’s metapoetic processual book on the everyday, *Le Savon*, or *Soap*. Written intermittently between 1942 and 1946, and completed in 1965, *Le Savon* embodies Ponge’s characteristic attention on the processes of writing and the delicate intricacies of everyday material forms. Although soap wasn’t exactly an everyday object during the Occupation. Like other common materials of convenience, soap was in short supply. “We had only the worst *ersatz*,” he writes, “which did not *froth* at all.”¹ Its uncommon commonness thus made soap a perfect vehicle for Ponge’s meditations.

“Soap is a sort of stone,” he tells us, “but not natural: sensitive, susceptible, complicated.”² As we learn, this familiar object is supercharged with these complicated sensitivities. And no wonder. Ponge had begun his meditation on soap while he was in the French

¹ Francis Ponge, *Soap*, trans. Lane Dunlop (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), 11, emphases in original.

² Ponge, 15.

Resistance and completed the text in the shadow of the Holocaust, the Occupation, and the Algerian War of Independence. It's hard not, then, to see soap's Jekyll and Hyde personality as both a vexed symbol for personal and intellectual hygiene and for a corrupted civilisation's obsession to purify the Other. As Nathalie Rachlin argues, Ponge's soap is very much born out of the annihilating conditions of World War II, where activists such as himself were constantly under threat of repression by the Vichy regime.³ Like Klemkow's soap, death is on the surface for Ponge. However, impersonal violence and risk underlie his understanding of societal extinction. This particular kind of death is punishing, where the stakes of personal termination through the means of social and political infrastructures are laid out in the context of victories and failures. Soap's relationship with water makes these threats clear. As he writes, "water is very moved and troubled" by soap and

very seriously punished...let's take the soap out of the water and consider each of the two adversaries. One, very much diminished, attenuated, but not in its qualities. The other, an enormous amount troubled, having lost face. Which one is the Victor?⁴

³ Nathalie Rachlin, "Francis Ponge, Le Savon, and the Occupation," trans. Rosemarie Scullion, *SubStance* 27, no. 3 (1998): 90.

⁴ Ponge, 42.

Ponge would continue to grapple with this historical memory after World War II. Moreover, the war metaphors would remain when he returned to his text in 1965. But as much as *Le Savon* is a text shaped by his experiences of the Occupation's machinery of mass death, I would also argue that *Le Savon* is also a text of artistic transformation. What delights Ponge about soap is its frothiness, hence his disapproval of the nonfrothy substitutes. To produce froth is one of soap's core properties because this froth not only demonstrates its duty to clean, and its labour of cleaning, but it highlights a shift in the soap's relationship with the elements. Soap is dry, wet, or bubbly depending upon its environment. Frothy when mixed with water, and bubbly when mixed with water and air, soap underscores a transformative identity that is artistic in nature. And soap's bubbliness delights Ponge:

these bubbles are beings in every (in their own) respect. Instructive in the highest degree. They rise in revolt from the earth, and take you with them. New qualities, unforeseen, until now unknown, ignored, are added to the known to constitute the perfection and particularities of a being-in-every respect ... Instead of their serving for something, it concerns a creation and no longer an explanation.⁵

⁵ Ponge. 77.

Bubbles counteract death for the sight of them is evidence of something produced, something gained—in Ponge’s words—in the moment that soap interacts with air and water. And what is more joyful and freer, than a bubble or a crowd of bubbles? Arguably, these tiny spheres of water, matter, and air reveal for Ponge the elemental condition of aesthetics where art is not indifferent to terrestrial, human concerns but can respond courageously to them. In periods of cataclysmic extinctions—the Holocaust, climate change, the fall of *Roe v. Wade*, police brutality, surveillance culture, biodiversity loss, the rise of fascism and theocratic totalitarianism, and so forth—bubbles, as a metaphor for creating art, are radical forms for joy. And to experience joy is, itself, an act of socio-political resistance against the erasures of bodily autonomy and the violent forces that might drown us.