Woodward Review

*Masthead*

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**Blood**

I live now among a kind of people who are made uncomfortable by the idea of two children, for most of their shared lives, sleeping breath-to-breath in the narrow alley of a single bed. I can see the evidence of the workings of their brains in the shifting of their blood. A blush—is what I mean. Perhaps they are recalling the work of Egon Schiele which has been described equally, across history, as erotic and grotesque. They are a kind of people who know the names of many artists, working in many disciplines, and have at the ready, many handy loaded anecdotes. I have learned so much from each of them, though never how to place a lethal pause in a conversation, killing it as cleanly as a decapitation would, by which I do mean dead, but with lots and lots of blood. So perhaps they are recalling the work of Egon Schiele, who was mentored by Gustav Klimt. Egon Schiele who was so prolific in his production of discolored, contorted women, his cheap studio the gathering place of street-kids. I recognize the power of the vague detail to create a taste at the back of the throat—that same bitterness as a pill swallowed dry. I understand the appearance of a bed creates its own electricity. Intentions do not matter, though my intention was never to produce discomfort. Made weak by loneliness, there are moments when I expose myself, a fool, hoping to be better understood. We were not sisters, if that helps. I never thought of it—our relationship—never questioned what caused us to be tethered, one to the other. As the younger of our two, I only ever knew us bound. I feel that I should not have to say, *Nothing like that*. But, nothing like that. What I mean is the intimacy that exists between children who have stopped the bleeding of one another’s cuts with the pressure of their tongues.
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

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. 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?3

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

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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.
PJ Lombardo  
responding to  
“Relentless” by Danika Stegeman Lemay

_I desire nothing but disaster, relentless_

& i peel the sepsis from between the bedsheets & my treebark & the animal sun spanks my rose ass boldly & tinsel & heat pours rampions & i button my shirt & the threads scream butter spreading ethereal dying event eaten by my flow of time & mint tears my cavities phantasmagoric & this inhabitant i used to know burns swallows in my vessels he committed sins he drunk stabbed his chariot through the pomegranate of the ditch & tubes command me train coming rushing of air squat clench sigh & i key cars & roll & rolling roll the men are angels resurrected from condoms i see dying across each other the abyss is knit with you & i i have met the marvel of sinking t’ mud & she hurled across my nation green molten mother-eating iron underwhelming anatomy of every day & i think about my dad i surrender & i think my dad might die at work he’s a truck driver & i scrub the pan clean deny & the pan shits itself again O waste! my dearest eye of sap! Do rain on me forever…
Ezekiel Tsieh
responding to the lyric in
Woodward Review 1

Can you feel my heart beat so? I can't let it go:
Lyric, repetition, and the poematic subject in question

Heard it all before; I want my money back!
— Bowling for Soup, "High School Never Ends"

Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)
— Walt Whitman, Song of Myself.

Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres. I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them.
— Jacques Derrida

It [a deciphering practice] proposes that the way we "normally" feel about Self, Other, and World should not be taken as any index of the "justness" or legitimacy of the ratios of distribution of power, privilege, and role allocation...
— Sylvia Wynter, "Rethinking Aesthetics: Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice."

This isn't the first essay I pitched. It's not the second one, which ought to have been submitted by the deadline which, at the time of writing, was two days ago. Rather, this is the third time I am trying to write this essay, having let a little loose on explaining myself
completely or concisely. But there is a point I would like to drive home that has run throughout every variation:

Poetry, and specifically the poetry we've decided to call "lyric poetry" today, is defined by two primary characteristics. First, that the poetic is not just an “event”, “experience,” or “encounter,” but that the subjectivity of the poem itself is structured by a paradoxical and unresolvable tension between poematic desire for singular totality and the impossibility to answer such a call in the poetic act. Second, that the work of interpretation which both constitutes the encounter and its aftermath—or, reading, as we are used to calling it in contemporary criticism—contributes an equal share as the poem itself to this particular subjectivity (Derrida, *Che cos’è la poesia*?). And while it is the case that the above has been well rehearsed by other readers of Derrida, this essay does not seek to be a dress rehearsal; my point in this essay is somewhat ajar. For if the poem is defined by this elusive subjectivity that at once is and is not (by virtue of its own impossibility), we must beg the question:

Is there a subject in a poem?

I do not have the time—and this venue is not the outlet—to putter around psychoanalytic theory in search of a case for
subjectivity on which to rest an answer. Suffice it to say, for present purposes at least, any answer will be deconstructive and therefore somewhat unsatisfying and unpalatable: Yes, because no; and vice-versa. Just so we're clear here: I'm not talking about the speaker of the poem, per se, but the question of whether subjectivity requires a subject at all, or if the poem—understood as event, encounter, and experience—can serve or operate as a subject in its own right (one might further ask, Turing-test style, if simulating a subjectivity is the same as having one).

There’s some critical consensus that acknowledges one of the prerequisites for subjectivity is a subject and therefore little time is spent establishing what a subject is, or otherwise avoiding detail on the matter, or that the subject, qua the French, is dead. Yet subjectivity persists, and how could it not when defined precisely by the impossibility to meet d/Desire? To put the question another way, in a deliberate reversal of how it has been commonly phrased: Who or what is addressing me in or from the poem?; Who or what is performing the poem’s dictated enunciations, and how am I supposed to receive them?; Does a poem need a subject?

This last is another way of asking: Does poetry need critics?
The trick of the (lyric) poem is that it does not belong to any genre, not even to a genre called “lyric.” This sleight of hand lies not just in the acts of writing, reading, and interpretation, but in the way it relies on what is already familiar, already at-hand, and already-ready: the poem does not make itself available to its audience, but was available before it had arranged itself into itself. The lyric creates a tautology of language that is both impenetrable and impossible from which to escape. It does so by way of repetition in a Deleuzean sense, in which the repetition of an event (the poem) is necessarily already differentiated or otherwise dislocated and displaced from its origin(al). This is precisely what allows for “theories of reading,” which is the term literary critics have embarrassingly coined either out of a genuine earnestness to expand definitions of the literary or for the vain veneer of colloquialism. Perhaps both. Whichever it is, the poem (and therefore its poematic) relies on and necessitates at-hand sensory and affective clichés, and... I'm kind of tired of it.6

A poem has a subject not because the subject is a prerequisite of subjectivity, but only because poematic subjectivity throws a

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6 Before I'm accused of being a crank or a hater (which, to be fair, I am both), my discomfiture with these clichés is not that they are ineffectual or otherwise dysfunctional; in fact quite the opposite. The lyric works. I relate to it; I feel it.
subject into the world. This poematic subjectivity is not inherent to
the poem itself, or to be more precise, is invisible to our senses and
to our aesthetic expressions. Rather, poematic subjectivity here ought
to be understood as the process by which the subject of the poem
emerges (or, at least, the illusion of one, such that a poem might be
addressed). In this way, poematic subjectivity is the result of the
encounter between critic and poem and renders itself distinct from
subjectivity as such. The poem itself cannot be the subject, for the
poem—inasmuch as it is an event, encounter, experience—cannot
in itself have d/Desire (and therefore does not meet the standard of
the poematic, which I would argue does). There exists a backwards-
looking movement that has gone acknowledged but uninterrogated
in contemporary theories of poetry and particularly of lyric (Jonathan
Culler's recent Theory of the Lyric, for example, admits itself to be
much more of a general outline of a theory than theory in and of
itself). This backwards-looking movement can be found in Derrida's
mentions of the double-movement of the poematic function, and is
supported through what he calls apprendre par cours. Derrida's pun

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8 For a quick glance at what I mean by this, I am deriving it from Jacques Derrida
by way of Timothy Clark's essay, "By Heart: A Reading of Derrida's 'Che cos'è la
here is on par cours, where to learn (or, in this case, "apprehend") is also to go “by/on [a] journey.” It puns on the French couer, meaning “heart,” hence making it an obtusely triangulated pun between French and English. Derrida instructs that a poem is something one desires to learn “by heart” (for which we can substitute “rote,” at least for the purposes of this essay), and learning both as a journey and being on one.¹⁰

Event, encounter, and experience do not collapse into each other so much as they are each mutually constitutive of the other two, so much so that the three separate terms themselves, though they signify—that is, describe—different affective (and even or interpretive) states in the acts of reading, writing, and interpretation, they do not imminently or inevitably conjure a subject even as they might operate in similar and simultaneous manners.

Yet this poematic subjectivity, because it is conjured without subject but not without referent (that is to say, without cliché), is half of the double-bind that is expressed in the linguistic tautology of the

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¹⁰ Ibid.
As both precondition and “post-condition” of the poem (I hesitate on words like “aftermath/afterlife” or “residue”), it conjures a subjectivity that is not so much obscured or obfuscated from us despite its tautology, but rather escapes prosaic language altogether to arrange words in a different system of meaning, i.e. a different language. This is, however, about as far as a poem is able to go. The work of subjectivity—which includes the work of creating a subject—lies precisely in the encounter: when the critic calculates that their attempt at interpretation is a worthy risk to violate or otherwise intrude upon the poem's subjectivity by attempting to decipher its meaning for a politics of the here-and-now.

Hence the problem with contemporary lyric poetry. Cliché is everywhere and nowhere. If cliché is one of the defining characteristics of poetry, and particularly of lyric, then what are we to make of it? This is not a question of what contemporary lyric might be hiding “between the lines” per se—it is not a program for interpretation. But as I aim to make demonstrate in the following paragraphs, contemporary lyric poetry relies on cliché for its

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11 It should be clear by now that the double-movement is also a double-bind. It might even be more accurate to describe this double movement as a "doubly-binding double-movement". 
legibility, and that that aesthetic choice has political consequences that are ultimately political failures—be they expressions of or catalysts towards such failure.

I want to make clear that I do not mourn the loss of genre and in fact quite celebrate it, but my argument here is concerned with poetry and its critics, and thus I feel the need to explicate upon and justify to some reasonable degree what I mean by lyric and lyric poetry, and how exactly it “repeats itself in a Deleuzean sense,” the argument that quite obviously haunts this essay (What does the “lyric” in “lyric poetry” denote?).

To start with a return: Derrida makes a significant distinction between the poetic and the poematic. The relevant passage reads:

The poetic, let us say it, would be that which you desire to learn, but from and of the other, thanks to the other, and under dictation, by heart, imparare a memoria. Isn't that already it, the poem, once a token is given, the advent* of an event, at the moment in which the traversing of the road named translation remains as improbable as an accident, one which is all the same intensely dreamed of, required there where what it promises always leaves something to be desired? ...\(^{12}\)

\(^{*}\) From Peggy Kamuf's translation: La venue: also “she who has come.”

\(^{12}\) Ibid.
Here already Derrida gives us the jargon to distinguish between what can be said (the poetic, which is the aesthetic—that is to say, language or expressive form—of the poem) and what cannot, yet desires to be said, and thus compels the imperfect utterance that results from this process. This latter is what we might decipher as the poematic impulse—the compulsion from within a poem that is indeed hidden between the lines, but hidden so that it is indecipherable. Such is the paradoxical dilemma of the poem, a dilemma that Derrida likens to that of a hedgehog (l’hérisson) having been thrown out onto an expressway. The tension between the poetic and the poematic is the poem itself and is what compels Derrida to urge us to learn poetry by heart (l’apprendre par cœur/cours).

But on the subject of repetition (and with its relevance towards criticism in mind), we must turn to the archive, at once historical and affective, in order to compute anything that might begin to resemble a critical response. Because the paradox of poetic criticism is that it cannot escape the poematic impulse (and thus becomes a discourse both about and within the poematic); and because poetic criticism is precisely what conjures (something like) a subjectivity, repetition becomes both the tool by which a poem can
be deciphered (and therefore learned by heart) and indecipherable to anyone or anything but itself.

An explication is in order. By "repetition" here I am referencing the concept of repetition as explicated by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*, in which repetition is argued to be the only true form of difference, in some significant part because of its iterability along both chronological and narrative time.\textsuperscript{13,14} Repetition for lyric poetry functions by taking a set of available tools—the language that the lines of the poem are written in—and arranging them in a way that is simultaneously similar enough for our cultural tastes and yet different enough from prose that we might recognize it as poetry. In this way, it could be said that contemporary lyric poetry is not quite so much suffering from exhaustion; it is simply doing what each art form is designed to do—repeat itself across different contexts throughout time. Perhaps that explains my boredom with it. Without its line breaks, “lyric poetry” is simply “prose poetry,” which is to say that contemporary lyric poetry is


\textsuperscript{14} My argument here—specifically the jargon on chronological time, narrative time, denaturalization, and denarrativization are all taken from Fredric Jameson’s essay “Our Classicism” in *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*. 
romanticism (or, romantic language) for our times. In this way it is
determinately undifferentiated from prosaic language in that it shares
the same available set of expressions but arranges them in a way that
denaturalizes and denarrativizes the prosaic structure. Its aesthetic,
in other words, provides—at least for me—a silent but looming
discomfiture with being comforted by lyric. As Patricia Stuhlke has
recently demonstrated in *The Ruse of Repair*, art (and for that matter,
criticism) that comforts has the potential to make unethical life
justifiable.\(^1\)\(^5\)\(^6\)

"Rhythmic dissymmetry" is the term Derrida uses in his
essay to name a trait by which a poem expresses its desire to be
learned by heart. And while I am partial to rhythm as a placeholder
for what I am calling repetition (i.e. the tendency of contemporary
lyric poetry to express a particular romanticism that I can't yet place),
it is worth keeping in mind that rhythm is something unique to
spoken language. French, for example, as an unaccented language,

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\(^6\) For more on why an ethics of discomfort ought to guide our aesthetic
principles, I reference Adorno in *Minima Moralia: Wrong life cannot be lived rightly*. If
you'll take my recommendation, Matt Waggoner's *Unhoused: Adorno and the Problem
of Dwelling* explicates this problem well.
relies—perhaps more so than the accented English—on idio-, topo-
dialectic, and rhythmic cues so as to be intelligible.

The point I am trying to arrive at here is that contemporary
lyric poetry is particularly adept at effectualizing what Nietzsche—
and then Deleuze—called the Will to Power, largely in reference to
artistic production. It does this through what I am tempted to call,
thanks to Rebecca Mead, the Scourge of “Relatability”. While
unsympathetic to Mead's rather conservative aesthetic values, the
concern I have is that "relatability" (en)traps us within the false
feeling of safety when we have instead been thrown—like
hedgehogs, like poems—into danger. Derrida reminds us that the
"gift" of the poem is a gift of subjectivity, albeit one that is instituted
within its own poetic and poematic order rather than one that
registers in vernacular prose:

A fable that you could recount as the gift of the poem, it is
an emblematic story: someone writes you, to you, of you, on
you. No, rather, a mark addressed to you, left and confided
with you, is accompanied by an injunction, in truth it is
instituted in this very order which, in its turn, constitutes
you, assigning your origin or giving rise to you... 18

18 Ibid.
With the myth of the stable subject utterly dismissed by contemporary standards (and the subject itself even considered dead by some), Derrida's hedgehog demonstrates the dilemma of the poem's articulation, rendered in his language as “movement”:

But our poem does not hold still within names, nor even within words. It is first of all thrown out on the roads and in the fields, thing beyond languages, even if it sometimes happens that it recalls itself in language, when it gathers itself up, rolled up in a ball on itself, it is more threatened than ever in its retreat: it thinks it is defending itself, and it loses itself. (Emphasis added)\(^\text{19}\)

It is perhaps here that I admit, and not in a footnote, that I have lost myself to lyric before—who hasn't lost themselves to the music that reminds them of themselves? But if what is needed of poetry—and of critics—in our present times is not comfort but a constant critique of the here and now, then what good is lyric and its critics?

I'm a post-aesthetician, and I'm over it.

Too much to say, and I don’t have the heart for it today.

— Jacques Derrida's opening words in his eulogy for Gilles Deleuze

\(^\text{19}\) Ibid.
Alexander Benedict
responding through cento to
Woodward Review 1

Who can make you feel better

I want to know the yellowthroat’s quick trill as
I went ——— a multitude
I know, too, in the glow of a screen at a black site…
I am in control of this dream.
I was born bald, but she couldn’t find the pictures to prove it.
I tried to stockpile sleep the way
I am in the passenger seat of the white old car of the best friend
I once loved and still,
“I go apeshit for so much less” but see,
I do not understand men.
“I made you a birthday cake” to my friend while
I nearly fainted and vowed immediately never to use the hand soap
again
I only saw an expanse of clean, matte gray tiles with a black
I and all our friends could be there together again, even one afternoon
under trees whose shade
I should pawn
I mean.
“I paid for that, you know.”
I cannot heave my heart into my mouth
I swallow a bird. The bird carries thread inside
I know
I
I ask
I went, winter
I had killed it with a wayward stone.
I knew.
Bill Neumire
responding to
Judith Skillman’s “Heat Dome”

In cartoons, one can paint a hole in a wall

& open it like a door. Over
time, circles.

Over us, atmospheric
Secrets & traps.
Here, a tigerlilly
with a cigarette burn
on the petal.
A band of fast winds
graffitis our deaths
like a flaking end. In a cartoon,
extreme heat makes characters melt. I’m told
the center of the sun is 27 million degrees.
I’m told without it, nothing. A strict aeronautical
policy bends in the jet stream. In which.
Red science. Yellow illusion. I’m told inside
the burn door is a memory.
Contributors

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**PJ Lombardo** PJ Lombardo is a poet from northern New Jersey. He’s received an MFA from the University of Notre Dame and has worked as a publishing assistant for Action Books. His poetry can be read in *Blazing Stadium*, *Surfaces.cx*, *Lana Turner Journal*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, and elsewhere.

**Bill Neumire’s** second book, *#TheNewCrusades*, was a finalist for the Barrow Street Prize. He reviews books of contemporary poetry for Vallum and for Verdad where he also serves as poetry editor. He can be found at [www.billneumire.com](http://www.billneumire.com).

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