

# Lana Turner Poetry Chronicle 2025

## The Historicity of Poetry

David Lau

A critical search party has begun to find works to challenge contemporary poetics with a wide spectrum of charm, rigor, and probity. The past is resource. How should we turn to it? What origins live in the present's diverse unity?

Ryan Ruby's essay-poem *Context Collapse* tells a straight ancients-to-postmoderns narrative of the rise of contemporary poetics. Today's hegemonic forms—fragmentary, personal-identitarian, documentary poetry—have, it turns out, long-ago origins. Like many before him, Ruby argues that poetry's history in the West is one of technical progress. His is an economic aesthetic resting on uneasy conceptual kludges pointing to the progress of poetry as a “media technology.” While the manifest content of Ruby's book partly concerns the avant-garde, the form of his poem is close to the Dana Gioia ideal: a conservative and temperate revision of modernism, whose ten-syllable, sometimes iambic lines deliver a denotative realism.

His account of poetics as the artist-audience integument of an emerging, now digitized and AI-enabled public sphere gropes toward a concept of poetics as the product of combined and uneven developments of modes of production. Like other Bourdieu-derived literary theory, his is never quite clear on this point. His passages on BCE Greece assess it in the poetic value language of ours. The bard, in a mobile camp or fixed hall setting, emerges in palatial Bronze Age Greece, where emerging chanted performances “look ahead” (Perloff's value expression) to later hermeneutics opening the gates of interpretive inwardization. Chapters on Greece point to, on the one hand, early sung poetry's functionality in a setting in which performer and listeners share space and values, whereas later writing alienates voice into written symbol whose audience may or may not share values. Here, in writing spare and mechanistic, he sounds like Anne Carson as a social democrat.

He analyzes the career of Bertran de Born, a Pound favorite, and the culture that produced Dante. For the troubadours like de Born, rhymes and dialectical patterns of variation are functional, discursive, “a tool / for conceptualizing persistence / within change and change within persistence.” Jongleur rivals debate and disseminate works while fixed or market notions of authorship sleep in the womb of a literary world without mass reproduction. Against these counterfeiters, leading troubadours complicate their poetry remorselessly, but the page is behind the times; for Ruby, page means that living scene of performance has already disappeared into reification. The movement dies but leaves traces in print culture. We are deeply enmeshed in recent poetry, the time of “Paper. Moveable type,” and recently the internet and AI, while avant-garde Language Writing is omnipresent. The modern is here reduced to a lyric-visual poem fusion, while Ruby demotes both ear and Olson’s projective verse in a curt passage. Poetry and prose enter an identity relation, a useful equivalence for this discursive poem. The page of print “imperializes” occasions of poetry, abstracting them away from performative settings. Citing Shelley, Ruby argues that poets are “the *canaries in the coal mine* where speech / intersects with media technology.” Poetry “attempts greater / Complexities of linguistic technique,” in a context of spontaneous, neo-Smithian “*market forces*.” Poet producers, vulnerable to piracy, anticipate literary victims of contemporary AI ripoffs.

Ruby shoehorns in the novel’s history to reinforce the importance of market forces as well as the identity of poetry and prose. Modern poetry, in an account on loan from Daniel Tiffany, owes much to what Ruby calls “Profit-oriented pastoral kitsch, / Commodified sentimentalities, / And marketable poeticisms.” Poems as market abstractions crystalize over time. Bourgeois shocker Baudelaire boils down to a poetic prose—and then this Baudelairean ideal opens out onto discussion of Brooklyn’s Walt Whitman, analyzed according to print mechanism “taken to its logical / Conclusion: free verse.” A “post-poetry” Whitman, a rational problem solver of lyric address, dismantles the second person. Citing Derrida on Pound, Ruby finally introduces the Idaho bard as interpreter of the Chinese ideogram.

Ruby contrasts Anglo-American modernism and avant-garde in chiaroscuro starkness. The relevant difference between them isn’t the futurist/primitive as

against conservative programs but that of post-symbolist poetry as against the manifesto itself. Written for highbrows, Eliot's defamiliarized language competes for "a dwindling customer base." Unlike the avant-garde, Eliot "[r]amifies the poem, complicates it, / Occulting its meanings," commanding interpretation in an ongoing hermeneutic. The avant-garde "istic" groups principally created the manifesto, which Ruby reduces to "paratext," i.e. something like his poem essay. Shorn of particular program, Ruby's simplifying analysis of the many-headed avant-garde manifesto notes its articulation of a "materialist / ontology of the sign" on which are built sandcastles of symbolic power arguments. For Ruby, Gertrude Stein synthesizes these two "tendencies" (conservative modernism and the para-text avant-garde). Stein as proper name "looks ahead" to supposed attention economies and information overloads; a fundamental relationship between avant-garde literature and the visual arts; and the poetics of grammar. Ruby interprets Stein through Sianne Ngai's category of the "stuplime," another conceptual kludge: Stein wrote back then what most still consider avant-garde. She is the painting-world tastemaker and networking writer, she who first disappeared in a storm-washed coast of ruleless language games. Here Ruby doesn't provide an account of her humor, wit, or playfulness—the fullness of her poetic *personality*.

For Ruby, poetry derived from a context in Greek campsite or palace is now conceived shorn of context as an example of "*critical commodity / Fetishism*," where the extent of poetry's alienation from circumstance means the intention isn't clear and doesn't count. The Williams poem of the word "machine" is precursor to AI and the blackbox "gimmick" aesthetic of Sianne Ngai. Mixing in Mark McGurl's Bourdieu-parroting frameworks, Ruby thinks contemporary poetry is a byproduct of the creative writing "Program Era," with its transformation of the social game or "field" of American literature.

In Language Writing we meet a post-nuclear accelerating "modernism." Ruby, riffing on Perloff, treats the movement in terms of Wittgenstein and grammar while shackling it to Modernism. He goes further by narrating it in the anti-social terms of its academicization. His is a sympathetic hostility to Language Writing: avant-garde texts communicate "*the same thing of no importance*." Language Writing has no narrative, no syntax, no format. Meaning is textual

gist, and the disordered text has none because the horizon is not dialectical but linguistic in the narrow sense. A visual arrangement level of poetry comes to replace signification as poetry is reduced to post-poetry, a kind of silence, something hinted at all along given how Ruby avoids explaining a charged passage of language as poetry, which is too Romantic for technology storytime. For Ruby, poetry plays no social role today. Post-Language, poetry today is supported by Target and Lilly; avant-garde or mainstream poetry is now POC VIP concept books, something Perloff first spied in the 1990s. She also saw then in John Cage a possible antecedent for another road for contemporary conceptual writing, in a fundamental revision of the 20th century canon as departure into sampling, a semi-asceticism. Ruby instead extends David Lehman's *The Last Avant-Garde* argument to Language Writing. Poetry is today a kind of academic hyper-reformism. Concept books are righting wrongs.

Ruby's history culminates in Cathy Park Hong's essay from *Lana Turner* number seven, perhaps the most viral poetry essay ever written. Wishy-washy, he endorses then backs away from Cathy's lightly supported, pigmentocratic criticism of the whiteness of the avant-garde. Whatever its manifest shortcomings, her point—that the avant-garde as a history and frequently invoked aesthetic category is another form of racial exclusion and othering—stands, he implies. *Avant-garde meets critical race theory* attains the maximum cultural value of specialization and complexity available today in poetry. Ruby concludes with Christian Bok and another type of avant-garde writing in the final moments of his text. Perhaps Ruby knows that a young Cathy Park Hong herself presented Bok as aesthetic ideal in her "fabulist" poetry manifesto for *American Letters and Commentary*. There she aligned with lipogram, procedural poetics, and conceptual poetry's remixing and sampling as writing. Linguistic readymade poetry still occupies a prominent place in poetics today if under the "color" sign. Sampling everything in every language, AI models now possess the ability to automate language. In a final poetic suicide, technical mechanism—now become data centers—swallows all previous poetry in service of automation.

There is something refreshingly grandiose about Ruby's intricate presentation, even if its postmodern pastiche of academic writing could perhaps be adequately reproduced by AI's large language models. Every phase is a shopworn familiar

one. Writers like Ruby and AI “curate” passages from their sources, weaving a text of different academic poetics, different discourses on the value or significance of poetics in terms of theoretical perspective. For example, his sometimes aptly chosen and loosely evolving synthesis of different academic discourses remixes both New Lyric Studies and Language Writing’s poetics. Here a contradiction, there a contradiction, no real attempt at a resolution. Ruby, like Pound before him, can’t make it cohere beneath a banalizing haze of sociological discourses.

Other weaknesses? Ruby articulates no sense of a *populist* avant-garde futurism, that apex of the historical pre-revolutionary and then Bolshevik avant-garde as political-poetic technique. The material significance of language is also dismissed in this revision of the Red Century, whose complex literary-linguistic theory gets sparse coverage. The ideology of today’s sometimes interesting poetics—books framed by academic-sounding projects or topics of environment, race, and gender—isn’t treated directly. These are not ancient but are a recent product, one not explained by nor fulfilling technological progress, but predicated on the cultural atmosphere proper to American Left-liberalism after the election of Barack Obama. For Ruby and many others, poetry isn’t in the language anymore, but in the curated identity of its maker and the technology of its making.

Consideration of Habermas, Badiou, and Benedict Anderson would have been helpful in terms of periodization. The historical materialist emphasizes the nonlinear, a continuity of discontinuity, while Ruby’s brushes history *with* the grain of technological late capitalism. Poetry is a transhistorical phenomenon, but as such it does more than “look ahead” in Perloff’s overused valuation crutch. Languages more saturated by internet discourse—exhibited in what Cal Bedient calls contemporary poetry’s tendency to merely “talk”—need stronger doses of purifying defamiliarization today, whatever the technical means.

Poetry, unpoetic and discursive in this account, is finally substituted for the data bots share among themselves. Data relentlessly literalizes itself. This conception of poetics is nihilistic-machinic, distinct from what Bedient means by poetry that “depresses subject matter” as it seeks “the oxygen of the indefinite.” Echoing Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* he writes, “to something within us, nothing is so suffocating as a denotation.” This imaginative indefiniteness of poetry is a transhistorical

dimension of the poetics of language, that house where we dwell never wholly in possession. The signatures of all things poetic language is here to disturb. It muddies the data, today's master signifier. Poetic disturbance—riotous, inventively discordant language—lives in the ways we speak, perform, write, and live with words as sounds. Rather than being transcended, performance and recitation of poetry for an audience has only multiplied in postmodern society.

Now the nub. According to Ruby, poetry has no social function. This Audenesque idea misjudges the historicity of poetry; it sidesteps consideration of poetry outside the post-conceptual documentary poetry genre. Against this, for example, the final poems of the late Joshua Clover take the idea of class consciousness and the historicity of cultural works seriously. One necessarily disputes some aspects of Clover's approach, but his elaboration of a militant politics and his radical idea of poetics remain a signal attempt of the recent time. The poetry that came out of the Marxist wing of Occupy, or the poetry to emerge from the protests of those years in Russia's re-politicized poetics, brought a creative urgency into political life in conjunction with then bleeding-edge analyses of late capitalism. These attempts inaugurated short-lived but new schools, rejuvenated poetic imagination.

Given this recent history, is there a sense in which poetry grows more complex as time passes? For example, in expressing a truth content of the historical situation of global capitalism? Does poetry need to grow into a tangle of semi-ugly, sampled nonsense to avoid any hint of Romanticism? To Marxify Ruby: the technical changes in the mode of production constitute the base of poetic historicity, but in what sense is poetry or literature growing in complexity as time passes? A product of its time, is poetry always adequate to the possibilities of the times? The crowning spiritual form of every age? Not anymore. The poem outstrips mere adequacy. Tossing aside all crowns, the poem is the negative of all discourse.

“Using the techniques made available *by* machine culture” (sampled from an interview with Perloff), poetry develops in a quasi-Aristotelian, straight manner, but with the explosive expansion of freedoms in the modern period. What counts as poetic now? New orders, revolutions in poetics do not flow from

technical linearity. Poetics of this Romantic-Modern order remains, subsists as latent possibility against the grain of Ruby's Bourdieu-McGurl derived critical sermons.

A century ago, Russian avant-garde poetry broke through to a new futurist-constructivist and finally Bolshevnik moment. This way of reading the futurists, as superstructural-cultural revolution, was grudgingly acknowledged by Perloff, while here Ruby reduces them to their manifestos. Strong programmatic claims of the Red Century are out of fashion, yet in underground, perennially disputed contexts they make the improbable comeback. I am at least open to the chance. I'll conclude this section with the comments of Russian poet Kirill Medvedev from a dozen years ago, in those days of the global protests after the financial crisis.

I don't believe that Russian history and culture have a special messianic mission, but I do know that from time to time the situation in Russia unfolds in such a way that it gives rise to a cultural-political leap, allowing us to "overtake" the West and present something genuinely new. That's what happened with the political form of the Soviets that came out of the 1905 Revolution and was later adopted by many revolutionary and social movements across the world. The same thing happened with the Russian avant-garde. It's possible that we're experiencing a similar situation right now.

Poetry at the limit of the possible, evoked by Medvedev, remains the challenge. Today the fate of our short-lived avant-gardes shows a profound political impasse. So far, the new schools like the one Medvedev outlines, or the "insurrectionary" one that was briefly convoked by Joshua Clover, have miniscule shelf-life and inconsistent grouplet dynamics. And yet whole new terrains of poetry remain possible.

### *Jameson's Aesthetic of Singularity*

What can be made of the postmodern poetry book of the singular, yet familiar sort written by Ryan Ruby? As he notes, it is something of a type: documentary, essayistic, book-length with ramified citational apparatus. Are

they the phantom topical projects of the non-existent avant-garde? Why is everyone writing a project poem to conform with academic protocols around nature, race, and gender? It must be homogenizing late capitalism, verdad? To aid my analysis I offer an explanation of the late essay “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” where Jameson defends his periodization of late capitalism, surveying the artistic, economic, philosophical, and political levels of its totalizing cultural logic. This logic today produces aesthetic “singularities,” absolute one-offs—the shark of Damien Hirst, the constructions of Robert Gober, the meaningless lines and strokes that resemble Chinese ideograms by Chinese painter Xu Bing—that challenge the category definitions. In probing this 2015 essay, I open here an alternative take on poetics today. Jameson’s slightly revised postmodernity, not a style in the arts but a historical period, retains all present significance. With modernity and progress concluded, the years since the 1980s represent a definitive new period. Globalization is the familiar name for this third phase of capitalism, after Lenin’s imperial and monopoly capitalism, while today a distinct multi-polar world order of capitalism is emerging. Ten years on from this piece, we are post-globalization.

For Jameson postmodernism is superstructure, globalization productive base after the fall of the Soviet Union, after China goes down the capitalist road, and after the disappearance of socialist reform party programs; it is also a world after Occupy and kindred networked social movements, signs of new forms of anti-capitalism yet to develop effective historical agency like those that characterized the eras of Romanticism, Modernism, and the era of decolonization. Without opposition to capitalist expansion the temporal dimension of the present, a “space” purified of past and future, shrinks to now. Sublime and tremendous, this now is for Jameson grasped as revolutionary disillusionment or abandonment, with today’s short-lived avant-gardes emerging with neither programs nor grouplets. Ours is an era of a new mutation in capitalism: electrification and heavy industry gives way to financialization and information technology from which “a new form of production is emerging” whose final development remains out of view.

Do singular works of art and literature today constitute a universal activity for Jameson? Hardly. Today’s “experimental” poetry—often lacking elevation,

imagination, beauty, or image creation—is, like conceptual art, made recognizable by institutional space alone. No antagonism that accompanied Modernism greets the new art nor the new poetry, yet they have also ceded a timeless status. Instead, the works are museums in small-scale, products of curation like Ruby's apropos, ultra present-tense selections of poetic discourse. Curation, with its rigorous process of selection and display, is everywhere, with theory itself *the example* for Jameson. Our present requires a flexible dialectic lighting up a true-false simultaneity as every last goddamn thing is subsumed under the corporate-sponsored institution the curator embodies. Jameson's isolated examples of art become recipes for producing events, "absolute one-offs," little Lyotard sublimes of historical discouragement. Such literary artistic unrepeatables necessitate a unique development of a device, a reinvention of form.

The historical displacement of the old industrial capitalism by finance capital, that sign of autumn leaf turning in the system, gives rise to ever more exotic credit and now crypto coin derivatives. They underwrite global trade, exchange rate variation, and US treasuries. As a momentarily exchanged insurance contract, such derivatives are more a unique event than something juridically valid. A kind of one-off close to the literature and art sketched above, a link between realities in our world of differentiated nationalities, labor processes, technologies, forms of living labor, currencies, the credit-derivative and the literary art of this era are paradigms of heterogeneity in the homogenizing process of producing and selling commodities in late capitalism. So many different projects, yet all so of a kind. The form of value underpins the hegemony of the concept of heterogeneity, the postmodern notion of the Real: a post-metaphysical absolutely differing difference, a blur-smear of variations on the non-identical.

Here we might puzzle over Ruby's claim about the growing complexity of poetry with new technical means. Mapping it onto the concept of heterogeneity sketched above, the new variety of concept books reveals in fact a new homogeneity, a higher-level stabilization of the heterogenous. Topics decided in advance, the poetics forwarded are largely discursive. They circle back even when they attempt to go to some unforeseen somewhere. No new fission

in their phonemes and significances, autobiographical-hybrid-memoir-poem-essays are a new groove pattern for publishers caught up in the pressures of market differentiation. At the heart of late capitalism, a dissolution of past and future in a prison house of the present, is the collective loss of historicity. Jameson: “A genuine historicity can be detected by its capacity to energize collective action.” Here I point again to Joshua Clover’s concept of poetics and action, different yet in difference united. Jameson’s statue of the postmodern also resonates here: Today we can’t imagine, let alone organize a changed future. But the above Jameson analysis of constitutively fragile derivatives (and my homologous connection of it to literature) gently contradicts the political diagnosis of futurelessness, and historicity can be reawakened by a utopian vision beyond our current situation. To be sure, the now old-fashioned concept book is a sign of historical standstill. The conceptual, poetry project book unifies a fragile discourse system, which may not exist in specific outside of it. Under such conditions, perhaps the day has nearly arrived when “poets” will be managing different algorithmic systems’ fancy for literary production.

A terrifying and “stifled historicity” repudiates metaphysical value and notions of human nature, principles whose disappearances so anguished Nietzsche and Sartre, according to Jameson. Yet there remain the cries against the system, the resistance to this state of affairs, and the singular political struggles of today with their cultural phenomena resisting subsumption under abstract category. Aesthetic singularity denounces all norms, like those burning condemnations of identity politics; such denunciations have become a norm, thus such politics’ conceptual relevance for the burnt-out, Left-liberal academic poetry project book. Indeed, the contradictions I’m outlining in today’s poetics recall Adorno’s negative dialectic of totality and the singular. As with philosophical ones, poetic contradictions—between the novel project and the homogenizing sameness of a trend—are worked on and out in practice.

What is the poetics of a political condition where space dominates time? “All politics is about real estate,” writes Jameson. We must find a new poetics of opposition here against everyone laying claim to some kind of project territory, an easy application astroturf of poetics. Land seizures, gentrification, Palestine: land expresses the separate existence of today’s social classes. Nearly

real estate poetics must turn here, back to other types of literary form for reserves against the project book gentrification of earlier conceptual art and multicultural literature. Cage's unsettling work remains one location. The peaks of Romanticism and modernism maintain all their attraction, too.

And what about a book in that stammering, tripping-over-its-multilingual-multiple-selves mode, that inventive literary mode of the 20th century, an epoch whose aesthetic instigator was Nietzsche, he who dared overturn the Hegelian subordination of art and poetry to criticism. Not a concept book, but a word-by-word book, each line a galactic band of stars, a music of new language, a travelogue, a chanted repetition with conceptual rhyming, *Galáxias*, Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos's recently translated book, is nothing like the poetry concept books of our present. More than ably rendered by Odile Cisneros (with help from versions by Suzanne Jill Levine, Chales Perrone, Norman Maurice Potter, and Christopher Middleton), this book represents a landmark achievement for the work of translating the last century's most challenging books into English.

Composed between 1963 and 1976, full of books, travel, art, and the allusion to tumultuous politics of the age of extremes, *Galáxias* seeks origins here of language and the world, as Cisneros notes in her introduction. At its origin, Language was more complex, and the book's fifty forty-line "fragments"—pulsing with rhythm, playfully pun-laden, quasi-Joycean with exuberant neologism—resemble odd changes of internally consistent, fractal-like developments. The line in *Galáxias* is something close in spirit to Language Writing's "new sentence," with resplendent accordion crinkles of meaning as one reads along. Far from a disordered text, de Campos seeks an unattained order, a generative poetic force made possible by a multi-layered inner listening to language from the parapet of Portuguese. Macaronic writing like this—anchored in travel, book, art, political history—is something to sing, to read aloud, to listen to for its mix of registers, its catholic approach to emergent meanings. Any critical take or discourse will wash shore, battered by the breakdown of the expected and the ordinary.

De Campos' wild version of his native Portuguese translates into neologicistic English, an oceanic murmur that sits crosswise the Joycean paradigm of

an externalized character in *Finnegans Wake*. “A casa del labirinto” here is constructed as a tour also of interwar and World War violence, plus the changes brought by decolonization. Losing its mellifluous Portuguese, de Campos in English picks up the physicality and density of language in this tongue. The English version is some brash, even ugly bull of heaven dodging incoherence. It is often noisy and strange:

nothing was worth it except to see the puddle at the bullring la  
monumental and frog-colored raincoats over bullfighters’ cloaks and  
the ninth la novena lackluster due to meek chestnut bulls pulling out  
short

The poet wrings sounds out of scene, scenes out of sound:

noseless people leprosy of icy winter and war that’s what the war is it  
separates you from the friend who ate at your table since childhood  
his friend against him that’s why he fled to find freedom once and for all

Reading his punctuation-free poetry, like that of the ancients, means mastering beginnings and endings, feeling one’s way along the ambiguous continuity of poetry against discursive clarity and the door-slamming stop. Language in de Campos is prepared like the proverbial Cagean piano to sound like nothing one has ever heard before. His poems approach the kind of naming that must have originally occurred. “Naming transforms everything,” as Jameson observes about Sartre’s conception of the necessarily social action of language. Poetry here doesn’t accept the world as it is, its reified status quo and common sense. The baroque flow of life poetic language relates is ubiquitous in this teeming text of connotations and impossible meanings: “that’s why this city is babelbaroque.” In a book he calls “a Baedeker of epiphanies,” the no Irish political-economic conditions of Latin America remain close:

where the new rots like the egg rots the daily jungle of the selfsalary  
in dailydoses the selfservice of hunger on dailycredit the dailymonthlyurinal  
estuary where river mouth is mound the fecalvary where the mound is  
midden such is such such is that thatsuchlethal same to monthlymenstrual  
sameweekly flies in the fish tank where I sweatstink my wages but the  
stoppage the message the visage but the veering the voyage

At sea, yet earthy, bodily, cerebral and heady, here is a poetry animated at near and far distances by history, origins, and political economy. From another angle, perhaps no text has come as close to Derrida's lines on Joyce: "He repeats and mobilizes and babelizes the (asymptotic) totality of the equivocal, he makes this his theme and his operation, he tries to make outcrop, with the greatest possible synchrony, at great speed, the greatest power of the meanings buried in each syllabic fragment, subjecting each atom of writing to fission in order to overload the unconscious with the whole memory of man: mythologies, religion, philosophies, sciences, psychoanalysis, literatures." Against Derrida's deemphasis of the Joycean access point of English, one could make the comparison with de Campos while emphasizing his access to babelized language from the Portuguese vantage.

The density of de Campos, merely glimpsed in the translation, is polygonal, and anti-essentialist like the superb examples of modern literature, which show that literature has no essence, as Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe once observed, "even in its inessentiality." The point of discourse is to make your perspective categorizable according to the existing essences, whereas poetry is not the artifice of discourse but its fundamental questioning. Discourse hears a death rattle every time a poem is written. A rising class of networked individuals is becoming conscious of themselves and their power in terms of contemporary literature, where one viral article now has the influence of all of modernism or whole schools of poetics of the recent past. Poetics is the generic name for the "perpetual activity" and actions of language in a specific historical time: this is the historicity of poetics. There should be more of the unexpected expected from it.