

Avant-Garde Then and Now: 2023 Poetry Chronicle

Avant-garde poetry is problematic today. A recent issue of the journal *Fence* offers several takes on the problem with poetry. Andrea Brady and Rodrigo Toscano mark out the debasement of the postmodern aesthetic tendency, now familiar lab-coat experimentalism. Elsewhere Ange Mlinko, interviewed by *The New York Review of Books*, criticizes the ubiquitous “project” book, marketed to a reader of internet journalism and memoir. A recent issue of the journal *The Drift* takes up Cathy Park Hong’s polemical, anti-avant-garde essay from *Lana Turner* number seven’s avant-garde forum. *The Drift* interviews Park Hong, provides an essay on her polemic by “scholar” Marta Figlerowicz, and publishes a folio on the avant-garde, a kind of negative mimesis of *Lana Turner’s* avant-garde forum.

Let’s top off the accusations against the present. Criticism is infected by jargon and moralism. Divya Victor wants “us to be thinking about identity intersectionally, particularly as it pertains to our positionality geopolitically.” This mode of thinking is the new pattern of post-liberal Americanization. Aesthetic experience—sublime, beautiful, ridiculous, singular, which never got its due, takes a way-back seat to marketability. Editorial work under topical headings runs amok. Poetry’s major presses corporatize by the minute. MFA programs mass produce contest collections. A certain kind of critical graffiti might declare about contemporary poetry: *dégringolade*. Wole Soyinka identifies a snitchy, denunciatory atmosphere at work in American poetics and criticism today. Couple this with an expanded, normalizing mainstream literary culture, and any airspace for an avant-garde outside or beyond the cultural centers is strictly limited, as our century’s capitalist social totality closes in on itself and becomes uncontradictable.

By comparison, the mostly European and pan-American avant-garde literature from a century ago—*Ulysses*, *Trilce*, *The Waste Land*, *Spring and All*, *Harmonium*, plus Surrealism, Vorticism, Stridentism—named, enacted the incongruities of nature and culture. As the nature-culture dialectic disappears in screen world, and the registration of its contradictions becomes more arduous, these older works of literature retain their subversive dimensions. These revolutionary and counterrevolutionary avant-gardes represent “the explosive disunification” of poetry and poetics (Jameson), rather than something optimized for platform circulation.

Andrew Joron twenty years ago identified a then-hegemonic synthesis of Language Writing and the New York School. We live now in the coming

apart of this “post-avant” synthesis. Some maintain elements of it, some break from it for BIPOC “allyship,” while the early century synthesis appears vestigial in muted hybrid forms. The contemporary is “post-conceptual,” “project-based,” with an inlay of identity. “Bad conscience,” everywhere in contemporary poetics, is evidence of an imperial art. These are the sad passions of decadence.

Yet some poets today return to the asubjective dimension of modernism, its locus classicus of formal novelty, stylistic singularity. On the evidence below, a consideration of new books by Brian Ang and Ben Lerner and recent translations of Manuel Maples Arce and Pier Paolo Pasolini, one can see the outlines of something to be born. An underground poet, editor, performer, and bookseller, Ang is aligned with the hard edges of early Language Writing. Lerner, who excels in a variety of literary genres, has borrowed from modernism, from the free practitioner’s postmodern, while also adopting a version of the Park Hong critique of the avant-garde. In these two poets we can see a renewal of an avant-garde sensibility (there’s nothing “post” about it), and the turning of modernist stylelessness into a mainstream sensibility, respectively. Both have written books that span the Red Decade of the 2010s, while the appearance of past avant-garde masters in elegant new English versions points to their ongoing relevance and freshness.

Ang’s text is prefaced by a comment about how the “project” of his *Totality Cantos* (Atelos) emerged from a (disingenuous?) remark by Joshua Clover: today there is no “aesthetic mode that can accommodate totality,” the “totality” being capitalist social relations as a productive world economy. Rising to this challenge, Ang posits totality as a series of discursive concepts, riotously jamming to each other. His *Cantos* develops a method out of our earlier shared concept of post-crisis poetics. Years after ceasing to publish his journal *Armed Cell*, Ang has created a mad superstructure of the polycrisis. Project books tend to delineate some social issue, “lived experience,” while Ang develops all the possible subjects of writing (!) if on an abstract, peak-overlooking-the-valley level replete with edgy Occupy politics. His naïve overreach is totally preposterous. Further, Ang proscribes all continuity, eliminates aphoristic forms of writing, decimates human phrases. Feelings are broken. Shorn of linkages, his three-hundred-page *The Totality Cantos* scrubs dry “sensibility” with stuffed lines of isolated words. Lacking linearity, this rhizomatic, Deleuzian form is a blur syntax. Lines, like primitive words (all meaning) come at you, in surging, populist fistfuls, with poise if not much beauty:

Feared people's place
 Profound fright head hand shop coalition clothing monitor
 infancy insurgencies
 Communist majority orbit compliance church bust
 Health
 Oceanic linear poetic montage dragooning focus cake

Sample any passage and the effect is similar, yet as totality, or sheer continuity, it is singular. Not a lyric of painstaking intellectual combination, despite the Pound allusion, *The Totality Cantos* puts forth its base of discursive concepts with a form rooted in experimental music. Adorno: "Spirit in artworks is posited by their structure, it is not something from the outside." Here the project is an arranged philology, an example of unreconstructed "language writing." Particular passages recall the Althusserian sense of totality: a social structure that is overdetermined and contradictory at every point in it.

Poem as text maze: heightening the present's tendency toward abstraction, Ang's demonstrative poetics have evolved over the period in which this text was conceived and elaborated. (I hesitate to say written.) Concepts are subject to erasure by a bracing interaction. The three lines below, close quarters, are ripe for an auto-exegetical knife fight:

Selective silenced lay fragment complex confrontation promise imperfections
 Clustered outlying collectivized resistance resolution withdrawal
 pretense command veneration millions
 Daring autistic pedophile baloney homosexuality traveling artistry
 Casting courts

Ang's post-Poundian poetics of extreme fragmentation, vocal polyphony, Whitman-length lines, and off-putting irony isn't for everyone. Run through an incomprehensibility program, this work captures that aspect of invention in computer "coding." Ang has this relation to early Language writer and poet Kit Robinson.

Ben Lerner's first poetry collection in the US in 13 years takes on the polycrisis. The forms are opposed to monoliths. They are variegation itself as though literature were one with multi-channel, mixed media installations. In Lerner a gritty realism encounters a simulacrum. The *Lights* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux) as title is useful schema: Kanye's "all of the lights" of fame, light as in speed of, lights of the society of the spectacle gone digital, lights

touching paint, or reflecting off it, light as meditative mode of reflection, the lights of a “virtue signal.” In Lerner, one enters the Joycean space of being omni-intentional.

With the contradictory heart of a poet, the quiet love of disciplined thought, and his signature analytical narrative flair—stories flaking off, fractal-like, and character asserting itself over omniscient voice—this new book of poems reads like a fragmented, Bretonian anti-novel. A self-portrait in a smartphone’s black mirror, the book’s play intensity is unrelenting, with the dialectical textuality of his younger days unabandoned. There remains a sort of personal anti-capitalism, a “soft montage” of Negri and Hardt, anti-war 2000s plus post-Occupy social movements. These phase in and out, à la Harun Farocki, as wipes, scrims, story forms, poetics statements, auto-fictions, first person narrations, lyric anthems. From the middle of the country, Lerner’s sophisticated baroque is a hillbilly elegy on opposite day. There is reincarnate here a manic Whitman, erudite in conversation at the department party or with his hyperintelligent children. He has been given just enough blood to drink in order to speak from the beyond. Early Lerner books of poems—more unified in form and featuring fewer individualized poems than here; his mode, the project book in the Waldrops’ derivation, became hegemonic—penetrated, narrated à la Chris Marker a post-Cold War, post-9/11 America. Geoffrey G. O’Brien arrived earlier at a politicized Ashbery aesthetic of gun and flag, a register of nihilistic affectlessness against the spectacle. Lerner’s second book *Angle of Yaw* mines this vein of anti-terror war Ashbery, where comic anger and fear interpenetrate each other. Political violence and dull economic compulsions cast a bracing pall in theory-speak.

One must exaggerate enough of something to have a style in the first place. “See the child,” McCarthy writes, witnessing style’s birth. It writhes, cries, and moves ceaselessly in numerous directions. Exaggerate the number of distinct styles condensed in poem, novel, essay, and you arrive at modernist style-lessness, Lerner’s *métier*, a formal breakthrough whose truth content is a kind of refunctioning of commodity culture. Notable as containers, then, here are the long prose poems, all single paragraphs, like a leak or a text dump, which break off into numerous directions unprepared by a pause or a break. Stylistic singularity is haunting the semi-formless prose blocks, these from a writer exquisite paragraphs. The definite article, the singular phenomenon also a preoccupation of many of the titles: *The Circuit*, *The Rose*, *The Voice*, *The Pistil*, *The Rose*, *The Son*.

In *The Lights* Lerner has recollected a poetics of the polycrisis age. Lights of the spectacle make an omni-text of our weak contemporary left. Witness the Sanders-campaign vibes: “my people are with me now / the way the light is.” Yet the poetry exhibits post-theory coolness. It beholds at an appropriately sublime distance. Through social forms of language, full of phrases in which characters blossom, the poetry contains others, wants audience and communion. Lerner writes with an urban, liquid quick invention. Even in poems set elsewhere (Marfa, for example) the hypermodern post-gentrification Brooklyn often feels like the subject of the book’s vast ekphrasis. Whitman here, Bertolt Brecht there, even Aristotle: poetics as a meditation on our warring identity clans set in the system of advanced capitalism. His recent novels and these poems shift from the “geopolitical” to these domestic concerns, with the protest or intellectual poetics of the recent social currents like Occupy or Black Lives Matter recurring as signals. And next to this, Lerner strikes a critical tone about a post-avant writing in “The Circuit”:

I am trying to remember what it felt like to believe
disjunction, non sequitur, injection
between sentences might constitute
meaningful struggle against the empire
typing away in my dorm

Or a stanza later he writes, “that you campaign / in conventional verse, but govern in avant-garde / pieties regarding pulling it apart,” with a subtle sense of irony for dereification shining forth. The master signifier of our times, race, with its competing, clashing meanings, exudes a strong influence here. In *The New York Review of Books* Lerner has endorsed Park Hong’s critique of the deluded whiteness of the avant-garde. His book, which in certain ways flows from the hegemonic injunction to be anti-racist, makes self-criticism of the textual avant-garde in a crucial, “virtue signaling” passage.

Ang too has enacted a self-criticism. With *Armed Cell* and *Totality Cantos* in the rearview, he now advances an “Assemblage Poetics,” an immanent critique of his “militant” poetics of Occupy vintage. His new webzine and new poetics “project” that uses album and recording related discourse in estranging samplings, á la his *Cantos*, is more a semi-conventional “project” book. It has a topic. The tenting concept of “assemblage” is vast, even cliché. The examples of assemblage, faintly linked, disband the armed cell. “Assemblage” is informal solidarity, as Alex Cruse or Tom Comitta can

each find their own way. One doesn't turn a corner on a poetics of identity, as *Totality Cantos* had done. While his journal *Armed Cell* framed poetics in terms of Badiou's injunction to seek a new militant subject, he has arrived at a new editorial project called *Assemblage Poetics*, which substitutes an aesthetic of formal openness for his previous dream of weapons.

Against the avant-garde pronouncements, today we have a dominant idea of a reparative poetics, with Ocean Vuong's "healshop" creative writing pedagogy a salient form of this impulse. Reparative poetics erases aesthetic distinctions in the call for solidarity with BIPOC authors. The problem of American poetry today isn't just a form or content one. Poetics has tracked the events of our social period, one of political currents without movements, social protest without change. The 2010s were a decade of mass protests, but a "missing revolution," in Vincent Bevins' phase. The avant-garde, after a brief appearance (in these pages), is missing, too, having liquidated itself in the unfolding sequence of Red Decade events.

Here we might restage Jameson on the aesthetic experience of modernism, ask what has changed: modernism was most often a utopian "suspension," a song to "radical innovation" – a "substitute" for modernization or revolution, or, instead, their "reinforcement." He writes mournfully that "it is never very clear." Sometimes aesthetic experience can be a compensation for the lack of revolution or modernity. Unlike the bad old days of the avant-garde, too much aesthetic production today is aligned with a reparative agenda ensconced in the status quo.

The past, in this neoclassical revolutionary avant-garde perspective, is there as resource, a golden age ripe for refunctioning. New translations continue to bring different parts of this past into view. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Anger (La Rabbia)* appears as a book in alarming yellow cover from upstart Tenement Press. Cristina Viti's translation of the text for a film stages its central question this way in English: "Why is our life dominated by discontent, by anger, by the fear of war, by war." The film related to this text was never publicly screened. (It is streaming on YouTube.) The opening montage depicts the detonation of a nuclear weapon over the Pacific. The threat of annihilation still enshrouds our world.

These words for a film as a collection of poems are prefaced by a comment from Marjorie Perloff, who emphasizes the poetry's contemporaneity with reference to social media video platforms and race as "colour." Yet the critique at the heart of the text is more bracingly political. Americanization, historical national liberation, nuclear war, and postwar anti-communism

form the matrix of its concerns. The early 1960s develops in a dereified mode: industrial warfare, spectacle capitalism, decolonizing Africa, the Cuban Revolution. This is not a “project” book but a specific montage of lyric excitations. In fact, *La Rabbia* is part of a two-film sequence, a diptych by Italian filmmakers Pasolini and Giovannino Guareschi, new cinema from the emerging New Left and the Catholic Right, a filmic duo of neo-Marxist and reactionary Catholic poesis. As an epilogue Tenement Press’s edition reprints John Berger’s essay on the film, which notes the specifically prescient character of the work: “Neocapitalism was already planning its global takeover.”

In this context, Pasolini articulates an expansive horizon of human solidarity, carefully rendered in “War in Korea”: “You were millions of men like us.” Focusing on precursors of war between Egypt and Israel, he writes: “Deathly sunshine of Allah: / in the name of a thousand subproletarian peoples.” Poems work as searing newsreels, rather than videos on ad-polluted social platforms. The question for Pasolini was what to do with these “ashes of Gramsci,” the novel mid-century historical conditions. He sought the necessary intellectual vantage point unavailable to the hostile enemy camp. It is crucial to consider the text at a disruptive distance from the present. Pasolini uses the phrase “gente di colore” as a lyric refrain, but rather than the contemporary essentialism of “people of color,” the poet turns the screw of it in a universal direction:

People of color, it is in dignity
that man has no colour.

The only colour of man
is in the joy of facing one’s obscurity.

This passage is followed by a sequence of poems on the revolutionary victory in Cuba. Pasolini’s film and text emanate from the time of wars for national liberation. Pasolini tasked himself with creating an avant-garde artform that challenged the prevailing sensibility of aesthetic experience and value. The horizon of his poetics was the new forms of the revolution.

The 1920s was the crucible for avant-garde poetry in Mexico and elsewhere, as is clear in Manuel Maples Arce’s poetry collection *Stridentist Poems* (World Poetry Books), newly translated by KM Cascia. Maples Arce glamorizes—with hyperbole, with strange and jagged lines—the revolution of

the time. "Here's my brutal / Many-minded / poem / to the new city," he writes in "City: Bolshevik Super Poem in 5 Cantos." Stridentism, abruptly tolerating no nonsense, identifies the "City" with a new physics of revolutionary energy, fatal combinations of humanity, architecture, and machinery. The poems are angular, gyrating from quick cuts, short bursts of a swaggering persona. Literary scenesters are harshly condemned, while "Russia's lungs / blow the wind / of social revolution / in our direction." The work of literature is a "substitute" for revolution as it continues the aesthetic intensification of the historical process:

Tomorrow, perhaps,
only the living fire of my verses
will light these humbled horizons.

He stanzas the emergence of the masses of Mexico: "Today the resounding crowd / floods the public squares." Suffused with this spiritual sense of abandonment, Maples Arce writes as if exuberant Bolshevik futurism were the real meaning of the avant-garde.

Today's rebellion against the avant-garde is a conformist rebellion. Its unchallenged assumptions are repeated and promoted. There is a regrettable certainty about them. But as "rebellion" it is a trend firmly in the groove pattern of the periodically self-liquidating identities of consumerism and academia. The "affirmative constructions" (Badiou) of the avant-garde, their degrees of formal novelty and politicization, distinguish them from precursors and from our present. Individual writers dismiss avant and post-avant, but it was not the individual but the groupuscule that gave rise to the phenomena of the avant-garde. These groups were protective, sheltering carapaces, the nurseries for first experiments.

The revaluation of the term avant-garde misses this eventual character of its emergence and marginal persistence. We live in a time of stark inequality and the concentration of power in ever fewer hands in the economy, culture, and politics. Writing from prison in India, Umar Khalid notes: "power seems to have turned the world upside down and inverted the meanings of words and hollowed out languages." The avant-garde literary arts take up this terrain of linguistic and conceptual debasement today.