

# Reginald Shepherd

## A Few Thoughts on Lyric Postmodernisms

The anthology *Lyric Postmodernisms* which this special section of *Volt* celebrates brings together the work of twenty-three highly accomplished poets of diverse geographical, ethnic, gender, and aesthetic backgrounds whose work combines lyricism and avant-garde experimentation in a new synthesis I call, after Wittgenstein, lyrical investigations. Some have been publishing since the 1960s, some have emerged more recently, but all have been influential on newer generations of American poets. Their work explores the poem as a form of thinking, a thinking-out and thinking-through. As Kathleen Fraser points out, “Wittgenstein’s foregrounding of the term ‘investigation’ in his *Philosophical Investigations* sets forth a *practice* of coming to the world without certainty, but rather with curiosity, *un*belonging to an established ordering, an openness to ambiguity and the unfinished...even the untried.” These poets discover, create, and explore new territories in the intersections between lyric enchantment and experimental interrogation. They innovate and recreate while still drawing upon and incorporating the lyric past and present. Their critical art is also a celebration of the riches of the lyric tradition. The presences of classical mythology and Shakespeare in the work of many of these poets, as well as their diverse engagements with history, may be seen as one sign of their dual approach to originality as both Baudelaire’s search for the new and the return to (plural) origins. Many if not most would agree with Elizabeth Willis when she writes that “I would place my work among those who recognize an evolving relation to both the ‘traditional’ and the ‘new’ and who tend to recognize *as* new this reconfiguring or re-engagement with traditions.”

These poets integrate the traditional lyric’s exploration of subjectivity and its discontents, the modernist grappling with questions of culture and history and language’s capacity to address and encompass those questions, and the postmodernist skepticism toward grand narratives and the possibility of final answers

or explanations, toward selfhood as a stable reference point, and toward language as a means by which to know the self or its world. Nathaniel Mackey notes the homophony of “lyre” and “liar,” pointing out that such a wariness toward or outright distrust of language, “promoting check over enchantment,” has a long if sometimes insufficiently acknowledged history.

All of these poets are deeply engaged in exploring and interrogating the relations of conception and perception, with how mind both makes its way through a world not of its own making and how mind makes a world of its own out of the world it is given: they explore both the possibilities and the limitations of this world-made-mind’s world-making. As Cole Swensen asks, “Does poetry try to reflect the world in some kind of clarifying way, or does it try to construct an alternative world...?” In literary critic M.H. Abrams’ formulation, is the poem a mirror or is it a lamp? This is a question to which there is no permanent or universal answer, and each of these poets has his or her own response or range of responses. These poems are both products of and rejoinders to the world from which they emerge and to which they contribute, a world by which they are conditioned but not determined.

Martha Ronk writes that “My work exists in the interrogative mood, whether or not a question mark appears at the end of a line.” All of these poets begin with questions. How to sustain or recover an authentic self (however that self is defined and/or constructed) and a rich and accurate expressiveness (in whatever terms one expresses expression) in a thoroughly textualized, hypermediated world of what Jean Baudrillard calls simulations, in which every experience is either simulacral or has always already been experienced before? (These concerns are obviously specific to certain social, economic, and cultural levels of the developed world’s consumer societies of the spectacle. A lack of reality is not most people’s biggest problem, even in America—quite the opposite, in fact.) Martine Bellen asserts that “Language represents a way of ratifying one’s existence.” These poets write in a context in which none of the terms of this statement—language, representation, personal existence and the possibility of ratification or affirmation—can be taken for granted. As if in acknowledgment of this flux and uncertainty regarding the very ground of experience, Bellen goes on to write “I am not mine.” Their work provides diverse, contingent, and often partial answers to the questions with which I began, in poems whose tactics range from the playful to the interrogative, the minimalist, the ironic, the lyrical, the extravagant, and even the

sublime, sometimes coexisting, sometimes operating by turn.

Before all these questions, these poets begin with the potentially enabling or crippling question of the lyric itself. As Derrida asks, what thing is poetry? (I think these poets would reply that it is not a thing but an activity, not a noun but a verb.) What does the lyric mean in our contemporary post-everything world, one which has been described as depthless, fundamentally inauthentic, and at if not past the end of history? What does it mean to be a poet, to choose this most marginal mode of discourse in social and historical circumstances in which all discourse sometimes seems to have been emptied of meaning, content, or value? (One definition of the contemporary poet: someone who's not over it all just yet.) Kathleen Fraser writes of poetry as a response to "the pollution of speech and thought that threatens from every quarter." How one responds to that constantly metastasizing contamination, and whether it can be effectively responded to at all, haunts every poet in this volume.

Artistically as well as philosophically, we live in a time "when there is no recognized critical aesthetic," as Mei-mei Berssenbrugge points out. Ours is a decentered contemporary American literary and artistic world in which there is no agreement even on what practitioners of ostensibly the same art form are doing or trying to do, let alone on those efforts' means or aims or how they could be evaluated. Timothy Liu notes that "American poetry is a Babel," with everyone singing a dialect of one, or perhaps of his or her particular tribe. But the Babelogue that is contemporary American poetry can also be seen as a space of opportunity and possibility: we are living not just in a time of uncertainty and suspicion (of language, of selfhood, of history), but in an unusually open period of poetic exploration and discovery, very much including rediscovery.

As Brenda Hillman writes in her essay "On Song, Lyric, and Strings":

"It's hard to know what *lyric* means for post-romantics, post-symbolists, post-modernists and post-postmodernists. [RS: Not to mention post-avant-gardists and post-contemporaries.] Lyric is an element in poetry, not a type, rendering human emotion in language; attention to subjective experience in a songlike fashion seems to be key in all definitions of lyric....Once lyric meant unbroken music, but since

the nineteenth century, it may be broken. It cries out in singular, dialogic or in polyphonic protest. There is the question of the individual ‘singer,’ not to mention the individual lyre or the famous problem of the solitary self. . . . Since the twentieth century unseated all certainty, the lyric is rendered on torn, damaged or twisted strings. A lyric poet sings boldly and bluntly to the general populace or is visited quietly and obliquely by the distressed hero who needs an oracle.”

None of the techniques of postmodernism—syntactic fracture or deformation, quotation, pastiche, collage, montage, cinematic jump-cuts, polyvocality or multiplication of voices, irony, parody, the mixing of cultural levels (breaking down the barriers of “high” and “low” culture) and the mingling of kinds of diction and discourse, intentional catachresis (incorporating the “inappropriate,” inviting error), associative rather than linear logic, seriality and juxtaposition instead of narrative or extended meditation—is new or unique. Open any page of *The Waste Land*, of *The Cantos*, or of *Ulysses* and you will find them. What is different is the uses to which they are put. While most of the Anglo-American modernists, engaged in the desire and pursuit of whole, used these methods to try to achieve a new and more true synthesis, many contemporary artists who might be called postmodern employ such devices to refute the very possibility of synthesis. There is no whole toward which they strive, only holes upon which they stumble, and many find the notion of totality entirely too totalitarian. Proceeding by means of breakage (formal, intellectual, psychological, emotional), they simply point, helplessly, hopelessly, and sometimes gleefully (there is a joy in smashing things, after all) to the pieces. But as Marjorie Welish points out, “The devices that make a poem literature can themselves be investigated, engaged, and thus refreshed.” Methods and modes do not have inherent meanings, and forms can engage with many different feelings.

Although the idea of the broken lyric (one that I borrow from poet Cynthia Cruz) is highly suggestive and useful in thinking about the poets assembled in this book, none of them is content to rest (however restlessly or even restively) among fragments, to admit disjunction and be done. Martha Ronk insists “I am not interested in single words set in white space, but in joinery.” Cole Swensen emphasizes her interest “in connections and relationships—at times more than in the things they bring together.” The brokenness of discourse, of identity, of the social field, is not the end point but the beginning, one that can be turned

toward possibility rather than either despair or blank-eyed resignation. Timothy Liu characterizes the opening toward the potentials inherent in loss as a movement from song to writing, and parallels it with a Blakean journey from innocence to experience, abandoning paradise without renouncing the longing for it. Cole Swensen writes that for her, “The very point where sense begins to break down is also where it begins to open out.”

Peter Gizzi describes a postmodern form of Keatsian negative capability toward which he aspires (or rather, to which he aspires to be open, allowing it to come to him, not directed by his will or his desire), a force moving through the place and time of writing that is “both a construction of self and an emptying of self—not autobiographical but autographical—flexible enough to accommodate figures, things, voices, documentation; to combine, build and dissolve being, boundaries—to somehow let the poem become itself.” Most if not all of the contributors to this volume also seek to occupy that space which is no space, to be that one who is no one and everyone. As Martha Ronk puts it, “The whole seems to teeter and to fail, certainly to defy logic, but in the most satisfying moments, in the failure of absolute congruity, to create new constructs.” This book collects and celebrates some of those new constructs.

In their great diversity, these highly accomplished poets all participate in a shared though varied project, yet they have rarely been thought of together. By highlighting their common goal of expanding the boundaries of what can be done in poetry, pushing forward the limits of the sayable, sometimes (in Brenda Hillman’s phrase) singing against singing, this collection sheds new light on their work, including work a reader may feel that he or she already knows, by showing its interconnections. My hope is thereby to reveal a new constellation of contemporary American poetry, one formed by the continuation, expansion, and self-questioning of the Modernist project into the postmodern era, which sometimes seems hostile to the lyric and its ever-renewed and ever-renewing possibilities. None of these writers has given up a faith in the lyric, however broken or transfigured. All seek to discover and/or recover, in the words of a perhaps unlikely forebear, what can be made of a diminished thing, or even if that thing (if it really is a single thing) is actually diminished at all. Bin Ramke writes that “Poetry is what we have in lieu of explanation, and in place of consolation.” But, activity and object, it is something that we have.