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Books, 2008)

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# PLEIADES BOOK REVIEW

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## Impolitic: Kent Johnson's Radical Hybridity

on *Doubled Flowering: From the Notebooks of Araki Yasusada* (Roof Books, 1997), *Epigramitis: 118 Living American Poets* (BlazeVOX, 2004), *Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz: Eleven Submissions to the War* (Effing Press, 2005), *I Once Met* (Longhouse, 2007), and *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde* (Shearsman Books, 2008)

Michael Theune

The past twenty years in American poetry have given rise to middle space poetry, poetry—sometimes labeled “Third Way,” “Hybrid,” and/or “Elliptical”—that situates itself in the middle space between mainstream/lyric and avant-garde/experimental aesthetics. While work in the middle space by now *should* have added up to an important and fruitful development in contemporary poetry—for there *is* much shared ground for these aesthetics to explore—middle space thinking and poetry for the most part has been very problematic. Paradoxically, the problems of the middle space—especially as it is presented in its three key anthologies: Reginald Shepherd’s *The Iowa Anthology of New American Poetries* and *Lyric Postmodernisms*, and Cole Swensen and David St. John’s *American Hybrid*—largely result from its trying to be too politic.

Attempting to heal rifts in American poetry and poetic theory, middle space thinking and poetry do not then want to create new divisions by providing what one in fact expects of a significant literary movement: a new kind of revelatory theory

about or approach to writing, one that would be critically decisive and, thus, of necessity, exclusionary. And yet, of course, exclusions were being made all the time: particular middle space poems were being published and anthologized, others not; particular middle space manuscripts won awards, others not. However, because there has been no substantive middle space thinking, no real middle space reasons have ever been offered for these choices. Instead, such choices have come to seem the results more of sociological factors than of any kind of aesthetic urgency—the middle space anthologies certainly abound with in-group selectivity. The rise of the middle space and the advent of Foetry are not entirely coincidental.

As a result, though swaddled in the sheen of the new, middle space thinking has ended up mostly feeding into and supporting poetry business as usual, allowing, and in fact requiring (because it in fact offers so little that's new), poetry to quickly fall back onto old taxonomic systems and evaluative judgments. For example, one of the very few ways, but also most substantial ways, that middle space poetry tries to define itself is over and against the more accessible, plainspoken poetry of mainstream poets and Ultra-Talkers—a contradictory gesture that isn't synthesizing at all, but rather is a tired, derivative repetition of the split between Language poetry and New Formalism that fueled the American poetry wars. This split also reinscribes the ancient division between tragedy and comedy, with middle space poets being made to seem high-minded and serious while the Ultra-Talkers play the fools. Additionally, even though middle space aesthetics could have been more accurately defined as a mode that authors *sometimes* use rather than a defining style, middle space thinkers and editors keep using the author as its touchstone (by, for example, organizing anthologies around poets instead of poems), implying that middle space poets *always* work in a highly elliptical fashion, and these thinkers and editors thus (mis)use the aura of the Author to underwrite their middle space aesthetics.

But the real problem with the middle space—which of course *does* have its successes, its fine poems, but successes which almost always feel scattered, isolated, not essentially *involved* with

the middle space because never essentially *described* by it—is that it covers up so much potentially revelatory but also disruptive conversation. Not only on the topics of “what constitutes a successful middle space poem?” and “why maintain a focus on the author?” but also “what happens to real political engagement in middle space poetry?” Much middle space thinking and poetry—again, as it is presented in its key anthologies—tends to be unproblematically apolitical. So much middle space work presents the world as if the war in Iraq were not being waged, and creates little strong opposition or resistance to critique and decry the debacles and travesties of the Bush administration, including its formation of policy driven by politics, its use of duplicity and lies, its rampant cronyism, its bluster and bad speech, its lack of vision, and its use of power to reinforce power (a vice compounded by the fact that political opposition often feels less like a real opposition and more often like more of the same)—debacles and travesties, it should be noted, also engaged in, if in a slightly more symbolic and less lethal fashion, by many middle space thinkers. The middle space is ripe for critique.

Kent Johnson is one of the great critics of the middle space. Though prolific—Johnson is the author of numerous books and chapbooks, an active translator (including, most recently, of two books, co-translated with Forrest Gander, by Bolivian poet Jaime Saenz), and the editor of four anthologies, including *Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry*, *Third Wave: The New Russian Poetry*, and two books featuring work by Araki Yasusada—Johnson is much less well-known than he deserves to be. Johnson deserves greater recognition because in the past decade he has emerged as one of the middle space’s most significant thinkers and indisputably inventive poets. Johnson’s significance in this regard, however, is not the result of an easy fit into the middle space but rather is due to the fact that Johnson situates his work at odd angles in and to the middle space in order to engage, challenge, and even disrupt the often facile middle space. What follows is not a full review of Johnson’s complete oeuvre or even all of his significant recent work, but rather an extended examination of Johnson’s work, specifically, as middle space poet and provocateur, the

gadfly, the muckraker of the too-well-oiled middle space machine.

In an interview with Ricardo Garcia Lopes, the editor of the Brazilian journal *Coyote Magazine* (available at <http://www.litvert.com/coyoteinterview.html>), Johnson certainly understands his position as one critical in regard to the middle space. According to Johnson, for approximately the past decade the creation and use of oppositions has established “a polemic convenience for the ‘avant-garde,’” a convenient narrative the effect of which has been “much less to describe the actual case than to obscure the fact of a terribly ironic, rapidly developing interface.” As Johnson notes,

Increasingly, that is, Language poetry and “avant-garde” styles growing directly out of it (under myriad denominations, like “post-language,” “abstract lyric,” “ellipticism,” “new synthesis,” “third generation New York school,” and so on) have come to be the zeitgeist....What’s happened is that most younger poets now want to write the *fractured lyric of intellectual, self-reflexive experience*, or else some theory-inflected version of the cool, campy Frank O’Hara-like poem, or some hybrid version of these styles. This “experimental” atmosphere constitutes the ascendant period style—

One of the significant facts of such interfacing has been the middle space’s smooth merging with established institutions. Johnson notes that, “as the hip insouciant poetics of the New York School had before it,” this new aesthetic “has become rapidly absorbed and adapted...into institutional poetic arenas, and the public demeanor of its prominent Authors, older and younger alike, is increasingly circumscribed by all the institutional boundaries of ‘official verse culture’: prizes, grants, competitions, academic careers, university or slick corporate/government-funded publishing venues, etc.” According to Johnson, such a development was fated to happen because of what he elsewhere—including, as noted below, in *Epigrammitis*—calls the “Author Effect.” That is, while Language poetry’s manifestoes proclaimed “a militant opposition to the poetic ‘I’ or ‘Self,’” they “never undertook to question, *in practice*, the ideo-

logical assumptions and entrapments of authorial orthodoxy.” That is, the Language poets “never managed to follow through on the implications of their theoretical principles...and turn the category of Authorship into a *poetic problem* to be explored, with the aim of making strange...its comfortable and automatized surrounds.” And this greatly limits Language poetry, and, one assumes, any poetry coming from it, trapping it “in a two-dimensional performative realm,” limiting “the range of its innovations...to surface issues of prosody, visual arrangement, syntax, and so forth.” And, thus, Johnson claims, ultimately Language poetry largely becomes its other: “essentially, a formalist phenomenon,” but a phenomenon still working to defend and justify itself through “increasingly stale and poignant pronouncements about the political relevance of ‘experimental’ practice.”

Recognizing that there is nothing inherently wrong with such trends, Johnson clarifies his point by noting, “But my point is that American experimentalist poetry is caught inside an outmoded grid of cultural rules; it is still waiting for its collectively articulated, decisive conceptualist moment. When that moment comes, things will get quite a bit more subversively indeterminate and exciting than they now are.”

*Doubled Flowering: From the Notebooks of Araki Yasusada*

Johnson himself presented, or was central in presenting, a model for just such a subversive conceptualist undertaking when he released into the world a work of perplexing, mystifying, seductive, beautiful, and critical, as he calls it, “hyper-authorship”: the work of Araki Yasusada. In the mid-1990’s a number of poems and attendant archival materials by Japanese poet Araki Yasusada began appearing in journals such as *Conjunctions*, *Grand Street*, and, in a special supplement devoted to Yasusada, *The American Poetry Review*. Yasusada, as reported in the various biographical notes and information published along with the poems, was a survivor of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima whose family was killed in or as a result of that attack. Very quickly, however, in part due to some factual infelicities in the Yasusada narrative, the veracity of Yasusada’s story

and very existence came into question, and it seemed that in some way Johnson was involved. Johnson admitted that a hoax of some sort—though some evidence points to Johnson being the central perpetrator of the hoax, Johnson has admitted only to being an executor of the estate of one Tosa Motokiyu, the pseudonym for the “real” perpetrator of the hoax, an author/provocateur whose identity Johnson has sworn not to reveal—had taken place, and editors printed retractions and potential publishers pulled out of planned Yasusada projects.

This hoax has provoked a great deal of literary criticism—“Araki Yasuada: Partial Bibliography” (available at <http://www.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~nagahata/yasusada-bib.html>), compiled by Johnson just two years after news of the hoax broke (and not updated since then), cites over 40 critical works on Yasusada. In varied and revelatory essays, these critics analyze the many meanings and multivalent significance of the hoax. Much of this criticism points out that the success of the hoax centers on the viscerally negative reactions to the hoax of those who published work by Yasusada, and how such reactions revealed how little changes in the literary world: these critics point out that, though we supposedly live in culturally-aware and theory-savvy times, and have in terms of aesthetics moved beyond the confessional, these editors’ knee-jerk reactions to finding out that there was no Author—or rather, not the author they expected—behind Yasusada indicates how much sway the old-fashioned Author still has, how much these editors of seemingly avant-garde, forward-thinking journals of these post-confessional days really were purveyors of Authorship. A few of these critics even argue that the hoax in part reveals the privileging of the poet over the poetry—Marjorie Perloff notes, for example, that if these editors thought the poems were good before they discovered the hoax, they should have liked them after the hoax.

Even with all of the above work having been done on Yasusada, there has been little examination of the kind of poetry featured in the hoax, even though the kind of poetry is central to the hoax. What kind of poetry was it that could swindle such editors? Yasusada’s poetry clearly is middle space poetry.

Like so much middle space poetry, Yasusada's poetry—the convenient term I will use to designate the poetry included in the Yasusada project—consists of formal experimentation, combining the lyrical/formal and the experimental/Language-inflected. For example, a number of Yasusada's poems, including one poem called "Sentences for Jack Spicer Renga," combine traditional Japanese forms—such as haiku and renga—with some more avant-garde techniques, including especially Ron Silliman's "new sentence." Other poems more generally combine a more avant-garde taste for juxtaposition and fragmentation for the traditional/lyric goals of confessional expression. If middle space thinking were less politic, less concerned with the Author, and more adventuresome, much of Yasusada's work could fit neatly into any one of the middle space anthologies.

Middle space poetry is highly suited to hoaxes. Especially during the mid-90's, such poetry seemed fresh and new, presenting the combination of the avant-garde and traditional as something that could deliver something new, presenting new surface features and stylistic idiosyncrasies, new routes for making meaning in poems. However, this style was in fact highly repetitive in that it was so easily imitated, so hoaxable. It is not difficult to stuff strange content into a form, to make poems that are "connected" and yet "broken," as Reginald Shepherd describes the middle space poem in his introduction to *Lyric Postmodernisms*, and that often are permitted to include error. Such poems, in fact, can be quickly mass produced. And this simple fact is vital, for it is what allows for the hoax to take place at all.

Mirroring and even anticipating the way in which the middle space requires the reinstatement of an "other" kind of writing against which it can be valorized, the Yasusada hoax also features its own foil, its own straw man to stand against: the pedantic assignments and comments of Yasusada's English teacher, Mr. Rogers. Mr. Rogers tends to give the kind of assignments that call for an exhibition of "the qualities of unity, order, completeness, and coherence..." And when Yasusada constructs a middle space bit of writing for class, Mr. Rogers responds in the most pedantic of ways, and it is clear that Mr. Rogers is the straight man in this routine, the fall guy. Readers

are supposed to understand that it is Mr. Rogers and not Yasusada who is mistaken when Mr. Rogers corrects Yasusada's supposedly incorrect English, or when he chastises him, requesting, ominously, "Mr. Yasusada: Please see me after class." This pedantic presence serves to put Yasusada's supposed genius into sharper relief.

Yet, as much as the Yasusada hoax reveals the ways that the Author still is privileged over a careful consideration of the work, the use of Mr. Rogers reveals that the hoax also calls into question how much the Author really is being carefully considered, how much anyone really cares about the author who was so privileged over the hoax. Yasusada actually was, as Brian McHale (in "A Poet May Not Exist": Mock-Hoaxes and the Construction of National Identity," included in *The Faces of Anonymity: Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publication from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, edited by Robert J. Griffin (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)) has come to label this particular kind of hoax, a "mock hoax," one in which plenty of indications were given about the inauthenticity of the author, including the making of particular allusions and references that were not factually possible. The Yasusada hoax reveals that it is not so much a particular author who is intriguing, it is the illusion of the Author, and the editors taken in by the hoax it seems were not going for a deeper understanding but for a rehashing of this old figure. It is important to bear this in mind because it reveals how readily these editors were to buy a bill of goods, and how much the Yasusada hoax enacts and reveals the myriad collusions—images of authors supporting authors supporting works published in venues which seem to be about values that they don't actually have supporting a picture of the world not really all that different from the one already held, a world largely divorced from contemporary politics—that make that bill of goods seem desirable.

At the very least, the Yasusada project should have led to much serious inquiry and self-criticism by those engaged in middle space practices and the promotion of middle space poetics. After all, in the Yasusada project—centrally perpetrated at the early stages of the rise and establishment of the middle space—

the middle space achieved a strange apotheosis. In it, Johnson thoroughly critiqued the middle space by exceeding it, by employing middle space tactics to leap over it and—in the somewhat miraculous act Nietzsche claims is necessary to transcend oneself—its many shadows, including that of its enabling opposition. Such a truly impressive feat should have deeply informed, and even reformed and reoriented middle space practice. Middle space practitioners and theorists should have felt the need to ask *what next?* And their answers, to rise to the level of the challenge Yasusada created, would have to be truly new and inventive, perhaps even leading to, as Johnson notes in his *Coyote Magazine* interview, “the development of a fairly broad counter-sphere of heteronymous practices that begin to freely circulate alongside the habitual province of ‘empirical’ and genetic ascription—a kind of parallel poetic economy...one not beholden to the relations of production and exchange of the official literary culture...”

But, of course, the contemporary poetry world is the world in which the conceptualist moment was *not* more widely seized, in which all the middle space institutions and practices Johnson critiques still exist, a world in which there are still middle space Authors and everything the Author entails. Johnson, however, does not let what should have been the impact of Yasusada go; as we will see, in various ways he brings up Yasusada to indicate the ways in which so much contemporary writing has already been surpassed, that such work has been weighed and judged and found wanting, that, in light of the Yasusada project, middle space works, if they themselves do not do something extraordinary and timely, are already critiqued, already done, already dated—facts that will only become clearer in the light of literary history. Until such time, Johnson keeps up the fight, cajoling the unresponsive world, but with necessarily new strategies, strategies which, while still conceptual, also are more blatantly direct.

*Epigramitis: 118 Living American Poets*

If in the Yasusada project Johnson challenged the idea of the Author with the ruse of a hoax, in *Epigramitis: 118 Living American Poets*, Johnson challenges our idea of the Author with

the truth of satire. For this undertaking, Johnson employs the epigram as his weapon of choice to attack and deflate the Author. At times a rapier, a hatchet, a bludgeon, an incendiary device, or a banana peel to trip the Author up a bit, the epigram is an inspired choice, one that, while both desperately needed now and time-honored, is, interestingly, almost never deployed. But our age, in which, as the Yasusada hoax shows, the idea of the Author, though often unacknowledged, is very much in existence, demands the epigram. As Johnson notes in the “Praefatio” to *Epigrammitis*, “The epigram was an honored vehicle of vigorous, uncompromised speech, and its common practice undermined, in very healthy ways, the genetic tendency of literati toward conformity and sycophancy,” genetic tendencies which have perhaps only gotten more pronounced today, when poets are “for the most part, strategically polite and scriptedly protocolled toward their peers.” In place of the smoothly running business of poetry Johnson wants a “combative collegiality,” one in which the epigram, a form used traditionally by even very “respectable” poets to “say vile, wicked, and funny things to another poet,” can be used to help inject “some virtue into the body politic,” and to allow poets “by and by, in the afterglow of invective’s catharsis,” to “meet in the commons to drink and laugh and argue intricate questions of prosody and other ultimately pointless things.”

At one level, *Epigrammitis*’s epigrams are just good fun, playful venting. “W.S. Merwin” reads, “Let’s just say it and be done: / W.S. Merwin is our Tennyson.” “Robert Pinsky” states, “I, too, dislike him, / though I’m not sure why.” But even at just this level, Johnson’s work is important. Read in the context of scripted, protocolled po-biz in which, typically, only kind things are said—in which, for example, as Kristin Prevallet states in “Why Poetry Criticism Sucks” (<http://jacketmagazine.com/11/prevellet.html>), “[P]oetry reviews are seldom poetry criticism. They are usually fondling acknowledgments demonstrating likeability”—Johnson’s jokes and japes read like revelations. While, occasionally, Johnson’s epigrams say nice things about others, the subjects of such kind epigrams usually are those who, in Johnson’s estimation, are not well-enough known in the

poetry world. More often, Johnson's epigrams are a corrective to undeserved or generally unchecked positive assessment.

They are, in short, anti-blurbs. How many times have you finished, or rather put down, a book of James Tate, thinking "*Again?*" only to then read the blurbs from Tate's compadres, all the while thinking, "*Really?!*" Johnson's epigrams give voice to such generally unvoiced outrage; his "James Tate" reads, "He caught the same disease as Charles Simic: / A bacterium from Europe, strained through / Asia, arrived in America ca. mid 60's. When / you get it, you do the same kabuki/log-rolling / dance, with minor variations, for forty years, / or until you die." Johnson's poem, like so many of his other epigrams—which also take on author's photos and blogs, all the suits and trappings of the Author everyone notices but which generally receive so little critical attention—is a smart, condensed version of all the catty and snarky comments, the evil—or often simply more accurate—counter-blurbs, you make in your head, or to share with your friends at the cash bar at the AWP conference, or else back channel on line, or if you're really brave, deep in the midst of a comment stream no one ever reads.

However, even though at times their word count is often less than the word count of many of the verbose, over-the-top blurbs gracing many of today's mostly unread poetry collections, these poems are much more substantial than blurbs or blog comments due to the simple fact that they are *poems*. The few negative reviews that get written nowadays often are dismissed as somehow radically peripheral or even antithetical to poetry, but by making poems out of such reviews Johnson manages to short-circuit such thinking, just as he short-circuits any thinking about what kind of poems the epigrams are. Johnson's epigrams could not be more plainspoken and, in fact, gossipy, and yet, by joining an ancient form with transgressive, contemporary content, and joining poetry with its critical antithesis, Johnson makes a new kind of middle space poem that is highly theoretical, and thrilling. This thrill is at least the thrill one feels when one reads a droll O'Hara poem: suddenly, your cattiness is validated—suddenly, it is vital and radical poetry! But it also is the thrill, and the theoretical justness, one feels as one reads the

sections of Charles Bernstein's "The Artifice of Absorption" which are broken up into lines of poetry, recognizing or being reminded of the thin line, or the non-existent line, between poetry and criticism. And, of course, ultimately, the thrill is being able to hear a poem plainly and boldly pronounce a much-suppressed truth. In 1919, well after the heyday of the heroic couplet, T.S. Eliot predicted that all that was needed was "the coming of a Satirist...to prove that the heroic couplet had lost none of its edge." Johnson proves that even in the era of the rise of the middle space poetry and its attendant critique of the plainspoken, ultra-plainspoken truth just awaits it epigrammatist to show that it has not lost its theoretical edge.

Johnson launches his barbs mainly at the supposedly theory-savvy and oppositional avant-garde, the Language poets and their post-avant, middle space progeny, those authors who, having dissected the Author in their writing, really ought to know better. As Johnson notes in "Bruce Andrews," though Andrews has written about "the need / for poets to rediscover the *V-effect*," that is, Brecht's *Verfremden* effect, or method for defamiliarization, Johnson reminds his readers that such an effect is seriously compromised by the presence of the Author: "But verily, / verily, I say unto you, Bruce, if you had a clue / on Brecht's relevance to the reified stage of our / present poesy, you'd more usefully be reflecting, / and with some good old-time self-criticism, on the / *A[uthor]-effect!*" Johnson's specific mode of attack is to deploy juxtaposition in order to reveal how rarely reality lives up to theoretical ideals, to reveal, that is, hypocrisy. According to Johnson, Michael Palmer's language mysticism, which attempts to negotiate a mystical *coniunctio oppositorum* of Language and lyric, results ultimately in slick po-biz cooption. Playfully channeling the Governorator, the epigram states: "O Ideal Reader, / Upper-Middle-Classed, / Pretty Girlie-Man, / Master of Fine Arted: / Through the Gate Whose Name is Author, / You shall be lost within / The Maze of the Market, / and you shall be, etc. / astonished by the letter, etc. / Whose Name is M, or L, or A, etc."

Johnson's favored juxtaposition tends to be historical juxtaposition. Recognizing that, of course, history and time will have

their inevitable effects on the assessments of all the poets writing today, that at some point the vast majority of Authors writing today will become at best mere footnotes to literary history, Johnson critiques by contextualizing, by seeing the present in light of the critical future when all of the chaff has blown away. Such is the case in Johnson's praise of "Alan Davies": "In the earnest years of Materialist Language / writing, he was the Idealist ugly duckling. / Now he is the one Swan of Metaphysical weight / to have escaped the Turkeyed fate of his siblings, / those stuffed Pomos on a plate, those ready-to-be / carved Lovelaces and Sucklings." As both risky, experimental works in their own right and a recognition of virtually inevitable historical anonymity, Johnson's epigrams also are arguments for greater literary inventiveness, for Yasusada-like experimentation with the Author, the Author being someone, as Johnson repeatedly points out, who will not be remembered anyway. Johnson would rather have such ultimate anonymity be embraced as creative and empowering choice now rather than an unwitting banishment later on.

If it is tempting to say that avant-garde poets don't worry about such mundane things as literary fame, their behaviors suggest otherwise. Consider, for example, Kevin Killian's reports from the National Poetry Foundation conferences on innovative writing in Orono, Maine, in 1996 and 2000. (Available, respectively, at <http://epc.buffalo.edu/documents/orono96/contents.html> and <http://www.bigbridge.org/issue6/orono.htm>; at <http://dodie-bellamy.blogspot.com>; Killian also reports extensively on the 2008 conference, though, of course, this publication could not have influenced Johnson's 2004 *Epigramitis*.) As evidenced by the facts that the epigram "Kevin Killian" states, "His Orono reports make avant poets excited and curious. / I was *furious* not to find a single mention of 'Kentuvius,'" and that many of the other key players of the Orono conferences (including conference co-organizer and middle space poet Jennifer Moxley) also are subjects of epigrams, these documents, at least as much as the overwhelmingly positive blurb, are behind *Epigramitis*. Killian's series of reports began, literally, as a fashion report (archived on the Buffalo Poetics listserv) from

the 1996 conference, and it has gotten more developed and slick since then, so that the 2008 report comes in 24 extensive installments. While in 1996 Killian complains about the ugly, text-heavy conference t-shirts and wants to give an “Oscar” to a particular plenary talk, by 2008, these reports, including the photographs that accompanied the 2004 and 2008 reports, are pretty much a slick, if text-heavy, issue of *Middle-Space People*.

However, there is one striking difference between Killian’s reports and *People*. Whereas our current fame culture generally loves cattiness and muckraking and shocking revelations, Killian’s reports, written by one invested in the scene on which he reports, are mostly jaunty, fabulous fairy tales, whitewashes. For example, in “What I Saw at the Orono Conference 2000,” Killian states, “Overall I had a marvelous time and can’t think of a single flaw in the arrangements or execution of this event, though I can imagine others carping (in fact, I heard some of them). Malcontents, though we need malcontents don’t we.” But Killian never significantly discusses these complaints. One is hard-pressed to discover in Killian’s writing why anyone would be discontented at such an event—though one can glimpse on occasion a picture of a tiny classroom with what looks like painted cinderblock walls with about five people in it, and you remember: *oh, yeah...this is, after all, a literature conference*. (This problem has been addressed by the 2008 report, in which the photos are mostly close-ups of well-dressed—even if in slightly grungy grad student bar-night mode—good-looking people. Such use of photography is clearly referenced in Johnson’s *Epigramitis*, which pairs each epigram with a photo—clip art, or something sloppily photoshopped, or a public domain image of a lesser celebrity, or a picture of a great poet the Author referred to in the epigram most certainly is not—in order to add further juxtaposing slapstick to the epigram’s attack.)

Killian’s increasingly slick presentation and lack of critique—which becomes palpable in the 2008 reports in which, in part 5, Killian states that “[o]f course, the best parts [of the conference], or almost always so, happened when we [Killian and Bellamy] would get back to Steve and Jennifer’s place and

dissect the things we had just done or seen..." but then does not discuss any of that dissecting—is especially strange in Killian. Closely affiliated with the New Narrative movement, a movement that stresses the use of fragmentation and meta-textual elements and divagations to make shocking and often revelatory investigations into sex, the body, and desire, Killian generally is a craftsman of such investigatory and revelatory writing. To *not* witness this kind of writing from Killian—a writer whom Johnson elsewhere refers to as “excellent”—in regard to the Orono conferences seems indeed to indicate the power of the presence of the Author, offering evidence of the fact that, as Johnson points out (in an interview with Pedja Kojovic; available at <http://www.bigbridge.org/fictpkojovic.htm>), “We inhabit a poetic subculture where there is great nervousness, touchiness, and bad humor when it comes to roasting the Poet’s legal identity...I suspect it has something to do with the deepening marginal status of poetry within a hyper-commercialized surround that’s increasingly driven by celebrity worship and media spectacle, from talk shows to politics, to art, to journalism, to war.”

Certainly, Johnson’s motives in writing *Epigramitis* are not pure. Some of his epigrams are motivated by revenge, a redress of personal grievances, for having been, at times, it seems, purposefully and systematically excluded from histories and narratives of the late-twentieth century avant-garde. They express their ire at people who do not support his work, or let their enthusiasms for Johnson’s work drop, thus participating in the silencing that Johnson finds so reprehensible, recognizing in it the most seemingly politic and slick deployment of a most powerful control. Other epigrams, such as “David Wojahn”—which states, “I love his article where / he says that Araki / Yasusada is a much better poet / than Ted Hughes / or Kent Johnson”—are about the (ironically) comparatively low esteem in which his own work is held.

Such self-righteousness, however justified, is leavened in *Epigramitis* by the many instances in which Johnson admits his own problematic nature. Ultimately, though, motives and manners do not matter in this case. The critique of the Author, and

all the ceremonies and ritual, the primping and preening, the asskissing and brownnosing, which prop up the contemporary Author, is there to be made. In one of her responses to the 1996 Orono conference, Marjorie Perloff notes, “We’ve got to keep arguing and not be too polite.” It is Johnson who most decisively and bravely picks up on Perloff’s directives.

### *I Once Met*

Modeled largely on Joe Brainard’s *I Remember*, a poetic work made up of a litany of remembrances each of which begins with the phrase “I remember,” *I Once Met* (also available at [http://almostisland.com/prose/i\\_once\\_met](http://almostisland.com/prose/i_once_met)) is a collection of approximately 80 prose paragraphs each of which purports to tell of a meeting Johnson had with another author, each of which begins, “I once met [insert poet’s name here].”

The work in *I Once Met* overlaps with many of the themes, techniques, and central aims of *Epigramitis*: Johnson still uses juxtaposition to point out hypocrisies; he at times uses his writing to settle scores; and, again, the brunt of Johnson’s ire is reserved for the avant-garde and their offspring, whom Johnson represents as being hypocritical, cliquish, obsequious. However, in *I Once Met*, Johnson’s thinking about the person of the Author becomes more complex. In *Epigramitis*, Johnson uses the cutting shard of the epigram to attack. In *I Once Met*, Johnson uses the more spacious prose paragraph to reconsider, to recognize that the Author is much more often an all-to-human, contradictory mix. So, for example, even though in his memory of Jed Rasula Johnson recalls responding to a publication of Rasula’s with a riposte, he also tells about how they later met for a drink at an MLA conference, and had “a most pleasant talk.” The contradictoriness, or rather the simple mixed-ness, of such interactions with authors is thematic. Johnson often notes that he has heard that authors with whom he has had some difficulty were in fact, in other contexts, “very nice,” and, if a man, “a real gentleman.”

Clearly, in *I Once Met*, the Author is a mix, and, as Johnson points out, in fact has always been. At the conclusion of his meeting with Mark Nowak in Pembroke College, Johnson looks

at a picture of Edmund Spenser and remarks on how Spenser is both “[g]enius author of the Faerie Queen” and “dark polemicist for genocide in Ireland.” There are, in short, very few clear villains or heroes in *I Once Met*. The only heroes are those few who faithfully embody their own mixed being, including a handful of clear-eyed pragmatists—including Clayton Eshleman, who responded to a gushing and flattering young Kent Johnson by remarking that if Johnson really liked him and his magazine *Sulfur* so much that Johnson should “send...a check for the complete run and write an essay about it all,” adding that “[i]f you want to be a poet, you can’t just flatter people and expect to get something out of it”—and a small group of those who have very good historical memory, and who thus have minds naturally attuned to seeing the often jarring juxtapositions, the natural correctives, that historical knowledge typically provides.

Such meetings, Johnson seems to say, in fact are only valuable as correctives. In large part this is because such meetings—or the accounts of such meetings—always are inherently unreliable. Eyewitness testimony generally is unreliable, but it certainly should be doubted when it is reporting on an encounter—always charged with myriad feelings: expectation, longing, obsession, jealousy, ambition—with the phantasmal Author. To emphasize this point, many of Johnson’s “meetings” are purely imagined, fanciful. In only his fourth remembrance, Johnson tells how, after a reading the two gave together, surrounded by Brown graduate students, Kasey Silem Mohammed, prompted by an insignificant request from Johnson, blurts out, “Go fuck yourself, you manufacturer of scandal...”; however, this account ends with the parenthetical note: “(No, not really, I just made that up.)” Johnson’s memory of Billy Collins is literally a dream sequence, beginning, “I never met Billy Collins, but once I had a dream about him,” but the dream is itself so stereotypically dreamlike that the dream itself seems fake. In fact, there are in it so many odd, ominous events, premonitions, stylistic parodies, hallucinations, ghostly appearances, and, frankly, factual infelicities that *I Once Met* seems less primarily a collection of memories and more a series of mirages.

This hallucinatory nature comes to a head in Johnson's remembrances involving blood, be it the blood of violent political regimes or Johnson's own blood relations. Mention of actual violence, no matter how dematerialized in decades of being hypermediated, becomes strikingly real in the ghost world Johnson creates. For, while there is much we do not know about particular authors and their particular lives, we do know about tyranny and genocide, and this becomes the real against which the hallucination that is the Author crumbles. In *I Once Met's* world of ghosts, the truly dead have the most substance. The other truly substantive presences are those of Johnson's sons:

I once met Brooks Johnson. He is my son. He is brilliant, compassionate, wise, at ease in his skin, clear and humble in ways I have never been. A true gentleman. I think they call it getting your genes from your mom. I wrote a poem about an evening we spent fishing together, which was published in a magazine. I am sorry I have not been the father to him he so richly deserved. And I am sorry I have embarrassed him here, in saying that. But you see, that's Poetry, and who knows its needs or its nature? No one does, my son. And I wonder if I've been waiting, all of my life, to write for you this small and stillborn poem.

...

I've never met Aaron Johnson. He is my younger son. He is beautiful, compassionate, deeply creative, sad, brave, true to himself and to others in ways I have never been. A young gentleman. By day, with abandon, he climbs towering cliffs, or speeds down winter mountains headlong, heedless of his life. By night, alone in his room, he makes drawings that are so complex, I am amazed. The killing love I feel for him, I've never been able to rule. And on either side of the screen between, our backlit shadows awkwardly move...I have heard him cry, and he has heard me cry, too. I hope that we will meet one day. Maybe we won't, but I think, really, that we surely will.

Although one imagines the veracity of these encounters matters a great deal to Johnson and his sons, in regard to the Author, it means very little. If real—and Johnson, from what I can tell, does have two sons, named Brooks and Aaron, though I have

no idea about the nature of their relationships—the encounters serve as strong critiques of the Author, who, in a reversal of the Biblical narrative, is readily sacrificed by Johnson in favor of his sons. In such a reading, the value of the phantasmal Author, who serves mostly merely as a hovering placeholder while the speaker summons up the courage to confess something difficult to his sons, is essentially nil. However, even if these memories are false, they still offer a moving fiction, one which reveals a willingness on the reader's part to sacrifice the Author, critiquing the stable and significant value of the Author for clearly more significant personal, familial encounters.

Though, with all the name-dropping in *I Once Met*, Johnson at one level clearly is establishing his bona fides, showing his credentials, all of Johnson's meetings are meant to show off how little import all such meetings have. They reveal that Johnson has met enough authors to say that he knows the ideal of the (unified, transcendent) Author to be a fiction, a—sometimes scary—fairy tale. In this way, Johnson's obsessive name-dropping becomes a kind of theoretical therapy. In *I Once Met*, the Author, who typically survives in obfuscating but seductive hints and suggestions, is so omnipresent in a host of so many manifestations that he virtually disappears into its hyper-reality. Johnson's strategy in *I Once Met* is the logic and strategy that a parent uses when she catches a child smoking and so makes the child smoke a whole pack, get sick, and hate cigarettes for the rest of her life. It is the brilliant, burly, counterintuitive strategy of using explosives to fight an oil well fire.

*Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz: Eleven Submissions to the War*

Johnson is even more explosive in *Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz*. The book gets its title from Theodor Adorno, who famously said that it is barbaric to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz. Johnson employs one of Adorno's partial retractions of this claim—"I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric...[But] literature must resist this verdict"—as an epigraph for *Lyric Poetry*. And, though, as a 40-page chapbook, *Lyric Poetry* is a relatively slim volume, it also is one of the twenty-first century's, and certain-

ly one of the middle space's, strongest anti-war statements. Asked in his *Coyote Magazine* interview what he thought of the role of poetry in light of the war on Iraq, Johnson states that "[p]erhaps what we need to do, as poets, is plug our deepest recesses into that great and encompassing uncertainty, fear, paradox, and, yes, dark comedy of the current conjuncture and just see what happens," adding that poets should "[a]llow ourselves to be shocked and lit up by the horror." *Lyric Poetry* is a book that does all that it can to resist the charge of barbarism, but it does so by, perhaps paradoxically, revealing the barbaric horrors of war, transporting us imaginatively into war's hallucinatory, nightmarish realm, and by revealing, and even admitting to, what is, in fact, the typical barbarism of poetry.

Considering the ways the American public—kept from seeing even the sterile, if still moving, images of flag-draped coffins—generally has been kept free from viewing the horrors of war, it is proper that contemporary anti-war poetry be graphic. In this way, poems can have some of the revelatory power that the shocking images—shocking in large part due to the fact that we were actually seeing them—from Abu Ghraib had. In "Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz, or 'Get the Hood Back On,'" Johnson captures images, but even more vitally, he captures the disconcerting voices, the mental states, of the Abu Ghraib prison guards. In each of this poem's six prose paragraphs, a speaker initially introduces him/herself to a prisoner, revealing him/herself to be the picture of a contemporary American while additionally offering hints about the larger ideological forces and systemic woes that have led to their being in Abu Ghraib in the first place. One begins, "A pleasure to meet you, Khafif, I'm an American boy, former Homecoming King and now Little League coach and Assistant Manager in-training at Wal-Mart, which is providing jobs and low prices for our depressed area, which has been hard hit ever since Maytag left town, life is tough sometimes." But then each one of these paragraphs turns upon a kind phrase—"I hope you won't take this the wrong way, because I don't want to assault your sensibilities, or anything like that..." "And since I believe it is always important to say what one means and not beat around the bush, I

want you to know something...”—to announce what kind of horrific torture the guard is going to inflict on the prisoner in order to soften them up for Military Intelligence: “I’m going to fuck you in the ass now with a fluorescent light tube, you sorry-assed, primitive thug...”; “I’m going to hold a pistol to your head and tell you to jack-off, while you recite the Koran as fast as you can, you heathen, Hell-bound fuck, and then I’m going to look at the camera with a cigarette dangling from my sultry, teenage lips, giving the thumbs up.” The threatened—or, rather, promised—violence is explicit and terrible, but the picture of the mind capable of being virtually simultaneously so polite and so cruel, a mind thoroughly indoctrinated into the customer service of consumer society that it cannot see what it is actually doing underneath its supposed kindness, also offers strong critique. Such horrors and such critique can be found throughout *Lyric Poetry*.

More typically, though, the awful juxtapositions revealed in “Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz” are employed to critique lyric poetry’s relationship with power and war. The kind words the prison guards speak more typically are the beautiful words the lyric poet sings even in the midst of violence. In the short narrative poem “Mission,” Johnson, writing “after” the ancient Greek poet Archilocus, tells the story of a small band of Greek warriors who set off for “lovely Asia” in order to sack a city. Along the way, in the midst of war preparations, the soldiers also pass their time with “writing poems” and engaging in poetic activity, speaking “in low voices of the beauty around [them]...of time, and friendship, and truth.” After just ten lines, the poem suddenly ends: “Aided by the gods, we stormed Smyrna, and burned its profane temples to the ground.” Lyric poetry, Johnson reminds us, was—even if (or, perhaps, especially when) written by classical authors on their way to demolish those they considered barbarians—barbaric well before Auschwitz.

The judgment passed on Archilocus’s military avant-garde is also passed on today’s Post-Avant-garde in poetry. In “When I First Read Ange Mlinko,” Johnson tells of how he first read the work of this Elliptical poet in an issue of *The Poker*, falling

in love with the “truly extraordinary” work “as if / it / were / some / message / from / beyond” until “for no reason at all” he remembers reading in an article “of four little girls / incinerated in a mud compound in a dry and lonely place, where fine carpets were made by orphans / for the foreign trade.” (There may have been some reason for such a connection: the issue of *The Poker* Johnson was reading also featured Iraqi poets.) Though very self-aware and self-critical, noting that he may be bringing this up in order to use “a tragedy that is not mine to give some moral pressure to a poem / that / up / until / now / hadn’t / been // about much at all,” Johnson also admits that having written of this tragedy “means nothing, anyway, in the end.” The reason: “...the girls did / die, ‘were evaporated,’ at least that’s what the little article said, and no matter how self- / reflexive I get, or / how suspicious you become of my quaint / and insecure prosody, / those dirty-haired, / often-raped / kids / will / still / be / dead // and never thought about again, by you or anyone.”

The result of such writing is that one feels both chastened and activated. One begins to see more clearly—more clearly than if one is simply told that, in Auden’s famous phrase, “poetry makes nothing happen”—how powerless poetry is, and perhaps even how complicit it is as a cover-up of current events. Such complicity is clear when, at the end of “Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz,” the last soldier to speak identifies him/herself as “an American poet,” who seems a deluded progressive, one who both is liberal in all the seemingly right ways—listening to world music, reading “Adorno and Spivak,” having “voted for Clinton and Gore,” having published “poems on the Poets Against the War website”—but who also recognizes his own complicity—recognizing that Clinton’s administration “bombed you a lot, too,” and that he lives “quite nicely off the fruits of a dying imperium”—and subjects the prisoner to a torture in which he boxes the prisoner’s ears “with two big books of poems, one of them experimental and the other more plain speech-like, both of them hardbound and by leading academic presses, and I’m going to do it until your brain swells to the size of a basketball and you die like the fucking lion for real.” Such a poem at least has some

potential to make something happen: one will write and think and act and work hard not to become like this hypocrite.

In fact, Johnson's poems are so potent because they reveal the central role that projection plays in our reading and thinking. The poet who appears at the end of "Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz" is terrifying in large part because under his sheen of liberalism, he actually is working on the nihilistic idea that nothing matters, though he projects this thinking onto his victim, stating, "By the time any investigation gets to you, your grandchildren will have been dead for over one thousand years, and poetry will be inhabiting regions you can't even begin to imagine." The poet, too, of course, will be dead when that investigation occurs, and poetry will have moved on, but this is something the poet cannot even begin to think about. And instead of really trying to encounter and work through this anxiety, the poet simply projects his anxiety and continues to carry out policy in the only way he knows how. Additionally, Johnson's placement of this section at the end of the poem is of course strategic: if one has recognized and has been judgmental of the hypocrisy and the projection of anxiety of the speakers in the other sections, one also must acknowledge and want to indict the hypocrisy and the self-deluding projections of the poet, the middle space poet who is content to hit someone over the head with the same old work instead of working out some other method of engagement.

This inclusion of reference to poetry at the end of "Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz" also surprisingly points to the strange presence of Billy Collins in *Lyric Poetry*. Collins—who also is one of the very few, and by far the most significant, plain-speech poets mentioned in *I Once Met*—is a poet who very often employs such a self-referential turn to discussing poetry at the end of his poems. This maneuver, if somewhat common, is employed at the end of Johnson's poem, "Baghdad Exceeds Its Object," which should be linked with Collins—for not only does "Baghdad Exceeds Its Object" end with a Collinesque self-referential turn to poetry, but it also employs many of the formal signatures of a typical Collins poem, including employing the stanza as a paragraph, and shaping the stanzas with sim-

ilar syntactical and organizational structures. However, though it gets its form from Collins, “Baghdad Exceeds Its Object,” in its voice and subject matter, is nothing like a Collins poem. Instead of being a bemused meditation on some domestic event, “Baghdad Exceeds Its Object”—the epigraph of which comes from Under-Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith, who states, “I want to be in the class of people who did...the thing that met the aesthetic of the moment”—is spoken in the manic, dictatorial voice of someone who cannot at all believe the violence of the collateral damage that the U.S. invasion of Iraq has caused. The poem begins:

Come off it, Tha’lab, you faker, you *kadhīb*,  
yes, very funny, but for goodness sake,  
just put back those purple bowels in your tummy,  
you’ll be late for work!

Make haste, Safia, you little scamp, you pig-tailed *qasida*,  
put that fat flap of scalp back on your crown,  
now’s not the hour for teenage pranks,  
it’s time to go to school!

After seven more verbal assaults, the poem concludes:

Good morning, Mrs. al-Jurjani, you *madin*,  
author of four essays on postmodern currents in American poetry,  
what are you howling and wailing like that for, hitting your skull  
against the flagstones like a mechanical hammer?  
A horse is a horse, and if a horse is dead, a horse is dead—  
More so, you are naked, which is unbecoming of a lady your age  
and standing.  
Like Hamlet, your emotion is unconvincing, for it exceeds its  
object.  
Therefore, we beseech thee: Show some gratitude, and put a plug  
in it.

Clearly ugly and abject, this poem becomes even more grotesque when read against the typical Collins poem that lives behind it. While a Collins poem often turns to reveal some insight or to deliver a punch line, “Baghdad Exceeds Its Object”

only becomes more unrelentingly brutal as it progresses, as its body count increases, and as it becomes clear that the voice is not able to see what's going on, even, it seems, projecting its own perspective onto a victim, noting, for example, of one that "we know you love the special effects of Hollywood movies," and not seeing that it is he himself who sees the carnage as just special effects, experiencing none of the pain and loss as worth anything—it all exceeds its object. While most middle space poets tend to shy away both from referencing in such a direct way the difficult, momentous content of Johnson's poem and from using the formal and structural lineaments of the typical Collins poem, a form and structure the middle space ascribes to its ultra-talk other, Johnson reaches beyond what middle space poets typically reach for and yokes this form with shocking content to make "Baghdad Exceeds Its Object" a truly radical middle space poem.

A clear anti-war poem, "Baghdad Exceeds Its Object," like all the other poems in *Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz* also is clearly meant to oppose the stance taken by Charles Bernstein in his essay "Enough" (available at <http://listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu/archives/poetics.html>). In "By Way of Afterword," the final piece of writing in *Lyric Poetry*, Johnson takes issue with the fact that, though Bernstein recognizes the need for anti-war poetry, Bernstein, according to Johnson, only wants anti-war poetry of a particular variety: not the kind of anti-war poetry of "righteous messages" and "digestible messages" to be found at the "Poets Against the War" web site, but, rather, anti-war poetry that is Language-inflected, that "must (in [Bernstein's] words) eschew the 'language of social and linguistic norms' and demonstrate, instead, measures of 'ambiguity,' 'complexity,' and 'skepticism' capable of exploring the ways such norms 'are used to discipline and contain dissent.'"

For Johnson, such thinking, which engages in precisely the righteous monologues and pronouncements by fiat Bernstein condemns in others, is hypocritical and just wrong. Referencing a talk given by Eliot Weinberger, Johnson notes that in fact "nearly all great and lasting anti-war poetry...is overtly political and written in language that approximates the 'norm....'" For

Johnson, the cause trumps—the cause *must* trump—any particular way of dealing with the crisis, and in *Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz* Johnson himself does not so much choose a single approach so much as avail himself of a variety of approaches to attend to the various dictates of his conscience and the dictates of the horrors around him, at times deploying the often very clear language of poetic engagement one finds in poets such as Blake, Vallejo, Hikmet, Ginsburg, and so many others, and occasionally combining approaches in his own way, as he does in “Baghdad Exceeds Its Object,” into powerful, singular statements which reveal how vital and engaged a radical middle space poetry could be.

*Homage to the Last Avant-Garde*

Containing selections of poems included in *Epigramitis*, *I Once Met*, and *Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz*, and a variety of new poems, including a smattering of single, short poems, and a larger collection of “traductions,” rough or free translations, from ancient Greek poems, *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde* could be mistaken for a collection of new and selected poems. However, *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde* (*Homage*) is significantly messier than the typical new and selected collection. For example, the poems in *Homage* are not gathered in sections strictly according to their original publications; instead, they are mixed up in the book’s six different sections. This mess, though, has meaning: it stands in contrast to the slick, the too-easily synthesized. In homage to Jack Spicer’s *Book of Magazine Verse*, each of *Homage*’s section titles features a reference to a journal; however, each of the journals Johnson refers to, in section titles such “Eight Odes for *The Evergreen Review*” and “Five Sentimental Poems for *Angel Hair*,” focuses on avant-garde aesthetics. And one of the key features of the version of the avant-garde featured in such journals is how amazingly diverse, and even messy, it was. For example, among erotic and even pornographic illustrations, *The Evergreen Review* published work by all sorts of writers, including poetry by LeRoi Jones, Frank O’Hara, Charles Bukowski, and Derek Walcott. In *Homage*, Johnson it seems is creating his own multifarious poetic community out of

his own work.

Such an undertaking is, in its own way, utopian, or perhaps, to borrow a phrase from Cynthia Ozick, Messtopian. Johnson wants a kind of messiness, especially in a po-biz world of the static or redundant middle, in which the slickly professional is taking over, in which journals more and more represent a single aesthetic, in which even first books, influenced by the market forces of first book contests, as Beth Ann Fennelly points out in “The Winnowing of Wildness: On First Book Contests and Style” (*The Writer’s Chronicle* 36.2 (Oct/Nov 2003): 53-4), lose “diversity” or “range,” a diversity or range which could potentially encompass and incorporate “experimental” poems and “formalist verse,” but which, however, become “drawback[s]” in the current zeitgeist, devalued in favor of more marketable “stylistic unity.” As with any manifestation of utopian thinking, though, the central aim is to reveal an alternative to the status quo. With his references to an earlier poetry scene, Johnson, ever conscious of history, reminds his readers of what the poetry world looked like, and reminds his readers, as well, that the culture of our current scene, which at times might feel natural and immutable, is really malleable, flexible. This culture has changed, and so it can change.

Beyond its stylistic diversity, its significant messiness, Johnson’s Messtopia does offer some specific messages. However, in one of the very few downsides of *Homage*, one must look elsewhere for the crystallized statement of intent. *Homage*’s statement of intent is included in “Imitation, Traduction, Fiction, Response,” the original publication (available at <http://jacketmagazine.com/32/k-kent.shtml>) of much of the work found in *Homage*’s third section, “Twenty Traductions and Some Mystery Prose for ‘C’: *A Journal of Poetry*.” In “Imitation, Traduction, Fiction, Response,” Johnson introduces versions of ancient Greek poems translated, or traduced, by Johnson and a (*very* likely fictional) co-translator. According to Johnson, these often bawdy and silly traductions, often wild versions of poems by often real Greek poets from between 700-400 B.C.E., have their serious point, a critique, to make:

[D]espite Modernism's partial recovery (Pound, notably) of classical practices of imitation, and a few salient examples since (Lowell, perhaps most famously), the assumption that poesis and its orders beam outward from the individual writer comfortably dominates our contemporary scene, including—waning theoretical claims notwithstanding—among our so-called post-avant, where gestures of intertextuality and citation seem most often proffered not in homage to and extension of what has come before, but in proof of the Poet's encompassing purview and authority—

According to Johnson, there's nothing wrong with this development, but it also is the case that other possibilities exist in experimenting with translation, that "a whole realm of conceptual and even fictional surprise awaits there"—what we will find is a whole new picture of how to develop poems, one based on the idea of imitation as outlined in the epistle on imitation sent by Petrarch to Boccaccio: "An imitator must see to it that what he writes is similar, but not the very same; and the similarity, moreover, should not be like that of a painting or a statue of the person represented, but rather like that of a son to a father, where there is often great difference in the features and members, yet after all there is a shadowy something—"

Although, generally, these ideas are much more fully—more largely, conceptually—embodied and taken on in the Yasusada project, and so in the section of *Homage* that features the translations from the Greek Johnson can seem somewhat redundant, there is much to like in the Greek poems the above writing introduces. The fragments these poems generally consist of often crumble into meaning—the last poem, "Poetry," found as an "anonymous fragment," reads only, "What [does] poetry do for the world?" and the response, according to the bracketed editors' notes preceding and following the fragment, which each read "[Rotted away.]," is that poetry can make nothing happen. A bit slyer is a poem attributed to the poet Hipponax: "Not once has the eyeless goddess, Wealth, / come to my hut and said, 'Hipponax, I'm / giving you thirty four silver minas and that's / just for starters.' Not once. // Slut-Bitch." The title

Johnson gives this poem is “Providence,” which not only names good fortune but also the name of the location of the Brown University writing program, which hosts a good deal of middle space poets, including Johnson’s friends, the middle space poets C.D. Wright and Forrest Gander. In a slightly masked way, Johnson employs the Greeks to complain about his own comparative lack of worldly success in poetry.

But, the traductions from the Greek also have their larger meanings. With their bawdy, direct language, these poems, like Johnson’s epigrams, remind readers of the tumult of poetry, the extent to which poets, and even classic poets, were engaged and enraged and embroiled. There was no Golden Age without its troubles. (Johnson in fact includes two poets who were militarily engaged: the mercenary Archilocus against Hipponax, who, along with his daughters, hanged himself to escape the fate of being killed by Archilocus.) And, as a combination of some well-known great poets, some lesser-known poets, and some likely invented poets, the traduced Greek poets are a reminder of the fleetingness of fame, and of the fact that to whatever extent one might be remembered, one also will be misremembered. The Author is at best a traduction and not a translation of the work, a creation out of what may not be pure motives—as “Fragment,” commenting on Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” states, “they will remember us / by our pieces. Our torsos / will move them to poetry. / They will put our parts on parade, / to imagine what we were, / so to forget what they, / dreaming us, are.”

Translation, imitation, traduction, fiction, and response are not limited to the section of traductions from the Greek; rather they are everywhere in *Homage*. *Homage* is a take-off on Pound’s *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, a book of traductions of that Roman poet from the first century B.C.E, a poet who is known, not least of all by Pound himself, as a subversive court poet, a poet in the circles of power but also, in his verse, at odds with that power, and for his decision to focus his poetic energies on the searching and inquiring lyric rather than the imperial propaganda of epic. In a similar way, Johnson’s work is a traduction of the work of a number of poets. The traductions from the

Greek opens onto the fourth section of the book, “Eight Imitations for *Trobar*,” in which each poem is written after the work of another poet, after Tu Fu, Cavafy, Jack Spicer, Nicanor Parra, Barbara Guest, Czeslaw Milosz, Cesar Vallejo, and John Ashbery. Extending the work on the Greek poets, the first poem of this section, “To John Bradley,” is a meditation on literary fame, or lack thereof, which ends, “Our poems will be completely / forgotten, rot in the landfill of oblivion. With wry smiles and toasts / to the ancient ones, we console each other: // In that common, mass grave, we shall never be alone.”

*Homage's* translations, however, tend to focus on the last avant-garde, that is, the group of New York School poets. David Lehman's version of the last avant-garde is here in many poems and references—including even a sestina, “Sestina: Avantforte,” which employs the names of the New York School poets, plus Joseph Ceravolo, as teleutons, an echo and a hybrid, perhaps of both Pound's “Sestina: Altaforte” and David Lehman's own “Sestina” (in *Jim and Dave Defeat the Masked Man*), which uses the names of poets including Anne Sexton, Whitman, Wallace Stevens, Ted Berrigan, and Marvin Bell as teleutons—and this most certainly is a group Johnson would want to pay homage to: Lehman notes that the poets of this group “like hoaxes and spoofs, parodies and strange juxtapositions, pseudotranslations and collages.” *Homage's* epigraph is from Frank O'Hara: “You just go on your nerve.”

However, as one might expect, Johnson going on his nerve must entail playing fast and loose with his homage. His homage cannot be all homage—it often is critique. Johnson also spoofs the New York School poets and, in an act that might be delayed poetic justice—in “David Lehman” in *Epigramitis*, Johnson notes, “In the Preface to the 1999 edition / of *The Best of American Poetry*, / he called me ‘incontrovertibly brilliant’ / and invited me to read at the KGB. / But then (O bitchy fickleness, thou marrow / of all poesy, of the last avant-garde, / even!), he decided he didn't like me”—Lehman's largely uncritical laudatory portrayal of this group. Lehman states that the New York School poets “are not the last avant-garde movement we will ever have,” but he does say that they do make up “the last

authentic avant-garde movement that we have had in American poetry,” claiming that the New York School offers a kind of “true poetry, which resists the blandishments of celebrity culture, is impatient with pretense and piety, and remembers that the gratuitousness of a work of art is its grace.” Though in some ways Johnson would agree with Lehman’s analysis—especially when Lehman notes that it is simply difficult to be avant-garde today as “the avant-garde’s incursions into the temple of art have become ritualized as predictable gestures of postmodernism”—Johnson certainly takes issue with Lehman’s notion of the New York School’s easy authenticity, implicitly arguing that if the New York School was “authentic” such often gratuitous authenticity is less than ideal.

Johnson, for example, brings up many of the foibles of the group. Importing late-twentieth-century poetry epiphenomenon Foetry, the website devoted to monitoring nepotism and cronyism in poetry prizes, Johnson writes of “the inscription W.H. Auden had written for Jimmy [Schuyler] in a first edition of *Some Trees*, by John Ashbery, / it said: To my friend in Foetry and all other things, Mr. James Schuyler.” Here, Johnson reminds readers of how this group often operated, giving each other prizes. (Auden awarded Ashbery, who had written an undergraduate thesis on Auden, the Yale Younger Poets Prize, and Ashbery, a Pulitzer Prize judge in 1980, helped to ensure that Schuyler won the award that year.) Additionally, according to Johnson, such advancement occurred in regard to work which perhaps was not always deserving. For example, it is clear that when Johnson writes in “Sestina: Avantforte,” “Kenneth Koch’s eyes got big as pool balls. A sestina? A sestina by the poet of ‘The Tennis Court Oath,’ John Ashbery?” Johnson is chiding what now can seem the New York School’s naivety and somewhat limited ambition—as Lehman notes, Ashbery himself notes that “[s]estinas are easy to write”—just as he also clearly is spoofing those who, like Lehman and many middle-space thinkers, seem to believe that one can be avant-garde by putting incongruous material into a poetic form.

Johnson increases the scale of his critique in “The New York School (Or: I Grew Ever More Intense),” a poem in which

he employs once again large-scale historical juxtaposition. In this poem, Johnson sets a seemingly rather playfully commodified version of the New York School—each of the poem’s odd-numbered prose paragraphs begins with a member of the New York School emerging from a toiletry product (“I turned over the bottle of shampoo and Frank O’Hara came out....I squeezed the toothpaste tube and James Schuyler came out....”)—against starkly contrasting violent scenes—each of this poem’s even-numbered prose paragraphs contains graphic depictions of violence, and often U.S.-sponsored violence, from around the world. In this poem, while the New York School’s name-dropping becomes brand-naming, Johnson connects this brand-naming and the rampant capitalist consumerism of which it is a part with the recent history of American violence abroad, violence that the New York School, in Lehman’s version of it, does not significantly engage.

If such critique seems familiar in Johnson’s work, *Homage* as a whole differs from Johnson’s earlier work in that in *Homage* Johnson begins to realize that he is someone who has a distinct perspective and a method to pass on. In *Homage*, Johnson, in effect, translates himself into a father, someone in a position to give advice to a new generation of poets. This is clear in “33 Rules of Poetry for Poets 23 and Under,” a work in which Johnson makes explicit—even to the point where he must apologize for being “so pedantic”—what he would want from younger poets, and in which many of the rules are a summation of so many of Johnson’s ideas. Johnson, for example, writes about the value of translation, the need to study “the old Greeks and Romans,” and the need to resist fashion, and he reminds readers that poetry is mostly “show and acquired manners,” offering encouragement to “[g]o on your nerves” especially when one thinks one shouldn’t. Johnson’s rules are world-wise and knowing, complex and contradictory lessons for poets today. Rule 2 states, “Don’t suck up to poets. Well, OK, you will do so, of course, like all poets do, but when you do, feel it in your bones. Take this self-knowledge and turn it into a weapon you wield without mercy.” Rule 13 instructs, “After reading Roland Barthes’s famous essay on it, watch professional

wrestling at least once a month. Reflect on how the spectacle corresponds, profoundly, to the poetry field.” Rule 24 states, “When someone tells you there are two kinds of poetry, one of them bad, one of them good, chuckle gently,” and finds its echo in Rule 30, which states, in part, that “[i]f someone tells you there are two kinds of poetry, chuckle gently.” And Johnson’s rules even include advice for poets who might themselves become parents; Rule 32 states, “Determine, as of now, that should you have children sometime, your devotion to poetry will somehow enrich their lives and not be a cause for suffering. Listen to me and don’t take this as melodramatic, middle-aged fluff. Quite a few kids have died for lack of what a poet found there.”

Johnson does not allow this translation into literary parentage happen smoothly. Though there are a number of poems about fatherhood in *Homage*—most of them in the book’s second section, called “Five Sentimental Poems for *Angel Hair*”—in them, fatherhood almost always is problematized, and the poems in fact *resist* sentiment. The only purely sentimental poem, “I Dreamt Us Having a Pure Father and Son Moment,” is pure fantasy, and “Sentimental Piscatorial,” a first person lyric poem largely about fishing with his son, a poem that even involves the passing on of fatherly wisdom—Johnson states, “...if // you are going to put your life into / poetry, make sure you stay low, walk slow, / and lay the fly right along the velocity // changes”—is riddled with footnotes explaining the poem’s references to other poets, including O’Hara, Kenneth Koch, and Whitman. Though unsentimental, such a maneuver makes sense: the father of a young poet, the position of father is one that Johnson knows that he shares with many others. In “Kenneth Koch,” the first poem from *Homage*, and a poem taken directly from *Epigramitis*, shows how that parental influence is everywhere and uncontrollable: “Thanks to his poem about a garbage can / lid being smashed into a likeness of King / George the Third’s face, my sixteen year old / son is now writing poetry. This activity has / recently led him to drinking alcohol and / experimenting with drugs, which makes / it difficult for me to say, but I’ll say it / anyway: Thank you, Kenneth

Koch, / for your marvelous contributions to Poetry.” Additionally, as indicated in a pronouncement that becomes the title of a poem, the son states, “Even though he’s known as a Language poet, I want to write like Norman Fischer,” Johnson knows that he cannot strictly limit who his own son might choose to resemble—some of these fathers may not be the ones Johnson himself might choose. And, of course, what all these fathers give may in fact be a mixed blessing. In a footnote to another poem, Johnson recalls how he was turned on to poetry decades ago by reading David Shapiro’s “Poems for Deal” in *Poetry* magazine, an event Johnson feels ambivalent about—he states, “Whether I should thank Shapiro with all of my heart or send him a very powerful letter bomb is a question I often ask myself.”

Kent Johnson’s advice is worth listening and paying close attention to, and his often incendiary and satirical poems are worth experiencing, no matter how difficult—or precisely *for* how difficult—such an experience can be. Johnson has struggled with and in the poetry world for some time, resisting its facile fashions, including, most recently and most prominently, the smooth interfacing of the middle space in poetry. Instead, knowing that no dialectic can smoothly incorporate the theses of beauty and freedom with the antitheses of ambition, privilege, and power, Johnson’s oeuvre recommends that we not pretend such a no-place, a u-topia exists, and that, instead of settling, use this always impossible situation to prompt us to continually struggle, and to be sure that—though it always will have to go through us, who we are and how we actually behave—such struggle engages with what actually happens in the world. Rule 22 of “33 Rules of Poetry for Poets 23 and Under” states, “Write political poems. But remember: The politics you are likely resisting are present, structurally, inside poetry, its texts and institutions. Write political poems with a vengeance.”

The thinking embedded in such linked directives, and the thinking enacted through them—that you don’t back down because you’re complicit, that you instead get smarter and stronger in order to struggle harder because with your new knowledge you can and you must—is central to Johnson’s

recent work. And, as a result, Johnson has produced thinking and works that are shocking, sophisticated, unpopular, responsive, ridiculous, revelatory, carnivalesque, brave, aware, uncompromising, engaged, important. That is, Johnson has written poetry and criticism that I think—I hope—will stand as part of poetry's lasting avant-garde.