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After the Bubble

There are no "camps" in today's American poetry. There are no "schools," except of course the universities that employ poets, including most of the poets in the new Norton anthology, *American Hybrid* (2009), where one finds claims like these, and where a case is made for an "idea of American poetry based upon plurality, not purity." The idea of the "poetic school" is anachronistic, editor David St. John writes, "an archaic critical artifact of times long gone by." For St. John's coeditor Cole Swensen, it is with "camps" much as it is with "schools" for St. John. She celebrates a newly diverse poetic field for which "the rhizome is an appropriate model." "Complex aesthetic and ideological differences" characterize this field, but mapping them is not easy, and for her this is a good thing. The idea of a "binary opposition" between camps or tendencies—one familiar genealogy highlights the anthology wars of the 1960s—no longer makes sense in a present "dominated by rich writings that cannot be categorized and that hybridize core attributes of previous 'camps' in diverse and unprecedented ways."

If only because it is published by Norton, *American Hybrid* should turn out to be a widely read anthology, valuable to poets and readers who want to make the case for a new paradigm in American poetry in which partisanship is muted, and in which the old avant-garde, now at home in the university, morphs into the swarm of less uniformly and self-consciously oppositional poetries known as "post-avant." While St. John welcomes "literary partisanship as a gesture toward what I would call a 'values clarification,'" he also believes that "all aspects and variants of hybridization in American poetry are of equal and lasting value." This is not the same as saying that all American poems are of equal value; St. John refers to the poems collected in the anthology. Still, there is not much by way of "values clarification" in either of

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the introductions in *American Hybrid*. If the poets in the anthology have "helped to erase the boundaries of poetic schools and leveled out many assumed hierarchies," we hear nothing about the hierarchies that remain. The editors indicate that there has been a decentralization of American poetry, but the poets in the book are said to belong to "a thriving center of alterity."

"Thriving center of alterity" also might work to describe the university at the time the anthology was imagined and assembled. One can't call the poems in the anthology "academic poetry" because the term is beyond repair, as Swensen suggests, but most of the poets represented in the book teach creative writing at prestigious universities, with schools in California and the upper East Coast especially well represented. St. John teaches at USC, Swensen at the famous Iowa Writers' Workshop. From where I sit the anthology's poets look like some of the most influential poets in the institutions currently most influential in shaping tastes, circulating opinion, and establishing value in poetry. If some of these institutions are thought to be better schools than others, or to offer easier access to forms of cultural capital, and if the university system is the most important site in American culture for defining poetic value, these poets are part of a hierarchy.

As the economy staggers, faculty and administrators in most American universities are obliged to cope with a reality where new resources are scarce and the organization of the university is under scrutiny. For the moment, MFA programs, which not long ago were growing like the real estate market, continue to crank out poets, but one wonders how long this can last. It might be that *American Hybrid* represents the end of an historical process that saw the poets and poetry of an avant-garde enter a university system that was itself expanding. One thing that the economic challenges confronting the university will surely do is pit the intellectual justifications for departments and their curricula against the realities of student demand and enrollment. At the moment, creative writing should be prouder of its success with enrollments than of its efforts to explain its value, while the opposite might be said of colleagues in literary and cultural studies. The little anecdotal information I have suggests that students increasingly view creative writing and literary study as distinct fields. That was not always the case. If they prefer creative writing, their reasons are various. Some have the idea that creative writing courses are more

relevant to contemporary life because they study recent literature. Some students speak of what they take to be a greater focus on writing, which they see as a transferable skill. Fewer speak of the appeal of courses cultivating "creativity" as a complement to the analytical demands of other courses, fewer still of the pleasure of the text over and against the misery of historical and cultural criticism. GPAs in advance of graduate and professional school might figure too; it is easier to get an A in creative writing courses. In the future, creative writing could become part of a Department of Writing Studies, the cream on top of service courses in composition and upper-level courses in digital rhetoric, leaving literary studies behind. The Department of English could shrink to the size of the Department of Classics. Or maybe Media Studies will absorb literary studies as the location of a more pertinent, broader cultural analysis. Students just don't read books anymore, I often hear; how long can the study of the book and literary history hold out? It is difficult to predict the outcome of the transformations now underway. But we can try to influence them.

Surging enrollments in creative writing surely contributed to the "bewildering precession of published titles" Craig Dworkin discusses in his introduction to *The Consequences of Innovation: 21st Century Poetics*, where he outlines options for the criticism of contemporary poetry. For Dworkin, critics faced with this much poetry can try to "graph and model the complex poetic ecosystem itself" in the way that Franco Moretti analyzed the novel in nineteenth-century Europe, or they can abandon "the dream of comprehensive knowledge altogether" in order to write about "isolated singularities" in a "local, focused, specialized, and *ad hoc*" criticism featuring "quick and rich descriptions of what it means for the text in question to be considered a poem" combined with "persuasive evaluation of its urgency." St. John clearly recommends the latter as the proper path for criticism. The danger is losing sight of the institutions that shape poetic and critical practice. Giving up on the effort to characterize, however partially, the larger field, is exactly the wrong thing to do now, when the overproduction of poets combined with fewer good jobs in the university seems destined to change the map of the field. Currently, most poetics e-mail lists are hosted on university servers. Local scenes have many connections to academe. And so on. What's left of an anti-academic poetry "counter culture" might be the poets at the slam, which reflects a populism that

goes either way, politically speaking, as the legacies of Beat poetry meet rap and light verse and sentimental-political declamation in performances having less to do with building community than with *American Idol*. Meanwhile, creative writers on campus are rarely read by their colleagues in literature, much less by colleagues across campus. The "thriving center of alterity" is a silo for self-confirming poetic practices. It might seem a large silo.

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Perhaps our reluctance to talk about poetry and the university is a new form of an older reluctance to talk about art and money. Most poets have not felt it necessary, or have found it pedestrian, to justify creative writing's—or, for that matter, poetry's—place in the university, though of course there are ways they might. Charles Bernstein has argued that scholars of literature work against the "backdrop" of current literary production: contemporary practice informs commentary about the poetry of the past. This view should be attractive to creative writers who teach poetry writing beside the history of poetry or view practice as a mode of inquiry. At least Bernstein has thought about what creative writing might be doing and how it relates to literary or cultural studies. Bernstein rejects the distinction between creative writing and cultural studies in favor of the transdisciplinary field of poetics, the study of signifying practices: "Signifying practices have only art from which to copy." He suggests that experimental writing provides models to help academic writing combat "frame lock," calcified disciplinary and discursive conventions that limit thought and expression. In 1999, Bernstein thought creative writing programs were "locked" in a "counterproductive antagonism with English departments." Eleven years later there is not much evidence that his influence, whatever his own profile, has changed that situation, either in creative writing or cultural studies. In *American Hybrid*, Swensen indicates that poets now wonder whether creative writing would be better off in the fine arts, which would mean abandoning the English department and the humanities and perhaps the dream of mutual influence Bernstein describes. She does not propose a destination for the creative writing program, and instead argues that the "inability to fit neatly into any department or school…will keep contemporary poetry from ever

getting subsumed by the academy, thus guaranteeing it a sufficient degree of autonomy to follow its own course while also staying informed on the intellectual issues of the day, which are indispensable to that course." Her remarks clearly predate the worst of recent news about university budgets. The important question now is not whether creative writing will be "subsumed" by the university but to what degree, and in what forms, it will be supported. Instead of worrying too much about what constitutes a sufficient degree of autonomy, poets who want to work in the university would do well to suggest what would represent an effective engagement with the discourses of the university.

Barrett Watten seems almost alone in his recognition of mutual influence between the academy and contemporary poetry. He dismisses the naïve, romantic idea that the professoriate has no role in shaping taste or poetic practice, and the idea that poets working as professors are not influenced by academic discourse. The university matters whether we like it or not, and many of us seem to like it, a lot. Discussing his own career and work in volume nine of *The Grand Piano*, Watten writes, "As a poet, I worked to achieve my professorship, and changed in the course of doing so. This took place in real time and space, in a sequence of stages."[1] Watten changed, or his work changed, because the "offer of legitimacy" attached to his professorship required him to take a position "within their discourse." (It may not be surprising that the offer of legitimacy was tendered when it was—given the proximity

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1/ For Watten, the "legitimacy" of his professorship properly "stems from the moment of [an] encounter" with his students, an encounter that allows him to learn about "the world my students come from and the world I am in." Similarly, "The origin of poetry is its encounter with the *other*, generalized as the othering of oneself." The counter-example Watten mentions is Ron Silliman, whose "disclaimer of legitimacy" is evident in his nonhierarchical, inclusive practice as a poet, if not always in his remarks about poetry. But Watten notes that Silliman's position on poetry and the university has changed. An earlier claim that "the MLA can't read" and sense of an "unbridgeable gap" between poet and university has been replaced by a "more cautious account of hegemony from the multiple sites we struggle in, including the universities where many of us work." Watten notes that Silliman also continues to argue that poetry is "accountable first to the public judgments of poets before those of canonizing institutions."

between the foundations of Watten's poetics and the dominant academic discourse of the 80s and 90s). And yet, for Watten, taking a position within the academy is not the same thing as fully accommodating its discourse. One always has the opportunity to resist its influence or try to redefine its terms. Watten directs a withering irony at the idea that "poet and philosopher are of superior rank, as opposed to the deficient status of the professor." Being a poet and being a professor are "respective capacities," he allows, and the "differential" between them serves both well. But in order for this differential to have value, one needs some account of where and how the interests and projects of poets and professors might diverge, as well as where they overlap, and therefore some account of what these interests are in the first place.

Swensen's understanding of the role of creative writing in the university is suggested by her citation of a modernist discourse about precision—the discourse of Mallarmé, Pound, Eliot, and others. Poets work on behalf of "the integrity of the language in the face of commercial and political misuse," she writes. Poetry refines the "language of the tribe." This line is a little thin by this point, and Swensen doesn't say how studying poetry is better suited for such therapy than the writing of geographers or botanists. Nor is it obvious that a modernist cult of precision serves either poetry or politics all that well.[2] I don't have a better rationale for creative writing's role in the university to offer and want for the moment only to note what appears to be weak interest in debating the issue.

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American Hybrid values the legacies of the avant-garde insofar as they help promote an ethos of formal innovation and experimentalism. This does not make the poets included in the book part of an avant-garde.

2/ Here I am thinking of Keston Sutherland's essay "Vagueness, Poetry." Interrogating Pound's idea that good art is "the art that is most precise," Sutherland writes, "Impossibility is not just a faded watchword echoing the 1960s campus occupations of 'Utopian' vocab. It is the absolute target concept; it is a positive contingency of all humane expression. Against *what I am,* the prospectus foisted into the ego like a shut and bolted echo chamber, there is *what we cannot be, but are.*"

There is no such thing as an avant-garde now—Swensen and St. John are right about that. The term has become an honorific. Stephen Rodefer and Kent Johnson, whose work I discuss below, understand this, too, which is part of the value of their work. At the same time, their work has little use for what, on the evidence of *American Hybrid* and lots of other publications, is pervasive: an aesthetic "courtesy" that "consists of refusing to pass critical judgment for fear of ruffling the sensitivity of the other," to borrow a phrase from Nicolas Bourriaud's *The Radicant*.

Few poets have ruffled more feathers in recent years than Johnson and Rodefer. The differences between them are also instructive. Rodefer subscribes to a Poundian model of literary history that puts the university in its place, so to speak, by naming it as the site of transient and ultimately inconsequential orders of value. Johnson's more interventionist position, by contrast, understands the competition among poets and poetries seeking legitimacy via academic sanction as all too consequential: he seems to boil in outrage at the hypocrisy of established poets claiming outsider status, suggesting an earnestness that Rodefer would likely find boring—though, to be sure, there must be more than a little irony in Johnson's performances. Johnson's 2009 letter to the online journal *Mayday* laments the decline of satire and other "derisive fare" in poetry criticism: "As U.S. poetry (mainstream and post-avant) has become more tightly tethered to academic careerism, sycophantic tendencies have naturally become more ubiquitous, and one outcome of the trend is that the 'review' and the 'blurb' have begun to blur in purpose and effect." Certainly there is too little serious reviewing of contemporary poetry at the moment, and what reviewing there is has to cope with the abject recognition that, while everyone hates naked boosterism, if one doesn't write about the books of his or her friends, too often nobody will.

Rodefer's most sustained commentary about the avant-garde is offered in "The Age in Its Cage: A Note to Mr. Mendelssohn on the Social Allegory of Literature and the Deformation of the Canonymous," an essay that was first delivered as a talk at the Assembling Alternatives conference in 1997. The essay was not published until 2006 (in *Chicago Review* 51:4 & 52:1), by which point the process that it witnesses and mocks, the absorption of the avant-garde in the university, was much more complete. A stylistic tour de force, "The Age in Its Cage" alludes in its title to Charles Olson's "Letter

to Elaine Feinstein" and appeals to whatever authority Olson's name then suggested. The style of the essay is crucial; the point is to resist the seriousness of the academic event while demonstrating that one belongs among the avant-garde that it celebrates. The last thing one wants is an academic essay, academic decorum. The conference is thus referred to as a "campfest" and "confab." After two epigraphs stating that the important thing about the avant-garde is its invisibility ("If you become visible, you're soon dead") and arguing that "*work & the* WRITTEN TEXT*…have the character of an* EVENT," the essay lists Rodefer's recent reading, which includes work then widely read in English departments—e.g., John Guillory on cultural capital. Like the allusion to Olson, this is a way of establishing Rodefer's authority to speak in such a setting; he flourishes avant-garde and academic credentials, as if partially to embody their new synthesis even as he trashes it. For Rodefer, Assembling Alternatives is a meeting not only of avant-garde poets but also of the avant-garde and the academy, which will lead some to imagine that a canon is in the making. This possibility makes him uncomfortable: "This'll all get decided later."

Rodefer fears that the sources of patronage for an avant-garde reveal the absurdity of the avant-garde enterprise: "Is A.G.&E. writing not coming comically—or is it cynically—close to VANITY LIT? Somewhere between cottage industry, force feeding, or government WHITE PAPER." He wonders if the self-declared avant-garde really has a target these days. "Dynamite NOBEL literature, is that not what we must strive to subvert? In the U.S., what is it potentially? TONI MORRISON, JOYCE CAROL OATES? CYNTHIA OZICK? SUSAN SONTAG [R.I.P.], LITTLE J.A.?" The pointlessness of setting oneself against these writers, against "official verse culture" (to use a phrase most often associated with Charles Bernstein), is made clear when we consider real problems in the world—e.g., war and destruction of the environment.

With distinctions between an avant-garde and the mainstream disappearing before his eyes, Rodefer is left with little choice. He can't side with the academy, but the avant-garde exists in name only, so he dismisses the question: "Poet, you should get a poem." And then, with reference to the fact that the conference hoped to promote international exchange in poetry, he adds "But writing at least inhabits and rules its own country, so we suppose. Though it could be more borderless." While the assertion that "it could be more borderless" nods to the

transatlantic focus of the conference, the idea that poetry is its "own country" is a reference not to the nation-state but to the "republic of letters." "This will all get sorted out later" means that the poetry that matters will be determined by readers of the future, and also by future poets who determine the work they want to take up. As I said, it is Pound's model. But in the future's name, criticism devolves to farce.

It was Pound who, following Carlyle, said that "the study of literature is hero-worship." One of the surprises of Rodefer's recent selected poems, *Call It Thought* (2008), is its inclusion of *Lies of the Artists*, a previously unpublished manuscript with a title that puns upon Vasari's famous work. The poems in the group were apparently written in the 1970s; Rodefer opted to introduce them when Carcanet chose not to reprint *Four Lectures.* (The book's lines were too long for the publisher, Rodefer says.) *Lies of the Artists* consists largely of compressed biographies of painters and poets. It opens with "Artist's Life," about the painter George Bellows, who, like Rodefer, was born in Ohio: "George Bellows was born in Columbus, Ohio / and went to Ohio State University." For three stanzas the poem is pure encyclopedia, its lines prosaic and arbitrarily cut. In a fourth stanza, the syntax introduces what might be read as more expressive enjambment, an awkwardness that suggests strategic elision (e.g., of "you" before "stare") as part of an effort to emphasize boxing as an apt analogy for Bellows's painterly technique:

> The work has a crashing vitality which
> jumps backwards, stare with open mouths
> and behave generally as people do who fight
> when they are shocked by an extraordinary blow like Bellows'
> palettes become limited in color, the light
> is focused in the ring and the composition
> is packed with dynamite.

After this modernist hymn to the power of Bellows's technique, the prose of the encyclopedia returns in a four-line sentence noting the "abrupt" and "untimely" death of Bellows after "an attack of acute appendicitis, / to whose first symptoms he paid no attention." While it is tempting to read the poem as a parody of the prose of artist biographies, I take it that Rodefer is perfectly serious: Bellows is honored in the poem. His death is not quite heroic, not quite the death of the artist

too preoccupied with and devoted to his art to know he's dying, but the poem seems to remember that ideal. Bellows was born in Columbus, and he made it out, all the way to Art. So did Rodefer (one of his word paintings executed some decades later has as its text "Never Ohio Again"). Rodefer's reading of the lives of the other famous poets and artists in these poems suggests the nature of his interest: they include Villon ("love's martyr"), Hart Crane ("'Apollinaire / Lived in Paris—I live in Cleveland.' / It wasn't easy"), and Picasso ("enormous virility").

In writing about Rodefer's poetry, Keston Sutherland describes an "Olympian" persona and "open-all-hours Big Time" perspective wherein "[Rodefer] and Homer look down on the caucuses of applicants." Rodefer believes in "master" poets, and, like Basil Bunting, believes they are the only competition worth measuring one's work against. Contemporaries are usually not real contenders. His respect for an elite cohort of poets approaches levels rarely seen in the university these days; his idea is that being a poet means something more than taking up an activity, much less a profession. It is like taking up a vocation in the sense that Allen Grossman likes to use the term—closer to a calling. It is an identity. In this context the most interesting poem in *Lies of the Artists* might be its last, "I Make Out Henry Moore," an elusive poem fragmentary enough to make it difficult to pin down a voice or perspective. At one point the poem seems to imagine a speaker who is working at a coal yard where he sees Henry Moore—not *the* Henry Moore, though in the context of the book one might be forgiven for wondering, but a Henry Moore who is driving a truck around the yard at the plant. In the poem's middle section we overhear a speaker addressing someone who is also the reader:

> Some of the ones who dug
> Were brought up by the company from
> The South, thirty years ago—housed at first
> In those grimy developments on the edge of the plant
> That social progress since has torn down.
> They've been here ever since.
> *Before I got this job I was a slave.*
> Now you are free. Your son
> Will maybe be a dentist. The other one, you don't
> Know what's wrong with him, all he wants to do
> Is chase ass. I ask about him

But you don't want to talk about him, you
Tell me about your son who's going
To become a dentist.

It is tempting to read the predicament of the "other son" here, the one who will not become a dentist, as Rodefer's own, especially given the model of the poet-artist on display everywhere in his work, where it is suggested that poets are hard-bitten by love, law, and circumstance, and are alcoholic or otherwise abject—Villon, or the rumor of Villon's life, is the chief model. But the glimpse of a larger society, not the chiasmus of ass-chasing son and future dentist, is what is most valuable here. The passage situates the poet (if that is what this libertine is) and the dentist too within an economy and a history: *Before I got this job I was a slave.*

Cut to an exchange at a National Poetry Foundation conference on the 1950s, as described by Libbie Rifkin in her *Career Moves*:

> I presented a paper in which I discussed Olson's early poetic career in the context of postwar "professionalization." Ed Dorn—Olson's student at Black Mountain College and an elder statesman at the conference—began the response period with a cool dismissal of the term "professional," suggesting that it was an entirely inaccurate characterization of the way Olson would have conceived of his social positioning. Olson was a "bohemian intellectual," he said, "*dentists* were professionals."

Rodefer has held a few academic appointments, though not appointments with the tenure enjoyed by some of his contemporaries. I would wager that, like his teacher Olson, he thinks of himself as a bohemian intellectual. The bohemian intellectual survives as an ideal among poets after Olson's era, and Dorn's, has passed. It survives together with the idea of the avant-garde as an alternative to the world of professionalisms that are everywhere increasingly the case. Foucault made it easier for professors to understand themselves as "intellectuals," while perhaps also rehabilitating the idea of the professional when he argued that "the intellectual's role is no longer to place himself 'somewhat ahead and to the side' in order to express the stifled truth of the collectivity; rather, it is to struggle against the forms of power that transform him into its object and instrument in the sphere of 'knowledge,' 'truth,' 'consciousness,' and 'discourse.'" This is the specific intellectual. Apart

from Watten and a few others, ideas such as this have not yet made it all the way down the hallway. Poets don't always consider themselves intellectuals any more than they think of themselves as scholars. At the same time, it seems important to keep the idea of an independent or unaffiliated—even "bohemian"—intellectual alive, as also the idea of an avant-garde, however remote these specters are at the moment, however much arguments about their value are arguments about the past. They might be arguments about a future.

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Kent Johnson's remarks about the avant-garde are less dismissive than they are disappointed, and in some ways he is a better avant-gardist than Rodefer. Rodefer is surely the better poet, though to make that case I'd need to sample *Four Lectures*, his versions of Villon, and other poems such as his Baudelaire "translations" and "Anemic Cinema." Johnson spreads out in the nooks and crannies of discourse that frame innovative practice in poetry, and he has it all over Rodefer when it comes to literary politics. There can be little or no difference between his listserv posts and his poems—or rather he sometimes uses the former for the latter. His poems *are* discourse about the avant-garde or "post-avant." His insistence on *new* forms (such as the "mandrake," explained in *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde* much in the manner that Jackson Mac Low explained his procedures) is either self-consciously theatrical or satirical. Johnson's complaints about the self-identified avant-garde (mostly Language poetry and its fellow travelers) don't suggest the boredom motivating Rodefer's dismissal of avant-garde schmoozing in the New Hampshire woods. He represents himself as a marginal figure beside a poetic elite. His comments about having been "air-brushed" out of a collaborative work by several Language poets (specifically, the book *Leningrad*) or badly treated in his suspension from the Buffalo poetics list—the full run of which is essential reading for those who want to read Johnson closely—are complaints about self-promoting, self-satisfied, and suspicious behavior.

Johnson indicts Language poets for their hypocrisy, especially in their criticism of an "official verse culture" they now represent. This is a judgment easy to make in the present. But what must be most disappointing to Johnson is the failure of the old avant-garde's challenge to

dominant institutions, and to the culture as a whole. His poem "Baghdad" has as its most important target not the American policy that produced the invasion or the military-industrial complex that staged it but "American experimental poets going nowhere on little exercise bikes." An upper East Coast "mainstream" elite, here represented by "Helen Vendler's bladder," fares no better. The point must be that mainstream and avant-garde poetry, if the terms make any sense at all now, are equally available for ridicule because equally impotent. Johnson's critique, as the despairing ending of "Baghdad" shows he fully understands, is shaped by, and responds to, the largely self-selecting nature of poetry's contemporary audience. His concern with reputations he feels are undeserved sits uncomfortably beside his criticism of Language poetry's failure to undo the author function—why be concerned with reputation at all, deserved or undeserved? His remarks about "games that poets play, pretending, as they do, that they aren't playing them" or about "the sociological similarities between poetry cliques and high school cliques," to quote from a recent web publication, do not hurt very much because they contain little not already known about the entrepreneurial activity of poets. John Wilkinson writes that Rodefer's characterizations of the "adornoboy" poets of Cambridge in a recent poem are "vague where they should be savagely ad hominem," and, while Johnson is in some ways less vague when it comes to satire of literary society, neither writer is exactly ferocious.

The best I can say about the writing of Kent Johnson is that it is clumsy—I mean this as praise. In its clumsiness his writing sustains pressure on genre much as the "new sentence" and other conventions of Language poetry once did. "The New York School (or: I Grew Ever More Intense)," which introduces the "mandrake" as a form, is described by Robert Archambeau as a "longish poem on the New York school…merciless in exposing the political hypocrisy of much experimentalist poetry." But the poem, if that is what it is, is only "about" the New York School insofar as its inventive dreamscape uses the names of several poets associated with New York: "I pressed the button on the shaving cream and Barbara Guest came out." Guest and the others in the poem's body oil basket stand for an aestheticism that is critically juxtaposed with scenes of the crispy baby type: "Accounts of the horror in the town of Hokaisu have the quality of Hieronymus Bosch's grotesque tableaux of apocalypse." One paragraph fantastically

proposes that one of "the American soldiers…punished for the killing and the cannibalism…was widely known throughout the U.S. military in Vietnam as an experimental poet of the highest order." This is not merciless. The contrasts are too extreme, too cartoonish, to make for merciless critique.

The poem ends in a vignette describing Johnson and his son gathering mushrooms "on the hills of Nokaido," and remarks that

> I guess I've been pretty lucky after all, enjoying the pleasures of calligraphy and sake in all the surplus time the labor of others has more or less made for me. Some of us are like rain, and others of us are like the thirsty ground, and others of us are like parasitical mushrooms, especially poets, and that's just the way things have come to be.

Johnson admits complicity in (and a parasitical relationship to) the economies that perpetuate "post-avant" aestheticism. But Johnson's ironies are such that it is not clear how we are being asked to take this recognition, or the poem's own most aestheticized moment, its ending. If the wise poet-father who says he feels like running down the hill "shrieking" in the lines that follow this passage had addressed his son as "Grasshopper" before telling him that "the gods of the forest are smiling upon us today," I would be certain that the poem was meant to be funny.

Johnson's criticism of the newly absorbed avant-garde will seem to some more ad hominem than Rodefer's, but I wonder about that. His introduction to *Epigramititis* alludes to the "vigorous, uncompromised speech" and invective of Catullus, while defending the value of the epigram as a form able to counter "the genetic tendency of literati toward conformity and sycophancy." In the end, though, the poems just aren't all that insulting. A poem citing a remark about shooting terrorists that David Antin made on the Buffalo poetics list following 9/11 seems almost forgiving now in its awareness of the context of Antin's remark ("And huge decompressed / machines fall, like ideologemes, out of the air"). An epigram about Ron Silliman calls his work boring, much as Rodefer had called *Tjanting* boring years ago, in an essay otherwise full of praise. David Lehman is called fickle. Will Alexander's poetry is said to be ignored by Language poets. It was fun to watch Amiri Baraka tell off Barrett Watten in Orono. Oh put the stick away!

Johnson's criticism is not always direct and can be the better for it. Consider his epigram "Robert Pinsky," which appropriates no less an authority than Marianne Moore:

Robert Pinsky

I, too, dislike him,
though I'm not sure why.

This is a better poem if it is read as critiquing knee-jerk reactions to Robert Pinsky's poetry than as a statement of Johnson's own vague distaste for Pinsky's poetry. There are such knee-jerk reactions, where the idea that Pinsky's writing is uninteresting gets mixed up with his status as a former Poet Laureate, or as a poet published by established houses in New York. In Robert von Hallberg's recent book *Lyric Powers* (2008), Pinsky's poetry, which is rooted, von Hallberg thinks, in "imitation of speech," is linked to "the premise that civil, secular values properly govern cultural life." While von Hallberg admits that some readers find Pinsky's poetry boring, he views Pinsky's "patient hypotactic style" as a credible and considered alternative to modernist juxtaposition and speed. To take on a claim like that would make for serious debate. Von Hallberg is not shy about identifying Pinsky with power. But without a critical discourse about poetry and power and these other matters, criticism of Pinsky will continue to operate like gossip in Johnson's high school.

Among the avant-garde personalities Johnson has criticized, his favorite target is Charles Bernstein. Predictably, *Epigramititis* includes a poem about him:

Charles Bernstein

Pity the aardvark; he seems
at once lost in the Ivy of the zoo
and strangely at home, too.

Johnson jabs at Bernstein's outsider-insider status in the academy and "official verse culture," remembering the academic essays devoted to Bernstein's poetry and the book contracts with the University of Chicago Press and Harvard (a selected poems is out from Farrar, Straus and Giroux). In his *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Raymond Geuss cites

a remark by Brecht: "Nothing but ad hominem abuse; that's better than nothing." The cleverness of the figure here—the aardvark lost in but also at home in the "Ivy" fixes Bernstein at Penn—prevents this from being abuse.

Johnson is an avant-garde poet without an avant-garde. Rodefer might be nearly the last bohemian on the scene. (There are a few others.) Obviously, neither speaks or writes from a position that will be especially helpful to those obliged to defend the study of contemporary poetry or creative writing in the university. But they are an antidote to the sentimental courtesies and complacencies that prevent a conversation about what and where poetry might be soon from beginning.