LETTERBOX

*Cole Swensen, Kent Johnson, and others respond to Keith Tuma's "After the Bubble" (*CR *55:3/4)*

Dear *Chicago Review*,

Keith Tuma's recent article "After the Bubble" covers much and various ground, but the recurring theme, as articulated in the closing paragraph, is the plight of "those obliged to defend the study of contemporary poetry or creative writing in the university," a cause he feels is impeded by "the sentimental courtesies and complacencies that prevent a conversation about what and where poetry might be soon." He earlier identifies those courtesies with "*American Hybrid* and lots of other publications" and in his opening paragraph states that most of the poets in *American Hybrid* teach in universities. Through this series of statements, he's dismissing many people who on a daily basis actually do defend the study of creative writing to department heads, deans, and colleagues on behalf of students in all departments. So I am unsure why he inserts little attacks on such teaching poets here and there. The attacks aren't particularly vicious; they just don't seem to have anything to do with his main argument, which is a good one: given the shakeup (or shakedown) of many colleges and universities after the 2008 crash, creative writing programs may increasingly find themselves asked to justify their existence and demonstrate their value to the broader culture. Steve Healey found a strong angle for this defense in a February 2009 article in the *Writer's Chronicle*, where he argues for the social value of the creative thinking that many programs teach along with the creative writing. There are additional angles that this argument can take, and the poets that Tuma is attacking are among those developing and presenting them.

I'd like to briefly address a few further points in the order in which they appear in the essay. In the first paragraph, summarizing comments on contemporary American poetry that I made in my introduction to *American Hybrid*, Tuma states, "'Complex aesthetic and ideological differences' characterize this field, but mapping them is not easy, and for her this is a good thing." I want to underscore that, yes, I think this is a good thing. Mapping such a situation is always a reductive gesture, and the very best it can do is create a static image of a constantly transforming situation. Even if such a map could be accurate, it would be out of date as soon as it was made. And yet some want cultural processes to just sit down and shut up and behave, to be trackable, mappable, and predictable so that value judgments, in this case

those that distinguish "good poetry" from "bad poetry," can be confidently made. I don't think Keith Tuma is one of these people, but his comments here and elsewhere inch toward that sort of false stability.

For instance, there's a trace of it in his statement that "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." As mentioned above, this map is going to change no matter what, but the part of this sentence that really took me aback was the casual reference to the "overproduction of poets." As if they were objects off an assembly line and not individuals who choose a difficult, competitive, and unpopular field because they love it and are committed to it, who then go to considerable ends and often great expense to try to deepen their perspectives on and background in the field. Poets are not "produced"; they work toward their own becoming, like everybody else. And the next phrase, "combined with fewer good jobs in the university," also seems wrong—MFA programs are not teacher-training institutions. The fact that many poets graduating from them would like to go into teaching because they think it's an ethical and potentially useful way to spend a life and because they love wallowing in literature is quite different from this picture of non-self-determining objects mass produced for a specific slot in the workforce. And the possibility that poets may choose to pursue a degree in creative writing or poetics as an end in itself, because they desire its experience and insights, isn't taken into account.

On a completely different point, Tuma writes: "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." Actually, I simply made the observation that there are such programs, but I definitely feel that there are questions of aesthetics and their ethical repercussions that poetic writing and the other fine arts importantly share, and close proximity may open up great opportunities for exchange. It's not that I think that every creative writing program should be in an art school—I don't think in such black-and-white terms—but I welcome the idea that poetry MFAs in particular are available in some art schools because positioning them there stresses writing, regardless of genre, as a fine art and gives poetic writers a chance to focus on their work as art rather than as material for literary criticism and cultural analysis. The difference is a focus on the moment of creation as opposed to a focus on reception. Both focuses are necessary and admirable, but the former is the territory of the poet, while the latter is that of the critic. While many people may occupy both positions, I value poets' having the opportunity to occupy only the one.

Tuma goes on to say that "[Swensen] does not propose a destination for the creative writing program," which is true, because I don't think there

is a destination, just as there is not "the creative writing program": there are many programs and many destinations, and we need them to remain various. Ideally, some creative writing MFAs would join MFAs in painting, sculpture, printmaking, etc., in art schools, while others remained linked to English programs, and yet others became autonomous departments, and others constituted themselves as poetics programs—with the different alliances that each configuration would entail. This is, in fact, the situation at the moment. People enter such programs for many reasons, and diverse structures meet diverse needs. The variety of programs available today moreover works against the persistent cliché of MFAs all turning out a certain kind of "workshop poem." If this trend toward diversification continues, it would mean, as Tuma implies, fewer creative writing programs dependent on English departments, but I would hardly characterize this as "abandoning" them, as if English departments had always been the benevolent protectors and stalwart defenders of creative writing. In fact, in many universities the two must compete for departmental resources, and literary studies often wins. That said, I'm in complete agreement with Tuma's implication that creating stronger alliances between creative writing and literary studies where possible will help protect them both.

Further on in his essay, Tuma continues: "Poets work on behalf of 'the integrity of language in the face of commercial and political misuse,' [Swensen] writes. Poetry refines the 'language of the tribe.' This line is a little thin by this point." I don't think this line is running thin at all, and certainly not "by this point." It's not a fashionable idea whose day has run out, and it's not a matter of "therapy"; it's an observation (or a proposition) of the way that language works to realize its own necessary evolution, so if it was ever true, it still is, and I think it is. Poetry operates on language in ways that no other medium can—or rather, poetry is that language use that puts a rigorous and transformative pressure on its language, whether it shows up in a poem, a film, a critical article, a work of visual art, or a stand-up comic routine. It just happens to show up more often in poetry. The writing of geographers or botanists does not, as a class, attempt a critical and transformative intervention on the medium of language. Poetry does.

Obviously, poetry is not the only language use with the potential to transform; slangs from various subcultures and jargon from various technical and scientific fields do tremendous transformative work on our language, but by and large at the level of vocabulary. Immigrant populations do deeper work in this vein because their contributions often disrupt the neat categories of parts of speech and make incursions into syntax, but poetry alone among language uses intentionally seeks to disturb and unlock the structures and categories of language at as many levels as possible. Bernstein's notion of "frame lock," which Tuma cites, is apropos here: not only given discourses

get locked into frames; the language they depend on does as well, and poetry works intentionally to unlock them.

Returning to the problem of courtesy, Tuma speaks of "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.'" I'm all for courtesy, and it is not a refusal to pass critical judgment; it is a manifestation of respect for and a willingness to listen to others, and I resent the implication that it is, in this case, simply a product of fear. It is not. On the one hand, editing an anthology is, in itself, an act of critical judgment, but on the other hand, and more importantly, in poetry (not in politics, not in social policy, not in lots of things, but in poetry today) I'm more interested in a positive criticism that analyzes what works for the given critic and why. I think poetry that I don't like but that is clearly of value to others should be reviewed not by me but by people who see things in it that I cannot and who will thereby perhaps show me a way into it that I couldn't have found on my own. I'm not saying that there should be no negative criticism, but critical judgment and simply being critical are very different things, and all too often, I find myself confronted by pieces that attack the poet rather than the work, or that simply trash something without the sort of careful and complete analysis that makes it useful. I see this issue of courtesy as related to the demands for a return to civility in public discourse; only once that civility is established can the conversation that Tuma so rightly says is necessary begin.

One final point of contention, somewhat related to the issue of courtesy: Tuma quotes Kent Johnson's reference to "the genetic tendency of literati toward conformity and sycophancy." Though it is Johnson's phrase, an air of this feeling filters through Tuma's entire piece. I don't happen to agree that people devoted to literature are "genetically" sycophantic conformists, but my real problem with the attitude is that it leaves no room for anyone to genuinely like either other writers or their writing. There's no sense that one might gravitate toward others from a solid sense of affinity and shared values; there's no room here for simply enjoying others' works. All positive connections are presumed tainted by shameless, self-serving motivations, making cynical suspicion and ambient opposition only wise. That's bad enough, but it also distracts us from our real enemies, and they're not poets.

Cole Swensen
Washington, DC

Dear *Chicago Review*,

I've been a fan of Keith Tuma's criticism since I first encountered it, way back when, in the old and great *Sulfur*, so I'm flattered that he calls attention to some of my writing in his new essay "After the Bubble."

But I feel the need to offer a couple of brief quibbles pertaining to comments he makes about me, which, granted, will amount to nitpicking with a piece whose first and central part is without question the sharpest overview we have of (to put it in polite terms) the sociological denouement of the American "experimental" poetic field.

Tuma suggests that I position myself as an outsider to that field, and he states that I am "an avant-garde poet without an avant-garde," right before concluding that my and Stephen Rodefer's work might suggest an approach for "beginning" to tackle the big institutionalized impasse that besets us. On the plane of ego, I appreciate such comments, of course. But truth is, despite my laments over the tragic-comedic fate of Language poetry and my occasional remarks about overblown, Museum-pining baubles like Flarf and Conceptual poetry, I don't see myself as any more avant-garde than anyone else. And in regard to staking my claim as an "outsider," it seems to me that my writing, whatever praise or disdain it might be accorded, is actually fairly obsessive about spotlighting its own poignant complicities with the posturing and position-grabbing of the "post-avant" milieu, a milieu now so far gone into academic compact and careerist kinematics as to be beyond repair, insofar as avant-garde spirit is concerned.

Of course, I'm aware that my penchant for satire has earned me a reputation as a kind of outsider oddball beyond the bounds of poetic protocol and propriety, that I am viewed as a gadfly who presumes a vantage of pompous judgment. But the point I'm often sort of trying to make in my poetry, or whatever one should call it (Tuma's not sure), is that as much as I would like things to be different—in the sense of wishing people didn't strut and pose as rebellious and advanced when they are really earnestly licking an institutional dance pole of professionalized, proto-Mainstream compliance (and in this regard, by the way, the *tachisme* gallery that is *American Hybrid* could be seen, more generously, as a gesture toward honest acknowledgment of what "oppositional" poetry has come to)—it's going to take much more to change the dispensation than the teeny hypocritical criticisms I can muster in my poems or proems, the best about which can be said, as Tuma himself has it (though in praise, I hasten to add!), is that they are "clumsy," no doubt in ways akin to the clumsiness of this ridiculously contorted sentence.

Another thing I wanted to say is that Tuma makes it sound as if I've written just two books, though not that I presume he should know any of my other ones. *Epigramititis: 118 Living American Poets*, one of the two he

quotes from, and with some fair reserve, is what I'd consider to be a minor effort, nothing more than a feuilleton. Tuma also mentions, in comparing us, that "Rodefer is certainly the better poet," but that to show this he'd need to "sample" from other of his works, including the terrific *Villon*. I don't argue that Rodefer is not the better poet overall (no doubt he is), but my (with Alexandra Papaditsas) *The Miseries of Poetry* is certainly better than Rodefer's *Villon*, just in case Tuma would want to sometime sample that, too.

Speaking of Rodefer, a poet I do deeply honor—the only Language figure, one could say, to go down swinging—it seems apropos to share here this memoir of an actual encounter between him and me, first published in my book *I Once Met*. It does intersect, I believe, with things I say above:

> **I Once Met Stephen Rodefer**
> I once met Stephen Rodefer. This was in England. It was Spring, and I was talking pleasantly to Kevin Nolan, Astrid Lampe, and David Bromige. Stephen Rodefer came over and said something like, So Kevin and David, is Eager Kent trying to suck up to you so he can make it in the avant-garde biz? He walked away, smirking, drink in hand, and I followed him down to the wine box. I grabbed his collar, pinned him against the wall, and said I would break his impertinent nose and worse if he ever messed with me that way again. I mean, I was really angry! OK, OK, he said, I won't, take it easy man, take it easy . . . Later that day, he read a long diatribe against Language poetry and the post-avant. Midway through his reading, a nine or ten year old boy, a beautiful boy, truly, son of a Spanish poet there, it turned out, walked into the room. And I am not making this up: The boy sat down in a chair against the wall of the side aisle, about twenty feet from the stage, looked at Rodefer and smiled at him in the fullest, the purest sense one could ever give to a smile. I at first thought this must be Rodefer's son, for I saw that he stopped and beamed a huge smile back at the boy, and when he went back to read after a few seconds of just smiling at him, while the boy smiled back in turn, when he went back to read, that is, his poem about the complicities and hypocrisies and treacheries of the post-avant, he choked up and began to weep. He wept as he read, catching his breath in great gulps, sobbing his way through the savage invective of his piece (an invective now swathed in the soft raiment of a most powerful sorrow). And I noticed that the boy, poor thing, was totally confused and upset by this, he didn't understand (and neither did anyone!) and so he ran, embarrassed, out of the room. After a spell, Rodefer took a deep breath, straightened his back, wiped his eyes, and continued, energetically, as if nothing had happened. It was later that night I learned that his own son, aged ten, had drowned, in Paris, three years back. And the person who told me this said that Rodefer's son looked uncannily like this beautiful boy from Spain. And so I cried that night, back at my modernized room at Christ's College, a room, it was, down the hall from Christopher Marlowe's old

> purported room, and I cried for a long time. And the next day I went over to Stephen, by the wine box, and put my hand on his shoulder, and said, That was one fine, powerful reading you gave yesterday. And he turned and said Thanks, that's very kind of you to say. And we made awkward small talk for a while, and we walked out into the courtyard together, where it was cool in the evening air.

I don't know if Tuma was aware of this sentimental proem before he paired Rodefer and me in his consideration. Its theme, I guess, is of a kind of knowing defeat, or something like that. I hope the fierce and peculiar younger poets of the country where this happened (poets Tuma knows better than any other Yank) can continue to soldier on, because in these parts, where the erstwhile avant-garde is now to Poesy something like what the Democratic Party is to the Imperial State, I think it's pretty much over for a while.

Kent Johnson
Freeport, IL

Dear *Chicago Review,*

Keith Tuma writes, "From where I sit the [*American Hybrid*] 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." This is true only if one is thinking of the poets who write the type of poetry represented in *American Hybrid*, but that is by no means the only type of poetry being written today, nor is it the most common. A look at the poets selling the most books, winning the major awards, and publishing in the widest circulation literary journals reveals that we are far from a situation where the poets of *American Hybrid* are the acknowledged legislators.

If Tuma wants to talk about creative writing in the academy, he should stop universalizing the role of the avant-garde (or the dilemma of its possible absence). It's this sort of metonymical view of the contemporary situation that is, I believe, why so few people are interested in joining the conversation. It's a conversation most poets who teach in creative writing programs (and still more who teach creative writing classes in places where there is no "program") will see as taking place "over there." For these poet-teachers (who have the numbers, if not the prestige), the creative writing classroom is simply a place where they talk about writing poems. To assertions such as, "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," they would simply respond, "Why?"

For most poets who teach creative writing classes, the university is

somewhere between a necessary evil and a simple bureaucracy, filled with all sorts of hurdles (a seemingly endless series of committees that do little; an often oppressive business rhetoric from the administration). It is not a place where most poets see the need for "some account of where and how the interests and projects of poets and professors might diverge, as well as where they overlap" or even "some account of what these interests are in the first place." For these creative writing teachers, their interests are in their classes and their writing. Conversations such as the one Tuma is pitching would sound to them like another tedious subcommittee meeting. To have a real conversation about the position of creative writing in the academy, which I agree is a good thing, one must find a way to talk about creative writing in some larger, aesthetically neutral way (good luck with that), or, at the very least, to sound an alarm that's audible over a 4/4 teaching load.

To his credit, Tuma is at least trying to sound that alarm: "In the future," he writes, "creative writing could become part of a Department of Writing Studies.… The Department of English could shrink to the size of the Department of Classics. Or maybe Media Studies will absorb literary studies." He continues, "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." Correct as he might be, this call for action isn't going to raise a lot of pulses. To some, such book-death talk will sound inevitable, to others alarmist and reactionary. Sure, we can try to influence the outcome of transformations now underway, but most teachers of creative writing will say that they're already doing so in their classrooms, and any call for some sort of collective, unified influence that poets (in and outside of the academy) might be able to exert is undone by Tuma's focus on a narrow slice of the aesthetic.

And while I can imagine that it would be a good thing to have a common rationale for creative writing classes, and that it would be helpful for creative writing teachers to have a view of themselves within the discourse of the university, any such attempt is going to run into difficulty due to the aesthetic and political differences of poets and their institutions. What Barrett Watten has to say about the role of the poet in the academy is going to be met with skepticism by poets who are skeptical of his poetry. Likewise, those who are skeptical of organizations such as the AWP (which is dominated by poets not represented in *American Hybrid*) are going to meet any position paper from it with skepticism. And both groups tend to ignore the subfield of creative writing studies that is housed mostly in composition and rhetoric departments, even as it is having this very conversation. A bipartisan commission, perhaps?

Finally, there are the massive differences in universities and colleges

themselves. What might be an interesting argument at a large and/or prestigious institution might sound completely foreign just a few hours away, at a small, regional public institution like Northwest Missouri State, where I teach. Simply stated, whatever fascinating and theoretically sound conceptualization of the place and function of poetry and poets that the most influential poets come up with in the most influential institutions is not going to travel well. Such difficulties are compounded by the fact that Tuma couples his call for a general conversation with examples from the avant-garde (however interesting these examples are), along with politically charged assertions of the "overproduction of poets" by graduate creative writing programs. True or not, this is beside the point, and it's not a way to entice poets from those programs into a productive conversation.

John Gallaher
Maryville, MO

Dear *Chicago Review,*

The primary target of Keith Tuma's piece is, so far as I can tell, surprisingly clear: professional courtesy. Bluntly put, the essay is an aggressive consideration of the relationship between an academic center that has long since absorbed and neutralized avant-garde practice, and an unrestrained fringe of hostile gadflies committed to a guerrilla campaign against this center. Valorizing marginal elements on the back of a condemned center is nothing new, but Tuma, who is unabashedly situated at the ground zero of academic privilege, is suggesting something markedly different. He is arguing, I think, for the necessary recalibration of an academy which—rather than ignoring its more cantankerous critics—would do well to adopt the discourteous stylings of exiled figures like Kent Johnson and Stephen Rodefer. And the essay itself performs just the sort of discourtesy Tuma frames as an antidote.

As the title of the essay suggests, we are on the other side—the wrong side—of the bubble, mired in a period of contraction, a time when the staggering number of poets and critics emerging out of graduate programs are increasingly less likely to find secure offices in colleges and universities. But despite this bleak employment situation, many of these poets and critics remain tethered to the most destructive cultural tendencies dominant in university programs. Professional courtesy is one of the more pernicious among these tendencies, and it is this that for Tuma marks a move away from productive partisanship and toward a self-congratulating, institutionally endorsed hybridity (offspring of the cultural pluralism that woefully dominated the freewheeling but nonetheless neoliberal 90s). What Tuma lays

bare—and this is perhaps the most important point—is the radical incongruity between the "sentimental courtesies" that presently govern academic criticism and the stunningly narrow circulation of intellectual, aesthetic, and economic resources within the academy. And what Tuma offers us by way of his performance is a useful model for a more meaningful form of cultural collective bargaining.

Richard Owens
Scarborough, ME

Keith Tuma responds:

Thanks to the writers who commented on my essay "After the Bubble" and to the editors of *Chicago Review* for allowing me to respond to their remarks. No one has noticed the essay's joke about the ideal reader of Kent Johnson being the one who has read every listserv post at the Buffalo poetics archive, but that's okay.

Richard Owens identifies "professional courtesy" as my target in the essay, and that's fair enough as a reading: I use the term "courtesy" as I found it in Nicolas Bourriaud's *The Radicant*. I find it helpful in explaining what I take to be an insufficiently reflective or critical pluralism on view in the introductions to *American Hybrid* and elsewhere in some of the discourse about American poetry today. While the essay is about the poetry of Kent Johnson (I have read your other books, Kent, sorry if it doesn't seem so) and Stephen Rodefer, the essay was written *for* Robert von Hallberg, whose attention to the evaluation of American poetry within its institutions has long been a model for me.

My readings of Rodefer and Johnson do not seem to be at issue for my respondents but instead my passing remarks about the introductions to *American Hybrid* and creative writing in the university. In the wake of the economic meltdown I see the possibility of a more consequential extra-academic poetry and critical discourse about poetry emerging. I also tried to argue that poets in the university would do well to think more about the value of what they do as it relates to the knowledge and practices promoted by other disciplines in the university. As I worked on the essay something an English poet said to me in 2008 as the economy was collapsing was much on my mind. With my usual gloom, I had suggested to this poet that English departments in the US and UK might soon begin to shrink: "Not necessarily a bad thing," he said. As it happens, I have long thought that the university has a lot to offer poetic practice—so did Ezra Pound, the New Critics, and the Language poets—and I have said as much even about British poetry in the UK. I still think this, but I also understood the poet's point. The existing

state of affairs is not necessarily ideal for poetry. Anyway, we cannot afford to be complacent about it, and too often we are: I have seen our "real enemies," and they include us.

Picking up on a phrase in my essay, John Gallaher says that where I am sitting makes all the difference. He thinks I won't convince anyone to think about these matters the way that I do. He's probably right, on both counts. I teach courses in literature and creative writing in a good department with well-integrated undergraduate and graduate programs in both areas together with programs in professional writing and rhetoric and composition. I am also an associate dean in a college of arts and science and so work every day with faculty in a range of disciplines. Sometimes I get to hear a little about what these colleagues think about poets and the work they do. As an associate dean, but also as a faculty member, I hope for productive, mutually informed and informing conversations among faculty in all of these disciplines. I hope they will defend their perspectives and approaches to knowledge and teaching: it's the business of an associate dean to make sure that academic silos don't create problems for students or for the university. In that regard, we might start with creative writing and literary studies. Gerald Graff writes in his January 2009 *College English* essay about creative writing that "the connection between creative writing and conventional literary study is another of the many questions about writing—and more broadly about the nature of academic intellectual culture—that we avoid discussing just because we can." The courtesy I write about in "After the Bubble" can be promoted by the very structure of the university.

Owens rightly suggests that an "institutionally endorsed hybridity" is the offspring of the "cultural pluralism" that "woefully dominated the freewheeling but nonetheless neoliberal 90s." Whatever the virtues of pluralism, and there are virtues, it is a problem if it limits important conversations and criticism. This year at the AWP conference I heard the director of a creative writing program that has recently separated from an English department say that professional life for creative writers at his university is much better now that the fighting with literary theorists has stopped and creative writers can get on with teaching what English departments used to teach, as if that were self-evidently of value and more recent developments in literary studies were best ignored. This is "courtesy." Courtesy allows us to continue in relationships with other disciplines that Graff likens to bad marriages where the conversation about differences has been abandoned. Where we might present our students with strong histories and debates about "the complex relationships between creativity, scholarship, and critical analysis," we opt instead to look out for ourselves.

If Gallaher is right that poets are likely to equate what my essay suggests they do with being asked to serve on committees (the horror!), I fear they are

already abject enough to surrender their futures. His is a depressing sketch of their morale, with or without 4/4 teaching loads. But perhaps some of them think the university ought to support their work without requiring reflection on or definition of its purposes: if so, that's the logic of entitlement. And is it really the case that there is something exceptional about creative writing that makes it harder to locate in the university than other practices and disciplines, or is it instead the case that creative writers aren't sure they belong in the university? I am all for experimenting with multiple locations for creative writing, but what I thought I saw glimpses of in the anthology's introductions was a reluctance to be co-opted by institutional missions that is parallel with the reluctance to accept or pursue characterization of the field of contemporary poetic practice, however provisional any such characterization must be. A literary critic who doesn't follow contemporary poetry privately thanked me for my "anthropological update" and wrote that this resistance to categorization, labels, and definition of any kind, this hatred of binary oppositions, positions, and argumentation, seemed to him a less developed form of what he is used to across the hallway in literary studies.

I am sorry that Swensen thinks I meant to attack the poets and poetry represented in *American Hybrid*. I admire some of the poetry in the book, and some of the poets are friends. What I was criticizing was the framing discourse of the two introductions, and only as it is representative of critical discourse about poetry today, or rather of critical discourse during the bubble years. My criticism of the introduction is shaped by developments that Swensen and David St. John could not have known about, specifically the economic collapse. Like Kent Johnson, apparently, I think the two introductions define a moment in American poetry where the memory of the institutional critique we associate with historical avant-gardes has faded. I wanted to link the satire and farce of works by Johnson and Rodefer not to "avant-garde" status but to different forms of institutional critique—to that function rather than to a specific identity. The difficulty of characterizing the field in American poetry can be (and often is) overstated, but the greater danger is that whatever difficulty there really is will provide us with an excuse to abandon attempts to characterize (or "map") the field, however provisionally. Without efforts to characterize the field, judgments of value concerning any part of it have that much less context and are that much less meaningful. This includes the passionate advocacy that Swensen asks for. She prefers "positive criticism" and properly distinguishes "critical judgment" from "simply being critical," but the risk of her "willingness to listen to others" while allowing the poetry she doesn't value to be reviewed only by others who do value it is that we'll all talk at one another in conversations of superficial engagement and then go off to tell the like-minded what we really think. That pretty much describes the situation of poetry reviewing

and poetry criticism today, where even that virtuoso of high-minded scorn, William Logan, performs negativity without much account of a larger field of practice. So we have a situation where Gallaher can say that Keith Tuma thinks the poets in *American Hybrid* are some of the most important or influential poets writing today, but others don't think so, so there! Other poets not included in the anthology might very well sell more books (the data, however, might turn out to be surprising), win more awards (maybe, but what is that worth?), and publish in journals with wider circulation (which does not equal having good, influential advocates as readers). If there are swarms of poets attending AWP who choose to ignore Barrett Watten's poetry, there is also the fact that there is an extensive critical literature about it, or at least about related poetries.

Two other points require a brief response. The first has to do with my use of the word "overproduction." That is an ugly word, no doubt: it bothers Gallaher and really bothers Swensen. Would the word be equally provocative if I used it with regard to lawyers? Part of the problem is mine for not having adequately distinguished between undergraduate and graduate level programs in creative writing. It should be easier to justify the former than the latter. Swensen cites an interesting essay by Steve Healey—I thank her for pointing me to it—that includes among its rationales for creative writing one that will satisfy some administrators. Creative writing courses, he says, cultivate "creative skills" and the kind of "thinking outside the box" that is supposedly (really?) more important in a post-industrial, "immaterial" economy specializing in manufacturing lifestyles and experience. Healey also suggests that creative writing is "prospering not *because* of but *despite* its lack of pedagogical and theoretical reflexivity," which seems right, though where Graff imagines that students are fleeing contemporary literary study's professionalizing discourses and theoretical vocabularies for other, more pleasurable and amateurish engagements with literature, Healey thinks that students are savvy enough to understand the value of creativity in this new economy. As such they must imagine that creative writing courses are the place where creativity is best cultivated, though surely not only creative writers know about invention and imagination. Swensen is right, however, that Healey is trying to make a case for creative writing; or rather he is exploring several ways of making its case. I don't have room here to respond to his essay, but he is doing exactly what I am suggesting needs to be done, as are others—Joe Amato and Kass Fleisher come to mind. Apparently Swensen knows that the poets gathered in *American Hybrid* are making similar cases to their local administrators. For what it's worth I think the best case can be made for creative writing courses situated in the English major within a liberal arts framework. But the MFA is another matter. There I do think we have to ask how many programs we need, or, more importantly, at what

point we are exploiting students to perpetuate a system that might do more good for those already within or managing it than those seeking to enter it.

Finally, there is the matter of Swensen's defense of the study of poetry writing and poetry. In her paragraph about the vernacular, she seems to have swerved from the Modernist refrain about poetry and "the language of the tribe" that I thought I heard her echoing in the anthology's introduction, so we have little to argue about. Insofar as that Modernist claim points to a purportedly therapeutic cultivation of precision in language use as something that good poetry promotes, I do think it is dated, or rather we are going to have to argue first about what we mean by precision and the value of precision in specific contexts and applications, and what poetry has to do with these. But in her response Swensen seems to be arguing now that poetry, or any poetic or imaginative use of language that is self-consciously concerned with something other than the communicative functions of language, attempts a "critical and transformative intervention upon its own medium." She thinks that the writing of geographers and botanists does not do this, "as a class." I wonder about that, as I also wonder about the distinction between poetic and ordinary language that might underwrite her argument. Swensen alludes to Charles Bernstein's remarks about "frame lock," but Bernstein's is an argument for interdisciplinarity and for attention to the discursive forms of academic prose and not an argument about poetry "as a class." I don't see a suggestion in his essay that poetry, or even "experimental writing," has unique responsibility for the kind of "transformative intervention" that Swensen discusses. I should say again that I have a lot of time for Bernstein's comments about the study of poetry and poetry writing in the university, even if his essay on "frame lock" is a little unfair to professionalisms and disciplinary discourse. But the problem is that there is as much "frame lock" in poetry as there is in any genre of academic writing, and there can be as little self-consciousness, though it is probably true that what self-consciousness there is has to do with different elements and conventions of writing. But Swensen's point about "slangs from various subcultures" and "jargon from various technical and scientific fields" putting "transformative pressure" upon language already qualifies her claims for the exceptional status of poetry, and that qualification in turn presents challenges for those who seek to defend creative writing in the university.

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