

Kent Johnson, *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde*. Exeter: Shearsman, 2008. 124pp. \$16

Kent Johnson's *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde*, a de facto selected poems long overdue from this singular author, features an epigraph from Frank O'Hara's anti-manifesto, "Personism": "You just go on your nerve." It's a fitting place to begin since admirers and detractors will agree that nerve is not something that Johnson lacks. He first came to prominence as a shadowy figure entangled in the Araki Yasusada affair of the mid-90s. Yasusada was supposedly a Hiroshima survivor and a disciple of the New American Poetry; several translations of his work were published in notable venues, including *American Poetry Review*, *Grand Street*, and *Conjunctions*. When it was discovered that Yasusada did not in fact exist, suspicion fell on Johnson, the poet's American representative, then as now a community college professor in Freeport, Illinois. The ensuing brouhaha drew brickbats from the poetic right and left alike: *APR* editor Arthur Vogelsang fulminated that the hoax was a criminal act, while Charles Bernstein decried the poems as a white American appropriation of Japanese suffering akin to the Gingrichian revolution then regnant in Washington. Even after the 1997 publication of *Doubled Flowering: From the Notebooks of Araki Yasusada* demonstrated that the Yasusada work represented no mere stunt but rather a strangely gorgeous and novel aesthetic project, Johnson has remained saddled with a reputation (one that he has at times helped to promote) as a gadfly, a crazed bomb-thrower in the halls of Poetry—especially within its self-styled experimental wing. While *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde* on the one hand confirms Johnson's taste for troublemaking and shows an occasionally adolescent glee in taking swipes at sacred cows, it simultaneously makes clear the sweep of his ambition: like the vanguard poets whom he tweaks and honors, he is out to clear space for the new by preserving the living energy of the past and clearing away all that is dead. It is a rich and astonishing collection, stuffed with dynamite, shit, and orchids.

Past is everywhere present in *Homage*, and the book's blend of reverence and ironizing gamesmanship regarding that past is announced on the cover. A socialist realist collage by Geoffrey Gatza simultaneously evokes Dziga Vertov and the satirical play of the Russian conceptual artists Komar and Melamid, while the title name-checks David Lehman's history of the New York School, *The Last Avant-Garde*—a book Johnson no doubt recognizes as at once a useful account of a vital movement in postwar American poetry and a chit in the game of contemporary poetic reputation-making. *Homage* itself takes its structure from Jack Spicer's *Book of Magazine Verse*. While Spicer titled his sections after various publications (*The Nation*, *Poetry Chicago*, *The St. Louis Sporting News*) that would never recognize his dis-

patches from outside as acceptable, Johnson offers his poems to the landmark magazines of the midcentury avant-garde: *Angel Hair*, *C*, *Locus Solus*. The gesture is fraught with mourning and critique: even as the book longs for a lost cultural moment, it accurately locates the new poetic establishment as the inheritors of that avant-garde impulse. In particular, while Johnson has both personal and aesthetic bones to pick with the Language writing that came to dominate post-60s experimental writing, reflected in such poems as “Epistle to David Shapiro” and “Even Though He’s Known as a Language Poet, I Want to Write Like Norman Fischer,” his sustained attack on that school seems fundamentally a sociological one: having made a remarkable success of their long march through the institutions, these poets have been rewarded by becoming institutions themselves. Johnson treats them with the mistrust demanded by his antinomian convictions.

His sensitivity to the micropolitics of interpersonal relations accounts for the omnipresence of the New York School throughout the collection, as though this poetic community provided a Bourdieuan test case for the contamination of aesthetic and personal friendships by ceaseless jockeying for position. The exquisite “Sestina: Avantforte,” for instance, while formally shuffling the names of its hero poets Schuyler, Guest, Ceravolo, Ashbery, O’Hara, and Koch, delineates a consistent, and consistently hilarious, concern over who might potentially top whom. In an imagined telephone conversation, O’Hara instructs Schuyler to keep mum about a visiting Dutch film crew: “[D]on’t tell Kenneth, because you know how he takes these things.” Shortly after, Koch arrives at Schuyler’s apartment to announce an impending translation of his own work into Dutch. Frenetically executing jumping jacks, Koch ends up reduced to ecstatic bursts of conjunctions: “And! But!” The paired conjunctions, quoting Koch’s own poem “Permanently,” serve at one level as a kind of index of the tensions inherent in any joint aesthetic enterprise, any shared school: the New York School is Ashbery and O’Hara and Koch and Ceravolo and Schuyler and Guest, but only some of them will become chancellors of the American Academy of Poets. The conjunctions serve, at another level, as a reflection of Johnson’s complex stance toward the scenes he depicts. “Sestina: Avantforte” doesn’t just make use of a form closely associated with the New York School, but also slyly deploys throughout allusions to such landmark poems as “Why I Am Not a Painter” and “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape”:

But look at this wonderful painting

Barbara Guest

has brought to show us...Kenneth looked up. **You have TANGERINES in it**, said Kenneth. **And hey, by the way**, he literally yelled, as he started to do jumping jacks at a great velocity, **What’s up with Frank O’Hara?**

**Wait until he hears about Holland! Last time I saw him he said he felt  
like he'd never write again! I'm writing a lot, though! So  
where's he been? Huh?** Uh, said Jimmy, he's, uh, been editing  
a new, um, sestina...full of, you know, cartoon characters...  
by John Ashbery...

Moreover, its chatty, gossipy mode is unthinkable without the innovations of the authors depicted within. The poem exhibits Johnson's palpable desire to inhabit the "and"; to this extent, it's a kind of extended fantasia on the close to Ted Berrigan's "Poem" on Pasternak and Mayakovsky: "They were great. / Now it's me." But this desire is saturated with skepticism, with a recognition of the minute betrayals that attend poetic exuberance, bound up as it is with self-regard. Barbara Guest, whose painting's debut is eclipsed throughout the poem by masculine posturing, gets the last word: "you've got to be fucking kidding me."

Johnson's obsessive concern with the ups and downs of poetic reputation, not to mention allusions to long-dormant dustups on the Buffalo Poetics list, may seem at first sight unattractively inside baseball. But while some of Johnson's poetry will be lost on readers less embroiled in the minutiae of the contemporary experimental scene, his writing uses tempests in teacups to tackle larger issues of power and domination. His sleight-of-hand depictions of the landscape of contemporary American avant-garde poetry, at once suspicious and mythologizing and visible not only in this collection but also in such recent works as *Epigrammitis* and *I Once Met*, may remind the reader of Roberto Bolaño, who also raised a marginal literary scene into fodder for comic epics. And the case might be made that Johnson, who spent much of his childhood in Uruguay and has published with Forrest Gander remarkable translations of the Bolivian poet Jaime Sáenz, is really a Latin American poet who just happens to have turned up in the Midwest. The affinity to such poets as Nicanor Parra and Raul Zurita lies not just in a shared disregard for poetic convention and propriety, or in a sustained assault upon the lyric self, but even more in the ruthless gaze of his geopolitical vision. Johnson's own engagement with Latin American politics (he taught literacy programs under the Sandinista revolution) no doubt taught him that the U.S. outsourcing of torture is nothing particularly new; throughout the collection, hapless avant-gardists continually rub up against the victims of state-inflicted agonies, hooded, scarred, burned.

"When I First Read Ange Mlinko," for instance, juxtaposes praise for the eponymous poet with the image of four girls incinerated by a missile from a drone plane, while "The New York School (or: I Grew Ever More Intense)" alternates sections in which the poet reimagines members of the school as personal grooming products with panoramas of torched cities and children

dying from radiation poisoning. The collection closes with what remains to my mind the most potent poetic critique of our atrocious Iraqi adventure: “Lyric Poetry After Auschwitz, or: ‘Get the Hood Back On.’” In a series of monologues, the all-American torturers in undisclosed locations around the world offer brief yearbook-style autobiographies before letting their charges know what they’re in for:

...it was just amazing, we had our pictures in all the papers and stuff, you should see my scrap book. I hope this isn’t awkward and uncomfortable for you, and I hope you don’t mind my starting out by just getting straight to the point and saying so: But I’m going to fuck you in the ass now with a fluorescent light tube, you sorry-assed, primitive thug.

The poem closes with a confession by an anonymous American poet, who bewails the ineffectuality of poetry to put a stop to the poem’s scenes of horror, while talking up the exciting literary vistas ahead.

Johnson’s never on riskier ground than in his engagement with the radical horror of industrialized killing. His methods invite the accusations that he is exploiting and trivializing the suffering of others. But it seems to me a measure of his fierce ethical vision, in fact, that he takes this precise risk, representing and exemplifying the impossible situation in which we all function: living reasonably comfortable lives that are complicit in the brutal pacification of generally invisible multitudes. The critique is all the more effective in that its most salient target is an aspect of the poet himself. No figure in the book, ultimately, is more narcissistically concerned with his poetic image, more genially and ineffectually aware of the anonymous suffering that suffuses the world. To the extent that Johnson’s writing hinges on a sustained assault on the very idea of authorship, after all, one would hardly expect the author himself to escape his own slings and arrows. “The Impropriety of the Hours,” after cataloguing the flaming death of various inhabitants of Southeast Asia, closes: “Yes, the whole town has gone up in flames, and I am speaking of it now, inappropriately, in the on-line light, of this fun avant life.” After Arkadii Dragomoshchenko declares a Soviet banquet for visiting American poets “a great quantity of such repulsive fucking dog shit,” Johnson can only reply:

“You think so?” I burbled, my mouth full of bread and sturgeon eggs.  
“Why it’s the first time in my life that I feel like a real Poet...I think this is fantastic!”

And here is the close of “Lyric Poetry After Auschwitz,” the last lines of Johnson’s book:

I want you to take this self-righteous poem, soak it in this bedpan of crude oil, and shove it down your pleading, screaming throat.

Now get the hood back on.

In these ferocious lines, as throughout *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde*, one hears the voice of Whitman transplanted into the national security state: the self now dispersed, furtive, anguished, mocking, at times sadistically cruel. It is not an easy voice to attend to, but even in the springtime called Obama, it remains indispensable.

John Beer

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*The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry*. Edited by Arnold Rampersad. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 424pp. \$45

*Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans*. Edited by Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. 224pp. \$27.95

*Rainbow Darkness: An Anthology of African American Poetry*. Edited by Keith Tuma. Miami, OH: Miami University Press, 2006. 226pp. \$17.95

*The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South*. Edited by Nikky Finney. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. 405pp. \$18.95

Does an anthology of African American poetry best explain its subject by beginning at the beginning? What do we make of African American poetry when there is no dutiful march forward through time? Chronology has always allowed African American poetry to demonstrate how it and its poets have progressed. Thus, the deictics at work in many African American anthologies—"that was *then*, this is *now*," "*look* how far we have come," "*these* poems show us what African American poetry is"—usually end up reverberating louder than the poems themselves. In other words, African American anthologies, in the pronouncement of their goals, are particularly susceptible to drowning out their poems. Time, but for the rare exception, pushes the anthology. But can the anthology push time back?

Enter *The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry*. It begins with Elizabeth Alexander's "Today's News":

I didn't want to write a poem that said "blackness is," because we know better than anyone