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MICHAEL THEUNE'S RESPONSE TO "SOME DARKER BOUQUETS"

I largely agree with Kent Johnson's analysis of the state of contemporary American poetry reviewing and criticism. (NB: I'm not the only one. Johnson's analysis jibes with the findings of some similar analyses, including Kevin Prufer's "'We're All in Bed Together': Poetry's Good News Culture" and Kristin Prevallet's "Why Poetry Criticism Sucks.") And I largely support Johnson's proposal calling for "a 'satellite economy' of apocryphal reviewing," especially if this means we get to read more of the kind of apocryphal reviewing Johnson himself has been writing in works such as *Epigramititis: 118 Living American Poets*, *I Once Met*, and the "Faits Divers" of the Feneon Collective (though Johnson has been ousted from this group).

However, I think Johnson's argument requires that we investigate and delineate more carefully the relationship between his argument's central and satellite economies. Johnson's argument is of two minds about the state of the central economy of contemporary poetry reviewing and criticism. On the one hand, as it requires the radical reforms Johnson proposes, this central economy clearly has real problems. However, on the other hand, some of Johnson's proposals imply that, in broad strokes, this central economy functions generally well, or well enough that the satellite economy would—somehow—function quite well by employing many of the central economy's problematic policies and procedures. For example, in Johnson's satellite economy, editors are the ones who would guard against the tendency for anonymity to further promote "cronyism" and the implementation of "superficial, vindictive agendas" even though, one supposes, these same editors also have been allowing the systemic cronyism and the advancement of superficial agendas necessitating Johnson's proposed satellite economy.

With this complication in mind, I'd like to suggest that Johnson's proposal, as it stands, can be understood as a somewhat problematic distillation and retooling of what already is going on in so much of the discussion of contemporary American poetry: Johnson's proposed playful, satirical, (potentially more) negative reviews might be considered the systemization of online flaming intended to burn exaggerated claims. However, while such acts can be important correctives, there in fact is little guarantee in Johnson's proposed system that they actually will be honest, substantive, or free of ad hominem attacks.

I'd be disappointed if the interesting developments in poetry reviewing Johnson proposes were to become only an intensification of po-biz-as-usual and in the process abandon the quest for the creation and publication of more accurate and able reviews and criticism. Thus, I want to make a friendly amendment to Johnson's proposal. I think we must view contemporary poetry reviewing practices with suspicion, but then the question for me becomes: where do we put our trust? And my answer is: where it always should have been: in valid, persuasive argument. I don't want, as Johnson says, "the orthodox mode…to be the norm." I don't want to *have* to trust editors, even the handful of excellent editors I in fact *do* trust. Rather, because short reviews—the norm in contemporary poetry reviewing—almost always lack the space to really make a case, and so almost always seem in some way hyperbolic and, so, flame-able, I want editors to do their part to promote more honest reviewing not only by allowing Johnson's "'satellite economy' of apocryphal

reviewing" but also by encouraging the growth of a more stable central economy through calling and making space for the production of more substantive reviews, reviews with room to make arguments that can, for example, take on the issues surrounding poems as much as the poems themselves, or show in detail the contradictions that arise from the work, or reveal mismatches between a poet's statements of poetics and what her/his poetry actually does. (Short reviews, of course, might still be written, but we might call them "notices," and conceive of their task as centrally descriptive rather than evaluative.)

Johnson notes that the negative review in a top-tier journal accrues enough capital to compensate the poet-reviewer for the risk inherent in publishing such a review. I'd claim something similar about the in-depth "necessarily skeptical" review-essay. Such writing serves and is repaid by Mammon: for example, if one is on the tenure-track, this writing likely will "count" more toward tenure than a short review, and may compensate for the couple of poems one cannot place in journals closely affiliated with the review's subject. And such writing serves and—perhaps—may be repaid by God: those who take on the task of writing such in-depth pieces might be considered by others—though probably not the author being critiqued—to be diligent, thoughtful and helpful. Or, at least such more-substantive critical writing would accrue less negative capital: because they could make their case, they would not seem like the mere snarky opinions of one person, but rather they would have the weight and force of a larger and more impersonal argument on their side.

Valuable in their own ways, such fuller arguments also have the benefit of really allowing the criticism Johnson advocates to be as satirical, playful, dark, dry, thorny, and/or enigmatic as it wants. (Or as editors and readerships—and laws regarding libel and copyright—will allow.) Such satiric criticism *may* be substantive, but it, or even the bulk of it, *need* not be.

And satiric criticism will have its place and function even within the—admittedly, somewhat—utopian system of enlightened conversation I hope for above; satiric criticism will be needed to correct arguments, perspectives, and trends even in the fuller, more substantive reviews I advocate. However, only in the presence of such fuller, more substantive reviews does such satiric critique itself become a truly substantive endeavor, one in which the satellite economy's orbiting might feel like a significant and vital supplement to a generally worthy central economy rather than just a further enabling of, as Johnson formulates it, the generally obsequious though occasionally eruptive miasma we currently have.