

*Scubadivers and Chrysanthemums*



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Essays on the Poetry of Araki Yasusada

*edited by*  
Bill Freind

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## ARAKI YASUSADA AND BEYOND

Bill Freind

In some ways, an introduction to the work of Araki Yasusada (and Tosa Motokiyu) is unnecessary for anyone planning to even skim this volume, since most of the essays provide their own overview of the controversy. But since presenting the history of the Yasusada scandal is almost as obligatory as the epic invocation to the muse, I'll give a quick summary of the scandal; however, rather than concentrating on the issues that were central to the discussion of the text in the 1990s, my concern is why Yasusada's work remains relevant, and how it has been enriched and augmented by the work Kent Johnson has published after *Doubled Flowering: From the Notebooks of Araki Yasusada*. In other words, this is less of an introduction than an e-duction: instead of offering an overview or analysis of Yasusada's work, it seeks to show how the Yasusada project anticipates and contextualizes Johnson's later work.

First, the quick summary: Araki Yasusada, allegedly a survivor of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, had his work published posthumously and in translation in the mid-1990s. The work was widely praised and seemed to fuse traditional Japanese forms and themes with more innovative North American techniques and a sprinkling of French critical theory. However, Yasusada was an invention, and while no one claimed responsibility for the work, most readers agree that Kent Johnson was the creator, although Johnson insists the actual author is Tosa Motokiyu, the pseudonym for an unnamed writer who is now dead.

To oversimplify somewhat, the initial debate about Yasusada essentially fell into two camps. Those who praised Yasusada saw the poems as an empathetic and moving testament to the atrocity of the bombing of Hiroshima and, by extension, Nagasaki. Others in the pro-Yasusada camp called attention to the work's heteronymy, a word most closely associated with the work of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, who created dozens of fully formed personae, in whose voices he wrote. For his celebrators, Yasusada constituted an aesthetically liberatory gesture, since in spite of the pronouncements of Barthes and Foucault, the figure of the author still dominates many modes of

reading. Recasting the author as a figure who is simultaneously present and fictive can be a way of undermining that domination, of not eliminating the author but textualizing him or her as another type of literary character.

Those critical of Yasusada often emphasized the ethical questions surrounding an author of (presumably) European descent not only appropriating the voice of a *hibakusha*, or survivor of the atomic bombing, but also employing some of the more familiar stereotypes of East Asia in general, and Japan in particular. For instance, Juliana Chang, Walter K. Lew, Tan Lin, Eileen Tabios, and John Yau write:

Like most hoaxes, Johnson's is fueled mainly by the potential for self-gain. And like all hoaxes it is complex—his act of yellowface at once plays into an existing and apparently vigorous orientalist fantasy, exposes American ignorance of both Japanese poetry and recent Japanese history, and levels a critique against an experimental writing community to which the author also seeks to ingratiate himself. In this last respect, Johnson's act is doubly disturbing: he wants the taint of scandal without having to take responsibility for the stereotypes he celebrates. (Chang)<sup>1</sup>

This is a nuanced claim: Chang, et. al., suggest that part of Yasusada's "yellowface" is in fact a critique of the insularity of contemporary North American poetics. At the same time, they claim that that critique constitutes a career move by Johnson, since it would allow him an entrance into the post-avant community. To do that, Johnson must walk a very fine line: he needs to employ racist and orientalist stereotypes without either endorsing or explicitly mocking them. The clear implication is that Johnson's motivation is mostly or even merely cynical. But the claim that the Yasusada project was "fueled mainly by the potential for self-gain" seems, simultaneously, both completely self-evident and unsupported by any evidence whatsoever. Obviously, almost all writers are fueled by the potential for self-gain: they're looking for some kind of approbation, even in the tiny, fractured worlds of contemporary Anglophone poetry. At the same time, to leap

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<sup>1</sup> I wanted to include this essay in the collection, but one of the authors refused permission to reprint it.

to unsupported speculation about authorial intention more than a half century after Wimsatt and Beardsley published 'The Intentional Fallacy' seems to be a peculiar move. As I noted above, many readers (including me) have suggested that the poems in *Doubled Flowering* evince a striking empathy for the fictive *hibakusha* of the poems. Does it matter if those poems stem from a cynical careerism or an "authentic" compassion for the victims? And how could we tell the difference?

The importance of the Yasusada work has become clearer with the subsequent publications of Johnson's poetry. If one of the central concerns of *Doubled Flowering* is the construction of the author(s), much of his later work concentrates on the construction of authority in both official verse culture and various otherstream poetries. In *Epigramitis: 118 Living American Poets*, Johnson resuscitates the epigram, that formerly venerable form that often served as the perfect poetic medium for praise, spite, and/or vindictiveness. Each epigram includes a drawing or photograph on the facing page, but they're metaphorical, not literal representations of the poet who is the subject of the epigram. For instance, the epigram to Robert Pinsky, which is paired with a photo of an inept-looking used-car salesman, reads:

I, too, dislike him,  
though I'm not sure why (Epigramitis 37).

As poet laureate, and now as *de facto* poet laureate emeritus of the United States, Pinsky, as Johnson notes, continues to play a role in which he is required to bemoan the irrelevance of poetry in the US, while coming up with solutions (or, some might say, gimmicks) to change this state of affairs. The epigram, which reworks Marianne Moore's widely anthologized 'Poetry,' suggests that as poet laureate Pinsky is the visible face of poetry in the United States, while the image contends that Pinsky has attempted to foist poetry to a largely uninterested public, just as a sleazy car salesman might use the hard sell to move a lemon off the lot. I think Pinsky operates as a kind of shorthand for other poetry salesmen such as Ted Kooser, another former laureate; John Barr, the investment banker who presides over the more than \$100 million endowment at the Poetry Foundation; and Dana Gioia, the former VP of marketing at General Foods who formerly directed the National Endowment for

the Arts.<sup>2</sup> Each of these men has explicitly called for marketing poetry as if it were a product.<sup>3</sup> That's where the irony of the photo really comes into focus: even a dismal used car salesman has a better sales record than these guys. The problem isn't only that poetry has become a business; it's that it has become a spectacularly unsuccessful business, as Pinsky, Kooser, Barr, et. al., attempt to foist a mediocre product on an indifferent market.

While Johnson certainly revels in controversy, it is wrong to dismiss him as merely a provocateur. When Charles Bernstein condemned the Yasusada project as "an expression of white male rage" (Bernstein 213), or when Arthur Vogelsang, former editor of *American Poetry Review*, called the Yasusada project "essentially a criminal act" (Nussbaum 82), those comments served as clear demarcations of the limits of what Bernstein himself has called "official verse culture." Submitting poems to a journal without indicating that the "author" is a heteronym is not only poetically unacceptable; in Vogelsang's eyes, it constitutes an actual violation of the law. Despite Bernstein's unmistakable commitment to some types of innovative writing, he believes that a white author writing under the heteronym of a *hibakusha* must be motivated by racially-based, or even explicitly racist anger. Johnson recognized those comments were instructive enough to use as blurbs: Bernstein's appears

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson's epigram 'The Poet Laureate' continues this conflation of those who would serve as spokespeople for poetry:

I can't quite recall his or her name presently.  
Is it Robert, Rita, or Billy?  
Or is it Ted? No . . . Ted Hughes is dead.  
He wears a helmet of hair in Hell.  
I'm so silly (167).

The accompanying photo is of Laura Bush, who has attempted to promote both reading in general and poetry in particular. The poem suggests that the attempt to domesticate poetry for public consumption puts the American laureate in a position that's analogous to the British laureate, whose job is to write verse for state occasions. The position of laureate makes these different poets indistinguishable from each other, and from the first lady, and suggests that they are at least tacitly complicit in the actions of the government that employs them.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent analysis of the strategies of Kooser, et. al., see Evans, Steve. 'Free (Market) Verse,' 29 July 2007 <http://www.thirdfactory.net/freemarkerverse-all.html>.

in *Also, With My Throat, I Shall Swallow Ten Thousand Swords*, while Vogelsang's appears both in that volume and in *Doubled Flowering*.

This was not to be the last time that Johnson was accused of violating the law. In *A Question Mark above the Sun: Documents on the Mystery Surrounding a Famous Poem "by" Frank O'Hara*, Johnson suggests that Frank O'Hara's famous poem "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island" (itself a reworking of Mayakovsky's 'An Extraordinary Adventure Which Befell Vladimir Mayakovsky in a Summer Cottage') may have been written by O'Hara's friend Kenneth Koch. Koch has stated that he found the poem after O'Hara's death, and Johnson somewhat tentatively proposes that Koch could have written the work as a tribute to his friend. As Johnson admits, the evidence is somewhat circumstantial, and he himself believes that O'Hara probably is the author. Nonetheless, even that was enough to elicit the threat of a lawsuit. Before *A Question Mark* was even published, Richard Owens, whose Punch Press was about to release the volume, received a certified letter from the Kenneth Koch Literary Estate threatening legal action. According to Johnson, the letter states "Alfred A. Knopf (publisher of both Koch and O'Hara), Maureen Granville-Smith, executor of the Frank O'Hara Estate, and poets Bill Berkson, Ron Padgett, Jordan Davis, and Tony Towle [ . . . ] all are strongly convinced that this publication is a malicious hoax, one that denigrates Kenneth Koch's character and dishonors his work" (Latta). It seems to me that this response is the most important aspect of *A Question Mark*. There's an absurd disjuncture between the funny, irreverent writing of both Koch and O'Hara, and the spurious threat of a lawsuit. I would guess that one of the central purposes of Johnson's claim was to see just how excessively the guardians (self-appointed or otherwise) of Koch's and O'Hara's reputations would respond to a fairly tentative thesis published in a small press book. And clearly, their response was excessive. While the signatories of the letter had close, personal relationships with Koch and/or O'Hara, the threat of legal action for "dishonoring" Koch's work seems more typical of a large corporation seeking to protect its reputation. Koch becomes essentially the same as Coke: he is a brand whose name must be protected. Perhaps this is the inevitable result of the author-fetish in late-capitalism: the name of the poet becomes a commodity even in the almost non-existent market for contemporary poetry.

Johnson's post-Yasusada work is often more explicitly political than *Doubled Flowering* which, in spite of its subject, does not even allude to the larger military or historical issues that surround the bombing. For instance, 'Lyric Poetry After Auschwitz, Or: "Get the Hood Back On,"' published in his collection *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde*, provides a striking example of this political engagement. In the poem, various American service members introduce themselves with stereotypical small-town American affability, then reveal the people to whom they're speaking are Iraqis they are about to torture:

Welcome, Kamil, I'm an American girl, nineteen, pregnant,  
my Dad is an alcoholic, but my Mother is in recovery, with  
her own Daycare, and I'll be taking it over after the Army,  
I've always wanted to have my own business, and I'm going to  
expand beyond just one location, I'm not thinking small. And  
since I believe it is always important to say what one means  
and not beat around the bush, I want you to know something:  
I'm going to hold a pistol to your head and tell you to jack-off,  
while you recite the Koran as fast as you can, you heathen, Hell-  
bound fuck, and then I'm going to look at the camera with  
a cigarette dangling from my sultry, teenage lips, giving the  
thumbs up. By the time you get to MI, you'll be softened up,  
and you'll tell us where the missing evil Baathists are. (120–121)

The poem resists an easy demonization: the unnamed speaker is a not untypical "American girl" (in her formulation), and she claims she believes "it is always important to say what one means and not beat around the bush." But what follows is a description of the torture and sexual, physical, and spiritual humiliation that Kamil (whoever he might be) will endure. We have no way of knowing if Kamil actually knows where the "missing evil Baathists are," so this torture could be as pointless as it is savage. This brings us back to the title of the poem, which alludes to Theodor Adorno's (in)famous pronouncement that to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric. But the poem fundamentally reworks Adorno's dictum: each of the sections begins with a seemingly hospitable introduction, then goes into a chronicle of savagery. The juxtaposition is jarring, even terrifying, and the implication is that a political poem written after Auschwitz must itself enact barbarism as

a way of addressing that barbarism. Contra Hannah Arendt, this evil is not so much banal as endemic, since these affable, salt-of-the-earth American soldiers almost effortlessly slide into atrocity.

However, Johnson's willingness to imaginatively address atrocity is not "witness," at least not in Carolyn Forché's already dated sense of the word.<sup>4</sup> Both poet and readers are not passive viewers but are instead already implicated:

Hi there, Madid, I'm an American poet, twentyish, early to mid-thirtyish, fortyish to seventyish, I've had poems on the *Poets Against the War* website, and in *American Poetry Review* and *Chain*, among other magazines, and I have a blog, and I really dig Arab music, and I read Adorno and Spivak, and I'm really progressive, I voted for Clinton and Gore, even though I know they bombed you a lot, too, sorry about that, and I know I live quite nicely off the fruits of a dying imperium, which include anti-war poetry readings at the Lincoln Center and the Poetry Project, with appetizers and wine and New World Music and lots of pot. And because nothing is simple in this world, and because no one gets out unscathed, I'm going to just be completely candid with you: I'm going to box your ears with two big books of poems, one of them experimental and the other more plain speech-like, both of them hardbound and by leading academic presses, and I'm going to do it until your brain swells to the size of a basketball and you die like the fucking lion for real. You'll never make it to MI because that's the breaks; poetry is hard, and people go up in flames for lack of it everyday. By the time any investigation gets to you, your grandchildren will have been dead over one thousand years, and poetry will be inhabiting regions you can't even begin to imagine. Well, we did our best; sorry we couldn't have done better... 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. (122)

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<sup>4</sup> It's interesting to note that Forché praised the Yasusada project, writing: "Yasusada's writing is an entry into a spiritual space . . . It is a work of art in the largest sense." (Johnson and Nagahata).

One of the potential drawbacks to political poetry is that it can offer both poets and readers the consolation of righteous anger and/or a kind of voyeuristic thrill that stems from the suffering of others. This poem works against those readings, suggesting that poetry, at best, changes nothing, and at worst is implicated in the very structures it would critique. Political poetry changes nothing, and not infrequently slides into a self-congratulatory complacency. But refusing poetry is not a possibility; as Johnson writes in ‘33 Rules of Poetry for Poets 23 and Under’:

Write political poems. But remember: The politics you are likely protesting are present, structurally, inside poetry, its texts and institutions. Write political poems with a vengeance. (72)

One of things that makes Johnson’s work so compelling is its acute sensitivity to the power structures that are present both in the realms of geopolitics and in the insular worlds of contemporary poetry. His attention to the latter suggests one of the most important aspects of Johnson’s work, which is its strong metapoetic and conceptual quality. His poetry continually returns to the question of how poetic reputations are made, of what poems count and why. This is a question that is central to the Yasusada project, since the initial success of the poems was due in large part to the fact that they so perfectly fulfilled the desire for an author who was simultaneously foreign and familiar, who perfectly encapsulated the *poète maudit* who died unrecognized, only to be discovered after his death. In other words, the Yasusada project presents an implicit critique to its own success, and to an endeavor such as this collection.

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