

PREFACE

SATIRE HAS BEEN AROUND ALMOST AS LONG AS STUPIDITY, and it's safe to say that stupidity has been around as long as humans, which makes both part of our defining condition. Mind you, there is probably considerably more stupidity around now than there was in the Pleistocene, if only because back then it no doubt got you eliminated from the gene pool pretty quickly. *Har har, did you see that idiot walk into the tar pit without looking?* Now it gets you promoted to some position where you can effectively screw things up and blame it on the people under you. Or run for President of the U.S.A. while claiming the whole thing is rigged. Or build a professional poetry Empire while claiming to be the avant-garde. While stupidity (and its constant companion, hypocrisy) surrounds us, it's difficult to put your finger on exactly what it is. Even Avitol Ronell who wrote the book on it, admits as much. "While stupidity is 'what is there,'" she writes, "it cannot be simply located or easily scored."

It can, however, be skinned, skewered, roasted, and hung out to dry. That's where Kent Johnson comes in. If we can't define stupidity, we can certainly expose it, and in exposing it, weaken it, even if we can never do away with it. That is the moral drive of satirists like Johnson, which rarely makes them instantly popular. From Ben Franklin's wicked critique of the hypocrisy of preaching liberty while enslaving yourself to debt in order to buy stuff you can't afford and don't need; to Mark Twain's take-no-prisoners savaging of Christian slave owners; to H.L. Mencken, Lenny Bruce, Richard Prior, Jon Stewart, Sarah Silverstein, and Negin Farsad, satire has been a source of resistance to the brutality and viciousness of U.S. national policies at home and abroad. Less often, it has also targeted the continuing hypocrisy and collaboration of various social and artistic formations who fiddle away looking for government money, ignoring the patriarchy that sells "liberty" and "democracy" overseas as part of an expansionist legerdemain, even as that same culturally beneficent government guns down unarmed black men in its own streets.

English language poetry, though, for more than a couple hundred years, has had a hard time keeping up with satire. The satirical poetry of Pope and Dryden sank beneath the wave of Romanticism's egotistical sublime and never really recovered as an honoured form. Edward Dorn was an exception. A student of the 18th century, Dorn drew a

bead on the stupidities of the mid-20th century U.S. with an acute intelligence and an unshakable moral centre. Mostly, however, the post-New American Poetry landscape devolved into a world divided between the post-post-Romantic, Amy Lowell-esque lyrics of the ubiquitous MFA and Creative Writing programs and the formalist postures of a self-commodified avant-garde jockeying for university positions and government money (any government, including the most repressive like late-Stalinist China).

Following Dorn's lead, Kent Johnson is a marked exception to that bleak situation. Since he began publishing in the 1980's, he has produced a stream of satirical work that equals Dorn's (and certainly gets a nod of approval from Mark Twain) in its relentless revelation of the hypocrisy thriving in contemporary life. In books like *Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz*, *Doggerel for the Masses*, and *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde*, Johnson has laid bare the cruel stupidities that have enabled vicious wars and domestic injustice and violence, confronting them with fearless honesty and moral clarity and a good deal of side splitting humour. The title poem of one of those books, "Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz," is among the most powerful anti-war poems written in the last century. In addition, Johnson is intimately associated with a number of unprecedented Events which he has produced and/or participated in which have disturbed the self-satisfied equanimity of the Literary Establishment (not least the Professional Avant-Garde), laying bare their empty aesthetic rhetoric, ridiculous posturing, and shameless careerism, at a time when more than ever we need clarity of vision.

Homage to the Pseudo Avant-Garde offers that clarity, bringing together much of Johnson's work since 2008 with more recent compositions, including some that engage the 2016 U.S. Election Farce/Tragedy. The sheer diversity of the writing is a joy. It is first-power poetry, even when it doesn't look like poetry, and that is central to its ongoing pleasure. Johnson's energy and enthusiasm constantly give rise to new forms, including bumper sticker verse, micro essays and biographies, procedural compositions, strict iambic meters, essays, and straight ahead lyric. He is always political without trying to be. The moral/political vision is steeped in his bones so that every word resonates with it without effort. Johnson radically breaches the patrolled boundaries of genre over and over even as he articulates an uncompromisingly honest revelation of the stupidities that surround us and inform us. In our current era with its Reality Television ontology and its universal commodification and professionalization of poetry, Johnson offers a fresh take on the world. Read on and thrill to the brilliance of this *oner* from Illinois.

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