

ENTREVISTA a medias con KENT JOHNSON

En 2020 le propuse hacerle una entrevista a K. J., en la lengua que fuera. La única condición: que imaginara, por un instante, como Lorca con Spicer (a quienes Kent admira sin medida), que ya estaba muerto. Para entonces, nada presagiaba su próxima, inesperada partida, un par de años después. Lo que viene a continuación es nuestro intercambio entre fines de julio y comienzo de agosto de ese año; la conversación se interrumpirá al poco rato, por decisión de Kent. (Andrés Ajens, Santiago, septiembre de 2023).



Kent Johnson y Andrés Ajens en Santiago de Chile, agosto de 2013

AA: Dear K, muerto fueras: Spicer, Lorca,

Nadal, Yasusada? [¿Cuál - the *first question* fuera?]

KJ: Lorca, pues, claro.

El primero. El fantasma. El más misterioso. El más guapo.

AA: Can you explain something more about your love and unlove, if any, with that quadruple case (alias *Geviert*) of great and ungreat, if any, poets? Give yourself your time. Remember: in eternity you have all the time.

KJ: Why do you ask in English? OK, I'll answer in English, and you can do what you like, my dear friend, Ajens.

Almost all poets, at least in the United States, are totalmente antipáticos, very not very nice people at all. They are out para ellos mismos y sus carreras poéticas, ready to betray their best friends if it will get them mejor position in the Field (véase lo que dice Bourdieu).

I don't know if this is the case in Chile. But it is a serious complication here, like a fucking semi-pandemic, where people quickly get infected and become zombies.

I think, at most, 5% of the poets here I have met over my 40 year career are actually *nice* people. The rest are assholes to one degree or another, totally out for themselves, playing the game and ready to kill the people they've pretended to be nice to with a stab in the back, either in person or in writing. Especially the "vanguardia" ones.

I suppose I could be exaggerating, but not by much. The situation has gotten much worse in the past twenty years or so, since the careerist zeitgeist has come to dominate US poetry, where almost all prominent poets are "professionals," privileged people, whatever their color, with academic positions, or with some kind of close relation to the corporate/state grant and prize-making institutions.

Big money has for the most part taken over the "scene." It has been done through major financial interests, buying out a once autonomous and resistant sub-cultural field. It has done it importantly through a Prize System designed to pit people against each other and to create a hierarchy that divides poets against each other in envy and competition. The Poetry Foundation, with its 250 millions of dollars in donations from pharmaceutical monies (I believe this was done by them in collaboration with the intelligence agencies) was the leading edge. This is not new. It happened during the Cold War in a major way and is documented. Major journals like the *Paris Review* and *Encounter* and the Iowa University Creative Writing Program (the main creative writing program in the United States) were infiltrated and directed by the CIA in the 50s and 60s. There is no reason to not think it is not happening again, especially through the supposed "avant-garde" currents, not least the ones related to 1970s and 80s Language poetry, as they attempt to spread into China and other countries now, through the sanction and financial aid of state institutions, here and abroad.

I don't want to go on for too long. ¿Te entiendo? La situación esta muy complicada.

AA: Not so long yet [...] Otra: Norman Finkelstien, "one of the finest commentators on poetry at work", según más de alguien al parecer, comienza su (aparentemente a todas luces entusiasta y/o encomiable) reciente reseña (8/1/2020) de tu último poemario, *Because of*



Poetry, I Have a Really Big House (Shearsman Books, Bristol, 2020) con esta —acaso satírica o al menos acaso paródica: ¿cómo saberlo?— confesión: “Satire is not my forte” (luego se da unas vueltas por su formación académica en literatura, para acabar convocando a la figura no poco socrática del “gadfly” alias ‘tábano’): “All this to say that I’m probably not the best reviewer for Kent Johnson’s new book, which is not only satire of the most aggressive and confrontational sort, but, like some of Pope’s best work, is aimed specifically at what is often referred to these days as “po-biz.” Johnson has been a highly visible po-biz gadfly for many years [...]. Luego, un poco más adelante, retoma: “At this point, a number of my readers are probably wondering why, given Kent Johnson’s reputation and past history, I’m venturing into the quagmire that a review of his work is bound to be. My reason is simple: Johnson is an important writer, and the questions his work raises are [...]”. La pregunta entonces (ya vendrá otra, tal vez, sobre otro pasaje sabroso de la misma reseña) sin parodia, aunque, con una pizca de para-oda acaso, lo que no fuera lo mismo (ya habrá ocasión de volver a este lío y desvío, espero): ¿cómo (no) leer estas frases? 1. *Satire is not my forte*. 2. *Johnson is an important*

writer. 3. *Finkelstien is one of the finest commentators on poetry at work* (incluso considerando solo esta reseña). ¿Dirías que hay sátira at work en alguna(s) o en todas ellas? (¿Sátira encubierta of course, o al menos no completamente desnuda, como casi toda sátira que se precie de tal por demás? ¿O bien se trata de *some statements* de cabo a rabo saturados de no-sátira, de a-sátira?; ¿es posible?). ¿Se entiende? Y/o en otras palabras, puesto que suscribiría en cualquier caso —sea que movilicen o no tonos o modulaciones satíricas; cuestión indecidible acaso—, *puisque ça attire bien sûr mon attention*, what about the satire in your œuvre at work? [Nota: aún no tengo idea, certeza alguna, si habré “usado” correctamente este giro no poco vertiginoso que es(tá) acaso *at work* en más de una las frases que anteceden; para el caso que adviertas sin-sentidos demasiado aberrantes, nítidos o monstruosos, gracias desde ya; ahí me avisas].

KJ: Uy. Y fijáte, ché, como decíamos en Uruguay, you’ve burst my bubble, because I’d been feeling really good about that review by Norman, who is a very respected person in the field, hereabouts. I am one of the people who has respected him (my auto-edit function just wrote “dissected him”), and for a long time. Pero ahora me has puesto duda en mi head. ¿Por qué será que la cínica parece ser algo cuasi-genético para los chilenos? Pero no, no, I would say that there’s no reason to doubt the accuracy of any of those statement, except maybe #2, that I am “an important writer.” Not because Norman is being satirical in saying it, but because I have said a number of complimentary things about him, both in public and private. All of which I meant, but that doesn’t mean that *Norman* has to totally mean what he says about me. So he could be lying, or half-lying, true. But that doesn’t mean he is being “satirical.” Satire can be perfectly truthful, after all. Maybe he *is* being satirical, though? I do hope not. Because I AM, no se puede negar, an important and famous poet, como hago claro en mi eterno poema de cuatro partes, en la página 15, “It’s Hard Being a Famous Poet.” I seem to have contradicted myself five times in this answer. Very well, then, I contradict myself.

AA: En otra parte de su reseña, Finkelstien mienta tu (supuesta) propensión a la parodia: “A set of poems called ‘From One Hundred Poems from the Chinese’ parodies Kenneth Rexroth’s anthology and skewers nearly every movement, style, and tendency of the last seventy-five years”. Luego de citar un pasaje del poema, plantea que estamos ante un cuento (“tale”) algo reiterativo de tu parte, pero que, como decía el Quijote, *no por repetido sale podrido*: “We’ve heard this tale before, but it bears repeating”. Finalmente remata, planteado que, con todo, *les jeux sont faits*, es decir, que “the radical decentering of the world of poetry is a *fait accompli*”. What a world! O sea, algo así como un mundo sin mundo, sin homogenidad mundana, de entrada repartido, allende todos los efectos de centralidad o centralización que no dejan de existir, comenzando por los de carácter lingüísticos, pues desde ya es bien distinto, hoy por hoy, hablar de world (*One world, one Love*, etc.) que de mundo para no hablar de *pacha* o *mapu*: “Though there are still centers of cultural power and individual arbiters in the world of poetry, the radical decentering of this world is a *fait accompli*. Nevertheless, literary opportunism, as far as Kent Johnson is concerned, is alive and well”. Pregunta entonces sobre la propensión a la parodia que te atribuye Finkelstien: ¿odia —en sí misma— la parodia? O, si prefieres, ¿qué hay, para decirlo fuera de toda poética de la “guerra”, justamente en Bataille, qué hay de la escritura de Kent Johnson et “la haine de la poésie”*?

[...]

* Cf. [https://monoskop.org/images/5/5b/Bataille_Georges_La_Haine_de_la_poesie_1947.pdf]