

SOME THOUGHTS ON ARAKI YASUSADA AND THE AUTHOR

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I'm going to talk about the controversy around the writings of Araki Yasusada, which are collected now in two volumes, *Doubled Flowering* and *Also, with My Throat, I Shall Swallow Ten Thousand Swords*, and try to offer, in so doing, some thoughts on issues pertaining to authorship and poetic identity.

I'd like to start by reading an intriguing passage from Charles Bernstein's "How Empty Is My Bread Pudding," the opening essay of a recent collection titled *Contemporary Poetics*, edited by Louis Armand, and published by Northwestern UP. The passage is actually a direct quote from the poet Rosmarie Waldrop; Bernstein interpolates it with pointed endorsement. Nearly concurrent with this book's appearance, Bernstein had published an essay in the UK (presented originally as an MLA address) titled "Fraud's Phantoms," an extended, highly charged attack on Yasusada. It is not hard to see (*Contemporary Poetics*, in fact, contains a negative essay on Yasusada by another Language poet, Bob Perelman) how Bernstein may have had *Doubled Flowering* partly in mind with the comment. It is, in any case, very apropos our topic, as you will see:

From time to time, poets or editors suggest the value of reading poems anonymously, for example publishing a magazine without author attributions. It sounds democratic, as if this would allow

us to read poems for themselves. But artworks, like people, are not self-sufficient but part of a series, embedded in contexts that give them not only meaning but also resonance, depth; you might even say, life. Without some sense of the author, one cannot account for these other, often determining, factors. Prejudice may be avoided. But (poetic) justice is sorely checked.

There are two main, fairly evident points suggested here: 1) That some sense of extra-literary context is necessary for appreciating a poetic work and 2) that such context is predicated on empirically verifiable authorships, these being crucial to the grasping of a work's meaning, resonance, and depth.

There is no doubt that some sense of historical context always accompanies meaningful poetic appraisal and appreciation. But the second claim—that such context depends on an identification of the writer's actual biography—is highly questionable. I'd argue, in fact, that the demand for definite authorship unnecessarily limits the spectrum of possibilities available to poetic presentation and appreciation and, furthermore, that these possibilities—relatively unexplored in our day—need in no way negate or undermine the more conventional approach to attribution that Waldrop and Bernstein advocate.

That more conventional approach, to be sure, famously put under analysis by Michel Foucault in his essay “What Is an Author?” is not going away anytime soon, and nor should it. But one could ask: Why can't poetry establish practices and paths that are capable of unsettling, even partly transcending, that disciplining context? Why can't poetry sometimes take hold of Authorship and all its attendant paratextual baggage—all that which we've been taught is untouchable and outside the purview of imaginative process—and undertake to fold it into a more comprehensive inventiveness, one that observes no legal, institutional, or attributional constraints upon the exploration of poetry's nature?

Bernstein's appeal for the Author's indispensability seems to brook no exceptions. In fact, though, his surprisingly

traditionalist coupling of standard attribution to literary value is called into question—and quite starkly, I'd say—by a good number of rather weighty, well-known, and decidedly *traditional* examples. One could start by mentioning, for canonical instance, *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, *The Song of Roland*, or *The Tale of Genji*. These are works, of course, whose depths, resonances, and meanings have inspired readers for a very long time now, even though we have little, if any, clue about the biographical life—or lives—behind each. We could, as well, add another weighty example: the entire Shakespearean corpus, written by someone we call “Shakespeare,” a name pointing to a life we know virtually nothing about, and which may or may not, in fact, designate a person who actually bore that name. Authorial context and the signature around which readerly comforts supposedly pivot are problematic issues in these cases, to say the least.

These *are* very old cases, of course, and they might be argued as exceptions, where authorship is lost to us due to the accidents and injustices of history. But the necessity of the author and the requirements of his or her biographical context, at least as Bernstein understands them, don't seem, either, to have been presumed by writers and readers of English-language literature in the more recent, well-recorded past. As John Mullan shows in his just-released book, *Anonymity: A Secret History of Authorship*, roughly 70% of novels and published poetry in England and America during the last three decades of the 18th century were anonymous or pseudonymous, and in the first three decades of the 19th a good 50% were, as well. And many, many more after that...

Readers didn't mind; in fact, as Mullan shows, they went wild for this: The pleasures these apocryphal books and journal publications provided were not just textual, but sociological, too, effects of a reading culture with a considerably more relaxed attitude towards attributional indeterminacy than we

have today: People would actively and happily speculate on who these hidden authors were—what traces or clues to their identities might be found in their works.

And these authorial mysteries were, in fact, considered a natural part of the interpretive mix, a challenging but in no way onerous aspect of (to allude to an old tenet of Language poetry) the reader's responsibilities as co-producer of the text's total sense. We've largely forgotten it was so, but authorial "context," not too long ago, wasn't necessarily handed to the readership in neatly wrapped parcels; it was something formed by a circumspect, participatory public. There is little evidence, in this regard, then, that *Gulliver's Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe*, the *Waverly* novels, *Jane Eyre*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Rape of the Lock*, *Lyrical Ballads*, *Don Juan*, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, or countless poems in literary magazines and anthologies (none of which initially bore "authentic" signature) lacked "life" or were wanting for "justice" in their readers' minds.

Indeed, since "What Is an Author?" there have been growing numbers of studies that show how surprisingly vast the tradition of anonymous and pseudonymous literature really is, across centuries and cultures (*Faking Literature*, by K.K. Ruthven, is an even more encyclopedic account than Mullan's). And this history reveals that our current assumptions about literary authorship—in particular, that the biographical/legal mark of provenance is a natural, even ethical imperative—is a relatively recent development. That the ideological force of those assumptions is now almost completely unchallenged in the field of our current poetry couldn't be more poignantly exemplified than by Mr. Bernstein's open endorsement of them: Even for an experimentalist like he, advocate of an avant-garde movement founded on a polemical rejection of the "I" and the "self," the guarantee of empirical Authorial identity presses itself as requisite for the maintenance of poetic order and axiological

protocol. In any case, it's into *this* hegemonic “context” of authorial decorum—a decorum, again, equally assumed by the avant-garde and the official verse culture the former supposedly opposes—that the writings of Araki Yasusada emerged in the mid-1990s.

Over the fourteen years or so since its first appearance, the work has generated a copious amount of accusation and defense. Eight or nine years ago, *The Nation* magazine even called it “the most controversial work of poetry since Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*,” and the debate has certainly continued, though at a more thoughtful level, perhaps, than the high-pitched reaction that was first provoked.

Let me try then to offer a few remarks, which might serve to prompt further questions or considerations. I have my views on the topic, obviously, but I don’t in any way claim to have settled, comfortable positions on all the issues the Yasusada work has—for the most part unintentionally—brought forth.

So, to touch on a little bit of the history: The Yasusada writing was first published, as I said, in the mid to late 1990s, at the end of the apogee of multiculturalism and post-colonialist studies in the US academy and elsewhere. It thus came in for strong attack from certain people, who saw the work as an appropriation of ethnic and cultural otherness, a hijacking of “subaltern identity.” I was assumed early on to be the “culprit” and had a number of very personal slurs directed against me. A group of well-known Asian-American poets, for example, published a polemic in the *Boston Review*, asserting that Yasusada was nothing but an example of “yellow face” opportunism and that I was a racist. Arthur Vogelsang, the editor of the *American Poetry Review*, which had published a four-page special supplement of poems and letters from the work, referred to it in print as “a criminal act.” John Solt, a professor at Wesleyan, told *Lingua Franca* magazine the poems were “Japanized crap.” Charles Bernstein, as I’d mentioned, also angrily weighed in, denouncing the

writings of *Doubled Flowering* as an instance of “White Male Rage.”

These would be just a few, mostly early, examples. There were many other attacks, and they haven't stopped, actually. More recently, for instance, Yunte Huang, a prominent figure in post-colonial studies, concludes a recent book from Harvard UP with an essay that purports to show, via a rather strained reading of Gayatri Spivak, that Yasusada is driven by a sublimated, colonialist desire to supplant atomic-bomb writers from Japan; and *The Believer* magazine, which claims to have a policy to not publish “snark,” printed a long screed full of livid, libelous remarks on my person, written, oddly enough, by one of the country's best-known film critics. So it's been very interesting, this aspect of the reaction.

And what makes it all so interesting to me is that the work itself—the gesture of empathically imagining a complex, decidedly non-stereotypical life through the vehicle of poetic fiction—is quite opposite anything that could be construed as racist or as an abuse of otherness. And it is revealing—I believe this is important—that none of those attacks against the work has seriously tried to support its extreme charges with specific textual evidence.

Now, there is of course the broader and currently very topical issue of literary forgery, within which it is tempting to discuss the Yasusada writing. The storm of contempt that has blown up in just the past few months in reaction to a spate of hoaxes in the genre of the memoir has been quite something, and the reaction can perhaps shed some understanding on the negative ways many have viewed Yasusada. Not a few people still maintain that Yasusada is an unethical forgery or “hoax,” primarily designed to fool unsuspecting readers.

In fact, just a few weeks ago, Scott Simon, of National Public Radio, expressing his disdain on the Weekend Morning Edition show for the recently outed *Love and Consequences*, by Margaret

Seltzer—the latest instance of exposed memoir fakes—referred to a previous, in his mind, parallel example. Simon said, and with a barely veiled tone of sarcasm:

“Ten years ago, prestigious journals published poems by a man billed as a survivor of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, who turned out to be a community college professor in [*and here there is a noticeable pause for ironic effect*] Freeport, Illinois.”

Simon (who I doubt has read the work) seems to feel the work collected in *Doubled Flowering* and its follow-up book, *Also with My Throat I Shall Swallow Ten Thousand Swords*, is no different in spirit from forgeries—like Selzer’s, or James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*—that have captured the media’s attentions of late. I’d propose that this is, and quite decidedly, not the case.

And the reason is simple: Unlike the forgeries that make Simon so indignant, the Yasusada writing does not, nor has it ever, attempted to obscure its status as a work of imagination. In fact, both books openly announce, on their back covers and in the generous appendix material at the end of each, that Yasusada is a fictional creation. To believe, that is, that they are hoaxed memoirs, collections of faked testimony, is to betray that one either hasn’t read the work, or wishes to willfully ignore the obvious that stares one in the face.

And this fictional openness, it’s crucial to note, was the case from the very beginning, when some pieces were published under Yasusada’s name in magazines, before the work was collected in book form. As commentators like Marjorie Perloff and Eliot Weinberger have pointed out, the poems, letters, drafts of English assignments, Zen dokusan encounters, musical scores, and assorted marginalia that make up the work reveal, of their own accord, and often through melodramatically apparent clues and contradictions, that they are fiction. Insofar

as they consort with the “authentic,” they do so not to non-problematically pass as such, but to actively bracket their status and provoke questions about the often problematic space of, precisely, authenticity. They are, one could say, coded documents that freely offer up their exposure.

One of the best of many good essays written about the subject is by the widely respected scholar Brian McHale. In this study, titled “An Author May Not Exist: Mock Hoaxes and the Construction of National Identity,” contained in the essay collection *The Faces of Anonymity*, McHale counters the superficial ways in which the reductive tag of “hoax” has been applied to Yasusada and theorizes pseudographic literary expressions into three different categories, arguing convincingly, I think, that the simple-minded notion of “hoax”—used as it most often is in a derogatory sense—is thoroughly inadequate in the understanding of works like *Doubled Flowering*.

What are these categories? “Genuine Hoaxes” constitute the first: fabrications carried out with no intention of ever being exposed. Examples would be such works as James Macpherson’s 18th century *Ossian*, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, *The Hitler Diaries*, the aforementioned *Love and Consequences*, and so on.

The second category is what McHale calls “Trap Hoaxes.” The point of these “traps” is didactic and punitive—to embarrass or expose the foolish credulity of a certain audience. Here, one could cite the famous Ern Malley hoax, designed to demolish the reputation of the 1940’s Australian avant-garde, or, more recently, the Sokal hoax, crafted to reveal the ignorance of “post-structuralist” academic critics of science.

The third category is that of “Mock Hoaxes,” which for McHale are fundamentally aesthetic in intent, and which to greater and lesser degrees are purposely adorned with signs of self-complication. Rather than serving some ulterior agenda, as

is the case with the first two categories, he argues that in mock-hoaxes “issues of authenticity and inauthenticity are elevated to the level of poetic raw materials... Mock-hoax poems make art out of inauthenticity.” He places the work of Fernando Pessoa, Thomas Chatterton, and Yasusada in this literary class, though in McHale’s sophisticated argument, these categories are also porous to contingencies of time and place, and works that through intention seem to fit within one category can shift, through reception, into another. The Ossian epic or the Malley poems would be examples of works that have undergone such evaluative shifts.

McHale’s gesture towards a more careful appraisal of apocryphal literature and its varieties, then, suggests how Scott Simon and others’ indignation might benefit from a bit more reflection and discernment. But while I fully agree with McHale that the so-called inauthenticity of the Yasusada texts is indivisible from their art, I would offer an important caveat:

While I’ve often remarked on the intriguing ways the writing interfaces with theory and the politics of poetry, I have also often emphasized, as the work’s caretaker, that *Doubled Flowering* was *not* primarily written as some kind of symbolic appeal for the “death of the Author” as against the “hoax” of conventional authorship, nor for any other “post-structuralist” notion. Ambiguities of agency, authenticity, ethnicity, and culture clearly inhabit the work, but these are, along with the ongoing critical commentaries branching out from them, largely incidental after-effects to the original impetus of the fiction. *Doubled Flowering*, to be sure, *does* prominently contravene (inasmuch as it gestures toward alternate, more fluid stagings of poetic presentation) long-institutionalized protocols of authorial control and classification that dominate our poetry at large. But its withdrawal of authorship is rooted in felt ethical imperatives which are interwoven into the work’s total aesthetic expression—imperatives which have little to

do, again, with “postmodern” aforethought. To quote Forrest Gander, from *The Nation* article I previously mentioned:

Yasusada proposes a radical contemporary aesthetic response to one of the worst human atrocities, what Kai Bird, Gar Alperovitz, and others have amply demonstrated as the absolutely unnecessary nuclear bombing of the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by American military forces. Using modernist strategies, the author(s), steeped in translations of Japanese literature and feeling uneasy, even—if they are Americans—complicit with the U.S. foreign policy that generated such mass destruction, invented an imaginative, political and poetic act of empathy. To write poems concerning Hiroshima, they felt it necessary to imagine themselves as the other, “the enemy.” They relinquished their own identities as authors and became invisible, as the Hiroshima victims themselves disappeared. It is an impossible gesture of solidarity, since one cannot become someone else and since one cannot truly imagine one’s way into an actual culture considerably different from one’s own. But nevertheless, it is a gesture worth making if its resultant poetry is worthwhile as art, as poetry, as—finally—contemporary Western poetry. In this gambit, *Doubled Flowering* is an astonishing success.

This is not to imply there was no self-reflexiveness or meta-commentary that entered the work over the stages of its production, for there certainly was. There are impossible allusions, purposeful anachronisms, cross-textual puns, strategic mistakes. The Yasusada does not pretend to be a pure, well-behaved archive, as it were, innocent, in its unfolding, of contamination and contradiction. In fact, Yasusada converses, copiously, with actual Japanese intellectuals, writers, and artists of the period, who were cleverly ironic, happily confused, even satirical about their own culture’s interfacement with the West. But this does not change the truth that the work originates, with

all its fated failures, as an empathic, questioning expression, and not as a marshalling of theoretical polemic cloaked in the lambskin of poetry. That the simple effacement of an authorship from a book of openly imagined fragments about Hiroshima should have been so widely taken in the poetry world as that kind of “punitive” gesture is, in fact, one of the most interesting and poignant aspects of the writing’s story.

A final point I wish to make is more straightforward and more crucial to me, as it certainly would be to Motokiyu, the work’s pseudonymous creator (or creators): Some commentators have suggested that the Yasusada corpus attempts to set itself above, or in judgment of, first-order testimonial literature, namely the poetry of those who witnessed, as victims, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Nothing could be further from the truth. *Doubled Flowering*, if anything, stands as a kind of testimonial to the testimony of *hibakusha* literature—a view, incidentally, articulated by Hosea Hirata, Director of Asian Studies at Tufts University, in an essay (“Tsukurareta hibakusha shijin Araki Yasusada: shi ni shinjitsu was hitsuyouka”) published last year by the National Institute of Japanese Literature. Among Hirata’s close relatives are survivors of Hiroshima, whose fragile testimony he also movingly recounts in an Afterword essay that appears in *Also, with My Throat, I Shall Swallow Ten Thousand Swords: Araki Yasusada’s Letters in English*.

I want to be as clear as I can (insofar clarity is possible with such a fraught topic) on this matter regarding Yasusada’s relationship to *hibakusha* literature, so please allow me to end with an answer I gave a few years back in an interview conducted by the editor of *Atomic Ghost: Poets Respond to the Nuclear Age*, the poet and critic John Bradley, who had just returned from Hiroshima, where he read poems from *Doubled Flowering* to a mass audience assembled at an event commemorating the 50th anniversary of that city’s destruction:

The Yasusada is most emphatically not motivated by an impulse to interrogate anything at all in hibakusha poetry, nor does it presume to set itself as an equal partner inside or alongside that body of work... Although it is inevitably a part of the broader realm of atomic-bomb literature, it exists in relation to hibakusha writing at a qualitative distance, as an after-image or echo of it, if you will. And I would hold that Yasusada's apocryphal status makes that echo no less real. It whispers something about the doubled-fusing and mutually-deformed flowering of our two cultures, about our unacknowledged confusion in each other, about some kind of deeper yearning to find our voices entwined with an otherness we know has been inside of us always. It's an otherness always whispering that Hiroshima's fate, which is beyond the markers of any name, could yet be ours, as well.