

DODGING ICICLES: MICHAEL RECTENWALD ON WHEN SPRINGTIME COMES FOR SNOWFLAKES

Michael Odom writes in the [Springtime for Snowflakes: "Social Justice" and Its Postmodern Parentage](#), *I saw his journey as one I have witnessed going the other way from my own. I have a philosophy degree but wanted poetry. I encountered the early critical theorists and Postmodernists when I went to the English Department. I considered them amateur philosophers with no background in the issues or history of philosophy and no grasp of logic. I expected that fad to pass.*

It did not pass. In fact, Dr. Rectenwald was progressing the other way, from poet and mystic Ginsberg apprentice and poetry lover, to high theorist of the holy of holies in the belly of the academy where poetry has been replaced by race/gender advocacy and Marxist, Postmodern, Social Justice, Critical Theory.

Michael Odom: Your journey into Marxist/PoMo/SocJus theory began with a passion for poetry. I think that story is as common in the U.S. now as it once was in the Soviet Union. I am especially interested in the question of how to, or whether one can, be a poet in a culture dominated by an ideology that sees art as secondary, tertiary, or trivial (the Beats would have assumed that's just capitalism?) and sees the individual as an expression of the groups to which he belongs. Even if Social Justice theory is a passing academic fad, is poetry likely to gain status again?

Michael Rectenwald: The demotion of poetry as a genre is explicable in terms of political economy and not so much ideology. Poetry is not the victim of capitalism per se or

capitalist ideology. Rather, as print space increases, poetry declines, because poetry is a condensed generic form that thrives, relative to other genres, when print space is limited. This phenomenon is explained by Lee Erikson in *The Economy of Literary Form: English literature and the industrialization of publishing, 1800-1850* (1996). Here's a relatively recent poem of mine that treats the decline in poetry as a genre:

Open Letter to the Poetry Magazine Editor

First let me say,
I am not bitter.
I don't regularly submit
Poems.

Neither do I submit
To your periodical.
If you aren't able to tell yet,
You will be.
So, don't get any ideas.
Nevertheless, hear me out,
Please.
I'm just saying, and I paraphrase,
Poetry is fucked.
That's right, you heard it.
But I know the history.
Your regulars with their lines
Evidently do not.
Their poems only appear,
My work is *read*.
I dare you to print this.
It is not a stunt; I really
Don't care.
But I'm serious,
All the more so
Because, although I'm not playing poet here,
This is too easy.

Dana Gioia was right.

Joseph Epstein was right.

Thomas Peacock was right.

I dare your readers to read,
Before sending yet another batch,

The Economy of Literary Form,

By the critical explorer,

Lee Erikson.

He argues that

The greater the availability of reading material,

The lower the status and demand-ratio for

Poetry. There you have it.

From a classical economic perspective,

In its condensed form, poetry

Is a waste of relatively cheaply filled

Space.

I'm sorry to trouble with the probabilistic argument

That my poem will get more attention than these others, either
here,

Or anywhere else.

See especially Thomas Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry,*

Where he laughs you in the face.

Even Shelley, the man, was shaken,

Provoked to write his famous special pleading yet mostly
unread

A Defence of Poetry.

Later his wife would take his name

And save it

Along with the rebuttal her dreamy mystic

Cried with to the unhearing muses

Of his art.

As her book would sell scores from the era

Of the sardonic Utilitarian

Right down to the present age

(Down for poetry, that is).

Then poetry was literature and fiction

Was not. Now fiction is not literature
And poetry does not
Exist.

Bentham had already killed you
Before Adorno killed you.
After Auschwitz,
The latter asked, who could write
Poetry? Poetry,
What's it for?
Asked the former.
Notice my prosaic style.
It's a commentary on yours.

James Laughlin,
For those who don't know,
The publisher of New Directions
Paperbacks and Pittsburgh native,
Loved the Steelers. They're on now.
You're not.

My interest in Marxism and postmodern theory did not come by way of poetry. Rather, "theory" effectively killed my literary life, at least while I attended graduate school. The course in "The Construction of Authorship" undermined my poetry and fiction writing for a good while. The course treated the legal, ideological, and cultural underpinnings of the modern "author," which, in connection with the poststructuralist critiques of Michel Foucault's "What Is An Author?" and Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author," murdered "the author" within.

Michael Odom: Your passion for poetry put you in conflict with your working-class father and got you to approach Allen Ginsberg for an apprenticeship. That sounds like a serious commitment to the art. How would you describe your early poetry? Did you imagine what your future would be then? Did you read only the Beats?

My earlier poetry, especially after I was influenced by Ginsberg's, is best described as "bombastic." I wrote what I thought of as social and cultural criticism in poetic form. At this point the only model for actually being a poet who could make a living as such was the Ginsberg model of gaining public stature from some sort of scandal, or the academic route. I didn't like "academic" poetry, so academia seemed out of the question for me when in my twenties. I had no real means for becoming scandalous, so the Ginsberg route wasn't viable either.

In terms of my reading diet, I read everything, not merely the Beats. I read anthologies of poetry from all eras, but in particular I was attracted to William Blake and other mystics.

But I was a lost soul when I studied with Ginsberg. I had given up on a pre-med education and simply had no direction. It wasn't until after I graduated with a degree in English Literature and after I'd worked in advertising for nine years that I could see a future for myself as a professor, but not as a professor of poetry. Theory, cultural criticism, and cultural history opened up this future for me.

I don't think there is any means for being a *poet* in the contemporary marketplace. That is, one cannot make a living as a poet *per se*. One can, however, if one has the "right" identity, become an academic supported for writing poetry and teaching classes in writing. But this is not an indication of the flourishing of contemporary poetry. These sinecures are best thought of as a return to a patronage model.

Michael Odom: During your time as an apprentice to Ginsberg at the Naropa Institute, you had a vision while listening to Ginsberg singing William Blake. Was that common for you? What did it mean to be an "apprentice" there and do you feel now, given the path to theory your life took, is it still useful to you now?

Michael Rectenwald: During my Ginsberg period, I was very much in the mindset of religious or mystic experiences. I wrote poetry that reflected this sensibility and was prone to religious experience when Ginsberg sang Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* during his Basic Poetics course. This religious or mystic sensibility/experience was likely due to the stress I felt as an extremely ambitious person who'd lost his sense of direction and suffered from panic attacks and a major depressive episode as a result. You can listen to me reading poems at the end of the semester, [eulogy](#) for him, published in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. I wrote this piece to ward off the panic that I felt in knowing that Allen was gone for good and that I would never talk with him again.

Michael Odom: You go into a digression about William S. Burroughs' son, a tragic story. People tend to forget Burroughs had a son who watched his mother being shot by his father. That very vivid human drama sits almost painfully between your Ginsberg era and your retreat into advertising, return to academia, and your diversion toward Critical Theory. Is his story there as a counter example toward the "extreme experience" approach of the Beats and others who appear to value art over people? Were you disillusioned with the Beats? Or poetry generally?

Michael Rectenwald: The story of my encounter with Billy Burroughs could be interpreted as an admonition about valuing art over life, but I meant it more as an indictment of the Beats, in particular William Burroughs. It is also a criticism of the tendency in some traditions of romanticizing the use of drugs for writing. As for my own feelings about literary writing, I believe I became a much better writer and found my real calling when I gave up trying to be a poet. So, ironically, the Construction of Authorship course helped me immeasurably, in the end.

Michael Odom: Your bio begins in vivid portraits, first of

your father. It seems telling that a calloused-hands worker can't speak with his communist son. Shouldn't those two be allies? Why are Marxists and their off-spring academics more likely to be allied with corporations, administrators and billionaires than workers and employees (your father then and you now)?

Michael Rectenwald: My father was a manual laborer, but as I stated in the book, he had no sympathy for socialism/communism, or even unions for that matter. He was an independent contractor and believed everyone should fare for themselves. He was a Democrat but liked Ronald Reagan. Ultimately, he believed in rugged individualism. Marxists might say that he suffered from "false consciousness" but I don't want to put his disposition down to that. I had arguments with my father about all this and I (mistakenly) believed that someone like me (an aspiring poet) would have fared better in the Soviet Union. My father scoffed at such a notion, just as I would scoff at it today.

I'm not sure what you mean by Marxists being allies with corporations but I will say that I noticed that leftists, who hated my position against "social justice" ideology, sided with NYU, with their notoriously lie-spewing PR agent. They chose to believe NYU over me, a singular individual with only his labor to sell. But we are living in an age of extreme political opportunism, with a leftwing vilifying "them Russians," as Ginsberg put it in the poem "America." We have a leftist McCarthyism afoot today. There's never been a better time to renounce the left.

Michael Odom: Do I detect a geographical snobbery as well? Do elite New Yorkers and/or academics look down on Pittsburg?

Michael Rectenwald: I'm not sure if you are suggesting that I am an elitist and exhibit snobbery toward Pittsburgh but if so the idea is mistaken. I much prefer Pittsburgh to New York and keep my main residence in Pittsburgh instead of New York. I

spend as much time as possible in Pittsburgh and as little time as possible in New York. All snobbery is provincialism and I don't think I can be credibly accused of it.

Michael Odom: I'm sorry, I was unclear. No, I'm suggesting the opposite. I was asking whether some of what is happening to you is motivated by your colleague's reaction to your working class, Pittsburgh background. Perhaps what I'm asking is to what degree you were an outsider already in academia generally or at NYU specifically?

Michael Rectenwald: I don't think that my colleagues showed any snobbery toward me on the basis of my social class or regional background. If anything, any antipathy that has been directed toward me has to do with my scholarship and my identity as a white, "cis hetero" male.

Michael Odom: I've encountered snobbery towards poets by theorists. Is poetry seen as just not as serious? Is that part of what your experience in academia has been?

Michael Rectenwald: I've seen theorists in English departments make fun of poets and the writing of poetry as a kind of solipsistic nonsense. Deep rifts between the theorists and creative writing people in English departments have existed ever since creative writing programs became part of English departments and the theory invasion reconstituted literary criticism. In graduate school I was asked if I had a "dark poetic past," as if having written poetry was an embarrassing fact to keep well hidden. The reasons for this kind of disdain are complex but they have a lot to do with the post structuralists debunking of the author and the elevation of the theorist in her place. This topic is worthy of a lengthy essay or even a book, but I won't venture any further right now.

Michael Odom: At one point you say "English Studies is no less commodified than any other profession. In fact, the

attention and consideration required to “package,” “brand,” and “re-brand” the scholar and her work is as thoroughgoing if not more so than anything I’d done as a pitchman for consumer brands.” Isn’t there, or shouldn’t there be, an aspect of scholarship that serves the art, that aspect that sends one to discover and popularize a recluse like Emily Dickinson, who was nearly crippled as a careerist?

Michael Rectenwald: Perhaps. I have no problem with scholars or others discovering and popularizing authors as such. In my own research in nineteenth-century British science and culture, I work to resurrect working-class intellectuals precisely for their intellection and not for social history alone; treating working-class subjects in terms of social history alone is the wont of most scholars who treat working-class subjects.

Michael Odom: I am thinking also of your encounter with “Evita”, the Cultural Studies grad student who met your literature emphasis with “...we’ll see who does better in the market in the end – the English literature traditionalist, or the Cultural Studies maven.” Other than marketing oneself, what work does a poet do that a marketable “cultural studies maven” need respect? Is that one thing the death of the author means, that you sell yourself and never an art or artist or work? Or, even more hypocritically, does debunking the status of the author only raise the fetish status of the theorist? Shakespeare is dead. Long live Barthes?

Michael Rectenwald: No, I don’t think that the death of the author means one never sells an art or artist. But yes, the debunking impulse was to elevate the theorist and demote the litterateur.

Michael Odom: Your story of being removed from an academic hiring committee for opposing the hire of a candidate whose application materials had spelling and grammatical errors: Is that common now? What is the criterion now to be hired as a

professor? Does that tie back to the question of the humanities failing to protect their subject matter?

Michael Rectenwald: Identity politics runs academia today. The first criterion for being hired is having the “right” identity. Everything else is subsidiary to that.

Michael Odom: Being mobbed by SJW’s did not prevent your promotion to full professor, but you said in another interview it has shortened your academic career by ten to fifteen years. Would you explain how that is?

Michael Rectenwald: I am on a five-year, renewable contract but the people who will make up the renewal committee will be drawn from the faculty to whom several faculty members trashed me. I have been unable to do committee work because no one will have me on their committees. All of this means that the likelihood that I will be renewed is very, very slim. I had planned to teach for another fifteen to twenty years. That has now been reduced to four more years.

Michael Odom: How does one turn back when Critical Theory/Social Justice is a person’s only education or when leftism seems the only available career path? Would you want to be known as a poet yourself?

Michael Rectenwald: I really don’t “identify as” a poet.

Michael Odom: Generally, do you think the English Departments have been good for the art of literature, specifically poetry?

Michael Rectenwald: No, not at all and that has not been their function.

Michael Odom: In describing your impending divorce, you tell of your wife asking, “who cares about Victorian poetry?” Your correction is that, at the time, you cared more about Victorian science and the distinction shows how much you had

drifted apart. That “drifting” is from poetry toward what most Americans call a “more serious” subject. Isn’t that the same boorishness your ex-wife is expressing but with an academic twist, i.e. art is unimportant and more serious people dedicate themselves to more serious subjects like science and politics? But the attack from the left comes from within the literature, art, and ethnic advocacy departments. Isn’t that even more corrosive to the arts than your ex-wife’s more common dismissal of aesthetics?

Michael Rectenwald: No, it’s just that I was more interested in Victorian science than I was in Victorian poetry. This has to do with the intellectual grist that the sciences provide, and also with a sense that in literary criticism or whatever it’s called now, scholars were merely reading whatever they wanted into texts, rather than treating them as historical documents with their own integrity.

Michael Odom: I know this is a big question, so your answer here will be, necessarily, glib, but...In *Social Justice*, you’ve written, “The individual person is reduced to a mere emblem of political meaning...” I wonder what type of poetry could be written with the idea of a person, the writer, the reader, as an emblem of political meaning? Is there a middle ground between a multicultural, relativistic, any-word/any-style-will-do approach and a magical say-the-word-and-it-becomes-fact approach? It seems to me an essential question for poets: just how important is the artful, careful use of language?

Michael Rectenwald: I’m not sure that I can relate this issue to poetry as such. The point of the passage is that under social justice, politics is utterly personal and yet the person is deemed nothing but an emblem of the political. It’s a dreadful situation in which politics has infested everything and yet there is no real politics because politics has been reduced to demonizing and condemning individuals, rather than mass movements. So both the political and the personal are completely disfigured by contemporary, postmodern “social

justice" ideology.

Michael Odom: Do you read contemporary poets? Which would you recommend?

Michael Rectenwald: No, I don't, and that's not out of any snobbery but rather just a sense that contemporary poetry is written solely for other poets and not a broader audience. So, since I am no longer trying to be a poet as such, I simply have no "use" for contemporary poetry. I don't mean this in any dismissive way but since I stopped trying to publish poetry I am no longer trying to remain au courant. Years ago, I read a lot of contemporary poetry, but I have gotten out of the practice and feel completely incompetent to say much about it now. When I do read poetry these days, it is mostly quite older material, because I teach cultural history. I love poetry that conveys *ideas* and sensuality at once. Likewise, my all-time favorite poem is John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. I love it for the drama, the incredible precision in language, and for the epic tale of the fall that it conveys so heartbreakingly. I'm also quite fond of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. In that case, I love the poet's grappling with the implications of evolutionary theory for faith and meaning.

Poets used to be allowed to be intellectuals and to comment on major developments and ideas. Now they are expected to stay small. I object to that apparent demand. Where is the epic today? Where is the narrative poem? Where is a poem like *Paradise Lost* that grappled with the major intellectual, scientific, and cultural developments of the time? Probably such poetry is no longer possible. Although a piece of satire, Thomas Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry* really explains this diminishment of poetry quite well. Poetry was once the language of all thought, including what we now call history, science, philosophy, etc... Now it is the language of no thought. It's the language of "feeling" alone. That's a very unfortunate circumstance for poetry and goes a long way to explain its greatly diminished cultural and intellectual

stature.

Michael Rectenwald is a professor in the Global Liberal Studies department at New York University. In addition to numerous articles on social, cultural and political theory, he is the author of [*The Thief and Other Stories*](#) (Apogee Publishing 2013), and