

In the Bennett Tree

# In the Bennett Tree

John M. Bennett

Gregory Vincent St. Thomasino

E·RATIO

In the Bennett Tree

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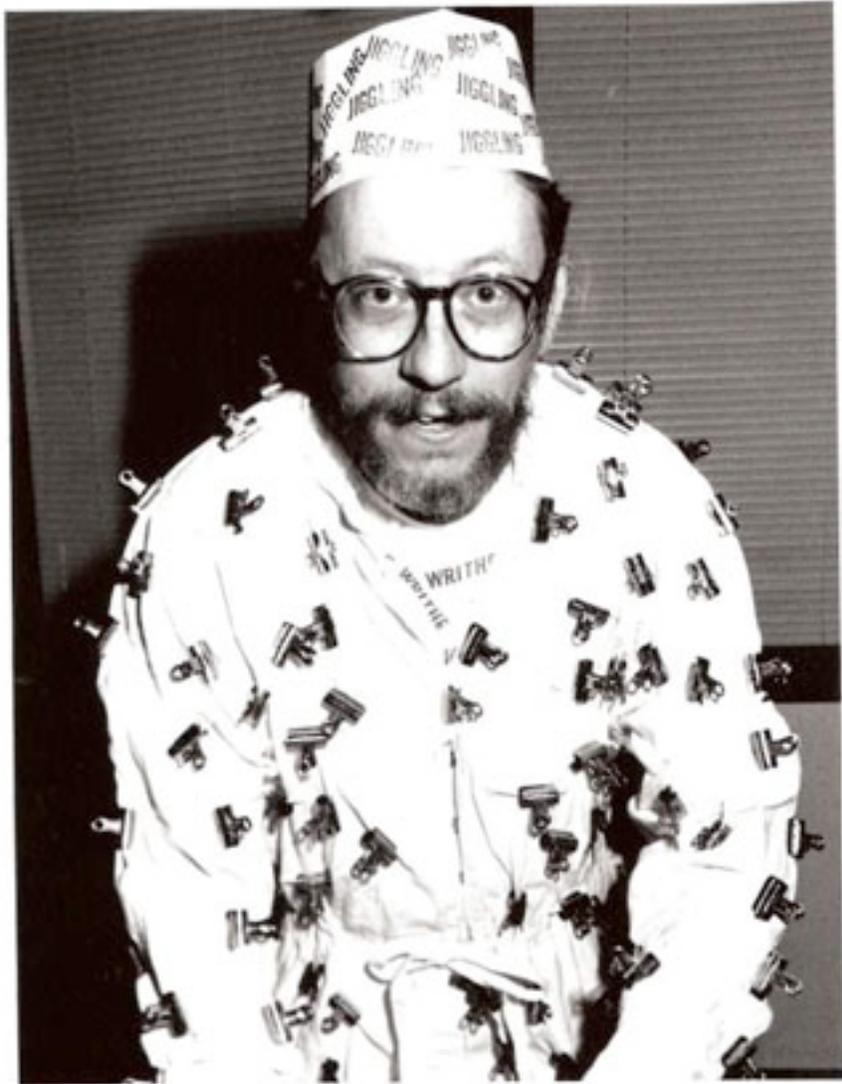


Photo by Mary Albrecht.

## *Introduction*

Twelve years. Wow. *It's been twelve years!* What was I doing, twelve years ago. . . ? I was sitting at this desk. Same desk, but I had a different compoohter then. I was sitting here opening the mail from John M. Bennett, and thinking, *it takes just three days to get here from Columbus*. It was coming on a regular schedule, and not just the poems but hot-off-the-presses postcards, chapbooks, recordings on cassettes (John M. Bennett, as if you didn't know, is an elocutionist—I say, I say, *elocutionist*—and that's a word I don't use lightly), and those photocopied, or, xeroxed, *handmades* (they were folded, 8 and a half by 11 sheets, folded into quarters and stapled—could never figure out why they were stapled, and so as not to disturb them I would lift the pages just so, just so as to sneak a peek inside: it was like reading under the covers with a flashlight). And these were, in many instances, collaborations, with poets from all over the U. S. and from Europe and from Scandinavia and from the ex-Soviet bloc and from South America. Bennett has always been a willing and generous, and famous, collaborator, and this was my opportunity to get in on the act.

Twelve poems. It's remarkable to consider that here are twelve poems that were written, and sent to me, in the space of about three months (they are dated, January 31<sup>st</sup> 1996 to May 1<sup>st</sup> 1996). I'm certain they came to me in their order of occurrence but this order is not reflected in the sequence that follows; and I think this is because the concept of the *Bennett Tree* did not arise until later in that year; and

when I put the sequence together probably it did not occur to me to keep their chronological order; and that is why this chronological order is not reflected in the sequence that follows (which is, nevertheless, the original sequence), but I have thought it wise to provide each poem its date (*and that is why these dates are not in chronological order*). Of the *Tree* poems, three appeared in Bennett's magazine, *Lost and Found Times*. The first, in issue #36 of May '96, was "SHIRT," and this did not carry the legend "from In the Bennett Tree." But then in issue #37 of November '96 there followed "EATEN" and "GOINGS ON" and these did carry the legend "from In the Bennett Tree." Twelve poems, and in the space of about three months—I'd say that's one mighty string of afflatus! And there are *four* dated March 6<sup>th</sup> and *three* dated March 20<sup>th</sup>! (Some of these original twelve would eventually find their way into John's 1999 volume, *Mailer Leaves Ham* (published by Pantograph Press out of Berkeley, CA).)

We may seem an odd pair, John M. Bennett and myself, but our poetries share some crucial distinctions. First, as discourse, our poetries foreground the communicative value of discourse, which means that *as discourse*, our poetries call attention to how communication happens, and to what communication is dependent upon, and that communication is not to be taken for granted in discourse but that it requires the intentional action of the reader, who in his turn becomes a participant in the excavation of meaning (note that here I do not say "signification," which is, I maintain, something distinct from meaning—for whereas meaning is subject to change, signification is substantially neutral in that while it makes meaning happen, it does not determine that meaning). And second, as poets our writings are "intransitive," which is to say this poetry is self-referential—it does not point to some aesthetic reality outside itself but is its own aesthetic reality.

What's more, about John M. Bennett's poems, these may very well be construed as "text-sound" poems (AKA sound poetry, *poesie sonore*, *verbosonie*, *poesie phonetique*) and to this end can be read in terms of an hyperbole of phonemes, or, if I might borrow some language from Richard Kostelanetz, from his Preface to his 1979 volume *Text-Sound Texts*, this is "language unspecific in pitch, which coheres in terms of sound, rather than syntax or semantics." And one need only to

## In the Bennett Tree

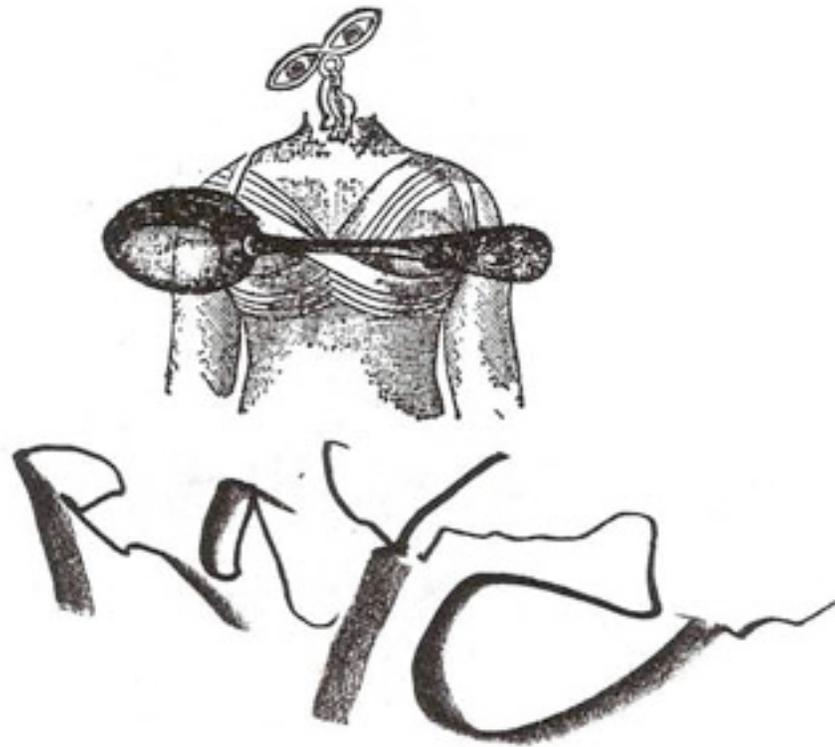
experience John M. Bennett in recital to understand why this is so. Meanwhile, to the other extreme, I think Bennett's poetry comes as close as possible to being a writerly version, if not equivalent, of abstract expressionist painting. (There is emotion, impetus, force, impulse behind these words, akin to the momentum driving the gestures and choreography of the painter.)

What follows are the poems presented side by side, first the John M. Bennett poem and then my excavation. And then we have included in this volume the essay, *Reading John M. Bennett: How to read and think about the poetry of John M. Bennett*. This essay, which banks on Bennett's volume, *BLANKSMANSHIP*, also first appeared in 1996.

—Gregory Vincent St. Thomasino

April 2008

In the Bennett Tree



JOHN AL BENNETT

JUN 14 1996

In the Bennett Tree

# **In the Bennett Tree**

January — May, 1996

## In the Bennett Tree

blooped over trail))) baloney, clamps and lumber,  
what was sawn ahead like head, Yacatecuhtli.  
Boyant-cheek, vapor in the final woods, blanker  
thin than, thinner doesn't end. Ah I sold that  
treacle, greasy now, languid as (acceleration!  
trips **AHEAD** for anguished gravelled femurs,  
rolling-corse (down the greasy steps or journey.  
Ah solid thin your thought! ("vapor!") in the  
logs you wrote before, ants and future ("yakking  
slumber") Your sandwich (smoking, that's

Jan. 20, 1996

In the Bennett Tree

A-ha! Iseult, I sold 'at was't Herr Ingermann?  
(Heads be-lopp'd, Rolfe, O E R. (Shmoking toot.))

Herr Gould! Herr Gould!  
Keep your voice down, you fool! What is it?  
Herr Gould, I cannot move my legs! I am frightened!  
I will carry you.

Clumps-ivies, oats & lambs 'er umbers voot in  
ants a'greasy shtoop Ya-ca-ta-cut. "Mill-willy."

Va'pootta Koch & Nord.  
Logs **AHEAD** be-F E U T o'er 'ter-wrote.

Ach du! Boot. Femoral foote 'uid.  
Foote woods, 'uid, ex-hoot pite. (Canal boat.)

## In the Bennett Tree

phase of hop)ping master raise your arms before my  
chest's lank clinging twist(ed round your claw  
leg last pants or never mind. Brood rebellion,  
bloody stool, quivering sunlight pools across the  
floor (shifted enzyme) least expected **CHAIN OF**  
leash enzyme slamming door (the pool shivers (rising  
from your heap of paper ("trackless stool") spored  
"redemption"// "ever mind"// oh flawed egg your pocket  
whistled sticky ("faster faster") (reached for still

Feb. 28, 1996

Hop (I) Ping, leash master  
(Allo-Allo, Reed & Horsefall),

raise your shivers/arms/rising from  
before my chest's lank and clinging twistical.

Or, bed(ed) 'round your claws and awithers leg,  
my cockatoo's last flawed-egg-pants-a-mishap, I. . . .

I kneehole Kates in skirts,  
Kates in jodhpurs, Kates in dresses,

Kates in phase o' birthday wrap,  
Kates in plastic wrap, Kates in candy foil—

my scarf wrapped 'round my pocket,  
and o'er my "never you mind."

Quivering s(double slash)pools o' bloody stool,  
or shifted enzyme (sell a loose?).

Spoored "redemption" slash garter set—  
my heap o' paper (reached for still and "ever mindful").

Sunlight ("trackless stool," my orang-u-tan strut),  
the whistled-sticky Sgt. Broodhare's floor.

(Says "faster, faster. 'S *slamming door!*")  
Her least expected "pretty mule" **CHAIN O'** rebellion.

## In the Bennett Tree

your tree's saddled, in)) case's point the barely  
leaves's clash cased ("flakes in bed"). Fairly  
more never here "nor there's" trunk smoulders  
baseless grooming nor revision. Chewing mica, force  
of sand, flickered mud's gnat's dome. Ah you crave I  
carve or **CONGREGATION** mats the grave gnat mounting  
on your nose ("Slick") sand thickened up your chew  
like staples, leaves. No room no basal shoulders,  
junk's arise. Floor's hair clear lever, (rises  
in the dark "facial shaking", flash of leaves. Ah  
bare joint's place! (Foam climbs

March 6, 1996

In the Bennett Tree

A-ha (mockery) 's bare joint's place!  
Was't 's flash o' leaves? Like basal staples, 's

la dolce v?  
“Yes, but the pain is to a tickle, now.”

A-ha (surprise) 's “facial shaking” leaves! 'Er  
tree's cased “nevermore” stokehole-smoulders bleeds a

gnat's flickered dome o' **CONGREGATION** here.  
No room, no—the grave gnat mounting, saddled

on your lever (and thickened,  
(a)rises in the dark F-o'-amانيac limbs, 's *case in point*)

leaves's “nor there's” trunk—the barely base lest agrooming.  
Chewing mica, 'er cinema—

re your G-Man super-8 box flicker noir (*any-*  
*type-of-reaction-which-gives-people-an-awareness-of-*

*themselves-and-what-they're-feeling*) Kliegl-force proviso—  
dare you crave I carve or sup and chew, I

carve or sup and gnash, o' mud or (“That”) slicky hair:  
a nose, a shoulder, a “sugar corn-pops in Clarkland.”

A-ha (triumph) clearly 's *mattes* to clash or Dulles!  
Floor 's bowl & spoon, unsocks 'm.

## In the Bennett Tree

known cure rate) heaven's bent more normatic jerkings  
off the hedge flaunt, caker than remission where I  
sought I mouthed all through emissions of the lander,  
tabled, tested for the cure **EATEN** fur best in your  
buttocks' face. Sander's mission, planned form  
mouth lost, condition of your hair's concrete ("caker  
then"). Off your edged slant cough, assurance static  
floor's bent (curator's un-

May 1, 1996

In the Bennett Tree

Off your edgy blonde / stiff / “couch” talk—  
cure(-ator’s) unsaid (maid) docent, ’er

heaven’s bent-more norm(atic) jerkings (“leg show”)  
behind the screen and off the hedge flaunt.

I sought, I mouth’d all through **EATEN** cank’r  
for the curator’s plastic buttocks. Tall & dominant.

(Face it, Miss Sanders, it’s your neotorso.) No  
concrete assurance in this “rubberite’s” world, but

diap’r’d elders’ emissions (“commodity”), style  
tribes, “tight-lacing,” catsuits, “our master key.”

In the Bennett Tree

your rain clawed) across the lark lot (empty form)  
glittered dark high remember, sepsis-clothes removed  
and wet. (“Wet”) sore, sheath of flight flit hand  
fingered your elastic or the “truth be known” your.  
Leaven snore, rank of clouds (“loud rank”) **GOINGS ON**  
cloud the floor or sleep. So *rainy* buts your truth,  
eclastic space and skin: I fingered noise and night,  
your sheath (“net”) flown, removed and misty off  
your silent thigh (parked and flittered clear) dim  
stars (walking out

March 6, 1996

In the Bennett Tree

'Twas a lark, the sheaf in Hamburg  
(empty form, “flit-fingered” in a lot);

sepsis-clothes and “high” remember,  
glittered dark—

the rank of clouds and **GOINGS ON**.  
“Wet-” parked, clawed sore, flown,

removed and so *rainy* off your Beth,  
I “But, but, but” your flaily “Nein.”

## In the Bennett Tree

scratch the) (blurred eye) snake compaction labelled  
blinking in the room your garbles in (“floating  
typer”) typist armpits nailed, branch exhumed or  
gust. The cables strayed, retribution in the wordless  
sink eye convexion **INHALE** vision of resink and  
clocker thirdly riddled in your bay (“gusty”) guts ‘n  
keys, your humo sailed. Hypist back slinks (“boating”)  
warbles in refusion “drinking” twine your crackings-  
aspect (“stake and labile”) “what your counter clocker  
‘thinks’” (waker

Jan. 31, 1996

Hyp(e-yeah-you)ist Bach, slinks a'warbles boy-out  
("boating," bowling, raving "tire throws").

Awake into a bad-hair situation. Or:  
Who taught you to fold money that way?

The cables stray'd. Retribution in the wordless  
("pass-way") vision. Out in my new sneak'rs.

Clock'rs bike thirdly riddl'd in your bay ("gusty"  
sand-cuff) guts 'n keys, your humor sail'd, 'er U-boat

"girl 'n green" re-fusion sink-eye **INHALE** nail'd  
compaction tubing. Says "head bag."

And "what your count'r-clock'r 'thinks'" and garbles  
in a blurr'd eye blink-me, tomboy drinkin'

("stake, fillet & labial" *fa, fa* cut, patch, stir-etch)  
"-ty" wine. Scratch that. Change + purse = church.

'Er ("floating gofer") typist's armpits,  
nail'd to the cross of PC getwithitnesses.

## In the Bennett Tree

for all I saw dust was) sheets flapping sky, was  
moon, comet airy taste remained, clutched the  
timing in my stomach ground-up birds and slight of  
diesels 'cross the lake and merely budded branches  
"espejo de agua" you were awkward when the book was  
opened. **MOSS MOUNT** ("groped the book") so awkwet  
with your twitching cord espejo fragments (bloody)  
napkins drift across the wake's "easel's flight"  
like ground-up words arise, writhe, clutch your  
plate and hair. Cómo beber sky's hat's alift big  
(wind or atacama

April 3, 1996

Naked 'cept for my 'glasses  
(window at a camera),

I clutch'd sleight-hand o' diesels 'cross the lake,  
I vein clutch'd-hand your sleight pagoda oak,

I "merely" budded branches saw,  
for awkward 'twas the capt.'s *arriba* airy sea,

mit Gila cot-a-paraplegia.  
"Espejo de agua." And seeing it was "mine":

"The rain is a perfect model for my lover."  
"But 'glee' is not a word I use in easel-light,

nor member-moon, nor comet's ancy.  
For to taste of ictus-fragment's blood *Veronicas*,

to drift-n'-id acord abaft my body top,  
my "new-to-the-touch-n'-swallow" bottom body,

my flapper-sheets—  
the pelvis **MOSS**—twi-twitching apink—

ground-up books, peewee dickey birds awrithe,  
but to **MOUNT** inside my fluffy boa."

In the Bennett Tree

chain fog!) blanker pages than your crate of ash  
division sensitivity (“blend”) across the mountains’  
secret hand form juice trembles cloud loss of hair or  
feathered eye (“stank”) wristed moon you masticate my  
calendar’s crumpled ball (“danker stages”) **POLE** ball  
stumbled out the tooth stank creamy pages “than your  
plate” tête foam (“spitty hair”). Your secretion-hand,  
loam sense, blended fountains. !Incision-Ah, your  
ash on chair I floated *pages* and, yawked ‘n yalked,  
blanker noose than (yanked’s

March 6, 1996

Clips 'em (geht ein) rood, my secret-snaffle Amy—  
blank'r, pgs' loss o' tuft-height (Still und brood).

**POLE** balloon-ball talk-to-tête fur, yawk'd 'n yalk'd,  
I, float'r pgs blank'r noose. A double gin, pleads.

Rosa Dei, foam too' stank—  
was told in tears and eye-blinks, and finger-snaps

(hand form division). Trembles cloud / juice / masticate,  
my wristed moon (in “danker stages,” calendar's fountains).

Texas. (Yank'd 's “spitty hair” and crat'r tooth.  
¡Incision! *Ahhhhh*—your sensitivity,

crumbled eye-ball bib(lio-)-suite.) Mountains' loam-sense  
maraschino “Prayer o' silence” (do not adjust your set)

the whole wearin' o' the colors thang.  
Romany. Blend'd secretion-hand bilge, or ash on chair-sit

tool-bell Tonga tom-tom. “Spittle.”  
Feath'r'd eye, Camus mine

“For some time, my life continued outwardly  
as if nothing had changed.”

## In the Bennett Tree

“saw contusion”) fats impale your plated lip blur  
nose (“impound the rocks”) your clothes of olive  
loaf, cloister off confusion “farted sky” or  
transportation. Spoke through baking nails you did,  
clicks logistic or you said “lexic **PORCUPINE**” dis-  
said and loggy (“sticks”) did you, hails the lake or  
groped. Some trance occasion, startled sky or fallacy  
((“loaf”) mount) of hoses locks and sound. I dreamed  
your hip as I ran past, paler cats (raised my

March 20, 1996

*for courtin' too slow)* Fats impale your plat'd lip, Sir Stanley.  
Nose-blur the lens, mine *lexic pur*, a "seen contusion," I.  
Cloister off or transdilation, the "miter'd sky-leguminous."

Whence hails the lake of hoses' locks & trance-occasion sound?  
Dis-said, as past I ran, mount of startled sky. Dream(p)t  
or hip your 'ualor white-bread ova loaf, what *clicks* or meta-shoe.

"Lazy" Daisy Farquar has a (purely rhythmic) secret.  
The one-thirty Vivian allays my terror-clamp.  
Every woman on the dancefloor is seventeen.

But yes, I make the co'fusion. *Or else why bother?*  
Your clothes are a fallacy of "nice."  
But so are mine. *Or else why bother?*

Ignore the baking nails—'er pomes Boo! my namby-pambies—  
and when they explode you'll be gambled away.  
Stuck a thumb or spoke a pie, corn'r'd **PORCUPINE**—

pick-up-sticks and Hop-Imp rocks, jujubes and cola pops.  
Penny loafers' leather slots.  
*Or else why bother?*

In the Bennett Tree

blinker then, broke-remorse, came and bedded blaster  
than combine the rafts of war or facial splinters//comb,  
stay stay changes so the drinker tears, drinker than  
submersion) (course you flailed planned raising of the  
horse, intrusion **RACY** past the sale just things,  
sinker than your leers rages fray, combing space! Ah  
your war's gasp's mine, blaster than my head's slant  
came//slope's stone,

May 1, 1996

My 'ead' slant came them double s's.  
Sink'r than your leers / rages / gasps & "join the fray."  
And my 'ead' slant came them double s's.

They combine. The rafts of war and broke-remorse;  
the tears, the faces; the drink'r's Prokop in Capek's *Krakatit*.  
The "Stay, stay and after downpours. The changes-so."

*I look at my reflection  
and try to resist the temptation  
to comb my hair.*

And the course you flail'd *oeno* to pen—the blink'r'd horse-pan,  
bedd'd blast'r **RACY** pour'd out 's hot lead brand—  
raising o'er my 'ead's 'lant came them double s's.

And my 'ead' slant came them double s's.  
Past the bidd'r's 'ale "jus' things"—'s "bad back" slope's tom.  
I said *Yes, Yes* 's 'ead's 'lant '*mersus* double s's.

## In the Bennett Tree

clock thatch) stable drools your looped tale-fire  
in the soffit or your arm. Claims return, my  
bookish eating (plate remission, muddy sandwich on  
the eyepatch quicken peas, rice 'n dandruff. Where  
your **SAME** floating bloomed, (*quicker* than your  
thigh sand blood glass of juice "book of ticking").  
Return my glasses, clammy arm. So often wires,  
often tails, straw floating on your pool. I  
chewed your (sudden sod

March 20, 1996

Or dissimilar.

(One men, “flux-” men, *Others, too.*)

Claims return unheard and quick’r-ridden,  
alapp’d, abitt’n, ’er withers-wrung—

the Engels-braid’d wanna-be, ’er corseted *you gots*  
*the stlye buts week ’ots the printing presses*

sergeants-at-salons “Girls World” (-gamy) jive.  
Though & yea I Thorpe an Argand—

to poach mine (Over, dys-other) own—  
’er float’d bloom’d- or boudoir- or buxom-sewn,

alas too often **SAME** (—’er “rope” un- / stable,  
drools-o’-juice & Betsy,

*not-as-yet-a ’geld’d bantling-boy—*)  
’er eye-patch clocks a *not-for-man-to-solve*

“pretty open-toe shoe” sandwich,  
’stablishes the classes’ she-boot *languette.*

## In the Bennett Tree

nasal moon inhaled) or flat//flight reversal, corn  
of cups inveighs the air (“bare”) scything of refraction  
slippers marble sauce spilled down your pants your  
very best. Clues removed, the itching chairs, syruped  
rain as night’s flocked staplers sparkly phones or  
hurled **SHIRT** incisions furls the sleeves you start,  
tabled cock and kites. Chainer spores, numen stance  
the “very itching” you refused (“milled aground”)  
your gripper//sky, bear, “lucky horn”, that//flailed  
sheathing donned (your

March 6, 1996

Long lost nasal moon,  
inhaled and lispings in numbers (mine).

My flat / spelt / flight reversal,  
a corn of cups inveighs the air (“bare”)

where scything of refraction slippers  
marble sauce spilled down your pants,

your very best (your Sunday best).  
Clues removed, the itching (I Ching) chairs,

syruped rain as night’s flocked staplers,  
sparkly phones, or hurled **SHIRT** incisions furls

the sleeves you start,  
the tabled cock and kites—Mr. Wimple,

jowl, Meisner & Meanny, Horst & Kirst.  
Chainer spores, numen stance—

the “very itching (I Ching)” you refused—  
but I (“milled aground”), a lacerated I / your

gripper / spelt / sky, your ’fraidy bear,  
your “lucky horn” & hand puppet—

your “that” / spelt / flailed & sheathing donned  
(your nasal moon, inhaled, and that-spelt reversal).

In the Bennett Tree



JOHN AL BENNETT

MAY 16 1996

READING JOHN M. BENNETT:

*How to read and think about the poetry of John M. Bennett \**

by Gregory Vincent St. Thomasino

In writing about an author, one runs certain risks. To paraphrase Samuel Beckett, one is liable to solve mysteries of his own making. So be it, then. But where concerns such as John M. Bennett, about whose work—with its deep textures, as though inverted, lying far beneath the surface—so little critical exposition can be found, such risks are, I think, justifiable (and a little mischief, forgivable).

I should like to offer what I believe are some valid, or leastwise reasonable, and I hope useful, directions or *points of view* for the general reader. This *reading* will in nowise be exhaustive; I will deal with what I understand to be Mr. Bennett's most often recurring *and most signal* devices. I will concentrate on what I take to be his most representative, and epitome, volume of poetry to date, that being *BLANKSMANSHIP*. My intention—guided by my own interpretive inference, of course—is to guide the reader to a point within and then out of the most idiosyncratic of these devices, and then leave him to brook the more accessible passages on his own.

I think it useful to point out Mr. Bennett's relation to the *avant-garde*, and then to the school of applied poetry, leastwise to provide a general point of view or angle by which to approach him. I will provide some informative ideas to keep in mind when reading him, with the hope

that these will help the reader in what to look for and how to think about what he finds. These *ideas* are, “new strategies,” “applied biology,” “revaluation,” and “logoclastics.”

Of these ideas, I should now only need to say a few words about the last, more will follow shortly. *Logoclastics* is my term for “the break in discourse.” I translate *logos* as “discourse” and *clastics* as “to break,” and I do emphasize this “break” must be understood not as in to fault or to violate, but as in “to break the news,” or as in “the break of day,” or as in a “breaking out.” The effect of *logoclastics* is to realize of the reader a conscious participant in the *breaking out* of signification. The effect of *logoclastics* is not to render *meaning* indeterminate, but to make play of its elasticity, to make play at the very position at which signification occurs. The effect of *logoclastics* is to *break* discourse but such that it may be reformed—in the conscious, deliberative intellection of the reading—so as to actuate and to celebrate signification.

It is by virtue of this *logoclastics* that Bennett’s poetry transcends any particular movement or school. And as now seen by the number of younger poets who are (either consciously or unconsciously) creating in imitation of his style, he is fast become a class of writing all his own.

## New Strategies

### *Bennett’s relation to the avant-garde*

John M. Bennett’s works are today still known only to the most devoted connoisseurs of the literary avant-garde. His many chapbooks and broadsides—all handsomely and artistically produced limited editions, but for the most part still available through his Luna Bisonte Prods imprint—are instant collector’s items. As for the term *avant-garde*, I must admit it is something of a convenience; that I should think it necessary to justify my use of it, and to qualify it somewhat, is evidence enough of its troublesome and ambiguous constitution; the term, *the concept* itself is a museum, or else—or so I would venture to consider—a brilliant but ostentatious mausoleum. If the term has any life left in it,

it is by reason of its connotations. If the term has any application, it is by reason of what it suggests. *And what does it suggest. . . ?* As for its being a delineable *genre* of artistic writing, it suggests that advances in poetic grammar are not inconceivable. And indeed there are advances—or, let us say, *new strategies in poetic grammar*—occurring in the works of John M. Bennett.

It pays to bear in mind, however, that “avant-garde” literature, if it may be said to be indicative of a (new) paradigm in artistic literary expression, does not supersede or render incommensurable any pre-existing or prior paradigm of “artistic literary virtue”—avant-garde literature, and altogether because of its limited appeal, simply does not have that force—but rather history has shown that avant-garde artistic writing is a parallel paradigm phenomenon, existing in large part in reaction to, and borrowing from (and being borrowed from in turn), the greater literary (and intellectual) community. It was the inadequacies and malfunctions of this, our greater literary community, that necessitated the “advances,” or, more precisely, “the new strategies” that we have come to associate with the term *avant-garde*. In this sense, the *avant-garde* is always itself at crisis (at once symptomatic of dis-ease, and the dis-ease state itself).

Avant-garde literature is not an island, but is, rather, a peninsula—existing in connection to the mainland, however far it may project into the sea.

### Applied Biology?

*Bennett’s relation to the confessional form and to applied poetry*

The *voice* that drives a Bennett poem in no way sounds of a beleaguered psyche; rather so much the opposite of that, this voice tells of a self- and body-affirming *persistence*. Bennett goes head to head with life; and with all of life; and he uses his entire being, his entire sensorial and intellectual capacity in his drive to persevere, to endure, to go on—to seize the moment and make of his momentum the significance of his

being alive, his being here, of his being now. This significance, this *union*, is the symbiosis he has achieved between his life and his poetry; they are very much one and the same—about as much as any poet can, or perhaps ought to, endure. The truth of this is borne out, I believe, by the fact of his very prolificacy; there is a Bennett poem to go with every moment, every arisen need, of the day (and of the night). Rather than being seized upon by life, he is quick to turn the coin and be the seizer; in this way his poetry is as a log, a daily record of incidentals and endurances. Read this way, his poetry sounds at once a coming to terms with life, with biology, with immediate body—and the uses to which such is put—and the starkly, sometimes violently individualistic expression of a craftsman near total learning of his means. And he will have it no other way. Our popular, polite (mainland) tastes and sensibilities have to, in a sense, get used to him. (This is indeed an acquired taste.) But we are always, it seems, in a state of getting used to the uncustomary—and for that reason, impolite—ways of having ideas expressed. Is it the idea *itself* that we find disquieting, or is it that, as custom would have it, certain ideas belong in certain places?

Sylvia Plath has remarked that she could not get a toothbrush into a poem, that for that end she needed the short story. What she was referring to—and in her own way triumphing over—was the certain politeness of the poem, a politeness that had been restricting, *constricting* the poet, a politeness that had in a very real sense been separating the poet from his body, *from his biology*. The poem as some platonic, abstract thing was precluding the poet from expressing, and addressing, himself more directly and with a sense of urgency; from turning to a more relative and satisfying simile, away from the obscure—and for that reason, concealing and disguising—metaphor. While the maladies of the flesh, especially lovesickness, and the vicissitudes of life generally (if not the *biological* inconveniences), have always been available topic for poetry, what was absent was the poet writing about his own, personal maladies, and vicissitudes, and in a diction that did not exalt them to the position of an ideal. (We know, if you will, that Shakespeare was keenly aware and adept at depicting the fortunes of human nature, and yet, what do we know of Shakespeare's own, personal maladies?) The overcoming of this certain politeness of

the poem—to begin with, a relaxing of control and disguise—has taken many forms, one of them being the confessional form.

For Bennett, the poem is a reflection (by which he sees *and by which he knows* himself), and to which and about which he comments; it is the place (the workshop) of his dialogue (his give and take) between body and soul.

Writing on the uses of poetry (both aesthetic and restorative), he has said, “Writing [applied] poetry . . . is different from writing as art only in the uses to which the creative process and the object created are put: the creative act is basically the same in both cases. The artist starts from a feeling of discomfort, senses a lack of balance in himself: the act of creation seems to be an attempt to find or create a feeling of order or clarity in the world and in the artist’s experience of it. This is . . . a movement toward a more informed and controllable integration of self and world.

“The difference between the person using poetry as a . . . [restorative] technique and the poet may be only in that the creative . . . process is an end in itself . . . whereas the poet uses his finished product to promote his experience of himself alive to the rest of humanity, to leave a record of his being in the world. . . .

“Long life, health, ‘happiness’ occur in growth, not in stability or static states. . . . Best said, the creative process helps achieve a state of conscious or informed change and growth.”<sup>1</sup> And I do emphasize the words, *conscious change and growth*.

*BLANKSMANSHIP,*  
*and the Revaluation of Some Elements of Grammar*

*BLANKSMANSHIP*<sup>2</sup> is, in this reader’s opinion, Bennett’s most successfully conceived and most satisfying volume of poetry; published in 1994, these poems mark a culmination in his decades-long pursuit. In the ads announcing its publication (though curiously absent from the book itself) the book carries the rather Beckettian, but no less peculiarly

Bennettian, subtitle, “A Poem of Nothing Knowing.” If the phrase “nothing knowing” seems remote, just consider the more familiar, “nothing doing.” What at first seems strange and unfamiliar, turns out to have been sitting beside you all along. But while *nothing doing* is easily converted to *doing nothing*, “nothing knowing” defies such a conversion. However we may cut it, our subject signals a metaphysical and existential state of perplexity—the coming to terms with *nothingness*. And while philosophers continue to quarrel over the ontological status of “nothingness” (that is, over whether “nothingness” is a valid philosophical concept), our more literary thinkers, psychologists included, have continued to address it and treat of it as though it were the *really real*. An immediate knowledge of *nothingness*—it can stop freight trains in their tracks, if only freight trains were *knowing*. But so as not to leave ourselves completely in the lurch where concerns what is *real* and what is “nothing,” perhaps it is best to keep in mind, that where concerns a “nothing knowing,” the sense of it is (and this is wholly bound up with logoclastics) that, *the real is not the rational*.

But what is “blanksmanship”? Is there such a thing as the practice of blanksmanship? Is there a precedent for it? In the Samuel Beckett novel, *Molloy*, we read, “. . . that you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery.” This is in fine the philosophy, *the manifesto*, of blanksmanship. Beckett took his words as close as possible to their literal implication—which would be *silence*—while still remaining a productive writer. John M. Bennett, very much his own man, rejects silence outright (for that would imply death) in favor of life, notwithstanding life’s *senseless*, “speechless” or too great to be described, *issueless misery*.

In “LIGHT STEAMS,” subtitled “*speech*,” the fifth of the ten five-stanza poems that make up *BLANKSMANSHIP*, the time of day is “in the AM,” and the body is awakening. From the third stanza, subtitled “statue,” we read,

## In the Bennett Tree

Could be's spinal eructation... toward's blank, er,  
blanketed muffling-voice, mumbling 'n formalized  
like a bell in milky sand, like a well-rounded...  
stand of teeth next a breast... could be's forced  
expatriation, ex-plained, un-related... mute  
radios in the trees where snotty tablecloths undulate  
in the breeze, where's hand like a fork digs in, loses  
a way (but finds's loosened belt and's shoes're free...  
(Like's time's all earth's, could be's...

Here we meet Bennett's first device, his use of the apostrophe. Ordinarily, the apostrophe serves to indicate an omission of one or more letters in the spelling of a contraction; most often—and again, ordinarily—the appearance of the apostrophe signals to the reader the possessive form of a nominative (a noun or pronoun used when it is the subject of a verb), and either the singular form or the plural. These rules stand for Bennett; but then, his application of them is open-ended—that is to say, these rules are not construed (by him) so as to state fixed limits, but general, and elastic, procedures. Bennett revalues the apostrophe. Bennett revalues the logic of the apostrophe—as it is both concealed and revealed in grammar—beyond both its descriptive and prescriptive range, but then so as to allow for a greater range of significance (or of suggestiveness, or of expressiveness). And the doing of this, is in accordance with the program I call *logoclastics*.

For instance, as a contracted form, “Could be's” is a contraction of *could be his*. As in, *could be his spinal eructation*. And, *could be his forced expatriation*. The apostrophe, followed by the letter *s* ('*s*), could at any time be the contracted form of the word, *his*. Again, for instance, as a contracted form, “finds's” is a contraction of *finds his*. As in, *but finds his loosened belt and his shoes are free*.

Thus, the main clause in the last line in this stanza can be construed or interpreted, *Like his time is all earth's*.

Furthermore, however, where the word *Like's* would ordinarily have one syllable, and one sound, here it has *two* syllables, *and two* sounds. In pronunciation, it would sound, *like* plus '*is* (*like 'is*) and the

stress is on the *like*. There is no *h* sound in the 's. And thus (and I am using phonetic spellings), the sounds we hear are not, *could bees*, but, *could be 'is* (and the stress is on the *be*). Again, there is no *h* sound in the 's.

So that we may become more familiar with his *apostrophic technique*, and in the process display some of the structures, the byways, thus made accessible here, let us derive a short-list (we will stick with the poems in *BLANKSMANSHIP*). First we'll list his word (his contraction, his device), and then an interpretation, and then a phonetic spelling of how it sounds (of how one might pronounce it).

o'er's . . . . . over his . . . . . *oar 'is*  
so'd . . . . . so he would . . . . . *so (h)e'd* (there is no *h* sound)  
it's's . . . . . it's his . . . . . *it's is*  
so's . . . . . so his . . . . . *so is*  
's . . . . . his . . . . . *is*  
'er . . . . . her . . . . . *(h)er*  
'e . . . . . he . . . . . *(h)e*

Going back to its Greek root, the apostrophe means *a turning away from*. I believe Mr. Bennett is using the apostrophe, not only as a sort of shorthand, but as a (necessary) means of distancing himself from his art, as a means of *dislocation*. In this way, he is, so to speak, severing the cord between his selfhood, and the art that is so much a product (born of) his selfhood. This enables Mr. Bennett to send his art (bearing so much the stamp and development of his selfhood) out into the world at large, where it can stand as *a record of his being in the world*.

Of somewhat lesser importance, but not of effect, is Bennett's use of ellipsis dots and of parentheses. An ellipsis, strictly speaking, is an omission of words (or paragraphs) from a quotation. And generally this rule stands (at least as there are an abundance of quotes—quotation marks—in Bennett's poetry which are as likely as not to command it). However, once again, as in the case with the apostrophe, his use of the ellipsis dots is open-ended. Going back to its Greek root, an ellipsis is *a*

*falling short*. And what “falls short”—as a matter of the poetry—is the thought or imagery being conveyed. In the poetry of John M. Bennett, the ellipsis dots may signal a pause *for* thought; as in, *there is probably more to be said (on this point)*.

Thus, when the poet writes,

Could be’s spinal eructation...

we should expect that he will at some time to come take up this thought again and either complete it with more detail, or carry it forward to another point or separate image; as when he rejoins with, *could be’s forced expatriation*. Or, with the more final and open-ended,

(Like’s time’s all earth’s, could be’s...

Also, ordinarily ellipsis dots are written with a space left before each dot and also after the last (dot) if a word follows; Mr. Bennett does not follow this custom. Rather, Mr. Bennett revalues the ellipsis dots. He makes of the ellipsis his own poetical device. Generally speaking, in the poetry of John M. Bennett, the (ellipsis) dots signal a pregnant pause; also they may separate images; but overall they signal (imply) an ongoing stream of thought (that may or may not find its terminus in the individual poem, but that may be carried over to another poem, or that may be explored throughout his entire volume, or his entire body of poetry, even; and thus a single but imposing summary—“a poem of nothing knowing”—can inflict itself upon a poet’s entire pursuits).

This idea of revaluation is also relevant to an understanding of his procedure with the parenthesis. Once again, the customary rules stand; but then, and again, Bennett revalues the logic contained in these rules, so as to make of the matter his own poetical device. His use of the parenthesis is open-ended. And where he does not write a “close

parenthesis,” it signals that his thought is, quite literally, *open-ended—and ongoing*. . . .

The ambiguity, and multiple byways, and sounds, brought into being by these devices, are all the stuff of logoclastics. These rendered devices and strange (unfamiliar) contractions serve to distinguish and render non-prosaic Bennett’s diction.

Let’s take another look at this stanza—subtitled “statue”—of “LIGHT STEAMS” and let’s take a look at this diction and see what we can find by way of “the elasticity of meaning.” I believe what we come up with will be (as a general rule) representative of Bennett’s entire body of poetry.

Again, the time of day is “in the AM,” and the body is awakening.

Could be’s spinal eructation... toward’s blank, er,  
blanketed muffling-voice, mumbling ’n formalized  
like a bell in milky sand, like a well-rounded...  
stand of teeth next a breast... could be’s forced  
expatriation, ex-plained, un-related... mute  
radios in the trees where snotty tablecloths undulate  
in the breeze, where’s hand like a fork digs in, loses  
a way (but finds’s loosened belt and’s shoes’re free...  
(Like’s time’s all earth’s, could be’s...

Let’s begin with, “eructation.” An *eructation* is the act of belching. A “spinal eructation” is, I imagine, a belching of the entire nervous system—a *belching of the entire organism*. What can it be, a *belching of the entire organism*? If ordinarily an eructation is a passing of wind from the stomach, then a “spinal eructation” is a *passing of wind* through (across) the nerves—and *the nerves play like eolian harp strings out of tune*. Much as in the case of Mr. Beckett with his farts, for Mr. Bennett, the poetic afflatus is no semi-divine inspiration, but is, rather, very much a bodily *expiration*. The poetic afflatus, here, works not so much in accordance with fancy, as with quick viscera. The poet’s irresistible impulse to write poetry is as much a form of dyspepsia (or indeed, his

need to *repatriate*, to return and to keep (himself) safe in his native land (his selfhood), the *place* from where he is brought out, and made exile, by his circumstances), as it is of some divine summons.

But consider the violence of the imagery—and moreover, that we are not certain whether Mr. Bennett is employing a simile here, that he may mean his image literally. The movement in this passage—that is, the movement of a heretofore inanimate or sleeping body (a statue in the pose of Rodin’s *Le Penseur*, I suggest) in its quickening—is initiated not by the touch of dulcet nature, *but by successive jolts, in the form of bodily inconveniences, to the nervous system!*

A distinctive feature of Mr. Bennett’s style, for better or worse, is that he does not develop to the full his ancillary images or ideas; he mentions “spinal eructation” and moves on (albeit he does so with the “ellipsis dots”). He does not linger to explore, to advance the image with additional information; he states the case, then pauses, then resumes only to lead us away, onto another image. If we are to follow him, to follow the poem, that is, we must accumulate and unite these images into one solid image; this solid image then becomes, in turn, but one element, one article, toward the composition and fulfillment of his theme, the theme of blanksmanship and of the poem of “nothing knowing.” The “spinal eructation,” whatever it may be, is an indispensable note in this course of events (so too, I believe, the image of the *Le Penseur*, which I have read into the poem). This course of events amounts to the doing of “blanksmanship.”

So far as logoclastics goes, John M. Bennett seems to break fresh ground with each new volume. His approach to the technical matters at hand is as practical, and unbiased, and playful, as is his search for a personal yet communal diction. He makes poetry of the very obstacles and impediments that would otherwise clog his way. And as a writer of applied poetry, he demonstrates without exception that poetic procedure is itself a way of life, that there exists a universe of “new strategies” just waiting to be discovered. I declare we must identify John M. Bennett as being one of the most active and *present* forces happening today.

\* This article first appeared in print in 1996 in *Pudding Magazine: The International Journal of Applied Poetry* #29; it then appeared online in 2006 at *The Argotist Online*. It is here revised slightly.

1. From an article entitled, *Poetry Therapy as Art*, in *Pudding Magazine: The International Journal of Applied Poetry* #1, 1980.
2. *BLANKSMANSHIP* (ISBN 0-935350-47-0) is available from Luna Bisonte Prods.

**John M. Bennett** has published over 300 books and chapbooks of poetry and other materials. He was editor and publisher of *LOST AND FOUND TIMES* (1975-2005), and is Curator of the Avant Writing Collection at The Ohio State University Libraries. Richard Kostelanetz has called him “the seminal American poet of my generation.” His work, publications, and papers are collected in several major institutions, including Washington University (St. Louis), SUNY Buffalo, The Ohio State University, The Museum of Modern Art, and other major libraries. His PhD (UCLA 1970) is in Latin American Literature.

Ars Poetica: “Be Blank”

**Gregory Vincent St. Thomasino** is the author of *The Logoclasody Manifesto*.

In the Bennett Tree

*taxis de pasa logos*

