

BOOK REVIEW

The Poet Resigns: Poetry in a Difficult World. *Robert Archambeau*. Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2013. Pp. 323.

Robert Archambeau's *The Poet Resigns: Poetry in a Difficult World* collects twenty-seven of his essays on poetry, written (as the publication history listed in the acknowledgments suggests) approximately over the past decade and a half. The essays split roughly into two types: discussions of broader issues and considerations of a fairly eclectic group of individual poets' work. Archambeau is best known for his monograph *Laureates and Heretics: Six Careers in American Poetry* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2010), a study of Yvor Winters's influence on five of his particularly notable graduate students (Robert Hass, Robert Pinsky, James McMichael, John Matthias, and John Peck) and for his Samizdat blog (<http://samizdatblog.blogspot.com/>). The essays in this collection resemble his previous writing. Again he is a smart, affable critic; his work is admirably lucid and consistently engaging.

In broad terms, Archambeau's interest in poetry might be termed more sociological than formal or thematic: he returns to questions concerned with "poetry and politics, poetry in relation to its social situation" (4). One chapter—which I will examine in greater detail—is arrestingly titled "Poetry and Politics, or: Why Are the Poets on the Left?" Several other chapters pose similar questions in their opening paragraphs. Referring to "the phenomenon of the poet as professor," another chapter poses as its central question, "How does the confluence of poetry and academe change the poet's self-definition?" (104).

Before turning to the specific issues that the essays investigate and debating their conclusions, it is important to note the qualities that make Archambeau's prose distinctive and appealing. He is a remarkably good-natured and far-thinking writer. His prose style is welcoming; readers from

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a range of aesthetics will enjoy this book. The subjects he explores typically inspire overheated manifestos and denunciations, but Archambeau's tone remains civil and understated. Indeed, one of his favorite strategies is the self-deprecating gesture: "I'm no George Oppen, still less any kind of Rimbaud," he demurs (2). Again and again he reminds the readers that he speaks for and to a rather unglamorous group—"we bourgeois liberals" (243). The anecdotes he shares about his life reinforce this picture of the author as an everyman poet-critic, one happy to admit his own missteps and reservations. The reader, however, should not be fooled by Archambeau's modest self-presentation. He appears so sensible that it is easy to overlook how provocative his claims truly are.

Two chapters strike me as particularly noteworthy. As its title suggests, "The Aesthetic Anxiety: Avant-Garde Poetics and the Idea of Politics" returns to the often-debated relationship between avant-garde poetry and politics. Archambeau examines several movements, including the surrealists and the language poets, in order to evaluate their responses. The chapter concludes: "It is interesting to note that surrealists were never quite able to establish a solid link between revolutionary politics and surrealist practice, and that language poets were unable to establish a definitive link between textual disruption and resistance to capitalism. But what is more significant is to note how long the urge to have both autonomous art and political efficacy has endured" (61). Here, as he does throughout the book, Archambeau skillfully summarizes great swathes of material, offering apt and evocative quotations. To investigate the big questions he raises about poetry and culture, he employs familiar if blunt markers, emphasizing poetic schools and periods. He favors the synthesizing generalization over the close reading. To this end, Archambeau prizes consistency—within movements and across careers. Accordingly, he is particularly hard on poets whose critical statements do not match their poetry and quotes appreciatively Geoff Ward's criticism of "a discrepancy between the aims and achievements of language poetry" (60). Several aspects of this argument strike me as objectionable.

First, Archambeau presents different writers within these movements as essentially similar. However, great differences exist between Ron Silliman's poetry and Charles Bernstein's, including, but not limited to, how each poet formulates the relation of poetry to politics. Great differences also exist within each writer's work as, over the course of their careers, they rethink and modify their previous positions. At this late point in language poetry's reception, attention to the differences might prove to be the most useful, clarifying the individual and group achievements.

Second, Archambeau implies that the differences between the prose statements' claims and the poetry's achievements discredit the poetry. But why should they? Some poets accurately describe their poems and the con-

ditions that inspired them; others do not. (Recalling his own earlier poetry, Archambeau admits, “If you asked me, back when I was writing either of these poems, just what it was I was trying to get across, I’m sure I’d have given you little more than a blank stare and a shrug” [3].) Ultimately, the prose statements achieved perhaps their chief goal: they drew attention to the poetry.

The title of another chapter poses the intriguing question, “Why Are the Poets on the Left?” Answering it, Archambeau cites “the overproduction of MFA- and PhD-bearing poets relative to the market” and delineates the result—“consequently, the educated feel pressure to accept work of a sort other than that for which they’d trained, ending with increased job dissatisfaction and an attendant growth in alienation, which often manifests as a more radicalized politics” (36). Because he foresees continued “overproduction of MFA- and PhD-bearing poets,” Archambeau predicts that “we’re likely to see an even greater trend to the left among the poets” (35).

Several reasons exist, however, to suspect that Archambeau’s analysis does not emphasize the most relevant facts. Leftist politics also marked previous generations of poets who entered the academy under much more advantageous economic conditions, a time when, as Donald Justice observed, “the proliferation of workshops” resembled “a pyramid scheme.”¹ The poets were generally leftist in those flush times, when jobs in the field abounded. In the broad terms that Archambeau employs, the different generations of poet-professors were generally “left-leaning” (34). In this respect, they differed from many of the High Modernists—Eliot, Stevens, Pound—whose politics tended to the Right. Instead, Archambeau’s final summarizing phrase suggests why so many poets share certain views. By “radicalized politics,” he means “leftist”; however, there is nothing “radical” about this position. Instead, the poets generally turned to the Left when they entered the academy—or, more particularly, the humanities wing of the academy—and took on the views of their workplace. More than alienation, conformity inspires the poets’ politics.

Given these facts, one might offer a prediction that is the opposite of Archambeau’s. I agree that it appears likely that an increasing percentage of poets with MFAs and creative writing PhDs will not work in academe. However, the reason that Archambeau cites explains the situation only partially. Many students who enter graduate creative writing programs do not view them as job training; from the beginning, those students intend to pursue professional careers in other fields. Low-residency MFA programs have achieved such popularity in part because they recognize this desire; they enable their students to hold jobs while engaging in formal study. Archam-

1. Interview with Donald Justice, in *Fourteen on Form: Conversation with Poets*, ed. William Baer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 87.

beau's description of creative writing graduates who "accept work of a sort other than that for which they'd trained" does not accurately describe them, since they understand their creative writing education very differently than he does. Accordingly, they are less likely to feel the "increased job dissatisfaction and . . . attendant growth in alienation" he predicts. Another detail clarifies the situation: poets who work outside the academy are less likely to share its views. If more poets work outside universities, then, their politics might also shift.

To raise these objections, though, is to respond to the book in the spirit in which it was written. In tone and argument, *The Poet Resigns* encourages conversation. While other authors seek to bulldoze readers with overstated arguments or diminish their claims with endless qualifications, Archaibeau strikes a more social tone. He sounds eager to discuss poetry with anyone interested and keen to continue the lively discussion.

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