

RESIGNATION AND INDEPENDENCE

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

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Poet who are also critics have been around for a long time: think Milton, Dryden, Samuel Johnson. But if you don't mind my slipping into Robert Archambeau's preferred historico-sociological mode for a moment, it's evident that the poet-critic in the contemporary sense—the faculty poet, writing prose essays and criticism so that (or with the effect that) less poetical tenure and promotion committees have something to discuss—is largely a twentieth-century phenomenon, to be correlated with the professionalization of English studies in the middle third of the century and the rise of the Creative Writing Industry in the second half.

Archambeau himself, as he details in the “Letter of Resignation” that introduces *The Poet Resigns*, is a poet-critic in recovery, a poet who's found his energies shifting over the years from writing poetry to writing about poetry. And of course he's not entirely comfortable with that shift, so in a wholly salutary manner he sets out to analyze it, most notably in “Oppen/Rimbaud: The Poet as Quitter,” a meditation on two poets who also gave up poetry (Oppen for a quarter-century, Rimbaud permanently). His conclusions, that Rimbaud's abandonment of poetry was a logical next step in his poetic career as “escape artist,” while Oppen elected to make the relationship of poetry to the world of power—precisely what had originally put him off poetry—the thematic center of his later work, seem to me spot-on.

The shades of Oppen and Rimbaud stalk unmentioned through much of *The Poet Resigns*: Rimbaud, the intransigently avant-garde Communist sympathizer who abandoned poetry for gun-running; Oppen, who bailed out of the Objectivist “movement” (and poetry itself) in order to organize strikes for the American Communist Party. The two men are as it were limit-texts for the collision of poetry and active politics. But in their wake there have been whole generations of poets, in both Rimbaudian and Oppenian genealogies of influence, who have argued that making poems can be in itself a way of doing political labor. Archambeau's subtitle, “Poetry in a Difficult World,” evokes Adrienne Rich (*An Atlas of the Difficult World*): where Rich's poems aim to examine and perhaps even to intervene in a world of disquiet, cruelty, and injustice, Archambeau is interested in the place poets stake out for their art, the claims they make about the relationship of poetry

and power—and the motivations for such claims.

The primary tools Archambeau uses to prise open the stories poets tell about their work's place in the world are good old-fashioned historical perspective, combined with a heady dose of sociological analysis. (Archambeau's sociology is inflected by that of Pierre Bourdieu, but it's often a quite common-sense questioning of the social roots of intellectual stances.) For instance, in "The Discursive Situation of Poetry," he examines the familiar genre of the "Lament over the Irrelevance of Poetry Today." We've all been through several rounds of this, from Dana Gioia's 1992 *Can Poetry Matter?*, to whatever the latest screed is, and the general theme is familiar: once upon a time people read poetry, poetry mattered to a "general public," poetry was *important*. Who to blame for this state of affairs depends on your inclination: the rise of popular culture and the dumbing-down of America, those dratted modernists who made poetry a pedant's game, the MFA industry, and so forth.

It's all based, Archambeau convincingly argues, on the false premise that poets' possessing a kind of social importance is something other than a transient historical phenomenon. When Dana Gioia or Joseph Epstein or Mark Edmundson (most recently) evokes a golden age in which poetry mattered, what they're really thinking of is a very specific historical moment: the mid-nineteenth century, the age of Tennyson, of the Victorian Sage. A great time to be a poet or a Sage—but not so great to be an illiterate factory operative, who outnumbered the Sages by a rather large factor. If we want poets to matter the way Tennyson mattered, Archambeau points out, we need to return to the social conditions of 1850.

Wanting the poet to have the cultural stature of a Victorian Sage is an aspiration closely related to various poets' assertions of the political status of their work. Archambeau spends some serious time analyzing some of these assertions, teasing out the complex weave of Krishnamurti-like cultism and political self-aggrandizement among the poets associated with J. H. Prynne ("Public Faces in Private Places: Notes on Cambridge Poetry"), totting up some of the political claims made on behalf of Language Poetry ("The Aesthetic Anxiety: Avant-Garde Poetics and the Idea of Politics"), and presenting a pretty damning indictment of Charles Bernstein's insider-outsider claims about the poet in the academy ("The Poet in the University: Charles Bernstein's Academic Anxiety"). These essays (and several others on related topics) are smart, thoughtful, and written in a gratifyingly lucid prose. More importantly, they pose questions of context and motivation that very much need to be confronted. But as convinced as I am by Archambeau's analysis of the social roots of poets' desire to *matter* politically, I can't help feeling

that he's given short shrift to the actual *content* of their political claims. Too often one gets the sense that for Archambeau, unless poetry literally "makes something happen" (to misquote Auden)—sends young people off to the barricades or packing to join the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, makes the Minister of the Interior resign in shame—then any political claims one makes for it are simply self-delusive. Archambeau does indeed take into account alternative propositions as to how poems might make a political or social difference, but he tends to dismiss them a trifle too hastily for my taste.

Sometimes, alas, the (recovering) poet-critic's socio-theoretical apparatus becomes unwieldy. When he trots out (with a drumroll) the still-resonant chestnut from Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness," only to tell us that poets, having less investment than stockbrokers in immediate economic events, are inclined to take longer (more liberal) cultural views, I get the feeling that a rather large and complex theoretical machine has been deployed to crush a rather small butterfly. And too often Archambeau tends to erect an over-elaborate conceptual scaffolding over a puny excavation. It's true enough that we can call the Irish poet Gabriel Fitzgerald, who seems still to be working his way through the Easter Rebellion and the Celtic Twilight, something of a "decadent"—but wouldn't it be briefer, and even more fun, to simply point out how mawkish and incompetent his verses are?

Archambeau has written a study of the poets who studied with Yvor Winters at Stanford (Robert Pinsky, Robert Hass, John Matthias, and John Peck), *Laureates and Heretics*, and is at work on a large historical study of the notion of poetic autonomy from the eighteenth century to the present. In contrast, the pieces in *The Poet Resigns* are largely occasional—book reviews, responses to immediate controversies, expanded versions of Archambeau's thoughtful blog posts. And they have the advantage of the best occasional writing: immediacy, a sense of responsiveness, conversationality. But Archambeau is a "big ideas" critic: he invariably wants to spin his momentary interpretations of texts into larger insights about the place of poetry in the world. Sometimes, as in the more general essays in the first half of the book, this results in excellent and provocative meditations; sometimes individual poets, poems, and passages from poems become grist for a relentless point-making mill.

There is enough to think about in *The Poet Resigns* to fill a shelf of books, and if Archambeau has the tendency sometimes to answer the big questions of our poetic moment a bit more rapidly than I'm comfortable with, he's to be given abundant kudos for raising them in such a clear and

thoughtful manner, and for tackling them in such lively and intelligent prose. There are many moments in *The Poet Resigns* when Archambeau's affection for poetry (in all of its forms) and his sensitive critical intelligence align perfectly with his structure-making impulses. And the more personal moments of this collection, such as the delightful "My Laureates," show that the poet-critic, whether his resignation be temporary or permanent, is by no means afraid to subject his own socio-politico-theoretical position to the same examination he has brought to bear on others.