Kafka and Variations

Robert Archambeau. *The Kafka Sutra*. MadHat, 2015.

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It's been more than ten years since Robert Archambeau published his first poetry collection, a decade in which (by his own account) he "mostly stopped being a poet to become (mostly) a critic" (Facebook), a shift declared with seeming finality in the title of his essay collection, *The Poet Resigns*. Coming after this, the appearance of *The Kafka Sutra* is a welcome event. But if Archambeau is now "a mostly-critic poet-critic" ("Swimming in 1937"), the line between these aspects is more permeable than it was for precursors such as Yvor Winters and Donald Davie (both of whom he discusses in his monograph, *Laureates and Heretics*). The final section of *The Kafka Sutra* is a critical essay, "Hating the Other Kind of Poetry," in which he situates his poetic practice in relation to his critical stance. One might see this as fidgety overthinking: wasn't Basil Bunting right to caution the poet, "Never explain—your reader is as smart as you" ("Some Bunting Quotes")? Can't the poet's work stand without support from the critic? I am perhaps complicit in this, in putting the critical cart before the poetic horse, but as the Afterword initiates the work usually left to the reviewer it seems sensible to continue it here for the light it casts on the poems.

Archambeau characterises his critical stance by two terms: disinterest and pluralism. The antonym of both may be a single term: partisanship. The essay begins with the responses generated by an essay he wrote on Kenneth Goldsmith: having attempted a value-neutral, purely descriptive account of Goldsmith's poetics, he recalls, "I found I was condemned for having praised him, praised for having condemned him, praised for having praised him, and condemned for having condemned him—all in roughly equal measure." ("Hating the Other Kind of Poetry" 95) Apparently the disinterested critic, determined to describe rather than to judge, now occupies an obscure and ill-understood position. One solution to this might be the advice given by "M" (one of several fellow critics identified here by Kafkaesque initials), that he should make "a strong case for the poetry you believe in, and against the poetry you don't." But this assumes that one can only "believe in" a limited range of poetics, defined by contraries that map onto the discursive framework of contemporary debates—that one cannot be pluralist, even provisionally. It should be noted that Archambeau doesn't record this out of a sense of rancour, although he does seem to relish conflict

between other poets (for instance, Robert Creeley's references to "that fucking Merwin"). But since disinterest and pluralism have caused such misunderstanding, it isn't surprising that he should expect the same when he puts his non-partisanship to creative use, and therefore attempt to disarm critics in advance.

Critical pluralism may provoke incomprehension and hostility; in creative work, it may also look like incoherence. A reader may be able to enjoy a variety of styles, but usually expects to do so discretely, from a number of books. A collection that does a little bit of everything may look like a grab-bag. Nothing wrong with a grab-bag, one might respond; but Archambeau, as he admits, has been through this already as an editor. Having launched his little magazine *Samizdat* as "a space for different kinds of poets to come together and talk to one another," its fate turned out as foretold by the appropriately fatalistic "K": "that never works." ("Hating the Other Kind of Poetry" 96) *The Kafka Sutra* flirts with the same danger, containing as it does Conceptualist procedures, personal lyrics, ekphrases, and translations of Surrealism, as well as the title-sequence. Pluralism may be a virtue in a critic, but is it enough to hold together a mishmash of styles, many of them assumed to be incommensurable? Or is there something else within the collection that can perform this adhesive function?

Some such glue can be found in the first section of the collection, comprising eight riffs on Kafka's short fiction, parables such as "The Great Wall of China" rewritten as comedies of erotic misfortune. These aren't parodies or spoofs; in fact, Kafka has his own tales of frustrated desire, such as "Rejection," in which "a pretty girl…walks past without a word" (*The Complete Short Stories* 383) in reply to a man's advances. What Archambeau does is to bring to the material another consistent feature of his writing, from monographs to Facebook statuses: humour, of a kind that revels in almost baroquely camp language as much as in schoolboy crudity. Instead of Kafka's bucket rider, for instance, who crosses the city to beg a shovelful of coal on a magically floating bucket—carried by urgency of his need and the absoluteness of his lack—Archambeau has a man bestriding his own genitals like a space hopper:

> His mode of arrival must decide the matter, so he rides off mounted on the swollen orbs within his scrotum. Buoyed upwards as if by a force greater than helium, he lays hands on his growing tumescence—the simplest of bridles—and so will propel himself with difficulty down the stairs, the bald and freckled spot atop his head scraping the ceiling. ("The Ball Rider" 14-5)

Subtle it is not. The most convincing of these adaptations, I think, are those

in which Kafka's ironic logic is best adapted to the contradictions of desire, for instance the substitution Archambeau makes for Kafka's choice of kings and couriers:

> He is offered the choice of becoming a husband or the lover of another man's wife. Men being what they are, he wants to be a lover, as do all the others. Therefore there are only lovers hurrying around the world, near rabid with ardour and bearing their secret letters of desire. There being no husbands, though, there are no wives, so there is no one to receive their amorous messages. Secretly they would all like to put an end to this miserable way of life, but fear commitment. ("Couriers" 9)

Less satisfying are those in which the transposition is only taken so far, then abruptly terminated, as in "Before the Door," in which the man from the country waits for admittance, not to the law, but to a brothel. As if the conclusion of that parable—"No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it" (*The Complete Short Stories* 4)—is too enigmatic to allow a salacious equivalent, this version ends abruptly with the man's unavailing attempts to bribe his way in. But given that the sequence tends towards the scurrilous and absurd, surely there's no real obstacle to carrying the conceit through to the conclusion of the story.

In other cases, the appropriate parallel is readily suggested by the original. Kafka's "The City Coat of Arms," another meditation on the incomplete tower of Babel, concludes:

> All the legends and songs that came to birth in that city are filled with longing for a prophesied day when the city would be destroyed by five successive blows from a gigantic fist. It is for that reason too that the city has a closed fist on its coat of arms.

Taking the tower, like a bad Freudian critic, as a phallic symbol, Archambeau's "The Coat of Arms"—one of three parables based on this set of imagery—begins with preparing a room for seduction, with "too much thought taken for silky acid jazz, wine choice, the softness of the lighting scheme, and whose books of experimental-but-sexy poems to leave on the coffee table," and ends with "the scene of construction unfinished. It is for that reason that his coat of arms depicts a clenched fist closed around the Tower of Babel." ("The Coat of Arms" 11)

This onanistic conclusion may provide a thematic key to the coherence of the collection as a whole. The biblical story of Babel is a parable of dissemination, in which God intervenes to "confuse their language so they

will not understand each other" (Genesis 11:7)—a condition mirrored by the mutual misunderstandings of the contemporary poetry scene, or scenes. If we reflect this back into *The Kafka Sutra*, we can read the subsequent sections as experiments in different poetic languages derived from the initial moment of dissemination, in its seediest sense: an originary jism sowing a plurality of isms.

In light of this, the second section, "Responses," represents the poetic tribe that largely dominated the 20th century: the tradition that stemmed from Modernism but relaxed its more dogmatic avant-garde tendencies so as to retain older models such as the Romantic conversation poem. This lineage is evident in Archambeau's addressing one poem to his doctoral supervisor and mentor, John Matthias, and another to Matthias's erstwhile teacher, John Berryman. Here the speaking "I" is, for the most part, the same person who writes discursive prose in "Hating the Other Kind of Poetry" and blogs at *Samizdat*, with the same enthusiasms (for punk rock as well as poetry), a daughter of the same age, and the same day-job as a college lecturer, all of which provide subject-matter. The poems are formally varied, with fixed forms such as the sonnet and sestina alongside varieties of free verse. In both, Archambeau frequently uses repetition: the necessary repetitions and recombinations in "Sestina: What Chester Kallman Did to Poor Old Auden" are echoed in the free verse of "La Bandera" and "Hieratic Perspective:

> I went into the cathedral that was for me alone,
> where the guide who was also for me alone,
>
> and of me alone, spoke to me alone[.] (45)

A century ago, these forms—fixed and free—were red lines within the poetry world, dividing it into antagonistic groups; but they have since been assimilated and ranged against later developments of the avant-garde, from L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E to Conceptualism. Archambeau experiments with the latter aesthetic in the collection's third section, "Two Procedures". The first of these, "Manifest Destinies, Black Rains," rings changes on an 1852 description of Washington D.C. from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* and a passage from Masuji Ibuse's 1965 novel of the Hiroshima bombing, *Black Rain*, in nine unmetered quatrains:

> A magnificent country, whose commerce whitens every sea,
> whose most majestic railroads and canals, like great arteries, hang down,
>   broken, in tangled profusion—

I had a terrifying feeling that one or another of them must be live, fierce. (1-1, 53)

Here, it seemed, the human mind was destined to develop its highest powers.
Here, it seemed, in the inexhaustible country they inhabit.
Magnetic nerves, with the rapidity of thought, bore intelligence to distant
extremities. I had a terrifying feeling
the mind was destined to spark and tangle: fierce and white. (2-1, 56)

The difference between this kind of *poesis* and the Audenesque sestina is less a matter of kind than degree, and brings into question the supposed antitheses between this one and "the other kind of poetry." Similarly, "Brightness Falls," a poem from the previous section, is structured around the famous error in Thomas Nashe's line "Brightness falls from the [h]air" and a typo in an email sent during the Balkan conflict of the late 1990s—another recycling of found materials. And though the second procedure, "If Wronging You Is Love," which simply lists poets and their Google search results in descending numerical order, bracketed by the words "If…is a poet, I don't want to be a poet" across seven pages, is closer to the aesthetics of Kenneth Goldsmith (especially with its reliance on the internet, and the fact that one doesn't so much read as apprehend it), its fundamental dynamic is still repetition and variation. The same is also evident in the collection's fourth section, "Versions," which collects translations "free and loose" (69) of Surrealists from Martinique (Lucie Thésée) and Belgium (the Piqueray twins), for instance in Thésée's use of anaphora:

Handsome, like those foam-topped tidal waves breaking high, in little crystal
globes.
Handsome, like the breeze that lifts a little tuft of tulle. If tulle were life.
Handsome, like a frozen face, tear-tracked, when the sun hammers down.
("Poem" 75)

This perception of underlying homologies between what appears to be radically different is fundamental to Archambeau's pluralism, as well as ensuring the coherence of the collection on the level of form. (We might see it as already evident in the title of his debut collection.) That said, the range of styles on display here stands a challenge to readers, most of whom will probably not be able to match Archambeau's catholicism: personally, I don't get any poetic pleasure from the Piqueray's "Tale of an experiment":

Whenever

He gets a chance

> The man
>
> Tears a head of lettuce
>
> Into a thousand pieces
>
> And stuffs them into a very strong
>
> Cup of filtered coffee. (83)

On the final page of the book, Archambeau describes its contents as "riffs on, replies to, or deeply unfaithful translations of what others have written…attempts to enter sensibilities other than my own" ("Hating the Other Kind of Poetry" 104). But which among this panoply of sensibilities is his own? One might identify this with the second section, which is the longest as well as being mostly written *in propria persona*. But a persona isn't the same as a sensibility, and it could be argued that that section is not characteristic of the collection as a whole. One way of putting it would be to say that Archambeau's own is not one among other sensibilities (which might lead to partisanship), but a kind of meta-sensibility, a taste for other people's tastes; or, like Keats's poetical character, "he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body"—but filling other poetic sensibilities, rather than "The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women" ("To Richard Woodhouse"). This might align him with the exponents of Uncreative Writing, were he not also drawn to the lyrical forms they have ruled out of court.

"Where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more?" asked Keats, contemplating the paradox of the poetical character. Given the nature of Archambeau's sensibility, which tends to react to others rather than generate its own steam, it's no wonder that he should feel resigned about the poetic vocation. I think it's fair to say, too, that while his work is funny, intelligent, well written and pleasantly anomalous, it isn't pitched at the same level of intensity as those—Kafka, Auden, Berryman, et al.—whom he follows while fondly joking with them. Nonetheless, *The Kafka Sutra* is an entertaining volume in itself, as well as an act of critical mediation, perhaps pointing towards a post-Conceptualist dispensation in which current polarisations will seem as narrow as the last century's regarding metre.

Works Cited

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