

ROBERT ARCHAMBEAU'S ENTICING CRITICAL MORSELS

Robert Archambeau. *Inventions of a Barbarous Age: Poetry from Conceptualism to Rhyme*. Madhat Press, 2016.

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“One thing a critic can do in the age of mechanical recommendation, other than insist on the pure or practiced nature of his or her judgments, or the acuity of his or her political evaluation of the artwork, is this: the critic can do a better and subtler job of understanding what a particular piece of art or writing is good at, and what it doesn't do so well,” writes Robert Archambeau, comparing the “mechanical recommendations” of Amazon.com to the work of the literary critic (243). The present review seeks to perform the same task that Archambeau assigns to the non-mechanical critic: to present the limits and strengths of Archambeau's *Inventions of a Barbarous Age: Poetry from Conceptualism to Rhyme*. As this quote already suggests, Archambeau's avuncular and good-natured style, not to mention his nonsystematic methodology, does not fit comfortably within the rarefied confines of academic prose. His titles are often light-hearted: “Ambiguous Pronouns Are Hot,” or “Poetry Ha Ha.” His brief essays, often spanning no more than a few pages, sometimes spring from his Samizdat weblog as well as academic conferences and similarly learned venues. Yet as these varied venues suggest, Archambeau's work is enlightening reading both for the lay person and the academic.

The advantage of the short form lies first in diversity. The book's subtitle suggests that both rhyme and conceptualism constitute the “inventions of a barbarous age,” but this apparent focus belies the heterogeneity of the poet-critic's many subjects, which stray far beyond the formal devices this subtitle suggests. In fact, if the book does display a consistent line of inquiry, it would not involve form so much as the social backdrop against which poetry takes shape. The section “Poetry and Community” is hence more representative of Archambeau's thinking—well beyond the bounds of this volume, throughout his critical work—than the essays on conceptualism and rhyme. Archambeau discusses, for instance, how W. H. Auden's early work demonstrates the “disinheritance” of a generation which, in spite of an elite education, found itself without a clear role to play in the interwar years (“The Disinheritance of the Poets”); how the constraints of telephone and postal communication before the age of internet conditioned the sense of alienated isolation of a poet like Richard Hugo (“Between Facebook and

Montparnasse: Poetry's Lonely Time"), or how the Russian poet Andrei Voznesensky's individualist preoccupations found a vast and receptive audience under the oppressive shadow of collectivist Soviet ideology ("When Poetry Mattered"). In all of these cases, form alone is less interesting to Archambeau than form considered as a function of social circumstances. As Norman Finkelstein writes on the back cover, Robert Archambeau is first and foremost a "poetic sociologist," and this approach also informs his essays on rhyme and conceptualism.

Once again, however, in variety and pluralism lie one of Archambeau's better qualities. Though familiar with Bourdieu and his ilk, Archambeau does not share that sociologist's totalizing view of fields of activity, nor are his references solely sociological. Writing of a used bookstore frequented during his doctoral years, Archambeau writes, "In a way, the exposure to the forgotten, the weird, and the academically untouchable has been a kind of secret weapon for me as a poet, critic, and writer—it's always been a kind of ballast against the winds of academic fashion" (275). Indeed, Archambeau's secondary material is often refreshingly idiosyncratic and unexpected, including such neglected figures as Asger Jorn, an influential figure for the Situationists. The book's third section, "Mystics and Gnostics," is particularly notable in this respect, because it approaches poets with obvious (and less obvious, yet demonstrable) religious preoccupations, highly unpopular in a literary milieu overwhelmingly dominated by secularism. The remarkable poets Peter O'Leary and Norman Finkelstein thus help Archambeau demonstrate heterodox forces at work in contemporary poetry.

Archambeau discusses his pluralism in "Hating the Other Kind of Poetry," and notably with regard to his foray into discussions of conceptualism, against which he experienced considerable backlash for his attempts at even-handed neutrality. He diagnoses Robert Creeley's venom toward his peers as the result, once again, of social forces, those of a field dominated by an economy of recognition. Archambeau does not pretend total impartiality, but upholds it as an aspiration and an antidote against backbiting, envious behavior among poets.

But Archambeau's wide-ranging tastes and references, and the brevity of his articles, also have limits. A broad net casts less deeply, and some treatments of certain figures, such as Deleuze or Levinas, may appear superficial, especially to eyes more used to the conventions of academic prose. "Who is a Contemporary Poet?" contrasts Archambeau's notion of the contemporary to that of Kenneth Goldsmith, ultimately rejecting both in favor of Giorgio Agamben's more sophisticated and complex notion of contemporaneity, but the article reads principally as a useful synthesis of Agamben's approach

to the concept, rather than as a substantial dialogue with Agamben and his ideas. And when Archambeau brings the work of Peter Bürger to the table, he does not necessarily consider the limits of this theorist's work. For Bürger, anti-art avant-gardes like Dada and Surrealism aimed to destroy the separation between art and life. But one can easily contest Bürger's thesis by observing that Dada and Surrealism, like all the avant-gardes of the Twentieth Century, relied just as much on artistic autonomy as other movements. For instance, when Surrealists called for terrorist action, writing that "The simplest Surrealist act consists of going out, revolver in hand, into the street and shooting randomly, as much as one can, into the crowd," the condition of acceptability of such a gesture is that of artistic autonomy. Only insofar as this ridiculous proposition can be regarded *unserious artistic play* is it possible to make such a statement. One might say the same of various avant-garde pieces in praise of Bonnot's band or the serial murderer of women Henri Landru. As soon as Louis Aragon was arrested for his poem "Front rouge," Breton defended Aragon by suggesting that the poem was *just a poem*, and did not earnestly call for armed revolution. In short, Surrealism and Dada, as much or more than other artistic movements, is directly predicated on the moral and practical autonomy of art. As Professor François Cornilliat once approximately said, placing a urinal in a museum does not contest the distinction between the institutions of art and those of daily life; instead, the gesture maintains and sustains the distinction by elevating the urinal to the status of art object. Duchamp's "Fontaine," in other words, exploits the distinction between art and life without contesting that distinction at all. Archambeau does gesture toward problematizing Bürger's problematic perspective, but the limit in scope of his short article does not allow him to engage substantially with the problems at which he hints (248-251).

Archambeau's use of Bürger is limited, like his use of Levinas or others, but it serves as one example of the limits of Archambeau's critical engagement with his source material. In the final analysis, the principal problem with Archambeau's articles are not that they fail to constitute real contributions to contemporary discussions of poetry—quite the contrary—but merely that they leave the reader wanting more. This is also a mark of praise: it is a measure of Archambeau's contribution that he regularly prompts this desire for a more in-depth inquiry into the matters he approaches. His essays are like tantalizing morsels leading the reader to further wealth, and the present reader looks forward to experiencing first hand the work of Peter O'Leary and Norman Finkelstein, for instance. One can only hope that Archambeau will continue to explore in such illuminating and entertaining ways the objects of his predilection.