The Poet Resigns
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Poetry in a Difficult World

Robert Archambeau
For Lila
Acknowledgments

During the years over which these essays were written I was generously supported by Lake Forest College, by the Illinois Arts Council, and by the Swedish Academy, and I am grateful. I am grateful, too, to the many editors, conference panel chairs, and publishers who invited and welcomed the essays in this book: Boris Jardine of Cambridge University, Louis Armand of Charles University in Prague, Emily Merriman of San Francisco State, Adrian Grafe of the Sorbonne, Mary Biddinger of the University of Akron, Kelly Comfort of Georgia Tech, David Caplan of Ohio Wesleyan, John Gallaher of Northwest Missouri State, Miranda Hickman of McGill, Kevin Pruf er of the University of Houston, Alan Golding of the University of Louisville, Don Bogen of the University of Cincinnati, John Matthias of Notre Dame, Jim Johnson of the University of Pittsburgh, John McIntyre of the University of Prince Edward Island, Joe Francis Doerr of St. Edward’s University, Chris Hamilton-Emery of Salt Publishing, Aditi Machado of Washington University in St. Louis, Katy Evans-Bush of Horizon Review, and Don Share and Christian Wiman of Poetry magazine. Without them, most of what is collected here would not have come into being.

I have been fortunate in my editors, and I have also been fortunate in those with whom I converse about poetry: Mark Scroggins of Florida Atlantic University, Norman Finkelstein of Xavier University, Joseph Donahue of Duke, Michael Anania of the University of Illinois—Chicago, Stefan Holander of Finnmark University College, D. L. LeMahieu of Lake Forest College, and many others, including those who have offered comments on my blog. John Wilkinson of the University of Chicago, Keston Sutherland of the University of Sussex and Andrea Brady of Queen Mary—University of London clashed with me over one of these essays, and I wish to thank them for their passion and their arguments. I owe particular thanks to David Park of Lake Forest College for introducing me to works in communications theory that have opened perspectives on literature for me that would otherwise have remained hidden. I owe a great deal to Caitlin Meeter and Traci Villa, without whose
support this project would have been far more stressful. Above all I must thank my wife Valerie and also our daughter, Lila—this book is for her.

A number of these essays have been published in books and journals, sometimes in slightly different form.


“Poetry and Politics, or: Why are the Poets on the Left?” appeared in Poetry (November 2008).


“Seeing the New Criticism Again” appeared in different form as a presentation at the Modernist Studies Association Conference, October 2006.


“Marginality and Manifesto” appeared in Poetry (June 2009).

“A Portrait of Reginald Shepherd as Philoctetes” appeared in Pleiades (Spring 2008).

“True Wit, False Wit: Harryette Mullen in the Eighteenth Century” appeared in different form as a presentation at the Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900 (February 2011).


“Laforgue / Bolaño: The Poet as Bohemian” appeared, in different form, in Notre Dame Review (Summer/Fall 2012).


“Nothing in this Life” appeared in Horizon Review (Winter 2011).

Several essays began life on Samizdat Blog, generally in less developed form. These include: “Negative Legislators: Exhibiting the Post-Avant,” “When Poets Dream of Power,” “Can Poems Communicate?” “The Poet in the University: Charles Bernstein’s Academic Anxiety,” “Poetry / Not Poetry,” “Neruda’s Earth, Heidegger’s Earth,” “Remembering Robert Kroetsch,” and “My Laureates.”
Contents

Instead of an Introduction: Letter of Resignation 1

Situations of Poetry
The Discursive Situation of Poetry 9
Poetry and Politics, or: Why are the Poets on the Left? 32
The Aesthetic Anxiety: Avant-Garde Poetics and the Idea of Politics 40
Public Faces in Private Places: Notes on Cambridge Poetry 64
Negative Legislators: Exhibiting the Post-Avant 80
When Poets Dream of Power 88
Can Poems Communicate? 97
The Poet in the University: Charles Bernstein’s Academic Anxiety 104
The State of the Art 115

To Criticize the Poetry Critic
Seeing the New Criticism Again 129
Poetry / Not Poetry 138
The Death of the Critic 144
Marginality and Manifesto 156

Poets and Poetry
A Portrait of Reginald Shepherd as Philoctetes 167
True Wit, False Wit: Harryette Mullen in the Eighteenth Century 180
Emancipation of the Dissonance: The Poetry of C. S. Giscombe 188
In the Haze of Pondered Vision: Yvor Winters as Poet 203
The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Poetry 208
Power and the Poetics of Play 219
Neruda’s Earth, Heidegger’s Earth 236
The Decadent of Moyvane 244
Modernist Current: On Michael Anania 250
Laforgue / Bolaño: The Poet as Bohemian 267
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oppen/Rimbaud: The Poet as Quitter</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remembering Robert Kroetsch</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myself I Sing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing in this Life</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Laureates</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I’ve never thought about resigning from poetry myself, but perhaps that’s because I haven’t had to: looking back on the changes in the kinds of writing I’ve done, I see I’ve become less and less of a poet, and more and more of a critic. One needn’t resign from a job when one has, for the most part, stopped showing up. When I first realized this, an inner dialogue broke out between my accusing superego and my ego, which stood like a guilty thing surprised. It was as if my superego had decided to play the part of Beckett’s Estragon to my ego’s defensive Vladimir:

Estragon: Morpion!
Vladimir: Sewer-rat!
Estragon: Curate!
Vladimir: Cretin!
Estragon: (with finality) Critic!
Vladimir: Oh!

He withers, vanquished, and turns away. (85)

When I’d recovered from this withering inner assault, I was left with a question: does writing less poetry, or no poetry at all, involve some kind of self-betrayal?

Not necessarily. George Oppen was poetry’s great prodigal son, coming home to the art he’d left behind. And Rimbaud, in giving up
The Poet Resigns

poetry, was no traitor to himself: he was honest to his own rebellious trajectory—the very fact that his actions still scandalize so many littérateurs stands as testimony to this fact. I’m no George Oppen, still less am I any kind of Rimbaud. But, in looking back on what amounts to my de facto resignation from poetry, I think I can see it as honest, in its way, to my own trajectory.

If there’s any kind of direction to the writing and thinking I’ve done since my student days, it has been guided by a compass aimed at the idea of the aesthetic, and behind that at the question of the meaning of the aesthetic in a world full of pain and troubles. One of the earliest poems I thought worth putting in my book Laureates and Heretics, “Pater and His Age,” takes up the question. It doesn’t have anything like an answer, though—just a worry:

In coke fire, in kiln: accumulation.
In furnace, in engine, in black iron machine.
In loom-thrum, train clatter, in sulfur and mine shaft
In ash from brick chimneys comes surplus, comes hoard.

Percussion cap, cartridge, hard black hands of miners.
Blasting of rock face, quick flash, hissing fuse;
Engineer, steel wheel, white sparks from hard braking,
Embankment, blue gas light, slum child, rank canal.

Consumption in cough and in candelabra.
Excess in the watch-chain’s long droop to the fob,
Use-value in square fingered hands warmed at ashcans
Whose fires light tight tangled streets without names.

And would I, too, flee the moralist’s preaching
To burn with the light of a hard, gem-like flame? (12)

I remember being proud of the pun on “consumption,” which I now consider something of a groaner. And I was utterly oblivious to how the title already indicated an incipient literary critic at work: it sounds like the title of a book of dry scholarship more than a title for an unrhymed sonnet, doesn’t it? But the concerns that animated me in the writing of this student poem some twenty years ago continue to animate me now:
the meaning of art and beauty and poetry in a world of power and pain and injustice.

Similar concerns animate a poem written about a decade later, “Poem for a War Poet, Poem for a War,” which steals its refrain from a John Matthias poem, which in turn stole it from a poem in Serbian by Branko Miljković. Here’s part one:

The lines inked on the map are railways and roads.
The lines on the road are refugees, and moving.
The lines inked on the page are a poem, your poem.

While you are singing, who will carry your burden?

The lines on the page are a poem, words
that move toward the refugees, their tattered world
of hurt and proper names, their lost, their staggering.

While you are singing, while you are singing.

The lines are helpless in this time of war. They survive,
if they are a poem, in valleys of saying, they survive
and reach for valleys where bodies cough, bleed, or stumble blind.

They survive while you are singing.

While you are singing. (27)

The conclusion of the poem works variations on what’s gone before:

The lines on the road are refugees,
Their paths are marked with ink, charted
on a General’s table. Your lines are a poem.

While you are singing, who will carry your burden?

A woman bends beneath her load, a young man stutters in his fear,
a guard at the valley’s border lets them through,
or not. Your lines are a poem.

Who will carry your burden? (27)

Again, there’s nothing much by way of a conclusion, just a question.
Indeed, if you’d asked me, back when I was writing either of these poems, just what it was that I was trying to get across, I’m pretty sure I’d have given you little more than a blank stare and a shrug. But something was eating at me, something about what art can and can’t do—and turning
the line that Matthias had taken from Miljković over and over in my head was the closest I could come to formulating just what that something was.

The meaning of those little poems might have been obvious to others, but it wasn’t to me, not for a long time. When I think of writing them, I think of what Jung said about a certain kind of art, which we might find “pregnant with meanings” that we can’t quite pin down at once. The maker of this kind of art often can’t speak about it very well, since for him the artwork is “the best possible expression for something unknown,” or an “intimation of a meaning beyond the level of our present comprehension” (314–15). We might come back to such works later, when “our conscious development has reached a higher level” (315) and we can speak with comprehension of those things that came to us initially in forms other than discursive prose.

My slow turn from poetry to criticism has, I’ve come to see, been less a turning away from something than a continuation. That’s what the poet John Peck assured me of, not long after my inner Estragon stood accusingly over my inner Vladimir. I wrote to him, wondering if I’d fallen away from poetry into something less important. Peck replied, saying: “rather than a falling-off, that kind of segue reflects a movement from a compact kind of symbolization to a more differentiated one.”

I can see what Peck means: the questions I’ve been most compelled to pursue in critical writing come out of my poems: poetry and politics, poetry in relation to its social situation (and, in a different way, the relation of poetry to plain statement). If my critical writing has been harshest when I’ve examined the works of poets who want to see aesthetic commitment and a commitment to social justice as one and the same thing, it’s because I dearly want that to be true but, like George Oppen, cannot convince myself of it.

Most of the essays collected here cluster loosely around a few themes, but this is not, to use Dwight MacDonald’s phrase, a premeditated book “written in cold blood.” Rather, these are the critical essays of a poet as he becomes a critic, written for a variety of journals and books. Some, too, started in the foul rag and bone shop that is my blog. Differences in format, tone, and rigor of argument stem from the differences in the origins of the essays. Such coherence as the collection may have is the coherence of a personality, not a plan.
Works Cited

Situations of Poetry
The Discursive Situation of Poetry

“Why do poets continue to write? Why keep playing if it’s such a mug’s game? Some, no doubt, simply fail to understand the situation.”
—SVEN BIRKERTS

The important point to notice, though, is this:
Each poet knew for whom he had to write,
Because their life was still the same as his.
As long as art remains a parasite
On any class of persons it’s alright;
The only thing it must be is attendant,
The only thing it mustn’t, independent.
—W. H. AUDEN

Statistics confirm what many have long suspected: poetry is being read by an ever-smaller slice of the American reading public. Poets and critics who have intuited this have blamed many things, but for the most part they have blamed the rise of MFA programs in creative writing. While they have made various recommendations on how to remedy the situation, these remedies are destined for failure or, at best, for very limited success, because the rise of MFA programs is merely a symptom of much larger and farther-reaching trends. These trends are unlikely to be reversed by the intervention of a few poets, critics, and arts administrators. I’m not sure this is a bad thing. Or, in any event, I’m not sure it is worse than what a reversal of the decline in readership would entail. Let me explain.
Decades of Complaint

While we don’t have many instruments for measuring the place of poetry in American life, all our instruments agree: poetry has been dropping precipitously in popularity for some time. In 1992, the National Endowment for the Arts conducted a survey that concluded only 17.1% of those who read books had read any poetry in the previous year. A similar NEA survey published in 2002 found that the figure had declined to 12.1%. The NEA numbers for 2008 were grimmer still: only 8.3% of book readers had read any poetry in the survey period (Bain). The portion of readers who read any poetry at all has, it seems, been cut in half over sixteen years. Poetry boosters can’t help but be distressed by the trend.

Poets and poetry lovers have somewhat less faith in statistics and rather more faith in intuition and personal observation than the population at large. They’ve intuited this state of affairs for more than two decades, beginning long before the statistical trend became clear in all its stark, numerical reality. As far back as 1983, Donald Hall sounded a warning note in his essay “Poetry and Ambition.” Although he did not blame the rise of the graduate creative writing programs for the loss of connection with an audience, he did feel that MFA programs created a certain formal similarity among poems. The programs produced “McPoets,” writing “McPoems” that were brief, interchangeable, and unambitious. His solution, delivered with tongue firmly in cheek, was to abolish MFA programs entirely. “What a ringing slogan for a new Cato,” wrote Hall, “Iowa delenda est!” Five years later Joseph Epstein picked up Hall’s standard, and carried it further. In the incendiary essay “Who Killed Poetry?” Epstein argued that the rise of writing programs led not only to diminishments of ambition and quality—it furthered the decline of poetry’s audience. The popular audience for poetry may have shrunk by the 1950s, argued Epstein, but at least the poets of midcentury were revered, and engaged with the larger intellectual world. By the late 1980s, though, poetry existed in “a vacuum.” And what was the nature of this vacuum? “I should say that it consists of this,” wrote Epstein, “it is scarcely read.” Indeed, he continues,
Contemporary poetry is no longer a part of the regular intellectual diet. People of general intellectual interests who feel that they ought to read or at least know about works on modern society or recent history or novels that attempt to convey something about the way we live now, no longer feel the same compunction about contemporary poetry. . . . It begins to seem, in fact, a sideline activity, a little as chiropractic or acupuncture is to mainstream medicine—odd, strange, but with a small cult of followers who swear by it. (n.p.)

The principle culprit in the sidelining of poetry was, for Epstein, the credentialing and employment of poets in graduate writing programs. “Whereas one tended to think of the modern poet as an artist,” argued Epstein, “one tends to think of the contemporary poet as a professional,” and, “like a true professional, he is insulated within the world of his fellow-professionals.” The poet, instead of responding to the audience-driven world of the book market, responds only to his peers, with the effect that the audience simply melts away.

Après Epstein, le déluge. The 1990s saw a phalanx of poets and critics complaining about the decline of poetry’s audience, and linking this decline to the rise of MFA programs. Dana Gioia fired the loudest shot in Can Poetry Matter? (published as an article in The Atlantic in 1991, republished in book form a year later). “American poetry now belongs to a subculture,” said Gioia, “no longer part of the mainstream of intellectual life, it has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group” (1). While he allows that they have done so “unwittingly,” it is “the explosion of academic writing programs” that is to blame for this sad state of affairs, as far as Gioia is concerned (2). Gioia was by no means alone in this opinion. Vernon Shetley’s 1993 study After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America tells us that poetry has “lost the attention not merely of common readers but of intellectuals” (3)—and that creative writing programs have contributed to this loss by cultivating “a disturbing complacency” and by “narrowing of the scope” of poetry (19). Bruce Bawer introduces his 1995 book of criticism Prophets and Professors by lamenting the professionalizing of poetry. He tells us that “those who read poetry—which, in our society, basically means poets” shy away from being too critical of the art, since “they