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A REVIEW OF *POETRY AND USELESSNESS:* *FROM COLERIDGE TO ASHBERY,* BY ROBERT ARCHAMBEAU

Robert Archambeau, *Poetry and Uselessness: From Coleridge to Ashbery* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 244, ISBN: 978-0-367-20736-6 (hardcover); ISBN: 978-0-429-26317-0 (eBook).

Reviewed by Ben Grant

I'm going to begin this review with a bit of a gripe, I'm afraid. I was asked to undertake it, and enthusiastically accepted the invitation, because of my interest in the subject of uselessness. Needless to say, for me a book entitled *Poetry and Uselessness* looked like a dream come true. My eBook received, I started reading it at once, and as soon as I did so, I had a sinking feeling. No mention of uselessness in the first few paragraphs, but plenty on "aesthetic autonomy"—not the same thing at all. I decided to search the text for the word "uselessness," and found to my dismay that it occurs only three times—once in the title, once on the series page, and once on the title page. The knowledge that the word does not appear at all in the main text did, though, afford me a novel reading experience, no small thing for as hardened a reader as myself—henceforth, every time I read the phrase "aesthetic autonomy" in the introduction, its effect upon me bore a striking resemblance to a slap on the face. That said, I can see that there is a relationship between aesthetic autonomy and uselessness, so I will try to explore that through my reading of the book.

In entitling a book about poetry and aesthetic autonomy *Poetry and Uselessness*, Archambeau implies that uselessness and aesthetic autonomy are synonymous. His central thesis is that the idea of aesthetic autonomy has been put to a variety of uses by the poets he considers (Coleridge, Tennyson, Yeats, Stein, Eliot, Auden, and John Ashbery), so equating aesthetic autonomy with uselessness then makes for a neat argument: the idea of the uselessness of poetry has, in fact, proven to be an eminently useful one. This is something of a straw man argument, though, for the real focal point of Archambeau's book is not the debate between uselessness and usefulness, but that between a conception of poetry as autonomous from the social and political realm, and a conception of it as socially engaged, or politically committed. Within this debate, the dominant position of those who argue for the autonomy of literature, especially within the Anglophone tradition, has been that literature is useful in different ways than overtly political writing. The most hyperbolic

expression of this is the famous concluding sentence of Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."¹

The fact that Archambeau equates aesthetic autonomy and uselessness means that the latter is largely repressed in this book, but it also means that it haunts the discussion of aesthetic autonomy in quite an uncanny way. I have said that the word "uselessness" does not appear in the book. However, the word "useless" does, on two (or let us say one-and-a-half) occasions. On the first of these, Archambeau writes of Coleridge: "He was certainly haunted by a sense that he was a mere imposter, a useless and weak outsider passing through a world properly belonging to people more confident, grounded, and socially integrated than himself" (34). Archambeau's approach in this book, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu, is to look at the ways in which the personal circumstances and psychologies of the poets studied intersected with ideas of aesthetic autonomy in their literary contexts to produce their unique bodies of work. A key aspect of this intersection for many of the poets is that it was their sense of displacement which led them to embrace an autonomous literary aesthetic. Thus, for instance, Eliot had to confront the loss of social status and cultural influence of the Boston Brahmin class to which he belonged; Stein had a strong sense of homelessness; and Ashbery experienced "three kinds of alienation—having to do with his sexuality, his relation to conventionally productive labor, and his status as a certain kind of poet in midcentury America" (201). Though it is only Coleridge whom Archambeau describes as feeling "useless," we might reasonably take him to suggest that these other poets also felt this way; after all, the culture to which they all belong is one which finds worth only in utility, and to be alienated from society is to be marked as useless.

Archambeau probably sees the idea of the autonomous poem as a correlative of the uselessness of the poet, but, by reopening the gap between uselessness and aesthetic autonomy, might we not instead see the latter as a kind of sublimation of the former, whereby feelings of uselessness (both individual and collective) are transformed into an eminently useful commitment to poetry? The book begins by demonstrating that the notion of aesthetic autonomy can be traced back to the eighteenth-century English philosopher Shaftesbury's philosophy of proper taste. For Shaftesbury, those who had taste were thereby placed at a remove from society and, for that very reason, able to guide it. This idea of a powerful cultured elite was developed further by Coleridge in his concept of the "clerisy," which had a strong influence on Arnold, and created the context in which Tennyson was torn between the roles of aesthete and "public moralist" (47). The late nineteenth century marked a turn from what Archambeau nicely terms "a cultured minority to a minority culture" (76), in which the idea of aesthetic autonomy served to create a sense of belonging and community within an artistic coterie, and all the later poets whom Archambeau looks at grappled in different ways with this context.

The first of these later poets considered by Archambeau is Yeats; Archambeau argues that Yeats sought, though ultimately failed, to unify aesthetic autonomy with a social role for poetry in a public form of art which could give expression to a true Irish nationalist spirit; more specifically, he dreamt that the Order of Celtic Mysteries could give “the arts a home in the world” (102). In this history of the idea of aesthetic autonomy, uselessness is indeed repressed, but if we see it as precisely that—the occluded, unconscious origin of the (as Archambeau amply demonstrates) highly useful idea of aesthetic autonomy—we might then be attentive to the ways in which it necessarily and insistently returns in unpredictable forms to undercut the historical narrative. Examples of this could include Coleridge’s fixation on failure, Tennyson’s enduring grief for his friend Arthur Hallam, Yeats’s unrequited love for Maud Gonne, and Eliot’s depression, which contributed to his most famous, and perhaps most useless, poem, *The Waste Land* (1922).

The second occurrence of the word “useless” in *Poetry and Uselessness* is not the word itself (hence the half), but its French equivalent, “inutile,” which has, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, been adopted into English, and come back into use recently after a period of obsolescence. It appears in the course of Archambeau’s discussion of the passage of Auden’s poem “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” (1939) in which occurs the phrase “poetry makes nothing happen” (quoted, 197). This is a phrase which serves as something of a leitmotif in Archambeau’s book: “for Auden [. . .] there is some comfort in this notion of poetry as a kind of timeless, aesthetic, inutile thing” (197). The use of the French here is entirely necessary, because “useless” simply does not belong with “timeless” and “aesthetic.” When we hear that English word, we think first of all, not of timeless jewels, but of that which is without worth, if not immediately of refuse and waste. The kinds of abject emotions I have just alluded to would be embraced by this word, rather than taste, discernment, and a love of the beautiful. The fact that the French word “inutile” can be associated with the aesthetic is owing to the fact that, as Archambeau says, the connection between “aesthetic autonomy and a minority literary culture” was imported from France in the late nineteenth century into the English-speaking world, as Aestheticism (78). In using the French word instead of the English, this whole culture of French Aestheticism (or, more accurately, what it is made to stand for in the English tradition) takes the place, and thereby represses, the everyday connotations of the word “useless.”

If one of these connotations is the abject, a second is purposeless play, and this is another form in which the insistent recurrence of uselessness can be traced through *Poetry and Uselessness*, most notably in the three poets whom Archambeau identifies as most strongly advocating aesthetic autonomy: Auden, Stein, and Ashbery. In the case of Auden, Archambeau finds a “deeper unity” between his claims for the aesthetic autonomy of poetry, and the political

content of much of his poetry, in “camp,” which he defines as “a kind of ludic and aestheticizing attitude” (163). In this light, Auden is read as a “camp dogmatist” (169), mistaken for a guru, who pokes fun at ideas which, unlike a satirist, he has some affection for, and Archambeau demonstrates that it was precisely the distance afforded by a camp attitude that gave Auden’s poetry political efficacy in the ideologically-riven 1930s. In camp, therefore, uselessness and usefulness would seem to hang together in a non-binary kind of a way.

The chapter on Stein is, for me, the least satisfactory in the book, precisely because Archambeau doesn’t attend to the role of play in her work. He takes her claims of genius entirely seriously as an expression of a monstrous narcissism, without considering the possibility that she might be playing (or right), and he reads in her poetry a displaced expression of her lesbianism (though it doesn’t seem all that displaced to me). Archambeau thus finds in psychological and social determinants the reasons why “[Stein’s] writing represents an impulse to aesthetic autonomy both purer and more radical than that of any other writer of similar stature and consequence” (109), but I would have liked to have seen a greater consideration of one of the things which makes that writing so radical, namely the free play of the signifier. Free play is certainly suggested in Archambeau’s characterization of Ashbery’s work as “a poetics of drift” (201), and I get the impression that Ashbery would be the most likely of any of the poets considered in this book to advocate a poetics of uselessness, for, we are told, when an interviewer “tells Ashbery he thinks Ashbery’s poetry gives us ‘language as a child would use it, language before it becomes useful’ [. . .] Ashbery interjects ‘yeah! yeah!’ enthusiastically” (204). This enthusiasm for the playful uselessness of language would be in line with Ashbery’s alienation from “conventionally productive labor,” and when Archambeau says that his “anti-dogmatic stance [. . .] extends even to the aestheticism to which he is drawn” (202), I would conjecture that this is because for Ashbery, as for me, aesthetic autonomy and uselessness are not synonymous.

Not so much in the margins of this book, then, as somewhere beneath its surface, haunting it like an uncanny double and occasionally breaking through, most dramatically in its very title, we can indeed find the spectral presence of a book on poetry and uselessness. Perhaps this is the only way in which we can possibly approach a spirit of uselessness within a utilitarian culture in which uselessness, by definition, can have no home. Nonetheless, I would still like someone to write about the subject more directly. The title *Poetry and Uselessness* has, unfortunately, already been taken, so how about *Uselessness and Poetry*, though I know that’s not the same thing at all. I’d be happy to review it.

NOTES

- 1 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry; or, Remarks Suggested by an Essay Entitled ‘The Four Ages of Poetry’* (extracts), in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 1199.