

Changing the Subject: Rae Armantrout's *Next Life*

Reviewed by Andrew Klobucar

Armantrout's literary origins within the poetics of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E confirms her work's appreciation of the sentence as a semantic unit. However, a somewhat less abstract relationship to language structure, compared, say, to the work of Barrett Watten or Susan Howe, enables Armantrout to launch a much more focused and often dramatic exploration of semantics, voice and aesthetic sensibility. Armantrout begins *Next Life* (2007), her most recent book, with a particularly apt set of opening metaphors concerning language and subjectivity that ably set the stage for an intricate performance of rhetorical play. Lest we, her readers, mistake the significance of the lines before us as a literal voice, personally directed to a literal audience, the opening title reminds the reader of the inevitable "Tease" of tone and position that is about to take place. Thus the narrative proceeds, the book begins – a complex set of ever shifting poses and pretences, not unlike

a cop's place
as he puts himself
inside the head
of a serial killer rapist

Like a string of prize chess moves, the opening sequences draw the reader in with a mixture of intrigue and apprehension. Whether we identify with either side of this particular dialectical struggle, the cop or the killer rapist, is irrelevant. One cannot exist without the other, and inevitably we will recognize both in the process of reading her work. Engaging Armantrout in her role as writer, we retain much of the cop's moral function and the surveiling eye that goes with it – the eye that cannot assess or judge without convicting. Yet, we also possess the convict's own desire to stay one step ahead of any and all judgement, as only the capacity to elude interpretation effectively limits the cop's critical hold (and moral sway) over the struggle at hand.

If the tension between the two orientations seems perpetual, it is, for Armantrout, exactly this quandary that best articulates the complex relationship between aesthetics and language – especially with respect to the role of the former in determining both perspective and position in writing. In fact, such dilemmas in philosophy have remained stubbornly consistent since the mid-19th century. As Robert Hullot-Kentor reminds us in his introduction to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1997), Moritz Geiger's original complaint on the elusive character of aesthetics as a field of study is as relevant today as it was almost 150 years ago: "[t]here is scarcely another philosophical discipline that rests on such flimsy presuppositions as does aesthetics. Like a weather vane it is 'blown about by every philosophical, cultural, arid scientific gust; at one moment it is metaphysical and in the next empirical; now normative, then descriptive; now defined by artists, then by connoisseurs; one day art is supposedly the center of aesthetics and natural beauty merely preliminary, the next day art beauty is merely second-hand natural beauty'" (xv). To interpret voice in writing as a literary or aesthetic device (as we must) is to negotiate the very limits of our own subjectivity according to the boundaries of the "licit" – in

other words, according to what is deemed “legitimate” within one’s social context. As these tenets exist primarily as prohibitions, it is no wonder that the facility to hear the author in a work recalls first and foremost the opportunity to evaluate them. Yet, returning briefly to Adorno, the fact that the determination to identify and thus proscribe that which is socially unacceptable is at the same time the determination to represent indicates the extent to which aesthetics preserves at the very limit of its negation its critical autonomy and, a bit like the serial rapist, its subsequent capacity to escape ideological capture. Poet and critic Jeff Derksen makes explicit this particular claim for poetry (and art) as an ideologically harsh mistress. “Poetry,” he writes, “as a creative practice can aim at an ‘actual freedom’ through a language that challenges and negotiates a neoliberal structure of feelings; this project would designate ‘the site of intervention’ while rejecting the formal freedom of what culture should do in neoliberalism (and post 9/11)” (5).

It is by preserving this capacity for intervention that Armantrout’s poetry, though often lyrical, conforms less to the law of the lyric voice (with its neoliberal attachment to “feeling”) than the particular demands and challenges of the lyric as an aesthetic device. The result is a poetics that not only centres its position in its uncertainty but insists that uncertainty remain at the centre of any position. Unaware of this inherent doubleness, the “tease”, as she terms it, we inevitably clamber upwards into a moral, idealised position; we forego performance for abstraction and “put ourselves / in a cop’s place,” which, in a supreme show of irony, remains forever dependent upon the position of our imaginary enemy, the one we must prohibit – the “... serial killer rapist / who appears to be / teasing the police” (1). Thus we have in the opening “stanzas” as clear a summary of Armantrout’s distinct take on subjectivity and language as any theory of her work can offer. The tone is suitably sparse, almost acerbic, identifying the practice of reading with the very forces that invoke culture as a mode of social regulation and language as law. However ruthless this comparison may seem, it duly provides the structure of metaphor in all of its inherent ambiguity with a direct and necessary role in knowledge construction.

Bare tree
is to human skeleton

as the holy spirit
likens objects

briefly

to make the world up
of provisional pairs (1)

What allows mimesis to represent the “bare tree,” however “briefly”, as a human skeleton quite literally endows it with the capacity to define and normalize. In this way, Armantrout’s common poetic use of juxtaposition stands historically and culturally framed within a wider epistemological tradition of nominalism. Yet, the key word here for Armantrout remains “briefly,” mapped as it is to the term “provisional” two lines below. The ever shifting points of definition that dart between the various locutions and voices within the collection do not just imitate consciousness, but instead literally construct it. Thus we find subjectivity in an

Armantrout poem constantly on the verge of transformation, especially when gripped in the midst of the everyday swirl of our media-saturated lives.

I was just going to click
on “Phoebe is changed
into a mermaid
tomorrow!” when suddenly
it all changed
into the image
of a Citizen watch. (18)

There may be humour in such lines, but there is no irony, for the experience is as real as one can expect any moment to be sitting captivated in front of the various screens (television, computer, film, etc.) that increasingly command our attention. Real enough, one might argue. Armantrout’s semantic juxtapositions ably mimic the everyday experience of interpreting the world through a language that at best provides fragments for a theory of meaning, but never the active facility itself. The poems in *Next Life* (a title that cleverly conflates the metaphysical promise of an afterlife with the standard reward in video games) offer no pretence of rescuing some long suffering pre-mediated consciousness from the dazzle of language, whatever forms or rhetorical guises it may inhabit. Rather it is precisely in the limits of these representations as provisional moments of awareness and identity that the important (perhaps only) possibility of autonomy resides. As Armantrout succinctly advocates in the title poem that closes the collection: “Don’t be a commodity; / be a concept” (77-8). In other words, in an eerie echo of Spicer’s earlier command for the poet to “be like god,” it is precisely in the “ghostly,” uncertainty of language, in its relativity and inconstancy that one’s subjectivity stands any chance at all of being free.

Works Cited

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