

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Leftover Laureates

Robert Wood · Wednesday, July 15th, 2015

For American readers, the issue of a poet laureate may not strike one as particularly controversial, or even important. It is a fait accompli. In Australia, though, it is far from settled. The issue of a poet laureate flared up in 2009 as well as in 2014. There were several prominent arguments in favour of the office, including in major newspapers *The Age* and *The Courier Mail*. The boosters seem to say: *poetry is good, let's have more poetry*. The paucity of their argument is its simplicity – there are too many unconscious assumptions here so that they often read like a liberal conservative cheer squad.

The most prominent poet to counter these arguments seems to be John Kinsella, who holds positions at the University of Western Australia, Cambridge University and Kenyon College. Kinsella wrote a piece, ‘[A Poet Laureate in Australia? God Forbid!](#)’, suggesting why he would oppose the office. His ‘no’ argument hinged on skepticism of government, arguing that poetry need be a sort of ‘subversive’ activity. His anarchist critique though seems hypocritical when considered alongside his ready acceptance of numerous Premier’s (i.e. Governor’s) Prizes, and, if one wanted to stretch the claim, the reliance on a national document (passport) for a certain lifestyle that is less than ‘subversive’ in its institutional status.

Amongst the boosters, Steven Schwartz [pointed out the obvious in *The Conversation*](#) by saying ‘there is a place for poetry in public life.’ There is, of course, already poetry in public places. To advocate for more of it does not necessarily mean one should support a poet laureate as a state sanctioned position.

I personally favour a poet laureate in much the same way I favour the state. The state as it is historically and currently configured is full of ills, but that does not mean that it has not done good things or that it cannot become a better version of itself. We must re-discover a certain utopianism in the state if we are to make Australia, or anywhere else, a place that we can love rather than leave. If anything, the state needs to be stronger – bank nationalization, state owned enterprises for natural resources, an activist rather than welfare condition, higher taxes on those who can afford it. Bernie Sanders indeed! The state, as a representation of the will of the people, as democratic, as that which can buttress a poetic life through economic support, strikes me as an altogether positive thing.

A poet laureate is an office that rewards the labour of the poet, the individual, rather than the commodity of the book, which is currently rewarded after the fact by the prize culture in Australia and elsewhere. To reward the subject rather than the object is a different condition. The post should

not come encumbered with an expectation of production – no new ballads for ministerial appointments or paeans to cricket. A state office though confers some type of legitimacy that I think is complicatedly welcome. A poet laureate could be synchronised with the federal election so one avoids the sort of overlap one finds in governors general and ambassadors. It would, in that way, be consciously political. The poet laureate though is simply the most charismatic servant of the public. American recipients can attest to that.

The question might be how many should Australia or any other country have? This is not so much to adopt a system like the US, where there is a poet laureate in every state, and many counties, as if one could ascend like an ambitious politician to giving an ode at the Presidential Inauguration in the capital. Rather it is that the funds for one office would be seen to detract from many other offices; that we would elevate in a lamentable manner one individual above all others to the detriment of group betterment. This is why the position needs to be rotated. More importantly, it needs to be part of an increase for poetry funding and opportunity for the sector as a whole.

Paradoxically, one could support a poet laureate if only because it allows one to oppose something. This is a position for the haters as well as the lovers. It could demonstrate in a clear manner where the lines of official verse culture are, and rather than people suggest that poetry is apolitical, the appointment would reveal the fakeness of objectivity's veil.

The other position we could propose is an anti poetry laureate in a manner similar to Charles Bernstein's [criticism of National Poetry Month](#). The anti laureate would be responsible for policing language to prohibit poetry. They would help cover all verse in public places – from statues in public parks to small installations. They would help remove poetry from radio and TV; stop parents from reading Mother Goose and other rimes; stop religious institutions from reading verse passages from the liturgy; ban musicals that use poetic techniques. They will censor love letters, prohibit children from playing all slapping and counting and singing games, and, replace poetry readings with motivational speeches. With an anti poetry laureate perhaps we will recognize just how much poetry there is already and that its diffuse profusion already enables so much.

The issue of a poet laureate is not about canon formation, even as there must be a recognition of particular aesthetic merits – some work is better than others, some work is more suitable for publication, some work is, presumably, more amenable to the state. A poet laureate is not altogether a conservative position. There is a history of state radicalism that it could draw on for succour, sustenance and spirit. For the good of poetry in Australia and other countries without laureates it might be worth considering more deeply.

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