

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Election News: Poetry and Oxford

Robert Wood · Wednesday, June 24th, 2015

There are elections and then there are elections. The latest one to capture my imagination was for the Oxford Professor of Poetry. There is no place like Oxford, and perhaps fittingly, there is no role like this anywhere in the world. Established in 1708, the professorship was created by an endowment from the estate of Henry Birkhead. It carries with it an obligation to deliver three lectures per year, but is in effect a part-time position.

Currently, the professor is appointed to one five-year term. After individuals are nominated, an election is held. People who vote in the election are members of the university's past and present faculty and all former students who hold a degree from Oxford. In 2010, on-line voting was allowed for the first time. As of 2009, it carried a stipend of £6,901, all of which suggests it is a position about prestige, honour, status. Indeed, in terms of official verse culture, it is second only to the poet laureate.

Reflecting the political idea of a two party state, this year's election (held last week) was billed as a race between Simon Armitage and Wole Soyinka. This was despite the presence of three other candidates and the final votes reading:

Simon Armitage – 1221

Wole Soyinka – 920

A E Stallings – 918

The immediate question we could ask from this is: why was there no commentary on Stallings prior to the election? Stallings is a female Classics scholar and poet, but it was assumed that she had no chance in securing the position. The lack of coverage in the mainstream media, including *The Guardian*, could be symptomatic of a misogyny that has plagued the professorship, which in the 300 years of its existence has only been occupied by a woman for two weeks.

The battle lines as they were drawn this time around were between populism and its Other. Armitage is recognized as the most popular poet in Britain since Philip Larkin, yet interestingly, Soyinka is somewhat acceptable to official verse taste given the conferring power of the Nobel honorific. This begs, in part, the question: what is official verse culture in Britain and what role does Oxford play in it?

To my knowledge, the focus in an Oxford undergraduate English degree is on English literature prior to the golden age of empire and the decline of it. In the first year, four papers are taken: 'Introduction to English Language and Literature'; 'Early medieval literature 650–1350?; Literature in English 1830–1910'; 'Literature in English 1910–present day.' In the second year

there are two course options – course one is four papers covering literature in English 1350–1830, while course two is four papers, including ‘Literature in English 650–1100’, ‘Medieval English and related literatures 1066–1550’, ‘Literature in English 1350–1550’ and ‘The history of the English language to c.1800’. The third year skews to Shakespeare, a ‘special option’ paper and a student’s own dissertation. Thus, there is marked preference for the medieval. This indicates a complex relationship both to the colonies and to Modernism. It seems, on the face of it, to steer clear of politics as they are expressed in the modern era. This might be to avoid conversation of India, the scramble for Africa, the American Revolution, settlement in Australia and New Zealand or English in a globalised society. This might be why Ron Silliman statements seem apt, particularly when he posted on Facebook after this year’s election results were made public: ‘That neither Tom Raworth nor Wole Soyinka or Jeremy Prynne have held the office says everything one needs to know about the irrelevance of Official Verse Culture in the UK.’

The poetry professorship after all reflects back a sensibility to those who have been educated at Oxford. It is unsurprising then that it would elect Armitage by a comfortable margin for he appeals to a firmly located sense of place that is in the UK. There is none of the indeterminacy and complex politics of Nigeria’s Soyinka. To my knowledge, no poet of colour has been elected to the Oxford position, nor has any Kiwi, Aussie, South African. However, Ireland’s Seamus Heaney has been elected. This position though seems to be one for the English.

There is a poet laureate in the UK as well, which is a royal appointment that carries with it the responsibility to produce work for royal occasions. In the United States there is a laureate too, which is administered by the Library of Congress and selected by a committee. It is possible then that one could imagine a system that combined Oxford professorship and the state positions. Up to 250,000 people can vote in the Oxford elections, so it is not beyond the realm of possibility that we could imagine a popular poet laureate being elected by the people of any other grouping – state, nation, county, other university. I am not necessarily encouraging this, but recognize that there are other ways of organizing public poetry as we know it.

These positions of contemporary power might not appeal to the great majority of poets. That may indeed be to detract from what many see as the important aspects of the work, or it might not fit in with their sense of longevity. Whitman, Dickinson, Celan, Pessoa, Lorca, O’Hara all had varying degrees of recognition in their lifetime. One might bank on a certain enduring popularity when one is long in the grave for example. That might be as close to the afterlife as the historical materialist can get. As Charles Bernstein writes:

### **Not for All the Whiskey in Heaven**

Not for all the whiskey in heaven  
 Not for all the flies in Vermont  
 Not for all the tears in the basement  
 Not for a million trips to Mars

Not if you paid me in diamonds  
 Not if you paid me in pearls  
 Not if you gave me your pinky ring  
 Not if you gave me your curls

Not for all the fire in hell

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Not for all the blue in the sky  
Not for an empire of my own  
Not even for peace of mind

No, never, I'll never stop loving you  
Not till my heart beats its last  
*And even then in my words and my songs*  
*I will love you all over again*

(italics mine)

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