



Rivista di poesia comparata

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Gregory Dowling:

SIMON ARMITAGE, **Out of the Blue**, London, Enitharmon Press, 2008, pp. 63, £8.95.

Simon Armitage has said that being a well-known poet is not the same thing as being well-known. However, while he is not in the same league as Britney Spears or George Clooney, he is pretty well-known—for a poet. He caught the public’s attention with his very first book, *Zoom*, published in 1989, at the age of 26, and has managed to maintain his reputation as a bright, original and (not least significant) accessible poet. At the time of *Zoom*, it became fashionable to compare the younger poets with the new wave of popular stand-up comedians. In the case of Armitage there was some point to the comparison; Armitage’s language was colloquial, street-wise and he often assumed a cool, anecdotal style.

His style has remained fairly constant in the eleven volumes he has published since *Zoom*; he tends to adopt loose but catchy metrical schemes, with occasional bouts of rhyming, or at least para-rhyming, and his language is still lively and colloquial. He occasionally makes deliberate use of clichés, and sometimes succeeds in restoring life to them; on other occasions he creates striking similes and metaphors which he seems to want to pass off as current street-slang (rather in the way that Raymond Chandler convinced readers that “The Big Sleep” was a well-known colloquial image for death).

His popularity partly depends on his skilful use of such media as the radio and television; in addition to featuring regularly on various arts programmes, he has written a good many documentaries and dramas (in prose and verse) for the radio, sometimes with the poet Glyn Maxwell. Perhaps his best-known work in this medium is the three-part dramatisation of *The Odyssey* (2004). He also frequently does performances of his own works up and down the country for schools and literary festivals and a number of his poems now feature in standard school text-books.

Armitage’s partnership with Maxwell resulted most famously in a travel-book, *Moon Country*, describing their travels around Iceland. The inevitable (and deliberately sought) comparison was with the poets Auden and MacNeice, who published *Letters from Iceland* in 1937; both Maxwell and Armitage have acknowledged their debt to Auden, but perhaps Armitage can be more fruitfully compared with MacNeice. The 1000-line poem that he was commissioned to write for the Millennium, *Killing Time*, takes its form and style from the diary-poem that MacNeice wrote in the 1930s, *Autumn Journal*.

Out of the Blue, Armitage’s most recent volume, brings together three more of his—as we might term them—“public poems”; one of them was written for the radio and two for the television. The themes are perhaps the most demanding that he has ever taken on and not all are equally successful. The first two poems in the book were commissioned by Channel 5 for commemorative programmes; the title-poem, *Out of the Blue*, was written for the fifth anniversary of 9/11, the second one, *We May Allow Ourselves a Brief Period of Rejoicing*, for the sixtieth anniversary of VE Day. The final poem, *Cambodia*, was commissioned by the BBC as part of a radio drama set in Cambodia thirty years after the rise of the Khmer Rouge.

With poems of this sort there is always the risk that the poet relies too much on the sheer power of the events to do the work for him- or herself; after all, how can the reader fail to be moved when reminded of such moments in history? In the worst cases, one may even have the unpleasant sensation that the writer is exploiting the event.

This, I hasten to say, is not true of Armitage’s poems. They are clearly worthy attempts to evoke and record the historical occasions and to pay tribute to the victims. But in at least two cases one does have the sensation that they do not rise much above “worthiness”. In *Cambodia* the subject matter is so horrific that it is clearly difficult for an outside observer to find a convincing way of tackling the material; one is reminded of Adorno’s famous question about the appropriateness of writing poetry after the Holocaust. As we know, poets from Celan to Anthony Hecht have found convincing and moving ways to testify to the horror, but usually after much meditation and inner torment. Armitage’s poem does not make this impression on the reader.

It is indicative of a certain tact, nonetheless, that he wrote nearly the whole poem in the interrogative, acknowledging the difficulty for an outsider to comprehend such an event. It begins with the question, “Is evil a substance, a thing?” and ends, about 220 lines later, with a series of questions beginning “When...?” He does succeed in creating some powerful images of the genocidal fury that gripped the nation, but on the whole we are left with the uncomfortable feeling that his customary rhythmic style and tone are not really suited to the material. The sequence of five-syllable anaphoric lines, consisting each of an iamb and an anapaest (a frequent combination in Armitage’s poetry), which becomes a kind of disturbing chant—“still spitting its teeth / still tilling its bones / still bearing its

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scars / still wearing its rags...”—is obviously intended to unsettle the reader, but there is something a little too technically slick about it.

The same is true for some sections of the VE poem. The poem is, naturally enough for a poet of Armitage’s generation, built mainly around images taken from old news-reels or television documentaries of the war, and he is often very successful in recreating verbally such pictures; in particular, the section describing the VE celebrations (“we’re dancing on pavements littered with shrapnel / we’re scaling the lampposts and mounting the flagpoles...”), with a jaunty rhythm based this time on alternating trochees and dactyls, has a compelling vigour, and provides a convincing picture of the almost desperate elation of the moment. However, as in *Cambodia*, he does not fully succeed in finding an appropriate tone or form to recount the more tragic events of the war, and they are merely gestured at, with all due reverence but without full involvement.

The most successful of these poems is the first one, which gives the title to the volume. In *Out of the Blue* he has succeeded in finding a convincing angle from which to evoke the tragedy of 11th September 2001. The point of view is that of an English trader working in the North Tower of the World Trade Center. This allows Armitage to use his natural strengths in recreating the event.

These strengths are his gift for colloquial immediacy and a strong vein of observant realism. A good example can be seen in the 2002 volume, *The Universal Home Doctor*. That volume contains a poem entitled *The Back Man* which begins with a Walter-Mitty-like fantasy dream of strange jungle-adventures but then retreats into the “ordinary”. The second part of the poem consists of a long passage in which the speaker declares himself repeatedly not to be the type of person involved in outlandish exploits but rather an average inhabitant of suburban England.

I sense it mostly in the day-to-day:

not handling some rare gem or art object

but flicking hot fat over a bubbling egg,

test-flying a stunt-kite from Blackstone Edge,

not swearing to tell the whole truth on oath

but bending to read the meter with a torch,

tonguing the seamless flux of a gold tooth,

not shaking the hands of serial killers

but dead-heading dogwood with secateurs,

not crossing the great ocean by pedalo

but moseying forward in the middle lane,

hanging wallpaper flush to the plumb-line...

The effect should be one of anticlimactic comedy, as in James Thurber’s story, but curiously the long litany of repeated negations and contrasting images has a strangely thrilling effect; it is as if the atmosphere of exotic adventure inherent to the denied activities (“not handling some rare gem...”) spills over into the lines of wry realism, so that these activities themselves seem to take on an aura of humorous but genuine excitement.

In his best poetry Armitage often manages to blend a kind of comic surrealism (“not chasing twisters across Oklahoma...”) with a down-to-earth realism based on an acute observation of contemporary day-to-day life—and an ability to capture what is in fact inherently odd in it: “trouserling readies extruded from cashpoints” or “swiping a key card in the hotel lobby...” He has been doing this since his famous poem *Very Simply Topping up the Brake Fluid* in his first volume (*Zoom*, 1989), which merely captures the tone of a car-mechanic as he condescendingly issues maintenance instructions to a woman; the technical details themselves provide the poem’s imagery. In later volumes Armitage often takes his material from his own activities around the house and garden. On occasions he takes a simple activity, like that of making a bonfire, and gradually turns it into an exaggerated epic (*Five Eleven Ninety-Nine* in *Dead Sea Poems*, 1995), but in his best works the surreal exaggeration is not necessary for the poem to make its effect—or he confines his love of exaggeration to comic metaphors and similes, which in themselves work as miniaturised tall tales: “Tyres so bald that you drive on a penny and know / if it’s head or tails...” (*Abstracting Electricity* in *Kid*, 1992).

These, then, are the qualities he brings to bear on the subject of 9/11. The story itself is already exaggerated enough and certainly does not require any “enhancement” on the part of the poet. He limits himself to convincing the reader (and spectator) of the reality of the lives of the people involved in the tragedy. He brings home to us the individual tragedies and he does this by focusing brilliantly on the little things that make up these lives. For example he gives us a description of the desk of the trader, with all its little nostalgic items.

Arranged on the desk

among rubber bands and bulldog clips:

- 12 ottobre 2018
Inaugurazione XXX Corso di Poesia con Franco Buffoni
- 7 ottobre 2018
Festa della poesia a Montebeni
- 30 settembre 2018
Laboratorio pubblico di Alessandro Raveggi a Firenze
Libro Aperto
- 23 settembre 2018
Mina Loy-Una rivoluzionaria nella Firenze dei futuristi - Villa Arrivabene
- 22 settembre 2018
Le Poete al Caff  Letterario
- 6 settembre 2018
In scadenza le iscrizioni ai corsi di scrittura creativa 2018-19
- 5 settembre 2018
Verusca Costenaro a L'Orchestra
- 9 giugno 2018
Semicerchio al Festival di Poesia di Genova
- 5 giugno 2018
La libert  d'expression   l' preuve des langues - Paris
- 26 maggio 2018
Slam-Poetry al PIM-FEST, Rignano
- 19 maggio 2018
Lingue e dialetti: PIM-FEST a Rosano
- 17 maggio 2018
PIM-FEST: il programma
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Why do young women dominate Finnish politics?

Author: Janne Wass

Finnish politics today is dominated by strong, politically savvy women, many under the

read in Eurozine

Editore
Pacini Editore
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here is a rock from Brighton beach,
here is a beer-mat, here is the leaf

of an oak, pressed and dried, papery thin.
Here is a Liquorice Allsorts tin.

A map of the Underground pinned to the wall.
The flag of St George. A cricket ball.

The same list will return at the end of the poem, as random items found among the rubble: “necklaces, bracelets, identity cards, / belt-buckles, cufflinks, ear-rings, combs...” The little evocation of England in the office verges perhaps on the sentimental but it is fully believable and gives us a definite point of view so that the tragedy is seen as clearly happening somewhere and to someone.

The moment of impact is described with great economy; the poet again focuses on the tiny details, and uses his characteristic springy rhythm of alternating iambs and anapaests:

But a Pepsi Max jumps out of its cup.
And a filing cabinet spews its lunch.

As often in Armitage’s poetry he achieves some of his finest effects through lists. In this case there is a kind of bitter irony in this tendency to catalogue things, as the speaker describes the havoc wrought upon this place of bureaucratic labour. As the forces of destruction sweep through the offices, the narrator can no longer list the objects themselves, but, in a sequence of anaphoric lines, can itemise—as it were—the movements of the debris:

a torrent of letters and memos and forms
now streams and storms
now flocks and shoals
now passes and pours
now tacks and jibes
now flashes and flares
now rushes and glides
now flaps and glides...

When he does manage to focus on the objects, the list turns into a purely random, surreal sequence, in which alliteration serves as the only unifying factor: “a yoghurt pot / a yucca plant / a yellow cup / a Yankees cap.”

The poem as a whole works thanks to the narrator’s tact. There is no attempt to reproduce the documentary images with which everyone is now familiar; Armitage deliberately alters the focus and continues to do so throughout the sequence. He matches the switch in viewpoint (and the shifts in emotional intensity) with a variety of stanzaic and rhythmical effects, which range from a passage in urgent, telegraphic prose (“Go up go down. Sit tight for now. Or move. Don’t move. It’s all in hand...”) to a series of mainly dactylic quatrains depicting the despair of individualised workers (“Millicent wants an answer now. / Anthony talks through a megaphone. / Mitch says it looks like one of those days. / Abdoul calls his mother at home.”) and sharply visualised sequences in clipped tercets (“I was fighting for breath. / I was pounding the glass / when a shape flew past...”) Perhaps the most poignant of all these passages is the twelfth one, in which he returns to the quatrain form and the first person. Here the rhymes are all on participle forms (burning-turning, waving-saving, driving-diving...). The cumulative effect of this sequence of trochees is undeniable; the falling rhythm perfectly matches the subject-matter, since all of the actions described have a downward movement; the last two lines are extremely effective in their bleak hopelessness:

My arm is numb and my nerves are sagging.
Do you see me, my love. I am failing, flagging.

Significantly even the question in this last line lacks its question-mark so that nothing breaks the falling motion.

In this poem Armitage has found a way to put his considerable talents to great effect. As already indicated, although he rarely uses strict forms, he has a good ear for rhythmical effects and is able to vary the movement of his verse appropriately. He is naturally observant and knows how to choose the relevant detail for his purposes; his feel for the contemporary scene is matched by a feel for contemporary language, which he can adopt to striking effect. The title poem of *Out of the Blue* shows what he is capable of when writing at the height of his powers. Clearly it is not a question of finding a “big subject” but of finding one about which he can write convincingly; it may sound absurd but the cricket-ball on the desk is, in the end, what makes this poem so much more successful than the other two, about equally “important” world-tragedies.

Gregory Dowling

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