

Three Essays On 'Potty' and 'Unprincipled' Professorial Poetics

(1) *Fatuous Formulations in Fallow Margins*

An Account of the Lecture Given by
Simon Armitage
as Professor of Poetry at Oxford
on the 16th May 2017
with the title
**95 Theses : On the Principles and
Practice of Poetry**

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Introduction

1. Many who attended this Lecture might have thought that it made an interesting and penetrating commentary on the craft of poetry as it proceeds into the twenty first century. If they listen to it again on the podcast - there is no text available; and it seems that no transcript is intended - they may be less sure of its cogency. Should they give further attention to it, they will find it to be, in the main, 'arid' and inconsequential as a meditation on poetry and poetics. Mr Armitage's '95 Theses' are almost entirely void of any theoretical and critical substance regarding 'the Principles and Practice of Poetry'. He is, at best, a fool.

2. In his twenty-fourth Thesis, Mr Armitage says that:

Of the many historical and ongoing vexations associated with the arts, poetry's very identity is one of its most agonising conditions.

Presumably he means '[uncertainty about] poetry's identity is one of its most agonising conditions'. Mr Armitage does not give any indication of quite who has ever been so 'agonised'; but his Lecture can only contribute to this 'agonising vexation' through his '*active ignorance*' of the original principles of poetry. He nowhere offers the idea that poetry is an historical craft of which we have evidence, in the form of what we call poems, going back thirteen hundred years. Nowhere does he discuss principles of versification, metre and rhythm. Nowhere does he suggest any particular distinction between 'poetry' and 'prose', except through the undeveloped concept of something called 'the line'.

3. Mr Armitage's Lecture begins with 'Theses' of this sort:

One. Subtlety is the watchword.

Two. This person's cat's whisker is another person's sledgehammer. This person's understatement, another's foghorn.

Four. I'm talkin' about the equilux between writer and reader, when the amount of daylight in a poem – that which is clear – and the amount of night-time in a poem – that which must be imagined or figured – correspond.

The whole Lecture is replete with this sort of 'poetic blather', which is rarely developed by

means of any examples or comparisons.

4. When Mr Armitage does attempt to engage with substantial matters of literary theory and criticism, as when he discusses 'The Intentional Fallacy' in Thesis [19], he demonstrates a simple ignorance of the true nature of the propositions on which the so-called Intentional Fallacy is founded. He presents it as holding that:

an author's objective can never be properly realised in the mind of the reader.

This is a simplistic distortion of a literary theory that is well summarised in Wikipedia thus:

New Criticism, as espoused by Cleanth Brooks, W.K. Wimsatt, T.S. Eliot and others argued that authorial intent is irrelevant to understanding a work of literature. The author, they argued, cannot be reconstructed from a writing – the text is the primary source of meaning, and any details of the author's desires or life are secondary. Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that even details about the work's composition or the authors intended meaning and purpose that might be found in other documents such as journals or letters are "private and idiosyncratic; not a part of the work as a linguistic fact" and are thus secondary to the trained reader's engagement with the text itself.

5. Worse follows when Mr Armitage approaches matters of 'Form and Content' – that simple and always useful philosophical, technical and critical distinction that is used in the analysis of poetry in particular. He deals with the idea of 'form' in poetry in a way that begins childishly and which proceeds, in Thesis [64], into an examination of a 'stanza' from W.H. Auden's poem 'A Summer Night' which makes proposals about it that are simply preposterous.

This is the stanza:

**Out on the lawn I lie in bed,
Vega conspicuous overhead
In the windless nights of June,
As congregated leaves complete
Their day's activity; my feet
Point to the rising moon.**

Mr Armitage proposes that:

if a spatially mimetic system were to operate – which is one of poetry's privileges – we could expect "Vega" to be found at the top of the poem, and "bed" to be positioned below "overhead". By the same logic, "feet" would be positioned beneath "the rising moon"...

These proposals are simply *deranged*.

6. Later in the Lecture, in Thesis [68], Mr Armitage discusses the function of 'rhyme' and rhyme schemes in poetry. He has this to say:

Undoubtedly, particular sounds in a particular order generate particular effects; but, to my mind, rhyme serves two more blatant and less virtuous purposes. Firstly, and as far as the writer is concerned, it operates as a provocation, on

the 'every problem a potential opportunity' basis. Rhyme is an obstacle to be overcome: it's a limitation requiring an ingenious and apparently effortless solution. Its second purpose, beyond offering an auditory mnemonic – which matters less now than it did in the era of oral poetry –, is to impress the reader: that is, to demonstrate cleverness by ramping up the degree of difficulty by which an idea is executed. Rhyme is an act of escapology in which thoughts must wriggle free of the bindings and fastenings of similar sounding words. "Voilà! Hey Presto! Ta-da" is what rhyme says to the reader: "I was in a tight corner there; look how impressively I managed to manipulate my restrictions".

Nowhere in the Lecture does Mr Armitage offer any qualification or amelioration of these strictures concerning what he identifies as the 'two more blatant and less virtuous purposes of rhyme' (which 'purposes' seem to largely overlap). His critical declaration thus applies to the use of rhyme schemes as a secondary patterning device in poetry as they have been used for a thousand years - which use has generally been regarded as being of positive poetic value. Mr Armitage's critique invites the same response as to his suggestions above regarding his 'spatially mimetic system' : that this is postposterous and unbalanced nonsense.

7. In the final stages of the Lecture there is one further spell of particularly absurd and deranged posturing. Mr Armitage asks the question,

Does poetry have a u.s.p.? Not really, I conclude – though the best I can offer is *the line*.

His often fatuous deliberations on the matter of '*the line*' lead him into this inane Thesis (which might possibly be numbered [83]):

So, credit the line; and credit also its ghostly other half in that fallow margin between the end of the line and the edge of the page, in the bubblewrap protecting the delicate edges of the poem from the packaging. On a page, that gap is for your mental notes, a designed void where intention and interpretation can come to an understanding. If poetry is 'the writing between the lines', that writing often takes place within the measured space beyond them; which is why poems in newspapers and magazines are usually presented as cartouche, or printed within their own display cabinets, rather than bleeding out to the same border as the surrounding prose.

How might we test out the absurd 'Principle' that Mr Armitage is proposing in a 'thesis' which has the 'feel' of a 'séance'? We have in fact asked him, through his Agents, how, if he were presented with, say, Shakespeare's sonnet 30, at the same print size on A5 and A4 sheets of paper, the 'intention' (whatever that term may mean) and his 'interpretation' of it, and the 'understanding' somehow 'come to' between them, might differ, and why?

Any reply that we might receive to our enquiry is unlikely, we think, to meliorate or justify Mr Armitage's attempt to envelop us in what might be called an 'ectoplasmic fraud'.

8. This Lecture may be said to be in many ways 'an insult to our intelligence'. As a presentation by The Professor of Poetry at The University of Oxford, it disgraces that Institution.

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May 2019