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

I

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 *deliberate 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. "Voila! 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 preposterous 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.**

Michael George Gibson
June 2019

II

Prologue

The insubstantiality of this Lecture might be said to match the preposterous vanity of its title.

At the outset, Mr Armitage says this:

> Five hundred years after Martin Luther supposedly nailed his Treatise to the door of All Saints' Church, Wittenberg, and in the form of complaints against poetry's contemporary indulgencies, and reassertions of its enduring values, I offer my own '95 Theses' to the floor.

Mr Armitage is drawing some sort of analogy here between the Lecture that he is giving and Martin Luther's presentation of his Treatise five hundred years before. The analogy is founded on the use of the term 'indulgencies'. (In an audio podcast one cannot detect any inverted commas that the term may be given; but I do not recall Mr Armitage making the usual 'inverted commas gesture' in the course of the Lecture). Luther was principally concerned to take issue with the way in which the Roman Catholic Church of his day offered Indulgencies for the remission of sins – which Indulgencies could sometimes be purchased with money. In the formulation above, 'contemporary poetry' is made analogous to the Catholic Church in its hierarchy from Pope to Pardonner. This is an absurd comparison. To whom does 'contemporary poetry', through what sort of 'hierarchy', offer what sort of 'indulgencies', for the remission of what sort of 'sins', and for what kind of 'payment'? The analogy is also one by which Mr Armitage presents himself as a 'version' of Martin Luther – and thus suggests that he himself is a reformer of courage and daring who will change the course of history. This is a vain idea. However, Mr Armitage may only be 'teasing' – which, if it is the case, is somewhat silly and contemptuous.

His own '95 Theses' (he does not claim to have written a Treatise) are, as he says,

> in the form of complaints against poetry's contemporary indulgencies, and reassertions of its enduring values…

The term 'indulgencies' must here, in an absurd change of meaning, refer to what are in Mr Armitage's opinion some sort of shortcomings in contemporary poetic practice. In this sense the Lecture does have some critical, reformative purpose. Furthermore, Mr Armitage tells us that, at the same time as making 'complaints against poetry's contemporary indulgencies', he will be making 'reassertions of its enduring values'. These 'enduring values' will presumably be a main component of, or will stem from, 'the Principles and Practice of Poetry' of which his '95 Theses' will give an account.

What, then, might be the scope of these reformative enquiries? The phrase 'On the Principles and Practice of Poetry' suggests that an historical account of the technical nature of the craft of English poetry might be made, even going back to its beginnings, say thirteen centuries ago. Mr Armitage's reference to Martin Luther certainly suggests that he will consider 'Principles and Practice' and 'enduring values' going back five centuries; and in the course of the Lecture he mentions the 'Pearl' poet, and Chaucer, which suggests that a perspective will be given going back to at least the 14th century.

Further, Mr Armitage would in fact seem to have a more ambitious and fundamental purpose in his Lecture than that of simply addressing 'bad practice' in contemporary poetry. In his 24th Thesis (which comes at about twelve minutes into a Lecture of slightly over an

hour) he says – as we have already noted:

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

And his 30th Thesis begins:

> And movin' on from definition to substance…

(whatever 'substance' may mean). Although it is not directly stated, it is clear that a part of Mr Armitage's reformative purpose and strategy is to provide *a definition* of poetry.

Unfortunately, as has already been indicated in the Introduction to this essay, Mr Armitage cannot hope to provide any useful and respectable answer to the question, 'What is Poetry?', because he is unable or unwilling to present any idea of those enduring historical principles and practices of the craft of English Poetry that have informed it over thirteen hundred years.

Before we examine Mr Armitage's '95 Theses', to demonstrate their general inconsequentiality and lack of any theoretical and critical substance, we will provide our own account of the enduring principles and practices of the craft.

III

On the Craft of English Poetry

The 'art' or 'craft' of 'poetry' is of course a 'literary' one. It uses, generally, words, to make things which are called 'poems'.

(The word 'poetry' is also used as a collective noun for any number of poems considered as a corpus).

However, a poem has a 'double constitution' or 'nature'. A poem is to be considered not only with regard to its semantic nature but also with regard to its abstract, sonic, technical nature.

It is principally by consideration of their formal nature that poems can be identified and distinguished from other sorts of 'word-things' (that is, 'things made of words').

In its abstract, formal, sonic and temporal nature, poetry is like music: a poem is a word-thing in which there is a marked, a particular patterning of sounds in time. This is the basis of the distinction that has long been made between 'poetry' and 'prose'. However, the distinction was and is more complex.

The art or craft of poetry is at least thirteen hundred years old. In Anglo-Saxon days the terms used for what we call 'prose' were 'gewrit' or 'anfeald gerecednes'. (The 'g's here are pronounced as the 'y' in our 'yet'.) What we call 'poetry' was termed 'fers' or 'meterfers'. Thus we can say that the art or craft of poetry was originally one of making metrical *verses*. Further, since in Old English such versed and metred word-things were also called 'songs', it may be inferred that they had a regular and consistent rhythmic structure, as in music.

The essential nature of rhythmic and metrical verses is that there are patterns of more or less regularly occurring main 'beats' or 'stresses', so that, as in music, a 'time' is kept in measures of a particular rhythmic nature.

In addition to this, secondary formal patterning devices were, from the beginning, an essential technical part of the nature of poems. These devices combined with those of versification. The systematic use of what has been called 'alliteration' (or 'head rhyme') was

used in Old English; and this was eventually replaced by the use of patterns of 'end-rhyme'.

These formal, technical characteristics, of sounds that are patterned in time, defined poetry as the art or craft of making poems, and distinguished it from prose; and these techniques have held true until quite recent times.

Of course, as was said at the beginning, the patterned sounds of poems are, generally, words; and so a poem presents that other, essential semantic nature. (The useful terms 'form' and 'content' have been used to acknowledge and describe the duple nature of poetry – its having an abstract, sonic patterning and also an existence as a verbal thing with meaning).

The language of a poem may be as 'plain' as some prose; but in poetry the use of words tends to be more or less 'expressive'. This expressiveness has for instance been described as 'the use of concentrated and heightened language in which words are chosen for their sound and suggestive power'.

What is sometimes called 'poetic language' includes 'figures of speech' and so forth. However, all these uses of language are not *defining* of poetry: for one thing, they are not regularly patterned; and, for another thing, they are all used to varying degrees in prose. Prose may be highly 'poetic' without being poetry – because not consisting of regularly patterned and rhythmised verse.

IV

An Examination of the Text

(A continuous transcript of the Lecture is provided as part V of this essay. Podcast times for most of the Theses, or supposed Theses, is indicated.)

Mr Armitage's Lecture begins thus:

> In Section Four of Seamus Heaney's 'Station Island' sequence, Heaney has a pointed exchange with a man of the cloth, a young priest who has "sweated masses as an overseas missionary in some steamy jungle". The poet can't picture this holy mascot in such an alien landscape, preferring to think of him "on his bicycle, performing domestic duties closer to home, visiting neighbours, drinking tea, and praising homemade bread", is Heaney's gently sarcastic description. To which the priest replies: "What are you doing here but the same thing?", questioning the motivation behind Heaney's pilgrimage, yes; but also, I think, accusing the poet of offering similar consolations and absolutions in the shape of poems.
>
> Five hundred years after Martin Luther supposedly nailed his Treatise to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, and in the form of complaints against poetry's contemporary indulgencies, and reassertions of its enduring values, I offer my own '95 Theses' to the floor.

In these introductory paragraphs, a similarity or analogy is suggested between the functions of 'priest' and 'poet' in that both may be said to offer 'consolations and indulgencies'. This allusion or metaphor is not developed.

The term 'absolutions' may be taken to refer to the Roman Catholic practice by which a priest will hear a 'confession' and offer the possibility of some sort of 'remission of sins' if the confessing person makes an appropriate penitential response.

The term 'absolutions' prepares us for the introduction of the term 'indulgencies' in the second paragraph – the latter term as it were absorbing or superseding the former.

As has been shown in the Prologue to this essay, these allusions, analogies or metaphors then fail, as nonsensical; but we are nevertheless obliged to examine the rest of the text of the Lecture to see if Mr Armitage anywhere suggests ways in which poetry offers what might be called 'consolations and absolutions'.

However, our principal attention will be given to establishing to what extent Mr Armitage identifies and examines what we have postulated as 'shortcomings in contemporary poetic practice' (which is our interpretation of his own phrase, 'poetry's contemporary indulgencies') and to discovering what theoretical and critical principles he brings to bear on such perceived 'shortcomings' (or 'indulgencies') by way of some sort of 'assertions of [poetry's] enduring values'. Of course, we will look for what may be statements regarding, or definitions of, these 'enduring values' as Mr Armitage perceives them.

*

One. Subtlety is the watchword.

Two. That this person's cat's whisker is another person's sledgehammer. This person's understatement another's foghorn. So here's the key question: Who are you writing for? If the answer is 'Myself', you're fibbing; and fibbing to yourself, which is the most deceitful of all deceptions. You write because you want to be read. Let's get that out into the open, and we can all move forward together.

(**Three**. I'm not going to read the numbers out every time.) To write only in the way others want to read is to sell out; but to write only in the way that you want to write is to disengage: to manage both is the requirement.

Mr Armitage here demonstrates a facility in metaphorical or 'poetical' phrasing, but offers nothing of objective significance regarding the 'Principles and Practice of Poetry'.

[4]
I'm talkin' about finding 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 same may be said of this Thesis as of the previous one.

[5]
It means, taking risks. Risking sentimentality, for example. For example, in Yusef Komunyakaa's much anthologised poem, 'Facing It', where the poet, a former reporter in the Vietnam War, stares into the dark depths of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and concludes:

In the black mirror
a woman's trying to erase names.
No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

A literary 'principle' of 'sentimentality' is proposed: but it is in no way defined (if that were indeed possible) or developed with regard to its use in poetry generally; nor does Mr Armitage suggest how it is operating in the example that he gives.

[6]

3.22 Poetry occurs at the dew point where difficulty meets understanding, or where considered thought condenses into considered language. Poetry exists in some optimal zone between the obscure and the obvious, between the pretentious and the prosaic, between the high-falutin' and the facile. I'm not saying that whatever falls outside that zone isn't poetry at all – even if that's what I happen to believe privately, I'm not sayin' it.

Here we are presented with three interesting metaphors in 'dew point', 'condenses' and 'optimal zone'; and these are then 'developed' by way of an unusual sequence of alliterating, qualifying pairs of terms. However, there is nothing of any critical substance in these terms and considerations; and no examples are given, to show us how they might be seen to be realised in practice. We offer these two sentences as an example of what we would call *'blather'*. Some attempt may be made to give objective critical substance to the term in due course. We would further observe that the concluding sentence of this Thesis has a certain 'smugness' about it – but we cannot define that term at present, either.

Of course, it may be that in the first four, and in the sixth, of his Theses, Mr Armitage is indirectly identifying instances or types of 'poetry's contemporary indulgencies' (in our sense of 'shortcomings'). Perhaps he is suggesting that certain contemporary poets fail, in their work, to find the 'equilux' or 'dew point' which he recommends. We do not know. What is curious about Mr Armitage's 'analytical process' here is that he is in no definite way making 'complaints' at all.

[7]

3.55 And as a zone, as well as havin' a conceptual dimension, it has a geographical one. Be internationalist by all means; but run the risk of dilution. Stay local by all means; but be an importer, otherwise you might think that you're ploughing your own furrow when actually you're digging your own grave.

Mr Armitage has, through the agency of metaphor, conceived of a 'zone' which itself has a 'conceptual dimension' and a 'geographical [dimension]'. This discourse can have no objective critical substance or validity unless examples of poems that he regards as being inside or outside the 'zone' are presented, in which actual 'principles' of poetry can be shown to be operating. Mr Armitage's enjoyable comic observation, with its opposed metaphors, may distract some readers or listeners from an awareness of the lack of objective theoretical substance in the Thesis.

[8]

If it helps, think of poetry as the semi-conductor of language, regulating both flow and restraint.

This Thesis consists of a clever metaphor conveying no critical substance. It may be placed in the category of 'blather'.

[9]

4.33 Poetry can provide a refuge for those who wish to write without the pressures of commercial interference, or the intrusion of celebrity, or any of the compromises associated with public engagement. But obscure poets can't then complain, as they sometimes complain, about a lack of interest in their work. Listen: if you're a poet, you're already obscure; if you're an obscure poet, you're operating somewhere beyond the orbit of Pluto.

Another mordant (and somewhat 'smug') joke may divert some of his audience from any awareness that these observations tell us nothing about the 'principles and practice of poetry', nor of 'poetry's contemporary indulgencies'.

[10]
5.07 Being culturally constructed, and therefore beyond an individual's control, that boundary between difficulty and understanding changes through time as well as space. We can't write for posterity, or be the actuaries of our own work, because we've no idea in which direction taste will shift, or where poems will stand in relation to it.

[11]
Neither can we rely on our spouses or descendants to catalogue our archives or laminate our reputations.

It may firstly be observed that Thesis [10] commences as a *non sequitur* but would seem to link back to Mr Armitage's metaphor of the 'dew point' in Thesis [6]. Then the question arises, 'taste in' *what?* This is unanswerable. Neither this Thesis nor Thesis [11] has anything substantial to say about 'the principles and practice of poetry'.

[12]
5.43 Irony was probably the guiding force behind this piece of London graffiti: but the intention is undermined by an underlying veracity.

[An enquiry was made of Mr Armitage, through his Agents, as to what was displayed on screen at this point.]

No comment can be made on this Thesis beyond saying that, if Mr Armitage is proposing that the employment of 'irony' is sometimes a feature of 'poetry', he is doing no more than making a somewhat unremarkable observation, and one which is applicable to literature generally.

[13]
[It makes a]? handy reference point for those students of mine who claim future readers will recognise their talent even if I don't; though, truth is, it's usually a hedge position they've taken up after a profit-warnin' on their current business model.

This Thesis is a coda to the previous one; and it might be thought to convey within its 'jokeyness' a certain contempt for some of his 'students'.

Fourteen. Helen Vendler has been one of our best contemporary critics because, by and large, she's on the side of the makers rather than the dismantlers. But what did Helen Vendler mean when she said at the end of an essay on John Ashbery that "'Accessibility' needs to be dropped from the American vocabulary of aesthetic judgement if we are not to appear fools in the eyes of the world?".

[15]
Actually, I know what she meant, because, in the sentence preceding it, she argued, via the examples of Mallarmé, Eliot, Moore, [Niwash?] and Ashbery, that "no matter how alien the content, or how allusive the lines, readers flock to their poems".

[16]

7.04 I could contest the definition of "flock", or argue that by having readers "flock" to them, those poets must be 'accessible'; or that all poems by their very nature are alien or allusive to some degree; or I could call in the number-crunchers to dispute the figures; but let me put it this way instead: if I were choosing which side of the argument to defend, I think it would be far easier to point to the large number of truly alien and allusive poets to whom readers have not only failed to flock but from whom they have actually fled; or to name-drop genuinely accessible writers - Chaucer, Milton, Wordsworth, Hardy, Plath, Bishop, Heaney, Harrison, etc. - whose evaluators and adjudicators are rarely considered fools.

[17]

8.03 'Accessibility', in the Vendler context, is a byword for 'popularity' which, by extension, becomes shorthand for 'dumbing down'. I see the connective logic; and yet, as a citizen of the world, I know that millions of really smart people go to the cinema, to art galleries, to museums, and to concerts, millions buy literature – but not poetry. If people "flock" to Mallarmé, what exorbitant verb shall we assign to the manner by which people congregate around Hilary Mantel or will attend the most recent Hockney exhibition?

It is not easy to follow Mr Armitage's 'line of argument' in this discussion of 'Accessibility'. It would appear that, when 'poetry', or a 'poet', is judged by whomsoever to be 'alien and allusive' (neither term is explained or defined), then the 'accessibility' of a poet, or work, is impaired or reduced to some extent.

A writer called Helen Vendler is quoted as saying that the term 'Accessibility' should 'be dropped from the American vocabulary of aesthetic judgement'. Although he does take issue with her, we can't be sure from Thesis [16] whether or not Mr Armitage disagrees with her (though he does claim to 'know what she means'); so, at this level, the 'argument' reaches no conclusion about what *might* be a 'principle' or 'practice' of 'poetry'.

On another level, we do not know how 'accessibility' is to be *assessed*. Although some poets are named as possibly being 'alien and allusive' in their work, no examples of their work is given. Further, although Mr Armitage tells us that *he* knows whose 'poetry' is 'genuinely accessible' or not (and he names some 'genuinely accessible writers'), he does not adduce examples and make any comparisons.

This is a demonstration that demonstrates nothing, an argument that argues *nothing in particular*. A 'complaint' would seem to have been made by Mr Armitage; but nothing of 'poetry's contemporary indulgencies' is actually *shown* to us – nor are any of its 'enduring values' defined and brought to bear on the situation.

This is all a particularly 'hollow' sort of 'blather'. The experience of reading these Theses is like that of peeling an orange, only to find that it is dry and tasteless inside.

[18]

8.47 I'm not an apologist for the superficial. Adrian Mitchell's contention that "Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people" was true up to a point, but would have carried more clout coming from a Hugo Williams or a Selima Hill or a Les Murray - hospitable and accommodating poets who also trust the imaginative and intellectual capabilities of a potential readership.

This Thesis has no theoretical or critical bearing on 'the principles and practice of poetry'. Further, Mr Armitage's assessment of the work of three named poets is no more than unsubstantiated personal opinion. And further, it may be asked: if 'Adrian Mitchell's contention' was only 'true up to a point', how would the 'contention' become any more

'true' if expressed by any of the other three named poets? This Thesis belongs in the 'blather' category; and would also seem to offer an extraordinary insult to Adrian Mitchell.

[19]

9.01 I'm only an occasional visitor to this platform, but a frequent teacher; and in the classroom environment fewer things have muddled the minds of Creative Writing students ~ those who read criticism, anyway - than The Intentional Fallacy, the notion that an author's objective can never be properly realised in the mind of the reader. It leads some students to throw away their pens in despondency, and others to throw down any old tripe onto the page on the basis that whatever they write will be misinterpreted.

[20]

But [while it looks like/would be naïve]? to assume that every aspect and angle of a poem can be safely couriered between reader and writer, it's defeatist to think that the greater or necessary parts cannot. How do I know The Intentional Fallacy is itself a fallacy? It is, when the critics of the New Criticism wrote about it, I understood it.

Mr Armitage's grasp and assessment of 'The Intentional Fallacy' is ill-informed and 'muddled' – and the childish responses (as he reports them) to his 'teaching' of it are not surprising.

Wikipedia gives a clear and concise account of 'The Intentional Fallacy':

> 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.

Mr Armitage's mis-representational account of 'The Intentional Fallacy' as

> the notion that an authors objective can never be properly realised in the mind of the reader

demonstrates that he has no informed 'notion' of it to teach to his intellectually vulnerable students. His personal finding that 'The Intentional Fallacy is itself fallacious' is itself fallaciously arrived at. His suggestion that 'when the critics of the New Criticism wrote about it' he might have 'understood it' has such a private intensity of ambiguity about it, that any desire to penetrate the statement will be resisted. Suffice it to say, that Mr Armitage's presentation of the matter of the Intentional Fallacy here (and, on his report, in the 'Creative Writing' classroom) is deplorable. This is nonsense that has a peculiar 'edge' to it. This Lecture is beginning to suggest an unpleasant and dangerous derangement in its presenter that might be said to stem from a mixture of ignorance and pomposity in him.

Finally, we may add that these two Theses tell us nothing about 'the principles and practice of poetry' in the past or the present.

[21]

10.25 Ambiguity, being a kissing cousin of The Intentional Fallacy, is also a much misunderstood and abused concept in poetry. "It's, like, ambiguous", says Scarlet in the Creative Writing class, responding to the last line of Josh's poem, which she doesn't understand. "Yeah," agrees Josh, "I was doing, like, ambiguity there", he confirms, largely on the basis that *he* doesn't understand it either. Or, "It's very meta" they might call it.

[22]

Wrong. Whatever its dictionary definition of 'inexactness', ambiguity is a controlled technique in poetry, being the managed balancing of two or more describable positions. Example; the last line of Hardy's 'Snow in the Suburbs':

And we take him in.

Receiving the cat into the house, he means. And he also means, perceiving the situation: he means them both, simultaneously and intentionally. As for 'meta' - i.e. 'more consciously and conspicuously of itself' - : if I hear one more student saying somethin' is "very meta", I'm going to take a bite out of a desk.

After providing us with the 'cheap thrill' of the technically meaningless, metaphorical term 'kissing cousin', Mr Armitage proceeds to talk again in a somewhat derogatory way about members of an imaginary class of his 'Creative Writing' students. He then provides a somewhat verbose general definition of the literary term, 'ambiguity'. His one, very ordinary example of the use or occurrence of an ambiguous phrase is 'borrowed' from Michael Rosen's book for children, *What is Poetry?* (Walker Books, 2016). He then closes the Thesis with a further derogatory remark about students.

The general tone of these two 'Theses' is somewhat 'childish'. 'Ambiguity' is not a specific 'principle' of poetry; it is only a 'practice' in literature generally, and a matter hardly worth remarking on.

[23]

11.55 To the supposition that a certain player couldn't be offside durin' a match because he wasn't interfering with play, manager Brian Clough is alleged to have retorted, "If he isn't interfering with play, what's he doin' on the pitch?" For 'player', read 'language'; for 'pitch', read 'poem'. Q.E.D.

These obscure remarks 'come out of nowhere'. The best response that I can offer to this Thesis is to say that laughing too much at one's own jokes is not 'cool'.

12.17 **Twenty Four.** Of the many historical and ongoing vexations associated with the arts, poetry's very identity is one of its most agonising conditions. Passing from 'Poetischer Realismus' to 'Poetry, theories of', the 1965 *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* I bought from a library sale in 1986, to try and figure out what the hell I was doing, had no entry for 'Poetry'. It's a situation its editors have since addressed, but to no resounding conclusion. More courageously, Edward Hirsch's excellent *A Poet's Glossary* has a stab at definition which begins,

An inexplicable (though not incomprehensible) event in language.

That submission will extend to another three pages; but the bracketed 'though not incomprehensible' spoke to me personally.

Reference to this Thesis has been made in the Introduction and the Prologue to this essay. What may be called the 'thrust' of this Thesis seems to be somewhat 'guarded'. Our understanding of it is that Mr Armitage is aware that there is an urge within the 'arts' to give some 'identity' to, or arrive at some 'definition' of, 'poetry'. His expressed interest in the bracketed part of the statement that he quotes of Edward Hirsch, suggests that he himself thinks that a 'comprehensible' definition or 'identity' may be provided for 'poetry'.

[25]

13.28 Poetry is 'shaded' language. On many examples of terrain cartography, hills and mountains are shown with shape to their south eastern slopes, as if light were emanating from the top left hand corner of the map, perhaps taking its bearings from printed matter - given that, in reading, north west to south east is the usual direction of travel. Forgetting for now that light rarely originates from that direction in the northern hemisphere, the shadin' exists as a visual subtext indicative of perspective. Similarly, in a poem the shadows of chosen words fall in a particular direction, suggesting an angle or view. It's a form of 'hachuring', as in

Hachuring distinct with threads of shadow

In Norman Nicholson's poem 'Gathering Sticks on Sunday.'

And moon and earth will stare at one another
Like the cold, yellow skulls of child and mother,

it ends, shading language in the direction of Emerson's statement, 'The end of the human race will be that it will die of civilisation'. [Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803-1882]

This Thesis is an especial piece of nonsense. Mr Armitage engages in what may be called 'gamesmanship' in metaphorical writing, creating an interplay between the metaphor of 'shaded language' and metaphorical implications derived from consideration of the techniques of 'hachuring' in cartography. However, the cleverness results in what is, metaphorically speaking, a loss of control of his material and the 'disappearance of his system down a rabbit hole'.

Mr Armitage's metaphorical conclusion that, in the closing verses of Nicholson's poem, we should see 'the shadows of chosen words fall' in the direction of a statement made in the previous century by Ralph Waldo Emerson - of which Nicholson may have been quite ignorant - is preposterous, and has no objectivity. We must presume that for Mr Armitage the possibility of 'poetry' using such 'shaded language' is a part of 'the principles and practice of poetry' and even one of its 'enduring values'. This is an absurd piece of theorising. It is somewhat deluded and deranged.

[26]

14.50 What other physical properties can help with identification? Comparing the density of a poem with the density of prose via the number of rare or unusual or interesting words or phrases per page might not be enough to highlight a quantifiable difference between the two, but let's still consider the specific gravity of a piece of writing as a possible indicator of its poetic quiddities and credentials. Let's locate it and celebrate it in 'Composed underneath Westminster Bridge', Denise Riley's bicentennial and parallaxed response to Wordsworth's Petrarchan sonnet, an uncharacteristically off-message urban moment from William - given his more usual role as poetry's Countryside Alliance spokesperson. Riley's reverse perspective from below the bridge might be a

subtle acknowledgement of Dorothy's unacknowledged role in the original poem; but it's the magnificent muddy slurp and viscosity I'm interested in here, its thickness of diction. [Here he reads the poem, which was also displayed on a screen]

Composed Underneath Westminster Bridge

Broad gravel barges shove the drift. Each wake
Thwacks the stone steps. A rearing tugboat streaked
Past moorhens dabbing floss, spun pinkish-beaked.
Peanuts in caramelised burnt chocolate bake
Through syrupy air. Above, fried onions cake.
Pigeons on steeleyed dates neck-wrestled, piqued,
Oblivious to their squabs that whined and squeaked
In iron-ringed nests, nursed in high struts. Opaque
Brown particles swarm churning through the tide.
That navy hoop of cormorant can compose
A counter to this shield – eagles splayed wide,
Gold martlets – on the bridge's side; it glows
While through the eau-de-nil flaked arches slide
The boats 'Bert Prior' and 'The Eleanor Rose'.

Here we are 'enmired' in further metaphorical discourse. Mr Armitage suggests that the 'identification' of a 'poem', and its 'difference' from a piece of 'prose', may be established by 'comparing' and 'quantifying' their 'density' or 'specific gravity'. This is a metaphorical application of terms from physics, where they are used in the investigation of the properties of *materials*, to the *immaterial* qualities of spoken language. He appears to 'invalidate' the project almost immediately ('might not be enough' … 'possible indicator'); but he then picks it up again ('Let's locate and celebrate it'…) in his examination of Riley's poem, concentrating not on considering 'the number of rare and unusual...words or phrases' in it but in suggesting, without being specific in any way, that it contains 'interesting words and phrases', and 'showing' us, in his own strikingly 'poetic' way, how it has 'a magnificent muddy slurp and viscosity' … and 'thickness of diction'.

One can only admire the subtlety of Mr Armitage's deceptive discourse here. He is 'ducking and diving' as might the moorhens and cormorants in Riley's poem. He 'throws in' remarks about the Wordsworth poem that will tend to distract attention from his 'pseudo-scientific game of metaphoricality' (which is intensified by his clever use of the term 'parallaxed', one which concerns the physics of light in astronomy.)

Finally, he comments on what he claims (without giving instances) are particularly effective verbal qualities in Riley's poem, using language of his own which, in its impressive use of alliteration and vowel qualities, may actually supersede anything of the sort in Riley's own poem. (We might add that, although sound may be the subject of scientific examination, it does not have a 'density' or 'specific gravity' that is 'quantifiable'.)

The question to be asked now, is: what has Mr Armitage achieved in respect of his intention to 'define' and give some sort of 'identity' to 'poetry' or a 'poem'? That is: what has he contributed to our understanding and appreciation of the technical craft of poetry and of 'poetry's enduring values' and 'the principles and practice of poetry'?

The same answer holds in respect of this as of the previous Thesis: little or nothing. Mr Armitage has *suggested* that the terms 'poetry' and 'prose' apply to different sorts of thing. Then he has made subjective and unillustrated claims for the presence in a particular 'poem' of what, in our earlier account of the craft of poetry, we have simply called

'concentrated and heightened language' etc. As was pointed out at the same time, 'heightened language' etc. cannot be said to be a defining characteristic of poetry, since the same sorts of 'heightening', and so forth, may occur in prose.

(A somewhat more analytic formulation regarding the question of the 'secondary' characteristics of poetry is required, not least because the terms 'concentrated' and heightened' are metaphorical. We will look to this.)

There are further considerations. Riley's poem is probably the only one that Mr Armitage presented in full, on screen; and it was one which he read out with care – if somewhat monotonously, to my memory. He calls it a 'parallaxed response to Wordsworth's Petrarchan Sonnet'; but, beyond that, he makes no reference to the formal qualities of the poem *as* a 'sonnet' with a precise rhyme scheme. He says nothing whatever about versification, metre or rhythm. The sense of 'aridity' intensifies.

[27]

17.15 Staying with definitions: if we describe the poem as a snapshot, which we occasionally do, especially the shorter poem - perhaps to distinguish it from something more cinematic, which might be the visual equivalent of the novel - ; if we associate the poem with the snapshot, possibly because it's often polaroid in shape and size, or cross-sectional in its presentation, then let's agree that it isn't necessarily the subject matter which is caught in time, but the moment of writing.

[28]

The hairs on the back of the neck rise on reading Hughes's 'The Thought Fox', not because we're re-witnessing the animal entering the frame, but because we're witnessing the poet framing the art of framing the animal entering the frame, the moment of an artist "gazing amazed at the work that points at him amazed", as he says in 'Full Moon and Little Frieda'. It's creativity's self-consciousness that's being captured and preserved.

What, we wonder, does 'cross-sectional' mean?

Here we are invited to engage with two new metaphorical systems. It may be that in Thesis [28] Mr Armitage is saying something cogent about a poem by Mr Hughes that may be somehow derived from the 'heightened language' that he uses of it; but, without the text, we cannot consider the matter. More to the point, it cannot be said that to suggest that 'a poem' is (in various ways) like 'a snapshot' provides any sort of 'definition' of 'a poem' (or indeed of 'a snapshot' - which is in itself a metaphor…) It is not possible to derive any 'principle' of 'poetry' from these Theses that can be put into 'practice' in the writing of 'a poem' or of anything else.

[29]

18.29 Another reason the snapshot analogy might be apposite is in relation to that satisfying clunk we recognise when two or more ideas click. Example: Ian Hamilton-Finlay's sculptural poem, 'Bring Back the Birch', where a reactionary request for the reintroduction of corporal punishment is ironically fused with an environmental appeal for the re-establishment of a tree species, where 'grove' and 'grave' are simultaneously monumentalised. [It is possible that this piece was displayed on the screen; but, if that was the case, no time was allowed for the audience to give it much scrutiny].

The same conclusion applies to this Thesis as to the previous one. Nothing specific or objective is said relating to 'the principles and practice of poetry'. 'Chasing' Mr Armitage's metaphorical 'meanings' can be fun; but in the end it does not bring the 'fruit' of

any theoretical or practical substance.

19.11 **Thirty.** And movin' on from definitions to substance, and to the question of whether poetry has stopped delivering the goods or supplying its legal high: sometimes you pay the dealer, only to be given the chemical equation rather than the product itself. Too many Walter Whites out there, peddling the science, when what we really crave is the hit. Or, as Heaney put it: "You want it to touch you at the melting point between the breastbone and the beginning of the solar plexus; you want something sweetening and at the same time unexpected, that has come through constraint into felicity".

[31]

20.02 If the drugs analogy doesn't please, let me wonder instead if poetry has stopped being the 'Expo', with its public interface between innovators and consumers, with its aisles and stores, bringin' its fair to the fair, and become instead the 'Conference', with poets as lanyarded delegates in closed sessions, professionals and experts in dialogue with co-workers and associates only.

It is impossible to say quite what the distinction may be, between the two terms or concepts, 'definitions' and 'substance'. These two Theses provide some 'personal pictorial opinionating' on Mr Armitage's behalf; but, since we are given no examples of 'poetry' that he thinks is successful or not, and why, what he has to say is no more than that: 'personal pictorial opinionating'. The cleverly worded metaphors may be suggesting something about 'poetry's contemporary indulgencies' (in our proposed sense of some sort of 'shortcomings'); and they may be saying something about the 'consolations' that poetry may bring: but nothing specific is actually said; no evidence is adduced in any respect; his 'complaints' have no substance. (And as to the 'absolutions' that poets may be 'offering': no hint of any sort has yet been given concerning this aspect of poetry - as Mr Armitage conceives it.)

[32]

20.33 It's generally agreed that at some point in history the novel replaced the poem as the principal and most popular form of literature; and it's difficult to envisage a reversal, given poetry's sulky introspection since that time. Broadly speakin', the contemporary novel operates through an unspoken reciprocity, offering readers the opportunity to engage without requiring them to unscramble an encrypted code.

Here we will 'chase some meanings'.

This Thesis starts with a plain statement, proceeding up to the semi colon; then we are asked to consider the unexpected but clearly stated proposition that 'poetry' could possibly 'again' become 'the most popular form of literature'. However, this interesting suggestion is qualified, metaphorically, by Mr Armitage's use of 'personification' in the diverting phrase 'poetry's sulky introspection'. It is an amusing device; but it is also a disappointing one in that he is expressing no more than a personal opinion through this metaphorical phrase - which opinion he does not expand upon or justify in any way with 'evidence'.

In the second sentence of the Thesis, Mr Armitage seems to be saying – as we move mentally through his very wise-sounding formulation, 'unspoken reciprocity' – that 'poems' are generally harder to read than 'novels' because the reader may be required to 'unscramble an encrypted code'. Of course, we 'know what he means'; but, in saying that, we are 'going along with' Mr Armitage's metaphorically expressed and subjective opinion – in support of which he does not adduce any evidence by way of examples of writing that might

fairly be described as requiring us to, metaphorically speaking, 'unscramble an encrypted code'.

At this point we may bring to bear certain considerations regarding 'the principles and practice of poetry' and of 'poetry's contemporary indulgencies' (in our sense of 'shortcomings in the 'practice' of the craft of poetry' in Mr Armitage's opinion). We might ask: how may we know when a poem has achieved the 'equilux' of Thesis [4] and/or is in the 'optimal zone between the obscure and the obvious', and when it has thus not actually reached, because of some process of 'sulky introspection' on the part of its author, what sounds like an undesirable state in which it requires its readers to 'unscramble an encrypted code'? I don't think that this Lecture will provide any direct or indirect answers to such questions. However, it can be said that, in this Thesis, Mr Armitage *would* seem to be making a 'complaint' regarding 'the practice of [contemporary] poetry'.

Too much 'chasing of meanings' in this way is likely to make the writing and reading of this essay tedious; so some 'economy' will now be attempted.

[33]

21.05 In a recent wide-ranging Ipsos-MORI poll conducted on behalf of The Royal Society of Literature, 90% of people reported that they had read a novel in the last six months, an encouraging statistic for authors, publishers, booksellers, and anyone who believes that reading is a good thing. But only 11% of respondents had read any poetry - roughly the same number who'd read a self-help book. Some nights I lie awake worrying that they are in fact the same people.

This 'quirkily'-ended thesis has some bearing on the previous one, providing what might be very circumstantial evidence for the effects of what Mr Armitage calls 'poetry's sulky introspection' on the readership of poetry. However, there is nothing here that bears on 'the principles and practice of poetry'.

[34]

21.47 Peter Porter's observation, that "poetry can either be language lit up by life, or life lit up by language", now seems a generous, even-handed and optimistic assessment, probably penned before the wide-scale emergence of poetry as language not so much illuminated by, but subjected to, some form of x-ray or CAT scan.

[35]

22.13 In a recent interview to promote his compilation triptych collection, *No Art*, the American poet Ben Lerner seems to acknowledge or confirm such a predicament. Across those three volumes, Lerner says that he's dealing with such topics as 'Univocalism versus Heteroglossia', 'The Impossibility of the Second Person Pronoun', 'The Repurposin' of Language', 'A Resistance to Closed Readings' 'Avant-garde Proceduralism', and 'Ironic Detachment'.

[36]

It's only really in the final poem of the book that Lerner gestures towards what he describes as "a calling for the possibility of feeling in poetry, daringly flirting with vintage or discontinued emotions".

[37]

In contrast, for example, with the stated subject matter of one of Lerner's students, Ocean Vuong, who, according to the blurb on the back of his debut collection, 'Night Sky with Exit Wounds', writes "about the most profound subjects: love and loss, conflict,

grief, memory, and desire".

[38]
It allows for a formal and confident distinction to be made, I think, between those poems whose critical and theoretical components are implied, and those whose critical and theoretical components are not only explicit but entire: poetry as criticism and theory.

23.55 **Thirty Nine.** Invent a measuring device for the above, a kind of breathalyser test that registers critical parts per thousand : keep blowing, keep blowing, the light's gone red, you're over the accepted limit, I'm going to have to ask you to step outside the vehicle, I'm going to have to ask you for your licence.

[40]
24.21 The Doomsday Clock, that hypothetical chronometer which gauges the perceived likelihood of planetary catastrophe, whose hands, the last time I checked - which was admittedly before the American task force steamed towards the Korean peninsular, and the NHS computer network succumbed to a paralysing virus - is currently set at two and a half minutes to midnight.

[41]
Interactive exam question: Onto the face of a clock anticipating the Doomsday Scenario, in which all the poets and all the critics in the world are exactly the same people, draw the current position of the hands.

[42]
25.05 Just to be clear, I'm not mountin' some shop-floor protest on behalf of the Poets' Union. Without criticism there is no poetry. If poetry is the egg, then criticism can either be the chick that hatches from it or the hen that laid it. And in the Venn diagram of manufacturers and commentariat, a shadowed area of overlap is an inevitable and healthy thing. But beware complete occlusion, the darkness occasioned by total obscuration, the oblivion brought about by 100% self-absorption.

These nine Theses may be said to have a unifying concern or theme: 'poetry as criticism and theory' regarding itself (Thesis [38]). (Theses [39], [40] and [41] are 'spurious entertainments' which play no practical part in Mr Armitage's factual outlining of what is indeed a particular 'complaint'.) In his development of this theme, Mr Armitage might be expected to make some specific and cogent comment on contemporary 'principles and practice of poetry'. He doesn't.

Thesis [34] is entirely metaphorical, and contains nothing of any objective 'theoretical' or 'critical' import. In Theses [35], [36] and [37], Mr Armitage presents things that have been said by two poets *about* their work rather than *in* their actual poems (which poems may, in the case of both authors, actually be 'accessible' and enjoyable pieces of work). From this he draws an invalid conclusion in Thesis [38] (as well as establishing a false antithesis between mutually exclusive categories that he has devised). He does not demonstrate in any way the operation and nature of any 'criticism and theory' in any 'poetry' that is *about* itself, or of what he calls '100 % self-absorption' His statement in Thesis [42], 'Without criticism there is no poetry' may be described as 'pompous bombast'.

[43]
25.47 Or we could further divide these two Venn diagram cells, a procedure which might lead to a 'jahari window' approach, as it would be described by that afore-mentioned 10%

of society frequenting the Personal Development section of Waterstones; or to a Rumsfeldian classification of poetry.

Here, after some metaphorical 'larking about' of no 'theoretical' significance, Mr Armitage abruptly moves us on from considerations of 'poetry as criticism and theory', to attend to what he calls 'a Rumsfeldian classification of poetry'.

26.12 **Forty Four. '**Rumsfeldianism'. Let's start with 'the known knowns', poems whose text is immediately comprehensible and whose meaning is in direct [fluention]? and proportion to it; poetry of 'Thribbish' artlessness, requiring little effort and bringing scant reward. When Geoffrey Hill made reference to "a cult of simple-mindedness" to have emerged in the 60s and 70s, it was the purveyors of 'known knowns' he was presumably at pains to distance himself from.

The title and development of this system of 'classification of poetry', 'Rumsfeldianism', is a 'gimmick' which undermines any seriousness in what Mr Armitage is saying. However, there may be some useful critical purpose to it, and it may yield some valuable reflections on poetical 'practice'. The presentation of the system may in general be seen as taking us back to the early stages of the Lecture and to his idea of an 'optimal zone between the obscure and the obvious' (Thesis 6).

Here, with his 'known knowns', Mr Armitage is certainly issuing some sort of 'complaint' about a contemporary 'practice of poetry' by some individuals, somewhere. However, the broad 'complaint' is no more than a subjective and theoretical one, as there are no examples to consider, and no demonstration of whatever 'principle' he is trying to identify. The mention of 'poetry of 'Thribbish' artlessness', and his reference to something said by Geoffrey Hill – made by Hill about whom we are not told – does nothing to give any substance to this category in his 'classification'.

[45]
Into the 'known unknowns' pigeonhole we might place large chunks of Eliot, for example. That is to say, we can all read and make sense of a line like

An old, white horse galloped away in the meadow;

and certain sections of 'Four Quartets' - for example, the opening lines of 'Burnt Norton' - have a nursery rhyme or even popular song simplicity to them; yet, for all the surface comprehensibility, the philosophical thinkin' underpinning the poetry remains remote, aloof, perhaps even ineffable.

As an illustration of his category of 'known unknowns', Mr Armitage does offer a line of verse by T. S. Eliot. However, there is a problem with the classification, which invalidates it: how can Mr Armitage say with any authority that a line from a piece by the fictional 'E. J. Thribb' does not have 'philosophical thinking underpinning' it that is possibly as 'remote, aloof and perhaps ineffable' as is the case (as he maintains) with the line of T. S. Eliot? The question also presents itself: if any line of 'poetry' has a 'surface comprehensibility' which may have an 'underpinning' of 'philosophical thinking' that is 'remote, aloof, perhaps *ineffable* [my italics]', how are we to evaluate its maker's poetical 'practice'? That said, it may be accepted that Mr Armitage *is* here issuing a 'complaint' – but one which is subjective and unsupported.

[46]

27.30 Donald Rumsfeld didn't actually get into the territory of the 'unknown knowns'; but I'm proposing John Ashbery as my bandleader in this category. That's because the fragmented and sabotaged cortex of his poems - certainly in his later work - is usually as intentionally un-followable as it is unfathomable. And yet the thinkin' behind it, signifier or signified, language as an unsatisfactory, unreliable and even disreputable tool when it comes to the analysis, perception and reflection of actual experience etc., etc.; all that is relatively well signposted and understood.

Mr Armitage now introduces us to his third category of 'poetry' in this strange, and indeed, bizzare 'analytic system'; and he enters on a peculiar 'encomium' to one 'poet' in particular, John Ashbery, which is extended over four Theses.

Mr Armitage calls Mr Ashbery his 'bandleader' in this category. It is an odd metaphor. It suggests that a 'band' of 'poets' could be named. Mr Armitage does not help here.

The second and third sentences in this Thesis present an absurd contradiction in the form of, say,

+a 'and yet' –a
(where 'and yet' means =).

How can what is 'as intentionally unfathomable as it is unknowable' be at the same time 'relatively well sign-posted and understood'?

We have nothing to rely on in this Thesis. Some example of 'the fragmented and sabotaged cortex' of any one 'poem' of Mr Ashbery's would be of great interest to us.

[47]

28.15 And finally, 'the unknown unknowns', the irresolvable linguistic equations of those out-and-out poetical experiments baffling to both reader and writer alike.

[48]

I've mentioned John Ashbery a couple of times already, and will mention him again as a special case, given how he's not so much cornered the market for unpredictability in contemporary poetry, but brokered some form of international free-trade agreement. Unexpectedness is what we expect from Ashbery, his principal strategy in recent years being deviation from the linear, a strategy that succeeds because his fragments are so surreptitiously eavesdropped, so convincingly reproduced, and so entertainingly juxtaposed.

[49]

Unfortunately, his virtuoso modus operandi has been misheard by others as a clarion-call for the abdication of logic and the abandonment of sense across the board. Many have noticed the truancy and mischievousness in Ashbery, and confused it with the school rules. Conversely, it's a big mistake to characterise Ashbery as some kind of Emperor in his New Clothes when in fact he's the tailor and dressmaker. "The poem is you" he reminds us in the last line of 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons'; we his coat hanger and dummy.

We are fairly confident in our numbering of Mr Armitage's 'Theses' from [45] to [53]. If [47] is a separate Thesis, it is a paltry one; but it coheres with the next two as we have numbered them.

At the same time, it must be said that what Thesis [47] tells us here about 'the unknown unknowns' - *and* what was said in Thesis [46] about 'the fragmented and

sabotaged cortex' of Mr Ashbery's 'later work' being 'usually as intentionally unfollowable as it is unfathomable' – is contradicted in those following 'Theses'. Thesis [47] talks of 'poetical experiments baffling to both reader and writer alike'. However, in Thesis [48] Mr Armitage says that Mr Ashbery – his chosen 'bandleader' in this new category of 'Rumsfeldianism', as well as in the third category – 'succeeds' in his chosen 'principle strategy' by producing 'fragments' which Mr Armitage, at least, finds 'convincing' and 'entertaining'. So, surely, neither Mr Ashbery nor Mr Armitage can be 'baffled' by the 'out-and-out poetical experiments' with which they are both *satisfied* in their individual ways? In other words, Mr Armitage is simply 'blathering on': these 'irresolvable linguistic equations' of Thesis [47] *aren't* 'irresolvable' at all.

If Mr Ashbery has 'not so much cornered the market for unpredictability in contemporary poetry, but brokered some form of international free-trade agreement', he cannot be so much a 'bandleader' as a dominating 'one-man-band'. The prominent position that he is now taking in this Lecture is extraordinary. However, what is perhaps more extraordinary is that Mr Armitage provides *only four words* as an example of his work. That he will not *show* us what he means, reduces his analysis of 'Rumsfeldianism' almost to 'nullity'.

'Null' and vague as all this is, it may be said that Mr Armitage is here setting out to say *something* about Mr Ashbury's poetical 'practice' – which 'virtuoso modus operandi', we are informed in Thesis [49], is 'misheard by others'. We are told in Thesis [48] that Mr Ashbury's 'principal strategy in recent years' has been 'deviation from the linear'; which strategy 'succeeds', according to Mr Armitage, in producing admirably presented 'fragments'. Once we have vainly tried to imagine for ourselves some delightful examples from 'the sabotaged cortex' of Mr Ashbery's 'poetry' - 'fragments' that are, in Mr Armitage's carefully assembled opinion, 'so surreptitiously eavesdropped, so convincingly reproduced and so entertainingly juxtaposed' - we may ask how they derive from some 'principle' or 'practice of poetry' as 'deviation from the linear'?

This Lecture provides no further help in the matter. We may only make some surmises of our own. The 'practice' of 'deviation from the linear' may have something to do with Mr Armitage's concept of 'the line', which for him replaces the conventional, fundamental term in poetics and prosody, the '*verse*'. It is somewhere after Thesis [75] that Mr Armitage discusses 'the line' as possibly being 'poetry's' 'u.s.p.', and of 'short lines' (or a 'truncated line') as used in the 'practice' of Ms Rae Armantrout. A 'poem' of hers, which does indeed seem to consist rather of 'fragments', is provided for us. But how Ms Armantrout's work may relate in 'practice' to that of Mr Ashbery, is not discussed: Mr Ashbery has long taken his 'one-man-band' off the 'stage' of this Lecture, after providing such a dominating presence. The sense of 'aridity' in the Lecture, and of being 'cheated', grows…

However, we may 'wind' the podcast back to Thesis [49] and so 'reprise' him in all his invisible and ineffable 'unpredictability'. It must be said that Mr Armitage's joke about Mr Ashbery's 'truancy and mischievousness' has a 'feel-good' effect; but then the 'vexations' set in again, because Mr Armitage doesn't let his 'bandleader' actually '*play*' any 'tunes'. We do not know if, in such pieces, Mr Ashbery achieves the 'equilux' of Thesis [4] or 'the dew point' of Thesis [6].

The concluding sentences of Thesis [49] are meaningless 'showboating' by Mr Armitage: it is *we* who have become *his* 'coathanger and dummy' – and it is *he* who is the 'Emperor in his New Clothes'.

[50]

29.58 Is it ever 'brave' to write poems? I've seen this word on book blurbs, in reviews, in citations of works. Certainly, some poets publish at great personal risk; but even for the likes of Mandlestam and Akhmatova, doesn't manner always pull rank on matter in the end? Won't mode always be looking to upstage material? Isn't the poet's mind always cocked to the poem standing as a poem in relation to other poems? In poetry, isn't there always an element of dancing in front of a mirror? Aren't poets like the dew drops in Yeats's 'Sad Shepherd', 'always listening for the sound of their own dropping'?

This non-sequential Thesis might be described as a typical piece of 'Armitage blather'. He takes the 'citations' of 'brave' as an 'excuse' for a clever verbal 'dance'; but the metaphorical alliterative 'stepping' in his rhetorical questions - 'doesn't manner always pull rank on matter in the end? Won't mood always be looking to upstage material' - might be described as 'cutely meaningless'. The Thesis provides us with nothing whatsoever of substance regarding the 'principles and practice of poetry'.

[51]

30.50 Some poets will attempt to disguise their exhibitionism or imply modesty by representin' themselves with the lower case 'i'. It worked for a day or two as a refreshing kind of self-effacement, allowing the poet to momentarily side-step the role of wise sage and important person. But, pretty soon it had the reverse effect, shouting "Hey! hey! over here, look at me, over here, I'm the quiet one!"

Mr Armitage's personal response to this occasional 'practice' engaged in by some contemporary poets, is valid. It is of some passing interest.

[52]

31.25 "First, try to be something, anything else", begins Lorrie Moore in *How to be a Writer*. She's pretending to tell you about life choices, but she's really telling you about writing. She's talking about fiction, but she's also talking about poetry. And then she's also talking about poetry, but she's also talking about literature. "You yourself are not literature", she's saying. Even the most candid confessional poet - the Lowell of *Life Studies*, the Plath of *Ariel*, the Hopkins of the so-called 'Terrible Sonnets', the 'Pearl' poet recounting his dream - if *his* dream is what it was - : we don't appreciate them because their soul-searching was so thorough, but because their illusions were so accomplished, their portrayals so convincing, their puppetry so life-like.

There is no connection in argument between the first sentence of this Thesis, and the third. Who *is* Lorrie Moore? Nothing is said in the Thesis of any direct 'critical and theoretical' value concerning the 'principles and practice of poetry'. The term 'soul-searching' has no objective critical substance or function.

[53]

32.24 So when Craig Raine says, "Poetry is the battle against the prompter which can only give you someone else's lines", he isn't suggesting that an individual's unmediated thoughts are poetic of themselves, no matter how unique; and he certainly isn't aligning himself with Alan Ginsberg's description of the poet [Aré]?, "stenographer of the mind", with its implication that any and every thought can be transferred unedited straight onto the page.

The opening 'So' of this Thesis implies a link in argument to the previous one. There isn't one. Then, Mr Armitage's use of two brief metaphorical utterances by two poets, and

his linking of them, is arbitrarily conjectural and lacking in logic. How does he know what Mr Raine is or isn't 'suggesting'? Why should we think that Mr Raine might be aligning himself with what Mr Ginsberg is reported as saying? and how can we rely on Mr Armitage's reading of the 'implications' of it? However, it may be allowed that the question is indirectly raised – but not pursued – as to what distinction might be made between 'prose' and 'poetry'.

33.00 **Fifty Four.** Sometimes in the appraisal of poetry, when judging competitions, for instance, or when considerin' applications for courses via sample poems, I've heard colleagues bring up the issue of 'trust'. "I don't trust this poem", someone might say at a grading meeting; or, "How trustworthy is this piece?". It happens in situations where there's nothing inherently measurable about the work to hand, and no calibration system beyond educated guesswork.

Mr Armitage is talking sense here about what may or may not be 'inherently measurable'. He might then understand why this essay finds his own 'calibration system' in matters of poetics, as evinced in this Lecture, to be 'untrustworthy'. There is nothing in this Thesis of any critical or theoretical moment.

[55]

33.32 The recent resurgence of the 'spoken word' scene is sometimes explained as a reaction to these opacities and obscurities in literary poetry. 'Performance poetry', in that version of events, is a breath of fresh air, sincere in its application, honest in its ambition, and happy to make itself vulnerable in front of a live audience rather than hide away behind the fortifications of a book cover. Its detractors disagree, arguin' that a poem in search of immediate responses and instant gratification is even less trustworthy, and fails the poetic polygraph test by virtue of its neediness. About ten years ago I thought I'd noticed a growin' rapprochement between the two camps; but certain irreconcilable differences persist, it would seem.

It is difficult to accept that the previous four Theses have considered 'opacities and obscurities in literary poetry'. Mr Armitage is making it up.

It is probably a good strategy to resist making a thorough search for objective 'meaning' and 'critical and theoretical' significance in this highly 'metaphoricalised' Thesis; just as it is best to resist scratching chicken-pox spots. However, it may be said that the existence of 'the 'spoken word' scene' *is,* in a general way, a matter of contemporary 'practice in poetry'.

[56]

34.35 On that same subject, James Fenton once commented how a group of aspiring poets he knew defined their practice through entirely negative characteristics: "no rhyme, no metre and no form other than open form" - which Fenton clarifies as "no form at all". He might have also added, 'no metaphor, no narrative and no subject matter' to this litany of poetic allergies and intolerances; though his larger point was in relation to the poetry reading as an event, and how writing for the eye rather than the ear hasn't discouraged page-bound poets from giving public performances of their work despite having nothing *to* perform. These are poets who put themselves through "the agony of standing in front of an audience reading words which were specifically designed not to be read out", Fenton comments, "and consequently put their audience through the same agonies as well?"

Here, we are provided, indirectly, with some ideas about what 'principles and practice of poetry' may be involved in performance on 'the 'spoken word' seen' – by way of a plethora of highly critical, generalised, and unillustrated opinions of Mr Fenton's about unknown people. This is the first and only time that Mr Armitage makes any reference to 'metre' (in which term he may or may not be implying matters of 'rhythm'); and it is also the first reference to 'form'. The second sentence begins with some 'empty' observations of his own, regarding 'practice' to add to Mr Fenton's: 'no metaphor, no narrative and no subject matter'. After the semi-colon we have what seems to be a 'shared' description of matters which are hardly explained at all. What is 'writing for the eye rather than the ear'? What are 'page-bound poets'? And if they give 'public performances', how can they have '*nothing to perform"*? What has all this to do with 'metre' and 'form'?

[57]

35.43 And those who write without respecting the importance of sound will fall in with Frost's description of Carl Sandberg as "the kind of writer who had everything to gain and nothing to lose by being translated into another language"; the kind of atonal or cloth-eared poet for whom 'something gets lost in the original' as they say.

The commencement of this Thesis is profoundly nonsensical. Why ever *should* 'those who write without respecting the importance of sound' be expected to 'fall in with' Mr Frosts comment about Mr Sandberg? We now see that Mr Armitage is 'drifting' towards consideration of 'the importance of sound' in poetry. He has nothing to say on his own part, 'hiding' behind a comment made by Robert Frost about Carl Sandberg which has no substance and meaning for us unless we are given examples of writing that we can *hear,* by hearing them read or by reading them to ourselves. Mr Armitage, 'pompous and opinionated' as ever, gives us his added opinion of Sandberg as 'the kind of atonal or cloth-eared poet for whom 'something gets lost in translation' as they say' without the merest justification of his use of these terms - the one, 'atonal', of which a formal demonstration could be made, perhaps using terms such as 'assonance' and so forth; and the other, 'cloth-eared', a merely metaphorical disparagement which adds to the 'bullying' nature of Mr Armitage's discourse.

And we still have no idea what he means by 'the importance of sound in poetry' *except in so far as, in Thesis [26], he expresses admiration for Denise Riley's* 'thickness of diction'.

[58]

36.10 [All those]? points about the acoustic and 'out loud' importance of poetry are true and well made; yet we shouldn't deny the special properties of writing on the page, even in its appeal to memory, often thought of as the preserve of spoken or oral poetry. Like recognising the silhouettes of birds on the wing against a featureless sky, the patterns and shapes of poems on the page, post Caxton, have become memorial mechanisms in their own right. So when Ed Hirsch describes trying to recall Frost's 'Desert Places', while driving through a snowstorm, he says, "I could see the shapely stanzas unscrolling".

[59]

36.57 John Fuller is saying something similar when he talks about "the glamour of the page", anythin' else just bein' "whispers in the wind"; and even when he refers to the "inner ear", and Hirsch to the "inner eye", they're both acknowledgin' that poetry presented as an entirely visual phenomenon, and received in silence, has its own unique pleasure.

Mr Armitage's somewhat amorphous argument about the effects of poetry on the 'ear' and the 'eye' is continued in these two Theses by way of something of a 'snowstorm' of

metaphors and quotes: but nothing of any 'critical or theoretical' moment is said about 'the principles and practice of poetry'; nor is there anything by way of significant 'reassertions of [poetry's] enduring values'. Indeed, it is impossible to comprehend how any 'poetry' can be 'presented as an entirely visual phenomenon'.

[60]

37.24 Added to which, analysing the noises a poem makes can lead us into the realm of the pseudo-scientific, often via a form of retrospective justification. Take Iain Crichton-Smith's poem 'Neighbour', which begins,

Build me a bridge over the stream
To my neighbour's house
Where he is standing in dungarees
In the fresh morning,

about which Carol Rumens, in her 'Poem of the Week' spot in The Guardian comments: "The sound of small waters threading over pebbles is captured in the 'r' and 'ree' sounds of the first quatrain". I regret choosing a column that regularly provides a highly effective arbitration service between specialist text and non-specialist readers, and from such a thoughtful critic; but her assessment in this case seems only correct in hindsight, when what we're really curious about are the decisions the poet made at the time of composition; because, isn't this the kind of interpretation that drives tentative or novice readers not only to despair but to disbelief? "I thought 'r' and 'ree' were the sounds of small waters threading over pebbles", said reader will complain when said syllables turn up in another poem, but this time representing a growling machine gun or the noise of a dry wind in a parched desert with nary a stream for a thousand square miles.

Mr Armitage's description of Carol Rumen's 'column' as 'a highly effective arbitration service between specialist text and non-specialist readers' is pompus and 'elitest'. However, he is still holding to the matter of 'the importance of sound in poetry', which now becomes a question of 'analysing the noises a poem makes'. His dismissal of the 'pseudo-scientific' acoustic analysis by Ms Rumens of a particular quatrain in a particular poem, is justified. However, it is also a rather unpleasant and unmannerly 'put-down' of the critic named; and, by the time he finishes his clever and amusing refutation of her approach *in this one instance*, one wonders what interest Mr Armitage may have, or wish to encourage in others, in the claims for 'the importance of sound in poetry'?. Further, his accolade regarding the acoustic effects in Ms Riley's poem in Thesis [26], though suggesting that he may indeed have some regard for claims of 'the importance of sound in poetry', may equally be said to be 'pseudo-scientific' and a 'retrospective justification' of what simply isn't there in the poem. With regard to what bearing Mr Armitage's Thesis [60] may have on his ideas of 'the importance of sound in poetry' : we now know that perhaps 'assonance' plays some part in the matter – though quite what 'importance' it may have, we are not told.

[61]

39.09 The internet may have undermined the printed page as the automatic location for poetry, but the page remains a high value plot for sought-after limelight - or, as Maurice Riorden termed it, "a coveted space" - not only in terms of prestige and the fact that it implies a degree of editorial regulation that the internet occasionally short-circuits. But in terms of its suitability as a physical, two-dimensional plane for the reception of

thoughts projected as language, it's still a comfortable fit.

This is an isolated Thesis, having no thematic connection to the previous or following Theses. To 'chase the meanings', one has to 'hurdle' about half a dozen metaphors. The Thesis has no particular critical or theoretical value.

[62]

39.48 Poetry in its written guise also allows us to play the 'form and content' game - always my favourite at school, still good value in the workshop. "The poem is tall and thin because it's about a chimney stack"; "The poem is presented in half-rhyme couplets because it's about two incongruous ideologies struggling to achieve harmony with each other". Put like that, it shouldn't be difficult to chose a form that represents a poem's intentions.

[63]

40.22 But, as Terry Eagleton points out, poems often operate by multiple systems, sometimes in concert, sometimes in contradiction. His example is Empson's quarrel with this famous quatrain in Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', lamenting, by elaborate metaphor, faithful rhythm, and manicured rhyme, how human potential is sometimes overlooked or goes unfulfilled:

> Full many a gem of purest ray serene
> The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear;
> Full many a flower is born to blush unseen
> And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Eagleton notes how "the elegance of the verse dignifies this dire situation in a way that make us reluctant to see it altered". [See ***How to Read a Poem***, Blackwell 2007, page 73.] Eagleton is exposin' a kind of inadvertent hypocrisy at work.

[64]

41.26 And even though I wouldn't go anywhere as near as that with my example, I've always felt a similar kind of contradiction in relation to the first stanza of Auden's 'A Summer Night':

> 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.

In what's generally accepted to be a successful opening to a successful poem, the grammatical systems appear to be running smoothly, ditto the system of sounds and beats, and plenty of other sub-systems as well, I dare say; but given the poet's apparent determination to paint a very clear, draughtsmanlike picture, wouldn't it have been more effective to arrange the stanza in accordance with the physical architecture of the scene he describes? By which I mean, if a spatially mimetic system were to operate - which is one of poetry's privileges - then, as a representation of the geometry of the universe as seen from a human perspective, 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", and a bathetic descent from the planetary body to the mundane appendage of the human foot would have saved the punchline to the end, where punchlines tend to be more effective. Such an arrangement would have also served to remind us, via a concluding pun, that it's the poetic foot as well as the physiological one that addresses the moon. Moreover, if Auden had managed to put his feet on the ground, so to speak, it would have allowed him to physicalize them as the comic protuberances they undoubtedly are, courtesy of that indented and therefore extended last line.

[65]

43.47 I suppose it could be argued that the ostensible nonsense of the first line, 'being in bed on the lawn' (something he occasionally did, apparently), legitimises the topsy-turvy arrangement of the stanza.

[66]

But for all his eccentricities, Auden was a no-nonsense poet, and this was a no-nonsense occasion, the author recalling a spiritually significant or quasi-religious episode, when for the first time in his life he knew exactly what it meant 'to love one's neighbour as oneself'.

[67]

44.26 Incidentally, given that the revelation took place on a fine night in June 1933, at The Down's School in Malvern, with Vega visible, and a rising moon, a combination of maps, star charts and weather records would probably allow us not only to triangulate the exact date of the experience, but also to tell us the exact direction the poet was facing at the time. That said, Auden was sitting down in his oblique prose account of the evening, and lying down in the poem, so we should be careful in considering the piece as a faithful documentary testimony.

It is in this sequence of 'Theses' that Mr Armitage's discourse becomes somewhat demented. The term 'demented' is not being used metaphorically. He becomes gripped by some sort of mania. Again, the term is not used metaphorically. We must tread carefully so as not 'to turn an ankle in one of the cracks' in this discourse.

Mr Armitage's phrase in Thesis [62], 'Poetry in its written guise', does link stylistically with the formulation in the previous thesis, 'but in terms of suitability as a physical, two-dimensional plane for the reception of thoughts projected as language', in its peculiar, 'pompous' formality. Mr Armitage does then relax as he prepares to 'play the 'form and content' game'. His discourse in these Theses now becomes increasingly nonsensical.

In order to understand how he is to 'play' the 'game' now, we need him to define his terms 'form' and 'content'. He does not do this; and we have to ponder on his usages of the terms. Before we do that, however, we might ourselves propose the best definitions or usages of the terms that we may. We would say that for many people - perhaps somewhat older than Mr Armitage - who were taught about and encouraged to think about artistic processes generally, the terms 'form' and 'content' are useful 'tools'. Their use in the discussion of poetry enables a clearer distinction to be made between the 'abstract' and the 'semantic' aspects of it. A poem's abstract, technical 'form' could be seen (and heard) to consist in its versification – in its metre and rhythm, and in the further patterning devices of alliteration and rhyme. A poem's semantic nature – the 'meanings' that could be taken from the words so arranged – were then termed the poem's 'content'. It could be seen how individually metred and formed verses might cohere in pairs, and in larger groupings - which structures could be distinguished as various 'poetic forms', such as the 'rhyming couplet',

the ‘quatrain’, the ‘carol’, the ‘ballad’, the ‘sonnet’, and so forth. (The form of the early alliterative verse-line did not, of course, lend itself to such complex structures.)

Now, a ‘game' usually has ‘rules’ or ‘laws’ which determine how it is played; and a ‘game' usually has an ‘end’ or ‘purpose’. In Theses [62] and [63], Mr Armitage gives us three examples of what might be called ‘plays’ or ‘playings’ in this ‘game'; and we have to deduce the ‘rules’ or ‘laws’ or ‘principles' of the ‘game', and its ‘end’ or ‘purpose’. For each of the three ‘playings’, we have to deduce to what, and how, Mr Armitage might be applying the terms ‘form' and ‘content' (as he understands the terms) and what might be the ‘relationship’ between ‘form' and ‘content' in each case.

In the first two ‘playings’, the ‘poems’ under consideration are hypothetical; which makes our task somewhat harder. To be drawn any further into Mr Armitage’s ‘playings’ of his ‘game' here (one which he finds ‘still good value in the workshop' – though to what ‘end’ or ‘purpose’ he does not say) in order to try to discover to what extent his usages of the terms ‘form' and ‘content' may be like or unlike ours, might be ‘madness’ of our own. We will proceed with caution, and note his apparent resolve ‘to chose a form that represents a poem's intentions'. We may ask, rhetorically and ‘in passing’, if, in Mr Armitage’s mind, ‘a poem's intentions' (as if a poem can *have* ‘intentions') are the same as what a poem is ‘about' (as it is said, in his two hypothetical examples)? We do not expect any answer to emerge; but we can at least say at this stage that Mr Armitage is working to elucidate something of ‘the principles and practice of poetry'.

In Mr Armitage’s two examples in Thesis [62], he is suggesting – though he doesn’t actually use the terms - ways in which ‘form' and ‘content' may be in some sort of ‘accord’. In the first hypothetical example it is ‘shape to the eye’ that accords with the ‘subject’, or ‘title’, or some such, of the ‘poem' – what it is ‘about' – that accord. That title or subject can itself be ‘visualised’. Nothing is said about metrical or other technical matters. In the second, more complex example, two technical considerations contribute to the (unspoken) notion of ‘form'. The first is couplet pairing - of verses that accord in metre but not in fullness of rhyme. This hypothetical example of ‘technical accordance and discordance’ is then thought to be in accordance with the ‘subject’ of the ‘poem' (what it is ‘about'), which is hypothetically and abstractly described as ‘two incongruous ideologies struggling to achieve harmony with the other'. Things are getting rather ‘rarefied’.

In Thesis [63] the complexities increase. We are offered an example of verses that are commented upon by *three* ‘voices’. We will not try to disentangle these voices here. (Anyone interested in doing so will need to read page 73 of Mr Eagleton’s book, ***‘How to Read a Poem’*** – Blackwell, 2007). Here, again, Mr Armitage does not use the terms ‘form' and ‘content'; but he would seem to be indicating, through this example, that the two may be in some sort of ‘discord’. The matters of ‘form' presented here would seem to be ‘elaborate metaphor, faithful rhythm and manicured rhyme'; and matters of ‘content' – that is, what the poem is ‘about', or what are the ‘poem's intentions' – are summarised as implications of ‘how human potential is sometimes overlooked or goes unfulfilled'. Mr Armitage’s formulation, ‘faithful rhythm and manicured rhyme', may be said to describe formal and technical matters of regular metre and rhyme scheme in the quatrain. In this instance, Mr Armitage seems to be saying that these formal qualities, and the poet’s, or the ‘poem's, intentions', are *not* in accordance. (We will not concern ourselves with discussing whether or not Mr Armitage’s conclusion that ‘Eagleton is exposin' a kind of inadvertent hypocrisy at work' is reasonable.)

Mr Armitage seems to be ‘climbing a high hill’ of theory here; and perhaps we are all ‘short of oxygen’. In his search for ‘a form that represents a poem's intentions' he now ‘goes over a cliff-edge’ into ‘free fall’ and ‘derangement’ in Thesis [64].

The terms ‘form' and ‘content', which Mr Armitage has not directly defined, have a

'ghostly' presence through this and the next three Theses. He brings them to bear, unspecifically, in order to explain why he has – as he claims – 'always felt a similar kind of contradiction in relation to the first stanza of Auden's 'A Summer Night''. The first thing to say is that the 'contradiction' that Mr Armitage identifies in Mr Auden's poem *is in no way* 'a similar kind of contradiction' to that which he suggests Mr Eagleton is drawing attention to in Mr Gray's poem. The analysis that he makes of the stanza is founded on the proposal, 'if a spatially mimetic system were to operate…'; and it is developed by means of what he terms 'logic'. We can, and perhaps should, connect that conditional 'if' (and the earlier 'wouldn't it') to Mr Armitage's use of the term 'game' in his introduction in Thesis [62], where he says, 'Poetry in its written guise allows us to play the 'form and content' game'. Perhaps Mr Armitage may only be 'playing' here; perhaps he may only be 'joking' in these four Theses...?

However, after reading and re-reading Theses [64] to [67] (to which may be appended Thesis [68]), this reader finds Mr Armitage to be 'on balance' (shall we say) *entirely in earnest* in suggesting that the making of such a 'logical' analysis of this stanza using a 'spatially mimetic system' is a reasonable and even necessary critical practice. It follows that the application of 'a spatially mimetic system' is then to be seen as *a principle that may and should be applied to the analysis of* ***any*** *poem or part of any poem*. It further follows that the same sort of 'spatially mimetic system' should be applied in the process of *composing* any poem.

Mr Armitage's observations and proposals here are simply inane. This is a derangement, a *mania*. He does not of course make any actual attempt to rewrite 'the topsy-turvy….stanza' in accordance with his 'spatially mimetic system'. This 'game-playing' is leading him - and he is leading his 'students' - into the idiotic 'practice' of deranged 'principles'. This is a disgrace.

And still he hasn't finished his derisive and derisory treatment of Mr Auden and his poem: in Thesis [64] he as it were holds Mr Auden down in his 'bed on the lawn' while he 'pummels' him with further gratuitously clever musings.

[68]

45.06 I could never prove it, but I suspect rhyme has dictated the sequencing of ideas in 'A Summer Night'. John Fuller suggests Christopher Smart's 'A Song of David' as a template; and once a rhyme scheme has been decided upon, and once the rhyme partnerships like "June" and "moon" have come so obligingly to mind, everythin' else must fall in around. And because it deals in sound, open-ended and faux-critical claims similar to those that I mentioned earlier, are often made in relation to the function and effects of rhyme in poems. 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 ear 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 from the bindings and fastenings of similar sounding words. "Voila! Hey Presto! Tada!" is what rhyme says to the reader: "I was in a tight corner there; look how impressively I managed to manipulate my restrictions".

Mr Armitage is now in his pretentious, presumptuous, preposterous and deranged 'pomp'. Here he turns his attention to the millennium-old and generally respected practice

of rhyming and creating rhyme schemes in poems. His 'magisterial' analysis of the technical, aesthetic and intellectual significance of the use of rhyme and rhyme schemes deserves careful attention, as we try to 'catch his meanings'.

In the first sentence of this Thesis, Mr Armitage's first eleven, self-regarding words, 'I could never prove it, but I suspect rhyme has dictated', could be replaced by three, 'Rhyme probably influenced', to allow the statement of a simple truism regarding the compositional process of poetry.

In the second sentence it is not necessary to attend to the reference to the work of Christopher Smart in order to assess the substance of Mr Armitage's analysis. The import of the second part of the sentence (which generalises from the particular case) seems to be that the use, in a composition, of 'rhyme' and 'a rhyme scheme' leads to an 'unworthy superficiality', shall we say.

In the next sentence Mr Armitage begins with the somewhat 'coarse' formulation, 'And because it deals in sound...' He then suggests that the presence of 'rhyme' or 'a rhyme scheme' can attract 'open-ended and faux-critical claims...in relation to the function and effect of rhyme in poems'. The term 'open-ended' is, well, an 'open-ended' critical usage. Furthermore, it must be objected here that suggestions regarding 'faux-critical claims' about 'rhyme' or 'a rhyme scheme' do not constitute any sort of argument against them: *sound* critical assessments may be made of their 'function and effect' nevertheless.

In his fourth sentence, Mr Armitage briefly and obliquely anticipates this objection to some extent; only to ignore it. He presents the indefinite formulation, 'Undoubtedly particular sounds in a particular order generate particular effects'. *However, he avoids making any consideration, beyond this, of the matter of the profound aesthetic pleasure that patterns of rhyme can and do provide when they combine with the pleasures provided by the more fundamental patterns of rhythmic, metrical verse* – except when he goes on to say, 'but, to my mind, rhyme serves two more blatant and less virtuous purposes'; which presumably means that he thinks that 'rhyme' may have some 'particular effect' that stems from some *more* 'virtuous purpose'.

He doesn't tell us here what that 'purpose' might be; but, if we go forward to his sixth sentence, we have: 'Its [rhyme's] second purpose – beyond offering an auditory mnemonic, which matters less now than it did in the ear of oral poetry...' This matter of an 'auditory mnemonic' may be the more 'virtuous purpose' of 'rhyme' (though it would appear to Mr Armitage to be a rather weak one); or it may be some other, unidentified 'effect'.

We can now consider Mr Armitage's extraordinary assertions regarding the whole matter of 'rhyme' and 'a rhyme scheme' - which assertions are prefaced by that statement, 'but, to my mind, rhyme serves two more blatant and less virtuous purposes'. These 'two more blatant and less virtuous purposes' are not truly distinct: they 'elide' into each other; they constitute one general poetical 'practice' of employing 'rhyme' or 'a rhyme scheme' in order 'to demonstrate cleverness' by providing 'an ingenious and apparently effortless solution' to the compositional process by which 'an idea is executed'.

That is it. There is no qualification, no 'may' or 'might'. No evidence or examples (beyond that of the first stanza of Auden's poem) are adduced to clarify and justify his critical assertions (which are implicitly supported by his fatuous and crazed critical analysis of that stanza). As they stand, his assertions are *demented*. These assertions imply that any poem of any era that uses 'rhyme' or 'a rhyme scheme' is therefore 'flawed' because its literary value is adversely affected by a poetic 'practice' the 'purposes' of which are not entirely 'virtuous'. Mr Armitage does not say how this 'lack of virtue' in compositional 'practice', this '"Voila! Hey Presto! Ta-da!"-ness', is to be measured. It might be said, partly in 'jest', that, as his 'Creative Writing students' reach the bottom of this 'topsy-turvy', 'helter-skelter' of ideas (which ends in a definition of 'rhyme' as 'similar-sounding words'), they will

probably not actually 'land' but will be 'levitated' by the 'ecstatic and supernatural' force of Mr Armitage's perverse, pernicious, stultifying, and stultified nonsense.

[69]

47.06 Brevity is another hallmark of smartness: the fleetness of a poem, its tight turning circle, its economy of language, the 'anything you can do, I can do quicker' aspect of its character. "Poetry is the art of saying in two words what is better said in ten", the late Brian Sewell is reported to have complained. And to disagree with Brian Sewell was always to be in the right. Brevity within a poem creates useful tensions, opposing our instincts to embellish, adorn and peacock, by stripping back to a tooth-and-bone bare minimum, curling up into a foetal ball when confronted with an immeasurably large and expanding universe.

[70]

48.02 And brevity not only within poems, but within collections too - most books being an economic and geometrical convenience to which the writer has shaped his or her output - a productivity only increased since the advent of the word-processor, a device which has circumvented the frictional drag of pen on paper that once allowed time for contemporaneous reflection.

[71]

48.31 Judged in these terms, Christopher Reid's *Katarina Brac* is exemplary, bein' a slim volume both in name and nature - thirty-nine printed pages, many of them printed with not very much at all.

[72]

But I also commend it for its sleight of hand, the poems being a fictitious set of translations of a fictional eastern European poet - a conceit which turns up the reverb on the poems, and makes devious advantage out of poetry's inherent foreignness in relation to everyday language.

A first observation to make here is that the flow of Thesis [69] is interrupted by the insertion of what seems to be a gratuitous insult to a Mr Brian Sewell (someone not known to this writer). When we remove that sentence, we find that the Thesis contains another, and somewhat mad, disjunction. If 'Brevity' (to which Mr Armitage seems to give his *approval* through the course of these four Theses) 'is *another* hallmark of smartness' [my italics], then the 'manipulation' of the 'restrictions' of using 'rhyme' and 'a rhyme scheme' described at the end of Thesis [68] *must be an earlier such* 'hallmark of smartness'. But, surely, Mr Armitage wasn't there *approving* of such 'demonstrations' of 'cleverness'? How can they then be, or bear, a 'hallmark' of *quality*? The derangement continues.

Mr Armitage's discussion of 'brevity' in these Theses has nothing important to say about 'the principles and practice of poetry'. A poem or a book of poems will be as long or short as is needed for it to say, in a satisfying fashion, what its author wants it to say - (though, as Mr Armitage tells us later, an 'editor' may have some influence on these matters). However, in Thesis [72] Mr Armitage does produce a clever metaphor, concerning 'reverb', which leads him in well to his next Thesis.

[73]

49.13 *Katarina Brac*, being 'Martian' in outlook, is also an object lesson in metaphor making ~ metaphor being another form of brevity through the mere instantaneous scheduling of ideas, another form of cleverness. Hence: "a radio thinking aloud"; "pale blue

butterflies as detachable as earrings"; "a blister like a moonstone"; a new born baby like "a little howling blood sausage"; and a stairwell outside an apartment like "the deepest, most superhumanly patient of ears".

Here, Mr Armitage – in developing, as we understand it, his useful suggestion in Thesis [72] regarding 'poetry's inherent foreignness in relation to everyday language' - is simply stating a literary commonplace. Poetry is well known for 'concentration of language', particularly through the use of figures of speech. The interesting metaphors that he quotes are no more than that. They could all well be used in prose pieces.

[74]

49.49 Some contend that poets have no business likening one thing to another, and that to do so is just affectation and decoration. I say that all aspects of cognition and perception depend entirely upon comparison.

The pomposity of this Thesis is remarkable; and who *are* the 'Some' that Mr Armitage so pompously reacts to on our behalf as well as his own?

50.18 **Seventy Five.** The problematic long poem isn't only problematic because of dwindling attention spans but because most of the things it can do can be done better by the novel, or the play, or the boxed set. Programme idea: a 'Grand Designs' format in which poetry's equivalent of Kevin McLeod follows the trials and tribulations of a poet about to embark on a composition of epic proportions. Over the course of the construction, we make frequent visits to the site, to find the poem in various states of completion, and the poet in a variety of moods, from the enthusiasm and energy of his initial outline sketches, to days of spiritual exhaustion and creative bankruptcy, and the jeopardy moment before the ad-break, when the central load-bearing beam is found to be rotten. We revisit the monolithic pile a year after completion; with the author proud of his titanic achievements, but reluctant to talk about its final cost, and with a For Sale sign at the front gate but, as yet, no offers.

The ingenuity of the metaphorical story-telling here may be noted; but the Thesis provides nothing at all of critical moment.

([76] to [84] : No attempt will be made to distinguish and individually number the next nine Theses)

[51.38]

Does poetry have a u.s.p? Not really, I conclude - though the best I can offer is *the line*. Be faithful to the line for a reason; or plot against it for a reason; but ignore it only to advertise your incompetence or ignorance. Some poets distance themselves from the idea of the line, seein' it as an Imperial Measure or colonial gesture committing them to an unacceptable tradition. The conventional line endin' in that scenario is a gilt frame or milled edge redolent of historical power structures. So a truncated line that cuts against phrase or clause might be doin' a radical job; and short lines are sometimes characterised as 'breaths', emphasising the rhythms of respiration over those of rhetoric, favouring the individual over the institution.

A fresh demonstration of the overall invalidity of Mr Armitage's Lecture is provided in this section. He will tell us about *'the line'*; and so the section may thus be said to give further consideration to fundamental matters bearing on a 'definition' of 'poetry'. However, since Mr Armitage declines to consider the term '*verse*', or matters of versification and

metrics, he fails to make any 'reassertions of [poetry's] enduring values' – though he does of course tell us something, if inconsequential, about the contemporary 'principles and practice of poetry'.

Here, Mr Armitage engages in a piece of complicated metaphoricality almost certainly designed to avoid directly mentioning, let alone considering, the matter of *verse*-making and the structuring and patterning conventions of measure, rhythm, and rhyme schemes, and so provide a technical definition of the craft of poetry. These traditional formal considerations are hinted at in his use of the terms 'Imperial Measure', 'traditional', 'conventional line endin', and 'the rhythm of respiration'. In the place of 'conventional' prosodic structures, he offers 'the line' as his 'u.s.p.' 'The line' may be 'short' or, presumably, 'long'. It is given no technical definition.

The dishonesty of this analysis of 'the principles and practice' of 'contemporary' 'poetry' is complex. It is, of course, according to Mr Armitage, only '*some* poets' [our italics] who 'distance themselves' from 'unacceptable tradition'. If he were honest, he would have to say that the *vast majority* of modern 'poets' do not follow the 'traditional' or 'conventional' techniques of verse-making. Clearly, Mr Armitage can have no concern about this; and he must, by default, be said to *approve* of the 'some poets' who have a particular anti-'colonial' response to the idea of 'traditional' or 'conventional' verse-making. Underlying it all is a particular dishonesty. This is that the 'some poets' cannot be said to be 'distancing themselves' from *'the line'* [our italics] as Mr Armitage offers it as a 'formal' entity : they must be writing in *'lines'* [our italics] of *some* sort and length : thus it must be systematic, 'imperial' *verses* that they are determined to avoid writing.

In this section, then, we are not told what 'the line' *is* as an entity. Mr Armitage will, it is true, provide us with some actual 'lines' of 'poetry' by two named writers (and he has provided other 'lines' earlier in the Lecture); so we can thus *see* that a 'line' consists of certain words, or sometimes a single word, at a certain position on the page: but he does not tell us ***why*** *any* 'line' *is limited to the word or words of which it is composed, and why it ends where it does.* This point may be illustrated by taking the third sentence in what must be Thesis [76] and presenting it – with a given title – in this way:

'Blather'

'Be faithful to the line
for a reason; or plot
against it
for a reason; but
ignore
it
only to advertise
your
incompetence
or

ignorance'

There is nothing in this section on 'the line', nor anywhere in the Lecture, that could provide a refutation of the claim that this is a 'poem', despite the fact that the disposition of this prose sentence into these 'lines' or 'lines' is an entirely arbitrary and mechanical act.

[52.46]
Here's 'Advent' by Rae Armantrout, a poet whose work I've become interested in - and not only because she sometimes stands next to me on alphabetically arranged shelves in bookshops and libraries:

In front of the craft shop,
a small nativity,
mother, baby, sheep
made of white
and blue balloons.

*

Sky
god
girl.

Pick out the one
that doesn't belong.

*

Some thing

close to nothing

flat

from which,

fatherless,
everything has come.

Occasionally associated with the 'language school' of poetry, many of Armantrout's poems rarely expand beyond the most clenched and clipped lines, lines which imply a skeletal elementalism, or seem ephemeral and tremulous, hanging there like linguistic wind chimes. That said, such concision and terseness can run the risk of appearing coy, precious, even melodramatic or hammy, or, as Craig Raine put it, "like the dying man in a movie trying to tell us where the treasure is buried".

[Presumably the whole 'poem' was presented on the screen while these sentences were spoken. Mr Armitage did not read it out.]

This Thesis about 'Advent' by Rae Armantrout (if it is a discrete Thesis) is most entertaining in its nonsensical and 'blathering' way.

There is no detectable, objective, technical, sonic or semantic structure determining why these four sentences that constitute the 'poem' should be set out on the page in the way

that they are, except in so far as that they are presented as three separate utterances. Mr Armitage gives no indication as to what 'principles and practices of poetry' he thinks Ms Armantrout may be demonstrating. He does say that she is 'a poet'; so, in his opinion this piece is a 'poem'; and the words, or word, presented at the particular, successive levels on the page are the 'lines' of the 'poem'. (We will simply state here that, when considered according to the 'traditional' and *still viable* principles of poetics that we set out at the beginning of this essay, this piece by Ms Armantrout may not be called a 'poem'.)

Mr Armitage's initial general description of Ms Armantrout's 'poems' - a description which we understand to be applied to this particular piece – is a most impressive metaphorical and sonic composition:

> many of Armantrout's poem rarely expand beyond the most clenched and clipped lines, lines which imply a skeletal elementalism, or seem ephemeral and tremulous, hanging there like linguistic wind chimes.

This is, one might say, 'a veritably voluptuous venting of verbal virtuosity' – if a little less blatant and more delicate than our response to it. The alliterating cls and then the 'rippling' of ls and es are so intense that we could easily be drawn into a 'pseudo-scientific' analysis of the sort for which he criticises Ms Carol Rumens in Thesis [60]. *'Tour de force'* is the usual term for such performances. But the whole 'masterpiece' descends into bathos, because the picture called up by the metaphor of the 'wind chimes' seems to be distorted by the force of a 'hurricane', in that the 'wind chimes' of this 'poem' are 'pulled' violently horizontal, like a tattered flag.

Mr Armitage then moves on to suggest that such 'clenched and clipped' pieces of writing by Ms Armantrout - and presumably pieces by others - 'can run the risk of appearing coy, precious', etc. One rather thinks that he considers this piece to have succumbed to that danger; but we can't be sure *what* he thinks. We certainly don't know how close Ms Armantrout may have come, in his opinion, to the 'dew point' or the 'optimal zone' of Thesis [6], or to 'the equilux' of Thesis [4]. However, one way or another, we can say that he *is* issuing one of his 'complaints against poetry's contemporary indulgencies'.

[53.44]
Short lines draw less attention to themselves when regulated by the flow of expression or the building blocks of sentences, but become conspicuous and even suspicious when their endings and breaks deviate from those administering principles for no apparent reason. An example : R. S. Thomas, a normally scrupulous poet on the page, breaks the last lines of 'A Marriage' like this:

> And she,
> who in life
> had done everything
> with a bird's grace,
> opened her bill now
> for the shedding
> of one sigh no
> heavier than a feather.

[This is a conjecture as to how many lines might have been on the screen. Mr Armitage paused for three seconds here in his delivery.]

Why? Amputating the penultimate line at the word "no" cuts against the natural cadence, squanders the opportunity of a partial rhyme between "heavier" and "feather", denies the phrase "of one sigh" the mimetic opportunity of existing in its own exhalation and lettin' the sigh expand into the blank space beyond, and misplaces the emphasis in that final line to the point where the sigh overbalances rather than counterbalances the feather. Nevertheless, in both Armantrout and Thomas, and no matter the interpretation, something is at stake and at risk in the breaking of those lines, and the line as a unit of organisation is honoured, as is the poem as a system of staged intervals.

[This section may well be constituted of two Theses.]

First, it may be said that the practical import of this paragraph is that, in order to obtain his 'partial rhyme', Mr Armitage would re-write the two final lines of Mr Thomas's poem as

of one sigh no heavier
than a feather.

Now we may consider the wider import of the paragraph.

The objective, non-figurative 'meanings' of the complex first sentence are difficult to extract – if there are such 'meanings' to be obtained at all. Whatever *is* being said, it may reasonably be suggested that 'the administering principles' by which Mr Armitage declares that 'short lines' may, or should be regulated – that is, the proper 'flow of expression', and (the use of) 'the building blocks of sentences' – must apply to 'lines' of *any* length. It may also be reasonably expected that the 'technical terms' – if they may be called that – 'endings' and 'breaks' – which may in fact be *two,* interchangeable terms for *one* objective 'technical' feature – may also apply to 'lines' of *any* length.

It may be that Mr Armitage thinks that he is here presenting ideas concerning 'the principles and practice of poetry' which amount to some sort of 'reassertion of [poetry's] enduring values': but what do his two 'regulating' and 'administering principles' amount to? 'Expression' is not a feature or element that can be identified, or 'regulated', in any 'line' of words. The term 'flow of expression' is a metaphor which, when presented as part of a discussion of 'administering principles' in poetry, amounts to subjective 'blather'. Regarding the second of Mr Armitage's 'administering principles', that of (the use of) 'the building blocks of sentences': he cannot mean that the individual words in them, or in the 'lines' into which the sentences are divided in 'a poem', are the 'building blocks'. He must mean that the grammatically identifiable phrases and clauses in them are such. These elements may be said to have 'endings'; and between them there may be punctuational 'breaks', whether in prose or in 'poetry'. These are matters which come within the sphere of the 'principles and practice of poetry' over thirteen hundred years that we have set out. However, as before, and as throughout this Lecture, Mr Armitage does not give consideration to the fact that the 'traditional' and *still viable* 'principle' that determines the 'endings' of 'lines' of *verse* was, and is, a matter of *metre*. That principle is not just one of 'poetry's enduring values': it is *its principal, objective, technical element or characteristic*.

We have reached a most interesting point in this Lecture. Mr Armitage is in effect presenting some sort of partial *technical* definition of 'poetry' and 'a poem' – or at least of 'contemporary poetry'. To illustrate his theory he uses two poems as examples: one by Ms Rae Armantrout, and one by Mr R.S. Thomas. The particular technical matter or element that he introduces is that of '*the line'*, and he tells us by what 'administrative principles' it is 'regulated' and thus 'defined'. He is in effect offering some part of an alternative theory

of prosody to that of 'metrical versification'. He tells us, at the end of this section of the Lecture, that the '*line*' is '*a unit of organisation*' in a 'poem', which 'poem' will be experienced as 'a system of staged intervals'.

Mr Armitage presents, then, two texts for our consideration. (In the Lecture itself the time given to them was of the briefest). We will place them side by side, and supply the whole of Mr Thomas's piece.

In front of the craft shop,
a small nativity,
mother, baby, sheep
made of white
and blue balloons.

*

Sky
god
girl.

Pick out the one
that doesn't belong.

*

Some thing

close to nothing

flat

from which,

fatherless,
everything has come.

A Marriage

We met
under a shower
of bird-notes.
Fifty years passed,
love's moment
in a world in
servitude to time.
She was young;
I kissed with my eyes
closed and opened
them on her wrinkles.
'Come,' said death,
choosing her as his
partner for
the last dance. And she,
who in life
had done everything
with a bird's grace,
opened her bill now
for the shedding
of one sigh no
heavier than a
feather.

For us, neither of these pieces of what are undoubtedly 'poetical writings' may be technically called a 'poem', because there is no discernable metrical system at work in either of them, and no additional patterning system of alliteration or rhyme. There is, then, no particular reason why they should not be written out as prose paragraphs and read as continuous grammatical utterances. We must then, place on Mr Armitage the necessity of explaining on what 'principles' he determines that these two pieces are to be called 'poems'.

We would ask of Ms Armantrout's 'poem', why the 'lines' of it are 'staged' in the peculiar way that they are.

He gives us some possible insight into his theory of the technical organisation of what he deems to be 'the poem as a system of staged intervals', by issuing a specific 'complaint' against Mr R.S. Thomas's 'practice' in his 'poem', 'A Marriage'. In Mr Armitage's view, the last two 'lines' of the 'poem' have 'become conspicuous and even suspicious', because the 'break' between them 'deviates' from those 'administering principles' that Mr Armitage has proposed.

The paragraph in which Mr Armitage 'justifies' his 'complaint' may be said to be his most direct attempt at objective, technical literary criticism in this Lecture. However, it is in fact chronically confused and subjective, and is ultimately absurd. To examine it closely we may set it out again:

> Why? Amputating the penultimate line at the word "no" cuts against the natural cadence, squanders the opportunity of a partial rhyme between "heavier" and "feather", denies the phrase "of one sigh" the mimetic opportunity of existing in its own exhalation and lettin' the "sigh" expand into the blank space beyond, and misplaces the emphasis in that final line to the point where the "sigh" overbalances rather than counterbalances the "feather". Nevertheless, in both Armantrout and Thomas, and no matter the interpretation, something is at stake and at risk in the breaking of those lines, and the line as a unit of organisation is honoured, as is the poem as a system of staged intervals.

Any possible technical clarity in Mr Armitage's discourse is lessened by the use of such metaphorical and subjective terms as 'amputating', 'cuts against', 'squanders', 'denies' and, later, 'at stake and at risk'. Then, interesting and ingenious as this next metaphorical formulation that we now quote again may be, there is, as we shall show in due course, no objective, technical substance to it:

> …denies the phrase "of one sigh" the mimetic opportunity of existing in its own exhalation and lettin' the "sigh" expand into the blank space beyond, and misplaces the emphasis in that final line to the point where the "sigh" overbalances rather than counterbalances the "feather".

This is complex, 'pseudo-technical nonsense', achieved in various ways. It is 'poetic gibberish' or perhaps 'gobbledygook'.

We must try to relate the matter in this paragraph to the two 'administering principles' previously offered. We have already observed that the 'principle' of 'flow of expression' has no objective critical meaning or substance, whereas the 'principle' of using 'the building blocks of sentences' *may* do. In the paragraph under discussion, the concept of 'the natural cadence' may be intended by Mr Armitage to be considered to be 'regulated' by *both* 'administering principles' at the same time. On the other hand, it could be that the term 'natural cadence' is actually synonymous with the 'principle' of 'flow of expression'. Matters are further complicated because, at the same time as we are required to make these considerations, Mr Armitage provides a further reason for re-writing the closing 'lines' of a 'poem' as he suggests, and that is to bring about 'a partial rhyme' between "heavier" and "feather". This, in effect, introduces a *third* member to the group of 'administering principles'. What may be his logical, theoretical and aesthetic grounds for doing so? He did not present his 'audience with the whole poem'. We have done so. There is no other 'partial rhyme' (or full rhyme) evident in it, and no opportunities for bringing any about by employing

different 'endings' or 'breaks' to the 'lines'.

However, it is clear that Mr Armitage thinks that Mr Thomas's 'poem' could be improved by ending it,

of one sigh no heavier
than a feather,

because, in his view, this setting is 'regulated' by *three* 'administering principles'. These are: (a) 'the flow of expression' (which may also be a matter of 'natural cadence'); (b) the use of 'the building blocks of sentences'; and (c) the achievement of 'partial rhyme'.

With regard to metaphorical principle (a), there is little that can be said. There is, as has been suggested, no way of objectively assessing something called 'the flow of expression' through the whole 'poem', so as to be able to assess its 'nature' or 'force' or 'direction' in the last two lines. The principle is one that we earlier suggested was a piece of 'pseudo-technical nonsense'. However, Mr Armitage's setting here of the 'lines' may still be further questioned, and seen to be inconsistent with (b). It may be suggested that the two 'lines', in both Mr Thomas's and Mr Armitage's settings, in fact constitute one of the 'building blocks' of the sentence beginning "And she", being the object of the verb "shedding", and that they should therefore be set out as *a single* 'line'. Then it may be further suggested that, if this 'building block' *were* to be subdivided into two smaller 'building blocks', it should, from a grammatical point of view, be into the portions,

of one sigh
no heavier than a feather,

so that the adjectival phrase qualifies the noun "sigh". (Had Mr Armitage presented the whole poem, he might have observed that there are perhaps five breaches of 'principle (b)' in it.)

There are two ways in which this setting might in fact be expected to appeal to Mr Armitage more than the one he has chosen himself. The first is that, in the final 'line', there is what might be called an *internal* 'partial rhyme' – that is, an assonance - every bit as interesting as the 'partial rhyme' that he has arrived at. The second, perhaps more important reason, concerns his idea that Mr Thomas's original arrangement

> …denies the phrase "of one sigh" the mimetic opportunity of existing in its own exhalation and lettin' the sigh expand into the blank space beyond.

This takes us back to his earlier, inane analysis of Auden's verses in Thesis [64] - verses which *did*, incidentally, seem to be regulated by 'the building blocks of sentences' (as well as having that full rhyme scheme of which Mr Armitage was so dismissive). It was of course a *'spacially* mimetic system' [my italics] that he was talking about there; but 'poetic licence' may allow us to 'see' a sigh 'expand' horizontally 'into the blank space beyond'. Our immediate point here is to contend that Mr Armitage, in setting out the last 'lines' as,

of one sigh no heavier
than a feather,

is placing the words "no heavier" in such a way as to 'block' the "sigh" from expanding 'into the blank space beyond'. Our setting, as above, avoids this problem. Mr Armitage's 'administering principles' seem to be somewhat 'at odds' with each other, like 'a sack full of cats'.

Now, this idea of 'the mimetic opportunity' would seem to constitute a *fourth* 'administering principle' by which 'lines', short or long, may be 'regulated'; so we bring it forward here, from Thesis [64], to joint the other three. Then, in order to understand this 'variation' of it here, we must proceed to the next paragraph of the Lecture [at 55.16], where the 'line' is said to have

> its ghostly other half in that fallow margin between the end of the line
> and the edge of the page.

We are now moving into what does seem to be a truly insane – and 'spooky' – 'region' of 'poetic thinking' about 'poetry', in which there are 'blank spaces' that become 'fallow margins' in which 'ghostly other halves' manifest themselves. (It is a 'region' into which Mr Armitage has probably been drawn under the influence of Mr Glynn Maxwell and his peculiar book, *On Poetry*, published by Oberon Books in 2012).

We have already said that we think that the whole second sentence in this paragraph is, in its attempt to provide a technical explanation of a perceived poetical fault, no more than metaphoricalised 'gobbledygook'; but there is one other element of it that might be examined. The idea that 'the sigh overbalances rather than counterbalances the feather' is 'pseudo-technical blather' and 'pseudo-poetical poppycock', shall we say; but it is interesting to note how the statement depends upon an ambiguous idea, that Mr Thomas somehow 'misplaced the emphasis in the final line'. It is possible that ideas of 'stress', 'metre' and 'rhythm' informed Mr Armitage's choice of the term 'emphasis' here. Of course, it is hardly likely that he would suggest that the 'poem' has any metrical structure such that it is composed of *verses*; but there is a hint in this that he is counting, or considering the effect of, stresses. We might say that he is almost committing himself to a *fifth* 'administering principle'; but we will not pursue that. Suffice it to say, it may be argued that we think that Mr Armitage's arrangement of the closing 'lines',

> of one sigh no heavier
> than a feather

creates an 'imbalance' in putting three (or even four) 'speech stresses' in one 'line' and only one speech stress in the other. There is thus a third reason why he should in fact prefer *our* setting,

> of one sigh
> no heavier than a feather,

to his own. This arrangement may be performed so as to give two speech stresses in each 'line', so that, when they are delivered isochronously in performance, there is a pleasing 'balance'; which balance is as it were confirmed by the 'double assonantal relationship' of "heavier" and "feather".

Mr Armitage did not read Mr Thomas's 'poem' out to his audience – nor indeed did he read that of Ms Rae Armantrout – to demonstrate or suggest that it had any special sonic or temporal aesthetic qualities (let alone make a demonstration of how, in his setting of the final 'lines', the sigh could be 'experienced' in any way as expanding into a 'blank space' or a 'fallow margin'...). That said, we must make clear our own attitude to these final 'lines', and to the 'poem' as a whole. Our setting of them – and Mr Armitage is right: they are 'lines', not verses – is only a conjectural response to Mr Armitage's real or apparent 'administering principles', to show how these 'principles' work against each other. But, as

we have said, we do not regard this piece as a 'poem': there is no metrical structure, and no additional pattern of alliteration or rhyme. The arrangement of the 'lines', with their 'endings' or 'breaks', is to us irrelevant. It is however a beautiful piece of 'poetic writing' which, when read, or when recited from memory continuously as prose, is profoundly pleasing and 'moving', and does not need or deserve to be 'messed about with'.

We have now as it were 'let all the squalling cats out of Mr Armitage's poetician's bag, and they have run off in all directions'. Now consider where we are. At [52.46] Mr Armitage took issue with a 'poem' by Ms Rae Armantrout in a generalised way. He did not read the poem, or say any more about it. At [53.44] he then extends this generalised 'complaint' about contemporary 'practise' in 'poetry' into a more specific 'complaint' which as it were reflects back on Ms Armantrout. This more specific 'complaint', regarding 'lines' that 'deviate from….administering principles', is then illustrated by considering a 'line' from a 'poem' by Mr R.S. Thomas that Mr Armitage considers to so 'deviate'. When he has delivered his specific technical 'complaint' in the terms that we have examined, he makes this interesting, indeed somewhat astonishing, statement:

> Nevertheless, in both Armantrout and Thomas, and no matter the interpretation, something is at stake and at risk in the breaking of those lines, and the line as a unit of organisation is honoured, as is the poem as a system of staged intervals.

In effect he has now *withdrawn* his 'complaints'; and he has demonstrated *nothing* about 'the line as a unit of organisation' or about the 'principle' of 'the poem as a system of staged intervals'. This is *idiotic*: it is vacant of sense and critical substance. (And we shall probably never now know – unless we can get him into private conversation – if for Mr Armitage the isolated words in Ms Armantrout's 'poem' are to be thought of as 'building blocks of sentences', and how far, for instance, the word "flat" is to be understood to possibly 'expand into the blank space beyond', before it meets 'its ghostly other half in that fallow margin between the end of the line and the edge of the page, in the bubble wrap….') Mr Armitage should perhaps, on that evening in Oxford in May 2017 have been put in 'a bubble wrap straightjacket' and removed from the Exam Schools as failing to present anything faintly Professorial; but, on a more decorous note, we can say here that we have, in this section of the Lecture, learned nothing of poetry's 'enduring values' whatsoever, and nothing of 'critical and theoretical' moment.

[55.16]
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 bubble wrap protecting the delicate edges of the poem from its 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.

This paragraph or Thesis, to which we have already referred, is another of what we might call Mr Armitage's 'small' but 'demented ectoplasmic metaphorical messes of poetical poppycock' (in which his own urge to alliterate is somewhat muted this time). However, it may be noted that the paragraph's opening words, 'So, credit the line', validates our previous submission that Mr Armitage's 'tangle' of 'administering principles' may be seen to apply not just to 'short lines' but to 'lines' of any length in 'poetry'.

(We might add that the 'refutation' of the 'principle' of the 'fallow margin' that was offered in the Introduction is perhaps unnecessarily complicated. All that needs to be said is, that if a poem is read to us, or if we recite one from memory, that poem is fully realised without there being the effect of any 'fallow margin' to consider, whether above, below, or to either side of it.)

[56.11]
'Prose poems', especially those conforming to Parkinson's Law, i.e. expanding to fill the space available, might be offered as evidence against 'the line' as poetry's only defining property; and fair enough: but the prose poem is usually just that, i.e. poetry disguised as prose, pretending prose values rather than proving them. It is poetry in fancy dress, entertaining us with its masquerade, though never expecting for one minute you will be duped by the fakery.

Here, in what is most probably Thesis [84], Mr Armitage concludes his dissertation on *'the line'* – an exercise that he began at [51.38] – with a 'mess' which has somewhat different qualities to previous ones. There are five of what are apparently technical terms being used in it: 'prose poem', 'the line', 'poetry', 'prose', and 'prose values' (whatever these may be). The Thesis may appear to establish logical connections between them, and to draw logical inferences and conclusions: however, it fails to do this because, for one thing, none of the terms has previously been given any clear definition, nor are any of them given one here. For instance, the idea of 'expanding to fill the space available' indicates that a so-called 'prose poem' is to be thought of as having its text set out to the margins of the page, as is the text of this prose paragraph of the essay. But the qualifying phrase, 'especially those', tells us – though no examples are given – that a 'prose poem' may have other 'forms'. However, Mr Armitage does seem to arrive, in the second sentence, at the broad but inconsequential conclusion or opinion that a 'prose poem' is not 'poetry'! (But then again, we have to ask how certain we can be of this, when Mr Armitage's argument in the first sentence carries the casual and unprofessional qualifying phrases, 'and fair enough' and 'usually'.) However, what *does* come clearly out of Mr Armitage's paragraph is that he regards 'the line' - *an entity the 'properties' of which he has never clearly 'delineated'* – to be 'poetry's only defining property'. And thus is the fatuousness of this Lecture more clearly demonstrated.

For what it may matter, we think that we have a secure numbering of the concluding Theses of Mr Armitage's Lecture. They 'beg many questions', and much discussion; which needs to be resisted in order to bring this essay to as quick a conclusion as we can. However, we will continue to search for 'complaints against poetry's contemporary indulgencies, and reassertions of its enduring values', and for objective critical analysis and speculation.

56.52 **Eighty Five.** I've been musing on the current situation in poetry: but what of its future? Nicolas Barker, in his book *Visible Voices*, comparing the receiving surfaces of a stone ceiling with that of a papyrus leaf, writes: "Stone is indestructible, and inscription on it permanent". Recent events in Palmyra, amongst other places, suggests otherwise - just as Shelley's 'Ozymandias' warns against notions of immortality.

There is nothing that we would respond to here.

[86]
Yet the desire to make utterance endure, endures. Barker goes on to quote R. B. Parkinson et al, citing a caption inscribed in the Temple of Horus at Edfu, in which Ptolemy X is offering an ink well to a group of deities credited with "having caused

memory to begin, because they wrote". It ends: "The heir speaks with his forefathers when they have passed from the heart a wonder of their excelling fingers, so that friends can communicate when the sea is between them, and one man can hear another without seeing him".

We might 'pick up' on the word 'hear' towards the end of this paragraph, and enter on a discussion of the possible aesthetic and other psychological effects of *reading* what is measured, metrical, verse from a written text, and *hearing* it recited without the text. (This might lead to a discussion of the original, oral phase of English poetry that is ignored by Mr Armitage, with its original defining characteristics).

[87]

58.15 In Morgan Freeman's voice it could be an advert for the next generation of iphone; but it's an ancient description of the miraculous and magical nature of considered written material, and one which still holds good today. The urge to emphasise language at the ceremonial level, and the everyday practicalities of producing text in a physical dimension, have all contributed to our understanding of what poetry is, and the characteristics by which we recognise it.

The same sort of considerations are 'begged' by this Thesis, particularly by its second sentence. This written utterance possesses what to us is an absurd pomposity 'propped up' by the curious phrases 'language at the ceremonial level' and 'text in a physical dimension'. But quite how the 'urge to emphasise' the one, and 'the practicalities of producing' the other, 'have… contributed to our understanding of what poetry is, and the characteristics by which we recognise it', has not been demonstrated in this Lecture by the application of any objective argument in technical or 'theoretical' terms. Mr Armitage's sentence is thus 'ceremonial' and 'rhetorical' bombast.

[88]

58.50 Accordingly, we should expect the orthodoxies of poetry to develop not just in line with the vocabularies of its practitioners but in accordance with whatever technologies are invented to store and convey it.

This is a 'ripe' piece of 'blather'.

(A definition of the term 'blather' could 'go along the lines' of: 'A rhetorical faux-critical or faux-technical statement or statements'. This of course requires in its turn a definition of the term 'critical'. Such an explanation would 'go along the lines of': 'Presenting argument in objective, technical or theoretical terms'. This then in its own turn requires an explanation of the terms 'objective', 'technical' and 'theoretical'… We will leave the matter there for the time being, and 'fall back' on the common appeal, 'But you know what I mean'.)

We do not know what Mr Armitage means by 'the orthodoxies of poetry', or how the phrase may relate to contemporary 'practice' or to whatever he takes 'poetry's…enduring values' and 'principles' to be. The phrase 'the orthodoxies of poetry' can have little meaning unless it is used to refer to the original craft principles of versification and so forth that we outlined at the beginning of this essay. These are what might be properly described as poetry's 'orthodoxies'. Mr Armitage drew only passing attention to any of these, on three occasions. He made no comment on the exercise of any of them by Ms Denise Riley in her true poem 'Composed Underneath Westminster Bridge' (Thesis [26]); he made no direct comment on the technique of versification and the use of a rhyme scheme by Mr Gray (Thesis [63]); and he derided Mr Auden's use of these techniques in his poem 'A Summer

Evening' (Thesis [64]).

[89]

59.06 So, is there a 'school' of Twitter poets yet, exchanging poems of not more than one hundred and forty characters, as if they were the modern equivalent of 'tanka' or 'haiku'? Of course there is, it's already a tradition.

[90]

And has anyone written the world's first poem using 'emojis' only? Yes, it's been done, and a good while ago.

[91]

Just as the 'Snapchat' poem is now well established. In fact 'Snapchat', that messaging service which delights in the ephemeral, and, with its insistence on perishability, might represent an unlikely opportunity for uniting the opposing forces of printed and performed poetry, given the way it delivers compact blocks of language as writing, but as writing which vaporises instantly, like speech.

Since no objective 'orthodoxies' or 'principles' of the 'practice of poetry', of past or present origin, have been established in the course of this Lecture, and no 'complaints' issued regarding their use; and since no examples of so-called 'poems' as 'tweets', or in 'emoji's', or as 'snapchats', have been offered for our examination, these Theses cannot be said to have any critical or theoretical import. They are 'unprincipled blather'.

[92]

1.00.10 And has a machine produced viable poetry yet? Actually no, not that I am aware of; at least not the kind of poetry I'm advocatin' and celebratin', despite the fact that there's plenty of poetry-writing software out there. One on-line customer review for such a package reads: "It works a treat. Personally, I still prefer to write the poems myself, but, hey, that's just me".

This Thesis is interesting for its use of the term 'viable poetry'. Mr Armitage's use of it may be literal or perhaps to some extent metaphorical. The Collins English Dictionary (1979) has these entries for **viable** adj:

1. Capable of becoming actual, useful.
2. (of seeds, eggs, etc.) capable of normal growth and development.

One rather thinks that Mr Armitage's use of the term 'viable', as applied to a 'poem', would be to suggest that the 'poem' is a 'successful', a 'good' example of its kind, a literary thing well composed according to right 'principles and practice'. We will return to his use of this evaluative term shortly.

1.00.43 **Ninety Three.** "Type your job title into the search box below to find out the likelihood that it could be automated within the next two decades", said the B.B.C website. I typed in the word 'poet'. Nothing happened. "Browse our full list of jobs" was the next instruction: but between 'Podiatrist' and 'Police Community Support Officer' there was nothing and no one. I took this as an encouraging existential sign. If a computer doesn't recognise poets, full stop, how can they be replaced? As I remarked earlier, we are an exceptionally insecure lot, unable to give a convincing account of what it is we do. But pity the poor 'Water and Sewage Plant Operative', for example, currently at position 146 on the 'career extinction red list', and with a 60% chance of imminent automation.

[94]

1.01.55 Which leads me to these final thoughts. Since the advent of the digital camera, and Photoshop, we're all photographers. And since the advent of the i-pod, we're all DJ's. And all composers once we've downloaded the 'Sibelius' software. And all scriptwriters with final drafts and 'Nudge on and Prompters'. And all film directors, as far as 'YouTube' is concerned. And all journalists, according to the Huffington Post. The list goes on. But we're definitely not all poets; which I find astonishing, given the apparent simplicity of the task.

[95]

1.02.41 "Prove you're not a robot" insists some secure website, before allowing users to continue. Transposed into a literary context, metaphorically askin' the same question of poems we encounter might at least give us confidence in filterin' out the 'junk' and the 'malware'. Some poems don't pass the 'robot' test, because they weren't actually composed by algorithms or binary coding; but they might as well have been, either because they're mind-numbingly shallow, or because they're inhumanly convoluted, gracelessly contrived. And the day a software package, or even a good mimic, can achieve that elusive but not illusory amalgamation of complexity and coherence which the most convincing poetry aspires to, that's the day we can all pack up and go home.

There is nothing in the first two of these Theses of any particular critical or theoretical significance. The 'silliness' of the penultimate Thesis emphasises and contributes to the general 'aridity' of the Lecture. The final Thesis however, does present some further evaluative suggestions in its last two sentences. We are told that a 'poem' is artistically 'unsuccessful' or 'bad' if it is 'mind-numbingly shallow' or 'inhumanly convoluted, gracelessly contrived'; and that it is a 'successful' or 'good' 'poem' when it achieves 'that elusive but not illusory amalgamation of complexity and coherence which the most convincing of poetry aspires to'. So, with a clever little assonantal alliteration on el and il, and a triple 'false' alliteration on three cs, he brings his peroration on 'poetics' to an incoherent close.

The word 'incoherent' was chosen here because Mr Armitage's '95 Theses' do not cohere into a critical whole of any value. What possible basis for a critical system can we draw from these last two sentences of his final Thesis?

Mr Armitage is proposing, in very general terms, that a 'poem' may be 'viable' if it is 'convincing' - and presumably 'convincing' if it proves to be 'viable'. However, his 'critical formulations', 'mind-numbingly shallow', 'inhumanely convoluted', and 'gracelessly contrived' are no more than subjective expressions of generalised opinion, as is the formulation, 'amalgamation of complexity and coherence'. Some of the early Theses are 'echoing' in these last sentences: the idea of 'the optimal zone between the obscure and the obvious', and of the 'equilux', and the 'dew point'… But, without *examples* in which the actual and practical operation of any of the purported 'principles' of composition that are implied in the subjective formulations are *demonstrated*, there is nothing for us to learn. Mr Armitage does not offer for our consideration any 'poem' which wholly 'convinces' *him* that it is 'viable', or one which fails to do so, and justify his evaluations of them.

There are, it is true, occasional evaluative comments in this Lecture. At Thesis [5], Mr Armitage approves of the way in which Mr Yusef Komunyaka is 'risking sentimentality' in the three 'lines' of a 'poem' with which we are provided; but we do not know how Mr Armitage may possibly objectively assess the *degree* of 'sentimentality' in any literary situation. However, even if he were to provide us with a 'balancing' example of what he thinks is 'failure' when this 'risk' has been taken, we do not think that the 'practice' that he

claims to have identified could be said to be an objective 'principle' of 'poetry'.

At Thesis [25], Mr Armitage 'identifies' what he perhaps thinks is a poetic 'principle' of 'shaded language'; and he approves of its perceived operation in a 'poem' by Norman Nicholson. We have considered the fatuous ephemerality of this 'identification'.

At Thesis [26], Mr Armitage approves of the 'thickness of diction' in Denise Riley's poem; but, in his search for some sort of 'definition' of 'poetry', he identifies no actual 'principle' at work, nor does he express any approval of any other aspect of the poem. Then, in the other critical direction, bearing in mind his strictures in Thesis [68] regarding the 'blatant and less virtuous purposes of rhyme', we may assume that he had a low opinion of the Petrarchan rhyme scheme achieved in the sonnet.

At Thesis [28], Mr Armitage approves of what he regards as certain imaginative achievements in a 'poem' by Mr Ted Hughes, 'The Thought Fox' – the text of which is not provided or quoted from. Here Mr Armitage is 'identifying' a poetic process of 'framing the art of framing' something - which process is otherwise described as one of 'capturing' and 'preserving' 'creativity's self-consciousness' - and he is approving of it. However, we wholly doubt its 'universality' and objectivity as a 'principle' or 'practice' of 'poetry'.

At Thesis [46], where he is developing his 'jokey' and peculiar analytic 'system' of 'Rumsfeldianism', Mr Armitage makes an 'evaluative assessment' of 'poems' by Mr John Ashbery. No example of these is, as we said earlier, provided or quoted from, beyond the provision of four words. His analysis is partly metaphorical – 'poems' do not have a 'cortex' – and partly theoretical in a way that is, as we noted before, too unspecific to be of any evaluative use even if examples of Mr Ashbery's work *were* to have been provided. The comments amount to no more than saying that: 'Mr Ashbery's poems can be 'difficult' but they are 'viable' and 'convincing'. Once again, what begins as an apparent 'complaint' against contemporary 'practice' in 'poetry' – if only as practised by one writer – turns into a vague sort of approbation. The Thesis may be said to become void and without value.

Matters are somewhat different in Thesis [57], where the 'bullying' attitude towards Mr Sandberg has been discussed. No evidence is adduced that might justify such treatment; but it can at least be said that Mr Armitage clearly does not find Mr Sandberg's poetry either 'viable' or 'convincing'. A demonstration of the 'atonal' and 'cloth-eared' nature of Mr Sandberg's work would have been of great interest; and a reference for Mr Frost's comments would be welcome. Likewise, in Thesis [63] it would have been useful if Mr Armitage had provided reference for his quotation from Mr Eagleton, and thus from Mr Empson - from behind whom, as it were, he emerges to declare at least one stanza of Mr Gray's long poem to be 'unconvincing' through reason of 'inadvertent hypocrisy'.

Were Mr Armitage ever to read this essay, he might complain that we are straining too hard to 'extract' meaning from, and give application to, his terms 'viable' and 'convincing'. He might well be right; perhaps we should indeed desist; but not before we have reminded ourselves how, in Theses [64] and [68], he preposterously criticises Mr Auden and his poem 'A Summer Night' (regardless of the interpolation of the 'weaselly' respectful Thesis [66]). Plainly, Mr Armitage is not 'convinced' either that Mr Auden properly applied 'a spacially mimetic system' in the poem, or that his use of a 'rhyme' scheme was contrived for any better purpose than 'to impress the reader'. However, we have previously given an opinion on what we regard as the insanity of Mr Armitage's 'blathering' in these respects, and the fatuous nature of the poetic 'principles' that he presents, and it is due time that this essay was brought to a conclusion, before we do ourselves – or anyone else – 'a mischief'. So, now 'we can all pack up and go home'.

V

95 Theses : On the Principles and Practice of Poetry

Simon Armitage. Oxford. 16th May 2017

Well, thanks very much, everyone, for comin' along.

In Section Four of Seamus Heaney's 'Station Island' sequence, Heaney has a pointed exchange with a man of the cloth, a young priest who has "sweated masses as an overseas missionary in some steamy jungle". The poet can't picture this holy mascot in such an alien landscape, preferring to think of him "on his bicycle, performing domestic duties closer to home, visiting neighbours, drinking tea, and praising homemade bread", is Heaney's gently sarcastic description. To which the priest replies: "What are you doing here but the same thing?", questioning the motivation behind Heaney's pilgrimage, yes; but also, I think, accusing the poet of offering similar consolations and absolutions in the shape of poems.

Five hundred years after Martin Luther supposedly nailed his Treatise to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, and in the form of complaints against poetry's contemporary indulgencies, and reassertions of its enduring values, I offer my own '95 Theses' to the floor.

One. Subtlety is the watchword.

Two. That this person's cat's whisker is another person's sledgehammer. This person's understatement, another's foghorn. So here's the key question: Who are you writing for? If the answer is 'Myself', you're fibbing; and fibbing to yourself, which is the most deceitful of all deceptions. You write because you want to be read. Let's get that out into the open, and we can all move forward together.

Three. (I'm not going to read the numbers out every time.) To write only in the way others want to read is to sell out; but to write only in the way that you want to write is to disengage: to manage both is the requirement.

[An attempt will be made to number Mr Armitage's Theses. Figures in the margin indicate time elapsed in the podcast.]

[4]
I'm talkin' about finding 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.

[5]
It means, taking risks. Risking sentimentality, for example. For example, in Yusef Komunyakaa's much anthologised poem, 'Facing It', where the poet, a former reporter in the Vietnam War, stares into the dark depths of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and concludes:

In the black mirror
a woman's trying to erase names.
No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

[6]

3.22 Poetry occurs at the dew point where difficulty meets understanding, or where considered thought condenses into considered language. Poetry exists in some optimal zone between the obscure and the obvious, between the pretentious and the prosaic, between the high-falutin' and the facile. I'm not saying that whatever falls outside that zone isn't poetry at all – even if that's what I happen to believe privately, I'm not sayin' it.

[7]

3.55 And as a zone, as well as havin' a conceptual dimension, it has a geographical one. Be internationalist by all means; but run the risk of dilution. Stay local by all means; but be an importer, otherwise you might think that you're ploughing your own furrow when actually you're digging your own grave.

[8]

If it helps, think of poetry as the semi-conductor of language, regulating both flow and restraint.

[9]

4.33 Poetry can provide a refuge for those who wish to write without the pressures of commercial interference, or the intrusion of celebrity, or any of the compromises associated with public engagement. But obscure poets can't then complain, as they sometimes complain, about a lack of interest in their work. Listen: if you're a poet, you're already obscure; if you're an obscure poet, you're operating somewhere beyond the orbit of Pluto.

[10]

5.07 Being culturally constructed, and therefore beyond an individual's control, that boundary between difficulty and understanding changes through time as well as space. We can't write for posterity, or be the actuaries of our own work, because we've no idea in which direction taste will shift, or where poems will stand in relation to it.

[11]

Neither can we rely on our spouses or descendants to catalogue our archives or laminate our reputations.

[12]

5.43 Irony was probably the guiding force behind this piece of London graffiti:

[An enquiry will be made of Mr Armitage, through his Agents, as to what was displayed on screen at this point.]

But the intention is undermined by an underlying veracity.

[13]

[It makes a]? handy reference point for those students of mine who claim future readers will recognise their talent even if I don't; though, truth is, it's usually a hedge position they've taken up after a profit-warnin' on their current business model.

Fourteen. Helen Vendler has been one of our best contemporary critics because, by and large, she's on the side of the makers rather than the dismantlers. But what did Helen Vendler mean when she said at the end of an essay on John Ashberry that "'Accessibility' needs to be dropped from the American vocabulary of aesthetic judgement if we are not to appear fools in the eyes of the world?".

[15]
Actually, I know what she meant, because, in the sentence preceding it, she argued, via the examples of Mallarmé, Eliot, Moore, [Niwash]? and Ashbery, that "no matter how alien the content, or how allusive the lines, readers flock to their poems".

[16]
7.04 I could contest the definition of "flock", or argue that by having readers "flock" to them, those poets must be 'accessible'; or that all poems by their very nature are alien or allusive to some degree; or I could call in the number-crunchers to dispute the figures; but let me put it this way instead: if I were choosing which side of the argument to defend, I think it would be far easier to point to the large number of truly alien and allusive poets to whom readers have not only failed to flock but from whom they have actually fled; or to name-drop genuinely accessible writers - Chaucer, Milton, Wordsworth, Hardy, Plath, Bishop, Heaney, Harrison, etc. - whose evaluators and adjudicators are rarely considered fools.

[17]
8.03 'Accessibility', in the Vendler context, is a byword for 'popularity' which, by extension, becomes shorthand for 'dumbing down'. I see the connective logic; and yet, as a citizen of the world, I know that millions of really smart people go to the cinema, to art galleries, to museums, and to concerts, millions buy literature – but not poetry. If people "flock" to Mallarmé, what exorbitant verb shall we assign to the manner by which people congregate around Hilary Mantel or will attend the most recent Hockney exhibition?

[18]
8.47 I'm not an apologist for the superficial. Adrian Mitchell's contention that "Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people" was true up to a point, but would have carried more clout coming from a Hugo Williams or a Selima Hill or a Les Murray - hospitable and accommodating poets who also trust the imaginative and intellectual capabilities of a potential readership.

[19]
9.01 I'm only an occasional visitor to this platform, but a frequent teacher; and in the classroom environment fewer things have muddled the minds of Creative Writing students ~ those who read criticism, anyway - than The Intentional Fallacy, the notion that an author's objective can never be properly realised in the mind of the reader. It leads some students to throw away their pens in despondency, and others to throw down any old tripe onto the page on the basis that whatever they write will be misinterpreted.

[20]
But [while it looks like/would be naïve]? to assume that every aspect and angle of a poem can be safely couriered between reader and writer, it's defeatist to think that the greater or necessary parts cannot. How do I know The Intentional Fallacy is itself a fallacy? It is, when the critics of the New Criticism wrote about it, I

understood it.

[21]

10.25 Ambiguity, being a kissing cousin of The Intentional Fallacy, is also a much misunderstood and abused concept in poetry. "It's, like, ambiguous", says Scarlet in the Creative Writing class, responding to the last line of Josh's poem, which she doesn't understand. "Yeah," agrees Josh, "I was doing, like, ambiguity there", he confirms, largely on the basis that *he* doesn't understand it either. Or, "It's very meta" they might call it.

[22]

Wrong. Whatever its dictionary definition of 'inexactness', ambiguity is a controlled technique in poetry, being the managed balancing of two or more describable positions. Example; the last line of Hardy's 'Snow in the Suburbs':

And we take him in.

Receiving the cat into the house, he means. And he also means, perceiving the situation: he means them both, simultaneously and intentionally. As for 'meta' - i.e. 'more consciously and conspicuously of itself' - : if I hear one more student saying somethin' is "very meta", I'm going to take a bite out of a desk.

[23]

11.55 To the supposition that a certain player couldn't be offside durin' a match because he wasn't interfering with play, manager Brian Clough is alleged to have retorted, "If he isn't interfering with play, what's he doin' on the pitch?" For 'player', read 'language'; for 'pitch', read 'poem'. Q.E.D.

12.17 **Twenty Four.** Of the many historical and ongoing vexations associated with the arts, poetry's very identity is one of its most agonising conditions. Passing from 'Poetischer Realismus' to 'Poetry, theories of', the 1965 *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* I bought from a library sale in 1986, to try and figure out what the hell I was doing, had no entry for 'Poetry'. It's a situation its editors have since addressed, but to no resounding conclusion.
More courageously, Edward Hirsch's excellent *A Poet's Glossary* has a stab at definition which begins,

An inexplicable (though not incomprehensible) event in language.

That submission will extend to another three pages; but the bracketed 'though not incomprehensible' spoke to me personally.

[25]

13.28 Poetry is 'shaded' language. On many examples of terrain cartography, hills and mountains are shown with shape to their south eastern slopes, as if light were emanating from the top left hand corner of the map, perhaps taking its bearings from printed matter - given that, in reading, north west to south east is the usual direction of travel. Forgetting for now that light rarely originates from that direction in the northern hemisphere, the shadin' exists as a visual subtext indicative of perspective. Similarly, in a poem the shadows of chosen words fall in a particular direction, suggesting an angle or view. It's a form of 'hachuring', as in

Hachuring distinct with threads of shadow

In Norman Nicholson's poem 'Gathering Sticks on Sunday.'

> And moon and earth will stare at one another
> Like the cold, yellow skulls of child and mother,

it ends, shading language in the direction of Emerson's statement, 'The end of the human race will be that it will die of civilisation'.

[26]

14.50 What other physical properties can help with identification? Comparing the density of a poem with the density of prose via the number of rare or unusual or interesting words or phrases per page might not be enough to highlight a quantifiable difference between the two, but let's still consider the specific gravity of a piece of writing as a possible indicator of its poetic quiddities and credentials. Let's locate it and celebrate it in 'Composed underneath Westminster Bridge', 'Denise Rileys' bicentennial and parallaxed response to Wordsworth's Petrarchan sonnet, an uncharacteristically off-message urban moment from William - given his more usual role as poetry's Countryside Alliance spokesperson. Riley's reverse perspective from below the bridge might be a subtle acknowledgement of Dorothy's unacknowledged role in the original poem; but it's the magnificent muddy slurp and viscosity I'm interested in here, its thickness of diction. [Here he reads the poem, which was also displayed on a screen]

Composed Underneath Westminster Bridge

Broad gravel barges shove the drift. Each wake
Thwacks the stone steps. A rearing tugboat streaked
Past moorhens dabbing floss, spun pinkish-beaked.
Peanuts in caramelised burnt chocolate bake
Through syrupy air. Above, fried onions cake.
Pigeons on steeleyed dates neck-wrestled, piqued,
Oblivious to their squabs that whined and squeaked
In iron-ringed nests, nursed in high struts. Opaque
Brown particles swarm churning through the tide.
That navy hoop of cormorant can compose
A counter to this shield – eagles splayed wide,
Gold martlets – on the bridge's side; it glows
While through the eau-de-nil flaked arches slide
The boats 'Bert Prior' and 'The Eleanor Rose'.

[27]

17.15 Staying with definitions: if we describe the poem as a snapshot, which we occasionally do, especially the shorter poem - perhaps to distinguish it from something more cinematic, which might be the visual equivalent of the novel -: if we associate the poem with the snapshot, possibly because it's often polaroid in shape and size, or cross-sectional in its presentation, then let's agree that it isn't necessarily the subject matter which is caught in time, but the moment of writing.

[28]
The hairs on the back of the neck rise on reading Hughes's 'The Thought Fox', not because we're re-witnessing the animal entering the frame, but because we're witnessing the poet framing the art of framing the animal entering the frame, the moment of an artist "gazing amazed at the work that points at him amazed", as he says in 'Full Moon and Little Frieda'. It's creativity's self-consciousness that's being captured and preserved.

[29]
18.29 Another reason the snapshot analogy might be apposite is in relation to that satisfying clunk we recognise when two or more ideas click. Example: Ian Hamilton-Finlay's sculptural poem, 'Bring Back the Birch', where a reactionary request for the reintroduction of corporal punishment is ironically fused with an environmental appeal for the re-establishment of a tree species, where 'grove' and 'grave' are simultaneously monumentalised. [It is possible that this piece was displayed on the screen; but, if that was the case, no time was allowed for the audience to give it much scrutiny].

19.11 **Thirty.** And movin' on from definitions to substance, and to the question of whether poetry has stopped delivering the goods or supplying its legal high: sometimes you pay the dealer, only to be given the chemical equation rather than the product itself. Too many Walter Whites out there, peddling the science, when what we really crave is the hit. Or, as Heaney put it: "You want it to touch you at the melting point between the breastbone and the beginning of the solar plexus; you want something sweetening and at the same time unexpected, that has come through constraint into felicity".

[31]
20.02 If the drugs analogy doesn't please, let me wonder instead if poetry has stopped being the 'Expo', with its public interface between innovators and consumers, with its aisles and stores, bringin' its fair to the fair, and become instead the 'Conference', with poets as lanyarded delegates in closed sessions, professionals and experts in dialogue with co-workers and associates only.

[32]
20.33 It's generally agreed that at some point in history the novel replaced the poem as the principal and most popular form of literature; and it's difficult to envisage a reversal, given poetry's sulky introspection since that time. Broadly speakin', the contemporary novel operates through an unspoken reciprocity, offering readers the opportunity to engage without requiring them to unscramble an encrypted code.

[33]
21.05 In a recent wide-ranging Ipsos-MORI poll conducted on behalf of The Royal Society of Literature, 90% of people reported that they had read a novel in the last six months, an encouraging statistic for authors, publishers, booksellers, and anyone who believes that reading is a good thing. But only 11% of respondents had read any poetry - roughly the same number who'd read a self-help book. Some nights I lie awake worrying that they are in fact the same people.

[34]

21.47 Peter Porter's observation, that "poetry can either be language lit up by life, or life lit up by language", now seems a generous, even-handed and optimistic assessment, probably penned before the wide-scale emergence of poetry as language not so much illuminated by, but subjected to, some form of x-ray or CAT scan.

[35]

22.13 In a recent interview to promote his compilation triptych collection, 'No Art', the American poet Ben Lerner seems to acknowledge or confirm such a predicament. Across those three volumes, Lerner says that he's dealing with such topics as 'Univocalism versus Heteroglossia', 'The Impossibility of the Second Person Pronoun', 'The Repurposin' of Language', 'A Resistance to Closed Readings' 'Avant-garde Proceduralism', and 'Ironic Detachment'.

[36]

It's only really in the final poem of the book that Lerner gestures towards what he describes as "a calling for the possibility of feeling in poetry, daringly flirting with vintage or discontinued emotions".

[37]

In contrast, for example, with the stated subject matter of one of Lerner's students, Ocean Vuong, who, according to the blurb on the back of his debut collection, 'Night Sky with Exit Wounds', writes "about the most profound subjects: love and loss, conflict, grief, memory, and desire".

[38]

It allows for a formal and confident distinction to be made, I think, between those poems whose critical and theoretical components are implied, and those whose critical and theoretical components are not only explicit but entire: poetry as criticism and theory.

23.55 **Thirty Nine.** Invent a measuring device for the above, a kind of breathalyser test that registers critical parts per thousand : keep blowing, keep blowing, the light's gone red, you're over the accepted limit, I'm going to have to ask you to step outside the vehicle, I'm going to have to ask you for your licence.

[40]

24.21 The Doomsday Clock, that hypothetical chronometer which gauges the perceived likelihood of planetary catastrophe, whose hands, the last time I checked - which was admittedly before the American task force steamed towards the Korean peninsular and the NHS computer network succumbed to a paralysing virus - is currently set at two and a half minutes to midnight.

[41]

Interactive exam question: Onto the face of a clock anticipating the Doomsday Scenario, in which all the poets and all the critics in the world are exactly the same people, draw the current position of the hands.

[42]

25.05 Just to be clear, I'm not mountin' some shop-floor protest on behalf of the Poets' Union. Without criticism there is no poetry. If poetry is the egg, then criticism can

either be the chick that hatches from it or the hen that laid it. And in the Venn diagram of manufacturers and commentariat, a shadowed area of overlap is an inevitable and healthy thing. But beware complete occlusion, the darkness occasioned by total obscuration, the oblivion brought about by 100% self-absorption.

[43]

25.47 Or we could further divide these two Venn diagram cells, a procedure which might lead to a 'jahari window' approach, as it would be described by that afore-mentioned 10% of society frequenting the Personal Development section of Waterstones; or to a Rumsfeldian classification of poetry.

26.12 **Forty Four.** 'Rumsfeldianism'. Let's start with 'the known knowns', poems whose text is immediately comprehensible and whose meaning is in direct [fluention]? and proportion to it; poetry of 'Thribbish' artlessness, requiring little effort and bringing scant reward. When Geoffrey Hill made reference to "a cult of simple-mindedness" to have emerged in the 60s and 70s, it was the purveyors of 'known knowns' he was presumably at pains to distance himself from.

[45]

Into the 'known unknowns' pigeonhole we might place large chunks of Eliot, for example. That is to say, we can all read and make sense of a line like

An old, white horse galloped away in the meadow;

and certain sections of 'Four Quartets' - for example, the opening lines of 'Burnt Norton' - have a nursery rhyme or even popular song simplicity to them; yet, for all the surface comprehensibility, the philosophical thinkin' underpinning the poetry remains remote, aloof, perhaps even ineffable.

[46]

27.30 Donald Rumsfeld didn't actually get into the territory of the 'unknown knowns'; but I'm proposing John Ashbery as my bandleader in this category. That's because the fragmented and sabotaged cortex of his poems - certainly in his later work - is usually as intentionally unfollowable as it is unfathomable. And yet the thinkin' behind it, signifier or signified, language as an unsatisfactory, unreliable and even disreputable tool when it comes to the analysis, perception and reflection of actual experience etc., etc.; all that is relatively well signposted and understood.

[47]

28.15 And finally, 'the unknown unknowns', the irresolvable linguistic equations of those out-and-out poetical experiments baffling to both reader and writer alike.

[48]

I've mentioned John Ashbery a couple of times already, and will mention him again as a special case, given how he's not so much cornered the market for unpredictability in contemporary poetry, but brokered some form of international free-trade agreement. Unexpectedness is what we expect from Ashbery, his principal strategy in recent years being deviation from the linear, a strategy that succeeds because his fragments are so surreptitiously eavesdropped, so convincingly reproduced, and so entertainingly juxtaposed.

[49]
Unfortunately, his virtuoso modus operandi has been misheard by others as a clarion-call for the abdication of logic and the abandonment of sense across the board. Many have noticed the truancy and mischievousness in Ashbery, and confused it with the school rules. Conversely, it's a big mistake to characterise Ashbery as some kind of Emperor in his New Clothes when in fact he's the tailor and dressmaker. "The poem is you" he reminds us in the last line of 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons'; we his coat hanger and dummy.

[50]
29.58 Is it ever 'brave' to write poems? I've seen this word on book blurbs, in reviews, in citations of works. Certainly, some poets publish at great personal risk; but even for the likes of Mandlestam and Akhmatova, doesn't manner always pull rank on matter in the end? Won't mode always be looking to upstage material? Isn't the poet's mind always cocked to the poem standing as a poem in relation to other poems? In poetry, isn't there always an element of dancing in front of a mirror? Aren't poets like the dew drops in Yeats's 'Sad Shepherd', 'always listening for the sound of their own dropping'?

[51]
30.50 Some poets will attempt to disguise their exhibitionism or imply modesty by representin' themselves with the lower case 'i'. It worked for a day or two as a refreshing kind of self-effacement, allowing the poet to momentarily side-step the role of wise sage and important person. But pretty soon it had the reverse effect, shouting "Hey! hey! over here, look at me, over here, I'm the quiet one!"

[52]
31.25 "First, try to be something, anything else", begins Lorrie Moore in *How to be a Writer*. She's pretending to tell you about life choices, but she's really telling you about writing. She's talking about fiction, but she's also talking about poetry. And then she's also talking about poetry, but she's also talking about literature. 'You yourself are not literature', she's saying. Even the most candid confessional poet - the Lowell of 'Life Studies', the Plath of 'Ariel', the Hopkins of the so-called 'Terrible Sonnets', the 'Pearl' poet recounting his dream - if *his* dream is what it was - : we don't appreciate them because their soul-searching was so thorough, but because their illusions were so accomplished, their portrayals so convincing, their puppetry so life-like.

[53]
32.24 So when Craig Raine says, "Poetry is the battle against the prompter which can only give you someone else's lines", he isn't suggesting that an individual's unmediated thoughts are poetic of themselves, no matter how unique; and he certainly isn't aligning himself with Alan Ginsberg's description of the poet [Aré]?, "stenographer of the mind", with its implication that any and every thought can be transferred unedited straight onto the page.

33.00 **Fifty Four.** Sometimes in the appraisal of poetry, when judging competitions, for instance, or when considerin' applications for courses via sample poems, I've heard colleagues bring up the issue of 'trust'. "I don't trust this poem", someone might say at a grading meeting; or, "How trustworthy is this piece?". It happens in situations where there's nothing inherently measurable about the work to hand, and no calibration system beyond educated guesswork.

[55]

33.32 The recent resurgence of the 'spoken word' scene is sometimes explained as a reaction to these opacities and obscurities in literary poetry. 'Performance poetry', in that version of events, is a breath of fresh air, sincere in its application, honest in its ambition, and happy to make itself vulnerable in front of a live audience rather than hide away behind the fortifications of a book cover. Its detractors disagree, arguin' that a poem in search of immediate responses and instant gratification is even less trustworthy, and fails the poetic polygraph test by virtue of its neediness. About ten years ago I thought I'd noticed a growin' rapprochement between the two camps; but certain irreconcilable differences persist, it would seem.

[56]

34.35 On that same subject, James Fenton once commented how a group of aspiring poets he knew defined their practice through entirely negative characteristics: "no rhyme, no metre and no form other than open form" - which Fenton clarifies as "no form at all". He might have also added, 'no metaphor, no narrative and no subject matter' to this litany of poetic allergies and intolerances; though his larger point was in relation to the poetry reading as an event, and how writing for the eye rather than the ear hasn't discouraged page-bound poets from giving public performances of their work despite having nothing *to* perform. These are poets who put themselves through "the agony of standing in front of an audience reading words which were specifically designed not to be read out", Fenton comments, "and consequently put their audience through the same agonies as well?"

[57]

35.43 And those who write without respecting the importance of sound will fall in with Frost's description of Carl Sandberg as "the kind of writer who had everything to gain and nothing to lose by being translated into another language"; the kind of atonal or cloth-eared poet for whom 'something gets lost in the original' as they say.

[58]

36.10 [All those] points about the acoustic and 'out loud' importance of poetry are true and well made; yet we shouldn't deny the special properties of writing on the page, even in its appeal to memory, often thought of as the preserve of spoken or oral poetry. Like recognising the silhouettes of birds on the wing against a featureless sky, the patterns and shapes of poems on the page, post Caxton, have become memorial mechanisms in their own right. So when Ed Hirsch describes trying to recall Frost's 'Desert Places', while driving through a snowstorm, he says, "I could see the shapely stanzas unscrolling".

[59]

36.57 John Fuller is saying something similar when he talks about "the glamour of the page", anythin' else just bein' "whispers in the wind"; and even when he refers to the "inner ear", and Hirsch to the "inner eye", they're both acknowledgin' that poetry presented as an entirely visual phenomenon, and received in silence, has its own unique pleasure.

[60]

37.24 Added to which, analysing the noises a poem makes can lead us into the realm of the pseudo-scientific, often via a form of retrospective justification. Take Iain Crichton-Smith's poem 'Neighbour', which begins,

Build me a bridge over the stream
To my neighbour's house
Where he is standing in dungarees
In the fresh morning,

about which Carol Rumens, in her 'Poem of the Week' spot in The Guardian comments: "The sound of small waters threading over pebbles is captured in the 'r' and 'ree' sounds of the first quatrain". I regret choosing a column that regularly provides a highly effective arbitration service between specialist text and non-specialist readers, and from such a thoughtful critic; but her assessment in this case seems only correct in hindsight, when what we're really curious about are the decisions the poet made at the time of composition; because, isn't this the kind of interpretation that drives tentative or novice readers not only to despair but to disbelief? "I thought 'r' and 'ree' were the sounds of small waters threading over pebbles", said reader will complain when said syllables turn up in another poem, but this time representing a growling machine gun or the noise of a dry wind in a parched desert with nary a stream for a thousand square miles.

[61]

39.09 The internet may have undermined the printed page as the automatic location for poetry, but the page remains a high value plot for sought-after limelight - or, as Maurice Riorden termed it, "a coveted space" - not only in terms of prestige and the fact that it implies a degree of editorial regulation that the internet occasionally short-circuits. But in terms of its suitability as a physical, two-dimensional plane for the reception of thoughts projected as language, it's still a comfortable fit.

[62]

39.48 Poetry in its written guise also allows us to play the 'form and content' game - always my favourite at school, still good value in the workshop. "The poem is tall and thin because it's about a chimney stack"; "The poem is presented in half-rhyme couplets because it's about two incongruous ideologies struggling to achieve harmony with each other". Put like that, it shouldn't be difficult to chose a form that represents a poem's intentions.

[63]

40.22 But, as Terry Eagleton points out, poems often operate by multiple systems, sometimes in concert, sometimes in contradiction. His example is Empson's quarrel with this famous quatrain in Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', lamenting, by elaborate metaphor, faithful rhythm, and manicured rhyme, how human potential is sometimes overlooked or goes unfulfilled:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear;
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Eagleton notes how "the elegance of the verse dignifies this dire situation in a way that make us reluctant to see it altered". [See **'How to Read a Poem'**, Blackwell 2007, page 73.] Eagleton is exposin' a kind of inadvertent hypocrisy at work.

[64]

41.26 And even though I wouldn't go anywhere as near as that with my example, I've always felt a similar kind of contradiction in relation to the first stanza of Auden's 'A Summer Night':

> 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.

In what's generally accepted to be a successful opening to a successful poem, the grammatical systems appear to be running smoothly, ditto the system of sounds and beats, and plenty of other sub-systems as well, I dare say; but given the poet's apparent determination to paint a very clear, draughtsmanlike picture, wouldn't it have been more effective to arrange the stanza in accordance with the physical architecture of the scene he describes? By which I mean, if a spatially mimetic system were to operate - which is one of poetry's privileges - then, as a representation of the geometry of the universe as seen from a human perspective, 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", and a bathetic descent from the planetary body to the mundane appendage of the human foot would have saved the punchline to the end, where punchlines tend to be more effective. Such an arrangement would have also served to remind us, via a concluding pun, that it's the poetic foot as well as the physiological one that addresses the moon. Moreover, if Auden had managed to put his feet on the ground, so to speak, it would have allowed him to physicalize them as the comic protuberances they undoubtedly are, courtesy of that indented and therefore extended last line.

[65]

43.47 I suppose it could be argued that the ostensible nonsense of the first line, 'being in bed on the lawn' (something he occasionally did, apparently), legitimises the topsy-turvy arrangement of the stanza.

[66]

But for all his eccentricities, Auden was a no-nonsense poet, and this was a no-nonsense occasion, the author recalling a spiritually significant or quasi-religious episode, when for the first time in his life he knew exactly what it meant 'to love one's neighbour as oneself'.

[67]

44.26 Incidentally, given that the revelation took place on a fine night in June 1933, at The Down's School in Malvern, with Vega visible, and a rising moon, a combination of maps, star charts and weather records would probably allow us not only to triangulate the exact date of the experience, but also to tell us the exact direction the poet was facing at the time. That said, Auden was sitting down in his oblique prose account of the evening, and lying down in the poem, so we should be careful in considering the piece as a faithful documentary testimony.

[68]

45.06 I could never prove it, but I suspect rhyme has dictated the sequencing of ideas in 'A Summer Night'. John Fuller suggests Christopher Smart's 'A Song of David' as a template; and once a rhyme-scheme has been decided upon, and once the rhyme-partnerships like "June" and "moon" have come so obligingly to mind, everythin' else must fall in around. And because it deals in sound, open-ended and faux-critical claims similar to those that I mentioned earlier, are often made in relation to the function and effects of rhyme in poems. 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 ear 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 from the bindings and fastenings of similar sounding words. 'Voila! Hey Presto! Tada!' is what rhyme says to the reader: 'I was in a tight corner there; look how impressively I managed to manipulate my restrictions'.

[69]

47.06 Brevity is another hallmark of smartness: the fleetness of a poem, its tight turning circle, its economy of language, the 'anything you can do, I can do quicker' aspect of its character. "Poetry is the art of saying in two words what is better said in ten", the late Brian Sewell is reported to have complained. And to disagree with Brian Sewell was always to be in the right. Brevity within a poem creates useful tensions, opposing our instincts to embellish, adorn and peacock, by stripping back to a tooth-and-bone bare minimum, curling up into a foetal ball when confronted with an immeasurably large and expanding universe.

[70]

48.02 And brevity not only within poems, but within collections too - most books being an economic and geometrical convenience to which the writer has shaped his or her output - a productivity only increased since the advent of the word-processor, a device which has circumvented the frictional drag of pen on paper that once allowed time for contemporaneous reflection.

[71]

48.31 Judged in these terms, Christopher Reid's *Katarina Brac* is exemplary, bein' a slim volume both in name and nature - thirty-nine printed pages, many of them printed with not very much at all.

[72]

But I also commend it for its sleight of hand, the poems being a fictitious set of translations of a fictional eastern European poet - a conceit which turns up the reverb on the poems, and makes devious advantage out of poetry's inherent foreignness in relation to everyday language.

[73]

49.13 *Katarina Brac*, being 'Martian' in outlook, is also an object lesson in metaphor making - metaphor being another form of brevity through the mere instantaneous scheduling of ideas, another form of cleverness. Hence: "a radio thinking aloud";

"pale blue butterflies as detachable as earrings"; "a blister like a moonstone"; a newborn baby like "a little howling blood sausage"; and a stairwell outside an apartment like "the deepest, most superhumanly patient of ears".

[74]

49.49 Some contend that poets have no business likening one thing to another, and that to do so is just affectation and decoration. I say that all aspects of cognition and perception depend entirely upon comparison.

50.18 **Seventy Five.** The problematic long poem isn't only problematic because of dwindling attention spans but because most of the things it can do can be done better by the novel, or the play, or the boxed set. Programme idea: a 'Grand Designs' format in which poetry's equivalent of Kevin McLeod follows the trials and tribulations of a poet about to embark on a composition of epic proportions. Over the course of the construction, we make frequent visits to the site, to find the poem in various states of completion, and the poet in a variety of moods, from the enthusiasm and energy of his initial outline sketches, to days of spiritual exhaustion and creative bankruptcy, and the jeopardy moment before the ad-break, when the central load-bearing beam is found to be rotten. We revisit the monolithic pile a year after completion; with the author proud of his titanic achievements, but reluctant to talk about its final cost, and with a For Sale sign at the front gate but, as yet, no offers.

[No attempt will be made to number the next nine of Mr Armitage's Theses.]

51.38 Does poetry have a u.s.p? Not really, I conclude - though the best I can offer is *the line*. Be faithful to the line for a reason; or plot against it for a reason; but ignore it only to advertise your incompetence or ignorance. Some poets distance themselves from the idea of the line, seein' it as an Imperial Measure or colonial gesture committing them to an unacceptable tradition. The conventional line endin' in that scenario is a gilt frame or milled edge redolent of historical power structures. So a truncated line that cuts against phrase or clause might be doin' a radical job; and short lines are sometimes characterised as 'breaths', emphasising the rhythms of respiration over those of rhetoric, favouring the individual over the institution.

52.46 Here's 'Advent' by Rae Armantrout, a poet whose work I've become interested in - and not only because she sometimes stands next to me on alphabetically arranged shelves in bookshops and libraries:

In front of the craft shop,
a small nativity,
mother, baby, sheep
made of white
and blue balloons.

*

Sky
god
girl.

Pick out the one
that doesn't belong.

*

Some thing

close to nothing

flat

from which,

fatherless,
everything has come.

Occasionally associated with the 'language school' of poetry, many of Armantrout's poems rarely expand beyond the most clenched and clipped lines, lines which imply a skeletal elementalism, or seem ephemeral and tremulous, hanging there like linguistic wind chimes. That said, such concision and terseness can run the risk of appearing coy, precious, even melodramatic or hammy, or, as Craig Raine put it, "like the dying man in a movie trying to tell us where the treasure is buried".

[Presumably the whole poem was presented on the screen while these sentences were spoken. Mr Armitage did not read it out.]

53.44 Short lines draw less attention to themselves when regulated by the flow of expression or the building blocks of sentences, but become conspicuous and even suspicious when their endings and breaks deviate from those administering principles for no apparent reason. An example : R. S. Thomas, a normally scrupulous poet on the page, breaks the last lines of 'A Marriage' like this:

And she,
        who in life
had done everything
        with a bird's grace,
opened her bill now
        for the shedding
of one sigh no
        heavier than a feather.

[This is a conjecture as to how many lines might have been on the screen. Mr Armitage paused for three seconds here in his delivery.]

Why? Amputating the penultimate line at the word "no" cuts against the natural cadence, squanders the opportunity of a partial rhyme between "heavier" and "feather", denies the phrase "of one sigh" the mimetic opportunity of existing in its own exhalation and lettin' the sigh expand into the blank space beyond, and misplaces the emphasis in that final line to the point where the "sigh" overbalances rather than counterbalances the "feather". Nevertheless, in both Armantrout and Thomas, and no matter the interpretation, something is at stake and at risk in the breaking of those lines, and the line as a unit of organisation is honoured, as is the poem as a system of staged intervals.

55.16 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 bubble wrap protecting the delicate edges of the poem from its 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.

56.11 'Prose poems', especially those conforming to Parkinson's Law, i.e. expanding to fill the space available, might be offered as evidence against 'the line' as poetry's only defining property; and fair enough: but the prose poem is usually just that, i.e. poetry disguised as prose, pretending prose values rather than proving them. It is poetry in fancy dress, entertaining us with its masquerade, though never expecting for one minute you will be duped by the fakery.

56.52 **Eighty Five.** I've been musing on the current situation in poetry: but what of its future? Nicolas Barker, in his book *Visible Voices*, comparing the receiving surfaces of a stone ceiling with that of a papyrus leaf, writes: "Stone is indestructible, and inscription on it permanent". Recent events in Palmyra, amongst other places, suggests otherwise - just as Shelley's 'Ozymandias' warns against notions of immortality.

[86]
Yet the desire to make utterance endure, endures. Barker goes on to quote R. B. Parkinson et al, citing a caption inscribed in the Temple of Horus at Edfu, in which Ptolemy X is offering an ink well to a group of deities credited with "having caused memory to begin, because they wrote". It ends: "The heir speaks with his forefathers when they have passed from the heart a wonder of their excelling

fingers, so that friends can communicate when the sea is between them, and one man can hear another without seeing him".

[87]

58.15 In Morgan Freeman's voice it could be an advert for the next generation of i-phone; but it's an ancient description of the miraculous and magical nature of considered written material, and one which still holds good today. The urge to emphasise language at the ceremonial level, and the everyday practicalities of producing text in a physical dimension, have all contributed to our understanding of what poetry is, and the characteristics by which we recognise it.

[88]

58.50 Accordingly, we should expect the orthodoxies of poetry to develop not just in line with the vocabularies of its practitioners but in accordance with whatever technologies are invented to store and convey it.

[89]

59.06 So, is there a 'school' of Twitter poets yet, exchanging poems of not more than one hundred and forty characters, as if they were the modern equivalent of 'tanka' or 'haiku'? Of course there is, it's already a tradition.

[90]

And has anyone written the world's first poem using 'emojis' only? Yes, it's been done, and a good while ago.

[91]

Just as the 'Snapchat' poem is now well established. In fact, 'Snapchat', that messaging service which delights in the ephemeral, and, with its insistence on perishability, might represent an unlikely opportunity for uniting the opposing forces of printed and performed poetry, given the way it delivers compact blocks of language as writing, but as writing which vaporises instantly, like speech.

[92]

1.00.10 And has a machine produced viable poetry yet? Actually, no, not that I am aware of; at least, not the kind of poetry I'm advocatin' and celebratin', despite the fact that there's plenty of poetry-writing software out there. One on-line customer review for such a package reads: "It works a treat. Personally, I still prefer to write the poems myself, but, hey, that's just me".

1.00.43 **Ninety Three.** "Type your job title into the search box below to find out the likelihood that it could be automated within the next two decades", said the B.B.C website. I typed in the word 'poet'. Nothing happened. "Browse our full list of jobs" was the next instruction: but between 'Podiatrist' and 'Police Community Support Officer' there was nothing and no one. I took this as an encouraging existential sign. If a computer doesn't recognise poets, full stop, how can they be replaced? As I remarked earlier, we are an exceptionally insecure lot, unable to give a convincing account of what it is we do. But pity the poor 'Water and Sewage Plant Operative', for example, currently at position 146 on the 'career extinction red list', and with a 60% chance of imminent automation.

[94]

1.01.55 Which leads me to these final thoughts. Since the advent of the digital camera, and Photoshop, we're all photographers. And since the advent of the i-pod, we're all DJ's. And all composers once we've downloaded the 'Sibelius' software. And all scriptwriters with final drafts and 'Nudge on and Prompters'. And all film directors, as far as 'YouTube' is concerned. And all journalists, according to the Huffington Post. The list goes on. But we're definitely not all poets; which I find astonishing, given the apparent simplicity of the task.

[95]

1.02.41 "Prove you're not a robot" insists some secure website, before allowing users to continue. Transposed into a literary context, metaphorically askin' the same question of poems we encounter might at least give us confidence in filterin' out the 'junk' and the 'malware'. Some poems don't pass the 'robot' test, because they weren't actually composed by algorithms or binary coding; but they might as well have been, either because they're mind-numbingly shallow, or because they're inhumanly convoluted, gracelessly contrived. And the day a software package, or even a good mimic, can achieve that elusive but not illusory amalgamation of complexity and coherence which the most convincing poetry aspires to, that's the day we can all pack up and go home.

Thank you very much.