ACTA UNIVERSITATIS LODZIENSIS
FOLIA LITTERARIA ANGLICA 6, 2003

Joanna Kruczkowska

LANGUAGE AND FICTION AS SUBJECTS AND MEDIA OF SIMON ARMITAGE'S POEMS

Simon Armitage is one of the most successful poets of the 90's young generation ("New Generation") in Great Britain, the author of five poetry books and a co-author of one. Coming from the north of England, he is extremely sensitive to local and slang idiom, "slipping between registers and reality."[1] Before becoming a freelance writer, Armitage worked as a probation officer in Oldham and used that "benefit of unblinkered experience"[2] in some of the poems I am going to discuss. Inspired by Ted Hughes, W. H. Auden and Robert Lowell, he has been compared to Paul Muldoon in his fragmentary vision of the world and disrupted poetic-narratives.

Armitage once commented on his writing: "For me, poetry has become ... a dialogue between one part of myself and another. One informs and the other translates. ... It's bugged, and the person listening in is once again the author. Writing has become a way of taking part without having to participate, and a way of being alone without being lonely ... words have no meaning unless they're spoken, seen or heard."[3] This view of poetry corresponds to some of its author's various approaches to language and literary fiction as both subjects and media of his poetry. His notion of language ranges from a point where language fails as a means of communication and a system of meaningful signs to the point where it can actually give rise to facts perceived as real or where it surpasses human comprehension. Between these two extremes there are attitudes closer to one or the other: language interrupting the vision of the real world or, on the other hand, constituting indispensable facts in a chain of events. Discussing literary fiction, Armitage reveals the mechanics of poetic imagery.

[1] Philip Gross, "Slangland," *Poetry Review* 82.2 (1992): 56–57.
[2] Peter Forbes, "Simon Armitage. Kid," *Poetry Review Special Issue* (1994): 4.
[3] Simon Armitage, "Kid," *Poetry Review Special Issue* (1994): 8.

He also makes use of intertextual devices, borrowing his characters from other authors' work, introducing double authors and modifying all those figures through fictionalising.

In his poetry notions of language as a means of communication as well as a reflection of life vary from failure to omnipotent creation. In "Speaking Terms" language cannot perform its fundamental functions: referential, artistic, emotional.

> Picturesque,
> a talking point, except
>
> words being what they are
> we wouldn't want to lose the only sense
> we can share in: silence.
> I could say the clouds
>
> are the action of our day
> stopped here to evidence
> the last four hundred miles
> like a mobile, hardly moving.[4]

Powerless, disabled by the two characters of the poem who are not on speaking terms with each other, the value of language as a means of dialogue, of sharing thoughts, impressions, emotions, has been reduced to phatic basic statements:

> But I ask you the time
> and you tell me, in one word, precisely.

In another poem, "Abstracting Electricity," language is reduced to absurd "platitudes" ("one standpipe doesn't make a summer ..."[5]). It abandons its logic when uttered. Words are no longer signs but merely unintelligible sounds:

> There's an echo; let's talk for the sake of it. Language,
> we know, is less use than half a scissors ...[6]

Language fails the speaker even before it is pronounced. It hovers on the brink of its phonetic realisation:

> unspeakable
> but there on the tip of your tongue.[7]

---

[4] This and the next quotes from: Simon Armitage, *Kid* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 65.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 42.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

The second extreme assumes that language has a power of causing things:

> It is / the way of things, the taking shape
> of things, beginning with their names.[8]

and going beyond them, beyond human experience, the universe, as in the poem "Zoom!"[9] where the mysterious "it" begins within the speaker's immediate surroundings and is eventually "bulleted into a neighbouring galaxy, emerging / smaller and smoother / than a billiard ball but weighing more than Saturn." When people ask the speaker what it is, he says: "It's just words," belittling the burden of the words' meaning. The users of the "small and smooth and heavy," unaware of its importance and nature, would not accept the speaker's answer. The words exceed the empirical thinking of the people who take "it" for something tangible. Their confusion stems from the conflict of two forms of perception, sensual and linguistic, one exercised by the people in the poem, the other remaining an unexplored potential.

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world,"[10] Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, "...solipsism strictly carried out coincides with pure realism."[11] Bertrand Russel prefaced Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "The essential business of language is to assert or deny facts." Yet "in practice, language is always more or less vague"[12] for it consists also of meaningless words conveying emotion. Indeed, Wittgenstein's vision of a logically perfect language was never fulfilled and this unfulfillment is the topic of "Zoom!". Words "bulleting" into the universe in "Zoom!" slip out of their users' control and cross the line of immediate sensual perception. There, they hinge on the unknown which can only be imagined or grasped by the visionary mind.

Within this bipolar view on language there is a transitory zone. I will consider two poems, one bearing a relationship to the first notion of language and disturbing the vision of reality by means of imprecision and inadequacy, and the other supporting the second concept of words actually constituting the substance of events. The poems are two dramatic monologues: "Eyewitness" and "The Stuff."

In "Eyewitness" language builds up a faithful psychological portrait of the eponymous speaker while falsifying facts with the rhetoric of equivocality, understatement and flannel:

---

[8] "Song," in: *Kid*, p. 54.

[9] *Zoom!*, p. 81. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from this poem.

[10] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner), p. 149.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 153.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

As you will appreciate, these contact lenses
are not binoculars,
my acuity is not what it used to be
and the pollen count
was astronomical that day. But if I said
the rear view mirror
and the wing mirror and the windows
made a kaleidoscope
which turned his yellow teeth through each
of its facets
I could hardly be accused of distortion,
Please bear with me.
I will take for granted your understanding
that conjecture
is anathema to me but even the layman
could not have failed
to notice something furtive in his gait;
something circumspect
about his manner. Clearly the embankment
was a vantage point
with which he had not reckoned. The knife
for instance,
a polished thing of the bowie type
was raised
at an angle on which I need not elaborate
and though the mist
was soupish and the level-crossing bumpy
would I be lying
if I said his upper lip trembled like the lip
of a man
on the brink of an incident? I would not.
Whatever happened
after that is anybody's business, but clearly
the dog was not restrained
and an ambulance would have struggled
in that traffic.
Am I making myself transparent?[13]

The rhetoric and other cunning devices include: persuasion in a tone of certainty ("As you will appreciate;" "clearly" – an oxymoron of the whole poem); conditional sentences distancing the speaker from the facts he describes and letting him evade responsibility for his words ("But if I said"); a reference to people not involved in the events ("even the layman / could not have failed to notice"); groundless judgment ("with which he had not reckoned"); examples, details and hypothesis narrated in the quasi-investigation style ("The knife / for instance, / a polished thing of

[13] *Zoom!*, p. 51.

a bowie type ...;" "the dog was not restrained / and an ambulance would have struggled / in that traffic"); a rhetorical answer making the question also rhetorical ("would I be lying" – "I would not"); generalization ("Whatever happened after that"); defense by aggression ("anybody's business; I need not elaborate"). And the most important: ambiguities ("a vantage point" – is it a point of view of the eyewitness or a convenient place for the criminal?; "transparent" – does it comment on the story or is it the lapse of the tongue, a part of the "transparent lie" collocation?); withdrawing half-way through the sentence and suspending more specific information ("at an angle on which I need not elaborate"); and finally defying anticipated accusations, annihilating them while formulating ("I could hardly be accused of distortion;" "I will take for granted your understanding / that conjecture / is anathema to me;" "would I be lying"). All this beating about the bush adding to the blurred and relative vision of the events presented in the evidence (shortsightedness, weather and road conditions, mirrors, standing distance) puts the reconstruction of the crime beyond the bounds of possibility.[14] Language, when its rhetorical powers are consciously used, imposes the way of perceiving the extralinguistic world, creates common-sense illusions often without a chance for the listener / reader to try and pass a reasonable or objective judgment on the message.

On the contrary, "The Stuff,"[15] another witness's story, levels the gap between language and the tangible, giving words a factual status. Even at the beginning the reader finds the speaker's flamboyant sayings and idiomatic expressions to prove his linguistic inventiveness or form usual speech links which can either be replaced with other phrases or words (like the vague "stuff" in the title, subsequently called "it" or "nicknames," can be substituted with "drugs") or simply avoided:

> We'd heard all the warnings; knew its *nicknames*.
> It arrived in our town by *word of mouth*
> *and crackled like wildfire through the grapevine*
> of *gab* and *gossip*. It came from the south

[14] The same impossibility applies to "Judge Chutney's Final Summary." The judge, trying to avoid expressing facts, inundates his listeners with idiomatic collocations signifying abstract notions mingled with words referring to material designates, and in this way restores the original meaning of idioms (eg. *you have held out/against the avalanche/of evidence*; *I have taken guidelines/for tramlines/and have followed/trains of thought*; *I have picked up/and hauled in/a line of inquiry,/the thread/of a story/which ends in my hands/with the head/of a viper*; *to take it/all back/would mean unpicking/every stitch/in every sentence*... etc.). He concludes his evasive summary with a verdict obscuring the division between the concept and the experience: *Life to mean life, life to mean living* and adds he is *tired of mind/and tired of body* (*Kid*, p. 31–35).

[15] *Zoom!*, p. 67–69.

so we shunned it, naturally;
sent it to Coventry[16]

and wouldn't have touched it with a barge pole
if it hadn't been at the club one night.
Well, peer group pressure and all that *twaddle*
so we fussed around it like flies round shite

and watched,
and waited

till one kid risked it, stepped up and licked it
and came from every pore in his body.
That clinched it. It snowballed; whirlpooled.[17]

The speaker continues in slangish elliptical discourse up to the last two lines thus proving that the initial words describing imprecise or vapid information have signalled the "twaddle's" significance:

I said *grapevine, barge pole, whirlpool,* chloride,
concrete, bandage, station, story. Honest.[18]

This is where the words and the facts find common ground in the mixture of language's emotional, metalingual and referential functions.

Apart from the ones in italics, the enumerated nouns adhere to facts: "bulking it up with scouring powder ... or sodium chloride;" "having shed a pair of concrete slippers;" "its cryptic hoarding which stumped the police: / 'Oldham – Home of the tubular bandage';" "pushed us / down to the station." The last element in the chain encapsulates their interaction: "story." The word echoes the speaker's previous fact-related sentence: "I spoke the addict's side of the story" and works as a part of the collocation "the side of the story." However, it also sums it up, betraying the mechanics of this narrative – chronological but disrupted by words regarded as commonplace metaphors which nevertheless act a significant part of the true events. The narrative is no longer a Structuralist system of "grammar" where "words" combine into "sentences,"[19] or, in Barthian terms, the level of sequences amounts to the level of actions topped by the

[16] The speaker, like Armitage himself, comes probably from the north of England; whatever comes from the south, is literally naturally shunned and sent to Coventry, back south. Another example of a "recycled" idiom regaining its original meaning.

[17] *Zoom!*, p. 68. My italics.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

[19] Structuralists attempted to look at fiction as a kind of elemental grammar in which various "words" – or functions – combine according to a set of rules to become a particular sequence, or "sentence": that is, the narrative itself.

level of narration (a single structure to contain "all the world stories" advocated by Propp).

The division of language into poetic and colloquial, written and spoken, and of the world into signifiers and signifieds has been lifted, since their communication is possible only on the level of story-telling both past and present. This notion refers us to that of intertextuality based on a belief that the world consists of texts freely interfering with one another. The aim of this interference is not even adding new meaning or inventing it but a sheer *plaisir du texte* which in "The Stuff" is the speaker's name-and-create game aimed at misleading the court or the police.

The narrative brings to mind other Armitage's poems – those on fiction in a piece of literature. Intertextuality with its shift of importance from the author-text to the reader-text relation has multiplied the possibilities of literary composition (always based on the arbitrary *licentia poetica*) by introducing double authors, as well as characters and authors from works of other writers. Factors involved in these manipulations – metafiction, self-comment, parody, irony – disclose not so much writing processes which would run under the text surface (as in Modernism) as its techniques which run on the surface, giving an unexpected or even clashing effect. Literary tradition (whose conventions are used and overused) and history (which is no transparent statement of the absolute "truth" and thus it is presented in an ironic and problematic way) function as either contexts, texts, or both. The world and literature are equally fictitious realities (Borges); in other terms, our quest for sense leads us to the annihilation of the sense itself.

Such an interfered, aberred construction of the world presented (the above-mentioned distance and textual interactions) found its way to a few of Armitage's "metapoems," such as "Looking for Weldon Kees,"[20] the poem from the series devoted to a certain Robinson in *Kid*,[21] and "The Metaphor Now Standing at Platform 8."[22]

Robinson, a persona borrowed from Weldon Kees's poems, is an ambiguous figure. Presented in the situations most banal (eg. the beach[23]) and most extreme (eg. suicide[24]), he is literally in two minds about his own existence. The idiomatic title with a changed word, as well as puns in other titles – "Robinson's Life Sentence" or "Robinson's Resignation" raise suspicion about the protagonist. A "historical" person, a seer, a ghost,

[20] *Kid*, p. 13–16.

[21] The Robinson poems include: "Looking for Weldon Kees," "Robinson in Two Cities," "Mr Robinson's Holiday," "Dear Robinson," "Robinson's Life Sentence," "8 p.m. and Raining When Robinson," "Robinson's Life Statement," "Robinson's Resignation."

[22] *Kid*, p. 52–53.

[23] "Mr Robinson Holidays," in: *Kid*, p. 24–25.

[24] "Robinson in Two Cities," in: *Kid*, p. 18.

a paranoiac, a suspect and an eyewitness, an aesthete indulging in decorum in the face of death, last but not least, a Mr Robinson summing up his life in a sentence. "Robinson ... this not-quite-character lurks through the book ..., most often glimpsed just disappearing. His narratives are lists of moments that never quite add up to a biography: guilty fingerprints that don't quite match. His life blurs at the edges with other figments of the real world."[25] He lives his own and other people's lives, a truly universal character reflecting everybody's behaviour and speech patterns. His equivocality indicates questionable elements of the fictitious literary world, eg. the notions of the author and the protagonist in "Looking for Weldon Kees."

The real author of the poem, judging from the book cover, is Simon Armitage. He has introduced himself into his own poem:

> I'd heard it said by Michael Hofmann
> that "Collected Poems" would blow my head off,
> but,
> being out of print
> and a hot potato,
> it might be a hard one
> to get hold of;
> more than a case of shopping and finding
> nothing on the shelves between Keats and Kipling.[26]

The real-life details would speak for the "authenticity" of the poem – the name of Michael Hofmann (Armitage's New Gen pal), the ad in the *TLS*, and the facts concerning the distribution and popularity of Kees's *Collected Poems*. Yet when it comes to the very person of the late Weldon Kees, the author appearing in a flashback, we can no longer be so sure. Kees vanished mysteriously on 18 July 1955, his car located near the entrance to the Golden Gate Bridge, his body never found:

> There was too much water under the Golden Gate
> since the day that dude became overrated,
> the dawn
> he locked both doors
> of his Tudor Fort
> and took one small step
> off the face of the planet.
> No will, no note, no outline of police chalk
> on the deck around his drainpipes and overcoat,
>
> not even a whiff of spontaneous combustion
> to hang his vaporizing act on.[27]

[25] Philip Gross, "Slangland," *Poetry Review* 82.2 (1992): 56–57.
[26] *Kid*, p. 13.
[27] *Ibid.*

Now he has been identified with his collection (metonymy in the title – the name of the author replaces the title of his book). The word following the last quote stirs further doubts. It seems Weldon Kees lived in the times of Robinson – and of Simon Armitage, startingly, who was born eight years after Kees's death:

> *Simultaneously*, Robinson ...
> was back in town
> and giving *me* the runaround.[28]

As a functioning embodiment of the fictitious character of Kees's, Robinson could be a living proof of the literary piece's independence after its author's death (it is interesting to notice that Robinson's signature, X, is an anagram of "Kees"). Instead of Kees distributing his work, it is being distributed by its own protagonist ("Underneath, a parcel, wrapped in a bin-bag, / about a size and weight of a book, a hardback."[29]). Robinson's existence is just as fugitive as Kees's ("not even a whiff" etc.); he dissolves into the air, "being out of print and a hot potato."

Here are dramatis personae in order of appearance: two writers and their common protagonist, all three living double lives in the real and literary worlds.

I. Facts:

1. Simon Armitage, the author of the poem "Looking for Weldon Kees"; born in 1963.

2. Weldon Kees, the author of *Collected Poems*, born in 1914.

3. *Robinson*, the protagonist of Kees's four poems.

4. Robinson, a real-life figure (information not checked), living either in the times of Weldon Kees or Simon Armitage.

II. Fiction (in "Looking for Weldon Kees"):

1. "I" ("Simon Armitage"), the speaker of Armitage's poem "Looking for Weldon Kees."

2a. "Weldon Kees" or "the dude," the character in "Looking..." and the author of *Collected Poems* which the speaker is looking for.

2b. Eponymous '*Weldon Kees*,' *Collected Poems*, the book by Weldon Kees.

3. "*Robinson*," the protagonist of Weldon Kees's *Collected* ... which the speaker is looking for.

4. "Robinson," the speaker's friend in "Looking..."

(Italics signal the distance between life and fiction, fiction's "narrating" the facts.)

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] *Ibid*, p. 16.

The figures of Armitage, Kees and Robinson as the reader knows them from books, media, school lectures etc., have been doubled and modified through fictionalising. "Looking..." is a prelude to Armitage's later "apocryphal" intertextual experiments from the collection "The Dead Sea Poems"[30] where in the opening piece the author comes across the Qumram Scrolls in the desert.

Another poem, "The Metaphor Now Standing at Platform 8," uses a similar technique of duplicating and transforming on the level of imagery, starting with the title where the word "metaphor" replaces the word 'train,' a seeming tautology of the word and the device (the "metaphor" is a metaphor of a train):

> The Metaphor Now Standing at Platform 8
> will separate at Birmingham New Street ...
> Parents and their children are today invited
> to the engine of the metaphor ...
>
> Take heart, a boy
> could do worse than be a spotter of metaphors ...
>
> This is a metaphor I'm running here
> not a jamboree ...

The train runs long distances and provides the passenger with certain diversions on the way – the pleasures of the consumption of words:

> Here is the buffet car at the centre
> of the metaphor, where hot buttered toast
> and alcoholic beverages will certainly be mentioned.
> In the next **breath**, lunch will be served ...
>
> Passengers, as part of our Transports of Delight programme
> let me welcome this morning's poets. Beginning at the guard's van
> they will troubadour the aisle reciting their short but engaging pieces.[31]

The train-metaphor with its "delights" is opposed to travelling by a "boat train" and a "seaplane," qualified in the text with the epithets "allegorical" and "symbolic" respectively. The qualifiers are mirror images – the "boat train" is an allegory (the "allegorical" allegory) and the "seaplane" is a symbol (the "symbolic" symbol). The first takes you to or from a port; it is a mainland destination or a point of departure that counts. Such is the nature of allegory – one representation (image) and one interpretation, both obeying the rules of a given artistic convention. Thus, it should be entirely translatable. The "seaplane," on the other hand,

[30] Simon Armitage, *The Dead Sea Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 52–53.

takes off and lands on the – unreliable – water surface. A symbol should allow more readings than an allegory; its meaning is undetermined (we can dive in and search the depths for it). It is still translatable though in many different ways.

We could stop here to conclude that the poem presents a postmodernist concept of metaphor as an open-ended device. But the metaphor is not a journey here. It is a means of transport. And the journey is life ("Madam, life is not a destination but a journey"). The gist of the link between life-journey and train-metaphor rather reflects I. A. Richards' theory of metaphor, the one of a tenor and a vehicle. What is meant (life-journey) is carried by what is said, its means of transport (train-metaphor). The metaphor is thus "a train of events," "a train of thought," and, to repeat after New Critics, "not a problem of language, but the radical mode in which we correlate all our knowledge and experience."

Armitage, having reinvented the universal persona of a dubious literary status, reveals the processes of transforming real-life details into fiction. He employs a metaliterary distance towards the author and the character as well as the tools of his creation, exposing functions and workings of poetic figures. By doing so, he makes the reader, plunging into delightful consumption of words, ponder over the creative process which made that consumption possible.

The poet's notion of language ranges from a point where language is a limit on human experience to a point where it denies that experience; in between there is a transitory zone where the speakers try to falsify reality or make it equal with language. Words can be enslaved by the mind, compelled to reflect thoughts and distorted impressions of the half-seen and half-heard world, break down half way through the impaired speeches. They can, nevertheless, get out of sensory and mental control as well. Such language annihilates, constitutes, alters facts.

Department of English Poetry and Drama and Poetry
University of Łódź