

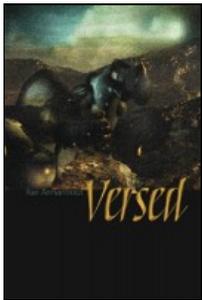
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APR 8, 2009

rae armantrout's versed

ROBERT P. BAIRD

[Note: This review is the second in a series. For the first, see [here](#). For the third, see [here](#).]



Rae Armantrout, *Versed*

For decades the confessional poem has been attacked by critics who find it intolerably naïve, suffocating, and limiting, the seal stamped by the signet of bourgeois values. John Updike, in a moment of intentional self-parody, captured perfectly the voice these critics hear: “Of nothing but me, me / —all wrong, all wrong— / as I cringe in the face of glory / I sing, lacking another song.”

By now, of course, the internet has made confessionalists of us all, and even the most stringent critics of the mode have shown reserves of complacency that could shame whole suburbs. But there was a time when criticism of confessional poetry had real teeth. When Charles Bernstein went after it in a 1980 essay, he argued that the moves had become too well known and the forms too much imitated, with the result that even the starkest of personal revelations ended up sounding phony:

Using various ‘taboo’ contents can read at this point as only a literary device to give the semblance of intimacy and authenticity... It’s not that one doesn’t believe the confessions of the private life to be true, but that such confessions take on a style and content largely predictable, largely, in a sense, already ‘publicized.’

One possible antidote to confessionalism’s predictability, Bernstein suggested, was a kind of poetry that took meditation as its model, a poetry in which “the mind thinking becomes the active force of the poem,” where “the music and rhythm of contemplation become the form of the life, a life, as it is being lived in a body.” Bernstein was talking about poets like Ted Greenwald, David Antin, and the Robert Creeley of *Pieces* and *Words*, but the poet who has turned his prescription to most impressive effect over the last three decades is Rae Armantrout.

Through much of her career, Armantrout’s poetic meditations eschewed first-person pronouns as much as possible, letting them in only when necessary to dress them down. “DUSK,” a fine little poem from her first book, captures the spirit well:

spider on the cold expanse
of glass, three stories high
rests intently
and so purely alone.

I’m not like that!

Since the 2000 publication of *The Pretext*, however, Armantrout has been bending her focus ever more inward. While she’s still suspicious of the self and its presumptions, lately she seems more willing to venture some positive knowledge about the self. Compare “DUSK,” above, to the last three sections of “Presto,” a poem from her new book *Versed*:

“What do you want
to be?”

Skeleton suits
and Superman outfits —

inappropriate touching
on drugstore racks.

*

Presto!

Pairs of flies

re-tie
the old knot
mid-air.
*
Blonde wigs and
wizard caps.
"I want to go back!"
Invisible knot.
I want to be that!

For Armantrout, the riddle of ontology, and the self's relation to it, has a special urgency: she has ~~kidney~~ adrenal cortical cancer. Unlike **Paul Guest**, Armantrout rarely puts her illness square in our sights, but it exerts a steady pull nevertheless, spreading across the backs of her poems like a tain that turns even innocent-sounding phrases into mirrors of mortality. "Dark matter," the title of a poem and the second half of the book, is a term borrowed from astrophysics; "Hey / my avatar's not working!" is a scrap overheard at an internet café; "But the part is sick / of representing the whole" is a joke about metonymy. All of these, however, become something much more sinister in the shadow of her cancer.

As in earlier work, in *Versed* Armantrout is determined to make form mimic mental function. She chops and stacks her lines to suggest the rhythm of thought and uses em-dashes to signal mental stutters. Voices from the outside world—an overheard conversation here, a snippet of Starbuck's soundtrack there—enter through quotation marks and add to the impression of immediacy.

Armantrout's success in this style is all the more significant because today the meditative mode wears the mantle of the "largely predictable, largely... 'publicized'" that Bernstein pinned on confessionalism thirty years ago. Amateur cognitive theorists are everywhere in contemporary poetry, and most of them are spouting the same cognitions and the same theories. Armantrout isn't entirely immune to this charge—every once in a while she'll write something that sounds like an MFA student high on Wittgenstein for the first time—but her quirky good humor usually spares her poems the smell of the seminar room:

Look — I'm cooperating!
I can pull myself apart
and still speak.
—From "Inscription"

Versed is a good book by a very good poet. But while I concede it's obnoxious for a reviewer to judge a book against some imaginary version of it he holds in his head, I can't help but think this book might have been better had Armantrout more regularly indulged her lyric gifts. In any other case it would be absurd to ask a Language poet for more lyricism—might as well ask them for a donation to the World Bank—but Armantrout has never been a "normal" Language poet. (Even Ron Silliman, in his introduction to *Veil*, Armantrout's 2001 new and selected, argued that it was "pointless...to identify [her work] as an instance of language writing.") The first half of "Pleasure" shows the skill with which she can deploy a lyric flourish when the mood strikes her:

A sleight-of-hand
equilibrium

being produced
as bees

pass one another,

a ticklish rumble
shuttling between blooms.

I'd like to think
I'm one,

no,
all of them.

There are several things to admire here: the extended metaphor, which brings down to earth the apiary image Dante used to describe the divine mind; the final four lines, which mimic the recursiveness ("I'd like to think") and misdirections ("I'm one, / no, / all of them") of our thinking; or the deployment of the contraction *I'm*, one of Armantrout's favorite tricks, which yokes the personal and objective selves under the strap of a single apostrophe. For my money, however, none of these qualities come close to that "ticklish rumble / shuttling between blooms," a phrase that affords all three of the pleasures Louis Zukofsky commended in poetry: sight, sound, and intellection. And so, while I certainly don't wish that all the poetry in *Versed* were like those lines—in fact I suspect they work as well as they do because of the austerity that surrounds them—I do wish a little more of it were.

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Disclosure: Some of the poems in *Versed* were published in *Chicago Review* while I was on the masthead, but I didn't play a part in their selection.

2 Responses

-  **Lilac Cotton**
April 11, 2009 (Edit)

It is all fine and good but there is this part of me that a "rose by any other name" is spelled midazolam.

It's okay to have the ability to rhapsodize in ancient philosophical folklore and call it new but it isn't okay to believe that it is.

All the same, it's nice writing, enjoyable with all the perks people ought to be able to expect from a practiced expert.

Reply



o **Robert P. Baird**
April 11, 2009 (Edit)

LC: Good call on midazolam. I usually try to lash myself like Ulysses to the mast to avoid the internet while writing, but here, clearly, the habit failed me. (As did, incidentally, the physician friend who happened to proofread the damned thing.) Anyway, you can bet if I'd known about it I would have used this line, from Wikipedia: "Midazolam is offered to death row inmates before execution in the United States." So add "Versed" to the list with "dark matter," the synecdoche joke, and all the rest. And thanks for the note.

Reply

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