

British National Identity, Topicality and Tradition in the Poetry of Simon Armitage

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Abstract

This paper explores the treatment of British national identity, topicality and tradition in the work of Simon Armitage, alongside broader issues concerning contemporary public poetry in Britain. Armitage, with Carol Ann Duffy, is a major candidate for the position of Poet Laureate in 2009. Both poets have explored constructions of national identity in their work, but it is Armitage who has located himself more assertively within the arena of public, national poetry. Despite his focus on modern life-styles and discourses, and deployment of the mass media to disseminate his poetry into non-literary public spaces, Armitage is particularly sensitive to literary and cultural tradition. Within his work, which is deliberately accessible and contemporary, tradition is always at play in terms of allusion, response and interrogation. In this sense, his poetry both occupies and challenges notions of canonicity and traditional conceptions of British national identity. His recent focus on the theme of conflict also works to expose the inadequacy of mainstream assertions of continuity and meaning when constructing national identity. Armitage places Britishness and British literature within a broader 'Millennial' schema of eclipse, destruction and regeneration. For Armitage the recurrence of the theme of conflict throughout literary history both connects the literature of the present day with that of the past and emphasises the future's instability and eternal lack of resolution. Therefore, Armitage's modern translations of canonical texts like the *Odyssey* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* foreground the fact that disharmony and conflict are, and have always been, national preoccupations.

Keywords: *British national identity; popularity; public poetry; tradition; conflict; Millennium; contemporary.*

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1. Introduction

Next year the position of British Poet Laureate, currently occupied by Andrew Motion, will again fall vacant. The last time (in 1999) the main contenders were Motion, Carol Ann Duffy and Simon Armitage. Simon Armitage may have been regarded as too young at the time, while contemporary commentators suggested that Duffy was rejected because of her sexual orientation. The media set up a fictional opposition between Oxbridge-educated, middle-class traditionalist ‘insiders’ like Motion, and leftwing, innovative ‘outsiders’ like Duffy and Armitage (Katherine Viner, *The Guardian*, Saturday 25 September 1999). While this stark opposition is inaccurate, Carol Ann Duffy has criticised the laureateship as it is currently defined, insisting that the first laureate of the new millennium should be a “democratic people’s poet” (ibid). Simon Armitage has also emphasised that poetry should represent a “communication device” to reach as wide an audience as possible (BBC interview, March 2004).

Both poets are again the main candidates for the job. Each has explored themes associated with British traditions, national identity, canonicity and millennial change. In Carol Ann Duffy’s long narrative poem, ‘The Laughter of Stafford Girls’ High’, for example, an epidemic of school-girl laughter at a straight-laced all-female secondary school leads to the collapse of the women teachers’ efforts to keep order and deliver their canonical teachings. At the beginning of the poem the pupils in one classroom are “getting Shakespeare by heart”, while in the next the girls are mechanically

...reciting the Poets Laureate
for Miss Nadimbaba- *John Dryden, Thomas Shadwell,*
Nathum Tate, Nicholas Rowe, Lawrence Eusden, Colley Kibber,
*William Whitehead...*but scattering titters and giggles
like noisy confetti on reaching Henry Pye as Caroline Joan
belted out Antony’s speech in an Elvis style-
For Brutus, uh huh huh, is an honourable man. (Duffy 2004: 229)

The “laughter” deflates the male-dominated national canon, leads gradually to the rebellion and liberation of the teachers themselves, and finally brings the collapse of the institution. On one level the poem represents an allegory of feminism, as both female pupils and teachers are freed from repressive forms of authority to explore their own destinies; but on another it re-maps Britain in terms of the limitations of insular ‘Britishness’ and heralds a new order based on a broader, more inclusive and informal perspective. The beginning of the poem sees the geography teacher mapping Britain for the pupils by listing the names of its rivers (“Brathay, Coquet, Crake, Dee...”), until a secret note “torn from the back of the King James Bible” begins its journey through the

classroom and initiates uncontrollable mirth and the collapse of decorum (Duffy 2004: 226-250). In the final lines one teacher walks to the edge of England and leaves her old identity behind: “By dawn, at John O’Groats, Mrs Mackay had finally run out of/land./She wrote her maiden name with a stick in the sand then walked/into the sea” (Duffy 2004: 246).

Duffy’s 1999 collection, *The World’s Wife*, also confronted the roots of literary tradition and popular wisdom, challenging the founding canonical texts in English literature by exploring stories from classical mythology, the Bible and the contemporary world from alternative, female subject positions, sometimes in deliberately comic ways: “7th April 1852/ Went to the Zoo./ I said to Him-/Something about that Chimpanzee over there reminds me of you” (‘Mrs Darwin’, Duffy 2004: 163).

In her treatment of the topic of British national identity, Duffy emphasises the disjunction between traditional clichéd valorisations of English culture and the chaos of modern life. ‘Poet for Our Times’ (1990) satirises the stripped, degraded discourse of the British tabloid newspapers, and ‘Translating the English, 1989’ (1990), juxtaposes traditional institutions, like the royal family and Buckingham Palace, with signs of urban corruption, disorder and decay:

Wheel clamp. Dogs. Vagrants. A tour of our wonderful
capital city is not to be missed. The Fergie,
The Princess Di and the football hooligan. (Duffy: 2004: 68)

Duffy has also engaged with topical events, but this engagement has often been in the service of her broader feminist project. In ‘Tall’ (*Feminine Gospels*, 2002) the protagonist is a female Gulliver who becomes increasingly isolated from earth and human society, as she grows “taller than Jupiter, Saturn, the Milky Way”. The larger she grows the more suffering she can see, until at last she looks back at the world of man to see the aftermath of 9/11: “She stooped low/and caught their souls in her hands as they fell/from the burning towers” (Duffy 2004: 221). In Duffy’s poetry this kind of topical allusion re-writes history, but does not necessarily seek to address a shared public consciousness.

Recently, Duffy’s poetry has become less political and more lyrical and intimate. *Rapture*, for example (which won the T. S. Eliot prize in 2008), traces the progress of a love affair. Conversely, Simon Armitage is increasingly establishing himself as a ‘national poet’- an unofficial alternative to the Poet Laureate (*The Sunday Times*, 3 September 2006). In fact, his recent projects suggest his interest in occupying and remoulding the official role itself.

2. National poetry and the Laureateship

Who should Britain's 'national poet' speak for in 2008, and what ought he or she to be saying? The laureateship has been a British institution for four hundred years. The Poet Laureate has traditionally produced verse on subjects of national importance, and has usually articulated a broadly conservative view. In the past, the title was awarded for the poet's lifetime, with a token annual salary of £100 and a "butt of sack" (108 gallons of sweet wine) paid by the Crown. Tony Blair modernised the laureateship at the end of the 1990s, but the Queen is still responsible for nominating the candidate on the advice of the government (Vanessa Thorpe, *The Guardian*, Sunday 18 May 2008). The publisher, Peter Jay, has described the laureateship as a "poisoned chalice. It is not a role I would wish on anyone" (qtd in Xan Brooks, *The Guardian*, Friday 20 January, 2006). For one thing, one of the laureate's tasks remains that of composing verse for the royal family, a duty regarded by many as anachronistic, recalling Britain's pre-democratic past when aspiring courtiers and poets sought patronage by praising the rich and powerful. For many people in Britain, the monarchy is an out-dated institution, and so the laureate's task of integrating celebrations of the royal family with topical discussions is sometimes uneasy.

Ted Hughes, Poet Laureate from 1984 to 1999, was regarded as "the most anti-establishment, black and acerbic poet to have become a court official" (Hulse 1985: 49, qtd in Ingelbien 2002: 111), but his poems for the royal family "earned him more scorn than praise" (Ingelbien 2002: 111). In 1999 Carol Ann Duffy commented that "no self-respecting poet" should have to compose poems for royalty (qtd in Viner 1999). Both Ted Hughes, in his volume of laureate poems (*Rain Charm for the Duchy*, 2002) and Andrew Motion, in his pair of poems celebrating the life of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother ('Picture This', 2001, and 'Remember This', 2002), attempted to unite shifting historical patterns, beliefs and conceptions of Britishness with the role of the royal family in national culture. Hughes tried to present the monarchy as a stabilising, eternal presence, while Motion recalls the unifying, inspirational influence of the monarchy on popular sentiment during traumatic events such as the Second World War. However, this agenda is problematised by the uncertain position of the royal family in contemporary public life. The recent film *The Queen* (2006), for example, explored the uneasy relationship between the monarchy, the mass media and the British public through an analysis of the royal family's responses to two major events occurring in 1997: the inauguration of Tony Blair as the first Labour Prime Minister in nearly two decades and the death of Princess Diana.

The problems faced by the Poet Laureate can be summarised by looking briefly at two of Andrew Motion's recent poems. 'Spring Wedding' (2005) is a sixteen-line poem written to celebrate the wedding of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles. Motion alludes vaguely to the controversial nature of the marriage, the blighting role of the media and other critics ("the roar of arguments...the scandal-flywheel whirring round") and the trauma of the past which (a typically lukewarm British) springtime works to heal:

...The heart which slips and sidles like a stream
Weighed down by winter-wreckage near its source
But given time, and come the clearing rain
Breaks loose to revel in its proper course. (Andrew Motion, 'Spring
Wedding', 2005)

The poem is notable more for what it does not say than what it does: specifically, its softening of the public's antagonism towards the monarchy. Motion's 'Regime Change' (2003), about the war in Iraq, is also rather oblique in its message. The poem depicts Death's annihilation of the country's landscape and cultural artefacts: "These places, and the ancient things you know/You won't know soon. I'm working on it now." The war is described in a generally abstract way, and political critique is implied rather than asserted. This obliqueness indicates the uneasiness with which the laureate's dual roles as topical poet and public property fit together.

3. British national identity and the literary canon

In the 1980s Michael Hulse claimed that the Poet Laureate was "now less an articulator of royal praise than one who expresses national experience, a sense of nationhood and Englishness" (Hulse 1985: 47). However, the role of 'national poet' is even more problematic in the new millennium than it was in Margaret Thatcher's Britain of the 1980s. Recently, multiculturalism in all its facets (ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, disability and sexual orientation) has become an arena of intense media interest and public debate. At the end of the twentieth century the poet James Fenton commented:

Englishness, for a poet, is almost a taboo subject. Britishness is altogether out. Whereas an American poet may speak to, or on behalf of his nation, this is hard for an English poet, now that it is not clear what his nation is. (qtd in Childs 1999: 180)

Events like the London underground bombings in 2005 have increased public insecurity about disunity in Britain. In the last decade numerous popular writers and broadcasters have published self-deprecating or defiant explorations of British national identity: for example, Jeremy Paxman's *The English: A Portrait of a People*, 2000, which begins: "Once upon a time the English knew who they were. They were polite, unexcitable, reserved and had hot-water bottles instead of a sex life" (Paxman 1998: 1). As Raphael Ingelbien has said: "ideas of England are increasingly being disputed by various claimants, [infiltrating] areas of debate as diverse as popular journalism, history, philosophy and literary theory" (Ingelbien 2002: 1).

The rise of cultural studies and postcolonial and historicist criticism has also foregrounded issues of national identity within literary studies. While Englishness was once considered as "an essence distilled by literature...now the concept of national identity is interpreted in terms of forms of ideology informing particular texts...the very concept of an 'English Literature' is now a controversial one" (Ingelbien 2002: 2).

The issue of the laureateship also highlights wider debates concerning the nature of poetry, its role in public life and relationship to tradition. While some people still regard poetry as belonging to a narrow elite, Duffy has insisted that poetry is now "part of the fabric of people's lives" (qtd in Viner 1999). In the last thirty years British poetry has become much more inclusive and popular, partly because of projects like 'Poems on the Underground' (exhibitions of poetry in underground stations and subways, launched by London Transport in 1986), and partly due to national public poetry competitions, polls and Internet publication.

Enterprises like the BBC television poll, 'The Nation's Favourite Poems', however, demonstrate the centrality of the poetic canon as it was constructed at the beginning of the last century within the public consciousness. When the show was first broadcast in 1995 the winning poem was Rudyard Kipling's paternal, didactic 'If', which can be found printed on tea-towels and wall-hangings across the country, and seems to belong to a colonial world of tea-on-the-lawn and disciplining-the-natives:

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
"Or walk with Kings"- nor lose the common touch,
[...]
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And- which is more- you'll be a man, my son! (Rudyard Kipling, 'If', 1895)

The poem belongs to another historical period when Britain's national identity and position in the world was a public preoccupation. According to Peter Childs:

When Queen Victoria died in 1901, England was fascinated by its own national identity, as though the combination of the end of a century, the last years of a sixty-year-reign, the Boer War and increased Imperial activity prompted a renewed interest in the country's role in the world. (Childs 1999: 13)

Britain's expansionist, imperialist project and the intensifying focus on national identity at the turn of the nineteenth century fed into the construction of a national literature (Childs 1999:14). During this period British poets tended to celebrate the past rather than establish new values or express new ideas: "their poetry was for the most part patriotic, conservative, imperialistic, and imitative" (ibid). Childs cites the example of the Tory journalist and poet, Alfred Austin, Poet Laureate from 1896 to 1913. His *Songs for England* (1898) was a collection of nationalistic, patriotic verse, such as 'Who would not die for England?', 'In Praise of England', 'On Returning to England' and 'Why England is Conservative.' Austin also defined what he meant by "England": "not only Great Britain and Ireland, but Canada, Australia, South Africa, India, and every spot on earth where men feel an instantaneous thrill of imperial kinship at the very sound of the Name ['Victoria']" (Millard 1991: 28; cited in Childs 1999: 15-16).

Nowadays, such poems would certainly provoke laughter in British classrooms, but in their time they represented part of a deliberate effort to record and construct British national consciousness along imperialist lines, essentialising notions of national pride in terms of universal moral truths. The construction of a national literary canon and the growth of a centralised education system developed in parallel. In 1902 the Education Act widened and regularised state provision of education. The new national curriculum was linked to the development of the literary canon, which was in turn linked to the concept of a unified national culture. It was believed that literature "could teach codes of behaviour and define national identity" (Childs 1999: 19). As Raphael Ingelbien has said: "the making of a literary canon has traditionally been one of the ways in which nations have sought to define themselves" (Ingelbien 2002: 2). The British classroom was a major site in which national identity and concepts of Britishness were constructed and prescribed (in the colonies, as well as in Britain).

Issues of inclusion and exclusion, of concepts of national identity as unifying or divisive, were also confronted in the early twentieth century (although this debate generally excluded most women and almost all of those outside the privileged academic environment until much later in the century). Ingelbien cites Cyril Connolly's essay 'England, Not my England' (1946), which represented a response to W. E. Henley's late Victorian celebration, 'England, My England'. Still later, George Orwell excluded himself from unified notions of national identity in 'England, Your England' (1941, cited in Ingelbien 2002: 1).

After the Second World War British poetry became increasingly de-centred. Again this was not a straightforward progression, but involved an interaction of competing beliefs and ideas. Peter Childs has connected the events of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, such as the rise of political protest, increasing rejection of military culture (consolidated after the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and protests against America's war in Vietnam), the Women's Movement, growth of Trade Union power and emergence of assertive counter-cultures based on ethnicity, political perspective, sexual orientation or gender, with poetry's increasing exploration of shifting concepts of national identity (Childs 1999: 124-7). The Welsh poet, Peter Finch, has also surveyed the development of British poetry since 1945:

British poetry has moved steadily from what many regard as twentieth-century parochial to a twenty-first century international. In the space of little more than fifty years the insular, clear verse of mainland English Britain has changed from being a centralist and predominantly male, seemingly academic practice to become a multi-hued, post-modern, cultural entertainment, available to all. (Finch 2003: 1)

Finch uses the term "parochial" to refer to the essentially middle-class, masculine and suburban themes explored by poets like W. H. Auden, Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis, who Finch associates with a specifically British, rather than international, culture, and an essentially white, masculine, middle-class outlook, or "tight stiff-lipped Englishness" (Finch 2003: 2). Childs and Finch both note the reactionary element in popular British post-war poetry, which they suggest represents a response to the decline of Britain's status in the world and the loss of shared beliefs to hold the country together. Philip Larkin's 'Homage to a Government', for example, derided Harold Wilson's Labour government for withdrawing all British forces east of Suez, while his 'Church Going' asked what purpose church buildings will fulfil once there are no longer any believers to attend services.

According to Finch, after the 1960s "British poetry took its vital left turn...The old order, knocked back by two world wars and the fall of empires, was finally teetering", resulting in the dismantling of traditional hierarchies, institutions and beliefs (Finch 2003: 4). In their 1993 anthology, *The New Poetry*, Michael Hulse, David Morley and David Kennedy noted the preoccupation of poets writing in the 1980s with "life in post-imperial Britain and the death of the national consensus" and, particularly in the case of northern and regional poets like Tony Harrison and Douglas Dunn, "a willingness to challenge the centre, to write poetry recognisable as social discourse" (Hulse et al 1993: 16, 20). Scottish, Irish and Welsh poets began to explore specifically Celtic national,

political and cultural identities, rather than situating their work within mainstream British traditions (Finch 2003: 6). Poets from the former colonies, writing inside or outside Britain, also became more visible, further transforming and “internationalising” the British poetry scene (King 2004: 10-11).

In the 1980s and 1990s poetry became increasingly linked to live performance, oral storytelling, music and stand-up comedy, as poet-comedians like John Hegley and Atila the Stockbroker became regular performers on the London comedy club circuits (Finch 7; King 228). Performance poets who took part in live competitions through the 1980s and 1990s (known as ‘poetry slams’ or ‘poetry jams’) tended to use their work as forums for public political protest (for example, against the policies of the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s, like the dismantling of the British mining industry and the First Gulf War). This movement to the left has given rise to the perceived opposition between the contemporary poetry scene in Britain and the poetic traditions of the past. In his polemical introduction to another end-of-the-millennium survey of British poetry, Gary Day claimed that contemporary poetry had been hijacked by politics:

...an exclusive concern with politics is threatening to impoverish our understanding of poetry. It has led to an ignorance of tradition and a corresponding blankness in the face of poetry as art. (Day 1997: 1)

Day in addition, complains that too much importance has been given to issues of accessibility and popularity, which has also led to a failure to understand the relevance of literary tradition.

On the other hand, Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain have complained of the dominance of traditional, canonical notions of poetry throughout the later twentieth century. According to them, Larkin, Hughes, and more recently, the ‘new generation’ poets (including Armitage), can all be linked to a narrow British tradition, which excludes experimental, neo-modernist or post-modernist poets, like Gael Turnbull and Jeremy Prynne. Caddel and Quartermain claim that late twentieth-century anthologies, and mainstream British institutions like the Poetry Society, have consistently privileged tradition over innovation. Poets like Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy are as “mainstream” as Andrew Motion, in that despite occupying a variety of subject positions, they assume control of the meaning of the text, which represents a coherent statement or perspective to be received unproblematically by the reader. They can therefore be linked with the ‘Centre’, and with discourses of privilege and power.

This argument is problematic, however. Does a popular poet who writes verse enjoyed by the masses reinforce or challenge the ‘centre’? And if it is asserted (as it is at the moment) that there is no ‘centre’, then where is the poetry of resistance located? Jeremy Prynne, for example, is based at Cambridge, the traditional site of privilege in Britain. If a particular poet does become popular at a particular historical moment, then it is worth asking why, and considering the ways in which he or she is read, and whether ‘popular’ readings are always adequate.

Like Philip Larkin, who dominated the contemporary poetry scene in the 1950s and 1960s, Armitage engages with contemporary critical thinking concerning England “at the empire’s end”.¹ However, unlike Larkin, Armitage suggests that it is within texts themselves, whether literary or non-literary, traditional or contemporary, that concepts of national identity originate and reside. He also insists on examining Britain within the context of global events. In both his topical poetry and his verse-translations, Armitage engages with literary tradition while moving poetry into a new phase of popular, contemporary narrative. This might be regarded as both a reactionary project (long, topical narrative verse was popular in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), and an innovation, since Armitage brings forms of everyday speech and sentiments into both his public poetry and his translations of canonical texts.

4. Simon Armitage’s public poetry

Simon Armitage is a poet who believes that poetry should be accessible and address contemporary issues. His work demonstrates a preoccupation with themes from modern life in Britain: the urban communities and institutions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the popular press and mass media, celebrity culture, popular beliefs, the class system, constructions of gender roles, education, immigration, travel, and issues of social integration. Armitage also defines his voice and cultural focus as northern: his novels, essays and television documentaries portray urban life in the north, particularly Huddersfield and Leeds in West Yorkshire (for example, his documentary, ‘Saturday Night’ for the television series, *Modern Times*, in 1995, and collection of essays, *All Points North* in 1999). Like Carol Ann Duffy, he teaches creative writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. He therefore demonstrates the British poetry scene’s shift away from the old southern, middle-class centre.

Armitage consciously deploys colloquial northern speech in his work, incorporating dialect and vernacular. His collection, *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid* (2006) contains a series of poems entitled ‘Sympathy’, voiced in broad northern dialect and slang (pp. 27-31). In a recent interview he explained his interest, as a northerner, in using dialect:

...you know, dialect poems are things that are usually frowned on and make you local and insignificant and it's been very interesting for me, as somebody from this part of the world, to try and find a way of representing some of the noises people make around here [Yorkshire] because, you know, in the phonetic alphabet they don't really exist. (Simon Armitage 2005: *Poetry Archive*)

Armitage has deliberately worked to bring poetry into the public arena, transporting it into non-traditional, non-literary public spaces, such as rock concerts, radio, live performance and television. He has also attempted to unify and define late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century British poetry. In 1993 Hulse et al described British poetry as essentially “plural” but cohesive in its newly democratic nature, accessibility and sense of poetry as “public utterance” (Hulse et al 1993:16). However, most critics find contemporary British poetry disunited. Finch claims that Hulse et al in fact demonstrate in their anthology that late twentieth-century poetry has no unifying characteristics. For Finch, the current emphasis on diversity and multiplicity demonstrates that “the many gleaming and disparate parts of British poetry do not like making a coherent whole...Twenty-first British poetry is no longer precisely English” (Finch 2003: 8).

Robert Crawford, Simon Armitage and Sean O’Brien are all popular poets who have recently attempted to establish a coherent contemporary British poetic canon and define the direction of British poetry (for example, Armitage and Crawford’s *Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland Since 1945*, 1998, and Sean O’Brien’s *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland After 1945*, 1998). On the other hand, David Kennedy has claimed that the poets of the ‘new generation’ (including Armitage) avoid authenticating unified notions of British national identity, deliberately presenting it in terms of a series of irreconcilable fragments (Kennedy: 55-78, cited in Ingelbien 2002: n.11). In the remainder of this paper I will consider Armitage’s treatment of contemporary British national identity through an exploration of his recent work. In particular I will examine his topical, commissioned poems, which were self-consciously aimed at and disseminated to a broad-based public audience, alongside his literary collections and translations.

In 1999, as Poet-in-Residence for the New Millennium Experience Company, Armitage was commissioned to write a “Millennium poem”, and particularly, to record the condition and perspectives of the British at that particular moment in history. During the year he visited millennium projects around the country, “charting the nation’s mood” (from an interview with Simon Armitage, *The Poetry Society*, 1999). The poem, ‘Killing Time’ (1999), was criticised for its darkness and pessimism, which seemed to some readers to conflict with the celebratory aims of the project. Rather than

presenting an affirmative, unified portrait of British life, Armitage structured the poem around disturbing news events and stories from the past year, within an implicit criticism of Britain's role in the world, particularly in relation to Anglo-American foreign policy:

Britain is an aircraft carrier moored off the coast of continental Europe,
home to a squadron of hawks and harriers. ('Killing Time', 1999)

After the publication of the poem Armitage claimed that it had been liberating to "mouth off" (express his anger and complaints) about the condition of England—something the official laureate would be unable to do (Interview with Robert Potts, *The Guardian*, 15 November 1999). The poem critiques the domination of British culture by the mass media, celebrity culture and capitalist values. Armitage explores the interaction between life and news, and particularly the way events are constructed, received and discussed in the mass media:

...news is just as much about what we don't know is going on, what doesn't
find its way into our living room. We use the news as a barometer of the
world, and it tells how we're meant to feel that day. But there are issues of
selection, presentation, authorial judgement. News is business and it ends
up as entertainment. (ibid)

For Armitage, the media's role in defining and interpreting reality distorts human responses to events and represents a barrier to true understanding. The poem reflects on a wide range of events across the world, such as the Colorado high school shootings, the Paddington rail crash in London, and the solar eclipse, which became a major tourist event in Cornwall. It is frequently the media's treatment of these events that is focused on: for example, in the case of the Colorado shootings Armitage describes the tired, media-controlled discussions of the nature/nurture debate:

It's back to the same
old debate:
is it something in the mind
that grows from birth like a seed, or
is it society
makes a person that kind? ('Killing Time')

The question is ironic, since it is frequently the process of media exposure and publicity itself that generates and feeds such events, distorting and corrupting people's responses to them. The line: "no news is good news" expresses Armitage's rejection of the media's appropriation of attitude and belief. However, since the poem is structured

as a kind of fractured ‘rolling news’ programme, partially expressed in the language of media sound-bites, the distinction between the poem’s different voices (popular public opinion, exploitative reportage, and the poet’s own implicitly critical voice) is sometimes blurred.

Although Armitage attempts to connect his topical material with the past one thousand years of history, this has the effect of emphasising the randomness, meaninglessness and lack of cohesion of contemporary events, and the predominance of conflict and combat in shaping culture. The sense of historical ordering is present in the structure of the poem (one thousand lines), but the poem also demonstrates that meaning and order is something that is always artificially imposed. For Armitage, the Millennium was just another story, based on an arbitrary moment in history: “a fictional date and a fictional time” (‘Killing Time’).

By shifting between events inside and outside Britain, Armitage also subverts traditional “patriotic” poetry by denying Britain’s insular complacency and forcing recognition of its place in the world: the impact of world events on Britain, and vice versa. At the time Armitage said:

At the end of the bloodiest century known to mankind, I hope the poem won’t swerve from its responsibilities, by aiming to address many of the global political issues as a piece of head-on public art. (Simon Armitage, 1999, *The Poetry Society*)

This statement emphasises Armitage’s desire to examine Britain from a global perspective (to look at Britain from the outside rather than the inside), and his refusal to define or portray Britishness in a unified way. However, it also conveys his intention that the poem should convey a meaningful message to a public audience in Britain. Armitage’s desire to see poetry enter new public spaces meant that the piece was broadcast on television as a poem-film on 1 January 2000. The film traces the progress of Millennium Man, a kind of Everyman protagonist, as he travels through Britain collecting the objects that people have given up. This story is interspersed with footage of real people surrendering items, which are finally burned at the Dome.

This focus on the surrender of objects or concepts that anchor human beings to the world alludes to another concern of the poem: the role of religion, belief and spirituality in modern life. The theme recalls the sacrifices demanded of individuals within millenarian cults, which regard human history in terms of one-thousand-year cycles. According to millenarian beliefs, the end of the cycle initiates the destruction of the old, corrupt order and instigation of the new. In the poem the Millennium Dome, the site of Britain’s self-congratulatory new-year party, becomes the site of the rejection and

destruction of the past and pursuit of new meanings and beginnings. Armitage situates the theme of religion ironically within his discussion of modern Britain. One focus of the poem is the way that Christianity was deliberately excluded from the Millennium celebrations due to concerns about offending or excluding non-Christian Britons:

Scarborough Beach on Good Friday,
sandwriting
says Jesus is Lord.
Letters come and go. On Sunday he's
lard, lurid, blurred,
By Tuesday he's bored. ('Killing Time')

Here, the tide's repetitive re-writing and scrambling of the Christian message demonstrates its gradual effacement from British culture.

Armitage's more recent public verse explores similar concerns. *Out of the Blue* (2006) commemorates three anniversaries: the fiftieth anniversary of V.E. Day, the thirtieth anniversary of the rise of the Kmer Rouge in Cambodia, and the fifth anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York. These poems were broadcast on television and radio, and published in the daily newspapers. 'May the 8th 1945' (2005) describes the British celebrations of the end of World War Two. The poem deploys a vocabulary of nostalgic patriotism, consisting of propaganda slogans, exuberant nationalist clichés and cockney slang:

We were bulldog British and still alive
with the future as bright as the widening sky
in the V of Churchill's victory sign.
We're singing our hearts out
going bananas [crazy]
to tunes rattled out
on war torn Joannas [pianos] ('May the 8th 1945')

The jingling rhymes and the listing of traditional clichés of British, specifically London, life ("hard weather", teapots, the lions in Trafalgar Square, Buckingham Palace, the English oak and Lambeth Walk) deliberately foreground the sense that Britain was apparently, at this moment, broadly united and assertive: traditionalist, monarchist, and Anglican:

And the dome of St. Paul's
picked out by torch
still golden and true
after years of hell... ('May the 8th 1945')

However, the section 'Returning from war' indicates the fragility and superficiality of this mass consensus:

Returning to what?
One man is met,
One man is not.
One man is slapped on the back in the pub,
One man's house is boarded up.
[...]
In another man's garden the flowers and stones
read Welcome Home.
One man weeps in a room on his own.
One man is asked his name by his son.
[...]
The stars took the shape of a Swastika once
but the heavenly bodies are ordered back.
Now there's a V sign, a spitfire, a Union Jack. ('May the 8th 1945')

The attempt to reconstruct and dramatise popular sentiment is undermined by the sense that national harmony is an illusion, constructed out of popular discourse, the patterns fortune-tellers find in tealeaves, or signs in the sky that will show people what they expect to see.

The long narrative poem, 'Out of the Blue', also deploys millennial themes to expose the instability of constructions of British national identity. The poem was broadcast on television as a poem-film on the fifth anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. Armitage describes the poem as "both commemorative and elegiac, but not political" (from an interview with Richard Brooks, *The Sunday Times*, 3 September 2006). However, this poem too is double-voiced, on one level voicing the personal perspective of one of the victims, and on the other imposing an external, global critique of events, which works to expose the protagonist's illusions. In this poem, America and Britain are strategically blurred. The speaker is a (fictional) British trader working in the World Trade Centre. He begins the day by reflecting on his position within America and western capitalism:

Is it shameless or brash to have reached top,
just me and America
ninety floors up?
Is it brazen to feel like a king, like a God,
to be surfing the wave
of a power trip,
a fortune under each fingertip,
a billion a minute, a million a blink,
selling sand to the desert,
ice to the Arctic,
money to the rich? ('Out of the Blue', Part 3)

The direct question (“Is it brazen to feel like a king, like a god?”) forces the reader to engage with the topic of religious and political conflict: in literary and religious traditions the worship of money, as well as the sense that one is superhuman, inevitably leads to disaster or damnation. The passage questions the morality of western capitalism and its impact on the world.

The poem also juxtaposes the global and the personal in its focus on the way that national identity is perceived. Just after this passage the speaker looks away from the window towards his desk, where he has arranged a variety of emblems signifying his Englishness. As in the memorial poem for V.E. Day, Britishness is constructed through a list of clichéd images (here, souvenirs from Britain associated with the speaker’s past):

Arranged on the desk
among the rubber bands and bulldog clips:
here is a rock from Brighton beach,
here is a beer-mat, here is the leaf
of an oak, pressed and dried, papery thin.
Here is a Liquorice Allsorts tin.
A map of the Underground pinned to the wall
The flag of St. George. A cricket ball. (‘Out of the Blue’, Part 4)

These objects are symbols of a cosy, parochial Britishness, a place and mental world that is defined as far away but waiting for him: “Here is a calendar counting the days.”

As in the V. E. poem, Englishness temporarily seems to inhabit objects and images, but like the “papery thin” English oak leaf, the meaning invested in these objects is fragile.

The poem narrates the aftermath of the attacks, as those trapped in the towers begin to try to communicate with the outside world. The victims’ phone-calls are “tightropes, strung/ from the end of the phone/ to a place called home” (Part 10). Information technology is the “web” they spin to try to get home: in the narrator’s case, back to Britain; but this system fails them, since there is no physical escape except death. Finally, the speaker can only watch from his position at the top of the world, in a scene ironically compared to a biblical Exodus:

And the people... New Yorkers flowing away,
a biblical tide of humankind, going north, going safe,
the faces of women and men
looking up at the nightmare of where I am.
Looking back at the monstrous form I’ve become. (‘Out of the Blue’, Part 11)

The scene of apocalyptic devastation is followed by the poet's assertions of contemporary life's fragility, transience and instability, and an implicit critique of the beliefs and structures that hold it together. The trader's initial questions ("Is it shameless/ brash/ brazen?") and assertions of personal identity ("here is"), are followed by a lament ("all lost") and a series of unanswered questions voiced "out of the dust":

What truth can be said to be bullet-proof?
Can anything swear to be built to last?
Can anything pledge to be hard and fast?
What system can promise to stay in place?
What structure can promise to hold its shape?
What future can promise to keep the faith? ('Out of the Blue')

In his 2006 collection, *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid*, Armitage deliberately weaves his focus on the question of contemporary national identity into an exploration of classical and medieval literary traditions, allowing them to interact and comment on one another. Some poems reinterpret the country's historical past, while others expose this past as an irrelevant illusion. For example, the extract from *The Bayeux Tapestry* is based on a medieval visual text: the massive embroidery depicting the Norman Conquest of Britain in 1066. Armitage re-interprets the 'story' of the tapestry: the death of King Harold and King William's establishment of a new order in Britain near the beginning of the last Millennium. The openendedness of history, and its endless conflicts, are indicated in William's awareness of the difficulty of his new job:

Nothing remains. History is mine.
England is France. in all but memory and name. (Armitage 2006: 37)

Throughout this collection, military conflicts concerning rule and conquest, contemporary class and gender conflicts, and post-millennium, global political and ideological conflicts are strategically blurred. Armitage exploits the popular British preoccupation with the historical past, while linking it strategically to the future, and subverts the traditionally affirmative function of commemorative battle poetry by linking these confrontations to contemporary threat and national instability. 'KX' (King's Cross) engages with the London Underground bombings of 2005, and again forces a consideration of the interwoven fates of America and Britain. Modern Britain is constructed as insecure: "primed/for that point in time when the world goes bust,/when the unattended holdall or case/unloads its cache of fanaticised heat." (Armitage 2006: 7)

Elsewhere in the book, as in 'Out of the Blue', British identity is questioned through the merging of English and American landscapes and motifs. 'The Stint' envisages another millennial scene: the end of a world in which things no longer make sense, heralded by birds which stream down from the sky towards earth. The setting is America, but there is also an "English scarecrow...running for home." (51)

The theme of submerged, and possibly irresolvable conflict is also present in the gender satire, 'You're Beautiful', which satirises and deconstructs contemporary British constructions of masculinity and femininity. The old assertion of the 'battle of the sexes' has evolved into a more subtle form of conflict, expressed in the popular cliché: "Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus":

You're beautiful because you can't work the remote control.
I'm ugly because of satellite television and twenty-four hour rolling news.
[...]
You're beautiful because you don't see love as a competition and you know
how to
lose.
I'm ugly because I kissed the FA Cup then held it up to the crowd.
[...]
Ugly like he is,
Beautiful like hers,
Beautiful like Venus,
Ugly like his,
Beautiful like she is,
Ugly like Mars. (17-19)

The representation of gender difference through the deployment of the Venus/Mars polarisation became part of contemporary discourse in the 1990s after John Gray's self-help text, *Men Are From Mars and Women Are From Venus: A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships* (1992). The poem highlights the way that 'reality' and perceptions of identity are constructed through media messages and popular received wisdom. The poem provides a wry comment on this book and its assumptions, which have permeated contemporary 'chick lit' (popular fiction for the liberated young woman, like Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*) and 'lad lit' (popular contemporary fiction for the confused young male, like Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*).

The sustained focus on the role of confrontation in constructing national identity is paralleled in Armitage's modern translations of classical and medieval texts, specifically *The Odyssey* (2006) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2007). *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid* includes a passage from *The Odyssey*, in which Odysseus's men reflect on their defeat of the Cyclops. Their sense of celebration and triumph is short-lived. In retrospect, the victory signals their doom:

The act was to haunt us. From then on
we were marked men, locked in a collision course
with the God of the Sea. He lurked in the depths,
a constant presence. We sensed him under the waves.
The boat shivered when he stirred. And if we'd known
the chain of event we'd set in place, the cruelty
and agony that stretched ahead, year after year,
the horror and terror and sadness and loss still to come—who knows,
perhaps we'd have chosen to die, right there, in the black cave,
out of sight of heaven and without sound. (5-6)

The passage's insertion amongst poems exploring contemporary and traditional constructions of Britain forces an engagement with the consequences of the war in Iraq, and Britain's role in the world in general.

The final work I want to discuss here is Armitage's controversial translation of the medieval poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, an extract from which also appears in *Tyrannosaurus Rex*. Armitage's occupation of the poem is significant, since the unidentified 'Gawain poet' has been associated with the north of England, and therefore represents an alternative voice to the court and 'centre' of medieval England. The poem can be linked to Armitage's preoccupation with confrontation, destruction and regeneration, but its overall function is festive and celebratory. The poem recalls ancient seasonal rituals celebrating the cycle of decay and renewal, as well as representing a formal rite of passage for Gawain from youth to manhood. The story takes place on New Year's Day when a magical Green Knight arrives at the court of King Arthur at Camelot to issue a challenge to his knights. A ritual combat with the young knight, Gawain, results in the beheading of the Green Knight who, rather than dying, demands that Gawain seek him in the north in exactly one year's time to receive a reciprocal single blow:

You're charged with getting to the green chapel,
to reap what you've sown. You'll rightfully receive
the justice you are due just as January dawns (55).

When Gawain confronts the knight one year later, the combat is transformed into a test of moral strength and courage: Gawain suffers humiliation, but is forced to admit his mistakes, and the poem ends in laughter and celebration. The emphasis on the process of rupture and violence towards healing and reconciliation recalls cultural traditions in which the New Year was greeted by ritual combat-plays like 'Saint George and the Dragon', and festive 'luck-visits' by figures demanding either money or some kind of engagement. These traditions affirm the value and power of tradition and continuity within an overall celebration of change. The focus on the mythic and seasonal realms in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* allows Armitage to inhabit a poetic arena normally associated with Ted Hughes, a Yorkshire poet and, as I have said British Poet Laureate. Hughes was fascinated by the natural world: the impact of man upon it and vice versa. He also translated sections of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* himself. Armitage has claimed that the poem's focus on nature, as both ally and combatant, remains relevant for a modern audience (Armitage 2006: Interview, *The Guardian*, 16 December 2006).

Armitage's translation has been criticised for its overtly modern language and heavy use of contemporary slang and colloquialisms (for example, the Knight "...rummages around, reaches at their feet/and cops hold of his head and hoists it high"). Robert Delamour has condemned Armitage for trying to produce a "Gawain of the people" (Delamour 2007). Armitage, however, has connected the project to his broader mission to bring poetry into the popular, public domain: "This is not an exercise in linguistic forensics or medieval history; the intention has always been to produce a living, inclusive and readable piece of work in its own right" (Simon Armitage, *The Guardian*, 16 December 2006). When the British supermarket, Tesco, decided to stock the book on its shelves, therefore, he insisted he was "thrilled" (ibid).

5. Conclusion

Simon Armitage's desire to disseminate a form of national poetry to act as a critique of nationhood expresses his globalising project. Armitage rejects 'closed' notions of Britishness, as defined by nationalistic traditions, canonical beliefs and the limitations of the mass media, self-consciously occupying the role of popular, public poet while stressing the inevitability of conflict and change, and the importance of global awareness in constructing a sense of nationhood. His topical poems deliberately engage

with the commemorative and documentary agenda that was such a prominent feature of public, national poetry in the past; however, he also foregrounds the problematic role of tradition, cliché and popular wisdom in the construction of national (as well as gendered) identities. On one hand, tradition is satisfying and confers a sense of national unity. On the other, it masks the inherent instability and transience of human culture, of which continual conflicts are a part. Armitage's engagement with literary tradition also emphasises his millennial, public project, by reworking the old to comment on the new. In Armitage's poetry tradition is absorbed, challenged and renewed.

NOTE

ⁱ This phrase is taken from Armitage's 'After the Hurricane' in *Tyrannosaurus Rex vs. The Corduroy Kid* (2006):56

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