

“How many constants *should* there be?": Rae Armantrout's Quasi-Scientific Methodology

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1. A Reading

The second, and central, section of Rae Armantrout's poem "Seconds" reads, on first inspection, like an extract from a scientific text:

A moment is everything
one person
(see below)
takes in simultaneously
though some
or much of what
a creature feels
may not reach
conscious awareness
and only a small part
(or none) of this
will be carried forward
to the next instant. (*Up to Speed* 23-24)

A disquisition on experience in time, this passage immediately raises questions. What happens to that part of experience that is not "carried forward" to the next moment? Is it stored subconsciously, or is it just lost? How does this relate to conscious knowledge, memory? And, finally, what to make of the vocabulary choice here? "[F]eels" suggests definitive sensation – is it possible for a creature to "feel" something without being aware of it? Why does this definition of a "moment" relate initially to "one person" but then, only a few lines later, to "a creature"? Are the two synonymous? How general and applicable *is* this information?

If this really *was* a scientific text it would surely move quickly to answer questions, switching swiftly from exposition to explanation. As it is, Armantrout frames this middle section with two disparate-seeming sentences. The first reads:

The point is to see through
the dying,

who pinch non-existent
objects from the air

sequentially,

to this season's
laying on of
withered leaves? (*Up to Speed* 23)

The final section concludes abruptly:

Any one
not seconded

burns up in rage. (*Up to Speed* 24)

Immense complications. To take the first section first, syntax, line- and stanza-breaks lead us through an increasingly complex image. First: “[t]he point is to see through / the dying.” So the dying are suspect, possibly deceptive, hiding something so that we need to, paradoxically, render them transparent in order to see them. This observation is apparently the “point” of some larger process or activity, as yet undisclosed. Second: “the dying, // who pinch non-existent / objects from the air.” Is it this odd activity that we are being asked to “see through”? The word “pinch” carries connotations of robbery or theft, so maybe so. The non-existent aerial objects are particularly easy to “see through” being, by definition, invisible, suggesting the tenuous grasp “the dying” have on reality. The poem continues though: “the dying, // who pinch non-existent / objects from the air // sequentially.” This is jarring. The illogic of the presumably hallucinatory process of pinching the non-existent objects from the air in the first place is contrasted with the apparently logical and rational order of their removal. It grants this previously suspect-seeming process a new air of reasonableness. Where then should our suspicions lie, if anywhere? “[T]o this season's / laying on of / withered leaves”?

At this point we are forced to rethink everything we have read so far. We are being asked to take the phrase “to see through” more literally than its idiomatic meaning would require in order to see through to “this season's / laying on of / withered leaves.” Which season is it? Autumn, presumably, when leaves fall from trees. “[L]aying on” is a curious way of describing that seasonal event though, implying not only a degree of conscious motivation, but also a certain decorative intention: one “lays on” a party or a spread for dinner – for the benefit of others and at one's own expense. Alternately, “laying on” has more religious/mystical overtones – the laying on of hands as a way of healing the sick. Either way, “withered leaves” do not seem a particular appetising medium for achieving those ends. And what does it mean to be asked to “see through” – beyond? – the *human* dying to this more general natural decay? A reminder that death has its own place in the “sequence” of nature? Something as

straightforward as that? Perhaps. But isn't that rather to overlook the specificity of "the dying" themselves, who may be so close to "non-existence" as to seem relatively "see-through" (as well as seeing more than is actually there), but who surely shouldn't be bypassed for that reason? The whole issue is made more problematic by that wrong-footing question-mark at the end. Whereas this sentence had previously seemed an authoritative laying down of the law, the apparent 'point' is now open to question. By extension, the whole assumption that what is being described is a situation that *could* have a "point" – i.e. some overarching process, narrative or activity – can now be doubted. What help can such preset assumptions be to anyone witnessing those *in extremis*?

Let's turn to the conclusion of the poem:

Any one
not seconded

burns up in rage.

A different sort of *extremis* here, that of a duel, in which the "principal" – the one actually fighting – has to have a "second" to help him, support him, observe that the duel has been fought fairly, etc. Any one not "seconded" in this way would be unable to fight and – especially if the duel were at their instigation in the first place – such a figure can be imagined figuratively burning up in rage. However, it seems unlikely that Armantrout should choose to end her poem with a general comment on the outmoded etiquette of an antiquated practice no-one feels honour-bound to observe any more. In a poem so concerned with questions of sequence and order a more direct interpretation suggests itself, one that takes the verb "seconded" in a far more literal fashion. Hence "[a]ny one" – i.e. any singularity – "not seconded" – i.e. not followed by a "2" (and, by implication, a "3," a "4," etc.) – "burns up in rage" – i.e. finds its monad status unbearable and consumes itself. This anthropomorphism itself suggests a further metaphoric level in which this becomes a comment on an altogether human need for sequence and/or progression.

Put the three sections of the poem together and some interesting interactions and reactions can be observed. For example, in a poem entitled "Seconds," not one of the three sections is longer than a single sentence. The middle section is distinct not only in its recourse to the language of science but also in its organisation as airy single line stanzas. The gaps work against the confident, flowing rhetoric of the sentence, breaking it up into smaller and more conflicting pieces. An index to this is the line "(see below)," that might refer to the "one" that appears in section three but is more likely an ironic gesture beyond the confines of the poem, as though this passage really were an extract quoted from some science textbook. The individual's "conscious awareness" is what he or she takes forward to "the next instant" irrespective of what is lost, missed or ignored. This sense of self, however imperfect, is what exists in time, an emphasis on the temporal that echoes the poem's title. "Seconds" are, arguably, the smallest unit of time that makes sense on a human scale, which we use on an everyday level: if something occurs to us in an "instant" or a "moment" we say "it only took a second" or "it was over in a second." Doubtless more occurs in this time than we can perceive or apprehend, consciously or unconsciously. This focus on the temporal limits of human perception may explain the shift in this passage from "one person" to "a creature" – a reminder that our "conscious awareness" is bound by our physical existence, the natural limit of our brains and bodies to sense and perceive.

This chimes in turn with the poem's opening section, in which the "natural" decay of autumn is apparently offered as a contrast or counterpoint to human death. However, if the underlying statement

seems to be “we exist in time as animals,” the final reconfiguration of the first section as a question addresses how useful or supportive such knowledge is. And yet it seems to tally with the human need for order, for “sequence,” even beyond the limits of reason. The image of this is the dying figure still pinching non-existent objects from the air even though this activity serves no obvious use. This figure appears also as an example of “sequence” itself. The nature of the hallucinatory process seems so utterly specific that the couching of this passage in general terms itself becomes suspect, something to be “see[n] through”: not all “the dying” after all pinch objects from the air in this fashion. The desire to extrapolate a general law from the specific, to somehow generate “the many” from “the one,” echoes both the desire to escape the monad state sort-of-depicted in section three and the idea of seeing balm in the sequence of natural decay and implied renewal (“can Spring be far behind?”). A hint of the specific does seem to creep in, that said, in the detail of “this season” – however abstract the idea of not noting which season it actually is, the fact is that this figure *is* dying, once and for all, at one specific time of year, at “one” “moment.” Placing this figure in the “sequence” of a generalised comment is perhaps a way for the unspecified observer – also, we must assume, individual, singular – to cope with the loss. The final re-framing of this passage as a question highlights the uncertainty of this position, the sense that recourse to “the natural” or “the general” may not be enough. The second and third sections of the poem appear, in retrospect, like codas to this overwhelming question, deepening its effect. The question must be asked, it appears, in order for the individual observer not to “burn[...] up in rage.”

2. A Reflection

In a 2004 interview Armantrout says “over the last, say, fifteen years, I’ve started reading as much science as I can. I get material or “inspiration” from reading to the limit of my understanding in physics or cognitive science” (*Chicago Postmodern Poetry*). “Seconds” offers an index to much of what I want to argue for in this paper concerning Armantrout’s engagement with science. Firstly, that she is interested not only in the “content” of scientific investigation, but also in its “voice,” the tone of confidence and authority that characterises scientific discourse. Secondly, that she delights in using this “voice” in her poems in juxtaposition with material that might more normally be labelled philosophical, sociological or even personal. And thirdly, that despite this incongruity Armantrout’s use of this “voice” is not simply parodic or critical (although it is often both). In a sense, her poems themselves echo and replicate the effects of scientific investigation and method. Although its argument is not linear – it doesn’t move clearly from premise to premise, proof to proof – the reader comes away from a poem like “Seconds” with the feeling that his or her knowledge has been increased, altered or that, at least, his or her assumptions have been questioned.

A favourite Armantrout tactic is the faux-axiom – the declaration that reads or sounds definitive on first encounter before gradually (or speedily) unravelling into a multiplicity of possible meaning. The final section of “Seconds” that we just looked at is an example of this. Others – taken just from her 2004 volume *Up to Speed* – include:

Pattern recognition
was our first response

to loneliness. (35)

[...]

The opposite
of nothingness

is direction (40)

[...]

(The whole being
of the sophisticated person
is an answer to questions
not immediately posed.) (43)

[...]

(A thought
is a wish for relation
doubling as a boundary.) (30)

[...]

When a dreamer sees she's dreaming.
it causes figments to disperse. (21)

And finally:

The fundamental
stuff of matter

is the Liar's
Paradox. (48)

Each of these seems designed to trigger first acceptance – surely such a clear, dispassionate, authoritative statement, delivered so conclusively, cannot be anything other than true? – and then a sort of double take, as complexities start revealing themselves.

Armantrout has said of this tendency in her work that she likes “endings that are like false bottoms, statements that at first sound true, but which, almost immediately cause the reader to have second thoughts.” She selects a particular example as offering a meta-commentary on the process:

The ending of “The Creation” in *Made To Seem* exemplifies this while (almost) saying something similar. It goes: “To come true, / a thing must come second.” That sounds definitive; it has a “truth-effect” while simultaneously undermining the status of truth, making it sound like a troublesome little brother. So, anyway: maybe I’m too busy undermining to develop extensive procedures. (*Collected Prose* 126)

These collapsing axioms can indeed be seen as an “undermining” of the voice of scientific rationality, but to regard it only as such would be to ignore Armantrout’s obvious attraction to this sort of language: why return repeatedly to this effect – as the examples just quoted demonstrate – if one’s intentions are purely negative? The answer may be that it depends on how you regard negativity. Armantrout may say she is “too busy undermining to develop extensive procedures,” but that “undermining” can itself be regarded as a kind of method. The progress of science – if we can believe in such a thing – has been as much about the overturning of previously established beliefs as it has been about fresh discoveries, new theories and innovative models. The sort of critical intelligence Armantrout brings to bear on experience has direct parallels with the rational methodology of science. From a certain angle any axiom or premise, however forcibly stated, is a challenge or invitation rather than a fact, what Karl Popper calls a “conjecture” – always open to the possibility of refutation. Armed with this quality of possible doubt, Armantrout is anything but a simplistic neo-Blakean chastising scientific discourse for its allegedly non-humanistic, clinical hubris.

In a poem with the loaded title “As We’re Told,” the degree to which Armantrout does and does not see the “narrative” of rational method as simply “another story” becomes clearer:

At the start, something must be arbitrarily excluded.
The saline solution. Call it an apple. Call this a test
or a joke. From now on, apple will mean arbitrary
choice or “at random.” Any fence maintains the other
side is “without form.” When we’re thrown out, it’s onto
the lap of our parent. Later, though, Mother puts
the apple into Snow White’s hand,
and then it’s poison! (*Veil* 120)

Here the exclusions necessary for a controlled experiment are gently – or perhaps not so gently – ridiculed. If the hypothetical situation really requires us to call the saline solution “an apple” then we really do seem to have lost the plot and “apple” does deserve to come to mean “arbitrary / choice” (although note that, scare-quoted as it is, “at random” suddenly looks less random and altogether more knowing, self-conscious and ironic). Another narrative of “the start” involving an apple is alluded to, although curiously inverted, in “[w]hen we’re thrown out, it’s onto / the lap of our parent,” where “lap” already echoes – and is contained within – “apple.” God and Wicked Stepmother then merge in the final reference to the story of Snow White. Appearances – and assumptions – can be deceptive: parents aren’t always benevolent to their children and apples aren’t always a source of sustenance (or even of a “fortunate fall”). Do stories help tell us such things or do they merely occlude them? Is this poem “a test” or “a joke”? It seems to require the seriousness of one and the humour of the other. The seriousness appears to coalesce around the sentence “[a]ny fence maintains the other / side is ‘without form.’” This is the isolationist thinking behind any exclusion or prejudice, that forgets of course that any fence is a negative imposition of form along both of its sides (“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall”). Armantrout’s target seems to be not so much rational methodology itself – though it can appear ridiculously pedantic at times – as the thinking that would see its “bracketings off” as somehow advantageous or admirably in themselves. Method – or narrative – is only as good as whoever applies it and a methodology, like any inherited convention, is always open to question.

In another poem, with the simultaneously definite yet vague title “It,” Armantrout sets out in surprisingly straightforward terms her doubt in faith and her faith in doubt. The first section is entitled “The Ark”:

How we came to be

this many
is the subject

of our tale.
One story

has been told
in many ways.

In the beginning
there was just one

woman
or one language

or one jot
of matter,

infinitely dense.

It must be so,
but who can believe it? (*The Pretext* 43-4)

Who indeed? If the singularity of Eve, or Babel, or the Big Bang, or “Lucy” is not to be believed in the face of multiplicity, where does that leave us? “[M]ust” origin be traced back to a single point in this way? How useful is to for us to make a “tale” out of it, either way? On the Ark, of course, things survived by being herded into twos – is Armantrout suggesting this as a possible counternarrative to one-ness? As in “Seconds,” even the movement from one to two is fraught. In the second part of “It,” “The Hook,” Armantrout seems to set up an aesthetics (or ethics) of doubt in more personal (or at least subjective) terms:

“But what about...?”
she asks

and stops,
shrunk

to the impulse
to formulate

some doubt.

Body a question mark,
soul a wire hook. (*The Pretext* 43)

“The hook” is that aspect of a subject or thing that makes it interesting, gripping or attractive, the part of a song that makes it catchy, a potential hit. In her 1998 memoir *True*, Armantrout provides an autobiographical context for this sort of “impulse”:

“Why?” and “What do you mean?” didn’t seem to have been allowable questions in my home. Now I can’t stop asking them. (*Collected Prose* 141)

If this desire to question – a “scientific” desire, I would argue – leads invariably to “shrinkage,” is this automatically a reduction? Might it not instead be a purification, a rendering essential? The poem lets the negative connotations stand. The final image, or set of images, is particularly suggestive and/or problematic. Again, it induces a double take: initially so neat – presented as a simple set of equations – its weirdness only unfolds on a more in-depth reflection. In a sense it seems a reversal of the norms of mind/body description, body become an abstraction that can only exist as a mark on paper or as an intonation in someone’s voice, while soul is granted all the present corporeality of a “wire hook.” Question mark and hook *look* similar however, almost mirror images. Of course the mind/body problem – the ghost in the machine – is a duality that has troubled thinkers from Descartes onwards – a duality to set against narratives of singularity perhaps, despite the mention of “soul” evoking the Biblical narratives echoed in the first part of the poem. A “hook” itself, in its curved support and intimation of violence, seems nothing other than singularity. We – perhaps like the questioner in the poem – wish to be let off the hook, but the poem refuses to lift us out of our torn, binary position.

Armantrout’s critical method refuses then to do the reader’s work: we too must adopt a similarly critical approach. To return briefly to the image of the Ark, we are all, as we’re told, in the same boat.

Works Cited

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Rob Stanton lives, teaches and writes in Savannah, GA, with wife and cats. His poems and prose have been published in numerous places on- and offline. He is working on, among other things, a book about Rae Armantrout. A sequence of self-published chapbooks can be found at <http://stores.lulu.com/store.php?fAcctID=3993260>. His first full-length book, *The Point*, is forthcoming from Pinned in the Margins.