

# The similarities and differences between poetry and prose

Simon Armitage considers the relationship between the two.

I once spent an hour with Margaret Atwood on a bed in a London hotel room during broad daylight. It wasn't as saucy as it sounds - I was doing an interview for the BBC and all the studios in Broadcasting House had been double booked - but I don't always get around to telling that part of the story.

Margaret Atwood is best known as a novelist, one of the finest living novelists in the world in fact, but she's also a poet, and I was keen to ask her about the differences and similarities between the two types of writing. Propped up on a pillow, she said that poetry came out of one side of the brain and prose the other, although she wasn't able to say which came from the left and which from the right. She was being metaphorical, I suppose, rather putting forward a new theory of literary-psychiatry, but it's an image I've remained conscious of ever since. For instance, if poetry comes out of the left hemisphere, should poets use their mobile phones only in the right ear, to keep the tumours away from the ideas? And should novelists sleep on their right side, to make sure enough blood gets to the brain by morning?

I'm a poet by nature, but over the last couple of years I've written a lot of prose, including articles for newspapers and magazines, reviews, essays, diary pieces, scripts, profiles, and eventually a book. Most people are more inclined towards the writing of prose because they read more of it and think they understand how it works. But for me it's different, because I've spent so much time thinking about and writing poetry. Poetry feels like a mother tongue to me, and when I first started to write prose with any seriousness, I had to go through the text afterwards striking out rhymes and disrupting any sentences that had fallen into a regular rhythm. It's also the case that I tend to see poetry wherever I look: adverts on billboards, vitamin lists on the back of cereal packets, names and addresses, public notices, shopping lists, even that card at the opticians with the letters disappearing to vanishing point at the bottom. Maybe I should get my eyes tested, but to my way of seeing things, the world is made of poetry, and it's easier to write it straight down rather than trying to decode or translate it into prose.

Here are a few generalizations. Poetry, I suppose, is a more intense experience, so line for line it probably takes longer to write. It's stupid trying to quantify it, but sometimes it's unavoidable. For example, a newspaper might pay £100 for a poem of twenty lines, or an article of five-hundred words. And a university tutor in a Creative Writing department might ask a student to hand in a manuscript of twenty poems, or a forty or fifty-page story. There's also the question of mood, or inspiration as it used to be called. Some mornings I can no more write a poem than fly, but most days I reckon I can plod forward with prose no matter how downbeat or unlovable I'm feeling, almost like having to get out of bed to go to work. And that must be true of novelists, who have to produce something in the region of eighty-thousand words every couple of years whether they like it or not. Having said that, I know poets who thought that prose, when they finally got around to it, would somehow write itself, like driving an automatic after years of messing around with the gears, but it wasn't the case. It's hard. Difficult. Needs to be learned. Just because you can read and write doesn't mean you can become an

author. It's like thinking you could design a formula on racing cars just because you own a clean driving licence

Writing, when it boils down to it, is the art of concentration. Concentration requires a type of mental acuity, and people tend to have one, inborn focal-length rather than both short-range and long-distance vision. Only a few writers, such as Thomas Hardy, manage to make it to the top in poetry and prose, and you have to take your hat off to those people, no matter which side of your brain you're trying to keep warm.

## Directory Enquiries I

*February. The telephone rings.*

*'Mr Armitage?'*

*'Yes.'*

*'It's Direct Line Insurance in Leeds, Is it right you're a poet?'*

*'Yes.'*

*'Are you well known?'*

*'How do you mean?'*

*'Are you famous?'*

*'Er ...have you heard of me?'*

*'No.'*

*Silence. The sound of thinking.*

*'OK, thanks.'*

## Directory Enquiries II

*March. The telephone rings.*

*'Mr Armitage?'*

*'Yes.'*

*'It's Direct Line Insurance in Leeds.'*

*'Oh yes.'*

*'You're not a probation officer any more, are you?'*

*'I'm not.'*

*'You're a poet aren't you?'*

*'I am.'*

*'I'm afraid there's an eighty-pound loading for that.'*

*'How come?'*

*'Higher-risk category.'*

*'Higher risk than a probation officer?'*

*'That's right.'*

*'How come?'*

*'Entertainment and Leisure. The public - nutters and all that.'*

*'I see.'*

'Sorry. Unless you want to explain to us what it is you do exactly, as a job?'

'You mean for money?'

'To earn a living.'

'Not really.'

'Fine. So will it be direct debit or shall we send you a bill?'

*From All Points North, Simon Armitage 1998*

## A short story from All Points North by Simon Armitage

You go to A&M Records to see them about writing some songs. They've been along, incognito, to one of your readings, and reckon you're the right man to 'put lyricism back into lyrics'. You get a taxi from King's Cross, thinking that the address must be close by, thinking that Sting and Chris de Burgh wouldn't want to go hacking around South London to sign contracts and pick up lorry loads of cash. But you're practically in Portsmouth by the time you get there, somewhere near Putney Bridge. The Irish girl at reception juggles telephones and flirts with two men in plastic trousers leaning over the desk, speaking a sort of transatlantic cockney. A motorcycle courier comes in with one letter in his leather glove, stands there for five minutes without lifting his visor, then eventually tosses the letter into a wicker basket and leaves.

It's become pretty clear by now that unless you suddenly rip off your mask and reveal yourself to be David Bowie, you're going to have to make something happen. But at the same time you don't want her to think that you're some creepy no-hoper with two dozen demo tapes in a carrier bag and a thousand more in the wardrobe at home. You mumble something to her about the man you've come to see (you call him Bosman, even though you know this is a Belgian footballer and not his name), and after another five minutes or so she announces over the tannoy that 'Mike Armitage is in reception.' You think she's confused you with the England cricket captain but still managed to get it wrong. Not long afterwards, she leans over the desk and says, 'Steven, you can go upstairs and meet the man.'

You sit on a blue settee, next to another blue settee at right angles. In a quiet moment, you stroll over to the far side of 'the man's' office to look at a photograph of Ilie Nastase, which turns out to be Bryan Ferry at his most unshaven. In the bottom corner he's written 'To Boz - for hiring and firing!' When Boz walks in, he's tall, good-looking, Turkish maybe but ultimately Californian, whatever that means. He's wearing jeans and a plain T-shirt, which you take as a reasonably good sign, and he slides on to the other settee, so you have to turn inwards to look at him. This makes your trouser leg ride up above the top of your sock, offering him a couple of inches of white hairy skin.

Twenty minutes later, you still haven't said hello, and Boz is halfway through his career portfolio to date, beginning somewhere in the seventies during the oil crisis, through Silicon Valley and the computer explosion of the eighties, and eventually to this two-sofa office on the New King's Road. The gist of it is that he's either made a bog splash or saved an industry from certain death

*every time he's put his mind to it, then jumped ship whenever he's sensed a gap in the market or a business opportunity,*

*You're just about to ask your first question when he begins his second monologue - a lecture on pop music - beginning in 1977 with the extinction of the Rock 'n' Roll Dinosaur. A picture of a long-haired, leather-jacketed Bryan Adams sneers from the wall. Even though Boz only comes up for air between paragraphs, you can tell that you make him nervous, and he begins stretching his vocabulary beyond its operational capabilities. At one point, he finds himself speaking about 'maximal influxions'. Five minutes further on, he's talking about 'timbre' as though it were something a lumberjack might shout, and looks quickly over to you for advice on pronunciation. For some reason you don't seem able to help him, and he gives him a well-what's a bit-of-pronunciation-between-us-blokes look. Reassured, he carries on towards the outer reaches of the English Language*

*You're probably embarrassed that he feels he has to speak to you as if you're Andrew Marvell. At the same time you're annoyed, in the way that geography graduates are annoyed when someone asks them, 'So what's the capital of Outer Mongolia, then?', or the way psychologists are annoyed when accused of analysing people. You're also pissed off with him for saying so many things that you disagree with, and pissed off for yourself for agreeing with them. You can see yourself from where the two Bryans look out from their photographs, nodding like a toy dog.*

*'And then in 1984...' you hear him saying, while someone in the next office picks up a guitar and murders the first three chords of Teenage Kicks.*

*'So what did you study?' he asks you, noticing that you're drifting out of orbit. 'Geography, then Psychology,' you tell him, expecting your next two answers to be 'Ulan Bator' and 'Would I do that?' But there's obviously no time for idle chit-chat, and pretty soon he's well into his definition of 'the pop-lyric' - what it is and what it isn't, and how you might fit into the scheme of things. What it is, apparently, is the subtle, barely noticeable juxtaposition of opposites, such as bitter and sweet, happy and sad. That's all there is to it. What it isn't, apparently, is 'me, you and a dog named Boo.' He uses this example several times, to the point where you begin to think how catchy it is, how the barely noticeable juxtaposition of its opposites brings about a kind of bitter/sweet, happy/sad sort of effect.*

*As you're thinking all this, you're hypnotized by the way he moves to the sound of his own voice, or the way he gives physical expression to his own words by use of his hands, mainly to explain musical terms as he understands them. 'Syncopation', for example, is a kind of two-handed separation, the kind that would cause a squeeze-box to draw breath, or a technique for the stretching of dough during bread-making. 'Harmony' is both hands flat out in front, rising and falling like levels of a graphic equalizer, and 'melody' is one finger drawing the troughs and peaks of a cable strung out along telegraph poles. During this simultaneous signing (you begin wondering if he has to deal with a lot of deaf people) Boz explains that many of his new acts, while being completely computer literate and speaking music as a first language, when it comes*

*to words and meaning are somewhat ... 'Challenged?' you suggest. 'Challenged. Exactly.' It therefore follows, apparently, that if they could knock out a few tunes, you could knock out a few verses to go with them. Before you know what you're doing, you're nodding in agreement with again, and Ferry and Adams are smirking at each other across the room. 'Of course, I'm sure that writing lyrics will be just the same as writing poetry, only different,' says the man. 'Like wanking with the other hand,' says you.*

*'Oh, if it was that difficult we wouldn't be asking you to do it,' says he, and a minute later you're back out on the New King's Road in the rain, looking for a tube station. You know for a fact that nothing will come of this, and you guess Boz knows it too. You're soaked to the skin, and a twenty-quid taxi ride down on the deal already.*

**Article Written By:** © Simon Armitage, 1998

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