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**TRULY, IT'S HOW I AM :  
Autobiography in Simon Armitage's *Book of Matches***

The title of Simon Armitage's fifth collection of poems, *The Book of Matches* (Faber 1993), refers to an autobiographical party game where the participants must recount episodes of their life story in the time it takes for a match to burn out. The first match tends to give rise to a number of dates and places from birth to the present day. As the game proceeds, certain details are focused on and explored as the autobiographical narratives take on more of a psychological angle.

Armitage's collection is divided into three parts: *Book of Matches*, "Becoming of Age" and "Reading the Banns". The section that interests us here is the first, a sequence of thirty sonnets, and thirty was exactly Armitage's age when this collection was first published. Apart from the first, each poem is preceded by an asterisk (\*) symbolising the initial spark as the match ignites. The first poem of the sequence explains the rules of the game but ends with a warning against the psychological aspects the game may take on:

My party piece:  
I strike, then from the moment when the matchstick  
conjures up its light, to when the brightness moves  
beyond its means, and dies, I say the story  
of my life –

dates and places, torches I carried,  
a cast of names and faces, those  
who showed me love, or came close,  
the changes I made, the lessons I learnt –

then somehow still find time to stall and blush  
before I'm bitten by the flame and burnt.

A warning, though, to anyone nursing  
an ounce of sadness, anyone alone:  
don't try this on your own; it's dangerous,  
madness. [Armitage 1993, 3.]

The twentieth poem of the sequence then reminds us of the game:

\*

Let this matchstick be a brief biography,  
the sign or symbol  
for the lifetime of a certain someone. [Armitage 1993, 1-3; 22.]

The last poem of the sequence also contains direct references to the game and its rules, ie. to the artificial framework within which the narrator is held to tell his life story. However, this last poem reflects a certain opening: the autobiographical and therefore retrospective game is over but what is left for the future? Perhaps a new “start”:

I tear the last match from the book,  
fetch it hard and once  
across the windscreen. In the glass

I'm taken with myself, caught in the act –  
conducting light, until the heat licks  
up against my thumb and fingertips, unlocks  
my hand, gives me a start, trips

something in the flashbulb of my heart. [Armitage 1993, 10-17; 32.]

According to the contract laid down by the rules of the game, each poem in this sequence should last the time it takes for a match to burn out, and equally by contract each poem, or the sequence as a whole, should be autobiographical: Armitage recounting Armitage.

To understand if this sequence of poems functions as an autobiography, we must first try and define what the autobiographical genre is. The publication of Philippe Lejeune's *Le pacte autobiographique* (Seuil 1996), offered us one of the first major texts dealing with autobiography as a literary genre, and in this book Lejeune gives us a very tight definition of autobiography:

*DÉFINITION : Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité.*

La définition met en jeu des éléments appartenant à quatre catégories différentes :

1. *Formes du langage* :
  - a) récit
  - b) en prose.
2. *Sujet traité* : vie individuelle, histoire d'une personnalité.
3. *Situation de l'auteur* : identité de l'auteur (dont le nom renvoie à une personne réelle) et du narrateur.
4. *Position du narrateur* :
  - a) identité du narrateur et du personnage principal,
  - b) perspective rétrospective du récit.

Est une autobiographie toute œuvre qui remplit à la fois les conditions indiquées dans chacune des catégories. [Lejeune 1996; 14.]

Certainly the biggest problem that poetry seems to have if it is to be considered as autobiography, according to Lejeune, are its “signes extérieurs”, its *outward signs of artifice*, the fact that poetry is written in verse and not in prose:

il faut que le lecteur puisse avoir l'impression de vraisemblance, de témoignage, qui est le propre du récit en prose, qu'il soit autobiographique ou non, alors que le récit en vers porte déjà à simple lecture les « signes extérieurs » de la fiction et de l'art, du moins pour un lecteur de l'époque moderne, et empêche le lecteur d'entrer dans le jeu autobiographique. [Lejeune 1971, 1998; 21.]

Though more recently Lejeune seems to accept that it must be up to the reader to decide how far poetry can be compatible with the autobiographical pact, his problem considering poetry as autobiography lies essentially at the level of discourse itself:

Le degré de « poésie » que le lecteur juge compatible avec le pacte autobiographique peut varier, et, s'il est élevé, engendrer des clauses annexes au contrat, le lecteur faisant la part des choses, acceptant volontiers comme licence poétique à l'intérieur du contrat les stylisations et les manières de parler propres au genre. Cela, s'il lit le texte comme autobiographie : mais dans la plupart des cas le « je » des poèmes est un « je » sans références, dans lequel chacun peut se glisser ; c'est le « prêt-à-porter » de l'émotion. La subjectivité universelle du lyrisme est assez différente du discours autobiographique, qui, lui, suppose une attitude de communication entre deux personnes distinctes et séparées. [Lejeune 1996; 245.]

Lejeune is not alone in thinking that these outward signs of artifice obstruct the construction of the autobiographical pact. In his article “Getting into the (Speech) Act: Autobiography as Theory and Performance” (*SubStance*, Online), Leah D. Hewitt reminds us that the ideas of Michel Leiris are close to those of Lejeune in his conception that autobiography must be “strict adherence to the truth without artifice and self-indulgence” and must avoid “the pleasures of gratuitous aestheticism”. These statements suggest that the autobiographical text should have a purely retro-mimetic function.

Thus, there are two major problems with artifice. Firstly, as Lejeune indicates, poetry draws attention to itself precisely because it is poetry. Secondly, the language used in poetry must not be perceived as drawing attention to itself because aesthetics—simile, metaphor, etc.—takes away from the serious nature of the text. Hewitt defends Leiris's view that the act of confession must be given and received seriously, and understands J. L. Austin's “serious language performative”, through which a statement is considered as being true, as supporting Lejeune's idea of the autobiographical

pact. However, it is almost as if the poetic voice of *Book of Matches* understood this necessity:

\*  
People talk nonsense and I put them straight.  
Call me brassneck, call me hard-faced  
but in this town the people prefer to be steered,  
railwayed, run out for the day  
to the beach with a bat and ball, then back again.

Look there, the hourglass or the waistline  
of a cooling-tower, or here, the pylons number off  
across the health at arm's length,  
or take the strain, holding the line. See  
from the observation car of the world

my way... [Armitage 1993; 1-11; 9.]

The question is: does the construction of the autobiographical pact need to follow the strict rules laid down by Lejeune? Following these rules certainly does allow us to recognize the autobiographical act, that is the utterer's presentation from a retrospective viewpoint of an utterance as supposed truth. But when Barthes wrote "[l']auteur, lorsqu'on y croit, est toujours conçu comme le passé de son propre livre" [Barthes 1984; 66], it is the interpretation of the utterance's authenticity by the reader that is underlined and not the author's adherence to a set of rules whatever they may be. If Armitage's authenticity in *Book of Matches* is accepted by the reader, regardless of the fact that it is a sequence of poems and that those poems are written in verse, then surely poems such as the following two, explicitly presented as retrospective narratives, do not undermine the construction of the autobiographical pact simply because of their outward signs of artifice:

\*  
Thunder and lightening hardly ever upset me;  
not now, not then, like from school when I took  
the longer, lonelier way back through the woods  
in those startling, bottle-green afternoons.

And once, at the house of the parish spinsters,  
I spied for an hour through the rain on their windows  
as one worked a brush through the other's hair,  
then raised both arms, surrendered, as the other  
lifted her cotton blouse over her, from her, this way  
then another, as they came together and fell  
below the horizon of the windowsill.

Like water, to carry not to spill,

I went with it, out of the rain, the woods,  
the instance of that new, unlikely love. [Armitage 1993; 8.]

\*

Mice and snakes don't give me the shivers,  
which I put down squarely to a decent beginning.  
Upbringing, I should say, by which I mean  
how me and the old man  
made a good team, and never took  
to stepping outside or mixing it up, aside

from the odd time when I had one word too many  
for my mother, or that underwater evening  
when I came home swimming  
through a quart of stolen home-brewed damson wine.

So it goes. And anyway, like he says,  
on the day I'm broad and bothered and bold enough  
to take a swing and try and knock his grin off,

he'll be too old. [Armitage 1993; 15.]

Although Barthes famously wrote that writing is the “destruction de toute voix, de toute origine” and that it is “ce neutre, ce composite, cet oblique où fuit notre sujet, le noir-et-blanc où vient se perdre toute identité, à commencer par celle-là même qui écrit” [Barthes 1984; 63], Lejeune believes that for there to be autobiography it is necessary for the narrator and the main character to be inseparable from the author:

L'identité se définit à partir des trois termes : auteur, narrateur et personnage. Narrateur et personnage sont les figures auxquelles renvoient, à l'intérieur du texte, le sujet de l'énonciation et le sujet de l'énoncé; l'auteur, représenté à la lisière du texte par son nom, est alors le référent auquel renvoie, de par le pacte autobiographique, le sujet de l'énonciation. [Lejeune 1996; 35.]

In *Book of Matches*, there can be no confusion, the author and the narrator share the same voice. Armitage goes as far as to give us the exact time of his birth:

... Sunday the twenty-sixth of May  
nineteen sixty-three.  
It was thirteen hundred hours, GMT. [Armitage 1993, 5-7; 31.]

He even describes certain physical details of himself with precision:

I take a centre line  
and let my fringe flop where the wind blows,  
northside or south. [Armitage 1993, 4-6; 5.]

In autobiography, both knowledge and recognition of the origin and identity of the body writing are essential: the body writing is precisely the identity the autobiography is attempting to (re)construct. However, Lejeune admits that *Je est un autre* [Lejeune 1980], and one could add: *la vérité aussi*. This brings us back to Barthes's ideas: writing is that oblique space where the subject is continually on the move forward, just as autobiography does not construct the Self of the body writing, but the other Self, the Self contaminated by lies (which for Lejeune is itself an autobiographical category) and misinformed truths, because the Self is necessarily observed through as many fragile filters as language, culture and, worse still, memory. Autobiography reconstructs an ever shifting point of origin, and Armitage knows this only too well: "The story changes every time" [Armitage 1993; 1; 30]. As in the artist's self-portrait, the autobiographical text becomes a mirror within which a multiplicity of images of the Self or Selves can be perceived, a mirror where it is possible to view the artist's alter ego(s). In this manner, "l'histoire de sa personnalité", the last part of Lejeune's definition of autobiography is respected. In this series of poems by Armitage the plural notion of the "I" is identified and confirmed, as in the following poem where Armitage plays with the fantasy of being the last survivor on Earth, thus placing himself at the centre of the world with the possibility of forever reinventing himself:

...and while I sleep  
a virus sweeps the earth, and when I wake I see  
the population of the world is

me. (Armitage 1993; 3-5; 17)

Or again in this poem where quite obviously the man with the pipe is the first person narrator:

\*

I live in fear of letting people down.  
last winter, someone leaked the blueprint for a plan  
to put the town back on the map:  
that everyone should stand and strike a match  
at midnight on the shortest, darkest day,  
to photograph it from an aeroplane. No way:

the workers wouldn't break bread with the upper class,  
the wealthy wouldn't mingle with the mob,  
the worthy knew a thing or two about sulphuric gas.

It came to pass that only one man struck; a man whose job  
or game was civic unrest and civil dissent, but who claimed  
to be lighting his pipe in any event,  
a man whose face turned purple as he spoke.

I know very well that man doesn't smoke. [Armitage 1993, 16.]

This poem shows that it is possible for the author to talk of himself in the third person or at least project himself onto a third person in an autobiographical text. Armitage likes to play with the idea of depersonalized autobiography in this sequence, but this does not deter from the autobiographical authenticity of the poet's voice since it is the reader himself who intuitively constructs the link between the author and the other characters. In the next example, the poet begins with an autodiegetic narrative but projects the passing of his life onto an anecdote that seems to be situated outside his own story. At the end of the poem, however, it is the reader who transforms the account of an homodiegetic event into autodiegesis, and though the utterance may not smack of truth, it rings with authenticity:

\*

I feel I am at the end of my tether  
and don't want to go on any longer.  
Not like those climbers on Malhalm Cove –  
dipping backwards for their bags of powder,  
reaching upwards for the next hairline fracture,  
hauling themselves from my binoculars.

And without enlargement they take on the scale  
of last nights' stars in Malham Tarn,  
inching upstream as the universe tilted, mirrored  
till we burst their colours with a fistful of cinders.

I follow a line  
from the base to the summit, waiting  
for something to give, to lose its footing,  
for signs of life on other planets. [Armitage 1993; 28.]

If the notion of truth is too removed from that of autobiography to be credible—that is to say it is foreign to that oblique space—one must be able to judge the autobiographical act in relation to another notion, that of authenticity, and authenticity is not undermined by those outward signs of artifice. For Lejeune the question of authenticity is strictly linked to that of faithfulness, and faithfulness raises the problem of resemblance for which Lejeune uses an extra-textual referent he calls the *modèle*. This *modèle* is the real to which the utterance says it refers to:

La "resemblance" peut se situer à deux niveaux : sur le mode négatif—et au niveau des éléments du récit —, intervient le critère de l'*exactitude* ; sur le mode positif — et au niveau de la totalité du récit —, intervient ce que nous appellerons la *fidélité*. L'*exactitude* concerne l'*information* ; la *fidélité* la *signification*. [Lejeune 1996, 37.]

Any information given through an autobiographical text is supposedly on an extra-textual reality, and is therefore meant to be an image or reflection of the real. The information given within the autobiography constructs the framework of the real which functions thanks to the *referential pact*. The referential pact is essential to the notion of authenticity because it is not the truth to which the referential pact refers but the resemblance of truth. When Armitage apologizes for lying, it does not put into doubt the truthfulness of the utterer but points to a clever use of rhetoric which strengthens the authenticity of the utterance:

\*  
I like vivid, true-to-life love scenes  
in a movie. No, that's a lie,  
that's when I like love least; [Armitage 1993; 1-3; 6]

In the next extract, the retroactive shame of the poet transpires when he asks us not to believe him. This is aimed at the “you” of the poem, but its rhetorical function is addressed to the reader and pushes us to believe in the authenticity of the poet:

Don't believe me, please, if I say  
that was just my butterfingered way, at thirteen,  
of asking you if you would marry me. [Armitage 1993; 12-14; 13.]

Thus, authenticity is simply the capacity of having confidence in the utterance as being an image of the real. Lejeune confirms this, adding:

c'est une preuve supplémentaire d'honnêteté que de la restreindre au possible  
« la vérité telle qu'elle m'apparaît, dans la mesure où je puis la connaître, etc.,  
faisant la part des inévitables oublis, erreurs, déformations involontaires, etc. »  
[Lejeune 1996; 36.]

These markers of authenticity are found throughout *Book of Matches*. A prime example are the references to geographical locations, as in the following extract, especially if one knows from the blurb that the poet was born and grew up in Huddersfield on the banks of the rivers Colne and Holme:

At twenty-eight  
I'm not doing great,  
but considering I came from the River Colne  
and its long, lifeless mud,  
I'm doing good. [Armitage 1993; 10-14; 4.]

However, as in this example, most of the elements which allow us to construct the frame of the real and construct our confidence in the utterance as readers, are autoreferential elements—here it is the reference to the age of the narrator and thus the poet—that is to say the rhetoric of the autobiographical narrative



line. This use of rhetoric affirms the identity of the narrator and the main character as being that of the author, and represents them, as in the case of *Book of Matches*, by the use of the first person:

\*  
 I rate myself as a happy, contented person,  
 in spite of troubles here and there.  
 Selfish, some have said... [Armitage 1993; 1-3; 5].

These occurrences of the first person are not simply the grammatical markers of a first person narrator but are also autoreferential as in the lines “Truly, it’s how I am” [Armitage 1993; 10; 5], “I am very bothered when I think / of the bad things I have done in my life” [Armitage 1993; 1-2; 13], or “Brung up as swine I was” [Armitage 1993; 1; 18]. With regards to the last extract, if the idea of Armitage being brought up as swine had to refer the reader to reality or to the truth, then it is highly likely that the autobiographical pact would be broken. One could argue that the irony of the line deters from the serious language performative. But this line and the poem as a whole have a metaphorical function—Armitage grew up in a rough area, toughening him up—which saves the authenticity of the utterance, and thus the referential and autobiographical pact:

\*  
 Brung up as swine, I was,  
 and dogs,  
 and raised on a diet of slime and slops  
 and pobs, then fell in one day  
 with a different kind. Some say  
  
 that gives me the right  
 to try out that line  
 about having a bark and having a bite,  
 and a nose for uncovering truffles, or shite.  
 Or, put another way,  
  
 what looks from afar  
 like a cloak of fur  
 is a coat of hair. Cut back the hair to find  
 not skin, but rind. [Armitage 1993; 18.]

Innocence is also a tool used by Armitage in the construction of an authentic voice. The redundant repetition of first person personal pronouns underlines the identity of the person speaking and the subject of the utterance in an almost juvenile way regardless of what is actually said: “Me, I stick to the shadows, carry a gun” (Armitage 1993; 14; 19). We find this innocence of voice

again in the line “In terms of a friend of a friend of mine” (Armitage 1993, 3, 20), where this playground rhetoric refers, of course, to the first person.

Most of these poems are written in the present tense and therefore do not initially seem to construct a narrative line with a retrospective perspective. If we stick to Lejeune’s definition of autobiography, these poems would be more akin to the self-portrait as they do not seem to fulfil conditions 1a and 4b. However, if we consider the poems in this sequence as a whole then there appears an obvious chronological construction of a retrospective narrative:

\*  
Thinking back, they pulled me like a tooth,  
or drew me like a rabbit from a hat,  
or else I came to life  
like something frantic from under the ice

on Sunday the twenty-sixth of May  
nineteen sixty-three.  
It was thirteen hundred hours, GMT.

Whichever way, it’s either passed me by  
at something close to the speed of light,  
or else I’ve lived it frame by frame, the whole  
slow-motion picture show,  
as if it were thirty years, nine hours,  
eleven minutes, five,  
six, seven spasms of the second hand ago. [Armitage 1993; 31.]

Armitage’s use of the present tense is not an innocent one as it allows the construction of certain aspects of the poet’s life, of his (Hi)story. In the next poem the poet’s mother is helping him take measurements in his house and the anecdote is recounted in the present tense. But we soon realise that our reading of the poem follows the narrator as he climbs the stairs with the measuring tape unwinding, and that these actions represent the years as they flow back towards the poet’s adolescence, the moment when he left the family home for the first time:

\*  
Mother, any distance greater than a single span  
requires a second pair of hands.  
You come to help me measure windows, pelmets, doors,  
the acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors.

You at the zero-end, me with the spool of tape, recording  
length, reporting metres, centimetres back to base, then leaving

up the stairs, the line still feeding out, unreeling  
years between us. Anchor. Kite.

I space-walk through the empty bedrooms, climb  
the ladder to the loft, to breaking point, where something  
has to give;  
two floors below our fingertips still pinch  
the last one-hundredth of an inch... I reach  
towards a hatch that opens on an endless sky  
to fall or fly. [Armitage 1993; 10.]

Almost in direct opposition, or in a mirror-like effect, the next poem in the sequence brings into play the father, and even though the poem begins in the past the reader soon realises at the end of the text that this poem is an evaluation of the present:

\*

My father thought it bloody queer,  
the day I rolled home with a ring of silver in my ear  
half hidden by a mop of hair. "You've lost your head.  
If that's how easily your led  
you should've had it through your nose instead."

And even then I hadn't had the nerve to numb  
the lode with ice, then drive a needle through the skin,  
then wear a safety-pin. It took a jewellers gun  
to pierce the flesh, and then a friend  
to thread a sleeper in, and where it slept  
the hole became a sore, became a wound, and wept.

At twenty-nine, it comes as no surprise to hear  
my own voice breaking like a tear, released like water,  
cried from way back in the spiral of the ear. *If I were you,*  
*I'd take it out and leave it out next year.* [Armitage 1993; 12.]

*Book of Matches* seems to encompass a writing period of two years, from the age of twenty-eight till the age of thirty when this collection was first published. In this way, the writing of this autobiographical sequence becomes itself autobiographical, allowing Armitage to oscillate between a retrospective narrative on the evolution of his personality and his own conclusions on his experience of life itself:

\*

A safe rule in life is: trust nobody.  
That's the first, and secondly,  
the man with 20/20 vision who achieves the peak  
of Everest (forgetting for now the curve  
of the Earth), looks east and west and gets

a perfect view of the back of his head.

Third, there will always be  
that square half-inch or so of unscratchable skin  
between the shoulder blades, unreachable  
from over the top or underneath. And fourth,

as I once heard said, don't go inventing  
the acid that will eat through anything  
without giving some thought  
to a jar to keep it in. (Armitage 1993; 14)

\*

Life:  
behind the spreading butter comes the knife;  
the deaf and dumb and blind man dozing  
in a field of rape, found by the sickle  
or the scythe. I'd been supposing

that it all adds up  
to something times the power  
of infinity recurring, but

it doesn't take a flying pass  
in Further Maths  
to figure out the sum  
of what's already gone, what's going on  
and what's to come.  
It's none. [Armitage 1993, 25.]

Summing up one's life or one's experience of life necessarily raises questions about what lies ahead and ultimately about death. The projection of the Self in death is often linked to the notion of the self-portrait, especially in the fine arts (one need only think of Egon Schiele's self-portraits), whereas autobiography is seen as the retro-projection of the Self. However, though the retrospective narrative may, through inherent qualities, suspend death, it cannot evacuate it completely, and in this way, for Armitage, a person's will and testament is necessarily autobiographical:

\*

I've made out a will; I'm leaving myself  
to the National Health. I'm sure they can use  
the jellies and tubes and syrups and glues,  
the web of nerves and veins, the loaf of brains,  
an assortment of fillings and stitches and wounds,  
blood—a gallon exactly of bilberry soup—  
the chassis or cage or cathedral of bone;  
but not the heart, they can leave that alone.

They can have the lot, the whole stock:

the loops and coils and sprockets and springs and rods,  
the twines and cords and strands,  
the face, the case, the cogs and the hands,

but not the pendulum, the ticker;  
leave that where it stops or hangs. [Armitage 1993; 23.]

Even beyond death Armitage's autobiographical game in *Book of Matches* is respected. As in the will, the poet's obituary, written by the poet projecting himself forward into his own death offers the possibility of writing an autobiographical text. But instead Armitage chooses to write a text for his own resurrection and therefore projects himself as a Christ-like figure. The slate of the poet's life is thus wiped clean, but even though he seems to have shed himself of his past, the reader enters into a reversed typology where the narrator's post-death state reflects his pre-death life:

\*  
I thought I'd write my own obituary. Instead,  
I wrote the blurb for when I'm risen from the dead:

Ignite the flares, connect the phones, wind all the clocks;  
the sun goes rusty like a medal in its box –  
collect it from the loft. Peg out the stars,  
replace the bulbs of Jupiter and Mars.  
A man like that takes something with him when he dies,  
but he has wept the coins that rested on his eyes,  
eased out the stopper from the mouthpiece of the cave,  
exhumed his own white body from the grave.

Unlock the rivers, hoist the dawn and launch the sea.  
Set up the skittles of the orchard and the wood again,  
now everything is clear and straight and free and good  
again.

The poems in *Book of Matches* may not present themselves as formal autobiography, but as the reader travels through the sequence he is witness to the autobiographical construction of an individual's life and the *history of his personality*, and this individual is inseparable from the name that is printed on the collection's front cover, that of Simon Armitage. The establishment of the autobiographical pact begins right from the title of the collection and of the opening sequence: *Book of Matches*. The paratextual function of the title constructs the frame within which the sequence of poems must be read and allows the reader to fully understand the nature of the autobiographical game: the author, narrator and main character (and many of the other characters too), are one. The outward signs of artifice of poetry do not deter from the construc-

tion of the autobiographical pact, but in fact give depth to the game, allowing the possibility of actually communicating more than is necessarily said in the time it takes for a match to burn out. The autobiographical rhetoric, the innocence of voice and playful figures of speech used by Simon Armitage only help to reinforce the autobiographical pact, but it is especially the performance of Armitage's authenticity of voice which makes the retrospective narrative of *Book of Matches* a true autobiographical text.

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