

A Reflection on 'The Way' by Rae Armantrout

Dave Sinclair

17 Sept 2022

A strange and puzzling poem. On a first reading, the poem seems to be a sequence of disjoint descriptions or statements. It has no narrative thread or obvious subject. It is not clear if it represents a single narrator, or multiple ones. It contains only three sentences (though the last sentence does not have a terminated full stop). The stanza layout seems rather odd, with line breaks in unexpected places, and sentences spanning stanzas. Does it have a meaning and if so what is that meaning?

Here are my thoughts in response to a first reading:

The Way

Card in pew pocket announces, "I am here."

I made only one statement because of a bad winter.

Grease is the word; grease is the way
I am feeling.

Real life emergencies or flubbing behind the scenes.

As a child, I was abandoned in a story made of trees.

The narrator is in church, or a congregation. There is some ambiguity about the "I" in "I am here". Is this the (unknown) narrator of the poem, the poet themselves or is it God who is saying "I am here". Presumably the latter.

A seemingly random statement with no meaning? Beats me what this is about. Maybe nothing.

Is this the line from the song in the Musical *Grease*? "Grease is the way I am feeling" suggest the narrator is feeling an affinity, a desire to be a 'greaser', to join a defined grouping. Stanza 1 suggests the narrator is in a religious congregation. But here the narrator is proposing the 'greaser' way of life, something rather unreligious. Why is there a blank line in the middle of the sentence?

The narrator seems unsure if the panic (i.e., the flubbing') is valid (i.e., real life) or simply some sort of agitation or unreal dismay that is not on public view? What are these emergencies? I don't know. In the next stanza there is talk of abandonment. Is the narrator suggest that while we put on a brave face on life, behind the scenes, in private, we are often more emotional, more likely to cry in distress? Maybe.

A story made of trees seems likely to be a book. A child being abandoned in a book suggests that the parent of the child used books as a way of occupying the child, while the parents did adult things. Is this a sad statement that the narrator was not loved by their parents and thus abandoned to an imaginary world, rather than the real world of their parents? Or is this the self-imposed and pleasurable abandonment we sometimes feel when we are completely absorbed in a book?

Here's the small
gasp
of this clearing
come "upon" "again"

The narrator (presumably back in the present as an adult) is re-experiencing the world they discovered in books as a child. The clearing perhaps can be interpreted as a comfortable resting place in the forest of knowledge. But does the fact that 'upon' and 'again' are in quotes mean this sentence is actually ironical? Maybe the quotes mean that the narrator is actually coming across this clearing for the first time and "again" is in quotes because the again is being said in a questioning way? Maybe the thought here is that one cannot return to the feelings and perspective of our childhood. Maybe, as adults, we can on revisit our childhood experiences as an adult (e.g., re-reading something like *Bleak House*, I have a very different experience and understanding of the story than that which I had as a twelve-year-old). I think this interpretation is supported by the use of 'gasp'. Gasp could mean that the narrator is frightened, or simply out of breath, but to my mind, it means that the narrator is shocked, surprised that revisiting the experience of youth is not a simple thing, but coloured by the experience of maturity.

In an interview, Armantrout discusses some aspects of the process of creating *The Way* (Armantrout, 2013). The first four stanzas are, it turns out, words she collected in her notebook as part of her daily experiences: "the first half of the poem are really different voices, different snippets of my world juxtaposed". She goes on to say that the second half of the poem is "more personal or in a coded way autobiographical" indicating it "is a sort of version, I guess, of my experience of being read to as a child." The poem thus embodies two forms, an initial found poem of four stanzas and then a personal statement in the last two stanzas.

When asked about the use of short lines and odd line breaks, Armantrout suggests this is a reaction to her early experiences of poetry in regular iambic pentameter:

...that's something that I often, you know, puzzle about and wonder if I do the best job at. Sometimes I do it for sound reasons, you know, for rhythm reasons. Sometimes I do it to cry, sort of build up a certain suspense. I don't like it when you can really see what's coming. If you can get any kind of surprise into the next line, I think that's best.

Disappointingly, the interview ends without any discussion of the ‘gasp’ of the last stanza or the strange use of quotes around the last two words. But then of course, it is perhaps unreasonable for us to expect poets to explain their work in great detail. A poet’s job is to create, not to explain, just as an artist’s job is to place colour on the canvas, not to say what the colour represents.

There is an online reading of this poem by Armantrout. I had hoped it might give some clues as to the intent of her use of line breaks and the quoted last two words, but, at least to my ears, Armantrout makes no special use of these notations in her reading. Aurally it is as if the line breaks are not there (or are just the tiniest of pauses) and there is no special inflexion on the last two words of the last stanza. Paradoxically, Armantrout inserts a longer pause between “upon” and “again” than she uses between the odd line breaks 3,4,5 and 6.

So, for me, this poem remains a puzzle. Obviously that doesn’t make it a bad poem. Poetry need not be transparent, particularly modern poetry. I feel the key to the poem is the relationship between the first four stanzas and the last two, between the white noise of the found poem, and the personal statement of the last two. My assumption is that Armantrout did not make random choices in selecting the material for the first four stanzas. They must add context to the last two. But at present, I don’t know what that context is. As I said, I don’t regard this as a bad thing though. This is not a poem that you only read once, and you are then done. There are already enough poems about daffodils and fluffy white clouds in that category. I think a certain amount of opacity, intrigue, ambiguity, uncertainty and use of unexpected perspectives is essential in modern poetry and adds a longevity to the reader’s experience of the poem. But I do wonder if, in *The Way*, that Armantrout has gone a step too far and provided a puzzle that can never be unlocked. That indeed would be disappointing.

References

Armantrout, R., (2001) “The Way”, *Veil: New and Selected Poems*, Wesleyan University Press

Armantrout, R., (2013) “Rae Armantrout explains her poem ‘The Way’”, YouTube, [online] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIPYSrgn_LU.

Armantrout, R., *The Way*, Pennsound, https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pensound/authors/Armantrout/WPS1/Armantrout-Rae_06_Way_WPS1_NY_5-10-06.mp3