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## Martin Malone

### TROUBADOURS

Simon Armitage, *The Unaccompanied* (Faber and Faber, 2017), £14.99.

Peter Sirr, *Sway* (The Gallery Press, 2017), €11.95.

One is reluctant to characterize the work of a poet who's proved himself to be as versatile as Simon Armitage in the past few years, nevertheless, it is difficult to disagree with the accompanying press release when it describes this collection as 'a return to his trademark contemporary lyricism'. Following those hugely enjoyable shaggy dog stories of 2010's *Seeing Stars*, and recent forays into literary translations of everything from the classics to medieval alliterative poetry, *The Unaccompanied* returns to territory, perhaps, more familiar to fans of his earlier work: the finely tuned, multi-textured and darkly humorous lyric. With a writer who came to prominence at such a precociously early age and who is now publishing his eleventh major poetry collection, I suppose, too, that issues of canonicity bleed through into our response: we are, God willing, looking at prime mid-period Armitage; at a collection commensurate with, say, *Electric Light* or *District and Circle*. The Heaney connection is not altogether irrelevant here because, although very different poets, each manage consistently to pull off that intangible trick of stars which poetry can do in the hands of a master craftsman in full possession of his or her material. The last time I was so profoundly impressed by a collection's ingrained accomplishment was when reading *Human Chain*. Let's not beat about the bush, then, *The Unaccompanied* is something of a *tour de force*.

Armitage has always been a master of just riding the wince of his lines, lines which frequently host imagery that drags everyday subject matter into much darker territory. It's what has drawn comparisons to Larkin and is here evident from the start: 'The Last Snowman' obliquely chronicles our melting ice caps whilst sporting a clay pipe which 'drooped from a mouth / that was pure stroke victim'. And the opening sequence of poems show-cases this sure-footed regard of a world in slowly accelerating change beyond old certainties and givens. The ragged sonnet of 'Nurse at a Bus Stop' is as poised and finely-judged a social comment as anything around right now, deftly sketching this 'Jilted bride of public transport', stood waiting to go perform her benevolent duties in a winter world where 'The centuries crawl past, / none of them going your way'. In 'Emergency', 'Poundland' and 'The Empire', we see decline's last stop on its own spectrum before total loss; where social signifiers of 21st-century diminution – the skeleton workforce, up-for-rent fire station, make-shift crew of volunteer part-timers and wide boys in white socks – are



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Not so much a return to form, then, as a reminder of that more permanent thing: class.

Longstanding personal connections to the Languedoc meant that I approached Peter Sirr's new collection with some degree of enthusiasm. I was not disappointed. His 'Versions of Poems from the Troubadour Tradition' plays fast and loose with elements of the originals whilst retaining their spirit in an attempt 'to find a matching music in English'. This has to have been a good decision, since Sirr has also managed to reinvigorate his material with the patina of contemporaneity in a dynamic rendition of twelfth- and thirteenth-century skull candy. Ezra Pound's rediscovery of Troubadour poetry sits well with Sirr's claims for its origination of European lyric poetry as we know it, but, in practice, there is something altogether more skittish and enjoyable abroad here, closer to Nick Cave than Modernist experiment. Nowhere is this more evident than in those pieces celebrated in Sirr's Afterword as 'meta-poems', which play comfortably with the idea of poetry in a manner entirely familiar to the twenty-first century reader: poems like Bernart de Ventadorn's 'Time comes and goes ...' or Arnaut Daniel's 'When the leaf falls ...' Here the lorn lover's hopes for his song to 'do your thing' put me in mind of nothing so much as Cave's 'Love letter Love Letter / Go get her Go get her'. And Sirr's greatest achievement here is the general spirit of song and freestyling which pervades this collection, literally allowing it to take flyte in places. Not that all this precludes some impressive translation work from Old Occitan, nor success in retaining that original spirit of the Troubadour flowering in the latter part of the twelfth century. There is, too, some deft handling of its matching music in twenty-first century English, apparent also in Sirr's original poems inspired by the tradition, such as the book's 'Coda', or 'Lines for the poet Macabru', who 'shivers in the meadow / ice on his tongue, bitter his song'. Here, Sirr shows us the possibility for a form of re-tooled, re-energised poetry inspired by the Troubadour tradition, though not so sonorous and self-consciously archaic as Pound's translations, more trimmed to contemporary registers.

Like John Le Mesurier, the Troubadour poets suffer beautifully, their courtly tradition demanding its riffs on unrequited love and performative fortitude on the part of the spurned suitor, 'who can't help loving her / from whom I'll have nothing'. There is an interesting distinction between this trope and that which characterizes the few female voices here present, such as Clara d'Anduza and Beatriz de Dia. Where the men gild their existential plight with big abstractions, these women tend to lament an actual physical separation, which makes their verses both more poignant and somehow more carnal. Perhaps what I like most about this collection, however, is its vibrant translation of the dominant rhythms of Troubadour poetry: the natural world and seasons turning in an age un-

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encumbered by quite so much trivial materiality. The book is alive with birdsong and trees shedding or coming into leaf, as lovers find natural correlatives to their own rising sap, or as Benart de Ventadorn has it:

When the woods and the hedgerows  
put on leaves and the flowers  
come out and spring greens gardens  
and meadows again and the  
mournful birds cheer up, likewise  
I too find my voice and my  
greened spirit comes into leaf.

In moments like these the influence of Troubadour poetry upon the later English music of Chaucer becomes most apparent, and Sirr succeeds in illuminating his case for them to be regarded as the founders of much that came after. His achievement in doing so is considerable, never less than entertaining and their 'torch flaring / down the centuries / to where it all began' is re-ignited in some style.