

The Salt Companion to Peter Robinson

Edited by Adam Piette and Katy Price

ADAM PIETTE is a Professor at the University of Sheffield, author of *Remembering and the Sound of Words and Imagination at War*. His current project concentrates on Cold War culture. He is Reviews Editor for *The European Journal of English Studies*, contributes a poetry section to *The Reader*, guest-edited a special issue of *Translation and Literature* on modernism and translation and helped set up the Edwin Morgan Centre for Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow.

KATY PRICE teaches English and Writing at Anglia Ruskin University. She is writing a book about astronomy in William Empson's love poetry. She writes poetry and is studying creative music technology.

The Salt Companion to Peter Robinson

ADAM PIETTE AND KATY PRICE



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham PDO, Cambridge CB1 5JX United Kingdom

All rights reserved

© Adam Piette and Katy Price, 2007

The right of Adam Piette and Katy Price to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Salt Publishing.

First published 2007

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 10/12

This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN-13 978 1 84471 244 1 paperback

Salt Publishing Ltd gratefully acknowledges
the financial assistance of Arts Council England



1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Contents

Adam Piette and Katy Price: <i>Peter Robinson's Tokens of Affection: An Introduction</i>	1
Roy Fisher: <i>Preface</i>	21
SPACE	
Adrian Poole: <i>Robinson's Roads</i>	29
Paul Hullah: <i>'Put In My Place': Arrangement of Self and World in Peter Robinson's Early Poems</i>	36
POETRY VS. CRITICAL PROSE	
Eric Griffiths: <i>Blanks, misgivings, fallings from us</i>	55
Steve Clark: <i>'How I can't but wish you well': Elegiac and Paternal Utterance in the Poetry of Peter Robinson</i>	84
REPARATION	
David Pascoe: <i>The Rough with the Smooth: Peter Robinson, Adrian Stokes, and the Forms of Reparation</i>	104
Jane Davis: <i>Reading in Reality: A Reading of 'There Again' by Members of Ridgeway Library Reading Group</i>	122
Adam Piette: <i>Cold War Conflicts in Peter Robinson's Poetry</i>	136
Andrew Fitzsimons: <i>'The Great Friend': Peter Robinson and Translation</i>	151
HOME AND ABROAD	
Ralph Pite: <i>Avenues / Returns: Peter Robinson and Liverpool</i>	165
John Roe: <i>The Refracted Self: Japanese Experiences</i>	175
Miki Iwata: <i>His Other Islands: Peter Robinson, Languages, Traditions</i>	193
ARTS OF THE EYE AND EAR	
Neil Corcoran: <i>Chance and Circumstance: Painting in Peter Robinson's Poems</i>	207
Katy Price: <i>Peter Robinson, What Are You Trying to Prove?</i>	219
David Taylor: <i>Background Noise</i>	233
Peter Robinson: A Bibliography, 1976–2006	253
List of Contributors	265

*Peter Robinson's Tokens of Affection:
An Introduction*

BY ADAM PIETTE AND KATY PRICE

Peter Robinson's poetry has both force and light complexity, the poems charged with encounter, testimony and the possibility of overcoming failures in communication or feeling. The poems, discrete and subtle, argue for the importance of our daily situatedness in the world as the manner in which we exist as citizens, both individually and collectively. They also argue for the importance of poetry as a mode of the imagination in writing which can stage forms of sympathy within, and active working through of, private-public experiences across all kinds of divide. The poems address us intimately, call up quiet and necessary reserves of feeling in the reader, and try to sustain fidelity to a culture of common understanding.

Peter Robinson's poetry is remarkable for its sensitive monitoring of local pressure points, acting as a sophisticated sensor of the emotional storm systems, accumulations and vortices occurring in lived occasions. He is a poet who holds to his fidelity to poetry as a special form of agency in the world as it is happening to him as a citizen on his way through and in the world. The style of his writing is to condense into core speech acts annotations on real events and experiences in his life, working them into transformed language on the page, always to an addressee, true in its engagement with the voices of others, alive to the sensations and temptations of a series of moments occurring in language, and slightly beyond language too. Robinson would agree with Goethe when he wrote in his old age: 'All my poetry is occasional, provoked by reality: it is thus earthed, has foundations'.

Eldest son of an Anglican vicar, brought up in parishes in the poorer districts of Liverpool, Robinson lived as a child in the neighbourhood of Penny Lane and Strawberry Fields. He absorbed some of the energy and experimental razzmatazz of the city in the 1960s, the pop poetry of Adrian Henri in particular, and his earliest writing was consciously in imitation of the Beat-inspired Liverpool forms that were buzzing round the city then. His first poems date from post-68 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia—reading Robinson from the 1960s to the present day is a story too of a citizen's journey through Cold War and beyond.

One of the surviving poems of this period, 'How He Changes', conjures up a walking persona disinvesting himself as he walks through Liverpool, of all his acquaintance, allowing the curve of the road and of the free verse to move him out of their sight and grasp 'right out of view' towards a new life: 'the sky like a blank drawing board / stands out, indifferently blue.' (*Selected Poems*, p. 20) Already we can see here some of the coordinates of Robinson's poetic: poetry on the move, under suburban skies, through cities, towards uncertain futures, blank, indifferent, disturbing, the poet trying to come to terms with the other people encountered on the journey, through troubled observation of the details seen and registered with piercing, nery eye. Typically, the poem is charged with translatory encounters and encounters with other poets' work too: 'How He Changes' elaborates on an actual translation of Pierre Reverdy's 'Comme on change', and nods in the direction of Kenneth Rexroth's cubist poetry, with allusions to Ferlinghetti's 'Pictures of the Gone World'. The intimate searching voice so characteristically Robinsonian is also growing out of this surrealist-Beat scene.

Liverpool was a city alive in other ways too—brimming with energy in the fields of music and art, at the same time as it was a metropolis undergoing the changes wrought on the UK by the Suez crisis—the aftermath of Suez rolls through the experiences of his generation and thus enters into the cultural landscapes conjured by the lines of poetry—power-lines registering the shock waves of Cold War readjustments, not least in the downgrading of Liverpool from Second City of the British Empire to post-industrial waste land. At school Robinson read the complete works of Joyce (excluding *Finnegans Wake*) and discovered a style he wanted in *Dubliners*, a book about a city not very different, in mood and atmosphere, from the Liverpool of the 1970s. Unemployment hit the city hard and the deep scars wrought on the minds and bodies of the people of the Northern towns are captured in unnerving, subtle and unsettlingly floaty close

observation in the collection *The Benefit Forms* (1978). Mass emigration from the city cut deep into Liverpool too in the 1980s—the ruthless economic culture of the decade divided the UK in two as never before, forcing each and every citizen to choose their camp, a mind-breaking civil war of words and suffering. Robinson's poems chart these changes, suffer them along the lines, watch and wait and take hold of what can be understood between those whom the times broke down. They choose to set up camp with those who moved along the way—again Joyce's exile in Italy seemed to beckon as exemplary for the times. The conductor Simon Rattle was at school with Robinson at Liverpool College—ending up as head of the Berlin Philharmonic. At some stage during his school years, Robinson knew he too would have to leave. 'How He Changes' was written in London in the summer of 1975 and initiates the key topic of departure and leave-taking in Robinson's poetry.

The city writing and poetry of unemployment were vital for his public life as a poet in the 1970s. He graduated from York University in 1974—his supervisor there was Nicole Ward Jouve, who was married to the novelist Anthony Ward—who had edited *Prospect* along with Elaine Feinstein and Jeremy Prynne. As Robinson recalled in interview with Nate Dorward:

[Anthony Ward] knew Elaine Feinstein, Jeremy Prynne, and Andrew Crozier, and lent me copies of books by the first two. They were all Donald Davie students, and I got pointed in the direction of the Black Mountain poets and the Objectivists, so I arrived in Cambridge having read American long poems, Zukofsky, Olson, Dorn, Creeley, as well as Prynne's books up to and including *Brass*, and plenty more besides. I'd also read some of what were the Fulcrum Press poets, and been most taken with Bunting and Fisher. Because I grew up in the North of England—my father's family in the cities of the Midlands and North West, my mother's from Tyneside with some Scottish relatives—I didn't find it difficult to think of them as poets who were making sense of my particular background. ('The Life of a Little Magazine')

He moved on to Cambridge to do graduate work and there he linked up with the first formation of the Cambridge School, editing the poetry magazine *Perfect Bound* and helping organize several Cambridge International Poetry Festivals. *Perfect Bound* published J.H. Prynne, Andrew Crozier, John Wilkinson, Geoff Ward, Tom Raworth, Rod Mengham, Christopher Middleton, Gael Turnbull, Peter Riley, Tim Dooley, Douglas Oliver, Wendy Mulford, Iain Sinclair, Allen Fisher and Marcus Perryman,

among others. The 1979 festival was run by Robinson and Alison Rimmer and had a big Saturday Night event with Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman and Kenneth Koch. The interview gives some tantalizing details:

Ginsberg did the whole thing for a tiny fee plus flights on to his next festival. The idea was to present the widest range of poetries so as to attract as many constituencies as possible. There was an afternoon of Sound Poetry, a debate between Silkin and Davie about poetry and politics, big readings by Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Joseph Brodsky, Edmond Jabès with Rosemary Waldrop translating, Michael Hamburger talking about Celan with an exhibition of his French wife's etchings . . .

A very public spat with John Wilkinson over innovative poetry and class ended Robinson's relations with the Cambridge School and he moved on to other things. The argument centered round a long broadside addressed to Wilkinson, published by the Many Press, 'Going Out to Vote', which ends with the tendentious line, 'My word, but you do go on.'¹ The line, Robinson swears, is also clearly self-referential, as the poem is very long, but it stung Wilkinson and marked the essential difference between Robinson and the members of the School. In interview, Robinson has argued that the poem is about essential problems facing any young poet in the 1970s:

'Going Out to Vote' is a survey of the territory of such a poet's relationship to social, cultural and historical knowledge: who sponsors this figure? what relation does this poet have to inherited wealth? from where does the special access to insight derive? who was he, or less often she, addressing? what use is a poem's apparent moral or political correctness in lived historical situations? ('The Life of a Little Magazine')

Still, the impression left is that of Robinson quitting the School because he preferred to move towards formalist choices. He has been accused of going mainstream—but the poverty and difficulties Robinson suffered from the 1970s on are an obvious rejoinder, as is the fact that the mainstream, as managed by London poets, has also preferred to marginalize poets like Robinson who operate athwart the categories and affiliations that publishers and reading communities so often rely on in their navigation of contemporary work.

Whilst still at Cambridge, Robinson carried on with his work for the Festival and co-edited *Numbers*, a review dedicated to poets discovered

¹ Written in Herschel Road, Cambridge, in May 1977. Published as *Many Press Broadsheet* no. 10 (London: Many Press, 1978). Uncollected.

through translation, like Vittorio Sereni and Györgi Petri, and poets closer in spirit to Robinson's plain style: Douglas Dunn, Charles Tomlinson, Roy Fisher. He also worked to sustain the reputation of Geoffrey Hill, a poet unjustly marginalized too, especially by the sniffiness of Motion and Morrison's *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. The collection of essays edited by Robinson resulted in a memorable battle of the books in the letters pages of the *LRB*, launched by Tom Paulin's review which had zeroed in on Hill's so-called 'cthonic' visionary nationalism, accusing him of being a political reactionary wallowing in imperialist Victoriana. Hill himself got understandably upset but, less understandably, seemed angry at Robinson himself—the affair served to sever Robinson's links with the other Cambridge School, associated with emotional close reading after the example of Christopher Ricks.

It was also during this period that Robinson consolidated the interest that complements his northern city angles—his attachment to the poet he considers as mentor, Roy Fisher. Roy Fisher's attention to Birmingham, his avant-garde poetry and visionary-pragmatic denotation of the industrial city's rise and fall, with its shifting inscapes and energies, have all influenced Robinson's work. The debt was repaid in the two books on Fisher's work which Robinson co-edited in 2000, *News for the Ear: A Homage to Roy Fisher*, edited with Robert Sheppard and *The Thing about Roy Fisher: Critical Studies*, edited with John Kerrigan.

Robinson's poems are not exclusively concerned with the city and his own movement through urban communities—a sizeable proportion, like the early poems 'Autobiography' and 'Dirty Language', deal with delicate candour and formal refinement with the harsh twists of perspective that make up difficult relationships. The distorted features of the suffering face glimpsed in the kettle, the strange imagining of emotional bonds experienced from false perspectives: the poems explore the interstices of feelings in a situation, self-consciousness gone slightly wrong between two hearts and minds. They read as eerily anticipatory of the terrible event that occurred in Italy in September 1975. Seven poems concern the traumatic event, the rape of Robinson's first wife (then girlfriend) at gun-point whilst Robinson was forced to watch. The poems have to be read and no commentary can do more than simply say that.² Suffice it to say that the event broke the relationship. It also traumatized Robinson, forcing out poems of reparation and

² The poems are: 'There Again', 'From a Memory', 'A September Night', 'The Harm', 'Cleaning', 'Vacant Possession', and 'For Lavinia'.

attempted understanding which know they must fail—testimonial writing that continues to inflect so many other poems written after 1975, like a shadow.

They are shadowed too by Robinson's knowledge and exploration of the psychoanalytic inflections of the mind, in particular Kleinian analysis. This body of knowledge has informed his intuitive thinking about relations between the genders, as well as the many family poems he has written. The concern is readable in the poetry's uncanny grasp of fetish objects, its startlingly frank and delicate sensing of male feeling for mother, wife and children, its acknowledgement of the censoring, elaborating and sublimating processes of art and representation. Robinson's writing on the work of Adrian Stokes, who underwent analysis with Klein, is critical evidence here, in particular in demonstrating the extent to which Robinson's feelings about the possibility of reparation after the attack in Italy were shaped by Stokes. In his introduction to the poems, Robinson elaborated the two phases Stokes identified in any artwork—destruction of maternal image followed by reparation:

In the former stage there is an acting out of aggression, a projection onto the materials of art, as in infancy onto the mother, of images lacking integration. At the second stage, induced by the artist's reparative need, he saw the process of art as an integrating of these tense and distorted images. In the work of integration, the artist constructs a whole object, whose articulation as a process of resolution helps confirm, or re-enact, the ego's integration. Both these stages contribute to the experience of completed art. The former, identified with process, is an incantation of parts which compels the involvement of spectator or reader. The latter, identified with completeness, emphasizes for the reader or spectator his separateness, or conversely the art object's wholeness, its otherness. ('Stokes—The Poet')³

The two cycles are played out in agonizing dramas of trauma and attempted resolution in the seven poems about rape and its consequences, a terrifying incantation of parts compelling our involvement, countered by attempted acts of reparation, healing, reticent sympathies.

Sealed in to the life story too and, since the poetry is also life story, the poems, is the abiding importance of Italy to Robinson. His father had been in the Intelligence Corps in Italy, from September 1943 to the armistice, encountering, incidentally, F.T. Prince, poet of 'Soldiers

³ Cf. introduction to *With All the Views: Collected Poems of Adrian Stokes* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1981).

Bathing'. It was partly through his father's talk, partly through the interests fostered by his study of art and literature at the University of York, that Robinson decided to go to Italy with his future wife to visit the museums, with a view to doing a thesis at Cambridge on Pound and Renaissance art.⁴ The attack occurred, as the poems 'There Again' and 'At Como' indicate,⁵ not far from the outskirts of Milan, whilst Robinson and his wife were trying to hitch a lift. It is no exaggeration to say that the event gives point and scope to almost everything Robinson wrote thereafter.

As far as Pound is concerned, Robinson ended up losing patience with the American poet, growing to dislike his bric-à-brac approach and especially his decision to do propaganda for Mussolini in Rome and the Republic of Salò. Pound's treachery is an abiding concern of Robinson's in the ethical work on poetry in his criticism and, specifically, in the article 'Ezra Pound: Translation and Betrayal' in the monograph *In the Circumstances: About Poetry and Poets*.

Begun in the summer of 1979, the seven poems written about the rape were composed during the period in which Robinson was discovering the poetry of Vittorio Sereni, sensing there a possible antidote to the problems posed by Pound. Sereni was not free of a sense of guilt, a burden on his conscience wrought by his passivity in fascist Italy until his capture in Sicily in July 1943.⁶ Robinson's poem 'The Harm' can be read as the first homage to the Milanese poet with its buried allusion to Sereni's line from 'Un incubo', 'Certo si pacciono, certo' ('Yes they're enjoying themselves') in the lines about the lovers heard through the wall ('clearly pleasing each other') (*Selected Poems*, p. 43). Sereni's single man hears the lovers' pleasure as torture, summoning unbearable thoughts of the war, whilst in Robinson it is the couple together who hear the other couple, the male's 'imperatives' awakening 'your distanced hurt, incorporated wrong'. The last verse of 'A September Night' ('I'd just make amends') (*Selected Poems*, p. 42) contains the first example of one of the principal themes of Robinson's work: the

⁴ Part of that interest can be gauged in the article 'Ezra Pound and Italian Art', in *Pound's Artists*.

⁵ 'At Como', written in Shugakuin, Kyoto, in May or June 1989, remembering a visit to Como for the first time since 1975 in September 1988. 'There Again', composed over ten years, 1979–1987, is in the *Selected* and can also be found in *This Other Life*.

⁶ Captured on the 24th of July 1943, Sereni spent two years in prisoner of war camps in Algeria and Morocco. Cf. his *Diario d'Algeria* (1947).

complexity and difficulty of true reparation for such incorporated wrong, a topic dealt with movingly in the essay on Wordsworth in *In the Circumstances*, ‘Reparation and “The Sailor’s Mother”’.

The interest in Sereni’s work culminated in a series of translations of the Italian poems, *Selected Poems of Vittorio Sereni* in 1990; Robinson met Sereni, just before his death, to work on these. ‘Towards Darkness’ (*Selected Poems*, pp. 47–8), with its allusion to Sereni’s ‘La malattia dell’olmo’ (‘Guidami tu, stella variabile, fin che puoi’) is based on memories of the second meeting, and takes the form of an elegy for the master of the *Linea Lombarda*:

With your gratitude and reticence,
through obscured exits, guide me
further than exchanged stilted phrases,
before you enter the collected dark—

The dark of death, imagined as survival only in some imagined future *Collected Poems*, can be countered by the charm of collaboration (the translations), of sensed similarities (Robinson’s poetry of reticence allying itself to Sereni’s), of companionship and mentorship through a troubled century. If the times are marked by cycles of violence and reparation generating poetic response, then Sereni has acted as a true guide through an almost impossible set of circumstances.

The last meeting between the poets took place in April 1982, just as the Falklands War was brewing on the horizon, and it is an indication of the reticent activism of Robinson’s craft that resistance to that war should take the delicate form it does take in the poem ‘News Abroad’ (*Selected Poems*, pp. 46–7). Written at twenty-nine, the poem is richly allusive, confident with the baggage of its cultural network: it is dedicated to Tim Dooley backing the subdued allusion to his ‘Above Genoa’; the kiosks ‘prophesying war’ echo Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’—newspaper propagandists are contemporary culture’s ancestral voices. ‘From square to square’ alludes to Robinson’s own translation of Sereni’s ‘Saba’ (‘da una piazza all’altra’); ‘supertanker’ remembers Montale’s ‘petroliera’ in ‘La casa dei doganieri’—Robinson’s poem takes place at La Spezia on the Ligurian coast where Montale spent his summer holidays, celebrated in his *Ossa di Seppia*. Montale’s poem addresses a dead lover lost beyond recall—her spirit seems fitfully to inhabit the lights of a tanker glimpsed on the horizon. The news of the distant war in ‘News Abroad’ escapes comprehension too, vanishing like the profile of the supertanker ‘into lowering mist’. Political events have the elusive quality of the dead, for

Robinson—his poetry is haunted, always, by the reticent ghosts of current events, intuited beyond the horizon as though in some Cold War sublime. Elusive but real too, since the wars of the Cold War, though occurring beyond the horizons of the West, are real enough; their influence is felt in Robinson's poem in the seagulls 'in close formation' like the pilots bombing the Falklands, 'souls of the deceased that swoop and glide'. The last line of the poem cites Pound's famous definition: poetry is 'news that stays news'. Poetry has a rival in the Cold War's current events, marginalizing poets and poems by stealing the thunder of sublime mystery and elusive power: 'news staying news though I don't understand.' If Sereni was of any guidance at all, he should guide readers of Robinson's work towards comprehension of the strategic uses of reticence as political symptom in the poems. Robinson is playing out the poet's marginalization in his political poems, elucidating the real loss of citizen agency in postwar forms of governance.

As with the companion poems 'Nabucco' and 'Die Lilliputbahn', the Sereni-inspired poetry from Italy draws the topic of reparation from its private realm into the zone of history. The poems rethink the relations of the UK to the rest of the world, ponder the harsh realities of the Balkan wars of the 1990s, as in the 20th section of 'Via Sauro Variations' (*Selected Poems*, p. 111)—'homeless from the nearby civil war'—and weigh the ever present burden of the Second World War and the concentration camps on postwar imaginations. 'Nabucco' (*Selected Poems*, pp. 73–4) is symptomatically powerless before the sense of doomed association it imagines between the spectacle of exiled Jews in Verdi's opera at a performance in Verona and the news from Mostar, 'dead faces in a war zone' from 'a shelled walled city', replaying the horrors of the 1940s. 'Die Lilliputbahn' (*Selected Poems*, pp. 116–7) stages Vienna not as a tourist Cold War destination (the Prater wheel from *The Third Man*), but in terms of the quiet of the park's station platform—Robinson is himself quiet as to what occurred at stations in Vienna, reticence matching the invisible elusive ghosts of the dead passengers of all those trains ('a train's / going in mist with an echo of voices'). Our own sense of hauntedness is inextricably involved with the trauma of the Shoah, echoing especially within our own private silences.

This is as much as to say that Robinson's poetry, though playing possum to the loud strains of politics and history, is political in the very ways it summons its privacies into lines of force, feeling and circumstance. Netted across the collections of poems are sensed relations between emotional forms of betrayal, passivity and anguished desire

and political and historical cruces of difficult judgement, as in Pound's betrayal at Salò, or Sereni's working through his own passivity in the Algerian camps and poems. The public poems shadow the private lyrics therefore in subtle and disturbing ways. The poem 'Unfaithful Translations' (*Selected Poems*, p. 57), for instance, looks to Sereni again as guide, but here in the difficult zone of infidelity—Robinson's second wife is Italian from Parma. Robinson's translation work is fused with this new relationship, Sereni's words like the carp in the waters, but which also figure her words to him, offering future joy, the promise of 'body, voice, touch' despite the watery disturbances of the treacherous medium of languages, and the tricky waters of infidelity on the tongue. Metaphors between language-use and intimacy implicate Robinson's readers in the performance of translated relationships, an involvement made especially clear in the opening poems to *Lost and Found* (1997) and *About Time Too* (2001). The speaker of 'Difficult Mornings' struggles to 'revise, / revise a voice into other people's prose / as if it were coaxing a weary lover', while at the conclusion of 'A Dedication' he promises, down a long-distance telephone connection, to 'say / words of explanation and launch them on the air'.

The theme and its treatment is revisited in 'Via Sauro Variations', imitating Montale's *Mottetti* (translated by Robinson in *Modern Poetry in Translation*) and Spenser's *Amoretti*. The twenty-five sections, like musical variations, are woven together into a modern Petrarchan sequence dedicated to his new Laura, in poetry that imagines the act of translation as communication between temporarily estranged lovers: 'desire, abandoned, still great, / to approach and reach near // an original, translate distances / in the miscarriaged language we say.' (*Selected Poems*, p. 105) The spaces and distances of the form, the stanza break, the line-ending space, are emblems of the distances that separate languages and different minds, however close. But they also figure possible companionate spaces, the zone of shared breath and desire. This double attitude to form owes something to the Cambridge tradition of close reading, but also to the example of the Italian poets Robinson admires, Montale, Saba, Fortini, Sereni above all.

The 1980s proved to be a difficult decade for Robinson, as for so many. Thatcher had begun her *Kulturkampf* in 1981 against the universities, and jobs in the academy became scarce, especially for specialists in contemporary poetry. The situation is treated in the *Entertaining Fates* collection (1992): the stifling socio-political atmosphere likened to a Tennysonian 'overgrown spinney', where the 'ivy chokes its mildewed

boughs / and interthreads hard earth' in the poem 'Not Yet Out of the Wood' (*Selected Poems*, p. 53). The wood in question figures the *selva* of poetry, the garden of matrimonial life, or the UK—in all three dimensions, the question 'do I wait or go?' is a compound of economic, sexual and cultural compulsions and desires. Robinson's persona has to choose to leave or stay, an Empsonian choice between the 'blankness' of a 'financially embarrassed' life as a part-time lover/poet/worker, or the lure of enforced emigration, the modernist dream of deracinated intelligence and sexual nomadism.

The departure did happen, but not as originally planned—Robinson left the UK in 1989 for Japan to take up a post as professor of English. Very soon after, the relationship with his Italian wife Ornella began—and the extraordinary intertwining of Japanese and Italian material in the poems began too. The move so far abroad also initiated a significant change in style. If we look at two representative poems written soon after the move—'An Undetermined Heart' and 'Lost Objects'—the new style becomes apparent. In both poems, the fresh new mode sings out: a more musical play of words, a lighter, clearer representation of the social and natural world, enriched by what one might call an ecological and anthropological conscience. 'An Undetermined Heart' negotiates the new culture of Japanese *politesse* and hospitality with an open mind, yet takes succour from the resemblances between the bare and oppressive domestic spaces of Japan and his childhood memories of displacement from vicarage to vicarage, despite the gulf separating expectations and emotional circumstance. Similar cross-cultural wit is generated in 'Lost Objects' which examines the kindly custom the Japanese have to hang lost objects in full view if found by someone else; the custom raises all the psychoanalytic ghosts Robinson struggled with in the UK, as well as enacting a charming replay of the Mallarmé prose poem 'Le Démon de l'Analogie' which ends with the poet seeing himself reflected in a shop window displaying a lyre with wings: 'Wordless in front of the next / lost property office's window, / you find yourself looking perplexed.' (*Selected Poems*, p. 70) The light, clear style also signals a release of comic energy in the poems, here in the soft-spoken joke about homelessness, voicelessness in a foreign culture, the perplexed self of the psychoanalytic *Cogito*, related to doubts about the survival of love in the Japanese city and suburbs.

Such survival became all the more critical within the writing after the other extraordinary violent event which has shaped Robinson's life: the brain tumour and operation he went through in 1993. It was a

benign tumour and the operation was successful, but it was an extremely dangerous procedure, and Robinson suffered deafness in one ear, a weeping tear duct and semi-paralysis on parts of the face. The episode was as close to a brush with death as a normal creature goes through without going under and its effects are given expression in the three poems, 'Before an Operation', 'A Burning Head' and 'Convalescent Days'. The poems are about the possible ministrations of poetry as daily meditation, as acts of communication and self-restoration against the shocks of the body under siege. In their quiet steadiness of nerve and their ways of attending to others, friends, family, fellow-sufferers under circumstances of fear, they are a serious contribution to a literature of care and near-death, read movingly in comparison to similar projects in the 1990s (Thom Gunn, Jim Ferris, Susan Wicks).

The move to Japan sharpened Robinson's sense of himself as a poet of travel, of departures and returns, as explorer of the flight paths and transit spaces of the modern world. The travel motif enables a range of different kinds of observation on the passing world: nostalgic returns to the North in poems like 'Your Other Country' (*Selected Poems*, pp. 114-5) addressed both to Ornella and to his own lost boy self ('Love, this is your other country'); returns to emotional trauma in 'Scargill House'—which is a twelve-section poem about meeting his first wife, Rosemary Laxton, again—and 'The Happiness Plant'; exploration of the past economic conditions which led to exile in the first place ('Red Wednesday'); even nostalgia being manufactured for Italy itself, a country married into and second home, in 'Nostalgia for the Present'; also pure transit poems, poetry of airports and departure lounges ('Leaving Sapporo' and 'Something to Declare'). As he has said in interview:

The great advantage of 'exile' for a writer, or, more strictly in my case, economic migration, is that you are freed at a stroke from the innumerable ways in which a native culture sets the agenda and delineates the pale of thought and feeling. It does this so thoroughly that it's only when you've got clear of it that you begin to see how much you've been shaped. Perhaps the greatest supposed danger is that you lose touch with your native tongue. Frankly, I think that's a parochial anxiety. I teach Literature in English, and English as a Second Language. I watch the different European and American news broadcasts by satellite at breakfast each morning. I'm in e-mail, fax, and phone contact with relatives, friends, and colleagues in most of the English-speaking countries and Europe. We live in the fragmentary, poly-lingual foreign community here, where the native Englishes are as likely to be American, Canadian, Australian, or New Zealander as the various UK versions.
(*The Poetry Kit Interviews Peter Robinson*)

In Japan, the city Robinson worked longest in was Sendai, and it is Sendai which gave Robinson one of his strangest of *trouvailles*. For Sendai happens to be where Jasper Johns was stationed during the Korean War. The vision of a coat hanger in a tree in the poem 'Coat Hanger' summons Johns' artwork, which itself, in Robinson's extraordinarily subtle allusive style, brings on so much else. As he put it in interview, in a passage which might indicate some of the light complexity of his learning:

Williams' poem ['A Red Wheelbarrow'] is directly alluded to—but where he has 'so much depends', I have 'so much else that could depend'; and I also had in mind that wonderful list and shrug at the end of Baudelaire's 'Le Cygne'. His is a poem about exile and change and survival, and so, in a different key, is mine. . . . Frank O'Hara's 'loneliness' on his destroyer in Miyagi Bay, off Sendai, in August 1945, Johns here during Korea painting posters warning GIs about VD, and me in the same place without my wife and family in 1997 . . . There are images of body parts emerging from foliage 'like a phantom limb' also borrowed from other paintings by Johns. The poem hints at affective disturbances, the substitution of objects for feelings, disorientations caused by losses of emotional target, and behind them wars and occupations, and the survivals of customs for coping with crisis . . . I think of it as a reprise of themes and ways of working that I stumbled on with 'The Yellow Tank' six years before. Those two slightly uncharacteristic poems explore their themes in a way that seeks to replace obsession with objects by attachment to people, or to achieve attachment by working through obsession. If you think of the poems as objects too, then there's your trajectory towards the sponsorship of understanding relations. ('Left to their own devices', *Talk About Poetry*, p. 119)

The poem is about the relationship between Johns and O'Hara—especially Johns' 'In Memory of my Feelings', the artwork Johns produced for the memorial folder after O'Hara's death based on his poem of the same title. Robinson's poem is one of a series that sustain his interest in art and art history, ekphrastic poems that explore the common ground and differences between the two rival forms of representation and imaging. Common to Robinson, O'Hara and Johns in this case is the comparable 'loneliness' within the Japanese city space, emotional data conjoining the three chronotopes, Second World War, Korean War and late 1990s Sendai, but also technical conjunctions between O'Hara's painterly personism and quotidian poetry, Johns' symptomatic Cold War obsessional art (all those disembodied members, those targets), and Robinson's poetry of distances, trauma and solitary dailiness. The poem

stages a dream of magical resolution of obsessions, discovering a sustaining form of life, a transformative means of survival, a living with the partner despite long distances. A great deal depends (as in hangs) on that absurd hanger in the trees . . .

In the notes to *Anywhere You Like* (2000), a collection published in Japan, Robinson has written:

During the period in which these poems were written, I have grown more used to the idea that I'm now living in three different places: Japan, where I work; Italy, where my wife's family live; and England, where I was born. Of course, this is a state of mind, rather than a material fact; but it is one which new means of rapid communication and the relative ease of long-distance travel have made seem natural. These three countries, with which I am directly involved, have very distinct languages and cultures. The poems collected here respond variously to these places and, naturally enough, to the histories of my relations with them.

A representative poem from the collection, 'Winter Zoo Encounter', takes off from a chance encounter with a Florentine at the zoo to explore the life and culture of the three countries. It also imagines sympathy with the caged animals with new ecological inflections important to the later Robinson. Something about trapped states beyond native language, related to the transitional and exilic states of being which Elizabeth Bowen summed up as 'air-mindedness' (the mind set generated by the relative ease of long-distance travel), and to the ecological anxieties of the twenty-first century, are coming together in the Japanese poems in ways from which their seeming directness and communicability might deflect attention. But the poems are also reflecting on love and language and estranging relationships with force and light complexity that links up to Robinson's whole life's work.

In poems like 'Pasta-Making', 'Closure', 'Stranded' and 'Italian Poplars', the poet, whether conjuring a portrait of his wife superimposed on a Degas painting, or ironically comparing a moment of loneliness to the strandedness of Robinson Crusoe, remembers that in his actual life, confected by force of will out of culture shock and hybrid experience, true value in love and friendship is discovered. And that the things loved, whether they be person, artwork, object or place, are more vital than ever for the survival of the species as well as of the self: so much depends on such lasting tokens of affection.

Throughout his career, too, Robinson has been a tireless and dedicated prose writer, mainly of academic monographs on twentieth

century poetry, but there are also: an unpublished novel, an edition of the poems of Adrian Stokes, a collection of essays on Geoffrey Hill, a co-edited collection on Roy Fisher, an unpublished work on representations of rape, and the fine collection of aphorisms published by Salt. The critical writing is keen and acute and deals with key Robinsonian concerns as a poet in the world—they explore questions of reparation (*In the Circumstances*), of speech act (*Poetry, Poets, Readers*), of situatedness within circumstances private and political (*Twentieth Century Poetry: Selves and Situation*), of ethical and non-passive agency—*Poetry, Poets, Readers* is subtitled 'Making Things Happen'. Poetry, Robinson would argue, acts according to an informal promissory relationship between poets, poems and readers whereby both reader and poet promise to experience concrete acts of feeling and judgement in the language zone of art in order to allow the poem to perform its real and pretended speech acts (*Poetry, Poets, Readers*, p. vi). Only by taking just such an ethical step into agency can poetry survive the scepticism of the modern world. And only by abiding by the ordinary responsibilities and risks of such informally contractual agency can poetry be said to offer reparation for past harm.

If Robinson's poetry is so engaged with the reparative ethics of the ordinary dailiness of English language use, then this is what has made his career in Japan such an odd and serious test and why the poems must undergo the motion sickness of their own travelling through sequences of homecoming, departure and exile. It is with a certain happy closure, then, that Robinson recently accepted a Chair at the University of Reading, and at the time of going to press is preparing to come home to England. Much of the bitterness of the economic fate of so many poets from the 1970s on has been harshest for poets who did genuinely attempt to sustain footholds in the academy. At long last, UK universities are recognizing, mainly through the success of creative writing programmes across the country, how valuable the teaching and research of practising poets can be within departments. Tenure at Reading for Robinson is poetic justice indeed.

Reading Robinson, finally, depends so much on a simple act of promising. As one of the aphorisms puts it: 'My ideal reader has chosen to spend time with these words in particular' (*Untitled Deeds*, p. 18). That choice once made is a form of promise, and it is a promise the very particular words of Robinson's poems respond to with strength, delicacy and a curiously affirmative *argumentative* intimacy. For the lines always live in constant dialogue with their interlocutor, living with the checks

and challenges of the words of the other. What Robinson wrote of Hardy's poems can be applied to his own:

Hardy's great poems exemplify how from the world of others' words—which are not the poem, not Hardy's regular art—comes the challenge, the check to that art; yet, at the same time, they demonstrate how such checks may be responded to in a poem, may become a part of the poem, and part of Hardy's unforeseen excellence in poetry. (*In the Circumstances*, pp. 81-2)

These essays hope to help readers enter into the promissory zone of Robinson's art, to help them enter too into the dialogic drama of its challenges and accorded responses, and to sense along the lines how Robinson's interlocutory poems conjure presences and occasions from the air, incorporating existences beyond his own, inviting us, always, in to the poetry to assent, if the imagination chooses to do so, to its composed and reparative speech.

We have organized the essays, after Roy Fisher's Preface, into sections according to the following topics: 'Space' (two essays on the road motif and the representations of interiors and exteriors in the poems), 'Poetry v. Critical Prose' (two essays contrasting Robinson's practice in his poems and in his criticism, specifically with regard to his handling of heterotonic rhyme and in the poems addressed to his children), 'Reparation' (four essays addressing different aspects of Robinson's reparative art, namely the debt to Adrian Stokes, a group reader response to a poem about witnessing rape, a study of the Cold War context and an essay on the importance of translation to the handling of the topic), 'Home and Abroad' (three essays dealing with Liverpool and Japan in the poems of travel and home-coming), 'Arts of Eye and Ear' (on the ekphrastic poems, on a key optical motif and on the relationship with pop culture).

Preface

Roy Fisher's 'Preface' ponders the autobiographical nature of Robinson's poems, and zeroes in on their quiet, undemonstrative but haunting effects: the oblique placing of the 'I' among sharply visualized objects, the 'absorbed metaphor', the 'sly, unfashionable rhymes', the 'shifting images and potential associations'. All of these add up to a very singular textual presence, and, for Fisher, an original configuring of the relations between life events and verbal surfaces.

Space

Adrian Poole's 'Robinson's Roads' looks at the road trope in Robinson's poetry and transport motifs more generally to focus on the travelling nature of the work. The various 'roads, tracks, vehicles and forms of motion' of the poems open up into stories about Robinson's open-ended exploration of decaying urban and suburban spaces as well as the very possibility of narrativizing certain experiences along the journeys he has experienced.

Paul Hullah traces the developing relationship between interior and exterior from Robinson's early work in *The Benefit Forms* to a surer negotiation between words and objects found in *A Part of Rosemary Laxton*, through a move from enclosed to accessible forms of space: 'the poet now looks at building blocks, patterns to arrange and live beside and with, where once he saw barriers and blockades.'

Poetry vs. Critical Prose

Eric Griffiths attends to Robinson's characteristic use of heterotonic rhymes, unpicking the poet's critical argument about there being only one world for living and reading poems in to reveal their genuine 'unsmoothed reality'. The rhymes suit moments of 'resolutely unresolved rhythmic ambiguity' in the poems where two different styles and worlds can be mediated without the fake unity of a perfect match.

Steve Clark subjects a demanding gaze on Robinson's poems to his daughters, arguing that they must necessarily complicate, if not invalidate many of the claims concerning speech act theory argued for in the critical prose, whilst admiring the ways the poems enact recognition of generational change and 'the nature of the parental or quasi-parental speech-act'.

Reparation

David Pascoe provides an illuminating account of Robinson's debts to the poet and painter Adrian Stokes, producing deep insights regarding the materiality of Robinson's verse textures—their origins in physical intimacy with urban space and their potential to make reparation.

Jane Davis presents a reading of 'There Again' by the Ridgeway Library Reading Group. Here key Robinsonian themes such as attempted reparation and the poetic subject's conflicted inhabitation of time and

space are movingly inflected and intensified through the group's questioning approach to this challenging poem.

Adam Piette explores the Cold War contexts of the early poetry, and its difficult engagement with the paranoia and militarization of Cold War UK, sensing continuities between Cold War cycles of political conflict and peace talk and the violence and reparation inscribed in the rape poems.

Andrew Fitzsimons, in his essay on Robinson's *The Great Friend*, looks at the translations and discovers a series of continuities between the original and translatory projects, noting the importance of Sereni to the interest in reparation within Robinson's own poetry as 'mirrored in his translational concern with restoring the damaged otherness of source texts'.

Home and Abroad

Ralph Pite's meditation on Robinson's relationship with the city of Liverpool explores the action of his writing between the stability of home and release of travel, the 'somewhereness' of poems that set disillusion and ambition working against one another.

John Roe's 'The Refracted Self: Japanese Experiences' is a close examination of the Japanese poems as works concerned with neo-modernist 'tribal dislocation' and exile, with the problem of the European gaze abroad, with the unease of the *gai-jin* or foreign resident in Japan, and as sites of cultural and self-refracting clashes between East and West.

Miki Iwata explores Robinson's poems incorporating Japanese experience, his transformation of culture shock into jest and his creation of tension between seemingly frank talk and the specifics of experience.

Arts of the Eye and Ear

Neil Corcoran examines Robinson's ekphrastic poems and plots the similarities between the poetry's narrative secrecies and the mysteriousness of the paintings of David Inshaw and the boxes of Joseph Cornell; the poems' 'embedded ekphrasis' helps Robinson 'place experience in memory and language'.

Katy Price pursues a recurrent optical motif in Robinson's poetry—the relationship between straight lines and rising figures—as a way to explore the diffidence and power that these poems offer their readers,

and discovering the artisanal, ecological, and muted vectors summoned by the motif.

David Taylor's essay 'Background Noise' is a lively and inventive account of the pop culture intertexts to many of Robinson's poems, trawling the lines for embedded references to the 1960s and 1970s songs heard on Radio Caroline and as amateur guitarist, from the Byrds to Chuck Berry. Most important are the Beatles (because of the Liverpool connection) and Dylan—the presence of these pop allusions opens up perspectives on lyric, popular culture and emotional narrative of real pertinence to Robinson's poetics.

Works Cited

Robinson, Peter. 'Stokes—the Poet', *Adrian Stokes, 1902–1972*,
<www.pstokes.demon.co.uk/ads5/prpi.htm>
(accessed 26 July 2006).

Preface

ROY FISHER

It's unusual in English poetry nowadays to find a writer of Peter Robinson's sophistication occupying himself with what appears, at least, to be autobiography. Poets who have taken the trouble, as Robinson certainly has, to study language and apprentice themselves to its workings rather than use it as poster-paint tend to sink themselves beneath verbal surfaces and exercise a phobic avoidance of the dangers of personal pronouns and what they may lead to. It has in any case become customary to regard the authorial 'I' warily as an ironic characterisation or a metaphor, and just about controllable. But 'you' and especially 'we' are treated as chutes into a void where characters in a poem can be subjected to misrepresentation, manipulation or lies, destabilizing the poem into harangue or the author's self-delusion.

Those pronouns undoubtedly harbour the properties of potential rogue terms, capable of swelling or shrinking or dying in their seats, distorting the texture of a poem. But to regard them as under strict compulsion to do these things is something of a libel, and it's a libel to which Robinson declines to subscribe. He appears to treat the 'I' 'you' and 'we' in as lapidary a fashion as the carefully layered words of his observations of scenery, weather and situations. Treating the pronouns in this way means they have to be given the stability and respect accorded to things; and a reader is steered away from over-dramatic reactions by this fastidiousness of the author. He doesn't psychologise much: and where he does venture into analysis of motives or emotions it's only by way of the briefest of excursions, securely supported by the structure of the poem.

It follows that although it would be possible to conjure the ghost of a biography from this work, it is clear that even from the chronological

ordering of his *Selected Poems*, such things as narrative, development, the road to death under the mandate of the biographical imperative, do not constitute the reason for the work's existence. The language is lucid but the sketches are left unframed; the life-images are held separate and inhibited from converging to form a story with a point. If we engage for a moment in a fiction and push the summary outline of Robinson's life away into another time—any time—and another set of places—any set of places—we can see how transferable its main terms are. A somewhat peripatetic scholar and teacher with links to several academies and good reasons for living part of each year in three countries. A pair of important relationships, one of them troubled; the witnessing of an enduringly memorable crime; a single potentially catastrophic illness; a compact set of allegiances to people and places. Not dull by any means: but a life-pattern that might have been issued to at least a whole subclass of good poets in a variety of epochs and cultures. Thus the life-events don't provide the driving force of the poems; rather they make up the terrain, a varied surface across which the poet travels, living his life but always exercising a strong disposition to make poems from somewhere close to everyday events. It's as if he carries a listening device, alert for the moments when the tectonic plates of mental experience slide quietly one beneath another to create paradoxes and complexities that call for poems to be made. These are not the ordinary urgencies of autobiography, but they are the urgencies of new creations.

I stress the evident and sustained closeness of the 'I' of the poems to the empirical Peter Robinson in order to go further into the question of the position he has quietly but with full knowledge taken up on the English poetry scene, widening and strengthening his territory with each new publication, and apparently unperturbed by the absence of a share in what little vulgar success there is to be had on that scene. From the earliest poems of his we're allowed to see he appears to have had a clear idea of the terms on which he would proceed: how much of the surrounding poetical idiom he would make use of; how much of the endlessly-moving sense of tradition that accompanies and feeds or constricts all of us. His approach to the literary canon was pragmatic. He's never peddled a petulant nostalgia. Neither has he ever become seriously entangled in the paradoxical world of the often brilliant dogmatism of theory-driven poetics; the paradox there consisting in the way exquisitely-devised concerns with arcane aesthetics are first of all moralised, then promoted as public and social issues, often in an

atmosphere of crude political bluster and inter-personal venom and contempt, leading sometimes to violence.

Robinson shows himself open, as a reader, to such work and accepts or rejects it according to its merits, while clearly finding it of little relevance to his own practice. From the formalist end of the field his work may, wrongly, appear to be of a piece with what has come to be called the Official Verse Culture. This is a manner, widely practised and published over several recent decades, in which the poems, hung from their titles, propose their occasions, anecdotes, locations or general topics in a disguised version of the way a lecturer will open a subject. There can be a wide range of personal tones in this poetry, from lyricism to near-bombast, but always the tell-tale defining signs are present. The work's mode of operation is to display, explain and, however subtly, to judge what it addresses itself to. The mode has the characteristics of an essay, even a paraphrase. 'Life' is written up, elevated a little way, into 'art' in a way that in the most popular instances gives a reader a sense of value received in return for the labour of reading. There will be decoration, a packaging of figures from what Stuart Mills called 'the bottomless school satchels of the metaphor-mongers'; but the Official Verse Culture depends mostly on an easy conversational style that has absorbed the relaxations, though not the excitements and constraints, of modernism. It is quite difficult to write really badly in this idiom, and it's much used, prophylactically or curatively, in Creative Writing courses.

It's easy to see how, swimming quietly along in this shoal of fish, Robinson can (as his publishing history suggests) be mistaken for part of it or even overlooked; for his work, though, in John Ashbery's words, 'curiously strong', doesn't have eye-catching idiosyncrasies and is short of convenient grab-handles. He doesn't do grotesques or caricatures; he's witty enough but not particularly comic; there's no extra-poetic tag of theme or material that it's worth anybody's while to hang on him; the biographical elements are, as I've said, put to poetic rather than dramatic use. And the essayistic qualities of the style have obviously had no appeal for him. It's such features as the smoothly-articulated densities of observations and mental events and the careful placing of the figure representing the empirical Peter Robinson that confirm his singularity.

I'm tempted to use pictorial similes to describe his poems. Though he's not photographic or viewy, a few visual hints will produce the

limited *mise-en-scène* a movie director might provide, particularly in urban or interior settings, for his actors—for these poems do mostly contain people. Often the well-placed ‘I’ is to be sensed as a shadowy presence, its back to the camera and off to one side and on watch. That’s a general effect. But close attention to the visual hints will show a poet intimately involved with the physical world and its evidences. Almost at random: ‘a full moon / blurred above neon, pantographs, sea’, ‘a wall’s late-modern, matt-white’, ‘The cypresses disordered / by stiff gusts, bedraggled strands / flurried at her face beside me.’ ‘Uncurtained, jammed sash windows / let on to Sandtex beyond the front door.’ ‘Trolley-bus cables divide that deep blue, all but black—’, ‘the scratches in a wooden step from its entry well’, ‘Strings of bulbs between each frontage, / white, with a fainter halo in the air’, ‘ploughed piles of exhausted black snow’, and the whole first section of ‘There Again’.

Robinson is a master of the absorbed metaphor, the device that, grammatically, lies hidden, absorbing the qualities of, say, a mood into itself and dispensing them informally back into the poem without a click of cleverness or a hint of the bottomless school satchel. It’s a device that can be profuse, plethoric and productive of internal collisions: Robinson’s choice is to use it sparingly and in such a way as to make a poem at once more physical and more lucid. A similar thing could be said about his use of adjectives, potential traps often abjured by those excellent teachers, the post-Poundians and Objectivists: ‘Adjectives drain nouns,’ said Basil Bunting. But in ‘dark carp swam beneath the surface / of their spacious liquid’ there’s no doubt that the quickly-dealt adjectives earn their right to be there.

It will be apparent that I’m disinclined to recommend a simple chronological reading of these poems of thirty years, or any attempt to trace lines of development, that venerable critical vice that lazily projects on to an artist’s work the quasi-romantic model of a quest composed of challenges, agonies, successes, crises and failures. Robinson’s work simply blocks that option. Individual poems have individual lives, individual musical qualities. In the absence of repetitious, empty or vacuously occasional pieces each work can be seen as something added to the world rather than a mere notebook page of commentary upon it.

Inevitably, though, there are changes in practice. The terms of engagement, already clear in the earliest work still in print, are at that stage held almost defensively close in the interests of definition and the avoidance of flooding by extraneous elements: the ‘drawing’ can be

austere, even stiff, with third-person constructions keeping characters at a distance. This position, since it was, I take it, pragmatic rather than programmatic, was to be neither repudiated nor vacated: but it might have been hard to see it as predictive of the richness, variety, suppleness and cultural inclusiveness of later work. I think of the sly, unfashionable rhymes that come to the attention only after they've already been at their work for a few stanzas; and the moments of easy-going Eliot pastiche in 'Via Sauro Variations', where Eliot is simply recruited and used, with no ironic purpose that I can detect. Then there's the extraordinarily complex 'Coat Hanger', a veritable aquarium of shifting images and potential associations, circling away into long regressions, and hung from its ending in an understated tour de force, an audacious play on a single word in William Carlos Williams's 'The Red Wheelbarrow' and thus, in turn, on the infinity of ideas available to readers of that poem. And back to the beginning of 'Coat Hanger' to see how what we thought was the poem has been altered by the revelation at its conclusion. This is far more than a domestic vignette.

Robinson's Roads

ADRIAN POOLE

You might think the main point of a road is where it leads you, but this is the view of confident travellers who know their destination and have faith in their feet, cycles, cars or buses to get them there. Peter Robinson's poetry asks what it means to lose your sense of direction or not to have one in the first place. 'For the minute there's nowhere to go,' he writes (*Selected Poems*, p. 31). This might be a relief no less than a predicament. Having nowhere to go can mean freedom from movement, purpose, urgency, sequence, story, for the time being. 'Often, now, the paths lead nowhere', begins 'The House Museum' (*Selected Poems*, p. 126). Or again, in 'All Around' we are told, 'I lose the sense of being aimed—/ of being governed by direction' (*Selected Poems*, p. 132). Roads are an unavoidable feature of our circumstances but they don't stand around nor invite us to do so. They ask us to take them and be taken by them, to accept a direction. The poet at risk of being trapped 'In the Background' thinks wistfully of other landscapes where 'the roads / are arrowed with direction' (*Selected Poems*, p. 32). Yet the arrows might prove as coercive as they're designed to be helpful: directions you might wish to refuse.

Robinson's poetry is fascinated by the appurtenances of transport. It's full of asphalt, tarmac, pavements, kerbs, verges, central reservations, by-passes, cross-roads, hard shoulders, crash barriers, expressway lanes, lay-bys, boulevards, avenues, headlights, windscreen wipers, grinding gears. Here is an assortment of characteristic lines: 'the smell / of tarmac soft as treacle on my soles', 'tail lights streaming elsewhere', 'the predictable returns of windscreen wipers', 'a car's / headlamps flaring through the trees', 'we'd paused / to let thick traffic pass', 'and parked at angles on display, / two numberplate-less cars' (*Selected Poems*, pp. 32, 38, 40, 65, 68, 79).

Not that you can always depend on cars: you might need public transport. A train returns the poet to his old home in 'The Interrupted Views' (*Selected Poems*, pp. 22–3); he enjoys 'Vienna's quiet' with a friend on the platform of 'Die Lilliputbahn' (*Selected Poems*, p. 116); in the Italian countryside he stares out 'for the shimmer of approaching trains' ('Changing Line' in *About Time Too*, p. 76); oblivious of her watching parents, his young daughter goes round and round on a toy-town train, disappearing into a tunnel—'and here you are again' (*Selected Poems*, p. 121). There are buses too. 'Between Fortunes' begins with two of his most glumly rhythmless lines: 'On a carriageway between South Lancashire / and Victoria Coach Station, London, somewhere', and it ends without arriving, on a modestly despairing rhyme: 'you're dispersed for hours / somewhere; somewhere the journey sours' (*Entertaining Fates*, pp. 10–11). 'Bus Stops' begins grimly with the day closing down from sunset to black, while 'Buses pass like the latest of our lost possibilities.' Yet the poem ends less forlornly than it began: a bus does come and we do get home, noting the bright city lights that 'tint the night's mist / a violet colour' (*Lost and Found*, p. 51).

When it comes to travelling further afield, you could once set off for Chicago through the Manchester Ship Canal ('Worlds Apart', *Selected Poems*, p. 11). But that's a thing of the past, amongst others: in 'The Albert Dock' a pensioner tells the poet, 'There's no fish here' (*Lost and Found*, p. 62). As for air-travel Robinson has one notably fine poem, 'Leaving Sapporo' (*Selected Poems*, pp. 75–6), but typically it's about being held up and missing his flight. Never mind, as it were, there's always all the details to take in and vent your feelings on—'labels, lounges, luggage carousels'. And you can go over the road that led to this stoppage: 'the unfinished expressway spur, / polythene flounces on its elevated sections', including much heavy weather, 'a continuous drizzling rain / which taunted squeaky windscreen wipers'. This is an exemplary poem of disappointment dispersed, of shame and blame relieved. Its final words are addressed to the indeterminate second person Robinson favours, who could be anyone, including in this case his shamefaced Japanese host, himself, and his readers: 'yourself, forgive.' Which is to say, not only 'forgive yourself' but simply 'forgive'.

It would be wrong to suppose that Robinson only writes about journeys that fail, disappoint, or are thwarted. But he is extremely attentive to the difficulties of travelling through space and time, and the movement of his own words on the page seeks to enact them. There's a telling couple of lines in the title poem of the early volume *Overdrawn Account*

(1980), that run: 'He grasps the shapes, not the sequence. / Others break the Highway Code.' (*Selected Poems*, p. 23) Grasping the shapes is a first step towards making something of your own—a poem, for instance. But finding the right sequence to make up a rhythm, a logic, let alone a whole story: this is more troublesome.

'And you might walk' (*Selected Poems*, p. 23). So thinks someone in 'Overdrawn Account', perhaps the same 'someone' who is 'stepping from a door', devoid of conviction, of much purpose or resources beyond those required to get down the street and—the poem's last words—'buy some small foodstuffs: / milk, eggs, cereal.' A minimal mission accomplished, this ending is so muted a celebration of the little you can live on that it's almost inaudible. Compare the relative luxury of the ending to 'The Explanation': 'these forms which live, if they live, / on a rabbit, a peacock, on whatever comes to hand.' (*Selected Poems*, p. 97) Much of Robinson's poetry is concerned with sifting out the welcome gifts from the surrounding enormity of what's given. In this task, roads are a mixed blessing. Like advertisements, they are too full of promise. They urge us to believe the good gifts that we're after are waiting at the end of the road. Whereas the real place to look, for better and worse, is the side of the road, by the way. There you'll find all the debris and the damage, but also the blessings—like the rabbit and peacock, 'in a gap across from the crem', who catch the poet's eye 'because I'd been going at a pace / to notice and remember.'

Robinson's poems do not break the speed limit nor do they deal with life in the fast lane. They are charitably disposed to people and things that don't get underway at all, or get left behind at the side of the road, on the verge, the pavement or corner. Like the jobless men hanging out at street corners (*Selected Poems*, p. 11), or his father's parish in its hollow, abandoned by a new by-pass: 'tail lights streaming elsewhere' (*Selected Poems*, p. 38). As for the detritus the poet can't help noticing that 'Wrappers, newsprint, litter stay / unshifted by wind on mown grass verges' (*Selected Poems*, p. 97). In 'On the Verge' a hoarding uprooted by violent wind is hurled to the side of the road where it joins the rest of the man-made waste: 'Utensils, bottles, durables daily / thickened on slopes beneath the town' (*Entertaining Fates*, p. 103). It's not all depressing debris. There can be beautiful weeds and delightful old words such as 'mugwort, willowherb, convolvulus' (*Selected Poems*, p. 128). A moral too, for the side of the road is where things don't just get dumped but also survive and can even revive: 'as if here too the most neglected / in the long run most survives.' (*Selected Poems*, p. 129) In 'Returning Signs'

the landscape itself seems to move under the pressure of reverie, memory or 'pushed aside wants', like an avalanche that picks things up and drops them again, 'and leaves you here like lateral moraine.' (*Selected Poems*, p. 122) If you're going to be cast aside it sounds better to be 'lateral moraine' than debris or detritus. The 'moraine' is a distinct improvement on the mere 'rain' that has closed the previous stanza, and a good deal of Robinson's later poetry tries to find some hope by the way, to put together the titles of two of his best poems. ('Some Hope' and 'By the Way', *Selected Poems*, pp. 18–20, p. 127).

Hope, comfort, solace, survival: all such possible goods are to be measured against the aftermath of the rape on an Italian road directly addressed in a group of poems first published in *This Other Life* (1988). In 'For Lavinia' there are 'those shapes' of which the poet cannot rid his own mind (*Selected Poems*, p. 45). The 'rain on the road' deepens the memory but may also allay it, in so far as the words are close to those of an older poet, César Vallejo, 'la soledad, la lluvia, los caminos' ('the loneliness, the rain, the roads').¹ In 'There Again' the event is surrounded by crash-barriers, puddle verges, windscreen wipers. And after, there is the site in which the memory is least forgettably lodged, where the two victims who have lived through the nightmare together are left by their assailant, for one of them at least to contemplate: 'how in that lay-by, and alive, / we viewed each other differently.' (*Selected Poems*, p. 41)

More mundanely, there are all kinds of arduous movement that figure the difficulty of finding, making and telling a story. There is the daily grind of travelling to work and back: 'It is an effort / home such days, / the land's fall / contrary to the crowd's flow.' (*Selected Poems*, p. 17) The tiny ellipsis between 'effort' and 'home'—where we might have expected help from a word or two such as 'to get'—means that the 'effort' of the journey seeps into the 'home' and stays there. There is motion that is jammed, stalled, paralyzed, frozen, portentous of death. In the poem 'Going Nowhere', for instance, thoughts of a friend who has recently taken her own life are grimly matched by 'traffic at a standstill, / glass steamed up' (*Ghost Characters*, p. 25). In 'The Relapses', the sense of failing or fallible health, both his own and his mother's, evokes images

¹ These are the final words of Vallejo's best-known poem, 'Piedra negra sobre una piedra blanca', ('Black Stone on a White Stone'), in which he imagines his own death by violence. Robinson notes that he was reading the Clayton Eshleman bilingual edition (California University Press) around 1979–80 (personal communication). He has a brief discussion of this and another poem by Vallejo in *Twentieth Century Poetry: Selves and Situations*, 2005, pp. 7–9.

of a blocked soak-away, of a braking train, of 'queuing cars' burnt petrol fumes', of a suddenly flooded drain (*Selected Poems*, p. 137). There are journeys that seem entirely to fail. 'I know / I shan't reach a destination' ('Faith in the City', *Selected Poems*, p. 39). 'Destination' is as worrying a word for Robinson as 'distance' is comforting. There are some thoroughly happy lines in 'In This Life' which imagine the other better life in which 'we're walking near home / through outskirts flecked with shade and sun.' (*Selected Poems*, p. 92) Not 'walking home', which one might think was a desirable destination, but better, 'walking *near* home'. Those 'outskirts' and the lighting effect are also ones that conduce to happiness. Unlike the journeys, especially in his earlier poetry, that run up against blank walls and dead ends. Or the sad and beautiful one about an ageing man whose hold on the story he's trying to tell is fading ('How He Changes'). He can only remember scenes and circumstances not persons or feelings, the remorse, the 'entrapments', the details (*Selected Poems*, p. 20).

Robinson is highly attentive to the details of everything on which we daily depend, including the walls that shelter and the roads that support. In 'A Homage' he imagines the painter L. S. Lowry walking through the back streets of Salford 'alive to the textures of decay' (*Selected Poems*, p. 13). In an act that models the poet's own sense of the mutual dependence of artist and environment, 'His eyes examine pores in a wall / that formed their intentness.' There is scarcely such a thing as a sheer smooth surface in Robinson's writing. Even the most apparently impenetrable wall has 'pores', a double-edged gift that means you can breathe or even see through it, though it may also be due to collapse on you. As for protective membranes like wallpaper, you should be prepared for them to give way 'like digestive biscuit / crumbled under packaging' (*Selected Poems*, p. 37). In another poem we hear of 'the paint-work's psoriasis, / eczemas of damp and mould.' (*Selected Poems*, p. 71)

Consider the third and last poem in 'Some Hope', occasioned by a visit to 'small, old relatives' in a grim northern valley town.² No warm soft welcome here from 'a population / whose heart is worn like stone' (*Selected Poems*, p. 19). The terrace house frontage is confusingly '[s]pongy, glistening', where the second word is as slightly promising as the first is lowering, a surface that yields too easily. The title 'Some Hope' could be

² 'Some Hope', revised three-part version, *Selected Poems*, pp. 18–20. Written in 1975–6 in Bradford, London, and Cambridge. First published in *Palantir* no. 6, 1977; reprinted in *The Benefit Forms*, 1978 and *Overdrawn Account*, 1980.