

PETER RILEY is one of the most important poets of the past 50 years. He was born in Stockport in 1940 and educated at Stockport Grammar School, Pembroke College Cambridge and the universities of Sussex and Keele. His first book, *Love-Strife Machine*, was published in 1969 and his two-volume *Collected Poems* in 2018, drawing upon the extensive number of remarkable books published over nearly five decades. He has lived in Denmark and different parts of England including Cambridge, the Peak District and Hebden Bridge. These experiences and his travels in Transylvania, Italy, France and Greece are explored in his poetry alongside other abiding themes of social justice, music, the lives of others and the primacy of poetry itself. In addition, Riley has been a prolific writer of incisive poetry reviews and was the poetry editor for *The Fortnightly Review* from 2012 to 2024.

KELVIN CORCORAN lives in Greece. His first book was published in 1985 and his *Collected Poems* in 2023, drawing upon fifteen previous volumes. His work has been commended in the UK by the Poetry Society, the Forward Prize committee and commissioned by Medicine Unboxed. It is the subject of a study edited by Andy Brown, *The Writing Occurs as Song*. Corcoran has edited an account of Lee Harwood's poetry in *Not the Full Story: Six Interviews with Lee Harwood*, 2008, and is co-editor with Robert Sheppard of the *New Collected Poems* of Lee Harwood. His work has been anthologised in the UK and the USA and translated into Greek.

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PROSE

Two Essays / Company Week / The Dance at Mociu * /
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About Poetry

PETER RILEY

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FOREWORD

KELVIN CORCORAN

'All these words are mine but I may have changed my mind since then.'
—Peter Riley (The Queen's Arms, Botallack, 2025)

The purpose of *About Poetry* is to offer a contextual account of the poetry of Peter Riley. Of course, it is a poetry that speaks for itself, but in *About Poetry* we also have the voice of the poet himself in counterpoint. To understand aspects of the origin of that voice led to the inclusion of two autobiographical essays. The essays and interviews are not only about Peter Riley's poetry, its transition through five decades, but also the landscape of contemporary poetry. Much of what is said here explores the poetics of that landscape, its achievements, contradictions, creative diversions and its vitality.

The opening paragraph of Peter Hughes' essay from *A Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Poetry, 1960–2015*, edited by Wolfgang Görtzschacher and David Malcolm, 2020, is an exact overview of Peter Riley's achievement:

Peter Riley is one of the most significant English-language poets of the past 40 years. His distinctive mix of Modernism, late-Romanticism and socialist ethics is fused with attention to and evocations of favoured locations such as the English Peak District, the Llyn peninsula in Wales, Transylvania and Greece. His focus on music is also an important feature. In both his poetry and his criticism Riley has had an important role in the re-evaluation of British poetry of the 1940s. His poetry concerns itself with the histories of working people, and their traces in the landscape and in art. His work absorbs Modernist techniques and practices, but also harks back to more traditional forms.'

Part of that achievement is how the difference between poetry and prose, and the limitation of prose in discussing poetry, is frequently considered in these essays and interviews. From the very first interview Peter Riley is keen not to see poetry reduced to the terms of prose. This can be read as an assertion about the limits of any book about poetry, including this one,

and an invitation not to compile such a book, or bother to read it if that mistake is made. Alternatively, *About Poetry* is a sustained, expansive and profoundly perceptive account of the primacy of poetry, the positive and negative shaping of contemporary poetry, and the poetry of Peter Riley. I prefer this second view.

Peter is living with the advanced symptoms of Parkinson's disease. *About Poetry* could not have been realised without the constant help and intervention from his wife, Beryl. All the knots which became entangled with each exchange between author and editor were disentangled by Beryl. Peter's Botallack declaration is proof of his very particular poetic gift. The Botallack declaration is there throughout the course of his work. This unending inclination to reconsider and rewrite his thoughts on poetry, and even those poems, which were at one point apparently complete, rings out in *About Poetry*.

That willingness to rethink, rewrite and rework has produced a remarkable and distinctive poetry over five decades. The most recent variation of such creative restlessness is accurately assessed by Adam Piette in *Blackbox Manifold* 14, 2015, where Peter Riley is described as a 'passionate plain speaker for the times... political-lyrical presiding intelligencer of these isles.' This quality is increasingly evident in the trajectory of his work in *Collected Poems* and even more so in subsequent publications *Truth, Justice, and the Companionship of Owls*, 2019, and *Proof*, 2023. The same open-minded reconsideration and engagement is there also in the reviews collected in *The Fortnightly Reviews*, 2015.

My first meeting with Peter is recorded here in the interview 'Spite-winter Provocations', 1983. His poetry has been a source of attention and delight for me since then. The answer to the question about what tradition is present in his writing still holds true. It is also an accurate preface to *About Poetry*.

KC ...what tradition is present in your writing?

PR English poetry. All of it, good, bad and indifferent, popular and unpopular, overvalued and neglected, the lot. It's an entire climate, all the poetry being written at this time in this country.

ON EDITING PETER RILEY'S ABOUT POETRY

Peter, I want to read this to you;
I'm listening to 'Oh Sleep, Why Dost Thou Leave Me?'
I know this song because you mentioned it in our interview
and it rises now in these early hours.

Then in one move the sun sets in the pepper tree,
a green mosaic of light dancing,
and the day runs over the sea to Koroni and Hebden Bridge.
I proofread the plural waves and all is revealed.

I cannot describe what life your work has given me,
a poetry unbound by circumstance is walking in
Listen, listen, my neighbour's dog the critic objects
And why not? We can include everything, almost.

The stars on show outnumber the village lights,
constellations beheld require no explanation.

SAMPLER

SPITEWINTER PROVOCATIONS

An Interview on the Condition of Poetry with Peter Riley

I went to see Peter Riley in Derbyshire on 24 October 1983.

I intended to write a thesis on his poetry. —Kelvin Corcoran.

KC: When I wrote the questions, I was aware that they were biased towards your criticism, your magazine articles, because I went there looking for clues.

PR: I think it can be dangerous to rely on a poet's prose, because it can so easily be marginal to the poetry, or to any poetry, or indeed nothing to do with it at all. Lord knows, with modern poetry you need all the clues you can get, but a poet's prose is quite likely to be the expression of a current obsession which, when it was fed into the poetry, dispersed into something else, or was transcended, or never came to anything at all. Even if the prose is coherent, which mine by and large isn't, it might connect in an interesting way only to the poetry being written at a particular time, which might not even be extant. Prose relates more apparently as a whole to the world and so is easier to attach. But the more interesting the prose is in itself the less likely it is, I think, to relate directly to poetry by the same author, since, I find, the best poetry comes out of a confusion of ideas and a sense of, er, abandonment.

KC: For me the criticism was a way in to the poetry, or one led to the other as I began to make connections. At first I didn't even realise they were by the same person.

PR: There will be connections and continuities, of course, through to the poetry from the prose but some of them might prove illusory – I mean there might be a cut-off, so that the prose words, even the same vocabulary, shifted into poetry no longer mean the same thing. The position of the words in a poem is after all, or should be, absolute. So you'd have to be careful not to reduce the poem to the terms of the prose; or vice-versa in a way. For myself, I find my own prose a good deal less interesting, as a poet, than 'the prose of the world'.

KC: So to the first question. Who do you read now, in contemporary poetry?

PR: I take the word 'contemporary' very literally; work of the same time as oneself, and by implication of the same place, the same nation or context. That's where you find what you're a part of. The rest is history: Ezra Pound or John Donne or anything in a foreign language. In the last twenty years English poets have tended to define themselves as part of a selective or optional context and I suppose that's natural enough and it's what poets have always done. But, I don't know; recently I've been deliberately trying to view contemporary English poetry as a whole. I've been deliberately reading people whose work I don't like, or didn't think I liked. I think it's important to do something like this from time to time. And in doing it to try to isolate the poetry in your mind from its entire surround – the person who wrote it and his repute and his affiliations and his success, his class, his politics, his personality, the kind of support he gets, the kind of criticism and puffing he attracts, his beliefs, his gender, ~~her~~ gender... all of it. It doesn't mean a thing; it's just a distraction from the poetry, if there's any there. It's very difficult. To approach someone like Larkin who's just surrounded by all kinds of crap and to read one of his poems as a pure act. It's amazing how difficult it is. I'm not even sure that it's possible, to disperse all that conditioning, whether it disposes one in favour of the author or against him. But why not? After all, the great grandfather poets that everyone reveres, the founders of modernism or whatever, they were surrounded by much greater heaps of crap than Larkin ever was, all of them – Pound, Eliot, Graves, Lawrence, Joyce, Lewis, Williams, Olson, MacDiarmid... their poetry flowered up out of the biggest rubbish tips of cultural wastage imaginable, not to mention the secondary accumulations of academic crud heaped up on their names ever since... and yet we can go straight to their poetry, or think we can. So why is it so difficult to read Larkin or Heaney, or from the other side of the fence, for someone over there to read Crozier or Prynne? It must be a different kind of fear. But actually, on the evidence, I'm not sure that people do read all those elder figures very accurately these days, I think a lot of reading is infected by prose, or is plain adulatory wishful reading, where you read what you want there to be there because for various reasons you need it, whatever they actually wrote. I think it's high time we recognised the reality of those founder figures of modern literature: that if you just read their prose, I mean their opinions, with no poetry, no fiction, no creative writing, you'd be dealing simply with a collection of crackpot ravings worthy of any lunatic asylum in the western world. It was in some way the price of what they did. It has no value at all and exploration of it is a sheer waste of time.

I sometimes think Wallace Stevens was the only sane man amongst them, and he said some pretty silly things sometimes too, when he wasn't writing poems.

KC: Yes he did. When we spoke before you mentioned that matter of getting over a 'them-and-us' feeling in poetry, the self-contained avant-garde that Doug Oliver writes about in *Grosseteste*.

PR: Yes, it can become impossible to see the poetry of certain people because you're simply too close to it, or rather too close to the person. If reading is important I suppose you always want to distance yourself. Actually I think it's very healthy to get totally immersed in an enthusiasm, to plunge in head first and ride it, mistakes and all, so long as the process is completed and you do emerge on the other side in the end. That sense of emergence to a wider field is what I mean by moving out to view the whole field of English poetry, which doesn't at all entail any rejection of what you've lived with.

KC: Is there a 'Cambridge' group of poets? There seem to be coincidences in the earlier work of you, Andrew Crozier, and J.H. Prynne, which suggest that there is.

PR: Well, there was, and wasn't, and there isn't. Certain people worked together to a greater or lesser extent from about 1966 to 1970, which isn't very long. The impulse started from J.H. Prynne and Andrew Crozier and others who were in Cambridge, on the model of the San Francisco worksheet *Open Space*. And it mushroomed. I think a good proportion of the bright young things of the late '60s got involved, or nearly did. And at one stage it was quite mysterious how people kept springing up whose work or presence seemed interesting and again and again there turned out to be some connection with that damp fenland city. I myself ... Andrew Crozier found me in Hastings; I'd ordered some Ferry Press books, and he was so amazed at getting this order from someone he'd never heard of that he came down in person to find out who it was. Then he started putting my work in *The English Intelligencer* and it turned out I had been in Cambridge three or four years earlier as a student. But conversely, others such as John James moved to Cambridge after they'd become involved with the *Intelligencer*. There was a kind of Bristol contingent, with a very promising poet, I thought, called Peter Armstrong. So anyway, for a while

there was a kind of group; I mean people paid very close attention to each other's work, and took each other very seriously, and did feel that they were working together, though actual physical meetings tended to be disastrous because of the high tensions involved. We had one major get-together, at what has flatteringly been called the Sparty Lea Poetry Festival, which took place in a hut in Northumberland. I shall never forget it as long as I live... but let's not go into that just now.

KC: If there was a group, did it have any kind of defined purpose or programme?

PR: There was a sense of the new. What exactly constituted that 'new' remained most of the time open to guesswork, or at any rate subject to constant revision. There were so many pulls in various trends, and they increased as it went on, which was a good thing really if you could ride it. There was first of all a zeal about rescuing English poetry from the doldrums by injecting it with various kinds of Americana, such as Williams and Olson and (later) O'Hara and Dorn, and the Open Space poets. It was difficult to know what all these Americans had in common, but at least they didn't write tight-lipped sociological verse of the kind that passed for poetry in England at the time. We were actually only one of the forces for renovation in English poetry in the late '60s: there were many others who attached equally intense notions of regeneration by importation, or even from within; there were others just as enthusiastic or forward-looking in their ways, dragging people like Ginsberg over the Atlantic, or rediscovering modernist poised poetry of the dandy kind by tracing New York back to Paris... But the Cambridge thing was strong and comprehensive, and tended to take on these other notions of freshness and incorporate them, with a lot of marginal conflict. I think it did a lot of good, though most people's best work was done after the closeness of association had spent itself. It would be difficult to speak of a Cambridge group now, except vindictively, I mean it's what some people accuse certain poets of being when they want to avoid their poetry. What's left is a network of respect (I hope).

KC: So it was only a 'Cambridge' association because some people happened to be in Cambridge at a certain time when contacts were established?

PR: I find it quite strange how forces emanate from certain centres. For many decades Cambridge has been a focus in English poetry of a kind

of metaphysical modernism – not experimentalism, I mean not pastoral letterist stuff, that never had any bearing – but a serious and total commitment to poetry as the supreme record of the transaction between self and the world, and as such essentially forward-looking; a total discourse which is advanced because of its immense importance, because of all that it has to take on, because language itself is the newly forged weapon by which the ever-shifting facets of the world and life are tackled. Am I making myself at all clear? I mean Cambridge has been a centre for a view of poetry as precisely advanced rather than experimental or merely up to date. In advance of other human discourses, in advance even of the poet. And it's advanced because it spreads over human experience like a sky and comprehends or covers all other forms of knowledge, but levered on the one person, the poet, and so not a generalising structure at all. The individuation is a factor of its total responsibility to experience. This is what makes it difficult. Oxford on the other hand has been the centre for mannerist verse-making, and still is. This contrast goes back at least to the 1940s, if not to the days of Wordsworth, and actually the position of the Cambridge Platonists in the 17th century strikes me as parallel. Some of their work, by the way, has still to find a publisher.

KC: More, then, than a constellation of persons?

PR: Nothing at all would have happened without the persons. But for instance, there was another Cambridge group rather earlier, when I was a student there, which I'm sure could have developed into something big, but for some reason didn't. This was among Cambridge students in the early '60s. Poetry was quite important in the life of the student community then, as I don't think it is now. And this group actually started *Carcenet* which was originally a student magazine. It was a Graecophile, sexually rather ambiguous group; it took on the Greek world in a way which was pictorial but more than that. It had something of the same outwardness as the later Cambridge thing, the sense of the person came close to the mythic and was still, as I recall, engaged with realities. It was a question of Odysseus and cheese sandwiches, and the poems were long and expansive and bright. Peter Mansfield is about the only name I now remember from that time. I often wonder what became of it all. I guess it all collapsed in various kinds of pastoral lure and the real force from Cambridge came five years later and was to do with America, at first anyway. The name *Carcenet* passed on to Oxford and ended up in Manchester. Are you warm enough? It's quite a cold day.