The Personal Art

SAMPLER

ALSO BY PETER ROBINSON

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This Other Life
Entertaining Fates
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The Personal Art

Essays, Reviews & Memoirs

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PREFACE

The Personal Art is a selection from my critical writings on modern and contemporary poetry produced over the last forty years, to which I have added a section of memoirs connected with a life that turned to such writing, as well as a few occasional pieces on my own poetry. Almost all of these pieces first appeared in other places. I am grateful to the editors and publishers of the volumes for their prompting, encouraged revisions, general support, and for permission to reprint here. Details of first publication can be found in a note at the end of the volume. The writings chosen have been organised into five sections. The first collects essays, articles, and essay-length reviews on some of the older twentieth-century British poets who most engaged me when young, arranged according to the chronology of the writers' works. The second contains a gathering of articles and reviews of twentieth-century American poetry, the third gathers writings about other British poets who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, some of them associated with what's called Cambridge School, which I encountered when first studying there, and with the British Poetry Revival. The fourth does the same for poetry from the island of Ireland, and from other Anglophone poetries. The final one is a gathering of occasional memoir pieces.

For one reason or another, I have never had to earn a living as a reviewer of books, and have, for the most part, been able to choose what to spend time thinking about and writing on. Naturally, a number of these pieces were produced because I accepted invitations to write on the book by the journal concerned. Others happened because I wanted to express gratitude or indebtedness to, interest in, and affection for, the writers concerned. The book's opening item, 'The Personal Art', is an expanded version of an essay written in response to an invitation to produce an account of my own poetry for the *PN Review*. I have placed it at the beginning to give it salience as a title piece – one that briefly sketches some of the concerns engaged with over the years. What unites the writings gathered here is an involvement with the nature of poetry, its forms of subjectivity, the minutiae of its techniques and how they can work to make experience, of selves and their relations with others, complexly intelligible. This is why I have adopted *The Personal Art* as the title for the collection, always remembering that the personal has meaning within implied and addressed cultural and social conditions

that require and assume the existence of other persons (represented, referred to, implied or addressed) and their personal lives – for the personal is, after all, what we have in common.

Peter Robinson

still one need not fail

to wish poetry well
where intellect is habitual –
glad that the Muses have a home and swans –
that legend can be factual;
happy that Art, admired in general,
is always actually personal.

Marianne Moore, 'In the Public Garden'

SAMPLER

ONE

SAMPLER

THE PERSONAL ART

> 'Où sont des morts les phrases familières,
> L'art personnel, les âmes singulières?'

These *ubi sunt* lines from Paul Valéry's 'Le cimetière marin' ponder the fate of homely phrases once used by the dead, their personal gift, and their individual souls. I have taken literally the second of his three terms as a title for this brief essay about poems in relation to privacy and the marketplace. Let me introduce the issues with a perhaps trivial example. My second book, *This Other Life* (1988), contains a poem about setting off to visit a friend in hospital and failing to reach her, thanks to a rainstorm, before visiting hours ended. 'Depending on the Weather' first appeared in a magazine with a slightly different opening to its fourth verse. 'Ten years on now, you have had two children, / complications' is a revision of 'you have had two hernias. / And children'. The later version is an improvement – I hope you'll agree – and the poem's dedicatee was not sorry to see the disappearance of that word 'hernias'.

It was not, I'm afraid, in consideration of her sensitivities that I made the alterations, but rather in response to the publisher's. That clumsy end-stopped line in the earlier version, and its gratuitously reversing the sequence of my friend's bodily pains, are good enough reasons for the change. However, if my publisher also objected to the poor technique, he chose nevertheless to express his criticism as a consideration for a reader's imaginative and moral delicacy. I had been too personal. Still, a bit of me continues to worry over the artful and half-disembodied vagueness of 'complications', which could prompt ideas ranging from various birthing difficulties, to the notion that having kids complicates life. I'm similarly slightly regretful about the loss of the particular reason for my friend's being in hospital.

The case of the 'two hernias' is perhaps a small instance of what Elizabeth Bishop in a letter described as her 'George Washington handicap – I can't tell a lie even for art'. If not exactly lying in the revised version, I could accuse myself of being economical with the truth. However, I did make the change with some tardy consideration for another of Bishop's artistic principles: tact and discretion, especially about experiences not one's own. The publication of a biography, letters, and recollections has made it abundantly clear how autobiographical

Bishop's poetry is, while equally showing what art she deployed to present this often anguished material with reticent good manners and 'the joking voice'. The truth of her poems, then, depended not on the handicap of an inability to lie, but had to be achieved despite it.

George Oppen differently emphasised the problem when writing to Charles Tomlinson on 5 May 1963: 'Not, perhaps I should add, that I take truthfulness to be a social virtue. I think very probably it is not. But I think it is poetic: I think really nothing else is.' If social and poetic values are to be considered distinct, it may be the task of some writing to keep them in touch with each other. One of the assumptions, here, is that poems are balancing acts: they have a truthful eye on their subjects, on the people involved, and on the demands of language and form; but they also take into account the minds of other people, such as editors, publishers, perhaps reviewers, and most of all, possible readers. Poetry begins in private lives, and is frequently about a private life too. If it reaches the public domain, it does so with the aid of, largely though not exclusively, the marketplace.

Though I'm going to emphasise the intimate and personal in this essay, what I have to say is not an embattled reiteration of Pound's 'a tawdry cheapness / Shall outlast our days', or his affront at the debasement of values 'Decreed in the market-place.' It is, rather, the exploration of a dilemma faced by any poet who finds that poems don't grow if they don't grow out of direct personal experience, and therefore always begin in autobiography, yet who also believes that this personal experience only has literary value if it is transformed by art into an example of something other than the merely personal, as well as a communication between people. How and to what extent the personal experience must lose its particular savour, if it must, so as to become such a communication and an art object in the public domain is another context for the balancing acts involved in poetic composition. While the poet and a language make this communication possible, it is publishers, postal services, bookshops, libraries, and most of all readers who make it happen. Though poems are usually written in private, the poet's creative solitude is populated with the memory of words and voices. While these include a vast array of other poems, songs, and writings, they are also made up of family, friends, acquaintances, public figures, and the critical utterances that have gone into producing literary self-awareness or conscience. Just as Wittgenstein was at pains to demonstrate that there could be no such thing as a private language,

so the poet's composing privacy can only be understood as a communal affair.

Similarly, what we consider events in private life or personal experience are frequently particular examples of all too common happenings. Robert Creeley has suggested that it is 'the personal which makes the common in so far as it recognises the existence of the many in the one.' *This Other Life* has a set of eight poems about the aftermath of a young woman's rape in Italy during September 1975. One of the many differences between being raped and being made love to is that, while the latter is an intimate form of social recognition, the former denies and assails the socialised privacy and individuality of its victims. That the rape that occasioned my poems was witnessed at gunpoint adds to what might be called the false public character of the event. When the rapist was brought to trial and the victims called as witnesses, this public aspect was, to that extent, socially recognised. Yet such a subject, one that appears all too regularly in papers and on television as news, is not readily accommodated. Talk of it causes embarrassment, spoils conversations. To be raped, in this sense, is to have been subjected to an experience that is simultaneously an isolating private pain (not to be communicated) and a painfully public fact (happening with other people present, then retold to a policeman, a solicitor, and finally in a court of law).

My attempt in those poems written between 1979 and 1985 was, it seems now, to renegotiate those terms 'private' and 'public', expressing tactfully what cannot usually be said, and so making a recognition of what had happened, while simultaneously restoring to the painfully public retellings a measure of intimacy and warmth that was differently denied in each case. W. H. Auden's epigraph to *The Orators* is one slogan for this poetic project: 'Private faces in public places / Are wiser and nicer / Than public faces in private places.' In my first book, *Overdrawn Account* (1980), a sequence of poems called 'The Benefit Forms' had tried a similar stylistic revaluing of unemployment and welfare state provision, experiences that occurred before the rape but were made into poems after it. More riskily, I was on similarly shifting private-public grounds when composing the poems of an infidelity and in 'Confetti', about another couple's marriage breaking up, in *Entertaining Fates* (1992).

Borrowing from Adrian Stokes' writings on art, I convinced myself that this aesthetic re-shaping of the private and public were forms of reparation. My book of criticism, *In the Circumstances* (1992), was an attempt to justify what Paul Muldoon in a recent poem has described

as 'that daft urge to make amends / when it's far too late'. Ian Sansom once underlined the fact that I 'seem torn between the idea that poetry has a duty to make amends and the belief that such an ambition is misplaced'. This is fair, but the apparent contradiction disappears if the 'reparation' I claimed could be found in and through composing poems is described as the emblem of an intimate understanding which has been damaged, denied, or destroyed. I would suggest that 'A September Night' seeks to be such an emblem, even when it appears in its last line ('I'd just make amends') to doubt what Muldoon calls 'that daft urge'. Even 'Depending on the Weather' could be read in this light as an attempt to convey a feeling frustrated by a storm.

This is one reason why the poems I write tend to be lyric dialogues, actual or implicit, with addressees in the second person singular, or which oscillate between second and third persons. In poems such as those about the rape, like 'Cleaning', the change of pronoun dramatises, at the level of the poem's speaking voice, a shortening of the distance that has been extended by a violation of the two people's privacy. My efforts had partly been encouraged by Frank O'Hara's 'Personism: A Manifesto', and especially the passage where he describes writing a poem for someone he was in love with on August 27, 1959, and 'While I was writing it I realised that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem'. Works that attempt to foster intimacy by their tone and address are not the equivalents of private phone calls or letters, especially when they most resemble them. The fact that a poem is written, rather than a call made, suggests that the purpose is not, or not only, to establish an understanding 'between the poet and the person'.

Some of my poems, written to be read by the people involved and by others unknown, try to bring into a public space the poetic equivalent of an intimacy which was, for whatever reason, lacking in the human occasion from which it arose. Apostrophes in poems are addresses to absent persons, and readers are 'overhearing' what may seem to have the mysteriousness of half a private telephone conversation. Yet these readers are not overhearing anything they are not meant to hear, and the other half of the conversation does not exist. The 'half' in the poem is designed to reveal all that the reader, strictly, needs.

Despite the fact that intimate poems apparently between just two people may resemble the vastly influential 'confessional' poem, this lyric dialogue style cannot afford to dramatise much the narrating poet figure. When Robert Lowell hears his 'ill-spirit sob in each blood cell, /

as if my hand were at its throat… / I myself am hell', his written up lines cast the experiencing self into an attention-claiming posture. Later, in the painful sonnet 'Reading Myself', he links his phrase making to a lack: 'I memorised the tricks to set the river on fire – / somehow never wrote something to go back to.' Yet just such a going back over things is at the heart of poetry's work and its capacity to endure. Placed between two or more people, a lyric dialogue poem is wary of upstaging the others involved; it is not then centred on one individual's problems or shocking experiences, and does not even partially confess, but is offered to the other addressed and the reader as a poetic recompense for an intimate understanding that is only too frequently not there in life.

Vittorio Sereni thought that 'one doesn't read a poem, one lives with it', and his emphasis points to an intimacy that is there in the relationships that people who need poetry build up with the work of poets that, as we say, they care for. No one ever said it was easy living with someone, and the same can be said for living with a poem. What's more, if you need this experience of long-term relationship with texts, it's likely you will seek out works that give pleasure and satisfaction over a long period; you might like things to be difficult from time to time; and you will not be convinced by poems which are ready to give their all on first acquaintance. If living with a work brings greater familiarity, it is as if the poem has also got to know the reader better: greater familiarity with a literary text is a form of self-knowledge. The intimate understanding produced by this living with a poem is an equivalent of, though by no means the same as, the intimacy with an experience, other people, a language and at least one literary culture, which produced the work.

Living with a poem, as with someone, means being involved in a process. The writing we'd prefer not to live without is, as W. S. Graham wrote, 'brought to life by the reader and takes part in the reader's change'. Finding such life-given, life-giving works involves considerable experiment and reconsideration. The poems I need are often not the ones I thought I wanted. Given the ideas about lyrical intimacy sketched above, it may not come as a surprise that I find myself returning to writing which was not intended only for immediate publication, but which seems to have some prior work to do, and which is full of the purpose to communicate, though not, apparently, to me: many of Shakespeare's 'sugared sonnets among his private friends', are like this, though it has not prevented them from remaining in print

for a number of centuries. This preference for intimate works will not justify writing only for an amicable province of one's own creation. The intimate tone and seemingly private subjects I have been speaking up for are, after all, not quite what they seem: they are there to help in the constructive re-composition of damaging occasions, not to confess faults, even when moral considerations and the admission of error or an expression of regret are part of what has gone into the poem.

To achieve the aim of placing in a public space poetic equivalents of intimate understandings that were missing from life, a poet needs readers, that's to say, some being attended to, and this involves a certain amount of literary 'success'. The required degree and type of this phenomenon will vary from poet to poet. Likely to hinder or thwart its achievement is a lot of personality marketing: this is because the writing of the poems and their being read needs processes of deepening acquaintance and self-knowledge; you cannot properly get to know someone, including yourself, if presented from the first with a decided commodity. I wonder if I am alone in finding myself quite frequently put off reading a book of poems by the guff on the back. This is not only because the claims being made are frequently hard to sustain, but also, far from characterizing the poetry, they paradoxically make all the poets sound the same. Similarly, the poet who comes to believe his or her identity as presented for the purposes of market share targeting risks being condemned to a life of self-parody.

This 'identity' has little to do with the 'art personnel' of Valéry's lines. There, you remember, the poet is meditating on what has happened to dead people's familiar turns of phrase, their personal talent, their individual souls. Human interactions have become fixed, if not erased, by death; processes of growth have ceased. In 'Concerning *Le Cimetière marin*', Valéry describes a compositional attitude in which the poet nourishes 'doubts, scruples, and regrets – so that a work perpetually resumed and recast gradually takes on the secret importance of an exercise in self-reform.' As if responding to Rilke's appeal at the end of his 'Archäischer Torso Apollos' that 'Du mußt dein Leben ändern' [You must change your life], Valéry suggests that it can be achieved through prolonged creative work, while Sereni's idea of the reader living with a poem indicates that this labour of self-reform need not be confined to the realm of the poet's efforts. After all, one prerequisite for writing and revising well is a reader's keen eye and ear for a poem's complexes of meaning and sound. It is in the processes of such sustained co-existence

that I would begin to understand Richard Wollheim's idea that 'Art is, in Wittgenstein's sense, a form of life.'

The personal art I have been defending is to be achieved through vital relationships – with language, experience, other people, and between readers. After all, the poet is just another reader once a poem is finished. During the summer of 1974, I worked as a security guard at a factory in Speke. When on nights, the job involved making hourly trips around the various clocking points on the premises. To pass the time on my rounds and scare away the dark, I would speak poems out loud. As a result, I still have off by heart snatches of Charles Olson's 'The Twist' and Elaine Feinstein's translation of Tsvetayeva's 'Poem of the End'. For me, such a repeated saying of poems is the key experience of this personal art. 'We must try to live!' as Valéry urges in his final verse, but just listen how that exclamation springs up from the sound of the noun and verb in the preceding phase, 'The wind lifts!': 'Le vent se lève! … Il faut tenter de vivre!'