



<http://revueties.org>

Revue TIES

9 | 2025

*Contemporary British Poetry
and the Long 1980s*

A Portable Paradise: **Practising Empathy with Roger Robinson's Poetry**

Adriano Elia

RÉSUMÉ. *Lauréat du prestigieux prix T.S. Eliot grâce au recueil *A Portable Paradise* (2019), Roger Robinson est né à Londres de parents trinitadiens. Il a passé une partie de son enfance à Trinidad avant de revenir au Royaume-Uni à l'âge de dix-neuf ans. Robinson se décrit comme « résident britannique à la sensibilité trinitadienne ». Cette double identité lui permet d'adopter une perspective à la fois intime et distante. Sa poésie exprime le sentiment de déconnexion ressentie au sein de la communauté noire britannique à travers une poésie nuancée et richement travaillée. Cet article s'intéresse à certains poèmes de *A Portable Paradise*, en mettant l'accent sur l'une de leurs caractéristiques les plus fortes : la notion de poésie dite « utile » qui aide à « pratiquer l'empathie » et à « provoquer le changement ». Pour aborder ces enjeux, cet article propose d'analyser la déconstruction de la notion traditionnelle de paradis qu'opère Robinson ainsi que ses réflexions sur la poésie et le rôle du poète à l'époque contemporaine.*

ABSTRACT. Roger Robinson, the winner of the prestigious T.S. Eliot prize with his book of poetry *A Portable Paradise* (2019), was born in London to Trinidadian parents. He moved to Trinidad in childhood before returning to the United Kingdom at the age of nineteen. As a result, Robinson described himself as “a British resident with a Trini sensibility”. This dual identity, embracing both insider and outsider perspectives, allowed him to delve into the sense of disconnection within the Black British community through his nuanced and richly textured poetry. This essay will consider some poems from *A Portable Paradise*, focusing on one of their strongest features: the notion of ‘useful’ poetry, which helps people “practise empathy” and “effect change”. To address these issues, we will explore Robinson’s deconstruction of the traditional notion of paradise and his speculations on the significance of poetry and the role of the poet in the contemporary age.

MOTS CLÉS : *Roger Robinson, A Portable Paradise, empathie, paradis, poésie britannique contemporaine*

KEYWORDS: *Roger Robinson, A Portable Paradise, empathy, paradise, contemporary British Poetry*

Born in London to Trinidadian parents, Roger Robinson relocated to Trinidad in childhood before returning to the United Kingdom at the age of nineteen. As a result, he described himself as “a British resident with a Trini sensibility” (Morris 2009). This dual identity, embracing both insider and outsider perspectives, allowed him to investigate the sense of disconnection within the Black British community through his nuanced and richly textured poetry.

In 2019, Robinson became the first Black British writer to win the prestigious T.S. Eliot Prize for his book *A Portable Paradise*. This essay will consider some poems from this collection, focusing on one of their strongest features: the notion of “useful” poetry, which helps people “practise empathy” and “effect change” (Armitstead 2020).

To address these issues, we will explore Robinson’s deconstruction of the traditional notion of paradise and his speculations on the significance of poetry and the role of the poet in the contemporary age. The first section focuses on four poems from Robinson’s *A Portable Paradise* collection and includes some analysis of the texts. The second turns to the role of the poet and Robinson’s view of it. In the third, we take our cue from the poet’s description of poems as “empathy machines” to focus on the practice of empathy in his work.

The ‘Paradise’ poems

A Portable Paradise (2019) is a collection of poems on wide-ranging issues such as the legacy of slavery, the Windrush generation, the Grenfell Tower fire, poems inspired by works of visual art, by musicians or by other poets. The title itself, *A Portable Paradise*, is a metaphor for the idea that we all carry within us the potential for joy and happiness, even in the face of adversity. There are four poems in the collection featuring the word ‘paradise’ in their title: “The Job of Paradise”, “And if I Speak of Paradise”, “Paradise”, and “A Portable Paradise”.¹ These poems offer intriguing insights into Robinson’s various perspectives on the concept of paradise. He employs this concept not only to challenge stereotypes about the Caribbean, but also to introduce an existential stance, viewing paradise as a state of mind rather than a physical place.

Robinson once noted that the first poem, “The Job of Paradise” (20), was inspired by a hearse slowly turning the corner of his road in London (Wilson). This event prompted him to reflect. There was the driver of that hearse, doing his job, and there was the hearse itself, doing its job. From this observation, Robinson highlighted the idea that it is the job of each poet and poem to “remind us how to live our days” by making “Earth feel like Paradise”, demonstrating to readers that ‘paradise’ may be all around them.

In “How We Value Contemporary Poetry: An Empirical Enquiry”, Bob Broad and Michael Theune (116-118) examined how a group of contemporary poets evaluated a series of poems by their peers. For this purpose, the poet-evaluators

¹ The page number of each poem is provided in brackets.

identified specific values central to such judgments. By focusing on the text itself, textual values emphasize an appreciation of how a poem achieves coherence through risk and surprise, leading to discoveries and revelations. In this context, the power of striking segments or particular ‘moments’ – the most surprisingly inventive parts – is crucial in making a poem memorable. In “The Job of Paradise”, this role is taken by the final lines, where the grave serves as a poignant reminder of our own mortality and urges us to live our days fully: “It is the job of a clean neat grave / to remind us how to live our days. / If only I could live my days till death suffice / and make Earth feel like Paradise.”

Endings are indeed likely candidates for the most remarkable passages of a poem, but this is not always the case. Poems must take readers on a journey. To achieve this, a poem must possess its own dimensionality and directionality – a form of development or shape that moves with control, negotiating the poem’s risk and incorporating surprise through its build and turns, leading to an ending that involves some degree of discovery or revelation. This process results in textual, and even moral, consequences (Broad and Theune 118).

In this respect, the development and shape in the poem “And if I Speak of Paradise” (40) make it more than a collection of inventive moments. This contemplative poem, formally resembling a nursery rhyme, takes us on a journey through familial memories and epiphanic incidents. Employing an iterative rhetorical pattern of “And if I speak of... I’m speaking about...” – a pattern that reappears, as we shall see, in the collection’s title poem – Robinson evokes figures such as intellectuals and revolutionaries, addressing pivotal themes such as Trinidad and Tobago’s independence from the United Kingdom in 1962, a journey that began four years earlier with the establishment of the West Indies Federation. Each element mentioned in the poem acts as a stepping stone to the next, unveiling a series of associations that ultimately lead to the concept of paradise:

And if I speak of intellectuals
I’m speaking about revolutionaries
And if I speak of revolutionaries
I’m speaking about independence
And if I speak of independence
I’m speaking about Paradise
And if I speak of Paradise... (Robinson 2019, 40)

This poem’s ‘storytelling’ becomes “history-telling”, suggesting an intertwining of personal and collective histories. This concept of “history-telling” serves as an apt critical category for poems like this, transcending mere biographical events to evoke a discourse spanning social, historical, and political issues – “*history-telling* [is] a cousin of storytelling, but distinct from it because of its broader narrative range and dialogic formation” (Portelli 1997, 23-25).² The poem reaches its zenith with the

² Portelli’s italics. See also Portelli 1992; Elia; Volpi 90.

assertion that speaking of independence equates to speaking about paradise, confirming the idea that paradise is not only a physical place but also a psychological state, encompassing liberation and self-determination.

The third paradise poem is simply titled "Paradise" (65). Robinson here explores the complexities of the term and scrutinises the existential dilemma characterising our contemporary age. The poet has consistently highlighted the distinction between "heaven" and "paradise", stressing that they are not synonymous (2021). The former symbolises the ultimate reward for a life well-lived, while the latter refers to an internal condition, something that one can carry within oneself. In this respect, Robinson noted that paradise is impervious to external influence: it is "a level of hope [...] something that no one can take away from you. It's not easily uprooted. And that hope is important for the human spirit. It takes residence within you" (2022, 207-208).

The poem opens with a rhetorical question: "Is Paradise an island of perfection?". For Robinson it does not seem to be, to use his words, "[t]he reward for a life of good deeds [...] All pina coladas, swimsuits, shades and sun beds", and thus the poet seems to place himself firmly in that tradition of intellectuals dismantling a stereotypical idea of paradise in the Caribbean context. Saint-John Perse, Derek Walcott, Jamaica Kincaid, and Shani Mootoo, among others, deconstructed this romanticized perception of paradise associated with the Caribbean, offering nuanced and thought-provoking perspectives that encourage readers to engage with the region's multifaceted realities.

Through his poetry, Saint-John Perse portrays the Caribbean as a landscape marked by historical intricacies and human struggles. In the poem "Anabase" (1924), translated into English by T.S. Eliot, Perse considers themes such as displacement, colonialism, and cultural clashes, presenting a Caribbean that acknowledges its beauty while also confronting its turbulent past and the challenges faced by its people. Derek Walcott encapsulated this complex and painful duality in the poem "A far cry from Africa" (1962), with the line "Corpses are scattered through a paradise".³ In "The sea is History" (1979, 25), Walcott reflects on the legacy of colonialism and slavery, tracing the Caribbean's tumultuous past, from its indigenous roots to the arrival of European colonizers and the subsequent displacement and suffering of its people:

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up.
The sea is History. (Robinson 2019, 25)

³ See Benicchi 9.

Moreover, reimagining Homer's *Iliad* in the Caribbean context, Walcott's epic poem *Omeros* (1990) offered a complex portrayal of the region, ultimately deconstructing the simplistic notion of paradise often associated with the Caribbean.

Jamaica Kincaid's writing, particularly her essay *A Small Place* (1988), also tackles the myth of the Caribbean paradise perpetuated by Western visitors, urging readers to reassess their idealized views of the region and acknowledge the harsh truths hidden beneath the romanticized facade. Similarly, Shani Mootoo's novels, notably *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and *Valmiki's Daughter* (2008), contribute to the deconstruction of the idyllic Caribbean paradise by highlighting the diverse and often conflicting experiences of individuals in the region.

Following this tradition, Robinson's poem "Paradise", especially the second part of it, challenges the conventional notion of an idealised paradise and poses thought-provoking questions about whether there might be a secret longing for something different. The desire for a night with bruised clouds, lightning, and a deluge of rain, tropes for the scars of slavery and exploitation, introduces an element of contrast to the predictable imagery of crystalline seas and beautiful beaches. This implies that even in an idyllic setting, people might yearn for the intricacies and unforeseen dynamics of life. This longing climaxes at the end of the poem with obscure undertones, revealing a desire for "a murder of crows / scything a fat-faced acned moon."

The collection ends with its title poem, "A Portable Paradise" (81), a poem that is evidently most significant for Robinson. His hope and aspiration are probably that his collection of poems be a safe and pleasant place for its readers, to help keep them going through whatever adversity they are facing. In formal terms, Robinson explores free verse and unconventional line breaks, enabling a fluid expression that blurs the boundaries between poetic and non-poetic language:

And if I speak of Paradise,
then I'm speaking of my grandmother
who told me to carry it always
on my person, concealed, so

no one else would know but me.
That way they can't steal it, she'd say. (Robinson 2019, 81)

The poem's most inventive moment revolves around the word 'empty', which is used both as an adjective – "get yourself to an empty room" – and as a verb – "empty your paradise onto a desk." Robinson's call to never give up, conveyed through the thematic emphasis on emptiness, suggests a connection with Taoism.⁴ In Taoist philosophy, the concept of 'emptiness' is not perceived as a void; rather, it embodies a state of potentiality, a source from which all things may arise. Emptiness

⁴ This connection is existential rather than religious. As Robinson noted regarding his own faith: "I am Christian. I say prayers, but I don't get to church much. [...] [*A Portable Paradise* was meant to help] understand the power of prayer in a time of trauma" (Armitstead 2020).

transcends the limitations of dualistic thinking and underscores the importance of non-action or “wu wei”. This state of non-action does not advocate inactivity, but rather aligns actions with the spontaneous unfolding of events.

Robinson’s poetry, with his metaphysics of a paradise to be carried by oneself, resonates with this ideal of Taoism. The boundless potential emerging in some of Robinson’s characters is indeed reminiscent of the Taoist principles of spontaneity and non-interference, involving the desire to embrace the present moment and acting in harmony with the spontaneous unfolding of events. According to the Chinese philosopher Chuang-Tzu, there is a strong link between Taoism’s notion of emptiness and true empathy, which “demands the emptiness of all the faculties. And when the faculties are empty, then the whole being listens. There is then a direct grasp of what is right there before you that can never be heard with the ear or understood with the mind” (Rosenberg 91).

Ultimately, amidst tales of despair, Robinson’s collection brings forth a fierce attachment to life – a relentless craving for that “sweet, sweet life” evoked in the poem “Shandilay Bush” (78-79). His concept of a portable paradise becomes a hymn to life, representing a state of bliss for those who confront life’s hardships with unwavering trust, aiming to transform the Earth into a paradise:

Drink now, past the dregs to the grit,
and in your mind we are forever
bound; my bitter taste that you once
swore that you couldn’t stomach,
you will now sip, and the taste
will come to remind you
of life, of oh sweet sweet life. (Robinson 2019, 79)

Another version of the idea of paradise is suggested by Robinson’s collaborative work with photographer and author Johny Pitts, *Home Is Not a Place* (2022), a composition of photography, poetry and essays that offers a reflection upon the complexity of Black Britishness at the start of a new decade. In 2021, the duo embarked on a coastal journey, beginning by tracing the River Thames from London’s east to Tilbury, a symbolic point where the SS *Empire Windrush* docked in 1948. The authors uncover not only the often-overlooked facets of Black British culture, but also examine the intertwined history of Empire and transatlantic slavery, to which every Briton is bound. The poem that lends its title to the book suggests some affinities between the concepts of ‘paradise’ and ‘home’:

Home is not a place for suffering. Be it house, hut or tent.
Turn down the volume of the outside world and rest. Replenish.
Home a refuge, the room you return to
and if there’s no return, home the dream.
Home a blessed space, a glowing hearth
from which the seraphim hold in their hand
offerings of bright orange embers. (Robinson 2022, unpaginated)

Although paradise often implies an idealised, almost utopian place, while home is more tied to a physical location, in Robinson's poetics, they intermingle and overlap, sharing an emotional resonance. A home is a "blessed space, a glowing hearth", where one feels safe and comfortable: similarly, paradise is envisioned as a place of ultimate comfort and contentment, evoking feelings of security and belonging.

The role of the contemporary poet

In his e-book *On Poetry* (2023), Robinson aimed to define poetry, inspired by American poet Gregory Orr's essay "The Four Temperaments of Poetry" (1996). Orr categorises poetry into four main types – lyric, narrative, descriptive, and argumentative – to examine the emotional and psychological temperaments it embodies. Lyric poetry scrutinises the speaker's emotions, thoughts, and ephemeral experiences, marked by rich imagery and symbolism. Narrative poetry revolves around storytelling, encompassing characters, plot development, and a sequential structure. Descriptive poetry focuses on visual and sensory elements, creating vivid corporeal experiences through intricate descriptions. Argumentative poetry aims to persuade or present viewpoints through reasoning and rhetoric, often tackling social, political, or philosophical themes. Orr suggests that poems can intertwine these temperaments, recognising their flexibility and value as resources for poets.

In response to Orr's insights, Robinson (2023b, 7) formulated the acronym MISSSO: music, imagery, imagination, story, structure, subtext, orchestration. Music represents the poem's organization of sound through its metrical pattern. Imagery describes contexts and experiences through the senses, while imagination underscores the poem's realities using unreal or imagined contexts. Narrative presence in poetry varies from minimal in lyric poems to fully developed stories in ballads and epic poems. Structure employs organising principles to enhance a poem's meaning or subtext. Subtext, described as "the engine of a poem" by African-American poet Terrance Hayes, represents the unstated meaning, crucial for a poem's success. Orchestration denotes the connection of every element in a poem to achieve the desired effect of the subtext.

Within the "Manifesto" series of *The Poetry Review*, poets are encouraged to craft their individual "poetry manifestos". In the Autumn 2017 edition, Robinson produced his own manifesto, initially adopting a critical tone to describe his activity while jotting down his artistic thoughts. Surprisingly, these notes garnered a considerable audience. Robinson presented these musings as personal dialogues concerning the artistic process rather than strict guidelines to be followed. They also serve as valuable advice for poets and others, cautioning against adopting a victim mentality or becoming complacent. Three reflections, in particular, are relevant to our discussion:

When you don't know where to go with your poem it feels uncomfortable. Sit in that discomfort long enough and the poem will tell you what's next. The poet's job is to translate unspeakable things on to the page. Things that seem

powerful or unrealised. This is the way poems find new realms in their readers. Poets: you have to try and break tradition while at the same time referencing tradition. It's hard to do and it takes some strength of craft. (Robinson 2017, 76-77)

While the first two statements serve as reminders of the importance of failure and the transmission of the ineffable as necessary stages in creating good poetry, the third statement re-establishes the role of the contemporary poet within the ongoing debate on the function of tradition in pursuing innovation.

Discomfort is considered a necessary step in achieving original results. In this respect, it is interesting to mention Nick Cave's reflections. Interviewed by Seán O'Hagan, Cave shed light on his songwriting process in their book *Faith, Hope and Carnage*, and coined the term "deceiving idea" to describe "the residual idea that pretends to be the astonishing idea", a concept pertinent to good poetry writing. Cave cautions against clinging to "the deceiving ideas, the residual ideas, the unused remnants of the last record" (Cave 156). He emphasises the need to discard these notions to create space for new, innovative ideas. Comfort zones, according to Cave, hinder artists from producing original work: "they are seduced by the comfortable and the familiar". He asserts that audiences need to be challenged, and a genuinely new idea might feel strange and unsettling (Cave 156-157).

The complex balance between innovation and tradition forms the core of inspiring and ground-breaking creativity. As is known, the debate on tradition's role in fostering innovation was ignited over a century ago by T.S. Eliot in his renowned essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). Eliot aimed to prioritise literary tradition and underscored the importance of a poem's text over the poet's personality. He argued that individuality is intricately linked with tradition: "the most individual parts of his work may be those in which dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" (Eliot 37). Eliot termed this process "depersonalization", a detachment that demands "continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Eliot 39).

However, Robinson's approach appears to differ from Eliot's assertions. While desirable, achieving the depersonalization advocated in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" becomes challenging when writing about tragedies such as the Grenfell Tower fire. It is awkward to divorce oneself from personality and emotion when addressing deeply personal and emotional events.

Moreover, Robinson's book features a poem titled "Corbeaux" (Robinson 60) with an epigraph by Ted Hughes (taken from "Crow blacker than ever", *Crow*, 1970). Another Hughes, African-American poet Langston, notably highlighted the importance of personalization in poetry, as he once stated, "Hang yourself, poet, in your own words. Otherwise, you are dead." Interestingly, a poem like "A Portable Paradise" resonates with the poetry of Langston Hughes, particularly his piece "Aunt Sue's Stories" (1921), sharing with "A Portable Paradise" the crucial element of orality.

Hughes wrote "Aunt Sue's Stories" to underscore the enduring memory of the Black community's past, aiming to ensure the remembrance of ancestors and their

struggles. The poem investigates the significance of history-telling, particularly through the narratives recounted by Aunt Sue, underlining their profound influence within African-American society. This narrative skilfully interweaves the past, present, and future; the weight of slavery's history intersects with Aunt Sue's storytelling, projecting its significance onto the future. This future is embodied by a young child who already grasps the authenticity of these tales:

And the dark-faced child, listening,
Knows that Aunt Sue's stories are real stories.
He knows that Aunt Sue never got her stories
Out of any book at all,
But that they came
Right out of her own life. (Elia and Volpi 83-86)

The importance of orality in transmitting knowledge as a valuable tool for teaching new generations about their legacy is acknowledged by Robinson himself. He once stressed that his mother was “an incredible storyteller”, indicating that, to a certain extent, his poetry emerged from her storytelling at the dinner table. In *A Portable Paradise*, Robinson amplifies the voices of marginalised communities, shedding light on their struggles and aspirations, nurturing a sense of community and shared experiences, and offering empathy and understanding to his readers.

Practising empathy

In recent years, the emerging field of empathy studies has attracted attention from various academic domains, including neuroscience, social psychology, and philosophy. Recognizing the significant role of literature in empathy discourse, Hammond and Kim rightly observed that while literature has been central in empathy conversations across diverse fields, its connection to empathy may be oversimplified (1). The prevailing notion that reading literature inherently promotes empathy and prosocial conduct fails to capture the nuanced interplay among reading, literature, empathy, morality, and society. To fully grasp the relationship between literature and empathy, it is essential to address the intricate dynamics inherent in literary and cultural studies.

In this respect, the work of Suzanne Keen paved the way for later scholars involved in the field of literary empathy studies. While acknowledging that the empathy experienced while reading may genuinely foster a sense of connection and prompt altruistic actions towards real people, Keen questions the axiom that identification leads to empathy and empathy leads to altruism: “If immersion in culturally valued fictional worlds [...] predisposes readers to good citizenship [...] [d]oes exposure to attractively rendered vice make readers vicious?” (ix).

In a nutshell, literary empathy studies examine how writers depict empathic experiences and how they encourage, evoke, or provoke empathy in their readers. Empathy and its precursor, sympathy, have long held significant roles in Western

intellectual tradition. The concept of sympathy dates back at least to the Ancient Greeks, who coined the term for “suffering together” (συμπάθεια).⁵

However, the German philosopher Robert Vischer was the first to introduce in 1873 the concept of *Einfühlung*, a term that translates to ‘empathy’ in English. This English term was coined in 1909 by psychologist Edward Bradford Titchener. Originally, *Einfühlung* was used in aesthetics to describe projecting oneself into a work of art, but it later evolved to represent the broader idea of understanding and sharing another person’s feelings. By the 1960s, the distinction between sympathy and empathy became more pronounced. Sympathy came to mean “to feel for” or “to pity”, whereas empathy was understood as “to feel with” or to experience another’s thoughts and feelings. Consequently, empathy became closely linked with ethical thought and action, while sympathy gradually acquired a slightly paternalistic connotation.

Regarding the connection between Robinson’s works and the notion of empathy, he defined his poems as “empathy machines” (Sethi; Robinson 2023b, 15), capable of transforming trauma into something accessible for people. However, this process can take a toll on the poet, involving the direct confrontation of trauma and the subsequent task of enabling others to safely comprehend its impact.

Empathy is indeed one of the defining features of Robinson’s poetry as well as his short fiction. Beyond showcasing a transdisciplinary inclination, his first collection of short stories, *Adventures in 3D* (2002), described on the back cover as the “literary equivalent of De La Soul’s *Three Feet High and Rising*, strongly underscores the role of empathy as it takes readers on a journey through epiphany and storytelling. Robinson’s primary goal lay in infusing his writing with vitality, contemplation, dialogue, smiles, all accessible qualities geared towards fostering introspective conversations within his audience, as he realised that this was the essence of why he wrote.

However, Robinson expressed his desire to “help people to practise empathy” (Armitstead) primarily through his poems. One way he demonstrates this is by humanising his subjects. Through evocative language, he captures their multifaceted humanity, diving into the depths of emotions and experiences. Infusing his subjects with empathy and understanding, Robinson allows readers to connect with the stories he tells on a visceral level.

Controversial issues such as personal and collective trauma are magisterially explored by Robinson. Two poems (“Grace” and “On Nurses”) included in the collection introduce the difficulty of the job of nurses, one of the jobs where the role of empathy is most essential. Robinson wrote from experience, as he was about to lose his son, and it was only thanks to the utmost care of a West Indian NHS nurse named Grace that his prematurely born son managed to survive: “On the ward I met Grace. A Jamaican senior nurse / who sang pop songs on her shift, like they were hymns. [...] / Even the doctors gave way to her, when it comes / to putting a

⁵ For a historical overview of the terms sympathy and empathy, see Hammond and Kim (3ff).

line into my son’s nylon thread of a vein” (Robinson 2019, 69). With its meticulous language, this moving poem skilfully delves into the emotional and physical repercussions of personal trauma, forging a profound connection with the reader. Its authenticity lays bare the intricate and sometimes conflicting emotions entwined with pain and suffering.

Regarding collective trauma and societal tragedy, in his poignant exploration of the Grenfell Tower fire that occurred on June 14, 2017, in the North Kensington area, Robinson humanises the tragedy by spotlighting the lives affected. He brings forth the personal stories, emotions, and struggles of those involved, painting a heartfelt portrayal of the individuals impacted by this devastating event. This feeling emerges in the poem “The Missing” (9), dedicated to the victims of the disaster. Here are some intense lines from the poem:

As if their bodies became lighter,
ten of those seated
in front pews began to float,
and then to lie down as if on
a bed.
[...]
A hundred people start floating
from the windows of a tower block;
from far enough away they could be
black smoke from spreading flames. (Robinson 2019, 9)

Another way Robinson expresses empathy in his poetry is by giving voice to the voiceless. He illuminates forgotten narratives of those who have been silenced or marginalised, stating that “[i]t is the job of Paradise / to comfort those who’ve been left behind” (20). In addition to celebrating everyday heroes like the seventy-two victims of the Grenfell Tower, Robinson’s poetry honours individuals such as the nurse who cared for his premature son. Beyond his written poetry, his performances are renowned for their intensity and their ability to deeply connect with the audience. His delivery and stage presence further amplify the empathetic impact of his work.

Reconsidering the notion of history-telling, Robinson extends his empathy beyond the personal sphere, encompassing broader social and historical contexts. His poetry addresses the legacies of colonialism and racism, shedding light on the ongoing struggles faced by marginalized communities. Moreover, it evokes empathy by encouraging readers to connect with the diverse experiences of others in a rapidly evolving world.

In *On Creativity* (2023a, 65), Robinson emphasised the importance of transforming theory into practice and art into life for poets: “If you are going to use empathy as a part of your creative work, then it might be wise to show yourself some empathy in your everyday life. It’s something I still struggle with daily.” It is in another work, *On Poetry*, that Robinson confirmed the above-mentioned idea that poems serve as “empathy machines”:

Poetry, when it's read, is a valuable chance to practise empathy towards the stories, sensations and concerns of the writer, and with that practice of empathy hopefully one can go out in the wider world and be more empathetic. Poetry is my serious attempt to create change in the world. (Robinson 2023b,15)

The significance of empathy in Robinson's poetry is affirmed by poet John Burnside, chair of the judges for the T.S. Eliot prize, whose comments on *A Portable Paradise* deserve to be mentioned (Cain 2020). He praised the collection for "finding in the bitterness of everyday experience continuing evidence of 'sweet, sweet life'". Burnside remarked, "There is a wonderful balance of the public and the personal in this collection. It is passionate and sociologically engaged [...] there was a strong sense of humanity to the book". It seems fitting to conclude our discussion with Burnside's pertinent reflections on the role of the contemporary poet:

Poets have always written about injustices like racism and misogyny because poetry is a great medium for that as it engages all of our faculties, our abilities as humans, our empathies. When people are overtaken by rationality, they forget humanity and pity. Poetry reminds us of those traits again. (Burnside quoted in Cain).

Works cited

- ARMITSTEAD, Claire. "TS Eliot prize-winner Roger Robinson: 'I want these poems to help people to practise empathy'." *The Guardian*, 16 January 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jan/16/ts-eliot-prize-winner-roger-robinson> (accessed 25 May 2024).
- BENICCHI, Cristina. "Prefazione." In ROBINSON, Roger. *Un paradiso portatile*. Traduzione e cura di L. Guzzo, G. Meriggi, A. Pozzi, M. Sonzogni, M. Villa. Milano: Biblion, 2022. 9-12.
- BROAD, Bob and Michael THEUNE. "How We Value Contemporary Poetry: An Empirical Inquiry." *College English* 73.2 (November 2010): 113-137.
- CAIN, Sian. "British-Trinidadian dub poet Roger Robinson wins TS Eliot prize." *The Guardian*, 13 January 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jan/13/roger-robinson-dub-poet-ts-eliot-prize> (accessed 25 May 2024).
- CAVE, Nick and Seán O'HAGAN. *Faith, Hope and Carnage*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2022.
- CHAMBERLAIN, Mary and Paul THOMPSON, eds. *Narrative & Genre. Contexts and Types of Communication*. London; New York: Routledge, 2017.
- ELIA, Adriano and Serena Isolina VOLPI. *Heading South with Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes*. Padova: Libreriauniversitaria.it, 2021.
- ELIOT, Thomas Stearns. "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). *The Egoist*, September and December. Republished in *The Sacred Wood* (1920). See *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 36-42.

- HAMMOND, Meghan Marie and Sue J. KIM, eds. *Rethinking Empathy through Literature*. London; New York: Routledge, 2014.
- HUGHES, Langston. "Aunt Sue's Stories." *The Crisis* (July 1921): 121.
- KEEN, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- KINCAID, Jamaica. *A Small Place*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988.
- MORRIS, Davina. "Trini poet Roger Robinson". *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, 17 August 2009. <http://archives.newspaper.co.tt/2009/08/17/trini-poet-roger-robinson/> (accessed 25 May 2024).
- MOOTOO, Shani. *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Vancouver: Press Gang, 1996.
- MOOTOO, Shani. *Valmiki's Daughter*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2008.
- ORR, Gregory, and Ellen Bryant VOIGT, eds. *Poets Teaching Poets: Self and the World*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996.
- PERSE, Saint-John. *Anabasis: A Poem*. Translated and with a preface by T. S. Eliot. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.
- PITTS, Johny, and Roger ROBINSON. *Home is not a Place*. London: William Collins, 2022.
- PORTELLI, Alessandro. "History-Telling and Time: An Example from Kentucky." *The Oral History Review* 20.1-2 (1992): 51-66.
- PORTELLI, Alessandro. "Oral History as Genre," (1997) *Narrative & Genre. Contexts and Types of Communication*. Ed. Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson. London; New York: Routledge, 2017. 23-45.
- ROBINSON, Roger. *Adventures in 3D*. New York: Lubin and Kleyner, 2002.
- ROBINSON, Roger. "Manifesto: Roger Robinson – 'Success is on you'." *The Poetry Review* 107.3 (Autumn 2017). <https://poetrysociety.org.uk/publications-section/the-poetry-review/manifesto-roger-robinson-success-is-on-you/> (accessed 25 May 2024).
- ROBINSON, Roger. *A Portable Paradise*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2019.
- ROBINSON, Roger. "Dwelling and Paradise". *Magma* 79 (Spring 2021): 18-37.
- ROBINSON, Roger. *Un paradiso portatile*. Traduzione e cura di L. Guzzo, G. Meriggi, A. Pozzi, M. Sonzogni, M. Villa. Milano: Biblion, 2022.
- ROBINSON, Roger. *On Creativity*. 2023a (e-book, Rogerrobinsononline.com).
- ROBINSON, Roger. *On Poetry*. 2023b (e-book, Rogerrobinsononline.com).
- ROSENBERG, Marshall B. *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*. Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2003.
- SETHI, Anita. "Roger Robinson: 'Poets can translate trauma'." *The Guardian*, 13 June 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jun/13/roger-robinson-poets-can-translate-trauma>, (accessed 25 May 2024).
- WALCOTT, Derek. *Collected Poems 1948-1984*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992.
- WALCOTT, Derek. *Omeros*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990.

WALCOTT, Derek. *The Star-Apple Kingdom*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.

WILSON, Anthony. "Lifesaving Lines: The Job of Paradise, by Roger Robinson," 2022.
<https://anthonywilsonpoetry.com/2022/10/02/lifesaving-lines-the-job-of-paradise-by-roger-robinson/> (accessed 25 May 2024).