

Peter Robinson in conversation with Belinda Cooke

BELINDA COOKE: *What does it feel like being back in England?*

PETER ROBINSON: It feels familiarly different, or differently familiar. The initial experience was of imported distance. It felt like looking at things from a very long way off, even when right in front of them. People's mode of speaking seemed insistent and attitudinizing, but it was just their ordinary emphatic English. There were quite a lot of new idiom and slang to get used to as well. That sense of acute strangeness has started to wear off, but the additional perspectives I can't help bringing to things will stay around. Mind you, most people have little use for such outsider perspectives; so it's possible they'll die away from lack of a role. There was a fantastic hope of reconnection and continuity that expressed itself in the impossibility of straightforwardly achieving it — though, again, that may take more time to happen less directly. One problem with living away from home is that you have to live as an inner *émigré* at the same time. Naturally, it's easier to come back in fact than to dispel the inward exile in yourself.

People who have had to endure extreme experiences often cite this as very distressing. No one outside that experience really wants to know — a large part of one's life shut out — a sense that your whole Japanese experience of 18 years may seem obsolete to all but your immediate family. But you're also putting forward rather a paradox: the feelings of dislocation you felt as an inner émigré in Japan are central to you — your mind still out there in its exilic role. Can you elaborate on what that feels like?

Don't get me wrong: it's good to be back. Other interviews have it that being in Japan was an extreme version of what I'd already experienced in my vicarage childhood. It could also be that a long-established habit of monitoring sensations for possible representation and exploration means dwelling on the paradoxes and complexities of any shifts or changes of environment. Let's not forget, either, why we ended up in Japan. There are hinterlands of ambivalent feeling about being in England that would prompt inner *émigré* sensations anyway. Your description of extreme experiences would fit over what happened when we came back from Italy in September 1975. It can happen if you spend your entire youth in the North of England and then live among people who wouldn't dream of going there, or if you spend a few years in mid-Lancashire and then

live in Liverpool. Perhaps the natural thing is to underplay these dislocations and ‘get over it’. My policy seems to have been (while ‘getting over’ on a daily basis) to stick secretly with the disjunctions as sources of meaning — find ways later of getting into print, literally and metaphorically, the matters that life is for ever inviting us to draw a line under. Equally, there has already been some evolution in my state of mind being back. I’ve an interest to see where it leads.

I get the impression that this refusal to close off, limit, or put an absolute definition to either experience or language is what gives your poetry endless scope for subtlety of nuance.

It’s kind of you to say so. Perhaps another reason is that I’ve inherited from a number of twentieth-century poets the idea that a poem is not the expression of an understanding, but its discovery in the process of composition. This tends to make the poems feel like precipitates from a continuing activity. Even when their endings draw a line under an experience, these may prove an aesthetic holding device that gives the poem a shape without definitively closing down the subject. There are cases where a poem’s ending positively invites a sense that its landscape, situation, or subject will continue elsewhere without either poem or poet.

It’s just this quality which makes a wealth of philosophies of time and space potentially valuable in understanding your poetry, though we’ve neither space nor time to pursue that here ... Your years in Japan have also meant living in a virtual poetic reality. What are your expectations of the shift to being an actual presence in Britain?

Difficult to say what I’ve been living in ... but ‘virtual poetic reality’ catches some of the contradictions in a cherry blossom season viewed by an alien, as well as that alien’s being a long way from poetry cafés, open-mike slams, little magazine editors, literary parties, and the like. I don’t have expectations about being a real presence. I’m starting a creative writing module, and arranging for a creative writing fellow. If people ask me to do things I try and help out. But whether readings at festivals and the like will come depends on others inviting me. You’re only present if people register you as such, and the best way not to be disappointed about that is not to expect too much. We’ll have to see.

Taking all this together I suppose the next question is — from both personal and career perspectives — how do you see yourself? Do you consider you are following the tradition common in America with the likes of Lowell, Berryman, Jarrell and more recently Heaney as poet academics or more along the lines of Larkin and Wallace Stevens not wanting to give up the day job — or something different entirely?

There are too many names in that question for me to answer without making absurd claims. Of course I can't (and don't want to) give up the day job; and people will insist on calling me a poet-critic or a poet-academic, or, in Japan, a scholar-poet. I don't much like hyphenated compound job descriptions: they tend to be used by *sang pur* types as one more marginalization device. I prefer 'and a': a university teacher *and a* poet, or, a poet who works as a university teacher, who writes criticism, does translations, edits books, goes to the supermarket, likes doing interviews. You know: multi-tasking.

Such a view sits well with the open-endedness of experience you touched on earlier. Once you've been hyphenated this would be you 'done and dusted'. The wish to put a lid on a writer brings to mind Ralph Pite's wonderful biography of Thomas Hardy that opens with a discussion of attempts to 'solve the mystery of Hardy'. Pite argues that the biographer's role is not to probe his 'one big, dark secret' but to recover his variety. You'd sympathise with such a view, given your own affinities with Hardy's work?

I enjoyed Ralph's biography too and have enjoyed revisiting Hardy's poetry for an essay someone has asked me to write. Mind you, biographies of Hardy also underline that if there are affinities, they're strictly with Hardy's work, not his life — not that I'm objecting to his views, or the way he treated his wives, or whatever, but merely that my life hasn't been like his. Still, we all have our complexities, conflicting allegiances, and need to keep out of boxes if we want to grow and change.

I take what you say except that maybe I do object to the way he treated his wives—yet more Victorian ladies driven mad in attics!

Well I don't want to judge any of those people for behaving as they did. They were living in different times. Hardy was a social and sexual radical, and suffered for it at the hands of the then cultural and religious establishment. There was doubtless a great deal of forbearance, as well exasperation, on all sides. Hardy was not only supporting Emma by

his writings, which were intensely time consuming, but also, to a lesser extent, his family members in later life. Lives and relationships can be difficult and I feel the need to understand better what was shaping them, not to pass a judgment.

To move on, do you have any plans to put Reading on the map as a new Mecca for poetry? One thinks of your early days with the Cambridge poetry festival ...

What happened in Cambridge, I've said elsewhere, is that I arrived in the town at a point when there was a lot of activity connected with contemporary poetry. There was a fairly busy scene ready for contributions. Reading has things going on, particularly associated with the Two Rivers Press, and I may be able to help. Still, this is a distinctly later phase in life and my limited energies will have to be managed and directed differently.

Having grown up in Reading myself and then gone to Liverpool university as a student I'd have thought Liverpool is where the action was, whereas Reading might have merited a Betjeman follow up to 'Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough'. Fortunately it's improved since the seventies. Then again, it might have the right urban ordinariness for your knack of turning a sow's ear into a silk purse with uneventful settings. So have you headed out with the notebook yet?

After the years in Japan's overcrowded cities, anywhere with brick buildings, domestic gardens, tree-lined roads, and a bit of British history would have been fine. Reading's near London, well connected to places where I have friends, and is neither quiet nor especially noisy, neither genteel nor especially run-down. It has rough edges; but it also has interestingly mixed domestic architecture, parks, canals, gasholders, railway lines and the like. As you know, I live with the idea that a poem might be about to crop up anywhere, so naturally a few pieces have already got written.

Maybe Reading could be a new heartland for poetry. It's only superficially nondescript: the Abbey Ruins are famous for giving birth to the first written song 'Sumer is icumen in lhude sing! cuccu'. Oscar Wilde of course composed 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', and Jane Austen went to school in Reading.

True: but you have to admit that neither Wilde nor Austen had much to say in favour of their Reading periods, and the fictional one I mentioned over lunch at my interview is no

happier: the hanging of Jude and Sue's children in Aldbrickham. My favourite Reading connection is that Rimbaud seems to have been based in the town during 1874, while he was writing *Les illuminations*.

Ah, interesting, that last one's new to me. So, once settled, do you think you're likely to maintain strong personal or poetic links with Japan?

After so many years, there are people we expect to keep in touch with, especially in Sendai, where we lived for so long. I don't expect to write many more poems set in Japan. That vein really has been mined, and, besides, my poems mostly come out of immediate surroundings: I'm not there.

So if you do get asked, how do you see yourself fitting into the contemporary poetry scene? And what is your take on what's currently happening in poetry?

A friend of mine once said that poets' positions in the scene (if there is one) are created by a kind of vacuum forming. You're sucked into the only space that is available for you — if at all. If that is the case, then there are reasons for fearing the shape that you'll end up being deformed into, and of keeping on doing whatever you do despite it all. It's rather that writing for me is an activity fed by going about in ordinary life and feeding my obsessions with poetry, past and present, alongside related matters. The scene, then, is the situation in which you find your work read or ignored, appreciated or criticized, whether you like it or not. A lot of activity recently has been about trying to persuade people to buy poetry books in numbers that the signs are they won't. If you pay much attention to the book-sales agenda you won't be concentrating on the likely sources of your art. Communicating with actual or imagined readers in the form of interlocutors for the poetry you write is a significantly different matter: poems can be successful, communicative works of art in that sense without adding to sales at all. You ask what's going on at the moment. The poets of the fifties are thinning out to extinction; the sixties vanguard and others are now the grand old figures. Then there are the lost generations and the few 'representative' types picked out to stand for what is supposed to be happening now — some of them getting pretty long in the tooth and weighed down with awards. At least two new generations of writers have come up in the almost two decades

that I've been away in Japan. My hunch would be that representative factionalizing by which poets are recruited for sales identity purposes to represent national, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, or generational sub groups has not yet run its course, tired though it may be looking. There's nothing convincing in the way of new movements. Some from the later generations of the sixties vanguards are still claiming special status. It's business as usual, I suppose.

You've put it in a nutshell there. One thinks of Pasternak's 'It's not good to be famous': 'The goal of art — is to give yourself, / not to create a stir, or be an overnight success. / It's a disgrace knowing nothing, / to be a name on everyone's lips.' What convinces you that a poem of yours has become 'successful'? Are you your own critic or do you have close poet friends you depend on (à la Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop for example)?

Well, I didn't mean to make unqualified claims for anything I've written. People, not usually poets, do sometimes tell you, though. Miki Iwata, who wrote one of the essays in *The Salt Companion* on my work, and has translated some of the poems into Japanese (well, I'm told), she has said she likes 'Pasta-Making', a poem whose interlocutor helped to translate it into Italian. Someone else tells me their favourite is 'The Coat Hanger', and that one prompted some eloquent words from Roy Fisher in the Preface to the *Companion*. You can experience instances where a poem seems to have succeeded for you, and others tell you they like it, so you feel a more or less unalloyed satisfaction — without that impacting on royalty statements.

Well, maybe, but having benefited from the explosion in creative writing courses of the past 20 years with your new post, I'd like to hear your thoughts on creative writing courses. Do you think anyone can become a poet?

It's true I've been asked to launch a module and head creative writing at Reading; but mine's a chair in English and American literature — and creative writing is not why they employed me, I don't think (it's because there are books of criticism and translation with academic presses in the UK and the States). Doubtless being fairly *persona grata* here after all these years has been helped by the fact that poets are no longer so anathematized in the groves of British academe. What do I think about creative writing? In the scale of

man's inhumanity to man it's fairly harmless! It probably comes in there with homeopathic medicine: not likely to do much damage, it may even do some good. Can anyone become a poet? Certainly they can. No one is *born* a poet. Art is a way of life. It's an interwoven set of cultural practices that have to be entered and learned in order for someone to contribute usefully to advancing them. What it involves is commitment and study, plus the good fortune to have a developed aptitude for words and a linguistic background that appreciates inventive usage. A reasonably cultivated taste for the other arts helps too, especially music and painting. I don't think it's useful to think of poetry as produced by those who were destined from birth to be poets; rather, it is made by people who have found they need to devote themselves obsessively to this activity — and in a culture where there are creative writing courses, well, they might help such souls find their way. One of the best must be Bill Manhire's at the University of Victoria in Wellington. A great many of the contemporary writers in New Zealand have gone through there.

I've never quite got out of my system Osip Mandelstam's belief in a poetic elite, that one is only a poet if acknowledged to be so by another poet: what he termed 'recognition'. He limited his own inner circle to about four other poets.

Me too, I internalized that in the 70s. The word 'poet' is an honorific: other people have to attribute you with the condition of being one. What we do is try to write the best poetry that we're able and hope that others find it so.

But I do think there are too many poems produced as a result of writing exercises picked up from self-help books or one-day courses. My pet hate is the obsessive use of dramatic monologues: 'Today let's pretend to be Eva Braun. Now what was she thinking in that bunker?'

Oh I don't know ... Perhaps I should encourage students to write dramatic monologues pretending to be themselves; but, seriously, the dramatic monologue problem comes from the widespread view, heard from the amateur poet guidebook to the avant-garde manifesto, that we should avoid the first-person singular. My view is that we should use that pronoun as a way of accessing significant experience. It's the one way I know to escape from the twin imperatives that will reduce subject-matter to zero at a stroke:

namely, you mustn't write about other people's experience because it's appropriative and presumptuous (unfair to Eva Braun), and, equally, you mustn't write about your own experience because it's vain, selfish, egocentric, not to say, solipsistic — a word I've had hurled at my head in the past. Others embrace loss of subject matter and write about language itself; but, frankly, that's been done to death in the last century, and, anyway, all good poems are simultaneously about both their own and *the* language.

Ultimately, I suppose one is looking for a voice of one's own. Can I now pursue a little further the question of inspiration versus the more pragmatic notion of poetry as something that can be taught. Speaking as one who has sweated eight and half years completing a PhD part-time while holding down a full time teaching post I recall it as an experience of permanent insecurity as to whether it's achievable, years before the writing is even nearing the right quality and above all reading lots of books — a labour of love, of course, but it leaves me wondering what do you make of these creative writing—in particular poetry— PhDs?

I don't yet know anything about them. My module is for second-years, and we also offer the possibility of students offering a finals dissertation in creative writing. There is nothing available yet beyond that at Reading, as far as I know. However, even with these two options, we require students to submit essays on the relationship between their creative writing and inspirational or sponsoring works from the body of the literature we study and teach in the department. I'm in favour of this because the sense of art as a form of life sketched above also means that you like reading very large amounts of work by your elders, contemporaries, or juniors. So the study and enjoyment of literature and the making of it are all part of the same commitment.

Ezra Pound suggested a twenty-year tutelage, which seems only right as you'd need the same for music or painting — which leads us nicely into the place of translation as part of that study. You'd surely agree about that?

It's invaluable if you're drawn to it. A student at Notre Dame asked me after a reading from the Sereni book that came out in 2006 what gains I had from translating poetry for my own writing. What I didn't think of in time, and regret not being quick enough to say, was this: translation, done properly, teaches you to be respectful of your own material.

There's a connection, that's to say, between being 'reckless with literal meaning' as Lowell admits in his Introduction to *Imitations* and the recklessness with his own meanings that cruelly mars the later volumes. I've mentioned somewhere in *Talk about Poetry* a feeling of nausea that would come while belabouring a piece of my own, desperately trying to 'make it work as a poem'. Translating is a way of learning techniques and, simultaneously, respect for others' techniques for meaning. If the translation doesn't come off, you haven't squandered an irreplaceable occasion of your own. You can either revise or abandon without intimate loss. If you spoil a poem of your own there can be inner recriminations and despair. So the lesson is: you learn respect for yourself, your own life and work, by practising it in the translation of others' works.

Where you mention Lowell's weaknesses in his later poetry, I'm assuming you're referring to the, at times, convoluted writing in Notebook and History rather than his final book Day by Day? Also to be fair to Lowell with regards translation, I think he has been labelled as the great proponent of free translation (another example of pigeon-holing perhaps) when in fact the translations throughout his life show a whole complex of different things from being extremely faithful, translations evolving and being reworked as his own styles of writing shifted, as well as some shocking examples of whole-scale plagiarism such as the lifting of sections from Hebel's 'Sic Transit' in The Penguin Book of German Verse. To limit him as the poet of imitation is far from the whole story.

I fear that you have a greater commitment to Lowell's oeuvre than I do. There are poems I can't help admiring in the three middle volumes, *Life Studies*, *For the Union Dead*, and *Near the Ocean* — and the last poem in *Day by Day* makes its point with grace and style; but I have a temperamental problem with his address to the world in poems. I don't sympathize with the idea that the poet must be a power-driven phrasemaker. As for *Imitations* and his other translations, I bow to your greater knowledge. Still, if he is in a pigeonhole as the proponent of 'free-translation' then it's largely his own fault for writing that fig leaf of an Introduction to the volume. If he says he has been 'reckless with literal meaning' he shouldn't be surprised if people understand the word 'reckless' as it is used about driving. I was recently looking again at his translations of Rimbaud. Both the opening of 'Mémoire' and the change of register in 'Le bateau ivre', from the frenzy to the child's boat in Europe, seem clumsily handled, in both cases because he wants more 'fire and finish' in his rendering than there is in the subtly nuanced originals. The same is

painfully true for the opening of Montale's 'La casa dei doganieri'. There may well be exceptions to the rule. But, for me at least, that appears to be the rule.

Yes, I wouldn't argue with you that Lowell's weakest translations are those where he allows his ego to drown the original poet's voice — anathema to your well-documented ideas of translation as a friendship. With that in mind, your views on the importance of Sereni for your work come up again and again. One useful and illuminating task might be to track echoes, and half-echoes of Sereni present in your work. Take Robinson in 'Typhoon weather': 'while to roll under desperate boughs / struck me as uplift enough — / and how it has to be, if this is life' and Sereni: 'Too much ash scatters boredom round itself / joy when it's here in itself is enough.' There's scope for a more extended comparative study. But I know that you don't like writers being put in pigeonholes. How do you feel influence should and can work?

I wouldn't be averse to someone tracking the echoes, intended and incidental, of Sereni. Your example is one I hadn't noticed. There's a difference between a pigeon-hole and an influence: the former is a means for confinement, of texts and writers and readers, while the latter can be a story of indebtedness, gratitude, traditions maintained, and an opening out of unforeseen possibilities. Accurately illustrating an influence reveals the collaborative inter-textual nature of creative activity. What I tend to object to in reviews is the way people latch onto a single allusion to promote an un-nuanced allegiance between me and some author whose probably being actively diverged from, commented on, or the like. Equally, any attentive study of the poetic connections with Sereni would reveal a host of differences in age, language, culture, experience, inspiration, technique and fate. It could produce an interesting study.

So when is an echo an echo, and when is it plagiarism? Richard McKane made an interesting point to me years ago about how translator poets can draw on those they translate to influence their work with the advantage that as it comes from a different language the influence may not be so easily detected ...

An echo can never be plagiarism, because, being an echo, it alludes to its source — so there is no theft. Plagiarism involves the active concealing of sources. I see the point Richard McKane is making; but if you are bringing something into your language by imitating a writer in another one, without meaning to have your imitation acknowledged as an echo, then it might still not be plagiarism because you are transforming your reading into phrases sponsored by the original but of your own making. Equally, you

might also say that imitating 'foreign' models is, or certainly was, a risky business in the UK, where if people don't get a comfortable feeling of the familiar and the home grown they are quickly suspicious and reluctant to engage. So you could say that poets might hide their translated sources so as to make their work seem entirely made in Britain. Given my reading and experience, I can't be constrained by the parochialism of British culture. Being attached to local conditions, and bringing the largest perspectives you can to bear on them, that's another matter.

To move on to your new book, 'The Look of Goodbye, I'm interested in why it had such a long gestation. Was there any original intention to bring it out as series of shorter books or was it always seen as such a large project?

My books often have a fairly long gestation. Usually it's not as long as the gap between moments of publication. For *This Other Life* it was somewhere in the region of six years, and for *The Look of Goodbye* it's the same. What happened with this latest one is that I had finished a book in four sections just before it became clear that we would be leaving Sendai and moving to Kyoto in March 2005. So, since I'd started to write *Lost and Found* when I moved to Kyoto for the first time in 1989, it seemed auspicious that we should be moving there once more as I finished a book and came to the end of fourteen years in Sendai. What happened was that no sooner had we arrived in Kyoto than I was invited to apply for a chair in Scotland and, soon after, for the one I was offered at Reading. The second Kyoto interlude would prove to be the end of my Japanese years. It seemed sensible to attach the poems written in 2005-06 in two sections to the end of the book. Naturally, one reason for doing this was that it made a more rounded volume. So it came to be a larger precipitate than the one I began writing when it seemed we'd be permanently resident in the Land of the Rising Sun.

So, for the benefit of our readers, as they say, could you elaborate on how you tend to structure your books, if you do have a single method. Is it simply a case of saying that the six sections of 'The Look of Goodbye are a chronological breakdown of 2001-2006? If so where does Ghost Characters (2006) fit in? In the case of 'There are Avenues (2006), it's easy to see you were working on an ongoing Liverpool sequence that evolved over a long period. So if it is the case you simply group the poems

chronologically in order to avoid crude thematic groupings, is this further evidence of not wanting to limit the connections between the settings, imagery, and language of the poems?

The pieces that appeared in the final section of *Selected Poems* (2003) and *Ghost Characters* (2006) were written, barring some late revision and a few stragglers, in the years from about 1998 to the early autumn of 2001. ‘The Relapses’ was one of the last to be completed. The earliest drafts of poems from the new book were coming to me in the summer of the same year, and by December 2001, when I wrote ‘Brief Visitation’ and ‘Totes Meer’, it seemed clear I was working on a new impulse, not adding poems to *Ghost Characters*. It’s difficult to say what prompts that sensation, but it has something to do with life experiences intersecting with the supposed state of the world. Summer to winter of 2001 was a time when the direction of the first decade of the new century really began to come into focus. It’s also influenced by how many poems have been accumulating and what they may have been about. The sections of *The Look of Goodbye* are chronological, but not strictly, and not until the last two parts do they match clearly over the years. Poems from the second and third sections were written, or at least started, during the summer of 2002 (a happily prolific one), but ‘Alien Registration’ was started that September and then added to the first part. By 2003 I’m working on poems for the third part, but still adding ones to earlier sections. The summer and second half of that year seem to have been a drought: just a few coming off successfully before December. The third and fourth sections were completed during 2004, the last poem in what was to be that four-section book (‘The Empire of Light’) being written in June. Then you get the 2005 poems in section five, a very complex and prolific time. Then the final section has poems from 2006 and some started in 2005 but only completed in the autumn of the next. So there’s a creative diary in the arrangement, but also some thematic organizing — using continuities and contrasts to get the sequence right. But I don’t have a single method. How they are structured depends on the poems I’ve completed.

The title of the book itself is, of course very ‘you’, triggering thoughts of both the physical and mental landscape of departure from Japan along with various other farewells that feature throughout the book. But I was struck in the first section with the extended use of conditionals (‘as if’, ‘perhaps’, ‘it might be’ and so on) as if to say these are poems about something that might be happening but one can’t really say

for sure. To continue our discussion of poetry as a craft to be learned: how conscious are you of creating this uncertainty or ambivalence in the poems?

Perhaps this touches on the nature of poetic knowledge again, of 'how do I know what I think until I see what I say' (if then), and the fact that poetic purpose is often counter-factual, against the run of life or thought or behaviour. Those were years in which I'm not the only one who felt that the way the world was wagging had become appallingly unproductive. More than ever it seemed that a temperament concerned with thinking the unthinkable, turning impossibilities into possibilities, was more embattled than ever. Ambivalence and uncertainty is a way to keep the present and the future open to reinterpretation and to make the past alive for reevaluation.

I particularly enjoyed the second section of the book. In 'The False Perspectives' you state that 'Everything is sloping off anywhere else'. Loss seems to dominate much of the poetry: lost loves, old haunts no longer there and the like, and in the midst of it you're looking for signs, markers, shifts in the weather with little expectation of finding anything tangible because of constantly changing perspectives: wonderful stuff... yet ultimately bleak — though 'bleak' can make for great poetry. How close is this emotion in poems to what the everyday Robinson feels when going about his daily life?

Is it bleak? I tend to find that when some aspect of experience has been shaped into a poem it's such a relief and the source of so fleetingly mysterious a pleasure (each time I read it) that whatever bleakness there might be is in effect burned off. Most of the time I'm not in the poetry-writing mood at all. I'm going from one task to the next. Presumably the states of mind that produce the aphorisms and poems are hibernating, or in 'sleep' mode, and can be woken up suddenly. But the emotions of the poems are constructions from specific experiences, and so don't necessarily impose themselves on a daily basis. Maybe I write so as *not* to be haunted by those things.

In connection with this, there is some serious pessimism going on in places. Sometimes it comes across as a slightly humorous and self-mocking reference to the self as landscape: 'you hardly recognize / your self, it is so overgrown', but even more 'worrying': 'out of love with all humanity / starting from myself' for everyone knows if we don't love ourselves then all is lost. Or is this 'the speaker' in the poem'?

Well, it's me — but, that's to say, it's 'me' the pronoun-character in this particular poem with its over-layered occasions: the one being evoked, and the one when the poet in me made the evocation. So I'm 'out of love with all humanity' after a difficult day on a crowded beach in Liguria in 2002. But then those two verses at the beginning of 'Stranded' are to set up the change of tune in the poem's second part. So the feelings are also being dramatized and placed to form a pattern or a transition in the work under construction. I wouldn't say that the statements are not mine; but they're happening to a represented 'me' who has been staged to figure as the intersection of experience in a poem. Applying the ideas to my life is not quite the point: which is why, I imagine, Roy Fisher makes that comment about how my poetry is not in fact autobiographical despite the superficial appearance of the empirical Robinson experiencing things.

This is helpful — the actual self and the self of the poems in a state of flux ... Finally, I was also struck by how coldly you convey the experience of exile. Those last lines from Bishop's poem 'The Prodigal' kept running through my head: 'But it took him a long time / finally to make his mind up to go home' — or Birkin's hatred of the snow landscape in Women in Love. Keeping in mind what we've just discussed, is that what you intended to convey and, though it makes for good poetry, does it reflect how you felt most of the time — or just at odd moments?

I had been putting a brave face on living in Japan for quite a long time; what happened first in Sendai, with the sudden death of an Italian woman who appears in a number of the poems, and then more dramatically in Kyoto, is that what I call in 'As Like as Not' the 'benefits of exile' began to crumble at the level of the Japanese education system and the treatment of alien teachers, as did our personal situation, friends, and social comforts. So the balance started to tip away from accentuating the positive to needed to get away — a feeling that increased with the emergence of a flickering confidence that a return home to suitable employment and a stabilized life was more possible. The precarious relation between enduring and enjoying, or at least appreciating, the benefits of remaining in Japan had gone haywire.

And on that note let me wish you and your family many happy future days in Reading ...