

## *Spirits of the Stair*

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PETER ROBINSON

*SPIRITS OF THE STAIR*

*Selected Aphorisms*

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*for Thomas Fisher Robinson*



*Julie Whitehead Redfern*



## *Spirits of the Stair*

‘y lo que seria peor, hazerse poeta, que segun  
dizen, es enfermedad incurable, y pegadiza.’

*Miguel Cervantes*





1

Don Quixote's housekeeper wants the little poetry books in her master's library burned, because, as she says, being a poet is an incurable illness far worse than his knight errancy. But, given his devotion to love and the righting of wrongs, it's surely too late. Don Quixote has already read them.

2

First I wrote to set things to rights. Then, believing that this couldn't be done without reciprocal acts performed in life, I wrote to set them emblematically to rights. Then, finding that this could only be done if there was someone to appreciate the *raison d'être* of the emblem, I put my trust in the reader's role. Just now, fearing that there are hardly any such readers, I'm left with an undiminished urge to write yet precious little sense of what good it might do. Time, perhaps, to return to first principles.

3

Providence too has its limits. Think how much more you can learn from a bad than from a good experience—provided, that is, you survive it.

4

People who always expect the worst can get a reputation for sagacity without having any real foresight: the odds are in their favour. Yet all of life's important decisions are bets against the odds.

5

Being never wrong might well mean failing ever to be usefully right.

6

Every occasion is a combination of things that have happened, which produce it, and things which have not happened, which, if they had, would have prevented it from happening. I arrive at a station (I bought a ticket and the train didn't crash), step down from the carriage (safely) and am kissed by a girl (she's arrived safely too) who later becomes my wife. By this stage my head is spinning. Now multiply by the number of occasions in a life, and the number of human lives.

7

Yesterday my five-year-old daughter told us about a dream in which she gave birth to her mother. But would that be less or more significant if she'd simply invented it to entertain us?

8

To my parents I owe everything ... even the things they didn't give me.

9

A poet has said that genuinely difficult art is truly democratic, and that tyranny requires simplification. So it does. And this would be a nobly democratic idea—if it weren't a simplification.

10

Trapped in your successes, goaded on by setbacks ... How mistaken it is to lose patience with your critics!

11

Randall Jarrell referred to the lyric poet as someone who stands out in the rain for a lifetime hoping once or twice to be struck by lightning.

But who would risk catching pneumonia in the hope of being burnt to a frazzle? No, a poet is a person with a head full of black clouds trying to make it rain.

12

Goethe's reputation: for 'immoral' read 'immortal'.

13

One of the benefits of growing older is that you come to know the exact map references for the nowheres you inhabit.

14

Your wife or husband, flat-mate, whatever, leaves the house early. Expecting her or him home around lunchtime, you leave a message promising to be back about five to make supper. But the other person stays out for lunch and only returns after half past five, having not read your note, when greeted by smells of cooking. Did you make the promise? Did you keep it? The relation of a poem's promise to its imagined reader is like your behaviour and that note.

15

Still though, if it's the artist who makes the promise by means of an artwork, it's the readers who must be there to keep it. And don't think this is a uniquely literary situation either: consider the bank loans and mortgages that have to be paid off by the descendents of those who negotiated them.

16

Across a train's windows, in the floating down to black, a horizon enlivened by lightning forks, you see staggering flow of currency! The

base rate reacts by being changed again. In any successful whispering campaign, there's a grain of truth, they speculate, and usually someone else to blame. It's as if the City's job were merely counting money.

17

Set some people down in the middle of a desert and they'll do nothing but complain about the weather. Others will start drawing you a map.

18

You think it slightly sinister, the way I suddenly vanish from your left, and turn up on your right—being deaf, stone deaf on my right side? I'm just giving you the benefit of my one good ear.

19

Keeping away from other people is hardly the best way to escape yourself.

20

A reason for the present decline in the study of history: 'The trouble with the past is that *I* wasn't in it.'

21

Another reason for the same: if you really want to disorientate someone, make sure that they don't know what direction they're coming from.

22

Put 'I' in a poem and I may make a space for others; leave it out and the whole thing is nothing but me.

23

The Muse: a busy person with other interests who hasn't got time for your work.

24

Prejudice: the energy expended in trying to make what is both the same and different feel merely different.

25

How to construct a prejudice: take an adjective in the singular, put a definite article in front of it, and there you are—the English . . .

26

Transience is here to stay.

27

Why does satire seem so plainly out of season? Because the powerful can't take, or even see, the joke—while the rest of us are gagging on the obvious.

28

Fame: it's inevitably a case of mistaken identity.

29

During the questions after a reading, a poet explained to the audience that the autobiographical 'I' in my poetry was a construct. I naturally

and politely agreed with this received idea about the fictiveness of autobiography. Later, my host who had been at the event commented that the opinion was quite wrong and that, if anything, I was dismantling the 'I' for inspection, so as to make it understandable to others and myself. This remark had the unexpectedly cheering effect of making 'me' feel understood in a way I hadn't foreseen.

30

If you've given a talk and during the questions somebody begins by asking 'But aren't you just saying...?' it is, of course, possible that the questioner has seen through your sophistications, but possible too that the audience has been invited to think again—and someone's declining the invitation.

31

A small child's need for attention can be simultaneously irritating, inspiring, and sad—so, too, a writer's.

32

Lonely 'geniuses' who don't have a good word for their contemporaries are making at least two mistakes in the one time: they fail to see that self-esteem in a vacuum is merely vanity, and they overlook what makes their contemporaries belong to the same era as themselves.

33

Drink-inspired writing is usually read by stone cold sober readers. Worse, writers on medication for hyperactivity or depression may be feeling better, but their readers aren't necessarily on the same prescription.

34

Unhappiness endured beyond measure can grow into a habit hard to break.

35

People say beauty is only skin-deep, yet in art the skin is deep.

36

Translations *are* like women (and indeed men)—in best cases their beauty and fidelity are wedded together.

37

Is there anything worse than a poet *manqué*? Yes, a critic *manqué*.

38

Some writers—when you send them ‘best regards’ and hope that things are ‘going well’ for them—immediately send you back a list of their latest and forthcoming achievements. Once I thought the only response was to behave differently. Now I think it depends on cases. In the above, I reciprocate with choice excerpts from the *curriculum vitae*. And that’s the last I hear from them.

39

While attempting to talk around my then situation, I was once smartly advised: ‘Don’t run yourself down, there are plenty of people to do that for you.’ But what others think of me is really their business. Mine is with seeing the case in perspective.

40

If misery is handed down from generation to generation, then it's no surprise that when I'm angry or depressed you hear the sound of an eighteenth-century farm labourer who finds himself forced to beg for work in a factory slum.

41

However untimely, when it comes death is always on time.

42

Here to stay, though gone tomorrow—that's all a writer hopes of life.

43

How difficult it is to put yourself under an obligation to someone you don't really like!

44

What I can't or couldn't say, and why not—these are some of the things that spur me into poetry. The poems are often placed between a speaker and an indicated or implied listener. It's as if I were talking to you, saying what I couldn't in a real situation—in a form that explains why, and yet preserves, in the poetic occasion, the impossibility of my speaking.

45

When the poems are read by others, and by those involved, the real situations alter again. Thus, as I do it, poetry becomes a part of life, of a life held in common differences. The poems are founded on intimacies because such private relations between people are what speakers of a language variously share.