

*Seaport*

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Feast of Friends

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A necessary displacement

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New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible (with Peter Barry)

# Seaport

ROBERT HAMPSON

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An earlier version of Hilda Bronstein's essay appeared as a review of *Seaport* in *Angel Exhaust* 15 (Autumn 1997). We are grateful to Hilda Bronstein and the editor, Andrew Duncan, for permission to reprint the essay here.

An earlier version of *Seaport* was published in 1995 by Pushtika Press, London.

# Contents

Foreword by Peter Barry	7
plenty of nothing	15
Part I: Landfall and Departure	17
perch rock	19
the docks	21
docks (2)	22
the docks: the emigrant trade	23
Part II: Spun-yarn	31
the chart	33
spunyarn	35
the picture of Liverpool	37
a committee of one	39
Part IV: The Leaving of Liverpool	45
growth-rings	47
you can't dance to art	48
st thomas st: requiem & blues	49
a city at war	55
new brighton	58
a better tomorrow	59
July 1981	63
the leaving of Liverpool	70
Appendix: From Section III	73
A Picture of Roscoe	75
Roscoe: To his books	76
Author's note to the interim edition, 1995	78
Afterword by Hilda Bronstein	79



## FOREWORD

When Robert Hampson first published *Seaport*, back in 1995, under the imprint of his own Pushtika Press, it was described as an 'interim edition', implying that a more complete and definitive one would follow in due course. It is especially pleasing, therefore, to be able to welcome this handsome new edition of a sequence which attracted an unusual amount of notice and comment for a small-press booklet when it first appeared.

*Seaport* deals with many aspects of the history and development of Liverpool, drawing on a wide range of documentary sources, and culminating with a vivid account of what the national press called the 'Toxteth Riots' of 1981. This event is seen in the context of the repressive policing methods of the day, especially as directed at black youths—one of the most unforgettable passages in the poem concerns 'a black 17 year-old/ arrested/ for dropping a chip-paper in Granby St', and then 'arrested again/ for "disturbing the peace"/ playing football'. All this is seen in the historical context of Liverpool's notorious role in the slave trade, and of subsequent patterns of racial discrimination, and the section is headed with an epigraph from Martin Luther King; 'A riot is at bottom the language of the unheard'.

The situation in the city has much improved since 1995, one symptom of that improvement being the International Slavery Museum, opened at the Albert Dock in 2007 (the bicentenary of abolition). It is an inspiring and hopeful place which celebrates resilience and inventiveness rather than defeat and victimhood. Long repressed aspects of the city's history have been aired since 1995, and it is now widely known, for instance, that Penny Lane is not the innocent-sounding childhood dream-place of the Beatles song, but is named after the 18th century Liverpool slave trader James Penny, a man who spoke in favour of the trade before a parliamentary committee in 1792 and was afterwards presented with a huge silver centrepiece for his dining table by grateful fellow-traders in the city. Liverpool had petitioned Parliament in 1788 asking it not to abolish the trade, and several

of the signatories of that petition also have familiar Liverpool names, familiar because they are now the names of streets and buildings known to everyone who grew up in the city.

In many ways, the 1980s and its aftermath was Liverpool's bleakest post-war period: as well as 'Toxteth' in 1981, there was Heysel in 1985, Hillsborough in 1989, and the James Bulger murder in 1993, and the backdrop to it all was, as Robert says in the poem, that the city was 'the Carthage/ of Britain's de-industrialisation'. Thankfully, things seem much better now than then, with construction cranes everywhere, a massive student population, and thriving sports and entertainments industries. But the depth and permanence of these changes cannot be taken for granted, and this book, originally written in the late 1970s and early 80s, remains an important and highly informative work which uses poetry in a powerful documentary mode to draw attention once again to the abiding contradictions and inequalities on which our society continues to be based.

With this new edition, *Seaport* takes its place in a major tradition of post-war urban poetry in Britain, a tradition which operates in the big-scale, open field manner pioneered by Pound, Williams, and Olson, and re-invented and developed from the 1960s onwards by British writers such as Roy Fisher, Ken Smith, Edwin Morgan, Iain Sinclair, and Allen Fisher. Roy Fisher summed up the aim and essence of the method in his well-known pronouncement 'Birmingham's what I think with', and in *Seaport* Robert uses Liverpool for the same purpose, and with constant inventiveness. Indeed, the elements I first admired about the poem were the numerous variations and subtleties seen in the way it incorporates and finesses its many shards and fragments of 'extra-textuality', and I concentrated on that aspect of the sequence in my earlier discussion of *Seaport*. Today I value it no less for those qualities, but I also see it as a unique poetic investigation of the fabric and provenance of today's urban Britain, and, more particularly, as a powerful and moving portrayal of the native city which he and I have in common.

Peter Barry



# Seaport



'A man does not know his own ADDRESS (in time) until he knows where his time and milieu stand in relation to other times and conditions.'

(Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*)

'The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces . . .'

(Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*)

'He what was waving his rattle is now married  
We what cheered Roger Hunt are getting on  
And we don't bloody like it.'

(R. L. Crawford, *The Scrap Heap*)



For Peter Barry, Nona Sheppard, John Simpson,  
Jim Stewart, and Gilbert Adair.



## plenty of nothing

back-to-back to  
basics:  
window, wall,  
door—  
damp yard-odour of  
ashpits.

flat-capped  
cropped  
black moustache

stands by  
yard-door to entry

broke his back  
dockside  
accident

a widow  
5 children  
2 more  
died in infancy.

yellowing teeth  
of the parlour piano

dust on the dresser

dull metal of marley horses  
the lithe & muscular backs  
of animals & men





## Part I

### LANDFALL AND DEPARTURE

‘The term “Landfall” is more easily understood; you fall in with the land, and it is a matter of a quick eye and of a clear atmosphere. The Departure is not the ship’s going away from her port any more than the Landfall can be looked upon as the synonym of arrival. But there is this difference in the Departure: that the term does not imply so much a sea event as a definite act entailing a process—the precise observation of certain landmarks by means of the compass card.

Your Landfall, be it a peculiarly shaped mountain, a rocky headland, or a stretch of sand-dunes, you meet at first with a single glance. Further recognition will follow in due course; but essentially a Landfall, good or bad, is made and done with at the first cry of “Land Ho!”. The Departure is distinctly a ceremony of navigation.’

(Joseph Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea*)

## perch rock

ships move in

from the bay

close to the flat coastline of crosby

into the narrows

perch rock stands

to starboard

the close

vestibular

landline

runs

from

the point blocks

of flats

to the graceful lines

of dark-brick

terraced houses.

## seaport

‘For centuries Chester had dominated the northwestern approaches when Liverpool was no more than a fishing village on the eastern bank of the little used river Mersey. As the Dee began to silt it was Neston which usurped Chester’s position, port of embarkation for the English forces *en route* for Ireland. Liverpool, however, grew fat and prosperous on the takings of the slave trade and, buttressed by the swiftly expanding output of manufactured goods from the hinterland of Lancashire, the town witnessed rapid development.’

(Quentin Hughes, *Seaport*)

Between 1680 and 1760, the population of Liverpool grew from 4,000 to 40,000.

‘This town has now become so great, so populous, and so rich, that it may be called the Bristol of this part of England.’

(Daniel Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island* . . .)