



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity
Partner Network



Article

How to Cite: Grundy, D 2018 Poetry and Secrecy in Luke Roberts' *To My Contemporaries*. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 10(1): 2, pp. 1–25, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.28>

Published: 09 May 2018

Copyright:

© 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.

ARTICLE

Poetry and Secrecy in Luke Roberts' *To My Contemporaries*

David Grundy

University of Cambridge, GB

dmgrundy@gmail.com

This article will address the relations between poetry and secrecy in two recent poems by Luke Roberts: 'Agitprop: An Ode' (2014), and *To My Contemporaries* (2015). Secrecy is shown to be not only a thematic concern, but part of the operations of their language. *To My Contemporaries* questions the tendency towards modes of 'secretive' sonic patterning found in 'Agitprop', as part of its resolve "to turn/my self-defences/inside out". The poem ends with a chastened mode of beginning again, "flinching in compression", after a grand gathering together of the titular contemporaries, which has seemed both to be invocation and farewell. The poet examines their own method and its relation to the pleasures of concealment and the near-paranoia born of conditions of political defeat and personal loss. They question the adequacy of certain models of "literary allusion and disclosure", of a poetry overly allusive, elusive and self-reflexive. The poem does not seek to obscure or conceal defeat through imagining it never happened, nor to valorise it in a condition of melancholy – one which preserves the lost, or secret object, in the structure of the language itself, in order to deny its loss. Rather, in reckoning with loss – and with the poet's own strategies of "self-defence", strategies of internalisation which must be "turned inside out" – the poem seeks to find a way to continue, a dialectical relation between concealing and revealing, defeat and continuance, noun and verb, object and quality.

Keywords: Luke Roberts; Jack Spicer; Edwin Rolfe; rhyme; secrecy; secrets

Introduction "What story is it you want to be told?": Naming and Narrative

In keeping with the theme of this issue, the present article concerns a textual object which is obscure even by the standards of small press poetry scenes dedicated to producing scarce and ephemeral material. Luke Roberts' *To My Contemporaries* was self-published in an edition of 100 copies in December 2015, and has received no

press attention. Nor has such attention been sought: the book is not available to buy online, and has been circulated exclusively by the poet. This in itself is a kind of 'secrecy', following on in the clandestine tradition of books made, in part, on hacked photocopying accounts: "the books we built together in the season of our/defiance".¹ The small press practice of cheap, small-run publications meshes with the poem's realisation that its audience is "reduced."

Roberts, who studied at University of Cambridge as both an undergraduate and doctoral student, has keen scholarly interest in the more politicised wings of the so-called 'Cambridge School' of poetry. He has edited a collection of the prose writings of the *English Intelligencer*, and recently published a critical book on the poet Barry MacSweeney.² His scholarly awareness of the questions of material textual production, and the political stakes of such writing, has undeniably shaded his own creative practice. As Roberts is aware, the history of much Anglophone poetry which figures itself as politically and aesthetically 'radical' has been one of obscure publication, ephemeral presence, in-group circulation, and the vexed questions of coterie, elitism, group identification, loyalty, betrayal, and solidarity. One might ask whether this underground approach, figuring at the level of composition, book production, distribution and critical and creative reception more generally, in fact counts as 'secrecy'. In what follows, I will address this question, arguing that, while secrecy might be taken to be personally inflected before it is politically inflected – though the vocabulary of 'state secrets' and the like is clearly an important part of the word's ambiance – it cannot be separated from political questions, both of which are framed and figured through the lens of the aesthetic. The way that the personal here shades into the political is often uneasy, and such uneasiness is a part both of the explicit 'content' of Roberts' work, and of its formal operations, particularly at the level of rhyme.

As I'll sketch out below, the concept of *privacy* is importantly related to that of secrecy, and connects explicitly to the machinery of punitive legal and administrative apparatuses faced and feared by those on the political left. Privacy and secrecy are key questions with regard to the political questions of the public sphere, the necessary clandestinity of aesthetic and political undergrounds whose interests and

magnetizing activities are often actively illegal. Both privacy and secrecy hinge on questions of reticence – holding-back, the melancholic disavowal of loss shading over into the enforced repression or hiding of things that cannot be said – and on trust, not only in terms of what can be said in public, but what can be said amongst groups of love, friendship and comradeship that are often subject as much to internal as external fracture.

Historically, as now, poets might well be worried about state censorship or surveillance; the risk of libel; the enshrining of each poem as 'finished' object; or a perceived need to maintain control over readership, insisting that these poems are not 'for' everyone. A key figure in relation to a number of these concerns is the American poet Jack Spicer. Spicer's early involvement in the nascent queer activism of the San Francisco branch of the Mattachine Society, and his refusal to sign the University of California's loyalty oath – a decision which severely affected his chances at an academic career – undoubtedly shaded his ambiguous position-taking in relation to debates about the political role of poetry during the Vietnam War era, and his defiantly, and often rebarbatively coterie poetics.³

In Book II of *To My Contemporaries*, there is an unacknowledged quotation from Spicer's 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference lecture, 'Poetry and Politics'. As is typical of Roberts' book, this quotation is further filtered through another unacknowledged reference, to Alice Notley's 1978 poem for Jack Kerouac, 'Jack Would Speak Through the Imperfect Medium of Alice', whose opening rejects a model of poetry as "sweetish nectar" and "fuzzed-peach/thing",⁴

So Jack spoke through the imperfect medium of Luke:
know exactly what your peaches cost, know exactly who your peaches are
for.⁵

Here, Notley's use of the peach as a figure for the sickly-sweetness which threatens poetry elides with Spicer's figure of the peach as market commodity, and the dangers for the poet of selling out. Spicer's lecture, written at the height of the Free Speech Movement in California, and of growing mass opposition to the Vietnam War, sets his

own insistence that poets write for and within a small group of comrades alongside the realities of making a living as a writer, and the hotly-debated question of poetry's political role. Spicer argues, with a typically withering putdown, that "people will exploit poets. They'll exploit the older poets for the knowledge they have, and they'll exploit the younger ones for the promise they have, which somehow or other gives the people some kind of thing that maybe they have promise too, which they don't."⁶ To prevent this risk, Spicer advises: "Stay absolutely loose, and don't accept any offers whatsoever." He then goes on to modify this maxim, arguing that, while a poet might not write primarily for "the market" – and might try not to write for the market at all – it is inevitable that "you're going to sell out eventually". Spicer illustrates this point via an anecdote heard on the radio, about peach farmers' ignorance of the operations of the market. Not factoring in the relation between the mass production of peaches and their relative market cost, these farmers flooded the market and were then surprised when the overall cost of peaches went down. Extending this analogy to poets, Spicer argues that, while you'll have to sell out "for economic reasons", "when you sell out, know exactly how much your peaches cost. Know exactly how many peaches there are on the market. Know exactly what is the price you can sell out for" (154).

In the history of small-press poetry, secrecy and selling out are related concerns. As with Spicer, Roberts' *To My Contemporaries* is a book whose mode of production and distribution is defiantly 'underground', and, as with Spicer, the refusal of broader distribution networks and the suspicion of instrumentalised uses of poetry map onto each other. Both in terms of the work itself, and the means by which it is printed and distributed, the kind of political poetry that Spicer writes is more of a touchstone for Roberts' methods than the more open, self-consciously 'democratic' poetics of such poets as Allen Ginsberg, even if Roberts also addresses with some enthusiasm the populist aesthetics of such by now-unfashionable Communist poets as Edwin Rolfe. Indeed, *To My Contemporaries* borrows its title from the Rolfe's 1936 book of the same name. Written shortly before leaving for Spain to volunteer in the International Brigades, Rolfe's volume serves as an emblem of a trend of socially-conscious, explicitly Marxist political poetry in the United States: a whole history

which, as Cary Nelson has noted, was effectively suppressed by the McCarthyite turn (Rolfe himself was blacklisted in the 1950s).⁷ Roberts' title thus looks for its example to a time of engaged poetry, marked by both its formal experimentation and political radicalism, whose political allegiances were not 'secret'; were, indeed, part of the poems' *raison d'être*.

Yet the title also marks the distance from the moment which Rolfe's work might be said to encapsulate. As with Spicer, Roberts' 'contemporaries' seem substantially different from the "multitudes" whom Rolfe's books seeks "to welcome."⁸ While perhaps familiar to the attendees of universities, conferences, poetry festivals and reading series centring on Cambridge, London, Brighton and elsewhere, or associated presses such as Mountain, Grasp, Materials, and Equipage, Roberts and his peers are less well-known within either the literary mainstream (which is, after all, hardly a hotbed of the left-wing politics or formal experimentation to which this poetry leans) or party political and activist circles equivalent to those which saw Rolfe publish poems in the *Daily Worker*. This is not to undervalue the tensions between political demands and poetry felt by Rolfe and others, and the political possibilities for the organised Left during the 1930s are clearly very different to those available in contemporary Britain. Predominantly based in or around academic institutions, and often working on politically and formally radical poetics, there is no material cause comparable to Rolfe's experiences in Spain, though the 2010 Student Protests against the then-Coalition UK government remain an important touchstone.

Yet the poem does not necessarily lament this reduction, even if the book's title establishes address as central. It is a poem *to* a specific group. The poem is filled with references to literature. It names and quotes from Charles Reznikoff, W.S. Graham, George and Mary Oppen, Douglas Oliver, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Muriel Rukeyser, Gertrude Stein, Rainer Maria Rilke, Stephen Rodefer, John Keats and Bertolt Brecht. Naming occurs frequently in Roberts' poetry, but its use in *To My Contemporaries* develops from its use in his preceding work. Like *To My Contemporaries*, a poem such as 'People from the Book Kept Entering the Room', from 2014's *Left Helicon*, is saturated with references to left-wing politics and avant-garde

literature. Yet these references often appear more as inscrutable jokes than as making scholarly or political points. Indeed, the poem's title suggests that these proliferating references function as much as interruptions to the present moment of composition, or inhabitation, as to points of clarification and contextualisation for it:

Now I imitate Neruda from memory [...]

Engels, the beautiful walrus [...]

Samuel Beckett feeding ice-cream
to a three-legged dog, it is the saddest thing [...]

The name of my band is *Theodor's Swimsuit*,
on a striped recliner,
it is the second saddest thing [...]

[...] if you bring Mussolini
into this, I will shoot him in a duel. I will use the robot
Bertolt Brecht to travel back in time, and I will go to town
on Gabriele D'Annunzio.⁹

In *To My Contemporaries*, however – particular in its second section – the names of poetic forbears are more explicitly posed in terms of what they can teach its readers. Early on, Roberts announces “this is a poem about timing and advice.” People from the book(s) keep entering the room, not as interruptions to the moment of composition, but as specifically invoked examples. The poem is about reading and learning from the poets of the past and the poets of now, disagreeing with them, recalibrating them. It also functions as a survey, a summing-up, reckonings and engagements with the feeling of a particular poetical and political moment, mournful lookings-back and reassessments, workings-through: most notably through the recurring presence of Stephen Rodefer in the third section.

Still, though this is very much a poem of address, as its title suggests, it's not obviously a grandly rhetorical, public poem. Indeed, its address often seems to

presuppose a readership already familiar with its author's work. Thus, in a passage from the second section, describing an incident in which an apparently prophetic dream sees the speaker hit by a car, Roberts writes "You know all this from *SUNROOF* but sometimes it's/good to be reminded when the record is so thin and the actors so distracted". This will inevitably be obscure unless one knows that 'SUNROOF' is a poem from Roberts' 2011 collection *False Flags*, and the reader who *doesn't* "know all this" may be somewhat perplexed. This moment of tension, of missed communication, mirrors the poet's own uncertainties. In part, the poet seems unsure as to whether the contemporaries for whom the poem is written will read it at all, and is unsatisfied with the demands that it self-reflexively claims they are making on its writing. At the end of its first section, in a passage whose pronominal ambiguity is, as we'll see, characteristic of the poem as a whole, the speaker turns either on themselves, or on their readers, or both, in what appears to be a gesture of frustration:

And I ask, what story is it you want to be told?
 One of suspicion and ease, the legacies of the bold,
 of how pleasure fell out of the syllabus?

Well okay.

Stories are important here. From its *in medias res* opening on, the poem has set itself up as a narrative. It begins with an un-named second person plural, with the speaker and companion(s) located somewhere that is defiantly "actual":

We were in the ice-cold pagoda observing the angiosperms
 we were outside the actual laundromat
 I felt the difficulties leaving my body.

The effect is of a story, not of absence but of presence, which insists on 'actual' place. Yet these lines immediately establish a play between inside and outside, the reality of the place and incident described and its transformation and re-framing within an (often obscured and non-linear) poetic narrative. While the poem describes its own mission statement as early as the fourth line – "this is a poem about timing and

advice" – it also betrays scepticism about the grounds for this mission, and the poet's suitability for accomplishing it:

how to begin when versatility's in thrall to caution
 afraid of repetition
 falling short of what we'd shyly call an ethics.

Indeed, the claim is that this is a poem *about* timing and advice, rather than an actual example of a particular kind of timing, or giving of a particular breed of advice. The poem risks being about something it cannot put into practice.

The opening 'Credo' of Rolfe's *To My Contemporaries* begins with some advice of its own:

To welcome multitudes – the miracle of deeds
 performed in unison – the mind
 must first renounce the fiction of the self
 and its vainglory.¹⁰

Roberts' negotiations of "what we'd shyly call an ethics" are more intimate than Rolfe's rejection of the bourgeois self for the socialist collective, the "strength and togetherness/of bodies phalanxed in a common cause,/of fists tight-clenched around a crimson banner". The narrator in Roberts' poem draws in elements of intimate or private reference, perhaps intelligible in their full sense only to close friends, while lamenting the lack of adequate awareness "when the record is so thin and the actors so distracted."

Yet the poem's second section begins with a declarative, almost teacherly citation of George Oppen:

George Oppen told us *flowers* are a symbol of undefined human happiness,
 frequently referred to in all political circles.

References to flowers and poets' writings about flowers (the "insurgent botany" of the first section) see references to Bertolt Brecht, Goethe, Gertrude Stein and Muriel Rukeyser transition into a list of "these poets [who] are your friends": a roll call, without naming names (save the late Stephen Rodefer, who recurs in the final section), but rather places where poets live, which functions as a "parallel of impressive orchestration unavoidable:"

Now imagine all these poets are your friends, alive in Cambridge, living in Brighton, or London, or Glasgow. There are special characters in Paris who often you think of daily, mainly Rodefer, and then the vast array of travellers to Berlin. In New Haven the Union's megaphone gets graced, and of course there's newly Baltimore, and Providence and Ithaca where I rest my head against your desk and breathe the air, think of the rest of our correspondents out West, our brilliant acquaintances in Chicago, the great intellectuals of Maine and sometimes Boston, which is to say nothing whatsoever of Canada, or our friend who has friends in China, or our lapsed curiosity about the poets in Ghana. I loved you unequally, like a grandmother with too many relatives.

This list of Anglo-American poets, recognisable in terms of specific reference to those in the know, recognisable at least as an index of international poetic kinship to those who aren't, seems to be one of those who might give advice to both the poet of this poem, and the 'contemporaries' to whom it is addressed. Frank O'Hara is obviously lurking around here, and not just in the joke about "our lapsed curiosity about the poets/in Ghana".¹¹ But the advice sought here is less fleeting, less part of an on-the-move sociality than O'Hara's. To some extent, it is a list of the titular contemporaries themselves. Yet the roll-call leads not to a present re-gathering, but to the poet's 'abdication', a deferral of meeting to "shades" which might be pastoral retreats but also suggest death:

Trivial smarts
 a kind of sympathy
 with power, desperate
 to administrate
 the administrators. Fuck it:

In the absence of named and unnamed friends, secret and defeat seem to perpetuate each other: defeat leads to secrecy, secrecy leads to defeat, in a circle of sonic echo. But these are only half-rhymes. How could a rhyme be reversed, and how could it be completed? This apparently formal problem also relates to the poem's earlier question as to "what kind of story [...] you want to be told", to the poem's avowed subject matter of "timing and advice", and to the problem of "nourished endings, solemn and inevitable".

"Stories of our absence": 'Agitprop: An Ode'

I'll return to the question of rhyme in the article's final section. However, to clarify what sort of story *To My Contemporaries* tells, I first want to turn to a poem out of which *To My Contemporaries* grew, and to whose dilemmas it perhaps provides some tentative answers. 'Agitprop: An Ode' is the final poem in Roberts' collection, *Keep All Your Friends*, published in June 2014.¹³ The title suggests a more sarcastic angle on the problems of political poetry set up by *To My Contemporaries'* reference to Rolfe and to a whole tradition of left poets like Brecht and Oppen. If agitprop was originally a functional term for functional art in the context of the Soviet revolution, it has more recently taken on the quality of a slur, even if recent debates amongst left-wing poets in the UK have sometimes suggested that such poets might indeed concern themselves with the writing of agitprop.¹⁴ The poet's title perhaps gestures towards both positive and negative connotations, without settling on the side of either: a studied ambiguity which negotiates its own way through those debates on the political role of contemporary innovative poetry.

Whether this title suggests that the poem *itself* is agitprop, or that it is an ode *to* agitprop, the poem itself might at first glance not obviously seem to be either.

Despite the apparent declarative certainty of lines like “the brief is continue to live”, something is missing. The poet doesn’t tell us what “the secret poem” is, or what the “stories” it tells are. These are stories of absence which themselves are absent, and there are no proper names here, so that who the pronouns ‘you’, ‘I’ or ‘we’ refer to is also unclear.

The poem’s last word is ‘alone’, and the shift is from ‘us’ – the ‘we’ who are absent – to ‘you’, in the singular, ‘alone’. Things reduce down. Here and in *To My Contemporaries*, Roberts uses ‘you’ to refer either to himself, to a more generalised addressee (the unspecified reader), or to a specific person. The ‘you’ of ‘Agitprop’ might be a moment of self-address – the pronoun forming the subject of the previous sentences has predominantly been the first person, though there is also a “you” who “imagines me stepping over the wreckage” of the lost plane. But we might also read the ‘you and you alone’ to whom stories are told as a general kind of reader, who is nonetheless specifically implicated in a community of poets joined by their simultaneous absence: perhaps the “whole generation of writers playing dead” from earlier in the poem, a satirical side-swipe at those who “fix [...] up their brands and flawless assets/in advance”.

In this final sentence, the first-person pronoun is absent: it is implied but not stated in ‘our’ and ‘you’, and the speaker’s agency in creating the ‘secret poem’ with its ‘stories of absence’ is elided by the fact that it is the poem itself which forms the subject of the sentence. Yet it is still there: I am telling you this, whether this ‘you’ is a more generalised reader, a particular addressee, or the poet talking to themselves – as *To My Contemporaries* has it, in contradistinction to its title, “speaking to myself at bedtime”. Indeed, even when *To My Contemporaries*, with its “audience reduced”, says that is speaking to no one at all (“Do you remember 2010 I said to no one”), by the very fact of saying this in a published poem, it *is* legible to anyone who reads it.

Similarly, in ‘Agitprop’, there *is* a ‘we’, even if it seems temporarily absent. I, the speaker, am telling you why or how ‘we’ are not, currently, here. This ‘we’ – me and you, whether in the plural or the singular – could be taken as the larger, collective ‘totality’ of which the poet earlier dreams: a knowledge and a mode of social being which is less fractured than might be implied by the poem’s referential shifts and

twisting argument, or the political secrecy and constriction with which it is concerned. So I am telling you that we are not here, that totality is only, for now at least, a dream: but in doing so I ensure that we *are* still here, in intimacies and commitments heart-broken or fading away or dreamed and projected and fragmented. "You" can still "imagine me", even if this might turn out to be a fantasy, and the daughter who is not there – "my daughter's name was Olive/in the singular" – is nonetheless a reminder – without wishing to reinforce normative valorisations of reproductive continuance through the figure of the child – that, once more "the brief is continue to live".

"Warm half rhymes/of secret and defeat": Rhyme and "nourished endings"

This brief seems to come from the operations of naming itself – the noun, the proper name 'Olive', could visually be separated out as the exclamation 'O live', then transmuted into the verbal instruction 'continue to live'. This kind of patterning, something like the secret disguise of code, a teasing puzzle, is one Roberts often plays with – and its mode of joining together echoes his insistent use of rhyme to draw connections between diverse objects or actions which carry the propulsive force, if not the "clear citation", of "argument in form".

Yet *To My Contemporaries* would seem to question this tendency, as part of its resolve "to turn/my self-defences/inside out". As in 'Agitprop', the speaker once again self-parodies, as a would-be pastoral poet who is "the bearer of gratuitous hayfever", falling off their bike, being hit by a car: "a good middle-class boy" who "didn't expect to see my friends arrested/or ejected from the lectures/thrown out of the Academy". In addressing the contemporaries of the title, this speaker attempts once again to "gather the actors to [his] chest": most notably in the international roll call of the poet's friends at the end of Book Two. Yet, as we've seen, this recall leads, not to a triumphal re-gathering, but to the poet's own 'abdication': "I give you my word, renounce my title, propose/to reconvene in shades unseen." Cast into a condition of doubt, an ominous "occasion you don't recall, blame all over the ocean", they are left only with a proposal to "reconvene" at an unspecified future time and location. Following this, the poem's third and final section is neither the triumphal

and defiant assertion of a new programme for poetry, nor the political call to arms of Rolfe's *To My Contemporaries*. Rather, it functions as a coda, the poet once again alone: or as a chastened way to begin again, "flinching in compression", after a grand gathering together which has seemed both to be invocation and farewell.

To a greater extent even than in 'Agitprop', which self-reflexively anticipated its own tendency to "fall in love with self-criticism", the poet examines their own method and its relation to the pleasures of concealment and the near-paranoia born of conditions of political defeat and personal loss. They question the adequacy of certain models of "literary allusion and disclosure", of a poetry perhaps overly allusive, elusive and self-reflexive, in which:

every parallel
 you can think of
 [is] pressed into the service
 of surface agitation.

Such self-examination hinges in particular on the description of a notebook containing drafts:

dedicated to error
 and correction,
 to warm half rhymes
 of secret and defeat
 never to be reversed
 or completed.

It's the figure of rhyme in this last quotation that I want to focus on here. Rhyme might create an illusory totality where none exists, both as a conscious attempt at tying together an argument and as the operation of language itself, put into play by, but not entirely accessible to the poet. This would function as what *To My Contemporaries*, in a different context, names as "parallels of impressive orchestration

unavoidable", or what 'Agitprop' names as "argument in form/which clutches and lets go in time to music". It both creates connections between diverse things and obscures argument, clutching and letting go – as in the various conspiracy theories explored in 2011's *False Flags*, which claims (albeit as a 'decoy') that "no conspiracy theory is dialectical". In its synthesis of disparate things, rhyme elides, rather than revealing, contradiction. Of course, rhyme does not exactly function like a conspiracy theory, for it slides uneasily between a kind of transcendent operation of language, in which connections are made between disparate things through the power of sound, and a demonstration of poetic dexterity, of the individual writer's own ability to join unlike things. "Distribute the stresses as you wish". There is no sinister operating force linking up series of apparently disconnected events, and such a claim would be to reproduce the logic of conspiracy theorists who seek a motive and a cause in evil persons, rather than in an analysis of systems. Nonetheless, rhyme risks a simple transformation or equivalence which is not dialectical, something which seems intrinsic to the inner workings of language, workings which assume a quasi-transcendental structure, obscuring their social production. Rhyme has the structure of revealed clarity but also of secrecy. In that sense, it is a secret which hides in plain sight: apparent revelation operates according to a secret logic whose agency seems to come neither from the poet's intention, nor from a traceable structure, but from something both within and outside language itself. Thus, in *To My Contemporaries*, Roberts writes "commanded not to go/on sounds alone."

In *Left Helicon* and *Keep All Your Friends*, Roberts' use of rhyme can verge on the satirical. Submerged, collaged and disguised quotation and reference act as a patchwork form of making, giddily running from line to line through rhyme, half-rhyme and grammatical suspension. As the pseudonymous Yam Piklé notes in a recent review:

The entire technique of *Left Helicon* seems intended to render the associative links that support [its] details void: a comic and repetitive tendency towards the banal replacing hysteria, the lyric speaker becomes a means of

approaching sheer form as the repetitive operation of the cognitive functions ceases to become interesting. It is no co-incidence that, as these associative links (context, by any other name), are stripped, what tends to emerge alongside assertions of the poet-speaker's presence are repeated visions of structures and movements.¹⁹

Rendering links void and "approaching sheer form" suggests that there is *something* to be elided: a "context" denied even to the attentive reader. Secrecy here is to do with not naming certain associative links, or with providing only those links – "structures and movements" which move from one thing to the other without saying why. It is also to do with over-naming, with the over-burdening of what Píklé calls "context, by another name": whether insistent, sometimes disguised citation and translation of literary texts, the shifting details of the environments in which the poem is written, or references shared only between the poet and a particular intimate lover or friend. As Píklé writes of "the poems' tendency towards associative play", "what had appeared to be poetic potential is at last figured as a failure to grasp". What Píklé names as "ability", "ingenuity" – and which could also be called proficiency, virtuosity, or precocity – substitutes for a more dialectical version of totality, while fully aware it is doing so, caught between pleasure and frustration at its own operations, its own elusive erudition. As *To My Contemporaries* puts it: "are you not done/with being erudite/and loving eruditely?" What simultaneously draws attention to an incident, trend or problem also defers or deflects from it: the figure of turning *towards* – "turn[ing] without reaching/to the books/for advice" – is also, in almost the same motion, a turning *away*. The "wheels in stereo" continue to roll.

End-rhyme can force a neatness of argument dictated by the pleasures of sonic completion, a completion which, when elided with semantic completion, gives the quality of memorable aphorism or truism. Roberts' rhymes tend to occur in the *middle* of lines, creating a logic which follows the sentences across the page and suspends, inverts or defers as much as it completes. Following from the "half rhymes [...] never to be reversed or completed", we might then ask, what would it actually mean for a rhyme to be 'completed', and what would it mean for it to be 'reversed'? In a poem in equal

parts about opening, closing and return, the “nourished endings” of rhyme might be the fulcrum for simultaneous operations of thought and sense, one which reveals the connection between – for example – secrecy and defeat, but also participates in the process of hiding and concealing what it might think to “disclose” or “expose.”

In ‘Agitprop’, as we’ve seen, Roberts writes: “The brief is continue to live”. ‘Continue’ here suggests the unfolding of an ongoing action. At the conclusion of *To My Contemporaries*, the equivalent word is “follows”, which instead implies that one action concludes before another begins. The poem’s final sentence begins with the speaker descending a hill to the porch where they began the poem, observing the evening light in the sky. They have, in the previous sentence, taken up a handful of fennel, and “the scent follows” them down the hill. ‘Follows’ is the last active verb in both the sentence and the poem, establishing a continuous present which leads on to three final similes. Thus:

I take up a handful
 of fennel,
 I really do this.

I break it up
 and descend a great hill
 and I can see the porch
 where I began this,
 and the light
 deep and outrageous
 streaked with singing
 and the stars break out
 and the scent follows
 like pleasing the dead,
 or the air returning to itself
 holding on to the living
 like precious calling time
 on precious closing.

This temporal suspension, a continuous present which is paradoxically concerned with 'closing', simultaneously suggests an ending and a refusal to end. In a pub, one calls time as an advance signal that the pub will soon close, before it has actually done so. But to "call time" on closing itself is to refuse one kind of closure – death, defeat, departure, loss – in the name of "holding on to the living". "[H]olding on" might suggest a kind of desperation which is more to do with "continuing", or preserving, than with "following". Earlier in the poem, it appears to associate with an intimate relationship: "Foam ripped over the road in the dark/and we held each other close". But the past tense 'held' and present continuous 'holding on' are different things; no longer able to hold in equal relation with another who also holds one (so that the holding can be done by a collective subject, what seems to imply a relation of two-person intimacy), the poet holds on the living in general, who, it seems, are in danger of slipping away, turning into the dead of two lines previously. The twin risks are of deferral and loss, the one of which might turn into the other: one might be placed *on hold*, while waiting on the phone, or one might *hold on* to the living in the face of the dead, aware of mortality and of 'closing', which is at once death and the end of the poem. In the absence of being able to hold another person in a physical embrace, the holding occurs, as we'll see, through acts of intimate communication in writing, recollection and dialogue that crosses time (reassessment, reminiscence, reappraisal) and seeks to affirm what seems to have ended or to risk being lost. Meanwhile, "calling time" also relates to naming, if we understand the "calling" of "calling time" in the sense of naming, or calling *to*, both a statement of something's quality and an act of communication, of address.

Earlier, we've been told that "Jack knew all the flowers' names", and that "George Oppen told us that flowers are a symbol of undefined happiness,/frequently referred to in political circles". The play here is between definition and the undefined, where the role of flowers as a placeholder for what can't be named is as valuable as the ability to name, "compiling notes [...] for a book of insurgent botany". To name something might both bring it to view and obscure it. In Book Two, Roberts writes that:

The verb is a precious kind of action, or a skill you listen to demands
without making, when the noun is exposure.

'Precious' recurs twice in the closing sentence of Book Three, and here, verbs are turned into nouns, through the participle form. *Action* is turned into *quality*, or *essence*. But this isn't the act of freezing such a designation might imply: the naming of something once it has gone, or the naming of it in the anticipation of its loss – "set[ting] the date", "at the end of the day". The poem's final section has been constructed on a three-step line, but its closing line is only the second of a new set: in that visual sense, an ending that is premature and that is not quite a full end, not fully continued, not fully followed, or followed through.

Defeat marks the cessation of a particular moment, or movement, and the poem as a whole is concerned with absence and loss: whether through geographical displacement, political defeat, the end of an intimate relationship, or death. On its second page it names these as "nourished endings, solemn and inevitable". Nourishment might generally be thought of as that which allows one to "continue to live" – to nourish an ending is a paradox, in which the ending of something is perversely fed, fatalistically desired. Yet this line is immediately followed by "the starting point is flinching in compression". A nourished ending transitions into a new start which, though it flinches and is compressed, offers the possibility that "you could finally be divulged". Divulged refers to the making known of something previously hidden – private, sensitive information – and the odd grammatical usage here suggests that it is the poet themselves who might be revealed, with 'divulged' also suggesting 'divested'. Certain "errors" might be corrected, the preoccupation with endings itself set aside.

The poem, then, does not seek to obscure or conceal defeat through imagining it never happened, nor to valorise it in a condition of melancholy – one which preserves the lost, or secret object, in the structure of the language itself, in order to deny its loss. Rather, in reckoning with loss – a reckoning which is also a reckoning with the poet's own strategies of "self-defence", strategies of internalisation which must be "turned inside out" – the poem seeks to find a way to continue, a dialectical

relation between concealing and revealing, defeat and continuance, noun and verb, object and quality.

As Book Three tells us more than once, Stephen Rodefer has died, and the poet has gone home. Rodefer, the great American poet, author of *Villon* and *Four Lectures*, among other “revolutionary remarks and deathless lines of verse”, spent much time in Cambridge (UK).²⁰ There he met Roberts, a formative experience for the younger poet, who, at the time of completing *To My Contemporaries*, had himself just moved away from the city after an extended period living there, and soon after Rodefer's death in August 2015. As well as a personal influence and friend, whom the poem wishes to commemorate, Rodefer serves as a bridge between New American Poetries and British Poetry Revivals, between younger and older generations, an appropriate figure in which to concentrate the poem's concerns. Indeed, the first and third sections of *To My Contemporaries* share the three-step line that Rodefer adopted (from Mayakovsky and William Carlos-Williams) in late works such as ‘Arabesque at Bar’ and ‘Beating Erasers’, a form noted by Roberts in a review of Rodefer's *Call it Thought*.²¹ Mourning becomes part of the time in which the poem was written: the second section was written while Rodefer was still alive, and he is mentioned, in the present tense, as one of a list of poetic contemporaries geographically absent but still alive, if isolated. But he had died by the time of the concluding section, his name moved from the present to the past tense. In this sense, the questions of “timing and advice” that the poem earlier proclaims to be its subject are more than a case of well-chosen sonic patterning and verbal dexterity, but part of a meditation on mortality, political defeat, and loss more generally.

Three pages before the poem ends, Roberts writes: “Meet me with everyone/you love, even badly”. This command is not addressed to a discernible object, though it would appear to relate to the address, earlier in the section, to the person with whom the speaker might have swum at a reservoir, though they never did, or with whom they have a conversation together in a diner. As with ‘Agitprop’, the second person here has the capacity both for specific, personal address, address to a group (of intimates and ‘contemporaries’), and something broader: the poet calling for the reader to meet them, half-way perhaps, a gesture of communication. “Everyone/you

love" refigures and opens out the roll-call of contemporaries from Book Two, on a more intimate scale, and one which, nonetheless, leaves the definition of love open, negotiable, to be struggled with and lived. The resolution to defer meeting at the end of the second section – "to reconvene in shades unseen" – becomes a more immediate imperative, rather than a future 'proposal'. The poet offers advice both to himself and 'to [his] contemporaries', which might, in some roundabout way, describe the purpose of the poem itself:

write to everyone
 you know
 write to everyone.

This is encouragement and necessity; in times of dispersal, as any poet, or any one, might figure them; an insistence on the need for communication, re-evaluation, continued dialogue, and one which might take place more privately, more carefully, with more openness to risk and disagreement, than in the fractious and fracturing fora of an often confusing public debate about the political function of poetry. The poem, then, engages with and emerges from the difficulties of finding frames for such concerns which don't descend into bickering and to the crossing of wires, but to a different kind of crossing.²²

Sometimes the poet of this poem may seem only be "speaking to myself at bedtime". But the poem, throughout, works through the incomplete condition, the "half-rhyme [...] of secret and defeat". Though "wary of making promises," and without ever exactly giving up that melancholically pleasurable condition, it ends with a final muted, clarion call of love, "deep and outrageous/streaked with singing".

Notes

¹ Luke Roberts, *To My Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Self-published, 2015), n.p.

² Roberts' books of poetry preceding *To My Contemporaries* are, chronologically: *Ripcord Worship* (Cambridge: Grasp Press, 2008), *False Flags* (Cambridge: Mountain, 2011), *Left Helicon* (Cambridge: Equipage, 2014), and *Keep All Your Friends* (Cambridge: Materials, 2014). See also Roberts, co-editor with Neil and Reitha Pattison, *Certain Prose of the English Intelligencer* (Cambridge: Mountain, 2012, 2014) and Roberts, *Barry MacSweeney and the Politics of Post-War British Poetry: Seditious Things* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

- ³ For Spicer's involvement with Mattachine, see Kevin Killian, 'Spicer and the Mattachine', in John Emil Vincent (ed.), *After Spicer: Critical Essays* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), pp. 16–35. For more on Spicer, see Killian and Lewis Ellingham, *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).
- ⁴ Alice Notley, *Grave of Light: New and Selected Poems, 1970–2005* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), pp. 71–2. To add a further layer, these lines also refer to the contemporary American poet Jackqueline Frost, to whom *To My Contemporaries* is dedicated.
- ⁵ Luke Roberts, *To My Contemporaries* (Op. Cit.).
- ⁶ Spicer, Jack, 'California Lecture: Poetry and Politics'. In Peter Gizzi (ed.), *The House that Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), pp. 149–172. Citations in the following paragraph are all from p. 154.
- ⁷ See Edwin Rolfe, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993) and Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–45* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) and *Revolutionary Memory: Rediscovering the Poetry of the American Left* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
- ⁸ Rolfe, 'Credo', Op. Cit., p. 59.
- ⁹ Luke Roberts, *Left Helicon* (Cambridge: Equipage, 2014), pp. 15–22, 29, 30.
- ¹⁰ Rolfe, Op. Cit.
- ¹¹ "I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun/and have a hamburger and a malted and buy/an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poems/in Ghana are doing these days". Frank O'Hara, "The Day Lady Died", *Collected Poems*, ed. by Donald Allen (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995 (1971)), p. 325. See also Andrew Epstein's useful blog post on O'Hara's lines. Epstein, "A Visual Footnote to O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died": New World Writing and The Poets of Ghana". Online, *Locus Solus: The New York School of Poets*, June 10, 2013 <<https://newyorkschoolpoets.wordpress.com/2013/06/10/a-visual-footnote-to-oharas-the-day-lady-died-new-world-writing-and-the-poets-of-ghana/>>).
- ¹² Luke Roberts, *False Flags* (Cambridge: Mountain, 2011), p. 6.
- ¹³ Luke Roberts, *Keep All Your Friends* (Cambridge: Materials, 2014), pp. 15–20. In the interests of full disclosure, I should point out that this book was published by the press I co-run with the poet Lisa Jeschke. 'Agitprop' first appeared in one-off Cambridge magazine *The Internal Leg and Cutlery Preview*, edited by Pocahontas Mildew in April 2014.
- ¹⁴ See 'Militant Politics and Poetry: General Invitation'. Online <<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/cprc/news/MilitantPoliticsandPoetry>>. Accessed 30th September 2016.
- ¹⁵ *Keep All Your Friends*, p. 16.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ It's worth noting in this regard that the ancient Greek *οἰκονομία* refers equally to the management of a household as to the arrangement of a poem and the administration and public revenue of a State.
- ¹⁸ *Keep All Your Friends*, p. 20.
- ¹⁹ Yam Píklé, [Review of *Left Helicon*], *Hix Eros: Poetry Review*, Vol. 6, August 2015, 46–51.
- ²⁰ "Deathless lines of verse" is from Jean Calais (Stephen Rodefer), *Villon* (San Francisco: Pick Pocket Series, 1976), p. 49.
- ²¹ Luke Roberts, "I like your voice/Look where it's come from": *Call it Thought* by Stephen Rodefer', *Readings: Response and Reactions to Poetries*, Issue 4, Online: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/readings/issues/issue4/roberts_on_odefer>, accessed 29th September 2016.
- ²² With regard to crossing, and to communication (both epistolary and poetic) in an earlier transatlantic

network of poets whose connections around politics and poetry were at once intimate, distant, fractious and deeply felt, recall J.H. Prynne's letter to Charles Olson: "Since I crossed the sea just like a ballad, with the one guarded hope, to give you this as a totally specific gesture: a respect which runs out into time like light." Prynne's concern for poetry, politics, and the "community of risk" is a key influence on Roberts: see his editorship, with Reitha and Neil Pattison, of *Certain Prose of the English Intelligencer* (Cambridge: Mountain, 2012). As the contemporary poet Lisa Jeschke puts it: "writing becomes this necessity for remaining intimate with our contemporaries and friends beyond immediate physical presence, at a time when everyone is given to the circus of globalised dispersal". (Correspondence with the author, April 2016).

Competing Interests

Luke Roberts' poem "Agitprop: An Ode" was published by David Grundy and Lisa Jeschke in 2014 through the small press Materials, as part of the pamphlet "Keep All Your Friends". (<http://material-s.blogspot.co.uk/>).

How to cite this article: Grundy, D 2018 'Poetry and Secrecy in Luke Roberts' *To My Contemporaries*. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 10(1): 2, pp.1–25, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.28>

Published: 09 May 2018

Copyright: © 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS The Open Access icon, a stylized 'O' with a circular arrow around it.