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'Exits' and 'Entrances': Roger Robinson's Poetry between Performance and Self-promotion

Abstract I: Vincitore del *T. S. Eliot Prize* (2019) e dell'*Ondaatje Prize* (2020), Roger Robinson interpreta il ruolo di poeta contemporaneo valorizzando il concetto di *performance*. L'approccio di Robinson alla poesia prevede l'utilizzo di elementi performativi come letture dal vivo, presenza sui social media e collaborazioni musicali. Tale prospettiva rievoca il motto shakespeariano secondo cui 'tutto il mondo è un palcoscenico', in cui le uscite e le entrate, artistiche e personali, sono cruciali nel plasmare i discorsi. Il saggio considera l'attività di Robinson tra *performance* e autopromozione, concentrando l'attenzione sui molteplici aspetti performativi che caratterizzano il ruolo di poeta nell'era digitale.

Abstract II: Winner of the *T. S. Eliot Prize* (2019) and the *Ondaatje Prize* (2020), Roger Robinson takes on the role of the contemporary poet enhancing the concept of performance. Robinson's approach to poetry involves using performative elements such as live readings, social media presence, and musical collaborations. This perspective evokes the Shakespearean motto that '[a]ll the world's a stage', where artistic and personal entrances and exits are crucial in shaping discourse. The essay considers Robinson's activities between performance and self-promotion, focusing on the multiple performative aspects that characterise the role of the poet in the digital age.

Keywords: Roger Robinson, performance, self-promotion, poetry, digital age, social media.

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts
(Shakespeare 1993a: 150-151).

Well into the 21st century, social media and the digital revolution have profoundly affected cultural production and reception and will continue to do so relentlessly. The increasingly ubiquitous presence of artificial intelligence is prefiguring unpredictable scenarios, leading experts to confront difficult questions regarding the modalities of control over such unprecedented phenomena.

Like virtually every other field, poetry writing has been impacted by the new state of affairs. The romantic notion of the poet, who recollects emotions in solitude and hopes that someone, somewhere will appreciate the effort is long gone. Today, those involved in cultural production, including poets, must perform multiple identities and take self-promotion seriously. Being active on social media and crossing artistic boundaries are now essential to reach diverse audiences. Gaining recognition and building an audience require this engagement; a mysterious absence of information as a hype-creating strategy now seems like a self-destructive move doomed to failure.

Most contemporary poets from around the world have become aware of this scenario and started behaving accordingly. Being the quintessence of personal and artistic hybridity, Roger Robinson is no exception. Born in London in 1967 to Trinidadian parents, Robinson moved to Trinidad during his childhood, later returning to the United Kingdom when he was nineteen. This dual identity, combining both insider and outsider perspectives, enabled him to explore feelings of disconnection within the black British community, mostly through his nuanced and richly textured poetry. Moreover, Robinson tested himself in different art forms (short fiction, essay writing, music, spoken word), paying careful attention to the performative aspects of his works.

In this essay, we will consider the multifaceted aspects of Robinson's output, as well as the ways in which he engages in its promotion and performative aspects, to reflect on the role of the contemporary poet today. More precisely, we will investigate the extent to which self-promotion and performance, both personal and artistic, have become crucial means for becoming an acknowledged and respected cultural figure. Contemporary poets like Robinson adopt a transmedial approach to reach a broader audience, and reinterpret and criticise an updated version of the Shakespearean metaphor of the world as a stage.

1. The World as a Stage Today

The analogy of the world as a stage and people as actors existed long before Shakespeare's time. This trope has roots in the philosophical works of Plato. In Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato presented the allegory of the cave, where he depicted people as prisoners observing shadows on a wall, similar to spectators in a theatre. This allegory explores the roles individuals play in society, echoing the idea of life as a staged performance. Although Plato did not explicitly use the phrase 'the world as a stage', his philosophical inquiries into the nature of reality and human roles align with the essence of this metaphor. Seneca also used this metaphor, notably in his essay *De brevitate vitae*, where he investigated the transitory nature of life and the various roles people play throughout their existence. Reflecting the essence of his Stoic philosophy, Seneca compared life to a play in which people are actors who must perform their parts, suggesting that what matters is not the length of life but the excellence of the acting.

Later examples include *Moriae encomium* (1511), in which Renaissance humanist Erasmus blurred the lines between life and play. As he noted, removing masks from actors on stage would ruin a play by exposing their real identities: by the same token, uncovering the true nature of people who perform multiple identities in life could upset the social order

and the roles individuals play in society¹. A similar metaphorical perspective emerges in Richard Edwards' play *Damon and Pythias*, written in 1564, the year Shakespeare was born, which contains the lines: "Pythagoras said that this world was like a stage / Whereon many play their parts; the lookers-on, the sage" (Edwards 2019). Moreover, when it was founded in 1599, Shakespeare's own theatre, *The Globe*, may have used the motto "totus mundus agit histrionem" ("the whole world acts as a player"), which was based on the earlier sentence "quod fere totus mundus exercet histrionem" ("because almost the whole world acts as an actor"), attributed to Petronius (Garber 2008: 292). To conclude this necessarily partial overview, in Act I, Scene I of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare also has one of his main characters, Antonio, compare the world to a stage: "I hold the world but as the world, Graziano, A stage where every man must play a part, And mine a sad one" (Shakespeare 1993b: 107).

But what does this metaphor mean today? In what ways do contemporary poets, writers, and artists engage with it? Although the context has changed, the metaphor remains relevant. Poets continue to explore how individuals present themselves and interact in an increasingly digital and interconnected world. For instance, poets like Robinson examine how social media and digital platforms have transformed life into a performative act, where individuals curate their identities and experiences for public consumption. In this regard, the critical tools of Performance Studies and Deconstruction can be valuable for understanding how contemporary poets like Robinson address issues of performance and self-promotion.

2. Robinson and Performance

As is known, Richard Schechner broadened the concept of performance to include not just theatrical events, but also rituals, sports, dance, and social interactions. He noted that all human activities can be seen as performances, where individuals enact roles and follow scripts dictated by cultural norms and societal expectations. Taking his cue from Erving Goffman's 1959 groundbreaking book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Schechner argued in the 2003 Preface to the Routledge Classics Edition of his own pioneering volume *Performance Theory* (1977) that

performances in the broad sense of that word were coexistent with the human condition. [...] What Goffman meant was that people were always involved in role-playing, in constructing and staging their multiple identities. [...] To do this, they deployed socio-theatrical conventions (or "routines") even as they devised personae (sometimes consciously, mostly without fully being cognizant of what was happening) adapted to particular circumstances (Schechner 2003: ix-x).

Being a poet today is more influenced than ever by the concept of performance. Contemporary poets frequently present their work at readings, slams, and festivals, where

¹ "Si quis histrionibus in scena fabulam agentibus personas detrahere conetur, ac spectatoribus veras nativae facies ostenderet, nonne is fabulam omnem perverterit, dignusque habeatur, quem omnes e theatro velut lymphatum saxi eiciant?" (Erasmus 1511).

the act of reading transforms into a performance. Schechner's theories can help analyse how poets like Robinson – as well as others such as Saul Williams, Anthony Joseph, and Kae Tempest, to name a few – utilise voice, gesture, and space to animate their written words. Robinson's performances are renowned for their intensity and their ability to connect deeply with the audience. His delivery and stage presence further amplify the empathetic impact of his work.

Similar to actors performing on stage, most contemporary poets engage in performance through their writings, readings, and public appearances. Social media functions as a contemporary virtual stage where poets showcase both their art and personal identities. This form of performance includes their creative output as well as their interactions, reflections, and personal revelations. Schechner's ideas about the broadened definition of performance help us understand how poets handle their online *personae* and engage with virtual audiences. To this purpose, a transmedial approach becomes increasingly important, as poets collaborating with artists from other fields (such as musicians or visual artists) participate in intercultural performances and foster new forms of poetic expression.

Robinson is well aware of the importance of crossing artistic and disciplinary boundaries. It is significant that, on his official website, he is described as an “internationally acclaimed poet, writer, performer, educator & mentor”, as well as a “workshop leader” who “brings his cultural depth and passion for poetry to global audiences” (Robinson 2024a). Robinson started out as a spoken word artist with dub poetry – he views dub as “the poetry of working-class suffering and protest” (Armitstead 2020). Later, he became involved in musical projects, recording solo albums with Jahtari Records and serving as the lead vocalist and lyricist for King Midas Sound and The Bug. These days, it is impossible for a poet to be just a poet; one must engage in various related activities that benefit from one another.

However, Robinson still seems to cherish a traditional approach to the poet's role. This approach involves emphasising the significance of practice, which is the foundation of the quality of any poet's work:

My experience in teaching has been primarily to show that writers are not born but made from consistent practise and craft. I have found writing to be highly correlated with reading. You can't have the creative development you seek without first finding enjoyment in the written word (Robinson 2024b).

In *On Poetry*, Robinson confirms that practice remains the most crucial aspect for a successful performance:

Some people are interested in performance but believe that they are interested in poetry. Poets are people who put their bums in their chairs to read and write poetry, in order to get it to an audience. That's it, that's all and if you do that on some kind of regular basis you are in the practice of poetry. When I teach, I like to say that for every poem you attempt to write, you should at least read thirty to fifty poems and establish what threads and techniques you notice, then try to see if you can apply them in a new piece of work somehow (Robinson 2023b: 117).

To elaborate on the notion of the poet's creativity, Robinson introduced an acronym, MVAS, to define a useful concept: a "minimum viable artistic starter" (Robinson 2023a: 11). This refers to "a very small creative act to get your day started. For a poet, it might be a haiku. For an artist it might be a blind sketch. For a musician, it might be to play a favourite song [...] an MVAS might jumpstart a full day of creative artistic flow". These reflections reveal that, in addition to focusing on the performative aspects of poetry, Robinson still relies on a traditional approach to the poet's role, involving practice, self-discipline, and work ethic.

Robinson's poetry often highlights this tension between the private self and the public *persona*. In this context, he incisively analyses crucial issues such as collective and personal trauma in his award-winning collection *A Portable Paradise*. His moving examination of the Grenfell Tower fire on June 14, 2017, in North Kensington, London, brings a human dimension to the tragedy by focusing on the personal stories and emotions of those affected, especially in the poem "The Missing" (Robinson 2019):

As if their bodies became lighter,
 ten of those seated
 in front pews began to float,
 and then to lie down as if on
 a bed. Then pass down the aisle,
 as if on a conveyor belt of pure air,
 slow as a funeral cortege,
 past the congregants, some sinking
 to their knees in prayer.
 One woman, rocking back and forth,
 muttered, *What about me Lord*
why not me?

Here, Robinson's transmedial approach is evident, as the poem was adapted into lyrics for an experimental track by The Bug, which bears the same title and was released in 2021 by the Ninja Tune label on the album *Fire*. The poet implicitly suggests that media coverage of the tragedy will never convey the necessary detail and intensity to fully capture the struggles of those impacted by this devastating event. This, in turn, leads to a desensitisation of the audience, causing them to fail to empathise with and grasp the painful effect of the tragedy.

Personal trauma is examined in two poems – "Grace" and "On Nurses" – which depict the challenges faced by nurses, a profession where empathy is paramount. Drawing from his own experience of almost losing his son, Robinson recounts how the exceptional care of a West Indian NHS nurse named Grace ensured the survival of his prematurely born son: "On the ward I met Grace. A Jamaican senior nurse / who sang pop songs on her shift, like they were hymns. [...] / Even the doctors gave way to her, when it comes / to putting a line into my son's nylon thread of a vein" (Robinson 2019: 69)³. With its meticulous language,

² Elia (2024).

³ Elia (2024).

this poem skilfully dissects the emotional and physical repercussions of personal trauma, forging a profound connection with the reader. Its authenticity lays bare the intricate and sometimes conflicting emotions entwined with pain and suffering.

Ultimately, Robinson is positioned between two forces: one traditional, grounded in practice and self-discipline, and the other oriented towards the present and future, emphasising performance and self-promotion. Regarding the latter, and in line with Goffman's perspective that the metaphor of the world as a stage implies a certain falseness in self-presentation, Robinson acknowledges that this metaphor can challenge the authenticity of performances and highlight the pressure to conform to societal expectations (Goffman 2022: 52 ff.).

In this context, Foucault's philosophy can help assess the authenticity of performance. As is widely acknowledged, his theories are particularly relevant for examining how societal expectations and roles are constructed and enforced. With regard to the role of the contemporary poet, Foucault's concept of discourse is essential, as it shapes and constructs knowledge, influencing our understanding of ourselves and the world around us (Foucault 2002). Discourse is more than just a way of speaking; it is a system of representation that dictates how we think, speak, and act. It establishes what is considered true, normal, and acceptable in society, thereby exerting power over individuals. Another relevant Foucauldian concept is subjectivation, which refers to how individuals are shaped into subjects through discourses and power relations. This process involves internalising societal norms and expectations, often resulting in self-regulation and conformity. In a world seen as a stage, individuals might feel pressured to perform according to these norms, suppressing their authentic selves to comply to assigned roles.

When we apply Foucault's ideas to the metaphor of the world as a stage, we see how societal discourses shape the roles individuals are expected to play. These roles are not inherent or natural, but are constructed through language and social practices. Robinson's poetry reflects the tension between individual identity and the roles imposed by societal discourses. The poet is aware of these opposing forces: while adhering to a traditional view of the poet's role, he critiques the social expectations and platforms where individuals must present themselves. At the same time, he recognises that maintaining a regular presence on social media is a crucial aspect of being a poet today. Posts, reels, and stories constantly show him sharing reflections on the poet's craft, performing new songs in musical collaborations, and even disclosing unpublished poems. Whether one likes it or not, online self-promotion has now become an almost compulsory strategy for anyone involved in cultural production.

3. Robinson and Self-promotion

In the Autumn 2017 edition of *The Poetry Review*, Robinson produced his own poetry manifesto, a series of musings on the artistic process serving as advice for poets (Robinson 2017). Among the themes, several reflections warn against adopting a victim mentality or becoming self-satisfied: "Don't become a victim and a complainer. Success depends on your willpower, productivity, and practice. You shouldn't even have time to complain"; "The world belongs to poets who can finish. Don't have many open-ended projects just floating. Give yourself a time and a date and finish it" (Robinson 2017). Robinson consequently

focuses on the importance of self-promotion – for him, unseen poems cannot even be considered finished, as it is the very act of reading that completes them: “Your poems aren’t finished until you present them to an audience. It’s unfinished if it’s stuck in a drawer somewhere”; “I think the basics are to get good (i.e., craft) and get seen (i.e., stages, journals, blogs, magazines, social media); that’s it”; “Poets, reject the sacred cows of your industry. Put no structures in authority. Get work seen and sold” (Robinson 2017).

Traditional publishing is still an effective way to reach a wider audience, especially when, as in the case of Robinson’s poetry collection *A Portable Paradise*, it leads to prestigious literary prizes such as the *T. S. Eliot Prize* (2019) and the *Ondaatje Prize* (2020). These achievements granted Robinson validation and credibility, significantly increasing his visibility, media coverage, and social media presence, which led to a boost in sales and readership. Additionally, they opened doors for further publication and participation in literary events such as poetry readings, literary festivals, workshops, and conferences. These successes also enhanced his networking opportunities, provided access to funding and residencies, and offered international exposure, including translation opportunities and a global readership.

However, the impact of the digital revolution has driven contemporary poets like Robinson to adopt various strategies to create a stronger connection with the literary community. Maintaining an online presence is essential: a professional website and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X are now necessary for sharing poems, thoughts on poetry, writing processes, and more. This scenario requires what we may define as an *orchestral performative act* on the part of the poet. In other words, Robinson the person performs as Robinson the social media *persona*, who in turn describes the work of Robinson the poet, who is the spokesperson for Robinson the person. The cycle is complete, but there can definitely be short circuits that blur the roles, the persons, and the *personae*, creating a plurality of identities that at times overlap and intersect with each other.

This multiplicity of selves can be analysed through Jacques Derrida’s insights to understand self-promotion in a philosophical context. Derrida’s philosophy challenges the stability of identity, and self-promotion implies a deconstruction of identities. This means that any presentation of oneself is inherently unstable and open to reinterpretation. The identity one promotes is not fixed, but subject to the play of differences and deferrals – what Derrida calls ‘différance’ – (Derrida 1982: xliii). Moreover, in self-promotion, the way one writes or speaks about oneself is never a complete representation; it always leaves out some aspects and includes others, thus creating a presence-absence dynamic – self-promotion, therefore, is always a partial and constructed narrative.

One recurring motif in Derrida’s criticism is the concept of iterability. Iterability refers to the idea that any sign (or, in this case, self-promotion message) can be repeated and reinterpreted across various contexts. This capacity for repetition allows signs to retain a degree of identity while being open to different interpretations depending on the context in which they appear. For self-promotion, this means that once an individual promotes themselves, the message can be taken up, repeated, and transformed by others in ways that may extend beyond or even diverge from the original intention.

Self-promotion also leads the way to what Derrida defines 'spectral' or 'ghostly': the image one tries to convey is always haunted by what is left unsaid, unseen, or forgotten. The self being promoted is a ghostly presence, more a projection than a reality. Derrida coined the term 'hauntology' – a portmanteau of haunting and ontology – to refer to the presence of elements from the past that persist in the present as spectral traces (Derrida 1994).

Drawing on and expanding the ideas of Derrida, Mark Fisher discussed how cultural artifacts, memories, and lost futures haunt contemporary life. He sees hauntology as a way to understand how modern culture is preoccupied with its own past. Fisher's concept of the 'spectral' is particularly prominent in his book *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2014), where he combines Derrida's notion of hauntology with cultural analysis to discuss how contemporary society is haunted by the past and the lost futures it once promised. Fisher provides a compelling framework for understanding how the past continues to shape and haunt the present, often in ways that limit our ability to envision and achieve new futures. His exploration of ghosts and the spectral through the lens of hauntology offers a profound critique of contemporary culture and politics.

Hauntology and self-promotion may intersect in different ways. Self-promotion frequently incorporates elements of nostalgia, which can be examined through a hauntological perspective. For example, poets may use past styles or cultural references to create a sense of familiarity and emotional resonance. This nostalgic approach can be viewed as a manifestation of hauntology, where echoes of the past influence contemporary promotional tactics. Moreover, in the era of social media, an individual's digital footprint often serves as a 'ghost' of their previous selves. Earlier posts, images, and interactions continue to shape and impact current self-promotion efforts. This lingering digital presence can affect how one is perceived and can be strategically utilised or managed in promotional activities. Individuals often draw on historical or cultural references in their self-promotion to establish a sense of continuity with the past. This approach aligns with hauntology, as it involves engaging with spectral cultural elements from earlier times to forge connections with contemporary audiences.

This philosophical framework thus provides a rich lens through which to consider the complexities and ethical dimensions of presenting oneself in various public and personal arenas. Robinson's is a case in point in this context. Applying Derrida's and Fisher's ideas to self-promotion in contemporary contexts such as social media, professional networking, or personal branding involves embracing ambiguity – acknowledging the inherent incompleteness of any self-representation and the fact that self-promotion messages are always ambiguous and open to different interpretations – as well as recognising the need for continuous reinterpretation, understanding that self-promotion is an ongoing process where one's image is constantly reshaped by various interactions and contexts. Typical examples of Robinson's approach to self-promotion include his social media advertisement for "20 Ways to Be a Better Poet", an online, streamable video poetry workshop accompanied by a *Nature Poetry Workshop* booklet and his e-books *On Poetry* and *On Creativity*. This bundle offers all the processes, tips, and prompts necessary for intermediate poets. As Robinson aims to make poetry education accessible to all, the bundle is sold through a Pay What You Can

option. Moreover, the widespread availability of videos showing him delivering his poems, whether intentionally produced or captured at poetry festivals, is also having a tangible impact. These strategies help enhance and reshape the connection between Robinson as both a person and a poet and his audience.

4. 'Exits' and 'Entrances'

The metaphor of the world as a stage serves therefore to question the authenticity of personal and artistic performances. Jaques's speech in *As You Like It* describes life as a series of performances, with people making their 'exits' and their 'entrances' on the world's stage. Applying this concept to the role of contemporary poets suggests exploring how they navigate their private selves and public façades, much like actors on a stage, particularly in the age of social media.

The concepts of entrances and exits in the everyday performances of contemporary poets can be considered in several meaningful ways. With respect to digital presence, entrances occur when poets share new work, participate in online events, or engage with their audience on social media. These moments provide opportunities to connect with their readership and make a lasting impression. Conversely, exits occur when poets take breaks from social media. These rare and temporary departures can leave the audience wanting more or provide essential space for reflection and creativity.

In public appearances, entrances involve participation in public readings, book launches, and literary festivals. These events are key moments for building reputation, sharing work, and engaging directly with the audience. Exits happen when poets step away from the public eye. These exits can be as significant as the entrances, signaling the end of a creative period, or simply a need for personal time. In the creative process, entrances occur when starting a new project, publishing a new book, or entering a new phase of creative research. Exits, on the other hand, happen when completing a project, finishing a poem, or deciding to leave certain themes behind. These exits allow the poet to move on to new creative endeavours.

In interpersonal interactions, entrances involve engaging in collaborations, forming new professional relationships, and connecting with fans and other writers. These are entrances into new social and professional spaces. Conversely, exits happen when ending collaborations or choosing to move away from certain communities. These exits shape the poet's professional and personal landscape. Regarding emotional engagement, entrances occur when examining different emotive and intellectual ideas, and opening up about personal experiences. These entrances can deeply affect the poet's work and audience. Exits happen when moving past certain emotional states, or deciding to keep certain experiences private. These exits can lead to growth and change in the poet's work.

This complex scenario highlights the nuances of the everyday activities of contemporary poets like Robinson. Exits and entrances for contemporary poets are multifaceted moments of transition, crucial in shaping their careers, artistic evolution, and relationships with their audience. While poets often experience both entrances and exits in public appearances, creative processes, interpersonal interactions, and emotional engagements, entering the digital realm represents a virtually irreversible shift. It is very unlikely that one can fully exit from it.

We have thus considered the multifaceted nature of Robinson's work and the methods

he uses to promote and perform it, reflecting on the role of the contemporary poet today. When asked about the significance of receiving the *Ondaatje Prize*, Robinson replied that it allowed him to gain more influence within the literary industry, which for him meant engaging in more socially conscious work⁴. In this respect, performance and self-promotion, both personal and artistic, play a role of utmost importance. As we have seen, Robinson embodies a version of the contemporary poet that transcends mere verse composition to fully embrace the concept of performance. This perspective evokes the Shakespearean motto that '[a]ll the world's a stage', where exits and entrances, both personal and artistic, are crucial in shaping discourses in a Foucauldian sense.

It is fascinating to consider how poets like Sylvia Plath or T. S. Eliot would approach self-promotion and social media if they were alive today. Most likely, they might have resisted using social media, which could potentially limit their visibility. Conversely, it is a rather surreal thought, but perhaps, like Robinson and many contemporary poets, they might have embraced performative elements through live readings and an online presence. It remains to be seen if future poets and artists can gain recognition and respect without adopting performative strategies and online self-promotion, or if, regardless of their merit, such strategies have become indispensable in the digital age.

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⁴ See Sethi (2020). Robinson was involved in the writers' collective *Malika Poetry Kitchen* (along with Malika Booker) and provided a platform for multicultural writers with the foundation of *Spoke Lab*.

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