



William Rowe Interview

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Source: English Studies in Latin America, No. 28 (January 2025)

ISSN 0719-9139

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WILLIAM ROWE INTERVIEW

STEPHEN MOONEY¹ AND WILLIAM ROWE²

¹ Stephen Mooney is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing and Poetry Coordinator at the University of Surrey. Amongst other things he co-runs the small poetry press, Veer Books. He is Deputy Associate Head, Education for the School of Arts, Humanities and Creative Industries at Surrey. His research interests include contemporary poetry and poetics, avant-garde & experimental film, temporality, performance, experimental & avant-garde music, gaming and poetics. His poetic practice varies across modes but is often connected to gaming methodologies and mechanics as these collide with language and poetry, from visual to lexical to performative to sculptural to sound.

² Rowe has played a leading role in the establishment of Latin American Cultural Studies in the UK. He was a founding editor of the Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies. At Birkbeck College he created the Contemporary Poetics Research Centre and ran a poetry workshop. He has published poetry, translations and books and articles on Latin American literature/culture and on British poetry. He is a co-founder of Veer Books, a small press which continues to publish radical British poetry. Helen Dimos and Rowe were awarded the Valle Inclán prize for their translation with glosses of César Vallejo's *Trilce*. Rowe is a Fellow of the British Academy.

Stephen Mooney: Let's start with how you would define or describe your poetics currently and how these have changed since you started writing poetry.

William Rowe: I think I'm now in a state of transition, so that the stance that stands out, I think, from earlier work is the stance in *Incisions* where there was an emptying out of any kind of I, as an identity and the speaking I was crisscrossed by winds coming from outside and meanings that it didn't feel belong to it, but it couldn't, on the other hand, let's say dissolve them. So, it was an I that was really porous to the nonsensical environment and, at the same time, an I that could register something of what's going on in the way people are speaking to each other.

I think that was valid, but I think I'm asking myself why is it no longer valid, and I think it's because the difficulty I find now, and I think that resonates very much with, say, Sean [Bonney]'s work and other people's work, is where can a poem speak from that is not going to be, not just crisscrossed by the, let's say, dominant modes of speech, advertising, state control and neutralising of rebellion, but also that there isn't a place that one can say is not co-opted – there isn't a place that – that was the word you used in your piece about my writing – I'm not sure co-opted is the word I would use now – that there isn't a place – a lot of people say space – I'd rather say place – that's not totally run through by the kind of silencing that Sean's letters speak about; “a dense hideous silence” which we live inside “right now.”

So, I'm very concerned by the place, which is not a pre-given place, that a poem can speak from, can make meanings from. It's not a place in the tradition of English language poetry. It has to be a place that one can actually speak from in a meaningful way, one that's not already trashed, I think, or taken over or reprocessed by current media, including Internet, so the place would be one

which has a direct emotion, a direct feeling, which may or may not be defensible – it doesn't matter – it's not about, you know, having the right feeling, and at the same time would, yeah, it would have to consist of an attitude to language.

What attitude to language? I guess, obviously critical, but at the same time how it's possible to stop the train, to stop the temporality that rapidly swallows anything one says, and to ... be a spanner in the works, but I guess more than that. Obviously, one could talk about a scream that's heard or not heard, which is a motif from Artaud and also from Sean, yeah, but that seems to speak of a kind of automatic truth of what comes straight from the body and I'm not sure that's available to us anymore. That is, the body in some kind of pain. I'm not sure that's available to us either, so I have quite a bit of debate with myself lately around those issues.

SM: The availability of these places has certainly been a focus for your poetry in the recent books; complex place as complex thought – is that fair to say?

WR: I find that what I used to write, apart from *Incisions* and some of the stuff in *Nation* has a certain intellectual complexity that seemed necessary at the time. I think it was to combine because, you know, I think, I think you felt that in *Nation* there is some very ordinary speaking, some very ordinary language and some moments of kind of knotting and difficulty and words getting stuck in the throat and of speech which ... which is non grammatical but comes out. So, there was that. I find again that's not totally sufficient now and that I'm really looking for a kind of way of being completely porous to what's going on, I would say that; completely porous to the kind of sleepwalking – okay, that's an old metaphor – completely porous to the pacified environment that we live in; not defensive towards it in any way whatsoever, but not submissive either, so I find that

very, very much what I want to do, and difficult. For example, I mean, I find there are quite a few gestures of aggression in *Nation* that are mostly, yeah, they're collective even though they're said with the I pronoun. They don't seem to be sufficient in that they presume that there is an enemy one can direct them towards who will be recognised by the reader and that will be an impulse of energy, you know, of a kind of nervous force that will come about for a reader. Again, I found that doesn't quite work anymore. Yeah, putting it really simply, a gesture of aggression can be just bravado, you know, so it actually doesn't have the fullness of an I, of a self that has gone through being in the situation we live in and has gone through a complete struggle against it; you know, bravado as a short circuit - that's what I feel.

SM: How would that short circuiting work? What would that be like?

WR: One way to cut through all of that, I've always found, and I still find, is that anxiety is a very good guide to what I want to do. It's elusive in the sense that I can very quickly, kind of, find that I'm writing in a way that cancels anxiety. Bravado is an example. A kind of, certain kinds of despair, I think, are a short circuit in that they avoid anxiety in a curious way, I mean a lot of people talk about despair, or have been – not perhaps, not this year but, in the past couple of years, okay – but, you know, despair is made up of meanings, it's not made up of simply some kind of fluids in the body – and to fully enter despair is to struggle with meaning, it's not, it's not a case simply of screaming out.

So, all of that's there for me. But at the same time, I've been wanting to – I think that's implicit in what I've said already – be more simple, and not to resort to intellectual complexity, maybe, as a kind of avoidance of anxiety. That's a certain bit of self-criticism there; I don't think it

applies to everything I've written, you know, but some of it possibly, so it's kind of like I want to increase anxiety, but the difficulty is that too much increase currently makes it very hard to write. So, it's as if there's no safety net, no network of meanings, of words, of signification; it's just the – as soon as you say the word the “abyss,” the abyss of despair, the abyss of a society that has actually no major forms of counter narrative or of counterproposals or of rebellious political programs it's, you know, it's a kind of trap I think, but it's real that those things are not there.

So, yeah, I think that's kind of a rough sketch of where I am.

SM: Okay, so you mentioned place as a site of what we might previously have called contention; you mentioned emotion as a way of – emotion or attitude – as a way of in some way, making that place, so I'm wondering, is that a sort of poetic motif, is emotion a motif for you.

WR: I'm not sure it's a motif because obviously an emotion can take the form of a representation in some way or other; that it could be a part of a scenario or an expression of the interior of the self. I think of it more as something that's moving through one and doesn't originate in the self, let's say is completely individuating, so if an emotion is a movement that isn't completely ours and is very much entangled with the outside and with, I guess, social pain, social suffering, at the same time it is in a way individuating and I don't know what the way through that question is because I think the way we've been educated and the way the culture works is that it's good to be individuated in the sense that one is different and only beholden to oneself and kind of distinct. That's not the kind of intuition individuation that I mean, you know, it's like so I know that I've always been fascinated by the notion of pain as a collective, as a collective, okay, quote unquote substance which we all carry and which becomes particular forms of suffering so once you get into suffering you've got

language and forms of expression. When you have pain, you have something that, in some ways, is pre-language or non-language. I've always been fascinated by that so that's one way of thinking about it.

SM: Is pain still a focus for your poetic language?

WR: It's not so much with me now; I think it was in the period of the latter poems – obviously they're not in the order of the book, *Collected Poems*, they're the first ones – it was there, then; I'm not sure so much there now but I mean the problem that unless one speaks out of what ones feeling there's some way in which ones going to get caught up in conventional expression – okay, and yet the very particular of an emotion, which we call personal emotion or emotional pain, yeah, I guess, culturally speaking it's supposed to be what separates us or distinguishes us rather than what we share, you know, so okay that has a political aspect that as persons who, as a person who is from a middle class history and white, you know, so that that leads us into a whole area of your emotion as conditioned and cut off from a whole set of other social layers, living people. And I don't think that's the final truth of what we're talking about so if we were to say that the suffering inflicted by advanced capitalist countries' governments like ours since Thatcher, the inflection of social cruelty as a way of marking the bodies of everybody who's in the society, unless we very deliberately refuse that then that starts to be where the individual pain meets the collective.

SM: Is this the porousness that you talk about?

WR: Yeah, yeah - it is, yeah.

SM: Because I think that that idea of a porousness ... it raises some questions for me in terms of language, then – language and experience itself – so what does that do to your language as a poet trying to what? Incorporate the porousness or just represent it, or what?

WR: It's not, I think, in some way it's sort of not something to be represented but is inside any representation one tries to carry out if one is really porous so that is more like a tone or a feeling. I think in, again in *Incisions*, there was quite a lot of that; a certain tone of being completely run through, if you like, in the metaphorical and non-metaphorical sense by the social as it stands. Yeah, but I think that one can't simply be totally porous, open and vulnerable unless one has some countering passion for being together in a different way, even if that that can't be formulated as a utopia. I mean, there has been a lot of debate about utopias; I think we're beyond that; I think the feeling now is that it's necessary to somehow represent where we are. I think to be completely porous, yeah, I can think of people who were, but I'm not sure they were poets.

SM: Interesting - who would those be?

WR: Someone like the writer Simone Weil – I think she was. I think her religious thinking made it possible for her to be. So porous that in some way she kind of gave her life to the suffering of others, and I mean without being a nun some kind of position within Catholic belief, theology – no, not that, but so open to the suffering of others. I don't think that's what parents do. I don't, do you think so?

SM: No, I don't think so. No, I mean there's a language component that suggests that there is a reliance on certain types of filtration.

WR: Of what?

SM: Filtration or translation, which is often at the forefront of the sort of interesting poetic sense out there which, which doesn't seem to do quite the same thing. It allows a certain type of porousness is what I say, but prohibits – not 'prohibits' maybe – but it blocks or it modifies other types of porousness, I think – the sort of preciousness in language that we often ...

WR: Yes, obviously, yeah, there's a preciousness of suffering that's, you know, horribly common nowadays as a kind of claim – a claim on who for Christ's sake? – but maybe it is a claim of ultimately a theological type, but absolutely I agree with you. I think a poet is living and making a certain relation and practice of language and that, if you like, is what – I think that's what you're calling filtering in the end – it's not filtering as in I'm going to decide in advance what's relevant or what's not, I'm going to protect myself from total collapse; I don't think self-protection is a good thing nowadays at all, absolutely not, but if one's committed to a certain living of language, then – I'm not happy with the word filter but I know what you mean, I think anyway, yeah yeah – so in other words one's not, say, simply a passive, what do they call it in the church, a passive – I forget what, like a vehicle, instrument of God's will?

SM: Instrument is the one that rings a bell in Catholic terms, yeah.

WR: Yeah, you know what I mean.

SM: Okay, so it's being together in a different way, that's a really interesting way to put it. Because that ... I mean, is that a way of contesting? You mentioned that they our current kind of social and political spaces are uncontested or uncontestable in some ways, or if you like, the role of language is ... what? Insufficient to contesting the current saturation that's there? So, being together in a different way suggests that that we move language to a different space – or place – or that we think

about languages doing something different to the ... what's the word I'm looking for ... to the revolutionary in some way; that its placeless has been ... run through, as you described earlier?

WR: I resonate a lot with what you're saying at that point, but I would say “the longing” – I feel a longing for different way of being together, I think that comes before an actual, let's say, poetic practice of language and so it doesn't determine particular uses of language. Who knows where it's going to go; I think we're at a point where the poetic forms of expression – let's call it expression – that are available don't answer to longings of that kind.

SM: Yeah, when I was doing the Trump book, the *Ratzinger Solo*, my approach at that point to something like that issue was to move away from meaning and look at character rather than ... that's why it's a kind of parody of three fictional characters, so to speak, rather than some sort of attempt to change the political language, so to speak, because the language is so tied into it at that point that I was looking for a different way to do it – I wouldn't do it that way now, I think it's moved on – so absolutely resonating with what you're saying about the “not sure where we are and what we do with this now” scenario and I'm not sure who out there is doing it. Verity [Spott] to some degree, has been experimenting with sort of lyrical language in ways that are quite interesting, I think. Whether that is unmaning that language in some way I don't know, but it certainly attempts to do something of that.

WR: I think it risks, what Verity writes from time to time, an extreme rawness where the placings that, you know, our vocabulary, our usual vocabulary, offers are just not available, and so it's in some way quite frightening. Where it goes, I'm not sure that her books necessarily know where

that is going to go to, but that will be part of a condition that we talked about earlier in this conversation, yeah.

SM: Okay, can we talk a little bit then about your earlier poetry, you mentioned it briefly. In the collected, it goes from the newest to the earliest poems, an interesting choice. I'm wondering why you decided to do that?

WR: I tend to ... how to say it, well ... I think the things I was wanting to work out in the earlier writing, wanting to express, let's say, were only kind of half worked out and so it's like I prefer for myself to read earlier stuff I've done through what I'm doing now, and I thought for readers that will make more sense. There're a lot of aspects. One aspect is I don't have a life of constant writing so I can't say, okay, in my early 20s that was that and then that and then that; there isn't that – there were periods of not writing poetry, and only translating. So, the one thing I've always done is translate, so there's a big gap really between the first work (the last section of the *Collected*), which is *Working the Signs* to the first section, which is the latest one. There are a lot of gaps, so I thought it better to give a reader a ground from which they might relate to the earlier stuff. Okay ... it's not a kind of beginning of a pathway, it's a phase – I would prefer to think of it that way, it's a phase – which was affected by what was going on at the time in my life, but also with other people I knew. So yeah, I wrote work before the *Working the Signs* book but that's the first, let's say, book, small book as such that that I published with Allan Fisher, and that came out of, on the one hand, quite a bit of involvement in anthropology and, on the other, a working out of how I wanted to write as somebody who appreciated William Carlos Williams, Lee Harwood, and so on; very much how I could bring my experience into those kinds of forms and it turned out that I did it in a way that ... I

certainly wouldn't do it now. But, no, the point I'm trying to get to, is that I did it in a way that was possible for me at that point, which was quite based on narrative exposition, quite based on description and turning certain scenes or sensual experiences into somewhat symbolic things, you know, so they would have a symbolic resonance. I think that was the way I was doing it. Yeah, I think really where the later work starts is the poetry workshop that you and Aiden and I were involved in with, first of all, with Ken Edwards and then with Ulli Freer, so that was an opening up into other ways.

SM: Yeah, I was going to ask you about that because I seem to remember at the time we had a bit of a job convincing you to publish this material and I'm very glad, given how wonderful *The Earth Has Been Destroyed* as a book is, and the poems in that, I'm very glad we pestered you enough that that you agreed to do that because I think that there is definitely a shift in the work and that book, particularly some of the smaller, more object like poems are wonderfully kind of situated in how you were thinking about poetry at the time. I mean, what would you say about *The Earth Has Been Destroyed* as a book?

WR: Yeah, it has fairly different sections in it; I would say that, perhaps ... I think it was the last section – it's pieces in prose where the speaking is from really a strange place of being almost possessed and of non-cohering experience. I think in those was probably where I most found I could let go of the need to get into some kind of exposition, if that makes sense, an exposition that, well, didn't have to be a narrative one, but at least had some kind of sequential logic where you move from one set of resonances to another. I think those are forerunners to *Incisions*, those prose pieces.

I think you were referring to the set called 'Lyric Series' which has some very short, kind of very knotty, yeah and it's great that you like them. I still like them, they're very knotty, knotty pieces, yeah. It's quite varied, I think – I was trying out different ways of writing in that book, and I was very glad when Carol Watts said to me, yeah, it actually works as a book, the different parts, as I guess I wasn't sure about.

SM: I think after that came *Incisions*. Though in the *Collected*, *Death Purge* physically starts the book.

WR: That's where it starts, yeah, that that was kind of the most recent stuff.

So I think between *The Earth Has Been Destroyed* and *Nation* what came was ... you mentioned earlier organizing, there were two ... well, it came around the time of the Poetry and Revolution conference that I organised with a committee which Sean [Bonney], Harry [Gilonis], a number of others, I think yourself were involved in, so we had a committee to do it, but working towards Poetry and Revolution coincided with quite a bit of *Nation*, and there I think the sense, the way what we were living through, which obviously had begun particularly with the student movement protests in 2010-11 and then had led to a lot of extreme repression from the law and the police, which was carried out in a very British way, as if it were kind of like yeah it's business as usual, but it was extreme, it was a really extreme – so all of that got into *Nation*. I think I had to change the mode of writing and be more direct. At the same time find a ... I think, yeah, I was speaking from a somewhat ... not desperate, but highly tensed "I" position. Yeah, I think as if some revolutionary gestures were available to us during those years, which I think they were, I think that's a fact, you know, and then things changed. I think there was that; I mean it was the

occupations movement, student protests and so on, yeah; it changed things that made people write differently, including me.

SM: Yeah, I really got that sense in that book that it is a ... it's about engaging with a space that has changed. One of the things I say in the article about the book is that – and I still stand by that – I think it is a book that changes its approach depending on when you read it. So, I started writing that article back around the time of *Poetry and Revolution*, actually, in relation some of those poems and then coming back to it a couple of years later, and then a few years later again; I was seeing how this book worked in slightly different ways because the context had changed. It still provided, for me anyway, a sense in which there is an attempt to, maybe, contest ... maybe that's not the right word now but, at the time, it certainly seemed to give the reader different ways in which the stuff in the air is managed or invoked or evoked by the poems themselves and that's a kind of temporal aspect to that book which I've always found really fascinating.

WR: Yeah, I mean certainly one of the first protests there was a whole group of us, some of them poets, shouting slogans like “we will wake the dead.” I was shouting something that [laughs] completely unresonant, but I was saying ‘constitutional assembly, now’ ... you know, okay, but people weren't laughing and then Justin Katko and, I think, in the second or the third of those protests when we were walking through the West End, he suddenly said I'm going to sound poem and he did a sound poem, you know, just right in the middle, the tall buildings on either side echoing and I thought we're going to really piss people off, but no, they were into it, you know, so there's a way in which the most ... how to say it ... the most magical layer, the most magical level of language or the most non-signifying, non-meaningful level of language, and the same time the

political slogan which was a revolutionary gesture, they were coming together. That happened and then it got shut down, okay, you know, it's not a question of being nostalgic, instead as you say, of registering and then registering how one finds the work now when one goes back to it.

SM: So, I suppose, in terms of what comes after *Nation*, then, there's a pair of shorter works, "The Spectre" and "Law," both from 2013, that stand between *Incisions* in 2014 and *Nation* as a text in its first incarnation in 2012, so can you talk a little bit about those two texts?

WR: Well, there's ... you mean between *Incisions* and *Nation*?

SM: Yes, because I think something different happened after *Nation*.

WR: Yeah, I'm not so capable of saying what it was partly because I feel some of it was an attempt to continue the mode of *Nation*. That was not working so well – some of it was kind of reaching out in the dark and not necessarily finding what was necessary. I think the mode, the emotional mode, is more negative. So there's a couple of Canary Wharf poems, there's one called "Helpful Banking" which ends with the line "help me to die," and, obviously, I guess in some way there was a bottom line in that writing, which is that the program ... that sounds too measurable, that sounds too graspable if I call it a program ... let's say that what the rulers wanted at that point was in some way to administer our death to us – I know the phrase "our death" echoes Sean [Bonney], so maybe that has some valid resonance as well – to administer death not only in the sense of shutting down our contrary energies but, but also in some way ... I mean, there is a poem that addresses the government's underfunding of the NHS in some way shortening lives, you know. I think there is a question about the kind of we, the us, the collective in that set. I think in *Nation* there's the feeling

that the I and the us are very much crisscrossing into each other. I think in the set that followed it there is maybe a certain isolation going on, in the tone.

SM: Yeah, I got the sense with both of those collections, “Law” and “The Spectre” that there is a sense in which the ground is shifting again, and the poems are struggling to find a way to ... identify themselves, maybe that's the way to put it.

WR: Yeah.

SM: It's interesting that you say that something is ... not *incomplete*, that's the wrong word, maybe ... but they seem to be grasping or reaching at something and not necessarily getting there, which is curiously sort of where we are again, in a way, with the placeness that we find ourselves in, in terms of poetry and its language. So, with the “Law” poems then ...

WR: Yeah, I was going to say, I mean, I think those two sets, two sections of the *Collected*, do, on the whole, seek to centre themselves upon an idea and I think that is where they limit their scope. I would say that. Most of them are in some way or other based on an idea, most of them. I think when they're not, they're better [laughs].

I have to say that Danny Hayward's recent book has kind of crystallised that thinking for me, his book called *Wound Building*, which is just out. It has crystallised that sense that one can be using an idea in such a way that there's a limit on really entering feeling and going wherever that needs to go even if it's to extremely awkward or even stupid places. I'm kind of paraphrasing his book – I think it's really very good. So, I would say, yeah, it's like these are post-student protest, student movement poems and they perhaps respond to a degree of isolation that's starting to happen. But,

as you say, I think it's important that one can think of them as not knowing how to place themselves. Yeah, I think so.

SM: Can you talk a little bit about the interface of theory and/or philosophy with your poetry?

WR: Yeah, I think the kind of caveat would be, well, poems are not, if they're real poems, beholden to any theory – they're not limited by theoretical thinking. I think some of the poems I've written have a certain kind of fidelity to a theory or a piece of thinking – I've kind of said that already, okay! I think, going right from the beginning, it's always been of great interest to me how there's a working out of thinking in poetry that, like William Carlos Williams, the poet thinks with the poem, and in the end that's always been thinking that interest me, but I have had a lot of commitment, a lot of involvement in reading philosophers. So, to mention one: Adorno and the way that conceptual thought is always exceeded by intuition, by what's happening in the now. And that one way of getting into that is that the inside any concept time is occurring so (obviously that's the case in your own poems from early on). There's actually a temporal aspect whereby no concept holds its ground. There could be granular time, it could be time in the most micro-time sense, in the sense of time as almost like seething particles, so I still hold to that. I am extremely interested in conceptual thought, and yet there is that way in which being in the world with all its senses exceeds it, precedes it, does have this temporal aspect. That's the part I've always been very interested in. So, time is happening in the poem. I think Aodán [McCardle]'s work is his thesis on time and poetry is extremely good on that aspect.

SM: Yes, I agree, yeah. His 'temporal now' is sharply embedded in the senses.

WR: There's been another set of theoretical orientations that came from Alain Badiou

and some of those are already in *Nation* to do with the idea of the subject not exactly as the empirical self, but as the power of breaking with reality that subjectivity can have – in no ways necessarily have at all, but can have – subjective force, particularly in moments of revolution, of epochal change. That that can be the case; I think *Nation* is quite concerned with that. The thing in Badiou about the event is somehow what one can be faithful to rather than any kind of theory, so something actually happened and that, whatever the political counterforces, the political economy does to suppress all memory of it, it happened – it's there, and one can be faithful to it. That affected me quite a bit.

Another thing that has always been there is Mallarmé and the feeling that what a poem can do is make an absence, can clear away the reality that presses upon us and make another sense in which what's there can surge upwards, but very often a very negative sense in Mallarmé, a lot of negation going on, a lot of nothing. So, there's some of that in *Nation*.

I think, it's related to the idea that, if you if you can make a clearing then something else can arise, but, you know, you have to make a clearing. I'm not really convinced of that now – I was, I think it's valid, but not what I think now.

The power of negation I would say is still with me and that's there in Marx and Hegel – change is to do with negation and the powers that hold their rule over us are actually themselves not going to be able to hold on to it for good. That's a bit a bit vague, but I would say an interest in the power of the negative, the power of the abolition that has occurred and still can do so.

Also, the element of chance, of pure contingency that escapes all the net that language can throw over reality, the power of the contingent can make holes in the net; that's an area of

fascination for me; I think it's there in some painters, obviously ... that one could as a poet provoke chance – I'm not saying I ever feel I'm that able to do it, but that seems to be a place one needs to get to and in writing, to provoke chance, rather than throwing the net of language over the world.

SM: So, going back to what you said at the beginning about trying to simplify your language, would you say that thinking (as a better word, actually, than philosophy or theory) is just as prevalent in your poetry, it's just the way that you're bringing that into the poems is different?

WR: I would say so, so that instead of the bridges between phrases or lines or stanzas being built of ideas or theories, I find I'm more and more interested in where the movement through space time, if you like, is not supported by theory or an idea, by a gathering of representations, but is actually happening in some kind of void which is also a porousness, like I said at the beginning, a vulnerability, an anxiety – exactly that, yeah.

SM: That's a really nice way to keep that there, so to speak, in a way that is responding to where you are, where we all are.

Well, let's talk about translation. Specifically, we'll get to the [César] Vallejo book, but you mentioned that translation is something you've always been doing ...

WR: Yeah, that's so. At college, I was writing some poetry, and then I went to Peru and I came into contact – that is, friendships – with poets who were writing what some people called social poetry. I think we'd call it political poetry. It was a revelation to me.

They were taking on the need to displace the lyrical tradition of what used to be called pure poetry, poetry that locates itself in a kind of outside of the social and they were using reference to historical, social events, realities – they were also using language that was part of, let's say, political

slogans, although they weren't using slogans, as such, but the need to formulate what we desire in the political – were using that kind of language and it completely changed my attitude to poetry; you know I'd been reading Movement poets, Eliot, Pound's earlier work and that kind of thing and it completely just took that ground away, and so actually I got together an anthology of Peruvian social poetry which I never published. So that's where the translation began, and then it went through various phases, one was realizing that that the social poets limited the things that a poem could do, in terms of frame of reference that they were setting up, let's say their routines, no, their programs, their uses of reference, their representations of known political and historical events, were limiting the capacity of art to actually shift the ground or even to erase the ground, by which I don't mean that I started to get interested in religious or metaphysical poetry, no! Rather, the capacity of a poem to shake the ground. So, I got interested in other Latin American poets and I started translating them. That went on for quite a while, yeah. Some of that came out in the Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry in Translation, some of it came out in particular books of individual poets' work in English. It's always been ongoing. It's being a way of extending exchange with the poets I've translated, but also, let's say a couple of the Peruvian poets I've translated were writing in ways that were deeply foreign or different, if you like, to what seemed possible in an English poetry; to have more resonance perhaps with French stuff like possibly Mallarmé, Saint-John Perse, people like that, or possibly with Renaissance British poetry, but was so outside the kind of empiricist mindset of English poetry.

So I felt the social poetry has a certain kind of empiricist mindset, in that there are certain things that you can touch and feel and they're there, which is inadequate to the thinking of, and

writing of, poetry that we need—obviously the ‘we’ implies resistance to official poetry. So, I started translating stuff that seems really foreign to what was around in English poetry and publishing it here and there. And then, finally, I found I was translating César Vallejo because right from the first few months in Peru I found that he attracted me very strongly. But I didn't get to publishing any of that work until Frances [Kruk] and Sean [Bonney] in yt Publications published a small book called *César Vallejo Poemas*, which I think no one has ...

SM: I don't!

WR: ... which Frances did the cover to. It was a short book of Vallejo translations, and I thought, yeah, I have to do more of them. The *Trilce* was different. I think a lot of people felt that that, to say it in shorthand, the renaissance sonnet in the English language is a major place of poetic thought, formal thought, form as thought, thought as form. *Trilce* does all of that, but in a 20th century context, so it's placing itself inside the time and place of the 1920s in Peru, but also within the world system of capitalism. It's an incredibly complex book, the most complex one I've ever read, of poetry, so I felt, yeah, I really want to get into it and I started translating it and then there was some ideas that I felt I needed to work out, so I was taking notes and then writing bits of prose. These were ideas I felt that the existing translations didn't take on: these were resonating with an expressionist Vallejo; there was, it's true, an extremely rich poetic I, but there were ideas from Hegel, there were ideas from Darwin, there were ideas about time that resonated with Aristotle, whatever, but not just resonated with; there were workings out. So, it wasn't like some poetry of ideas that you get in English poetry, where ideas are referenced and you're supposed to appreciate them, travel with them for a bit. No, Vallejo actually gets right to the heart, the subsoil of certain

ideas and very often rejects them, but not from an opinion point of view, but from the point of view of poetic thought. I found that incredible.

SM: Before, before we come to the *Trilce* poems themselves, I wanted to make a point about the William Roweness [sic] of your translations. I think I'd said this at the time that *INRI* [by Raul Zurita] was published, I read it and I said: these are William Rowe poems. They feel like William Rowe poems, to me, having read *The Earth Has Been Destroyed* and other material that you were doing around that time and it's an approach to translation which I think could do with some talking about because you're not a literal translator. So, can you talk a little bit about that, first, before we talk about the three different components, so to speak, of the *Trilce* poems that you're publishing.

WR: The *INRI* translations, I felt the motion of the words as quite incredible when I first read it. Something I knew had some existence, a partial correlate existed somewhere in the English language, but not in exactly the present way it's used by poets, and then I felt it was also you could say a violation – I don't think it's that confrontational but there is a ... okay, it has various dimensions; there is the use of a kind of vulgar language in *INRI*, an energy that is not trying to be lucid sometimes, that is simply expressing itself, and I think there's some of that in *Nation* and *The Earth Has Been Destroyed*, which is – I don't think people have commented on but which is a lot of small slippages out of correct grammar, and correct usage and normal syntax – they're not as in neo-Dadaism or neo-Avant-Gardism, and they don't try to call attention for themselves – they're trying to slip out of the noose of grammatical regularity and all that that means socially.

So, that was my attitude from *The Earth Has Been Destroyed* onwards, that there are ways I don't want to be inside regularity, but I don't want to be an avant-gardist either doing spectacular

things. So, I found *INRI* was right there for me. Also, I found I could ... I would almost say reproduce ... I could actually kind of live inside the syntax and it would gradually become an English syntax, by drawing on, to some extent, pre 20th century English poetry, maybe, 17th century, especially. I found the syntax – it just came to me out of ... whatever, everything one's read. But it's not so far from my own writing, yeah, as you say, it's not. It was a good discovery, yeah.

SM: I think Raul Zurita's work does resonate with you, doesn't it, in terms of his poetics and his language? You published another text of his, *LVB*, Ludwig van Beethoven, with Veer. What would you say about that – is that different from your translation of *INRI*?

WR: No, it's not different because though *LVB* is from later work of his, the landscape is still the ground of emotion. So, instead of having an empirical landscape that you have emotion about or, let's say, a fantasy or metaphysical landscape, which is a basis of something perhaps allegorical, it's neither. None of those is actually a direct relation between emotion and landscape, which is very rare. He just does it, and so I think *LVB* is like that; it does seem to be kind of surreal landscape. I don't think, in the end, it has much to do with surrealism, it totally busts, breaks empirical experience of landscape and critical thinking about landscape, it just breaks them completely, but it's there – that's the amazing thing, it's there and yet it's not supposed to be there! It's completely there – where do you place it? I mean, we could place it in terms of visionary poetry, visionary poetics but I don't think so in the end, it's something else.

SM: Okay, so with the *Trilce* poems, then, there are three components, if you like, to these translations: the poem in Spanish, your English versioning of that poem and then the third component that responds to the poem in different ways. So, the three together are the translation is

my sense of this; that the Spanish itself is part of the translation, the original Spanish. So, how would you talk about the process that got you to that because it strikes me as a really unusual, innovative, striking way to imagine a translation - how did you get to that initially?

WR: It started when I was beginning to sketch out the ... I wanted to work out the ideas that were being traversed in the poems and I started writing bits of prose and then they became something like glosses. And I thought, yeah, okay, this is actually going to be a book with Spanish, translation and then gloss; I was thinking of it as a double translation of that point. That was the first phase. And, as I said before, the ideas that are in play are mostly not properly acknowledged, reflected in existing translations, maybe because it's impossible both to translate the emotional movement in the poems and the same time the thinking. The Spanish is a very complex weave of those components, so I think I must have written a gloss to every poem. Then, a year later or so, I came back to it, and thought ...mmm [laughs], yeah, yeah this has too much focus on the ideas, what about the emotions?

So, then, I rewrote them, aiming to get the interrelation between thought feeling. Having done all of that, I started doing a few rewrites of them with Helen [Dimos] because she'd read the glosses and she thought it's a really good idea, but I disagree with some of what it's doing. And I think we started to talk about them, and I realised that the second phase was too much in the mode of paraphrase and interpretation – obviously, those two overlap.

The point wasn't to paraphrase the poem – that diminishes the poem if you paraphrase it – so then Helen I started – obviously, I don't want to diminish what I did - it is hellish hard, to do a

paraphrase of a *Trilce* poem – it wasn't facile stuff that, you know, you can find in guides to passing A-Level English and so on. So, Helen and I kind of got into rewriting some of them together.

The current phase is that we've rewritten all of them together and she could probably speak to that better than me, what's particular about that, but I think what we've managed to do is to speak to, or at least what we hope we've done is speak to, the poems as actions, as complex actions; complex in the sense that they move and they radiate in a number of directions at the same time, in an immensely condensed way. Yeah, this is pretty singular, and it can actually be something that moves one to want to develop in oneself a similar kind of muscle, intellectual and emotional muscle, say. I would say it's not intellectual 'and' – it's like both together – that book is very singular in that way.

SM: They strike me those ... you're calling them glosses ... as far more than glosses, I would say, or maybe you're just expanded the word gloss to mean something which in itself is highly poetic and uses the sort of elasticity, and again, the porousness of poetic language to give us something which is not just, as you say, a paraphrase or notes to, or thinking about, the translation itself, but they are poetic objects all in themselves and to me now I can't imagine how you would write a translation without these anymore.

And so, it strikes me as that important a component to this sort of, let's call it experimental translation or innovative translation, that this is the new thing now, this is what we could all be doing, in a way. Not that we necessarily have the ability to do so, but I think it's an astounding idea but also then to include it as part of the poems ... for me, as well – maybe you don't see it this way – but, for me, the Spanish is also part of the translation.

WR: I think it is; Richard [Parker] has proposed that we do it as a landscape shaped book, so, we have the three columns side by side in some way we haven't totally worked out. So, actually you know you're starting to read the translation, but you have the Spanish very close by and certain phrases, words that you've already got pulled into, you read the translation and you've traversed something but you're not entirely sure what because Helen and I have tried not to simplify, but always to communicate. You've got some very gritty stuff that you've started to feel inside you, and then you read the, for lack of a better word, the gloss and then hopefully it is ... I mean, I'm reluctant to say it, but yeah, I think it is a poetic object.

SM: I'm putting my neck out there and saying this is definitely that.

WR: And I think you're right. There is a really nice comment on that work by Joan Retallack where she says – I'm quoting – it literally makes the work of translation an essaying. She also says there's a generic expansiveness to this way of working. So, I think that's pretty well said; in other words, the combination of poetic translation and prose; generic expansiveness I think, yeah, I like that description, but, yeah, I think they're poetic objects – I like the way you've said that.

SM: Another way that you could describe this is a new form of triptych, no? Or a new form of poetic or experimental ... no, it's not the right word, of innovative ... whatever word we want to use ... triptych and you're using that sort of visual idea of translating it into a lexical form, into a new way of doing that.

WR: Yeah, I mean I don't know how far that's extensible to other kinds of translation, because, you know, doing it that way was inspired partly by Bill Griffith's work where he would have, let's say, Icelandic saga on the left; in the middle, he would have a literal grammatical translation, maybe you

could call it homeo-syntactic; and then on the right a poetic translation, I'd say. So, the middle one, some people would call it literal – I think it's more like homeo-syntactic; it's like getting into the strange knots and turnings of Icelandic language. So, you have the three.

There are several books by Bill in collaboration with John Porter, a colleague at King's College, that I don't think are available now, that helped inspire it. The other thing I will say, though, is there's something about a thing you want to translate where there's a demand; that the what we call the original demands that you do something with it, and that's to do with a collective sense of other people – you want to make it available, but you also want to do that through making it a piece of work that is yours, but not in an individualistic sense.

Then I think of *Romeo and Juliet*, which I read recently, and actually how Shakespeare does a kind of strange translation of Petrarchan sonnets, Petrarchan being the kind of classic Renaissance sonnet, and *Romeo and Juliet* for a page or so they speak in sonnets, but the whole play is actually pulling that mode apart into its various rhetorical, power-seeking, if you like, components and so you actually get a critique as well as a translation. I found the whole thing of translation where it's actually about bringing into the now, really, really interesting, so I think Shakespeare is bringing Petrarch into the now of his own work, but also Elizabethan politics, you know. Pretty amazing – he makes Petrarch seem kind of like ... what would you say ... a library dork or something!

SM: That's definitely going in!

WR: Yeah, I should have said “nerd,” probably.

SM: Okay, great and in terms of that book coming out what's the projection for that?

WR: Well, the type setting is going to be really tricky, and so Richard and I will work on that with some help from maybe others, with Helen right there in the work.

We hope to get it out in time for autumn this year, 2022 – it's the anniversary of *Trilce*, 1922, so it's 100 years. There's a Vallejo conference that we aim to present it at. There's going to be a session in London, where it's going to be presented and some reading. So, you and other friends will hopefully come along.

SM: Great. Okay, so we said we come back to the other poet poetry/poetic things that you do and have done. As one of the most important figures on the poetry scene, I would say, in the last 30-40 years in terms of that side of things as well, how would you describe the other poetic things that you have done and the things that you have facilitated?

WR: I spent most of my work life working in King's College and I was always trying to get crossovers between, say, English and Spanish literatures and then I did organize at Subvoicive—run at that time by Gilbert Adair [1980s and 1990s]—some sessions of Latin American poetry and translation, but also in Spanish.

I did a journal that only ran to, I think, three or four numbers called *Ecuatorial*, a bilingual journal in Spanish and English, so there was that. There were some gatherings at King's where we presented Latin American poetry. Then, there was a translation group – we called ourselves a translation collective, but also around the time I was working in King's, so we were translating from Spanish but also from other languages, and that went on for a while – a lot of that got published in different places. It was myself and a couple of friends who were particularly involved in that, Jason Wilson and Juan Antonio Masoliver, there were a number of people, yeah.

But when I got to Birkbeck, all the backlog of my involvement in British poetry suddenly became okay, we can do things. Because at King's I was in the Spanish department and in the English department there was Eric Mottram so he and I and John Porter did stuff together. Mottram was the main organizer of the series of readings at King's. We did that, but once I got to Birkbeck, okay, so I was able to choose what I wanted to do – that was part of the deal with the agreement, with the appointment, so I said yeah. I wanted a poetics centre, so started that up. Soon after that, the poetry workshop with Ulli Freer got going.

SM: Which was fantastic and introduced certainly Aodán McCardle, Piers Hugill and myself and various others to a whole new way of doing poetry and was absolutely pivotal. I would say, as an encounter for a lot of us, I think, where traditional poetry workshops are very different and very conventional whereas we needed something different. The Contemporary Poetics Research Centre (CPRC) itself was foundational, not just for us, but for a lot of people, I think, around that time.

WR: I think it was, yeah. I don't remember all the details, but we did do some readings that were very lively, mainly in Birkbeck, but also at other venues.

And then we started Veer books, which was Stephen Mooney, Piers Hugill, Aodán McCardle, Ulli Freer and myself. I had a lot of connections with people who seemed crucial, I think, to all of us, like Maggie O'Sullivan. I think Poetry and Revolution [Birkbeck College 2012] was a step into a wider sphere and making larger interventions or claims and it was big, you know, there were 100 people there or more and it was a two-day thing. The follow up was Militant Poetics [Birkbeck College 2012-3], which most people in the end just called Militant Poetry, which was

deliberately a limited number of people – we aimed to produce a text, but we ended up not producing a text and producing, let's say, an argument [laughs].

Meantime, Sean [Bonney] had started a group called Radical Poets, but that also flew apart as soon as the question of who has the right to represent it and to take that representation and just certain actions ... it just broke apart at precisely that point, which is interesting.

And then there was the London Poetry Festival, which I think was really, pretty much unique. It was incredibly lively, the first time I think Verity [Spott] read in London. Tom Raworth was also there. There were Kurt Folch and Martin Gubbins from Chile. It was a whole range of people, and I think the vibe, the energy was very special.

SM: Yeah, I think we had Iain Sinclair there, we had Brian Kim Stefans, we had various people from the US including Bruce Andrews over as well. It was quite a thing, and, actually, I think the ...

WR: ... I'm leaving out something– there was the E Poetry Festival.

SM: Absolutely, yeah.

SM: There was also the Research Grouping or the talks – I forget what they were called now, the talks that were done every week or every two weeks in the room that we're not allowed use anymore—the Council Room.

WR: Yeah, I mean, it was basically a group of students, some of them representing the Students Union and then some of the poets from the Poetry Centre, yeah, it was a sit-in and then it was privatised after that.

SM: So, those Talks, those discussions, were extraordinary as well, they were a real kind of coming together of everybody that was doing poetry at the time, from London and beyond – well, no not

everybody, but there certainly was a sort of coming together of people involved in the innovative poetry world to listen to talks, to discuss ... those went on for hours, sometimes, after in the pubs and so on. Again, really important, really crucial, I think, to the London poetry scene and people used to come from outside London.

WR: Right, yeah, and then there was the journal called *Readings*, which was a Web-based journal. *PORES* was another web-based journal, and that brought a lot of work together, radical thinking, yeah.

SM: You also organised ... I think you've got some funding for this, didn't you? ... the *Rock Drill* CD series with Optic Nerve.

WR: Yeah, with Colin Still of Optic Nerve. We got some funding for that and we launched that series at the end and that gathered together some very fine readings by Tom Raworth, Maggie O'Sullivan. I think particularly Raworth's was really singular. There's a Lee Harwood one; I remember going down to visit Lee Harwood with you and Aodán so it was also like, yeah, let's just see people, let's just sit and talk.

SM: Yeah, we did a lot of that – again, I thought was a really kind of foundational ideas that we learn about poetry by not necessarily by just doing it, but by meeting the people who do it.

So, then you upped and left London, you went off to ... well you technically retired, in the way that professors retire and then continue to work endlessly on critical and creative materials.

WR: Yeah, there were three years, I think, maybe five, I forget exactly how many, when I was working as, I think, it was a fractional contract post-retirement. But those were the days of Poetry and Revolution and the London Poetry Festival. Then, like you say, I upped and offed to Athens

where Helen and I've also done some different kinds of gatherings, one of which you've been to, in fact, two of which you've been to when we read the floor.

SM: Yes, that was fantastic, it was a great event.

WR: It was a Veer visit to Athens, where I think seven British poets came, including you.

SM: It's funny, my father, at some point, as I think I'd shown them part of the article that I had written about you, and he said: is this guy some kind of anarchist? [laughs] Probably, yes, so I thought in terms of how we might describe you as a poetry person, that's not a bad start point, I suppose.

WR: I'm all right with that, yeah. [laughs]

SM: So, what is your current work doing?

WR: I'm part of making a couple of films, socialist films, the first one was about the Paris Commune and the second one was a response to a Cop26 in Glasgow, the climate conference, and so I've been writing some material, mainly songs, for that. So, that's ongoing, so it's like bringing poetry and song into political film, that's an ongoing work.

SM: I didn't know about that – that's really interesting – how are you actually doing the filming?

What's the ...

WR: ... Well, the Paris Commune one was, let's say, partly stills or graphic material to do with the women's organization in the Paris Commune, partly to do with way they communicated to the outside world, so it was also footage shot now, of scenes that could carry the way that the Paris Commune is meaningful for us. So, we did a lot on zoom. There are two filmmakers in the group, who actually did the editing work, but there were others of us who did visual and text work. The

second one is the COP26, it was more ambitious, and I wrote three songs for it, which we collectively somewhat reworked, and they're part of the film.

SM: I'll look forward to seeing that – fascinating.

WR: We're called the rs21 Art Group– that stands for 'Revolutionary Socialism in the 21st Century' – the films are on their website (<https://www.rs21.org.uk>). Anyone who wants to have a look at those films will find the songs on the second one, which will be uploaded after some post-production work.³

³ <https://www.rs21.org.uk/2021/03/18/remembering-the-paris-commune/>