

An interview with Rogan Wolf

Who is Rogan Wolf?

I am in my late sixties. My unusual forename Rogan is Irish and some of me is Jewish – hence the surname. But English is how I've ended up and came to be born and I live in the UK. I have recently moved out of London.

I come from a family of four, two boys and two girls. One of my sisters had Down's Syndrome. She was called Kim and died in 2012 at the age of 57. She had a major part to play in my growing up. We were close and she taught me a great deal.

I am a widower. My marriage to Sophia, who died of cancer, produced three sons, all now grown up. Our marriage was problematic, though vivid. I now live happily with someone else. Her name is Nicola. Nicola has four grown-up children of her own.

I ride a push bike and jog and make bread for the household. I do not have a TV. My mobile is not smart and is kept on for emergencies only! But emailing is a pleasure and some sort of release and so is running my blog.

I hate and fear the frantic materialism and regressive chauvinism of our time and agonise over the future which we as a race seem to have made for ourselves. But, curiously, at the same time, I am often happy, much happier, in fact, than in my youth. In the present phase of my life, many of my days do seem to include moments of joy, even ecstasy, as if it has taken all these years to learn to appreciate what I was born to.

I have written poetry all my adult life. But I see it less as a vocation or end in itself than as a means to emotional honesty and redemptive understanding between people. It comes as second nature, if not first.

There are many joys in my life but one of the greatest is reciting my own and other people's poems, throwing potent words out into air I am sharing with my audience. But then afterwards, often, comes deflation. Did anything actually happen then? Did the words do anything?

You were a mental health social worker, what's the link between poetry and social work?

This is an intriguing question and I'm grateful for it. It has made me re-visit a theme which perhaps I have not thought about enough until now. I don't think there's a simple answer to the question, nor a particularly lucid one.

Social work is surely about making and keeping connection with what's difficult, and making whole, making good, what is damaged or fractured, as well as possible. Shaping, reconciling, finding, connecting. Being genuine, being open. And none of that is far away from the business of making poetry, language groping for connection between person and that person's surrounding reality, between I and Other.

And for me, social work was about making a living in a way I could respect, since I could not make a living as a poet and in a way did not want to. For many years I was not even confident enough to name myself publically as a poet. In that sense I used social work as a bit of a disguise, or a holding operation. But in the end I was proud of being able to call myself a social worker. It was an acceptable identity in its own right. It had integrity.

And I suppose I prefer emotionally labile, intense human contact, to being an academic or contemplative or literary specialist. I worked in mental health and some of the most wonderful encounters I have ever had took place with people whose mask or worldly carapace was in pieces and their being was all raw but also intensely real and intensely human and warm and urgent. There is quite a lot of me that's raw as well and I feel at home in those circumstances and in that company.

And perhaps, at least at the outset, social work gave me a way of being part of society, without really buying into it. Again, poets don't fit that snugly into society either, and nor should they. My social work role was to help people establish a place in the world who, like me, found it hard to do so, for all sorts of reasons. That of course is a paradox, but it helped me establish my own ambivalent and mediating position in-between. The people I worked with and for inspired me and taught me.

Social work is also hugely based and reliant upon the ability to use language that gets through to people. Language that is muscular and vibrant and acutely attentive and which reaches out. Nothing less will work. So my social work was a constant training ground for writing in a language that actually communicates.

Another and different point: Poetry is not just "heart". It is head as well. But I think people turn to poetry to recover, restore contact with, their emotional wholeness, their inner working, the refined and potent complexity of what happens in the feeling world of the individual. I think the social worker, or counsellor, is using, or needs to use, some of the same intuitive and empathic faculties and finesse from within his/her being as the artist and poet does and must do.

And so to Martin Buber and his wonderful book "I and Thou." Chancing upon it in my twenties helped me make a lot of sense of my social work persona, and how to do social work ; and it gave a vital image and justification and frame of reference for my poetry. The fragile hyphen between I and Thou opens a world where true meeting takes place, where I address Other with the skills of love; it is where good counselling takes place; and it is where poetry is well spoken and properly heard.

On the strength of those conclusions, some years ago I founded a small charity called "Hyphen-21". It has a website (www.hyphen-21.org - now badly out of date and needing a revamp) and the material on it seeks in various ways to exemplify what I-Thou connection means in practice, mostly as an indirect way of articulating and validating what social workers and similar practitioners do and the non-material skills and values they work by. A very wobbly and uncertain surf-board, the hyphen. But, in our blurred and furious and floundering world, perhaps the only solid ground that remains to us.

And of course these images of the hyphen have also led to poetry.

Here below is an excerpt from the introduction to a series of poems I wrote in the mid-nineties called "I hyphen Thou" :

"Buber's book contrasts two ways of relating, I-Thou and I-It. In the first way, I experience You directly and in full as having as vital and central a life as I do, though different. I place myself in our being connected, your matter being my matter also. In the second way, I hold myself back in rational detachment and/or evaluation and/or ego-centrality. I look out on You from my position of being separate and other.

The poems suggest that, in a rushing world, where shapes which once seemed firm and distinct are now blurred and insubstantial, where supports which once held steady and felt containing no longer even hold together, the only true ground that remains to us is the unsafe hyphen which connects Me

to Thee. We must learn to ride this hyphen. We must learn to fly it. We must learn to follow where connection leads us.”

What do you write about and which are the projects you are involved in?

I can, and do, and need to, write poetry in a reactive way. In other words, simply what happens to me does often then simply get transferred into a poem, onto the page. In order not to capsize, the man at the rudder of his sailing boat does need to keep re-adjusting his craft’s relationship with the weather, finding his answer to it.

But ideas get me going as well, not just events. An idea leads to a line or succession of related thoughts, or set of images, and then comes a set or succession of poems along that line, a bit like the “variations on a theme” which you often find in music or in painting.

“Variations on a theme” does seem an apt and perhaps the only form that now belongs. A large edifice, all one building, all one concept, with its regularity and pillars and grand overall statement, doesn’t seem to fit anymore. Your product might stand tall in the landscape for a little while, but is soon decrepit and overtaken by new times and, just by standing there, is merely inviting some desperate and hate-filled young person lost for meaning to come and blow it up. Better and more pertinent to advance very cautiously, in fits and starts, in zig-zags, from different angles, on tip-toe, wearing disguises.

So, that set of poems on the hyphen between I and Thou ; a set suggested by the Jungian concept of the Shadow, written at much the same time as the I-Thou poems and perhaps belonging with them; a series about “breaking”; a series of meditations on the image of “stone”; a long sequence suggested by the image of the last emperor of Constantinople, “[Travels of the Last Emperor](#)” – in history, he died on the walls when the Turks broke in at last, but in my sequence he just wanders off and becomes a refugee, a pilgrim, an outcast, a fox slinking between the suburban gardens. At some stage he might even become Gordon Brown, after the banking crisis, dishonestly blamed by the English for the faults of capitalism which they themselves revere. And in the seconds before the crowds dismember him, our protagonist notes that the emperor they were cheering was wearing no clothes, and says so ; so might this ragged emperor even be the poet and truth-teller pursued through the shadows, an Orpheus, a Dionysus...?

The emperor poem was written over a period of twenty years, following me through the decades. It may even not be finished yet, though I suspect it is.

I seem to like long poems, which is silly in an age in which people’s attention spans seem to be decreasing. In 2014 I translated a wonderful long Turkish poem called “Gazze Risalesi” into English. The poem is by Cahit Koytak and laments the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians in Gaza. I think it is a poem worthy of the Old Testament, sharing its images and references but also some of its authority. I have called the English version “[Despatches to my Gazan Son.](#)” It is soon to be published by the Turkish equivalent of the British Council.

Another recent long poem is a part-“translation” of a poem called “Speak, Parrot” written in the reign of England’s Henry VIII, father of Elizabeth the Great. Since I was a student, I have loved the poem for its wit and outrageousness and exuberance – all that anarchic energy fizzing in and between the stanzas as they progress in their stately fashion. And perhaps above all for its urgency and its courage. The poet John Skelton was risking his life in publishing it, attacking Cardinal Wolsey who he saw as an abuser of power and threat to the state. My partner Nicola suggested I do

something with the poem myself and to my astonishment I found that the formal verse-form in which it was written suited me very well and I finished my version with a succession of rhyme-royal stanzas of my own. And my version becomes a diatribe delivered against some of the serious ills and dishonesties of contemporary Britain. So the parrot peers out of his cage and condemns a nation and a government that have surrendered themselves to the worship of Self, of Money and the Lie. The poem also includes various references to Rupert Murdoch and some of the nastier activities of the UK press, much of which pretends to be “free” but is not, and instead is just a mouthpiece for the Lie.

I like the poem and its imagery. The parrot in his cage is the poet in his sanctuary, maybe even the soul itself, hiding in the rib-cage, but what will happen to the parrot if he really speaks out and says the truth? “I pray you, let Parrot have liberty to speak!”

Here is a link to it, which also gives a bit more background :

<http://www.roganwolf.com/publicsite/2015/04/12/the-parrots-liberty-to-speak/>

I will say that I think I am drawn, as I think others are drawn, towards vital areas of life which might lack words - “elephants in the room,” as the English say. And I am drawn because there seems to be, or is, an emanation of fear that spreads from that silence, that hesitation. This somehow acts as a kind of magnet, the awkward passage in the conversation. It is not bravery to want to explore that passage, that gap, but a kind of irritation, a sense that this is where the real energy is, everything else just a show, a pretence. There is some kind of feared monster lurking in that mist, in that cave, between those words. Due perhaps to our fear, it lacks a name and shape. Instinctively you want to go after it. To throw a net of words over it. To name it, so as not to be haunted by it, to touch it, so as to be healed of it, so make flesh of it, so as to be given access to it.

So perhaps the two strongest poems I have written, again both long, and perhaps each more of a set of individual poems than a unified whole, are “A Light Summer Dying” and “The Going.” The former follows the story of the last few months in life of a young woman who died of cancer ; the latter tells the story of my own mother’s last years as she was slowly overwhelmed by Alzheimer’s. I have read “A Light Summer Dying” to social work and nursing students, where it had a major impact(Here again we have the connection between my poetic concerns and social work ; but also my interest in taking poetry outside and beyond its literary comfort zone).

And I write quite a lot about social work and mental health on my blog www.roganwolf.com and want to write more ; and have written a whole set of “Fables and Reflections” which try to make sense of the world and of human behaviour from the perspective of the wobbly I-Thou position, the threatened right hand side of the brain. The Fables can be found on the blog as well.

I run a project called “[Poems for...](#)”. It supplies small poem-posters online, which can be downloaded free of charge. Many of the poems are bilingual (50 languages represented, including Italian). I began it in 1998.

The original vision behind the project was that the poems should be displayed in healthcare waiting rooms, bringing a human touch of empathy to these places, which can be so bleak and impersonal. But nowadays it is mostly school-teachers who download the poems, for use in class. The poems go all over the world.

More information about “Poems for...” can be found on its website. All the poems can be found there too, once you have registered, which is simple and also free. There are three main collections of poems, with contributions from a wide range of authors. The main collection is called “Poems for...One world” and contains most of the bilingual poems. These have recently been joined by two new collections under the “One World” heading, one on mental health and the other on learning disability.

The project has been extensively funded over the years, the funders including the UK Arts Council, the NHS, the Mayor of London, the John Lewis Partnership and the Foreign Office.

What is poetry to you?

I go to poetry to make sense of things and to be uplifted by the quality of the sense thus made. Good poetry somehow dignifies us, we who do so much to disgrace ourselves in other spheres.

The image of sailing keeps coming to mind. There is something exquisite about the way a sailing boat finds and fits itself to the line of the wind, so that the craft makes progress out of the natural force, charts a course in league with and perhaps in spite of the shapeless element, but also transcending it through finding its way through it, in this case through putting the right words to it. There is something transcendent about a good poem.

In finding the exact words for something difficult yet common or fundamental, you don't only cast light on it, you actually take a share in it as fellow-maker. No longer just shaped by experience, you shape something splendid in connection with it and in human answer to it. God has made the elements in which we swim. The poet finds some words for what God has delivered, thereby providing a kind of raft, even a yacht.

That being said, a lot of poetry leaves me feeling disappointed, a bit let down, as if the grand attempt has fallen short, or been betrayed by human failing. But the attempt itself is always to be respected, even honoured, however insufficient the end-result.

www.poemsfor.org

www.roganwolf.com

www.hyphen-21.org

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