



Hyphen-21 (supporting community)
Registered Company No. 2925831
Registered Charity 1040077

<https://hyphen-21.org>
<https://poemsforthewall.org>
<https://roganwolf.com>

Annual Report 2019

Introduction

I have been writing these reports for years now, each Christmas. For some of those years, it was a requirement for Companies House records – but now, in the case of this small charity, it only needs to go to the charity’s Trustees. They are there to support the charity’s work, but also to act as representatives of the community, and their scrutiny should include concern with probity and also common sense.

For Hyphen-21 is still operating as an accountable company and charity. And Companies House still has a deadline of December 31st for the previous year’s financial accounts to be delivered. In our case, these only need to be in summary, these days, something called “micro entity accounts,” and our latest summary shows that the charity didn’t receive any funding income last year (it hasn’t for several years, in fact) and there’s now just £1,821 left in the bank. But they also show that during the year, I spent £589, which means that a micro entity of activity is still in evidence around the name of Hyphen-21. I would like to describe that micro entity as part of this report.

In effect, and from my own observation, the “charitable” activities I shall describe are nowadays less than those of many an ageing individual acting on his/her own account, no longer needing paid employment to keep him/her fed, watered and fittingly employed. But I enjoy the fact that, however diminished the present activities might be, they are in effect twigs on a larger tree which has a history, a context and a continuing scope. The tree is still present in the landscape and being tended. I remain in service to it.

Activities and Developments over the Year 2019

The implications of the term “Hyphen-21” are wider than a poetry project, we all know that. They are about community and the I-Thou form of contact between people, and between people and their surrounding world. That mode of empathic connection and mutuality sustains and maybe founds/finds both community and the individuals who form it. And does I – Thou connection require skills, or is it just a gift, a given, a chance ? Arguable, but I think all three. And is it an individual character trait, or a social duty ? Both. And does it need defending ? Yes.

And social work and psychotherapy and counselling and nursing and teaching and the arts and family and community itself, all rest to a large and I think primary extent upon the hyphen

between I and Thou. A slender foundation, a fragile footing, easily and readily forgotten or attacked. Easily and readily crucified, you might say. But “Humanity cannot bear very much reality.” So that’s it in a nutshell, pretty well.

(But, in passing, I should just put in the reminder, in case it’s helpful, that all these references to a hyphen stem from a book called “I and Thou” by Martin Buber. He suggests a duality of modes of being : I – It and I – Thou. Buber compares the two modes and suggests that both belong, but need to be in balance, each in its true place. But the mode “I -Thou” is presently not just the more fragile, it is also in question to a degree that threatens humanity’s survival. Hyphen-21 is chiefly interested in the mode “I-Thou”).

And Hyphen-21 had heady beginnings to do with strengthening this hyphen that hangs so precariously in the air between all of us, or – if not strengthening the thing itself - strengthening at least our understanding of it, or encouraging a new respect, or language, or time, for it, and strengthening, affirming, equipping and upholding those who practice it.

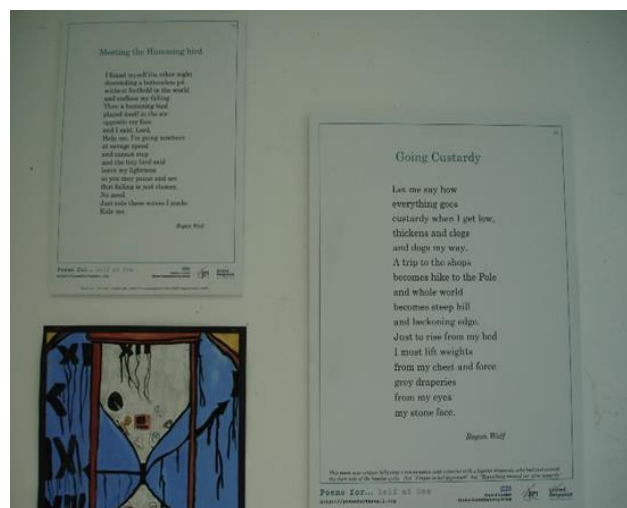
But, in general, I think the language of empathic I-Thou connection in our society has grown weaker, not stronger, over the last decades, a weakening process of overwhelming strength, so to speak. So this becomes a time for holding on, alert for the chance, rather than going forward. At a fairly early stage, the charity became centred, or was driven back, on public poetry as a kind of manageable and achievable image of I-Thou speaking and connection. (“We have a way here of opening people’s lives to each other” wrote David Hart, the poet who commissioned all the 52 poems of the first collection, “Poems for...Waiting”).

So, in common with the earlier reports, this one will soon begin to talk about poetry.

First, though, I will say that another intention has always been to talk about mental health work as well - good practice and good policy in that field, good I-Thou connection across this other deep and fundamental divide in all our nations. And still that work has not been done. A web-site is ready for it, created by Joe my eldest son. I am writing the beginnings of this report on the day before the General election. Paradoxically, I have thought that if Mr Johnson gets his majority, and it still looks as if he will, I might find it easier, then, to turn my back and hunker down to this job of work I have been putting off for so long. It will be a kind of air raid shelter, a protective device, a distraction, a building of something for better times.

Onto the poetry.

First, I’ll add some detail to references I made in last year’s report to some work I’d started with two comprehensive schools in Bristol. It involved mounting exhibitions of some the project’s mental health poems, during Mental Health Awareness Week. Here is a small picture from one of the exhibitions, held in School One, and combining poems with pupils’ pictures. Hyphen-21 paid for the poem enlargements.



I expected to do more work with those two schools, and to extend to others in Bristol, but this never happened. I think the reason is simply that there is too much pressure on the staff concerned, there are too few of them, there is too little time. In present conditions, initiatives of this kind are the first to slip off the teachers' *To Do* list.

Therefore, although I myself learned quite a lot from working with those two schools, my learning still has to follow me where I go, and I'm not living in Bristol any more.

Here's one example of the problem. In the last report, I mentioned an English teacher from School One. Here I'll call him "Teacher A". Teacher A was newish, young and in my view of very high calibre. He had the inspirational idea of himself selecting one of these poems each week, from the website, and sending it round as an email attachment to all of his teaching colleagues – not just the English or modern language ones. The idea proved popular and he received good feed-back from colleagues. In essence, the feed-back confirmed that the poems offered some breathing space and – perhaps more important - some recognition of the need for it. And I just loved all of that. It was a hyphen idea, you might say. Right on the button. For the hyphen needs nurturing and acknowledging, and those who ride the hyphen through the storm need help to keep their footing, their full humanity.

But the idea is no longer happening. Teacher A has had a mental health breakdown and, since then, has left the teaching profession altogether, citing the pressure of the work. It left him with no time or self (or I-Thou) – no breathing time or space. There's some irony in that bad-tasting story.

But here's a slightly happier one from the same bit of work. Another School One teacher used the Microsoft Powerpoint programme to put together some quotes from the mental health poem collections. Extracting quotes meant that the text displayed could be larger than if the whole poem were reproduced onscreen. The rotation of quotes was put onto the school's several small plasma display screens throughout Mental Health Awareness week. I saw them and was struck by the power of the words in this new medium. Adverts have been deploying memorable lines for ages – with manipulative intent, mercenary or political. But poems ? Perhaps we are exploring some new ground here, in some small way. New approaches to publishing and also new platforms for truth-telling - as a way of countering old but ever more brazen ways of telling lies.

Here are links to the pdf versions of two poem selections so far produced, both for plasma screen rotating displays. One is a slightly revised version of the mental health selection already mentioned : <https://poemsforthewall.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Mental-health-awareness-slideshow-revised.pdf> ; this second link is to a small selection from the bilingual poems, which I re-formatted soon afterwards, to suit a small plasma screen : <https://poemsforthewall.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Bilingual-slideshow-latest.pdf> It was shown in the library of the second school I worked with in Bristol.

On to this year. A major event that took place this Spring was the move my partner and I made to a village several miles out of Bristol. And, by slightly difficult coincidence, just before we moved away, I was able to mount an exhibition of bilingual poems from the project's collections in Clifton Cathedral. An exhibition of *poems* ?

I recommend a visit to Clifton (Roman Catholic) cathedral to anyone who does not know it. It was built in the late 60's and early 70's and is resolutely, and in my opinion triumphantly, of that architectural era and style. Its size and shape allowed me to enlarge some of the poems to AO size, which is the largest they've ever been. They looked simply wonderful in situ, dressed in all their different languages and vantage-points, their words and other aspects made all the more powerful and eloquent by their setting. I believe that they, in turn, actually added something to the setting, as well. The exhibition was situated on a wide balcony above the font, looking down on the altar. On first seeing the poems in place, Nicola exclaimed, it's like having a modern-day book of psalms up here. Here was humanity speaking together with honesty and largeness of spirit, in many languages, using words rather more worthy of our race than "Let's Take Back Control" and "Get Brexit Done" !

For those people on Facebook, you can find a good pictorial record of the exhibition here : https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100009086896863&sk=media_set&set=a.2271411376505070&type=3 The advantage of the Facebook "Album" set-up is that it allows you to enlarge each picture to full screen size, and allows me to provide background information alongside each picture.

But here is another arrangement of the pictures even more immediate and easy to access : <https://photos.app.goo.gl/ajwMWSykbYYQxeSk7> Just Click on any picture and it will enlarge ; a second later an arrow will appear on the right. If you click on that, you will be shown the next picture in the sequence.

The charity paid for the enlargements and for the exhibition as a whole.

If anyone knows of another cathedral, or church, or mosque, or synagogue, or temple, where the same idea might suit or be of interest, please let me know !

And so onto our new home. Except for short intervals, I have never lived away from an urban setting before. Silence and wide views tended to be week-end or holiday experiences. They restored me for my return to reality - home and work. It has taken me awhile to accept myself in this utterly unfamiliar kind of ordinary environment, to allow myself to be here, almost. Even as I write, several months after the move, I can barely believe I am here. By the same token, I can already barely believe that I ever lived there, either, with that incessant noise, that psychic battering from second to second in detail after detail, for decades accepted as the norm.

Poems on village walls ? Well, yes. To be precise, on the waiting room wall of the local health centre, where hangs a large plasma screen, on which rotate a long and varied list of online health notices and invitations to local resources, attractively presented – plus now, from time to time, a poem, on view for 30 seconds, before it politely gives way to some other aspect of village life. But the project's poetry is now part of this community waiting room's life.

Poems in the village school ? Yes, though even here, or here too, the pressures on teachers' time is slowing things down. As so far discussed, the plans are : plasma screens again, perhaps a reading to the children as a way of de-mystifying the whole business, and/or some group work with them for creative writing.

One idea I've had, in relation to my contact with the school, which is a nice primary, is that the project should make and upload a new poem collection especially focussed on children of primary school age. Let me recommend to you all a large book of illustrated poems for children called "I am the Seed that Grew the Tree." It's newish (2018) and has won prizes. I have proposed to the publisher, called Nosy Crow, that *Poems for...the wall* should select some of its poems, include some of its lovely illustrations, and translate them onto our posters. These would go up on any plasma screens interested, and would include full acknowledgements to the publishers. The publisher has got straight back and expressed interest. I would select the poems in consultation with interested children (and staff) at the school here.

And now a doctor based in a health centre in a village nearby has also expressed interest. So his waiting room plasma screen too will soon be including a selection from the project's poems. He says he'll make sure they spread into other centres round about, as well.

A strange route to what may just be a new lease of life for this project.

So let this idea take whatever shape it can find for itself, wherever it belongs, or whenever it chances on someone receptive. So long as I'm about, I'll keep exploring the possibilities.

In the meantime, the website remains live and active, much less busy these days than it has been, but open to anyone "browsing", whoever and wherever the browser may be. Here is a list of the latest seven people to have registered on the site :

December 19 th	JP	Manchester	For use in a hospital
November 29 th	KH	Manchester UK	For Personal Use
November 19 th	YA	Nova Scotia, Canada	For use in a school
October 26 th	VP	Prato, Italy	For use in a school
October 7 th	CL	Dallas, USA	For use in a hospital
October 3 rd	AM	London NW6	For use in a hospital
October 2 nd	MH	Gainsborough, Lincs. UK	For use in a school

Finally, me.

The mind-set/heart-set/dread-set that has led to Brexit among so much else, feels like a mortal enemy to me, but one that needs understanding better than I understand it. I keep trying to. I also keep trying to stay sane by holding it all a bit outside of me, or as much as possible (it's harder when you don't have a regular working day to take your attention). One way of doing this has been to write satirical rhyme royal stanzas as a kind of running record of the dreadful story, following the model and form of, and some images and symbols from, a poem called "Speak Parrot" by John Skelton (1460-1529). The rhyme royal stanza is a traditional verse-form apparently introduced to English literature by Chaucer. It has seven rhyming lines and progresses in orderly fashion, unlike Brexit and unlike me. Nicola reckons they have acted as a sort of literary equivalent of a daily cartoon. I think that's a good simile.

Over the months, I put my tumult and witness into them and then walked off into my day (they were usually produced overnight and early morning). I put together more than 150 of the things in all, but now it is several days since I started writing this report and Mr Johnson has won his landslide election victory. The tension having broken, the parrot has nothing more

to say. He has retired to the top of the Tyndale Monument, both for safety from the Flood, and to await more interesting and positive developments.

Perhaps the main theme running through all of the parrot stanzas is that of truth-telling. The caged parrot is pre-occupied with the truth. He hears everything, perhaps to his cost. And, being a Bird of Paradise, he must pass on the full truth of what he hears. To surrender to the Lie is to succumb to the worship of the Self and mere apparent self-advantage, at the expense of the truth of things as they are, and of Creation as it needs us to behave, and this misdirection of worship in turn and paradoxically is a threat to us all, including to the culprits themselves. As the Lie flourishes unchecked, trust withers, along with community and Democracy and any human future.

If anyone can bear to look at, or dip into, the Parrot stanzas as a collection, they can be found here : <https://roganwolf.com/wp-content/uploads/Parrot-Addenda-1.pdf>

In recent months, various sources have articulated a need to hold politicians to account for lying. Politicians who do so are already breaking an oath they all must take to “tell the truth” (Nolan Principle number six). But this oath appears to have been very lightly delivered in many cases, and very feebly or inconsistently enforced. The lying politician is a caricature, but the lie has a new power in this generation, as deliberate policy and highly successful technique. As the forger threatens our financial transactions, the soundness and authority of our means of exchange, so the politician’s lie threatens our whole body politic. For democracy relies absolutely on our trust in words. But whereas financial fraud and forgery is treated as a punishable crime, lying in public office is tolerated as a norm, even – it would appear - a qualification for the post of Prime Minister. With no sheriff able or willing to arrest them at High Noon, the hoodlums rule our main street.

Here is an example of one of the initiatives, its instigator presently under great pressure : <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/borisjohnsonpostjcio> Marcus Ball has taken out a private prosecution against Boris Johnson for lying, arguing that, in Common Law , this constitutes Misconduct in Public Office. If successful, Ball would of course set a precedent. He has been working on the case for three years and is hugely in debt. Various other groupings and initiatives are emerging, with the same focus. One is “Compassion in Politics” – see : <https://www.compassioninpolitics.com/> Another is Plaid Cymru – see https://www.partyof.wales/make_lying_in_politics_illegal.

Maybe, at least for a while, we need to be thinking more in terms of remedial campaigns of this kind, than of the position of one or another established Party. Our political systems need to work and our present systems don’t. Our established Parties don’t.

To say, to do, to live “I – Thou”, you need a sound language to say or do or live it in. A language in which liars flourish is unsound, foul, unfit. I propose that the truth-telling campaign is one in which this charity might take an interest over the next few years.

But I shall end this report with a poem (see Appendix One !). It was written a few weeks ago. This poem makes no call on some harlequin parrot ranting on about this and that, but represents my simple delight in the River Severn.

Of my Neighbour the Severn



The Severn. Photograph by Nicola Knoop

by Rogan Wolf

Of my Neighbour the Severn

(i)

I shall speak of my neighbour the Severn,
its majesty and turbulence.

I turn and think of Brexit, or tonight's meal,
or look east to the steep edge of the Cotswolds
where Tyndale stands sentinel, behind his bars,
or to the motorway on its speed-bound axis ;
but even then, the Severn lurks in my mind,
in my words, in all my moments here ;
it claims a temple in my days, like a god,
with its vastness and banked unrest ;
It offers somehow a benediction.

(ii)

It's a task beyond me to accomplish,
I cannot do justice, words fail.
The Severn seethes and stretches
a few fields away from our pebbles
and rose petals. It carries two nations' weather
systems along its back, and two nations'
memories and guilts run deep in its underworld.
To put words to all this
is like throwing a net into the torrent.
The Severn's furies continue
their timeless practices.
The net snaps.

(iii)

Suddenly the hedgerow, steeped in its own
minglings of history and rose-hip
neglect and blackberry
gives way and there it is
across a sodden field,
the wide water, the dangerous
grace of it,
and my spirits lift
as if released, as if some constriction
has been withdrawn and this is where
they need to be, these far reaches
their truest extent.
They rush to place themselves
on station.

(iv)

Of course the Severn runs
to the sea,
yet where does "sea" begin?
Is not the Severn
sea itself?
Many rivers
open into its argument,
joining its currency
and unrest -
the Avon, the Wye, the Cam.

They void themselves
into a greater sovereignty
adding to its under-flows
the warp and weft of them
the pulse of their progress
under the sun and moon.

(v)

They know the Severn so well,
these faithful few I met.
Like pilgrims, they attend each year.
Let others head for the far exotic beaches
notching up the place-names
the selfies, the “likes.”
The faithful camp just here
for their fortnight off the pace, the Severn
their only company,
seething yards away.
It recognizes them.
It knows their teasing.
It knows one day it will gather them in,
enclosing them,
immersing itself in them.
They enter the water
and the mud clutches at them
but still they remember the footholds,
the hidden platforms underwater,
and the times when tide retreats, and leaves the salmon
captive in the pools.

Before the tide turns,
The faithful dance in the muddy water.
“She disappeared yesterday,”
he said. “She missed the ledge
our feet have learned to reach for
and I had to pull her up again
by the hair, laughing.”

(vi)

That ferment to the west,
fingers spread wide, writhing,
the rays of each sunset playing
on its surfaces, burnishing,
brazen, bringer of peace,
yet knowing no peace itself
and having no purity
of texture... The eye searches
for innocence, the transparency
we find in waters untainted
by human agency. But here it's clay
disturbed, scooped up and dispersed
by the torment of the currents.
The Severn's fish are full of its clay,
they breathe it, and the shore birds
trip across it like ballerinas
as it gleams greedily at low-tide.

And the Severn's *waves* are full of its clay,
mauve, bronze and copper
shimmering along its surfaces
as it spans the millennia.

(vii)

Sweet Severn,
I came from afar to hear your song.
Hear mine.
We cannot run softly.

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14th October 2019