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*Collected Poems*

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# AGAINST BEING BLUDGEONED: DISCOVERING APOTROPAIC FUNCTION IN WILLIAM ROWE'S *COLLECTED POEMS*

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## ABSTRACT

William Rowe's work as a poet in his own right led to the publication of *Working the Signs* in 1992—and then nothing until a flurry of six books, 2009 – 2016. The article proposes death, both personal and large-scale political, as a constant concern, but that the strategy changed between 1992 and 2009 from leftist witness of Latin American devastations to radical interventionist in search of protective measures against neoliberalism globally triumphant. The first four sections deal with the later books' devisings of aesthetic strategies to ward off despair in the clear-eyed face of police violence, an everyday environment captured and neutralized for political spectacle and informal sacrifice, and sedimentings of gender enmities. Focus then shifts to *Working the Signs*, a product of Rowe's fieldwork in Mexico and Peru, and its concern with the (non)-disappearance of the dead; brief accounts are included of precursor texts by Pablo Neruda and D.H. Lawrence. Finally, attention turns to the last book of his own poems Rowe has (so far) published, *Death Purge*, via a search for models of visionary poetic mimesis in César Vallejo, Raúl Zurita, and Rob Halpern. Rowe's overall apotropaic strategy is given as comprising a) an insistence on articulating political realities his readers risk taking for granted; b) a constant readiness to turn to exploratory advantage possible Badiouian "events" (e.g. the multi-city riots in Britain, 2011); and c) the occasional shameless reaching for moments of delicate aesthetic delight.

KEY WORDS: William Rowe, anti-capitalist poetry, politics of image, British riots 2011, Walter Benjamin.

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William Rowe's *Collected Poems* (2016) brings together his seven books so far as a poet in his own right (his career as a translator of Latin American poets goes back to 1968 and continues). *Working the Signs* came out in 1992; there was a 17-year gap then a flurry: *The Earth Has Been Destroyed* (2009), *Nation* (2012/2015), *The Spectre* (2013), *Law* (2013), *Incisions* (2014), and *Death Purge* (2016). In the *CP*, these—unusually—appear in reverse chronological order, so that if we read sequentially forward, we are primed to look for earlier instances of motifs we have already seen become urgent in later poems. The matter is not quite so simple, though. It does seem to me that after living through some forty years of global neoliberal zeal, increasingly abyssal inequalities, and attendant climate breakdown, Rowe, beginning with *Earth Destroyed*, came to understand that his task as a poet was, at least, a protective one, so that his work would seek to foster an alertness to the ways, both visible and invisible, political despair makes its corrosive inroads; and to counter those by offering ways to imagine things difficult if not impossible to articulate. At the same time, death, both personal—"Black widow / 18" above your head / on a thread" (*CP* 283)—and on the larger political scale of the (non)-disappearance of the dead, is already established as a motif in the otherwise very different *Working the Signs*: the first five poems are set in Mexico, the second five in Peru, and one of these on the Peruvian Day of the Dead or *Día de los Difuntos*.

Perhaps a focus on certain poems in *Death Purge* and *Working the Signs*, the first and last books in the (premature) *Collected Poems*, the most recent and first in the career, can reveal aspects of the poet's work pertinent to the concerns sketched above, though not without visits elsewhere.

## WHAT CAN POETRY DO?

Rowe recorded, in sorrow and anger, the premature death of the major British poet Bill Griffiths (1948–2007) in “Bill walks out” (*CP* 253); the later “Bill knocked out” in *Nation* (a kind of “Griffiths, thou should’st be living at this hour!”) comes in the context of several poems—“learning to learn,” “the shopping mall is burning,” “found event,” “outlived lives,” and others—that hark to the multi-city UK riots of August 2011; attention is also directed to the police violence once the cops were able to regroup and the subsequent harsh sentencings. The poem’s opening—“his disgust / for disgust” (166)—appears banal, even self-neutralizing until we realize the first disgust, as felt by Bill, presumably, is with a wider contempt on the part of the ruling class for whole swaths of British citizens. The third line’s erasure of interval—“painunbound”—features one result of that contempt; whether the perpetrators are seen as police enforcers of the punitive austerity that was then a year old, the Cameron-Osborne cabinet that had imposed it as a major wealth-redistribution measure in wake of the 2008 recession, or both, “they,” Rowe writes, “were of the party of death” (166).<sup>2</sup>

The aesthetic stakes are glimpsed here:

the line refraction  
of something that  
if hell  
speaks  
prevents that thing from being seen

Partial rebuttal immediately follows:

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<sup>2</sup> For an argument that standard macroeconomic models did not demand ‘austerian’ policies around 2010, indeed the opposite, see Paul Krugman, “Austerity.” For a critical retrospective and assessment of worsened conditions since, see Thomas Scripps, “Ten Years.”

but the soft drill  
of the poem  
ah reader  
the small swirl of letters  
touches it (166)

The “soft drill” suggests an insistent boring-in; “the small swirl of letters” might be a result of concussion. As an experience, it is nowhere centered. And yet to get bits of it and hold them there, sharding at each other, is something accurate.

But what is that “something” that occults whatever hell might have said? Nothing, in truth, that *can* be seen. The short poem “outlived lives” has intimated the bewildering scene:

drive through the actual [tear-]gas  
the outgoing screams  
vacating something that’s  
even the frame  
((even the furnace (162))

The cutoff at “that’s” signals a struggle to find an angle via which to articulate what is going on here. Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” (1921), in designating the making of law and preserving of law as the two functions of legal violence in the modern state, insists on the police as a perpetual site of confusion, for while police violence is “for legal ends” it also carries “authority to decide these ends itself within wide limits” (242), especially when intervening “for security reasons” (243) on direct behalf of the state; and so ranks of body-armored Robocop types in full intent to traumatize

present a clearly visible force that at the same time is “nowhere-present, all-pervasive, ghostly” (243), with complexifying layers of support (“even the frame / ((even the furnace [or ‘finance’?—Pluto was god of riches as well as of the underworld]”) (243).

That’s one thing poetry can do, and not trivial: bring into language an actually dense experience that many who had it, along with media spectators (“during the news / ... / eyes would / stand / in opaque word”), are struggling to get any purchase on (*CP* 39). Few have rendered articulation of what we find blocked or dispersed as a potential service of poetry more movingly than Anna Akhmatova, recalling waiting outside the prison gates in Leningrad along with many other women seeking some facsimile of contact with their loved ones inside:

Once, someone “recognized” me. Then a woman with bluish lips standing behind me ... woke up from the stupor to which everyone had succumbed and whispered in my ear (everyone spoke in whispers there):

“Can you describe this?”

And I answered, “Yes, I can.”

Then something that looked like a smile passed over what had once been her face.

(568)

Steve Willey suggests, precisely, the effort to name “what has fallen out of words” (*CP* 135) as a key to Rowe’s *Nation*.

**KRUPP AG (ALL OVER THE WORLD)**

from that height  
the financial district  
can be seen  
the gherkin and other  
crude shapes  
but not the money (*CP* 259)

“Gherkin,” the less than respectful popular name for 30 St Mary Axe, a commercial tower in the City of London, already indicates that Akhmatova’s “describe” is not a straightforward term, any more than is “experience.” Bertolt Brecht goes after both in *The Threepenny Lawsuit* (1931), famously arguing that a “photograph of a Krupp factory or the AEG [General Electricity Company] says practically nothing about these institutions,” and adding that “whoever reproduces those aspects of reality that can be experienced does not reproduce reality” (ctd. in Long 201). But Brecht was also well aware that just as the photographic image could be used to commodify a multi-dimensional and conflicted reality, so it could be turned to a more probing function—if, say, one combined images and a variety of paratextual commentaries. Rowe gives a version of that in the *Death Purge* poem “phenomenology = ideology,” in which we are presented with a man

dying on the floor  
of a plane  
at heathrow  
can’t breathe (*CP* 50)

Why he is dying is unclear from these panting lines but he is being “restrained by / security guards,” the passengers told to stay in their seats, and the flight attendants forbidden to intervene. The narrator seems to have been a witness and to have brought “the death image” home for domestic haunting. The poem ends with a commentary:

the dying  
will be  
screamed  
into general existence  
or will  
kill us (51–52)

A man is dying for unknown reasons, and “security” tells us there’s nothing to see here; all over the world are deaths, in wars, famine, ethnic cleansings, paramilitary or gang actions, from drone strikes or bombs, in refugee camps, from inadequate or sabotaged medical attention, poisoned utilities or poverty or what were once freak climate events, and we take in the news, when we do, overwhelmed. Say for the moment that the poem juxtaposes these propositions in full awareness it cannot bridge them, cannot so much as intimate a route from one to the other. The gap between them *is* the unhealed wound and the poem’s task is not to let it seal over, as the apparent seamlessness of what the witness has seen and heard would encourage—including the built environment train or car has traversed going to or from Heathrow.

[T]rees & grass &  
sun &



something's been

disappeared (53):

phenomenology as ideology exactly, or in Theodor Adorno's words, "the spell that this world casts by the overwhelming force of its appearance" (*Aesthetic* 58). At this point, there is no meaningful difference between image and whatever reaches the senses supposedly *unmediated*; it is all Debordian spectacle, mundane as it comes, holding in place the facts of the world.

### **"OTHER PLANETS"**

Wound as unhealed condition appears in *Death Purge* in disagreement with a formula in the late David Graeber's *Bullshit Jobs* (2018), a text which probes the ruling-class terror of idle hands that results in the invention of "paid employment" (proliferating administrators, telemarketers, dog-walkers, junior executives serving the intra-corporate jockeyings of their superiors) "so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case" (53). "The moral and spiritual damage that results from this situation," Graeber writes, "is a scar across our collective soul. Yet virtually no one talks about it" (15). Rowe directly cites these lines then takes issue in a deliberately ambiguous move:

(David Graeber you wrote that

there is no collective soul

the only thing that is is a wound

where can it be written (*CP* 20)

The lack of punctuation along with the stanzaic space allows us to insert a pause after “wrote that” or carry through, giving a) You wrote the lines I’ve just quoted, endorsing a “collective soul,” but let me insist ... ; b) You wrote “collective soul” but your thesis also implies it cannot exist. In both cases, for all your good work—during Occupy Wall Street, for example, also of 2011, Graeber was influential in coining the instantly resonant term, “We are the 99 percent,” effectively reintroducing the concept of class struggle into American politics—despite this, here you concede too much: the rote phrase “collective soul” need only insinuate that a fellowship unachievable in class society has in discourse at least already been achieved: a “mystic unification,” which for Max Horkheimer and Adorno always “remains deception, the impotently inward trace of the absolved revolution” (39). But deceptive too is national division as a decoy from global class division: “canary wharf 2” (Canary Wharf on the Isle of Dogs being London’s second largest financial district) opens by recalling the City’s “gherkin” as one of the fetishes featuring in the 2011 riots, moves on to urban redevelopment and the desolations it leaves behind, and references “su espanto” (“your terror”) in the same stanza as Fallujah, which “brags loss of code it brags code” (*CP* 68–69)—“code” here would be not only the Geneva Conventions but, for example, every governmental regulation abrogated for the “at least sixty private security companies in Iraq” (Flynn). The poem’s implication seems to be that these events (in London, somewhere in Latin America probably, and Fallujah) would feature as disjunct segments on the nightly news. But the links were already international; the Bush administration’s “coalition of the willing” included a number of Latin American countries; and the properties on Canary Wharf, as of August 2021, are jointly owned by Brookfield Property Partners,

headquartered in Hamilton, Bermuda, and Qatar Investment Authority. It opens up like nodes which both must and cannot be connected, “an event for which there’s no image,” as the poem’s epigraph, from Rilke’s Ninth Elegy, offers—or only an image deliberately cursory, as in the poem’s ending:

the manager’s everywhere he’s  
getting fat the same thing  
happened to them wind of other  
planets wind of this (69)

There’s no “manager,” any more than there’s “a collective soul.” But “other / planets” might rumor some revolutionary alternative, albeit a long, long way away.

#### **ANGRY DEAD: WOMEN AND MEN**

there’s a woman  
buried  
under each  
single column

I am eight years old  
every word hates hurts

more sacrificed women (*CP* 186)

The *Death Purge* poem “for Ioulia” arguably mixes two mythico-religious traditions. Ioulia was the name of a 5th-century virgin from Carthage crucified on Corsica for her refusal to participate in a Roman ritual: a martyr for both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. The other tradition includes a more famous virgin martyr, Antigone. The poem, containing the first in the book of three Antigone references, is here in full:

ferryman  
    (coin for him in your mouth  
the redness of it  
or you can put it on your forehead  
with a headband  
like Antigone did  
for herself  
and her brother (31)

The redness of mouth or coin is the obvious question—for this is the line through which the transfer passes: an example, no doubt, of Allen Fisher’s “quantum leap / between some lines / so wide / it hurts” (6–7). It could be the gold coin, Charon’s toll, plausibly figuring as a blazon for the price (her own life) Antigone has paid for ritually ushering her brother into death. Or it could be the red opening of her mouth, uttering scorn at her sister Ismene, at Creon, both her uncle and the *tyrannos* of Thebes, and at the citizenry’s Chorus; or of her vulva, in thwarted rage that she will

never go through the wedding ceremony with her fiancé Haemon or—conceivably and in secret—her brother Polyneices; or of her menstrual blood; or of the fratricidal war that has brought her here. The quantum gap “hurts,” the poem insists, because of the spread of what might fill it.

The poem immediately following “for Ioulia,” “her wildly weeping,” takes its epigraph from Friedrich Hölderlin’s 1804 near-word-for-word translation of Sophocles’ play: “the spirit of ever-living and unwritten wilderness / and of the world of the dead” (32). Although Antigone is not directly mentioned following the epigraph, she thereby presides over the poem, here less as psychopomp than mourner. Hölderlin’s lines point to where Creon wants to send—or “hide” her (71): walled up in rock, still living but outside the bounds of civilized exchange, in a desolation of grief unto death: “someone else is the witness / there is no witness / spectres turn away” (CP 32). My own immediate image is of burkha’d women in varieties of rubble emptying their lungs in effort to vocally express/expel the loss consuming them, casualties of militarized neoliberal glee that even in their televisual split-second “cut the knot of pleasure / with total scission”: an all-too-brief melt into common humanity. The poem’s subsequent focus is less exotic and troublingly, as it seems, less clear-cut, being rather “the poor the disabled the out of work the / non-bullies the exploited in bullshit jobs / the unnecessary” (32)—those whom the predators, “tories and labour and corporations and hedge funds and IMF” and others; “eaters of the dead” and themselves, in Rowe’s indictment, “the dead dead” (32), deride as “losers,” the worst term of abuse under late capitalism. But these are also contemporary avatars of Antigone in her unrepresentable capacity—child of incest, with a mother and grandmother in one; from the start, a definitional maelstrom, outside of what Judith Butler calls “cultural intelligibility” (3). If the Latin American dictatorships of the 70s

gave us “disappear” as a transitive verb—the disappeared, the made to disappear—inserting the contradictory meanings into the one word, Artaud had performed a comparable operation in his 1947 essay “Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society,” where a word etymologically stressing the voluntary is made to admit an alternative agency. Rowe’s *Poetry in Times of Resurgent Fascism* (2020) cites Sean Bonney using “suicided” in this sense (28), in reference to “the ghosts of the suicided” whose “revenge” his writing wants to facilitate but is unable to (82); and “her wildly screaming” ends with the slogan “no more suicides!” (CP 32).

Related to this cracking-open of single words are kinships that lurk in apparent opposites, and this is crucial for Rowe’s poetics. When Antigone asks if Ismene has heard of Creon’s decree regarding the respective treatments of their dead brothers, Hölderlin’s close attention to Sophocles’ diction has Ismene reply that she has heard no further—“no loving word nor sad either”—than news of the deaths; and so up to now “am not happier and not sadder” (71). The dualisms are sufficiently stabilized (and consequently precarious) that one may bleed into its other, not least Antigone and Creon: in claiming divine sanction for her crime the former “absorbs,” Butler comments, “the very language of the state against which she rebels, and hers becomes a politics not of oppositional purity but of scandalous impurity” (5).

Before pushing this further, we should attend to a further blurring of opposites in Rowe’s case. His ventriloquizing term “the unnecessary”—applying not only to the categories listed (“the poor the disabled the out of work ...”) but also, presumably, to the rioters of 2011, variously described by authorities as “defective consumers” (ctd. in Newburn 989) and “feral rats” (ctd. in Scripps)—surely calls up Giorgio Agamben’s interpretation of the ancient Roman concept of “*homo*

*sacer*,” whose peculiar “*sacratio* takes the form of a double exception ... both from the sphere of the profane and from that of the religious” (82); since he has been abandoned by the gods, killing him constitutes neither state execution nor priestly sacrifice. Today, such effective social invisibility, or in Agamben’s term “bare life” (1-5), shows up only in statistics (traffic victims, the unemployed, COVID hospitalizations; those dying on a plane on Heathrow tarmac ...): often unintended but routinely accepted as a price of business as usual. But sacrifice itself has a transactional essence: *Do ut des*, “I give so that you might give,” was a legal contractual principle in ancient Rome as well as a religious one. “Bare life” can therefore be killed *and* (informally) sacrificed; indeed, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the Enlightenment’s inability to move past a sacrificial economy, only to obfuscate its persistence in new guises, gave many of its claims the lie from the beginning (49–56).

Defying power in the name of bare life, then, by taking on a voice of the powerful, is hard to avoid, and in poem after poem, Rowe makes no attempt to, indeed, he stresses the opposite: “ah corpse-eaters / and murderers of the dead / oh tories and labour and corporations and hedge-funds and IMF ...” (32). I say who you are and fix you in that identity, even if this is not the performative utterance of a judge whose words effect the real-world incarceration of bare life, rather the performative utterance of a poet as malediction. Rowe comments in a Q&A session to an early version of his *Fascism* text, “I guess curses *are* ugly. And what it [the curse under discussion, from a poem by Verity Spott] seeks to destroy is also ugly. So there’s no moving away from what is deeply disgusting, rather an attempt to move through it” (“Morris Lecture” 1:10:06). The curse likewise recognizes that what effects the relation of language to reality is power and the space to wield it

more than philosophical reason, so that a curse “invokes that kind of other relation with real things” (at 1:126:46). It has its psychic perils: “Margaret Thatcher died today / long live death I shouted.”

His companion is troubled:

that’s a fascist slogan you said

it’s ours today I said

viva la muerte<sup>3</sup>

her bag of bleeding flesh

and the cynical morning

and the murderous sky

let the music vomit her out (*CP 27*)

This is in the vituperative league of Ezra Pound’s *Hell Cantos*; Thatcher is either brandishing a “bag” of victims or replete with millennia of male shudders at the menstruating body (that Thatcher herself was long past that would simply generalize it). But targets of terms such as Pound’s—“The saccharescent, lying in glucose, / the pompous in cotton wool / ... / the great scabrous arse-hole, sh-tting flies” (64)—even today would be assumed to be male; only the female needs to be specified. I can remember no soubriquet for Thatcher, pro or con, unanimated by reference to her gender (“the Iron Lady,” with its S/M connotations, or cartoonist Steve Bell’s “Maggie” with the farm, turner, in her cadaverous zeal, of men into beasts). Rowe’s line may thus release a more visceral but also more reflexive fury, even as it makes the moral risks of that uncomfortably clear.

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<sup>3</sup> In a footnote to *Resurgent Fascism* 6–7, Rowe links the slogan to “the Francoist general José Millán Astray ... an admirer of Hitler and Mussolini.”



## HUNGRY GHOSTS

Much of *Working the Signs* seems to constitute a homage to “The Conquistadors,” the third section of Pablo Neruda’s *Canto General* (1950), along with a repudiation of D.H. Lawrence’s 1926 novel *The Plumed Serpent*. From “They Come Through the Islands (1493)” and “Now It’s Cuba,” Neruda conducts a continental survey of cruelties: the Indians “were bound and tortured, / burned and branded, / bitten [by attack dogs] and buried” in service of rapacious cant: “Here the cross, there the rosary, / here the Virgin of the Cudgel” (43–4). “The Conquistadors” of course is only one relatively short section of an epic with comprehensive ambition; the next and much longer section is “The Liberators.” But with Neruda’s epic behind him, Rowe is free to work on a more compact scale:

Open yourself to this:

sky and earth-shadow gods

sky regulation of conduct

white power.

...

Quetzalcoatl

penetrating bones in hell

dismantling altars

making crosses chatter like skulls

fossil fuel for the living

and will come back

from the East

(he said). (*CP* 283–84)

Reference here is to the story—probably untrue, as Inga Clendinnen reports (69–70)—that Moctezuma II believed that Cortés was the god Quetzalcoatl “come back,” this cowed credulity being a reason for the speed of the Spanish takeover. It was first reported by Cortés; the “he” of Rowe’s parenthesis above could refer to either him or the Emperor, allowing some doubt as to the story’s veracity, and identity shuttles between them: “Flash feathers blue aquamarine / splintering the earth / dethroning the emperor” (284). What the Cortés-as-Quetzalcoatl narrative offers Rowe is condensed access to the syncretic mythical world whose overlappings of history, like those of any cultural myth, scholars still pick a cautious way through. It also introduces the reader to a set of metamorphosing images (the title poem “Working the Signs” is a riot of such metamorphoses) that lends this first book a figurative coherence much diffused in the later work.

In Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent*, landowner Don Ramón and the general Don Cipriano seem uninterested in contemporary manifestations of Spanish power, bidding rather to revive the worship of Quetzalcoatl; the novel’s heroine Kate Leslie is drawn to “the primitive assertion,” “the old, terrible bond of the blood-unison of man, which made blood-sacrifice so potent a factor of life.” But Ramón, “admitting his blood-unison, at the same time claimed a supremacy, even a godliness” (ch. XXVI). Empowerment of the masses is not his aim, rather a feudal stasis—all of them, in the long flight from modern atomization, at once enthralled and appalled by dissolution into the collective. Leslie finds “the primitive assertion” at its purest in the lakeside Indians’ “pathos of grace

... something very beautiful and truly male, and very hard to find in a civilized white man" (ch. VI),  
yet she confronts in Mexico City

the dark eyes of half-created women, soft, appealing, yet with a queer void  
insolence! Something lurking, where the womanly centre should have been; lurking  
snake-like. Fear! The fear of not being able to find full creation. And the inevitable  
mistrust and lurking insolence, insolent against a higher creation, the same thing  
that is in the striking of a snake. (ch. IV)

Repeated use of the snake as menace signals equivocation in regards to the novel's central symbol;  
the Indians who figure "blood-unison" also embody Leslie's greatest dread: "Let the white man once  
have a misgiving about his own leadership, and the dark races will at once attack him to pull him  
down into the old gulfs. To engulf him again" (ch. IX). In fact, the most explicitly violent scenes in  
*Working the Signs* appear in "The death of [Andrés] Alencastre," the Peruvian "quechuologist and  
poet" who

was thrown into a straw hut  
and burnt alive  
by the Indians of Pacobamba  
after drinking with them

in the same place where his father had been killed by Indians "for taking their land" (297–98). It  
seems a perfect example of *tu quoque* except that the white supremacist's panic about being engulfed  
by "the dark races" is absent here, the tone sober throughout. Speeches by Alencastre and his  
daughter stress his love for the land and beneficence toward its people; after the burning the Indians

are reported to have cut the legs, arms, and tongue off the corpse, indicting each for the injustice it committed, and perhaps cut out the heart as part of a ritual to fertilize the land and bless weddings: at the annual carnival, where a lamb's heart is being burned prior to burying:

You're the one I love, the man says  
and the woman: Will you be able to have me?  
Can you look after me? Have you cows?  
Have you sheep? That's how they choose each other.  
When it's dark they go off to the hill  
and that's where it ends. (300)

No racist paranoia, then, but also no yearning for a pre-capitalist utopia, echoing a point made in the book's second poem, "Let's go! / Best not return / to the subverted Eden" (286).

One result of that subversion is of course landfills of dead; and "[s]ouls come back / cannot leave the places / where food is put out for them" (290). On the *Día de los Difuntos* they revisit the earth; families bring "crates of beer and bags of cakes" (303) to the cemeteries. Rowe's "Night of All Souls Day, Toqroyoq" is narrated, it seems, by a Western tourist joining up with other tourists and perhaps a few locals who push the drinking past noon to mid-afternoon, then leave the cemetery to drink elsewhere:

[S]uddenly we were  
hungry there was  
nothing except a tin of sardines  
in the only shop still open

which we followed with a bottle of cheap pisco

to make the sardines digestible

then danced in the dormitory

of the Agricultural Aid Station. (303)

—“a rusty sardine can,” incidentally, being what the Indians were rumored to have dismembered Alencastre with (300). The next morning the narrator’s vision is impeded by “triangles and other abstract shapes” “which finally dissolved / after mid-day” (304). But the dead are hungry; Rowe’s characters drink and eat in apotropaic mimicry, as if to outflank mortal consumption of them by rendering themselves insensible, leaving for the morning only flashes of cubist memory. The dead haunt memory’s peripheries, however, as do those ghosted alive. In wake of the UK uprisings of August 2011, Rowe’s *The Spectre* presents the following:

Soho

6:30 pm

raindrops

on a black BMW

the streets

are reconciled (112)

This is a precise and beautiful evocation which the closing couplet completes even while indirectly reiterating the warning: phenomenology = ideology. Clearly that does not account for the success of the mimetic action, the Hemingwayan precision of detail that prompts the reader to fill in the rest, both sensorily and atmospherically. For some further grasp of this, Benjamin suggests, we need to include the image-in-language, the stanzaic rhythms and inter-mirrorings around pauses, the poem's form. The vividness of these Soho streets, he would insist, "flits past. It is not improbable that the rapidity of writing and reading heightens the fusion of the semiotic and the mimetic in the sphere of language" ("Mimetic" 722). Perhaps. Certainly, we need a placeholder for why linguistic mimesis—which includes but is not limited to narrative scenarios—can be so effective. This will be of more than passing interest.

## UTOPIA NOW

CREON.        So she will understand, but as the ghosts do,

Honouring dead things is a mere excess. (Hölderlin 94)

Two acts of extraordinary poetic mimesis have exercised Rowe for some twenty years: the poem "Mass" from César Vallejo's *Spain Take This Cup From Me* (1939)—given in Rowe's translation, along with probing commentary, in *Resurgent* 1–7; and Raúl Zurita's book-length *INRI* (2003), Rowe's translation of which was published in 2009. In both cases the issue is resurrection. "Mass" comprises a series of pleadings with a dead Popular Front fighter not to stay dead, first by a comrade then by increasing numbers, urging their love for him; but only when "all the inhabitants of the earth surrounded him" does the corpse slowly get up and begin to walk. As for *INRI*, in a sequence

of blocks, rolling, incremental sentences stage topographical upheaval as Chile's *desparecidos* are dropped from planes into volcano mouths and the sea. The cordilleras, the coastal plain, the sky, the sea go down, only to rise again transformed by amorous inclusion of those decreed to vanish—including survivors (like Zurita) of the Pinochet years, hitherto themselves in some way dead (*INRI* 83, 86ff). Crucially, these texts do not simply reach for an idea long available; they earn it by remaking it, against formidable odds. To hear Vallejo's poem properly requires, Rowe insists, "placing in suspense a particular way of thinking ... expressed in the notion—the law—that resurrection ... is simply unreal. This leaves open the question of what is real inside the idea of resurrection" (*Resurgent* 4)—something he has already answered with respect to Zurita: "What remains of Christian thought is the idea of a common life" ("Afterword" 136), on which the Pauline extension of resurrection, potentially, to all is premised, and love as its means. Vallejo leaves open the rent in reality; Zurita's Epilogue part-revokes it: "No. / They are dead"—not to mock or eradicate experience of the text, but rather in hopes to reorient it, as confirmed by Rowe in his "Afterword": "This is a book that completes itself outside itself, outside literature" (134).

In *Working the Signs*, Rowe conveys political orientation largely as witness of a context often exotic in its historical as well as cultural detail ("The 5th sun secured / by self-sacrifice / of bird-snake-mask-man" [*CP* 293]). In his later poetry, set mainly in England, not only is the tenor of the imagery much muted, the feel is altogether drabber—"cut to M16 / Vauxhall / eye / drain" (58), where we note the pun on "drain"; or

7 pigeons

if you want to

count them

and if you don't

on Monday

by the council estate (66)

where we note the support for objective fact—and the strategy has turned in the direction of direct formal interventions into ideological blind spots, as identified and detailed by Stephen Mooney in “Poetry as Political Response.” This “declarative mode” (23) takes in the sometimes deliberately clunky vocabulary (“the / non-bullies”) and the often-blunt phrasings that can seem more suited to commentary than a poem (“return to / some / / thoughts / / some / major violent systems” [CP 63]). More precisely, perhaps, what his readers can be expected to know, even to take for granted, Rowe insists, without rhetorical flourish, on rendering explicit: this is objective nightmare, the global/local system that in its resolutely callous unsustainability “will / kill us” (52). If Rowe wants his work also to “[complete] itself outside itself, outside literature,” then his writing already straddles that divide, its status, in Mooney’s words, “even as poetry ... necessarily unclear at times” (26).

What, then, is or can be purged in *Death Purge*? The title poem opens with footsteps overheard at night “long after / the event / occurred” (CP 15). If by “the event” Rowe means the 2011 uprisings, he may also have in mind Alain Badiou’s sense of “event,” something abnormal that has unapparently breached a situation, and the truth of whose revolutionary potential only “an



*interpretative intervention* can declare” (181). A “subject,” in Badiou’s sense, is identified by emerging fidelity to this event, which would suggest that the riots have yet to break cover as what Badiou calls an “evental site” (173–77); it also suggests an uncertainty on Rowe’s part as to what that event, if it was one, might entail, and that one of the tasks of *Death Purge* is to try to find out.<sup>4</sup> The poem then shifts to the sound of metal at night, perhaps cars, but the poet is reminded of the “burning metal” (15) of a plane crash and has a vision of his own death. By now we seem to be in a dream, whose next scene is the hold of a ship returning from a Japanese prison camp where the narrating persona wants someone to die in his place, or alternatively, “a witness / to his death the exact moment,” even as he will soon hear the gasps of many men dying and wonder, “hwat is there to be done?” (17)—in poetry specifically, given the ludic spelling-tweak. For in Bonney’s sardonic reminder, “Everybody knows that Thatcher faked her death” (70), and no doubt the “absolute love” that would be needed to scream “the dying ... into general existence” is

not to be

in language

no

it’s a scar

no

the mark, the law

no

hhhhwat

---

<sup>4</sup> See “second materialist exercise” for further probing of the/an “event” (CP19).

is to be done? (CP 17–18)

Again and again—in “the unvomited,” “thanatorium,” “it is wrong,” “a new face of death in german society,” “start the civil war,” and elsewhere—these poems return to the cruelties of a sacrificial economy gone informal. Apparently, “it’s easier to destroy the world / than to destroy capitalism” (26)—which itself has more and more clearly undertaken the former. Death *purge*?

But it is a book, a project, not a random collection of poems. Let’s have a look at another take on love, in “a common place”:

under grammatical skin  
the anti-poem  
because the coming body is female  
(inconsistent with what you are)  
is a fourth body  
(like some flesh)  
in fact tenderness  
(keeping it and losing it) (37)

In the book’s center, this is a sustained effort to imagine some figure beckoning to shelter, to a tenderness the persona has some difficulty holding onto, perhaps even recognizing. It’s called a “body” and a “female” one, but not quite the female we know, for it is also “a fourth body” (rather than the hermaphroditic third that a number of esoteric traditions would offer to synthesize the usual two, or a third by way of transgender surgery); the “you” that this body is “inconsistent with” is everyone. It is worth comparing this to production of another impossible body, in Rob Halpern’s

book-length mix of prose poetry and stanza-forms *Common Place*, a text Rowe's title and opening lines—"and what is / by an immense subjective force / the common place" (CP 37)—are almost certainly meant to evoke. Halpern's "immense subjective force" as writer is dedicated, it seems, to reanimating, via the mimetic magic of closely detailed pornographic scenarios, the erotic stir that the word "ligature," in a news report of a detainee suicided in Guantanamo Bay, aroused in him (*Common Place* 23). But the book as a whole is not pornography, fretted as it is by recurrent unease—about the author's motivations, his manipulative power contained throughout "by the camp's circumference" (123), his fantasy's effective participation in the American consumer economy (86, 127)—that delivers the cumulative verdict: this is a "dumb experiment" (123). Like Zurita, if for different reasons, Halpern rescinds the mimetic fantasy, knowing the reader cannot but retain it as the bid of body and imagination

to span an otherwise unbridgeable gulf, the amplification of pleasure's signs being the means by which to perceive an occulted bond... What word isn't obscene under such conditions? ... [I]f love's realization implies a revolution in the very structure of our life-world signaling the end of a truth whose universality *forever false* hangs on the death of every particular, then his body demands a love I can barely even intimate. (71–72)

Rowe's "a common place," while following a comparably visionary model, is only part of his own strategy. At the point where we glimpse the fraught possibility of a transcendent tenderness, the poem turns, associatively, to divinity and its ambiguities:

oh god

oh scorpion

who drags a bone

on what track what surface? (37)

The “scorpion” surely evokes, in another nod to Halpern, whatever presides over the carnage, torture, rubble, militarized displacements, and (now) genocide in the Middle East (“the manager” become a pitiless complex of often rival alliances). Rowe’s own mimetic “impossible” in this book takes the form of relentless returns to politically engineered suffering, neglect, and death, everywhere a constancy of suffering which we realize, at some point in its chafing of us, can never be “adequately” detailed. Death has not been purged, unless a surfeit of it is a kind of purging; the utopia will not come. But the poet is left with an alternative: Make utopia now.

This may seem to cheapen both concepts, the impossible reduced to a formal gambit of overload, utopia to writing and reading poetry, both of which we can do where we are. But what does the forever deferred utopia reek of but the Christian Heaven as opioid? And yes, as Hannah Arendt says, the notion of inner (conflicted) freedom, beginning with Paul and elaborated by Augustine, realizes itself as social freedom only in collective settings (145–48). But Rowe’s poems, in dialogue as they are with numerous voices, require a collective setting for their very conception; and his *CP* has already entered into a global scattering of poetry communities intersecting with or grazing or ignoring each other—the present volume of essays one more instance of that. And yes again, the broader project has not been completed “outside itself, outside literature,” and never will be in any directly traceable way; but, as Arendt also insists, “[I]t is not in the least superstitious, it is even a counsel of realism ... to be prepared for and to expect ‘miracles’ in the political realm”

(170)—where she defines “miracles,” prefiguring Badiou’s “event,” as secular “interruptions of some natural series of events, of some automatic process, in whose context they constitute the wholly unexpected” (168). (It goes without saying that such a “miracle” need not be good.)

*Dialectic of Enlightenment* argues that Odysseus overcomes the series of mythic terrors he faces precisely by imitating them with reasoned cunning: “It is impossible to hear the Sirens and not succumb to them; therefore he does not try to defy their power” (58); he hears them but (bound to the mast, even straining in the ropes) survives it.<sup>5</sup> The apotropaic function of art, Adorno will later argue, is bound to mimesis even as (like the cave paintings) it begins to separate itself from magic—whose power it retains, again, in a different, less virulent form, insofar as it also retains the rational as a demand *for* (aesthetic) form. Rowe’s (and many others’) poetry, then, is apotropaic action where it is needed: inside the collective death drive that the organizing imperatives of global capitalism are unable to turn back from. In the meantime, the overall strategy of *Death Purge* acts as a “corrective of [the] reified consciousness that has ... burgeoned as totality” (*Aesthetic* 330), also contextualizing the book’s earned—and sustaining—moments of delicate beauty. Here is “yellow” in its entirety:

yellow

some sort of

nowhere

some

yellow

---

<sup>5</sup> That is, for these writers, the Enlightenment *begins* with the compromised struggle against mythic terror in Homer’s great poem.

red-yellow

places

if I could

see

with insect eye

I would

yellow

was-yellow

not yet (62)

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