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Episode 32: Niall O'Sullivan (June 2015)

Host: David Turner - **DT**

Guest: Niall O'Sullivan - **NO**

Transcript edited by: Harriet Foyster - 04/06/2017

Conversation:

DT: Hello my name is David Turner and this is the Lunar Poetry Podcast. This month I'm in north London talking to Niall O'Sullivan, poet, part-time lecturer and host of Poetry Unplugged and we'll begin as always with Niall giving us an introduction to his work.

NO: My work... Yeah I should point out that we are in north London but I live in south London, that's an important part of my work. I don't know what to say about my work because I've been doing... I've been involved in poetry for... Since 1997, so coming up to twenty years, about eighteen years I think. So the things I've written about and the ways that I've written have changed quite a lot. At the moment my writing seems to encompass these kind of square, sometimes quite intense paragraphs of prose that I call prose poems. And that's my writing really.

And before that I wrote a tonne of poems in terza rima, before that I wrote a tonne of sonnets, before that I guess I was a bit more of a performance poet. So my work has gone through a lot of things, I guess class comes into my work quite a lot, my background comes into my work. At the moment a lot of stuff that I'm writing is just weird stuff that's kind of... I guess quite influenced by Richard Brautigan and a few others, so it's quite surreal. It seems to have one foot in kind of urban reality. I wouldn't call it magic realist or anything like that, they're just surreal poems about eccentric things that sometimes have a bit of a political subtext, but not always.

DT: Thanks very much. And as Niall just said there we're both from south London and for some reason doing this interview on the Holloway Road. But it's good.

NO: Exactly.

DT: And also today Thursday 7th May and there is a general election happening in the UK. But when this goes out it will all be long forgotten. And hopefully Cameron will have been sacrificed to the socialist gods or something, or we will have all moved to Norway.

NO: Yeah. Well we can edit this can't we? So we can say it right now. Brilliant! Victory! I was always behind them all the time. 1... 2... 3... All hail to my neo-con rulers! If any private businesses want to fund my poetry, where there will be subtle plugs given for your product all the time, then I'm your man.

DT: Niall is having an LED display attached to his chest as we speak.

NO: If you've done nothing wrong then you've got nothing to fear.

DT: So we're going to try and avoid talking about it as if it's not really happening because at the moment it's not relevant to this but I think we're going to start talking about Poetry Unplugged which is an open mic night that takes place every Tuesday at The Poetry Cafe in Covent Garden in London, and Niall's been hosting that for like one hundred and fifty seven years?

NO: Yeah something like that!

DT: Yeah. And I don't know I suppose there's a generation of poets that view you as like some sort of Catholic priest figure in that we all really feel guilty when we haven't seen you, we really should come and see you every week but it never really pans out that way.

NO: It's like the kids that visit their old school. They go a couple of times and they're like "oh we'll be back, we'll be back."

DT: "Honest Sir!" They still call you sir.

NO: Then you don't see them again. You see them on the telly and stuff like that.

DT: So how did you get involved with Poetry Unplugged?

NO: I used to read at Unplugged. It was the second ever poetry night I ever read at, in 1997. So I did my first reading, my first open mic, at a place... Riverside Studios, a place that was really... Anyway I won't go into details about that one, but it was in West London so I did that one and then Poetry Cafe. I remember reading an article in The Independent, this magazine, newspaper that used to be a bit left wing.

I read an article... They had an article, I shit you not, about bars where the staff were smarter, better dressed than their clientele and one of them was the Poetry Cafe with this dude at the bar called Fran who always ended up on telly as a different thing every week. He was like this relationships expert one week, and stuff like that. Yeah he was such a blagger. And there was an interview with him, and I went "oh, Poetry Cafe." So I went to TimeOut. And the pages of TimeOut were kind of like the Bible of the poetry scene back then, people weren't as active on the Internet.

There was no social media, no web 2.0 and all that. So yeah you'd go to TimeOut and I just saw 'open mic, every Tuesday, Poetry Cafe' to cut a long story short. So I was a patron of Unplugged and a regular reader at Unplugged for about seven years before they asked me... Before I took over from Carl, who took over from John, the guy who started it, John Citizen. So yeah I've been hosting it for ten years but I've been coming to that night for much longer... seventeen/ eighteen years.

DT: It's interesting, that point about TimeOut, because I haven't been doing it for long enough to really know the open mic scene without the aid of Google. But I mean that was... I think Unplugged is so well established now, I think it's the first hit if you're trying to find an open mic night in London.

NO: Yeah.

DT: Because there a lot of people that I've spoken to and that's their first... The first place they've read. Is that not an odd experience for you knowing that so many people have come through for the first time there?

NO: Not entirely because it was the first place I and a lot of people who I'm contemporary with also read at. So I'm glad it's still that kind of rite of passage for a lot of people, and seeing lots of names of people, just finding the old lists. It was really cool when I was at home, finding the notebook, because my first few lists I did for the first couple of years as a host I did in different notebooks. Anyway finding Scroobius Pip's Poetry

Unplugged virgin list and stuff like that. I don't think it's strange because it's central London, it just tends to be the first hit on Google. The location's good because it's tied to the Poetry Society. So I've got a lot of things working in my favour to make sure people come through that door, and I think it's all down to my natural charisma.

[Laughter.]

DT: I don't think through anyone's fault, but it seems like quite an intimidating first place to read, just because everyone seems to know what they're doing in there, when you go down there.

NO: Right yeah.

DT: It was the first place that I read properly as well. But once you're down there at least the staircase seems too small to run out of again. So once you're in you're in, and you have to do it.

NO: You were nervous as well weren't you? I mean everyone's nervous.

DT: Oh I was terrified.

NO: I was terrified when I first read there. And people who are nervous are really funny because they look sort of different. So someone who's really nervous, they look like they're going to trash the venue or something like that.

DT: I still look like I'm going to trash the venue without being nervous! But I was particularly angsty on that occasion.

NO: The man from Broadmoor is still my highest...

DT: What's that?

NO: Is it Broadmoor? Have I got the name wrong? Broadmoor, the criminally insane prison where all the serial killers go. There was a guy who came to Unplugged.

DT: Oh was there?

NO: Yeah he turned up, he turned up to sign up and I just noticed this intensity about the man right away, it's kind of like a shark going through and the fish are just getting the fuck out of the way. And it was just like that, like he stepped into my personal bubble and I just felt... I just wanted to swim away. So I said "oh yeah okay so it's your first time? oh great," and I introduced him as a Poetry Unplugged virgin and all that, then he gets up on stage and I remember he just goes "I just got let out of Broadmoor for a crime I didn't commit." And my brain immediately knew that you don't get let out of Broadmoor for crimes don't commit, you're in there because you're criminally insane, it's got nothing to do with what you did or didn't do.

DT: Yeah. No no no.

NO: Like you could be found innocent but then they could find out along the pathway that you're a very dangerous person and you go away there. So he's there, he's reading his poems and everyone is just like "okay, this will be over in five minutes." And there was something about his poetry at same time, I've got to say it was a real doorway into another world. And I think that's what Unplugged gives us, more than all of that T.S Eliot Prize bollocks and all that kind of stuff. And the kind of nice, tidy sort of spoken word even that kind of like finds its way. This raw, kind of intense, scary, other-world stuff normally you find at open mics or kind of little presses and stuff. So he's reading his work and everyone's a bit like "this guy... This dude's scary but it'll be over soon".

And I remember he just does one line of a poem and he says, first line of the poem is "I fuck children and I don't care." So everyone... The silence is full of everyone in this room going "alright, I feel I have to intervene now, I have to say something, I'm probably going to get a table stuck into my head but I'm going to stand up now" and you can see everyone swinging themselves to go "enough, okay?" and then other people who were just doing the whole no back bone thing or whatever. And the next line of the poem was "was written on the cell wall" and everyone goes "oh, oh thank god, oh."

DT: "I don't have to become a martyr."

NO: Yeah, exactly! Anyway that's a long story short but yeah. So what can I say? All people come to it because it's very visible, it's very high profile, it's been running for such a long time and it has its own momentum. So yeah I think that's more... I mean I'm glad I've been part of that for ten years, April is my ten years as a host, but yeah I'm glad I've been part of that. It's nice to see so many... To be in a position to also help people along their way, if they're not going to read at Unplugged for every week of their life it's nice to point them in different directions.

DT: Yeah I was going to say because it is quite a nice entry point. Even if you just read, maybe, for three or four weeks in a row and then go off and find other nights that are closer to where you live or they suit your sort of friendship circle a bit better or something like that. But it is a really good entry point. I mean do you think that hosts of other poetry nights should be encouraging performaners to push themselves or raise their game a little bit, or even a lot?

NO: Yeah I... There are varying degrees. So I think Unplugged is very much... There's a friendly pressure to people that I apply, I try and keep the vibe up and then I try to invite people to also keep that vibe up. And I wouldn't necessarily say I encourage people to kind of up their game and stuff like that. When slam was invented by Marc Smith that was very much about getting people to up their game, it was giving the audience scorecards, it was spirit of Rome in the eighties, and he just felt that the open mic was too self-indulgent and he wanted people to basically... He wanted a real dialogue between the audience and the performer. I feel two ways. I remember Poetry Unplugged, when I used to go there, it was like we were deep into the performance poetry era.

DT: Yes, yeah.

NO: As I have controversially pointed out in my blogs and so the late 90s/ early noughties. And I remember it was people just... It was all about performance. Yes there were quite pagey poets as we like to call it, but there were loads of performers literally doing their greatest hits every week, honing their... They had five poems and it was all about getting those poems... Sometimes developing a performance, they seemed to see it like their rehearsal spot for it. And also actually there were a lot of actors because back then you could still get an equity card based on poetry performances and gigs and stuff.

DT: Yeah, I was thinking because, not that I believe that Poetry Unplugged should change and I put Poetry Unplugged in the same sort of small group as maybe Spoken Word London where they are nights where newcomers are welcome, and people are really welcome to come and just try new stuff out and there's no real pressure to perform as such and I mean perform as in being any good. You can just come and try something out. But I wanted to go on later to discuss maybe the need for more critical discussion and reviewing of spoken word.

NO: Oh I agree.

DT: And whether there should be a different... Some of the other nights. if we talk more specifically about London just for a moment without sounding too London-centric, but if some of the other nights should be trying to provide a platform where people come and raise their game a little rather than just being supportive, as Unplugged rightly does.

NO: I always say if poets ask me for advice I do that whole line that I was given by Jem Rolls many years ago, he's the guy that used to run a night called Big Word. And he told me to read in every toilet in Soho. And so I read all these places where you know the audience were hostile and stuff like that, and I don't know if there still are places where the audience are hostile but I definitely read at a few places with audiences that would turn. And I had audiences turn on me. I never gave a fuck when they did. But it's just... But it helped me a lot as a performer, and it helped me to kind of develop presence and stuff like that, and focus, and intensity, but also charm and stuff like that.

I mean there's a place... The Foundry used to have an open mic there run by [inaudible] who did great work. But I thought there were a lot of wankers reading, well not just reading but in the audience, these entitled pricks who thought that they were, I don't know the mob I guess but they weren't. They were like the people that were displaced... The first wave of people displacing people from the East End. And so I remember one time I actually got them on my side with my poem and they were all like "weyyy hey hey" at the end of it. After all their "weyyyyy you can do it weyyy" I remember doing the poem and I went "yeah you can all fuck off."

And that felt great, to get them all on my side and then basically just giving them the finger, and just go "I don't like you you're scum." So yeah, that's how that worked for me, and I wouldn't recommend that to everyone. Yes I think we should be trying more stuff out and we should have a bit more... I think we should have varying degrees, nights like Unplugged

are important because it's about people finding their feet. I don't want this to be the night where someone performs and then never performs again. But I think the audience maybe should sometimes be a bit more vocal about what they like and don't like. I think there are reasonably civil ways of doing that. And I think, yes, as we'll probably talk about later there really is a role for informed criticism, informed on it's criticism.

DT: Yeah. Actually I tell you what, why don't we take a poem and then we can get on to talking about that perhaps.

NO: Okay so let's go with something relatively topical shall we? This poem is called Interglacial. It was in the Morning Star about maybe a year ago, maybe. But there always seems to be an election so it always seems to be relevant.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:15:33]

DT: I'm most impressed that you reference that whale.

NO: We all remember the whale don't we?

DT: Yeah. We should never forget.

NO: My Irish relatives they talk about... There's a dolphin, I don't know if he's still about but if you went to Dingle there's a dolphin that would visit the boat and everyone else called him Funghi. And I just remember my uncle just referring to him as 'that fucking demented dolphin.' I'll do the accent, my own peoples' accent, "that fuckin' demented dolphin." It's just... I love that kind of thing. So yeah just we're all very tragic about that whale, we all really mourned it. But I have something in my head it's like an uncle just going "that fuckin' demented whale." Anyway... The bones are in the Museum of London now aren't they, or something? I hear.

DT: They should be more of an honour, they should be on the plinth in Trafalgar Square, that's where they should be. No more of this art bollocks. Just put the whale up.

NO: Exactly, yeah.

DT: We'll just stick for the moment talking about the spoken word scene in the UK, and this idea of having more criticism. But do you have any ideas of how you feel the scene should develop, or which direction it should take? Or do you think there should be any particular changes to the way it's run?

NO: I think I'd start with a disclaimer that no one, if it's kind of a young scene, no one needs to give a shit about what a bitter old fart like me thinks should happen. I'm very much from a sort of... My kind of, I guess my peak, one of my peaks came when there was a real what I called the death of performance poetry. And all I meant of that... I didn't mean like

you know it's a bit like the death of punk. Of course there's still punk, of course people still paint like impressionist painters and all this kind of stuff.

When we really speak like that it's a very dramatic wave, it gets a few more hits of naming it, maybe slightly inaccurate, but it means that a lot of the innovation of that particular thing, a lot of the stylistic breadth got developed in that particular time. And people still use it, but it belongs to a kind of certain historical era. So when performance poetry... It basically meant that a lot of performance poets, people from our generation were either getting straight jobs or they had children or whatever, that kind of thing, were vanishing from the scene. It felt like a generational shift was happening and at the same time a lot of other poets who had got older, so like everyone, Patience Agbabi, Tim Turnbull, even Tim Wells. I mean he'd hate to be called performance poet.

DT: Go on, do it, do it.

NO: He's still tied to that. He's a performance poet with his la-de-da, flouncy, jump about the stage and telling us all war is bad. I'm fed up of it.

DT: He's such a hippie.

NO: Yeah, such a hippie. So there were these poets that were kind of... But now they're published. They've been nominated for literary awards and so you know Patience Agbabi was nominated for the Ted Hughes Prize, she's one of the next generation poets. Tim Turnbull has been nominated for the Forward Prize a couple of times. So they've crossed into that literary sphere. And then like spoken word, there's a generation of younger poets, it's very much like the page/stage divide in a lot of ways. It was quite dead, not meaning that there wasn't still stuff we could look at one side and go "that's performance and that's literary" but it was just that the blurring line, this line of division was very fuzzy.

And I think it's a bit less fuzzy today. I think there's more of a page/stage divide again. I still think there are people that cross over, but not as excitingly and as often as they were in that kind of early to mid-noughties period. So anyway yeah, spoken word today? I don't know, what would I say about where I'd like it to go? I think ninety five percent of the spoken word poems I hear would be better if they were a minute longer. I mean a minute shorter! Not longer. Bloody hell, stop me there! Do not take that to heart, young children. They don't need to be longer.

It's like saying that track on that Yes album needs to be longer. And I mean that, metaphor. I find that a lot of them, they bring out a compelling image, they have some wonderful lines and then they tend to have... There's like this need to... It carries on and you're thinking "you've made your point really." Then the cliches creep in. And then they seem to end it on some big epiphany, you know? They seem to... It always has to be tied up at the end.

DT: There has to be a goal to it or something?

NO: Yeah and so in some ways you could say it's very traditional public rhetoric. Speechmaking. There's nothing wrong with that. You can't kill that. That's always going to be a part of the human verbal life.

DT: Do you think that's a natural sort of result of there being such a large amount of prose poetry, and people feel the need to end the story? Because even if it's in verse or form people still tend to end this... Maybe it's just because it's become a fashion I don't know but they have to wrap it up somehow.

NO: I find prose poetry to be very economical actually, I find a lot of prose poetry to be the opposite. It's normally a paragraph which is very concise and most prose poems don't last longer than a minute to read, I find. I mean I could be wrong, that's a very big field!

DT: Mine go on for ages!

NO: A prose poem is just a poem with no line breaks that's all. But I find that a lot of prose I do hear, like Claudia Rankine's latest work Citizen, which is a huge book which Penguin are going to relaunch their poetry off the back of. I think it has a lot of economy and I don't think there's a lot of that economy in a lot of spoken word stuff. I find that it kind of... Yes it has to do that big ending, wrap it up with a big moral message, and sometimes actually the really compelling stuff is happening in the situation that they're relaying.

DT: I see what you mean, maybe it's more to do with slam influence then? Because you're trying to get a direct message across in order to get points and you need to be fully understood. You know a sort of concise prose poem doesn't really go anywhere.

NO: I'm being completely spineless here as well by not giving any proper examples, you know what I mean? But I don't want to hurt peoples' feelings.

DT: No no no. This is not... I don't mean to talk about that. And this is really the point of what we're going to come on to discuss now, is how you can discuss and critique poetry without destroying people. Because it's not actually about that. It's not about ripping people to pieces. It's about having a system in place where we can say "well that isn't this certain style or these particular fashions aren't really working."

NO: And this is just my taste, maybe there's whole audiences that probably really like...

DT: Absolutely. The disclaimer that you made that you don't believe your opinion is that relative... And I'm not making a podcast because I think my opinion is that relative. I just think that people need to talk about this, and hopefully this starts a discussion. This is not a definitive answer about anything because you and I both know fuck all about anything Niall, we both admit that.

NO: And one of these guys that we're criticising could just turn around and go "well here's my ten thousand thumbs up on YouTube, and there's your little word of criticism."

DT: Or they could look at my poetry and then we'd all be fucked.

[Laughter.]

NO: So I mean there's that, that seems to be working, if that's what people are after, if they're after thumbs up and all that that's fine. Sorry I've just veered us off the... So you're talking about criticism and stuff like that? I think Sabotage Reviews is a kind of criticism. Actually, another disclaimer: there's nothing wrong with a hatchet job. In fact poetry needs more of them. And I think before I say anything about lack of criticism in... Ooh is someone about to walk in? He's shaking his head. Anyway it doesn't matter. That will make no sense to your listeners.

DT: There was a man looking through a window.

NO: Somebody's booked into his classroom, we thought that they maybe aren't having the class or something. So anyway. What was I saying? Criticism.

DT: But did you want to talk about reviewing first?

NO: Reviewing. Well it's the same... yeah, reviewing.

DT: Because I don't... We get on to discuss why I don't believe that they're same thing but.

NO: Okay, okay, reviewing. I think any problems I point out about spoken word and live poetry reviewing are already existant in literary poetry. So the Guardian have their horrible little guffey pieces where they review a collection and say "bold" and stuff like that, have one mild line of dissent about three quarters of the way through the interview. And it's all very done in this kind of atmosphere of "it's good for poetry, we're helping preserve this precious specimen and we're keeping it from dying."

That's the mindset. I find that same mindset has been in a lot of poetry. I think poetry... Well there's not been any spoken word reviewing, not a lot. I find Sabotage Reviews... Some of the stuff I've read of theirs seems to be a bit too... I think the problem seems to be the reviewers are mates with people that they're reviewing for a start.

DT: Yes. Yeah.

NO: So people sort of like a bunch of four star/ five star Edinburgh shows of people they know... I'm being quite honest here. Sabotage is a great thing, Claire Trevien is amazing. I think she's doing a brilliant thing. I think their spoken word reviewing I've not being massively impressed by.

DT: No I haven't. I don't think it's very good standard. And I completely agree, it does seem like friends talking about friends.

NO: Yeah. And search for the word... Do a search on the word heartfelt. It turns up in every review. Well, maybe not every, but a lot. Heartfelt. What does that mean? What does

that tell me about a piece saying it's heartfelt? Bollocks. Yeah just search heartfelt, oh my God. And I just felt also that there seems to be a lack of engagement with the history of spoken word. It's very narrow, it's a bit too "I've been part of this scene, I know this person, this person, this person."

They're not looking further back. I mean that's why what Tim Wells is doing with Stand Up and Spit is so important in a way, bringing up more history so that the more history we learn about spoken word... And it's not the reviewers fault, it's that a lot of oral art forms don't get recorded. A lot of things which are kind of underground art forms or things like folk movements, I should say, rather than academic movements, they don't necessarily get recorded so it's very hard to have that sense of history.

DT: And it's... It annoys me that so many reviews are in actual fact adverts for shows. They're not reviews they're just... They tell you when and where it was on, they tell you a bit about the form of the show but there's no... You're absolutely right. And my biggest problem with it is being quite interested in reading fine art reviewing papers. You cannot write an art review really without referencing something that's come before, because you have to put it into context because that's the form that exists within the fine art world. And it's definitely something that's missing in spoken word reviewing. And if you do miss out that context then you have to really go into much more detail into something else, you know?

If you're only going to talk about the moment you have to talk about it properly, not falling back onto cliche. I mean I know if you're trying to write three or four reviews in a month or something and have a full time job it's easy to fall back on these things. But then you shouldn't be writing the reviews, you know? If you're finding yourself unable to write without that.

NO: The best reviewer is an outsider. People always think "oh reviewers, they're the people who can't do it." In some ways they should be the people that can't do it, they should be the people that don't have to be able to do it. They should be the people that know how someone... They should know about the history of it, and they should know what it's like for someone who hasn't experienced this thing what it could be like for them to experience it. And I think the idea of an outsider who isn't afraid of burning bridges is very important.

DT: Yes.

NO: I think the problem is our scene is so small there's no such thing as an outsider. What would an outsider do? They would be so shunned, and I mean there is that thing where... I've done it myself like that Nathan A. Thompson wrote. Everyone was like "who's this bloke? Never heard of him!" He did this critique of slam, which wasn't great. Anyone who uses a line like, and I've heard this quite a lot, "this poem is like a fine wine," you know, "to be enjoyed like a fine wine." That's that far away from saying that writing a poem is like making love to a beautiful woman.

[Laughter.]

NO: You know what I mean? It's just so... So there's that.

DT: I'd love Swiss Tony to review some of my poetry.

NO: But yeah we all grabbed our pitchforks and torches and went after him. And so there is that. I mean someone wrote a very unkind review of Poetry Unplugged. I felt it was unkind because why are you reviewing Poetry Unplugged? It's an open mic.

DT: Actually at Lunar Poetry we never review open mic. So if we go to events we only go to review the features and if there are features and open mics we'll only mention one or two open mics if they've been outstanding and worthy of comment, because an open mic slot is not there to be reviewed. I think you can write a review about what the venue's like and how welcoming the whole event is, you can write a review about the event, but not the people reading. I think that's unfair when it's open mic.

NO: It's really unfair. Most people haven't come there to... Some of those people might be having their struggles with open mic. Imagine doing your first open mic, and the battle it is maybe to get up there. And there are some people that also have had a previous crisis of confidence that go to an open mic, so to actually write a review of that person without knowing why they're there or whether they've been booked I think is out of order.

DT: Yeah. And so going back to the idea of criticism, the reason I believe there's a difference, because you know reviewing, I believe, is there as a record of particular events. You can obviously... There are elements of criticism in good reviews but a critical paper as such about the open mic scene or a particular style of poetry or spoken word is never going to be a review. So I believe that way of thinking stands alone. I was just wondering why there isn't more of that, regarding spoken word.

NO: Criticism?

DT: Or critical theory.

NO: Yeah, some of it's been quite bad as well. It's a bit of a gravy train PhD. There have been some people who have had a bit of prominence and had articles published in the Poetry Review and stuff like that about performance poetry, and they've come up with some weird, what I find... I don't really recognise. They've done these weird, lazy genealogies like where it's like "oh it started with the Beats, then it went to the black art movement, then it hopped over to Dub poets, and then it hopped over during the 80s to Benjamin Zephaniah. And there's that whole ignoring, the stuff that Tim is showing everyone now. Basically for a research thing, you find out they'd not done a lot of research.

There's a good book by Julia Novak which is more of a guide actually. I'd say if anyone was going to review poetry, live poetry, they should read a book called Live Poetry and Integrated Approach by Julia Novak. I use it with my students here and it's just very thorough in how it defines poetry and performance and also how you could review it, or how you could communicate through critical... Basically it asks you to build up a critical

language and a critical approach for that. I think anyone who is interested in it should... It's about eighteen quid or something like that.

DT: This is, I think... Actually you put that better than I did, the idea of where the difference between criticism and reviewing is. The critical language that you need in order to write critically about the art form is probably inappropriate for reviewing because that kind of language might be unapproachable for people that haven't ever seen a spoken word show. But if you're writing more critical theory then you do need that language and it doesn't seem to me, I mean I may not have found it yet, but it doesn't seem to me that it does exist. It's not definitely not that deep-rooted, you know?

NO: We haven't got that, and maybe that's why it's kind of unfair for me to point my finger at these young people who have stuck their necks out a bit to start writing critical reviews of spoken word stuff. But there's certainly an idea of where's the framework that we can use? And you could say that a lot of other genres and literary things, they have well entrenched critical approaches. But still you have warring critical approaches, you have stuff like the New Criticism. But in a lot of ways... It's not that new now, about a hundred years old, but in a lot of ways it really affected literature, that school of criticism, so that when performance came back to the fore it was really interesting that the New Criticism addressed nothing about that.

It was very much about confronting a text without the outside reference of the life of the poets, it was literally like you can confront a text on it's own in isolation, and you have all the critical tools to deal with that. That's basically the approach. It stands and falls by it's... Literally how it stands as a text on it's own. Which I think is ridiculous. I think there's about four seconds of serious examination before it falls apart. It shows white men from a certain background of course came up with that, completely oblivious to their background, their privilege, and what they see as neutral is actually something that's very very particular to their culture. So live poetry I think... Yeah I think there are ways in which you can address it.

When I send my students out to poetry nights I have these little checklists and it's everything about the venue, what's the literary standing of the poet themselves? What's the biographical aspect of the poet? One piece I show my students quite a lot is Skinhead by Patricia Smith from Def Poetry Jam. I'm not a massive fan of Def Poetry Jam as a show, I find it's a bit too worthy. And it's one of those attempts to film poetry. Whenever they film poetry they always over-drill the audience. Of course the audience are always part of a performance. But they're saying "okay you must all make tonnes of noise here and overreact in so many ways because it's good for poetry!" They always say that line.

But Patricia Smith's performance of Skinhead is amazing because it's a poem basically about fascist thug. He's lost his fingers in an industrial accident. He now goes out, he got laid off and he goes out and basically inflicts despicable acts of violence on people of ethnic persuasions and gay people and so on. It's about the anger. The whole poem is told from the vantage point of it but of course the thing that performance changes about this is it's an African American woman performing this character. And that's what works about it. It's not only the contradictions contained therein but the depth that it lends to it. It's not that it's a hollow husk, if you read that in isolation... I don't really do this but if I gave that... I think I

tried it once and then I thought "I wont do that again..." Where I gave the text to my students and said "I will show you the performance, read this, don't immediately jump to any conclusions, there's a trigger warning."

I don't do that anymore. "Don't do that again." And it went quite well but I thought actually that could have gone really wrong. But the poem itself you'd look at it and you'd think "oh my God who wrote this?" And then you see a black woman performing it and it makes sense. Taylor Mali did a performance of that poem in the voice of Patricia Smith, performing it to an audience that included Patricia Smith, and by all accounts it didn't go down very well. The only person in the audience smiling and laughing was Patricia Smith, in this "what's this stupid white boy doing?" type way. And it was naive of him, someone that usually excels at performance, to not understand that performative aspect. That's just one example of how actually performance is really important.

And actually once you're sensitive to things like that and then you watch literary poets performing, and you see what the bedrock of the performance is there. What ideological things are presented, by how everything from you know the twenty minute introduction by the dean of the university who talks about how important this poet is and reads out the name of everything they've published ever, and then brings on the person who's going to introduce the poet! That kind of thing. That's all ceremony, that's all performance, that ritual helps hold up that literary facade, the importance. The thing that they're trying to perform there is the importance of what is happening.

The importance of this poet who is visiting us. And then even the poetry voice, the lectern, when people read their poems like this... And it's because it's very important now and I cannot inject any emotion into it because this is heightened speech... And actually when you listen to Yates and listen to some of the other guys they're very much into the idea of poetry as heightened speech. And it sounds kind of hammie. They all sound Scottish, no matter where they're from. And even Basil Bunting's reading of Brigg Flats.

But once you get an ear for that it's quite good and you realize what they're presenting in that performance is the idea of one poetry, something between speech and song, has a music to it. They're presenting that idea and I think Yates said somewhere said that a poem should not be read in the way that you talk to someone across a breakfast table. We should recognise in our performance that it is a thing that is magical, cantatory. And it's interesting that now the dominant way of performing a lot of stuff is in a conversational sense. So what are we saying when we perform in that way? What are we saying? Are we making an ideological statement that there is no line between poetry and conversation?

DT: Unfortunately I think that people aren't thinking about that.

NO: Maybe not lots of them, but they're assuming it maybe?

DT: Yeah maybe without realising it. Maybe we should have another poem.

NO: Yeah. I went off on one there. The caffeine is kicking in. Also I'm in a lecture room so this was going to happen, I was always going to start lecturing at some point.

DT: I feel like I'm going to have my notes checked at the end.

NO: Yeah exactly! Can you pretend to look like you're on Facebook? There's something in this poem, I guess it's about my previous life, or part of my previous life. My step dad is a lecturer. And I remember him giving me advice and saying "get a pointer and then stand at the back of the classroom while you're delivering your lecture and then everyone who is on Facebook has to shut down their page." Good advice! Anyway this is a poem about how street I am, and about how much of a tough blue collar man, demotic man of the people that I am.

And how you just shouldn't mess with me really. Because even though I write poetry, I'm not some softie. You know a lot of known poets do that, it seems to be the whole subtext of their thing is like "I write poetry, but I'll smash your face in with a brick." Anyway sorry, this poem is called Shanked on a Clear Winter's Day.

[The author has not given permission for this poem to be reproduced]

[00:39:53]

DT: Thank you. It always makes me laugh.

NO: True story.

DT: True story. It might seem too far fetched.

NO: Yeah. I like to say that when people talk about crime and racist kind of like, you know, people have racist theories of crime. I always say "one time I was stabbed by a white man of my own class."

DT: He jumped me. He literally jumped me.

NO: I was shanked by one of my own peoples so you know I can't point that finger at other ethnicities for being more involved in crime.

DT: So when you had the job as a Jackie Chan impersonating gardener, you were writing poetry at that time were you?

NO: Yeah yeah I was writing and performing it. I had about four or five years at the theme park and then I worked for about six years at a council in West London. And so I was writing poetry. I left art school and then I kind of realized I wasn't going to be doing paintings, I realized that I wasn't going that way, that I was much more into my writing. I wrote quite a lot and then within about nine months really I did my first open mic. I remember I got encouraged to do it by this white Zimbabwean guy that I worked with. Everything was as sexual metaphor to him.

So I remember him noticing me reading all my Henry Miller books at the time, as young men are wont to do. And I remember him turning round to me and saying "mate you've already popped her cherry now it's time to go out and give her multiples." Everything was this sick, depraved... For some sick, depraved reason that was the motivation I needed to get on a train and stand up in front of a room of people that I assumed would be like my old English teacher, and read my poems and risk them going "that's not a poem." Everyone's idea of what will happen in their first open mic half the time.

DT: So did you tell your co-workers at the time that you were writing or..?

NO: They kind of found out eventually but I had a good eight years of... Some found out, some came along. Actually some used to come... One or two used to come to the nights but I would try and keep it kind of secret, and have my secret little notebook that I had. Kind of like Fred Voss, the Long Beach Machinist, who I think is finally retired, didn't really ever tell the guys that he wrote poetry, you know? His books selling okay in Europe and that kind of thing but there he is in America working with these machinists. They knew I was different at the same time you know?

As soon as you have any kind of la-de-da leanings and they find out about that you're like Little Lord Fauntleroy walking into that yard. And they found out in the end, they found out... I was still working as a gardener when my first collection was published. My last day, I remember this, I was strimming around a playground in Acton and for the first time in my entire career as a gardener I hit dog shit with a strimmer, and it went in my face, inside my mouth. I just remember being stood there, turning off my strimmer. I'd already given like a month's notice, it was two weeks into that notice because I was going on a tour with Apples and Snakes.

DT: What's Danny Glover's character name from Die Hard? He's always getting shot two weeks before retirement.

NO: No no no you mean.

DT: No, no, Lethal Weapon, sorry not Die Hard.

NO: You know what? I've forgotten the names of them myself. It's because we know it's just Danny Glover. But yeah isn't he always nearly retiring?

DT: Yeah, and there's a bomb under the toilet or something.

NO: Yeah exactly. It was one of those things where I was just like "that's what the last straw tastes like." And I left. But a lot of my early work is about that blue collar life actually, writing about my experiences and if I hadn't read people like Fred Voss or even Charles Bukowski I would never have known that that was good material for poetry, so it was really good to have some influences.

DT: I spoke to Helen Mort a little bit about this when I did a podcast with her but for slightly different reasons, but do you feel... Is guilt too strong a word for the reasons that

you would have kept writing about working class issues? Just because there seems to be this idea that if you're coming from that sort of blue collar working background or working class family it's hard enough to tell your parents "I might want to study art" or "I might want to be a writer" or anything. But then to actually move into it properly.

NO: Yeah. I was really lucky with my parents because they were always really supportive of what I do. I mean my mum just wanted to get into the middle class as quickly as possible. My dad was a fireman and then he became a failed businessmen. But then even he kind of went up, he'd started off working in Earl's Court Road fire station when he came over. Within about ten years he was in fire security at Harrod's, they have a little fire department there. He ended up being an odd-job man for Mohamed Al-Fayed quite a lot. And he used to see Dodi sneaking out the back when he was grounded.

So anyway, my family kind of had that... I guess they were aspirations, anyway, but what I liked about my parents is that they would always be very supportive. They were never going to do what I do with my daughter, it's like "I want that toy." "Okay I'm buying it for you right now!" That kind of thing. She makes a monosyllabic gesture. But they wouldn't do that for us. If we showed an aptitude for something, they would get behind us. So if I start doing loads of drawings then they'd go out and buy a bunch of felt tip pens or whatever, and come back with stuff for that.

If I showed that I wanted to act they'd quickly chuck me in like in a little remedial... I don't know some little drama class or something. But if there was some big flashy thing I wanted they'd never buy that for me but if we showed any kind of aptitude... I thought it was really good parenting anyway... For a certain thing they would get behind us. So I was really lucky to not be the traitor of the family in that sense.

DT: Yeah but it was a similar story with Helen where she was definitely supported by her parents to take the academic route and go to Cambridge and study psychology. But the social pressure still remained on her because she came from that background. You know there wasn't any direct pressure from her parents as such. And it's just interesting because you made that point earlier about some poets getting up and just being really masculine, because they write poetry that have to be.

And it's just this idea that... I don't know some people, it's either masculine... I'm talking about men mainly because they are idiots right? And it's these ideas of being working class and trying to remain masculine because I suppose most of these traditional challenges no longer exist in our lives. Our lives are very comfortable, we're all, in this country... The majority of people are what would have been middle class before. I can't be as working class as my parents, it's impossible, we all luckily earn too much money. Education is better.

NO: At the same time our parents were more able to buy property.

DT: Yeah there are challenges, of course now. I'm not saying it's some utopia, I just mean I can't be working class in the same way. I could be working class in a different way which is that I'll probably never own my own home. I'll never have car.

NO: Then I guess we're all working class!

DT: Exactly yeah yeah! It's more whether you felt like, maybe subconsciously, you felt under pressure to, not keep writing about that, I don't mean this as if you only wrote about those things, but do you feel drawn to it?

NO: I think yeah. You know what I think there are so many things that I didn't realize were class issues. Stuff like I went to grammar school. See I'm getting more and more middle class all the time. Because I passed a stupid exam which meant I didn't go to the thing that meant I was going to be having five kids by the time I was 16. It was literally that stark a choice where I grew up, in the part of Slough that I grew up in. So at grammar school I noticed that for some reason the teacher started singling me out and I did't know why. I thought "what's going on, what's happening?" And I only realised when... The school was right on this estate and it's the estate that I grew up on, and I still had mates on that estate.

And as soon as they found out I was hanging with these mates on that estate then they kind of just suddenly closed ranks on me. And what I didn't realize until much later in life is that there was a class aspect for that. At university as well, you know? All the other hippie kids at art college and all this kind of stuff. I became quite aware of it then, this thing which is no matter how well meaning they were, there were definitely aspects of 'you're not the same as them.' But I'd never hung around people like that until I went to college. One thing I love about art is that it shone that light on me. I came from somewhere where if you wore a kind of slightly weird t-shirt you'd get hounded by like forty-seven 12 year olds on BMXs.

[Laughter.]

DT: It's like that scene from Peep Show where they're all cycling around David Mitchell going "oi! Clean shirt! You clean shirt!"

NO: Yeah. If you were slightly out of the ordinary trust me you would get shit. But yeah there's that thing, seeing out of a world, actually, seeing a world of middle and upper middle class people, that was really, really illuminating for me I guess. and I'm seeing that there was a mental life that you could have that I was never really encouraged to have by people that I grew up with. That was something, yeah. There's an interview with Byron Vincent... Byron Vincent did this really interesting talk for Radio four, Byron Vincent the spoken word performance poet, he did a talk about a year and a bit ago about class.

And I remember her saying at the beginning of it, he goes "I come from a working class background, I grew up in a working class area, I grew up on an estate, but I'm middle class now." And that was a really interesting thing to hear. I thought "wow if that's true then I'm definitely middle class now." You know I make a living as a poet and lecturer. I live in central-ish London.

DT: I suppose that's the point I'm making. Now working class is much more of an attitude than really a reflection on your bank account. The possibilities you have in your life. My dad left school at fourteen, worked as a plumber and ended up at the post office, stuff like that you know. Those stories don't occur anymore and that's not the world we live in anymore.

You know? That kind of working class. Anyway, we could go on and talk about it forever. So when you did finish working as a gardener or manual labourer and moved into the world of writing more full time and teaching, what effect did that have on your writing?

NO: I remember what effect it had on my physique! I think I put on about two stone in as many months, I was an arsehole honestly. I was so full of shit. I'm still full of shit but it really went to my head, really went to my head, my ego, just my body... I think if anything my body just matched what had happened to my ego. When I first got the opportunity and people were paying me to go on tour. I didn't think... Like there's one admin that likes my style, thought I'd be good at writing a fifteen minute commission to take on tour, because there was a bit of money in it because I was used to not making a lot of money. I was like "the amount I get paid here, I can live on this for this long, and if I have to go back to digging holes after that... Fair enough"

But oh my ego just exploded and I was doing stupid shit like eating those full Englishes and just drinking drinking like bottles of beer in the afternoon and stuff like that. I think I had a bit of a mini-alcohol... I wouldn't say alcoholic. I had a dependency, let's just say, and it really manifested itself. I was turning up for gigs drunk and stuff like that. Not particularly on this your but other gigs and probably... If I had the brain about these things that I have now... At the same time I realise now that a part of that was almost like a mini crisis in my life. To dramatically go from one lifestyle to another, from this very physical working job that I got paid nothing for, surrounded by people who have all kinds of shit going on in their lives, and this masculinity, to go into this very liberal world.

DT: It must be very unsettling to suddenly be put in a world where all of your natural defences are useless because you are not being targeted in the same way at all. You're not just having to put up with a load of other gardeners taking the piss out of you for not reading the Daily Star or whatever.

NO: Yes exactly, suddenly it's really different and really dramatic and maybe, because I walk in with my... The whole defensive mechanisms that I've got, you walk into somewhere and like I was saying earlier feeling nervous as hell but looking like you're the guy that's going to throw someone out of a window. You know it's not that's all. And I remember I really offended everyone in Penzance.

[Laughter.]

NO: I did, I did. I said some line, I can't remember what it was but it was something that made it look like they weren't struggling in their lives. Actually in Penzance there's lots of unemployment and lots of people, and the economy there had gone to shit at that time. And seeing this guy from London, because you know anyone who's from outside of London sees London as a place where there's no poverty... So seeing someone from London, this white boy coming in, make a few little comments... Yeah if I go back there now I swear they'll probably have a wicker man waiting for me. I'm definitely never going back to Penzance now.

I felt bad about that afterwards, I got an email from someone quite patiently explaining to me why I was so offensive and then me being banged to rights and just saying sorry to them, but me realising I was doing that in a lot of places. I guess it's something that me and a few other posts still do sometimes, it is really interesting that I sometimes question my role now when I turn up in front of an audience of what... Most of my gigs have an audience of liberal middle class people. Thank you for coming and paying to watch me slag you off in poetry. I need to have an epiphany about that as well. Why am I slating stuff that makes people feel good about going out and watch that stuff when I'm writing stuff that doesn't make them feel that way? What do you know? Anyway.

DT: If we talk just briefly about the course you've been teaching, or the modules you've been teaching this year, what age are the majority of the students on the course? What level of course is it?

NO: Well there's a BA I teach, a couple of BAs I taught, and that's sort of first year and second year undergraduate with some mature students as well. So the undergraduates are nineteen, twenty, possibly twenty one, and then the mature students any age over 25. And then there's the MAs I've been teaching as well which is different. It's much more advanced. The kids that I teach, the students that I teach for the BA, a lot of them, a lot of students here at London Met are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, a lot from working class backgrounds. I really enjoy it. I really enjoy finding a way of having to go "this is why some Tories like Dryden and Pope are relevant to you."

I was just talking about economy in long poems but rhyming couplets where a long complex argument is spoken about something very intellectual but very social, and that whole kind of restoration poetry thing is, in a lot of ways, really relevant to working class and black and Asian minority ethnic people, anyone who might be, to use this shitty word, disenfranchised or maybe aren't feeling privilege, People have something to talk about and people have a feeling of a socio-political context.

In some ways what these tory boys were doing at the advent of coffee houses in London is kind of very similar to this Internet, YouTube, social media, sudden connection of ideas and its intellectual dialogues. Stuff like that is very rewarding, to kind of take stuff that they might not have been aware of, and they might have just fallen straight into the spoken word model of doing things, but to give them more of an idea of the history of poetry and how things have happened before in English Literature by these dead white guys can still be relevant and can still help them.

DT: Are there any areas of knowledge relating to the thinking around poetry or writing techniques that your students are lacking? Because I wanted to go on to ask you if you think there could be any specific changes to education before they reach this BA level.

NO: You mean like in school? I think you have to treat it like they've not been taught poetry. You have to treat it like that with a BA. Even an MA to be fair, I was thinking MA students, they might come from creative writing they might not have actually studied poetry in an academic sense. They might not have actually read poetry, they might have got in on the strength of their short stories and stuff like that. But you have to start from the

beginning really because even though, and it's funny because we end up teaching some of the same poets they probably have been taught in the national curriculum, Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Byron, the War Poets and so on... But we teach them under a slightly different context, I guess.

We really try to develop an idea of history and the history of ideas alongside how poetry is developed, and we do in a very short amount of time. And we get them to try the basics of writing, trying to get them to write in iambic pentameter, try and get them to write in different forms, to get them to think about rhyme, I think all of this stuff can only help them. I don't think anything, any of it would ever hinder anyone who wants to go into spoken word in poetry or whatever. Especially rhymes and stuff like that. Performers can always disguise a really dodgey rhyme. They know how to do it. They know how to disguise an underwritten line with their performance skills. But man if your writing is tight you don't have to put that effort in. If your writing is tight then actually makes the performance job easier for you. I don't know enough about the national curriculum these days to really...

DT: No that wasn't actually... That wasn't what I meant, because I sort of cast you as this figure and I didn't mean to question it quite like that. But if you had more time on the course are there any particular aspects you'd like to be able to do differently or spend more time on while you're teaching?

NO: You know what. I think you can always have too much time but I think the most important thing for a lot of poets and a lot of writers is to get out there and have a life. Give them the tools but that's just the tools, you know they need the substance, they need to get that from there. Some of them, to be fair, already have the substance, the mature students, we've got single mums coming in, they've lived loads of stuff.

We just need to give them the tools and off they go. The work's never done in poetry. I think from what I have taught, I mean I teach a poetry and performance module myself, and I think it's about the right length. I would just say to them everything else... I can give you some theoretical background stuff, but everything else you need to learn is by just getting out there and performing.

DT: Do you like write on the white board "this week and this weekend's homework: have fun"? And everyone goes "whaaaat?!"

NO: I write "work like you don't need the money, dance like no-one's watching and love like you've never been hurt" on the whiteboard and they all just look at me.

DT: Could you just tell us briefly a bit about the performance module that you started?

NO: Yes so it is basically a poetry and performance module where we go very quickly through oral tradition and stuff like that and then we look at different... So the first half of the module is based on historical developments in poetry and performance and socio-political developments. So I have one about poetry and intersections between poetry and comedy where we look at Lenny Bruce and Allen Ginsberg and stuff like that. And we look at their obscenity trials and about the question that is asked by Allen Ginsberg was able to get

by on the artistic merit but Lenny Bruce, in many ways whose work was not that different to beat poetry, didn't because it was comedy in that assumption.

We look at intersections between feminism and spoken word. And actually one thing I really like about contemporary spoken word and young people doing spoken word at the moment is intersectionality getting explored. And also feminism actually, how much feminism has kind of really come to the fore in a really effective way. Young people are politicized and talking about things in that sense. But anyway when we look at all these different historical outlooks, intersections between feminism, black and minority ethnic poets, goodness my mind is blanking now... Hip hop and poetry as well.

Can rappers be appraised as poets? And then the second half of the course we look at things differently, so we'll have one that is more analytical, so look at body language and poetry, we look at the voice of the poet. We look at mixed media and music with poetry. So the first half is very historical and more about the socio-political aspects. And we have a whole slam poetry one as well, looking at the history of slam. And then the second half is more analytical looking at all the different aspects of what makes a performance. And that's how it seems to work.

DT: Okay. As always, well whenever we get chatting we could probably chat for about three hours, but I think we're going to wrap up. We'll end on a poem I think. So we'll take the third and final poem please?

NO: Okay yeah, sort of a poem. So this is something I've been working on, a little project, my current thing I'm working on where I've done a call out for people who are interested in being my only friend. And I had a stupid little manifesto type thing of all the requirements. And then I've been writing about the 'not fictional at all,' he says, responses I've had from all these different people woven in between. So I think there's about four more of these to go before I hit the end of it tell the truth.

I'm kind of halfway, well more than halfway through at the moment. So I get all these little paragraphs summarizing each person's life who's applying to be my only friend. And there's a recurring motif about a guy called Ken who seems to who seems to have, among many things, a supernatural power over foxes and he writes his name a lot with exclamation marks. So there's then Ken narrative running through it. So I'm just going to read these two paragraphs which summarize two friendship abdications and if you want to know about Ken you're just going to have to read it. So I'll read these two out now.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[01:06:19]

DT: Thank you very much. Actually before we finish do you have any blogs or websites you want to mention?

NO: I think the easiest thing for me to do, I finally worked this out, is if you go on to niallosullivan.co.uk there's basically feeds for my tumblr, my audioboo, my YouTube,

SoundCloud and my blog. And so my website is a catch-all for all these kind of things that I want people to look at, read and listen to. And you can follow everything out from there, so if you just go on my website then you'll find loads of stuff to read, listen to and watch.

DT: And we'll list all the things under the podcast anyway, under the description. Thanks Niall.

NO: Is there anything else I can say to burn any bridges of anyone else?

DT: No we burnt them. I should have come with a list of people that we wanted to upset.

NO: We'll read them out and just say "fuck off." But no I think that's enough bridges for one afternoon isn't it?

DT: Yeah. And check out Niall every Tuesday at the Poetry Cafe for Poetry Unplugged. If you have done this before or not done it or just want to watch.

End of transcript.