

A NEMETIC POETICS, OR BEING HAPPY ALONE IN COMPANY

*One can have friends without wanting to see them.*

CHARLES LAMB

A problem shared is a problem doubled unless the problem is an essential and painful truth, that is awful, until it is inspiring, when experienced, in shared recognition, with other human animals. Can you achieve this anti-alienation of making things in writing poems? If you like.

Doing poetry can be proper lonely for reasons quite different than what many people seem to think. You hear people parrot on about the solitude of writing, as though the act itself were unusually isolated, or that the ways and means of creating or editing a poem require a removal of not just the body and the mind, but the soul. Everything that requires concentration is lonely. Everything worthwhile requires such attention. That's how taste and skill is made.

The unusual monoculture of poetry is a stereotype responsible for quite a good deal of bad poetry. Poetry is less remote than fiction say, taking a comparison in the same field, for arguments sake. You don't have to spend hours alone in your room on a computer to write a poem. No, poetry is lonely for me because of the very specific 21st century milieu. Poetry is out of these times, no matter what anyone says. It is a thing without market force, which allows it to create weird contextual manipulations of what quality is, and more importantly, it really really requires concentrated affirmative attention to be enjoyed as both writer and reader. No big deal, but we are in an era when everyone's brain is morphed up by rapidity. This is not necessarily a bad thing. But it is bad for good poetry.

This is why a lot of (not all) 'popular' poetry is now resting upon a strong biographical context and why all the articles about poetry's popularity mostly won't mention with whom it is popular and what kind of poetry it is that's popular. That's not just because the journalists tend to not know there are

types of poetry. Again, not necessarily a bad thing. It's simply the world has changed around the poem and the poem can only change so much. It can only be so accessible when it is good. It cannot convince like the cinema, say, at its lowest common denominator.

All this means, fundamentally, and reasonably, no matter how much work you put into writing things that are not boring and predictable and sentimental, things that are concerned with language itself, and what has come before, and how unimaginably complex, mysterious and difficult existence and language is, and no matter how good you get at performing those things, in public, to audiences, virtually no one can care. That's obvious though, isn't it? Isn't that a good thing overall? To know you are out of that kind of pursuit of success? Most of the time it is a blessing. Sometimes it makes you feel lonely. Hacking away at a seam somewhere remote, not wanting to make virtue of obscurity, not wanting to be swimming in language plastic with extreme artificiality either, and not wanting to court academic or tribal support systems of insulation and deluded bitterness, and yet, still being unable to swallow the anti-intellectual and sentimental thrust that dominates, without a common-sense quality control, the artform in your nation. You're stuffed really, if you want something other than your own little trough. But again, what can one reasonably expect? To write difficult, strange, hermetic, coded, weird books and expect them to appeal to readers? Funny when I say it like that.

*How could a poet from a Slavic country hope for anything more than a chamber audience confined to a few universities? We all entertain our illusions, but not when they overstep the bounds of reasons.*

CZESŁAW MIŁOŚZ, Nobel Prize for literature

I've contradicted myself, and truly, I don't want a lot of people to care, that's inevitable with what I'm interested in and given the way people are, but this all provides a problem that must be solved. How does one create meaning, purpose, motivation, even joy, pleasure, excitement, working away at a medium that can feel repetitive and pointless (knowing it is supposed to)?

Well this must reason come from the inside of everyone doing this kind of work. I choose and chose poetry precisely because it is not in my nature. I rabbit on, full of language, but I am also impatient, often reductive, heavy handed, clumsy, arbitrary. Knowing this, and choosing poetry, after living other lives and knowing nothing of it, precisely because I hoped it would offer balance, I find my own personal way to keep on, not giving up, not succumbing to the lonely feeling of wasting one's time and words, is to innovate around what is possible in poetry contextually as well as in its content. I follow what seem like obvious questions down their tunnels. Why are poems not published handwritten? Without colour or legibility play? What is the reading of the poem a static, staid simulacra and not a possibility for liveness, proximity, time against the language of poetry? Why do poets not often manage their own work like professionals even though all the other arts do in the 21st century? These questions go on and on, and that's an enormous gift. Blah blah, I talk about this too much, in print and person.

My point is perhaps the most fruitful of them all, for me personally, has been to ask, why don't poets collaborate? With other poets and other artforms? I can say safely they do so easily, having organised hundreds of events over the last decade where over a thousand poets, across the world, have been asked to work in pairs, and done so with grand results and great energy and joy. I have proofed my concept with others, forming transitory but generous communities which have supported the making of challenging and complex work, live, and it has taken me on an extraordinary personal journey. And I have found it surprising, near ten years in, to still find people finding collaboration innately innovative to poetic practise.

At its core though, this part of my work, has been entirely selfish. This is what I have come to realise, more than I did before, and its why I am writing this essay, post facto. For a burden shared is a burden halved. I have collaborated so extensively, so ambitiously, so intensely, for myself. I have somehow mitigated defeat in my other works by constantly working with others, with their ideas, words, cultures, languages, processes, personas, bodies and minds. Collaboration has allowed me constant permission. It is a powerful form of personal pedagogy, masquerading as projects for the world and for the benefit of others. It is for me. It allows me to be enriched, to be constantly learning and changing and doing and attempting. It has often been a way of making, maintaining and building friendships which then far outstrip the works that the relationships produce. It has been a means by which I have written (far too much) and published and performed and exhibited, across the world, with almost constant pleasure and contentment for a decade now. It might sound overly pragmatic, but it has worked. The plan worked, collaborating has left me smug.

This book is the second volume of my collaborations. The first was released in 2013, entitled *Enemies*. I wrote an essay to open that book then, though it was in the front. I think it was the first time I tried to mitigate the confusion of potential readers, to explain, to offer a firm apologia, before the mess began. From that essay:

*Consider the meagre works in this volume as a miniaturised bulwarks against being solitary — sandcastles before a tsunami, that might provide you with the smallest apertures of pleasant distraction. For my own part, if my work sits alongside, or inside, work of a quality such as I hope you will when discovering my own collaborations, beyond this page, it can only be elevated. The others who are my Enemies in art and in life, who make up my community, and who will not let me be complacent, are what collaboration means to me. I hope for you they might take on another meaning that I cannot possibly fathom from my privileged vantage.*

When some close friends read the essay, they made a joke to me that has now come true. They said I went on about friendships so much I sounded like I really didn't like the people I was writing with. I protested too much. Well the compilation of this volume has sent me back on an archival mission. One in a way I would not normally allow myself. To discover just how much I have worked with and through others, since 2013. This inevitably led me back to *Enemies*. And when I then looked at the contents, I saw something I already knew. Some of those people remain my finest friends. Others though, I now do not like at all. A few I even actively dislike, though I repress this from any outward social iteration, as that'd be rude. And they know. Everyone always knows these things. And these things are normal, if you stand for anything. But these dislocations are probably my fault. Or so I assume, as is best to assume.

What I realise, which one can't help but know by one's mid-thirties, is that friendships will both renew themselves and kill themselves. And perhaps, if you have the exact same friends for decades, there's maybe a problem? No judgement intended here, but friendships, do they not die and regrow, as you yourself change? Some drift away, and are not broken, but disappear all the same. But do friendships, I wonder, improve with one's own age, and experience, and hopefully, associated wisdom? I think yes but will say I'm not sure, because I am embarrassed about the confidence of my article in *Enemies*. Collaborations are a means of friendship, yes, and they are an innately social act of writing, one that replaces the unknowable inspiration of the solo piece with the equally vital and viable suggestion or genesis of another active presence in the world. But they are really about ourselves. Collaborations are really just mirrors rather than procreations. I mix my metaphors to not mention wanking and poetry in the same sentence.

Looking at *Enemies* I realise I was quite idealistic, and this is a nice realisation. I wrote my first poem in 2009 or 2010 and the book was published in 2013. Precisely because of the foolishness I included some works in the first book I now wish were not there. I mean this without pessimism. Perhaps

the opposite. Maybe in ten years, or twenty, I will be amused by the entire document and it will stand for something, for me, that is entirely positive. A record of the lost, in moments and people, some of which I didn't like but no longer know exist, and others, also gone, whom I think only generous thoughts of. And with Nemeses too, if there are not breaks from those in this book, have I gone wrong, maybe?

I suppose my point is that these books are markers for me, they are records. As I said the first time around, records of friendships yes, but more than that they are records of living life actively seeking the company of others, open to new relations and friendships and experiences. This is what I am committed to before I go. Well this is about me. And differently than solo projects and books of my own, these collaborations are about me all the more.

The fact is that I embrace the failures innate in knowing many others, of remaining exposed to the possibility of more discord and dislike for the want of something that is, now, as I write this, in 2019, very much embodied and evidenced by those I have worked with featured in this volume. My true friends. And all this, a book, a marker, a concrete finish, polish, afterthought even, because, as I have said, it is the making which is the thing for me. Not the result or its reception. How have I lived up to the moment of its release into the world is what counts, but it needs its release. The thing itself is a dead moment, dead tree sliced, which is a source of great pleasure, but not the thing itself, but makes the purpose which nullifies the loneliness and so completes the circle.

I shan't overdo my working definition of poetry, an artform referent to language whose primary aim is not necessary communication or information, as a means of being free in collaboration, but I shall say I do think those at ease with their own role as an intervention in language, rather than a metaphysical creator of it, tend to work very well with others. And perhaps this is why, when in 2014 I co curated an exhibition at the National Poetry Library on the history of collaboration and poetry, with head librarian Chris

McCabe, I could find no other book like this one you hold in your hands, nor my last volume of selected collaborations. There had been no single poet who seemed to have compiled their various collaborations in this way. Either I am weird, or that is weird.

Many suggest poetry, in practise, is many decades behind other artforms, and I do think of László Moholy-Nagy, and his theories of entirety and multiplicity of practise being fundamental to the 20th century artist, and then I feel much more at home with why this book exists. I've been occasionally miffed at some people suggesting collaboration is some special fetish of my work. At root, I think there is no reason for collaboration being absent from poetic practise other than culture. While teaching at a university I teach it, collaborative poetry, and this has born out my theory, as my curatorial actions have also, that poets grow in collaboration, not only in their works, but in their abilities.

Much could be made of how I have paged the cinematic, photographic and visual works in this book. I have thought hard about how and why I have done so, but, beyond my opening note, each has found its form, in dialogue with my collaborator, in a manner as mysterious and improvised as the works themselves.

Turning to the more practical innards of this book itself, many of these collaborations are entire extensive engagements and projects unto themselves. Excerpts are included from full length poetry collections written with Ailbhe Darcy, Prudence Chamberlain, Colin Herd, Harry Man, David Berridge and Tom Jenks. Though these each range dramatically in form and tone and content. Tom and I fashioned a book of 1000 weird english proverbs inventively titled 1000 proverbs. Prue and I wrote a near dozen long poems each dripping juice on a Disney movie. Ailbhe and I began writing for a tour of Ireland, *Yes But Are We Enemies?* which I curated with Christodoulos Makris and also produced the collaborations with Christodoulos and Billy Ramsell featured in this book. We wrote modernist, disjunctive reflections on the history of nuclear bombs and a sense of impending apocalypse with a



line length restraint. Colin and I also began writing on a tour, Auld Enemies, after seeing an Oskar Kokoschka painting in an art gallery in Aberdeen, writing on to cover his entire life, year by year, researching and exchanging. Harry and I compiled our various collaborations from the Ledbury and Stanza festivals and disturbing late night stalking sessions into a Greatist Hits of sorts. You get the picture, that this book is not only a selection, but a compilation, being selections within selections.

The selections made are scant next to the size of the writing they represent and they are just snippets, but I have tried to pace these works, with their nodding towards an invisible totality, throughout the book. They sit beside one off duo poetries, written, often, in hotels and on trains and planes, for readings or performances. With Joe Dunthorne in Swansea, his home town. With Iris Colomb in Surbiton and Canterbury, not her home town. With Rike Scheffler, in Middlesbrough, also definitely not her home town, reading, as we did, over a game of chess (that I won and the audience watched, without notable complaint.) In Bristol, with Patrick Coyle. From the The South West Poetry tour, John Hall and Camilla Nelson. From the North West, with Nathan Walker.

Or beyond the glittering travelodges of the UK, to the Struga festival in Macedonia, for example. The world's longest standing international poetry fest. Where new works with Pauli Tapio, Shimon Adaf and Yekta were written. And to readings in Tbilisi, where Luke Kennard and Eley Williams wrote with me. To Venice for Ariadne Radi Cor's gorgeous illustrations. To Paris for Ibunka with Zuzana Husárová, and in Ljubljana, learning how to introduce poets properly with Morten Langeland and Copenhagen for Open Mouth Surgery with Morten Søndergaard

And group collaborations from Croatia and Argentina. They stand in for similar larger scale collective works made all over the world, often too large and unruly to page in this already ambitious book. Then to my festival, in London, where my works with Fabian Faltin, Aušra Kaziliūnaitė, Max Höfler and Krišjānis Zelģis were made.

Missing from this are collaborations with Amanda de la Garza from Mexico City, Naeimeh Doostar in Malmo, Zhawen Shally from Erbil, Kiwan Sung who read my heartbeat, live in London, as I panted like a dog, and we could find no way to render that upon the page. No space for my sound pieces with Sharon Gal and Dylan Nyoukis, my work with neuroscientist Daniel Margulies. The talking performances with Emma Bennett and Tamarin Norwood. My painting and reading with Jerome Rothenberg. So much has been left out of this book, despite its size, and for that, those poets, artists and writers should be grateful.

To the others, who are in this book with me, a near final word. Thanks.

I'll leave the actual final word, again, to Charles Lamb.

*Tis the privilege of friendship to talk nonsense, and to have nonsense respected.*