

Lawrence Upton interviewed by Christina Epperson

with brief notes by Lawrence Upton

November 12, 2013

Epperson:

Hello Mr. Upton,

My name is Christina Epperson, and I am a senior English major at Virginia Commonwealth University. I am doing a final project on *Likestarlings*, the online journal through which a poem of yours and Matthew Cooper's, **The goods**, was published. I enjoyed your piece thoroughly; the staccato rhythms throughout it interspersed with the long, winding lines were very beautifully written, and created a wonderful pacing. I am interested in talking with you about the initial submission and subsequent collaborative processes. Please let me know if you would be able to speak with me. Thank you for your time.

Upton:

Dear Ms Epperson,

Thanks for your email and especially for your kind comments on **THE GOODS**.

I should point out what appears to be a misunderstanding. **The Goods** is my poem entirely. I just looked at the web site and see that it could be clearer. The layout of the pages was entirely theirs; and I seem to remember, though I'd have to check, that some preamble in my typescript was dropped.

You'll notice however that the poem is headed up by my initials. & the next poem, # 2 is headed by Matthew's. At no point did we write together. It was more call and response. We can talk about that if you wish: we can talk about anything! but my writing is mine and his is his.

I have engaged in various approaches to collaboration; and we can talk about that too.

Some questions.

- a) Do you propose an email interview? I would prefer that to Skype. It's easier to administrate and I can give you a better answer, I should think, by considered email.
- b) What is your time frame / schedule for this? There will be times when I am very busy and I want to plan.
- c) Are you interviewing Matthew as well?
- d) Would you consider publishing the interview if both wished it?

Lawrence Upton

Epperson:

Mr. Upton,

Thank you for your response! I see what you mean about the call and response style; this makes much more sense. I would love to discuss that with you, and I will send along more detailed descriptions of what exactly I'm interested in as far as this type of collaboration goes.

I haven't been able to find a way to contact Matthew, unfortunately, though I am still searching. My time frame is about three weeks; I can get the interview questions to you by tomorrow night. I'm still working on the finer points of them. I agree that email would be the easiest route to take. If you wished for the interview to be published, I'm sure we could work something out; I have no problem with that. Thank you again!

Best,

Christina Epperson

Upton:

Hi

Last January, which was the last time we spoke, he was going on leave, a sabbatical, I think. Maybe he's still on it. I can just about cope with three weeks, especially if I do get your initial interests early. Then I can think about them as I am working on other things.

I'll be online tomorrow. Not much Thurs. But a bit Friday. I'll give you response a.s.a.p.

November 13, 2013

Epperson:

Hello!

I've come up with some basic questions for you. My project is focusing on this particular style of collaboration, how it is similar or dissimilar to other styles of collaboration, and how the internet has played a part in making it possible, since many of the writers published on *Likestarlings* are from different areas of the US, UK, and Canada. Based on your responses, I may have some follow-up questions.

From the bit of research I've done on collaborative poetry, most of it seems to be two or more poets writing one poem together, rather than a conversation of sorts using poetry as a medium. *Likestarlings* is the only journal I have found that utilizes this type of collaboration. Do you know of any other publications of this kind? If not, why do you think this is?

What is your perception of the goal or theme of *Likestarlings*?

What were the submission and editing processes like? Were they similar to or different from other publications?

Were you solicited to submit or did you submit of your own accord?

Once you were paired with another poet, how did the dialogue begin? How did each poem build upon the last? Were they continuations of a theme or more of a response to the previous poem?

Did you and your partner communicate face to face, via telephone or email? Was there a discussion of what each of you wanted to write about initially and/or throughout the process?

Was the process of writing in this way difficult? From my understanding, it seems almost like a correspondence between two minds, only in the form of poetry. How would you describe it?

What is your philosophy of writing? How would you describe your personal style?

How do you normally go about composing a poem? Did you alter this process for this collaboration? If so, how?

Have you participated in collaboration like this in the past? If so, what was your experience? How was it similar or dissimilar to this particular style of collaboration?

The advent of the internet, and its increased presence in our lives, has had a noticeable effect on the publishing industry. Do you think this kind of hindered or helped this type of collaboration and writing in general, in your opinion?

Thank you again for your time, and please let me know if you need any clarification. I really appreciate your input on this.

Best,

Christina

November 14, 2013

Question 1

Epperson: Do you know of any other publications of this kind? If not, why do you think this is?

Upton: *Likestarlings* seems fairly one off in this regard. Collaborative work does appear elsewhere; but I can't think of any other publisher who concentrates on it.

For what it's worth, a small magazine that I edit recently published a collaborative poem by me and Richard Kessling. The magazine has as its focus *Writers Forum Workshop* so there is a multiplicity of aesthetics. I'll attach the pdfs so you can read everything.

I'm not sure how much demand there is for collaborative writing. That's one thing. Demand here would include interest; and I am speaking of demand / interest outside of academia. Other reasons would involve consideration of what we mean by collaboration; and that is something which I think will come up shortly under another question.

Question 2

Epperson: What is your perception of the goal or theme of *Likestarlings*?

Upton: Well, *Likestarlings* is fairly explicit on that itself: "*Likestarlings* is a place for talking in poems. We pair poets with poets and they write new works in collaboration with one another. We also publish occasional interviews and pieces on poetics, with a particular focus on new thoughts about address, process and collaboration."

I am not sure what they mean by "talking in poems". Do they really mean "talking"? Where would that fit into rhetoric? It would hardly be opposed to it. Is their second sentence a definition of "talking" i.e. being paired with another and writing new works in collaboration with one another?

That raises the question of what is meant by "collaboration". Collaboration seems to mean quite a wide variety of things colloquially, even among artists. Someone will write a child's book, say; and that book will be illustrated. It is then likely that the result will be described as a collaboration even if the illustrations do not really match the text.

This can change to the point where one is somewhat forgotten. Alice in Wonderland might be an example. Lots of people know of Tenniel; but not all. And I believe that Carroll / Dodgson suppressed a section that Tenniel couldn't or didn't want to illustrate.

Pooh is Pooh not least for the images (and I have to say that if I had been Christopher Robin I might have spent my life taking revenge on my father). They make some aspects of those stories more palatable to me; but that's something else.

There's a question coming up later where I'll say a little on a possible useful meaning of "collaboration".

Question 3

Epperson: What were the submission and editing processes like? Were they similar to or different from other publications?

Upton: Matthew and I came to an agreement on the final text. For some reason we both sent it in, each to a different editor. They published it.

It seemed much the same as any other efficient publication.

Question 4

Epperson: Were you solicited to submit or did you submit of your own accord?

Upton: I was solicited. David Hawkins sounded me out to see if I was interested in principle and then proposed Matthew

Question 5

Epperson: Once you were paired with another poet, how did the dialogue begin?

Upton: We were given each other's emails as I understand it. I was given Matthew's; and I wrote to him. This was March 2012. I sent **The Goods** which had been written in 2009 and posted on *Wryting* in 2011.

That is, I wrote **The Goods** long before I had any expectation of being published by *likestarlings*. I didn't know of the existence of Matthew Cooperman.

I sent **The Goods** as an idea for starting us off. On reflection I'm not sure it was the friendliest choice; but whether or not there is anything in that judgment, Matthew responded and seemed to accept the proposal readily.

On *Wryting*, after the file's been deleted from one's own PC the text is quite difficult to get back, at least. *Wryting* is a place where one exchanges ideas really; although I should say that I contribute little to it now. Anyway, the idea of seeing the poem available somewhere else is attractive.

I recall there was a suggestion from Matthew that we might only include the section to which he felt he had responded whereas I was keen for people to see the whole of what had been available to him. More importantly, perhaps, I wanted to see the whole thing available generally. That's what happened eventually and I think that's ok. There were many aspects of what Matthew wrote to which I did not respond.

Epperson: How did each poem build upon the last? Were they continuations of a theme or more of a response to the previous poem?

Upton: I think you can answer that more objectively than I. I was, I like to think, attentive to what was in Matthew's poems; but other things intrude.

I cannot now remember exactly how I got into the solar system in my second. He mentions the sun and the moon; and I was spending a lot of time in the open, attentive to tides and the state of the moon.

Looking like a tangerine walking down the street came from a fashion page in a women's magazine that I read in a health centre while they were trying to work out where their backsides were: a couple of hours to get a doctor's prescription supplied!

I can read quite a bit of annoyance from that in the verse, both poems; but it's hardly foreground.

Knowledge slips aweigh picks up on things Matthew had done but also relates to email chat I was having with others, particularly Richard Kessling aforementioned, who provided the model story of animals choosing their life expectancy. But somehow it got mixed up in my head with Greg Bear's **Eon** and **Eternity**. This may not be easy to see and really doesn't matter. It's a thing that was in my head quite a lot when I was writing poems I would describe now as polyvocal. I had in mind Bear's narrative description of everyone expressing their view almost instantaneously in electronic space, the living and the undead in electronic storage.

What finally emerged from that in this poem though is the one line which I haven't seen in years, I think, but used to be very common – I'm going back before the arrival of the net – unexpected end of file.

So one is thinking of one thing in terms of another, telling one's stories and so on. I'm inclined to say blah blah.

And off the top of my head, my **Periglis Beach**, which is a place but isn't really a beach but a foreshore and isn't called a beach, led to Matthew's **Denver Beach**. That made me think of Matthew Arnold and Anthony Hecht and you can see both quite strongly in the poem as I remember.

Question 6

Epperson: Did you and your partner communicate face to face, via telephone or email?

Upton: Email.

Epperson: Was there a discussion of what each of you wanted to write about initially and/or throughout the process?

Upton: No.

Question 7

Epperson: Was the process of writing in this way difficult?

Upton: No. Yes. It constrained me in some ways; but, in others, it directed me.

Epperson: From my understanding, it seems almost like a correspondence between two minds, only in the form of poetry. How would you describe it?

Upton: Well I wouldn't describe in those terms. I'm not sure I'd be bothered to describe it. It is what it is. It was a bit like a conversation, I suppose, especially after the drink has flowed; or after you know each other so well that you don't listen properly. You respond, but you add and you ignore.

It would be nice if there were a correspondence in the other sense of similarity. That takes us back to what we mean by collaboration.

Question 8

Epperson: What is your philosophy of writing?

Upton: I'm sorry but I don't know what you mean.

Epperson: How would you describe your personal style?

Upton: I like to change styles, as you can see to some extent from the range of pieces in *Likestarlings*.

Question 9

Epperson: How do you normally go about composing a poem?

Upton: So many ways. I have no one way. I do subscribe to the view that one never finishes a poem but only abandons it (and sometimes goes back even then). I can't remember who said the first bit. It can take me years to write a poem. Decades. Other times they seem to finish themselves, give themselves a shake and head off to a publisher.

Epperson: Did you alter this process for this collaboration? If so, how?

Upton: I couldn't just follow my inclinations, though I had a fair go. I think we were doing our best but not in a way to block or shame the other. Certainly that's how I felt. A bit like a band with each showing off what they do best, but all hanging together.

Question 10

Epperson: Have you participated in collaboration like this in the past? If so, what was your experience? How was it similar or dissimilar to this particular style of collaboration?

Upton: I was going to say "No"; but there's the second half.

Let's go back to "correspondence".

I don't know how much you know of my work; so I'll tell you that quite a bit of my output consists of collaborative text-sound composition. To be clear, this is the term as coined by Lars-Gunnar Bodin and Bengt-Emil Johnson, text-ljud komposition, circa 1967, perhaps precisely 1967! It labels a wide area of activity as practised then at *Föreningen Fylkingen* in Stockholm and is therefore one of what the late Dick Higgins called intermedia.

What I'll do now is suggest you have a look at the first 2 items in this pamphlet

<http://nowtpress.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/lawrence5.pdf>

and then maybe you'll have some questions.

John Drever and I perform our works, our text-sound compositions, live; and that moment, for the duration, there are two active composers on stage, making one piece. That is the situation for which I reserve the word collaboration

Question 11

Epperson: The advent of the internet, and its increased presence in our lives, has had a noticeable effect on the publishing industry. Do you think this kind of hindered or helped this type of collaboration and writing in general, in your opinion?

Upton: It helped it. By snailmail it would have taken much longer. The reception of the writing would, I am sure, have been much different. It not only speeded up the process but enabled me to work where I was. My poem about Periglis really was written at Periglis, which is on the UK Atlantic shore. I am writing this to you in a cafe in Surrey.

I'm not saying it makes the writing better. That's something else. Without email, these particular poems would not have happened though different poems might.

18th November 2013

Epperson:

Mr. Upton,

Thank you so much! These answers are great; I'll be using some of them for my presentation on Thursday, after which I'll probably have a few more questions for you raised by my peers. As for the philosophy of writing question, I suppose I was just wondering what you believe the basis of writing is, where the inspiration comes from, and how you translate that into a work

of poetry? I'm sorry for the confusion. Thanks again!

Best,
Christina

Question 12

Epperson: I suppose I was just wondering what you believe the basis of writing is, where the inspiration comes from, and how you translate that into a work of poetry?

19th November 2013

Upton: I think the question you are asking applies to all the arts; and that wouldn't have been a problem in the past when there was, it seems to me, a perceived hierarchy of the arts, with poetry at the top. (In the beginning was the word - which may have been a Greek position but is hardly out of place with the Hebrew reliance on and respect for the word)

I tend to rely, a little shakily, on "inscription" which, in one way or another, deals with all the arts and media.

As to what the basis of writing (inscription) is... I won't reject the question again. I really am not trying to be awkward.

The thing is there may not be a basis for it. Not a thought out one. We do it. We have been doing it for so long that it might seem it always has been done. Human marking of the external world seems almost as old as the speciation of our race. It is part of what we are.

The Cageian line I have nothing to say and I am saying it might be of some use here. That might be a position I could favour.

An alternative would be to ask IF there is a basis for writing.

Certainly you might find some sympathetic ears among the right wing opposed to, what shall we call it?, open field education, where a utilitarian approach may find no use at all in poetry. (Look at **What the chairman told Tom**, by Basil Bunting)

But of course there are other approaches to the utilitarian. I heard on the radio a bit of Professor Peter Singer suggesting a utilitarian approach to aid and charity - as in helping the many rather than the few and the really poor rather than the relatively poor... Quite different to the usual utilitarian. But I am in danger of going off the point.

I heard Malorie Blackman interviewed (she's a children's laureate here). I am not entirely sure but believe that during the course of the interview she said she was only happy writing and always knew she would be... I imagine that

something similar might have been said by Doris Lessing, who has just died. I heard a playback of her advising young writers to do so while they had the physical energy.

This may be to turn the process into some kind of obsessive compulsive disorder, but... We might reflect on the number of times that spouses and partners have commented on being second place to or in competition with writing whether a muse is mentioned or not. I am, I think, speaking of men writers.

It seems to me that women do not seem to exhibit this single-mindedness in the same way as men.

Jane Austen seems to have been able to put her pen down whenever she was needed if only (?) emotionally.

I am less sure of myself on George Eliot, but I think the same may have been true of her.

Mary Shelley seems to have deferred to the men, both Byron and her husband, but, free of those 2, seems to have raised children and written. Whether she farmed the children out or not, I am not sure.

Deference though is not the same. But before I let it go I'd suggest that Elizabeth Barrett was a potentially better poet than the one she became, possibly just because she was so close in all ways to such an obviously gifted poet as husband Robert. He certainly encouraged her but may have unwittingly overwhelmed her.

As an aside there's a clever-clever early story by Norman Mailer, of a man writing, rather than paying attention to the woman he is with as they walk along, he writing a story of a couple breaking up as they walk along and apparently anticipating and / or copying down what the woman will say i.e. seeing his life as source material. I find that kind of approach interesting but repulsive.

I know any number of contemporary female poets who seem to manage an apparently obsessive output without the downsides of obsession. So on one level it may be a matter of the woman deciding she's not going to take too much shit. On another, it may be that women, given space, are better able to multi-task, though I'd rather find another word than multi-task for it; and outdistance men.

That's all prejudice; it's not a thing I have investigated; but I just had an email from a female colleague with whom I worked on Saturday last. She came to the workshop prepared, and remarked during a chat that she was worried about getting a long piece of writing finished. In the evening she made her long journey home and, I am sure, gave due time to her family. But on Sunday I slobbered while, I know now, she worked because I've had an email saying hurrah I've finished the long piece of writing.

It may be the women I know! but it seems to me that women generally have to achieve more, i.e. work harder, than men for the same recognition. It may be the same as the general tendency for immigrants to work harder than the indigenous population.

I don't believe inspiration comes from anywhere because I am of the opinion that there is no such thing. It is the process by which a spirit is inhaled or breathes into the body, metaphorically and in reality, and I don't go for that. Many use it as a posh word for where the idea came from and I would much prefer to use that kind of terminology. (I have a feeling that I hold forth on the subject in the film **Sonic Visuals** which you can access from my website; but how much use that will be to you, I am not sure because I can't now remember what we talked about over all.)

We work in traditions. That's true of those who don't work in traditions, who spend their time avoiding them - as anything more than three or four years old may now be called traditional almost anything done twice is a tradition. I'm being facetious. Sort of. We imitate each other is the point.

I was quite influenced by hearing Robert Graves saying that the poet made herself a better poet by imitating another of known quality. It struck me as having something going for it and I have put that into practice on several occasions, as well as being aware and ready to learn whatever I can from whomever.

Initially, I chose Thomas Wyatt (first half of 16th century) who was not the best choice to make although I stuck with it and learned a great deal.

Like many, I learned by getting myself out of the unwitting grasp of Wordsworth's style. Ditto Hopkins. Ditto Dylan Thomas. That was all in my teens and may have saved me a bit from T S Eliot...

I'm not quite sure where the idea of changing style came from.

That's all one kind of getting the idea.

Workshops provide another stimulus. I try to present a poem a week to *PoetryEtc* and have done for years. There are many of us do that. The WF workshop meets on average around once a month and one needs work for that. And so on.

And that's before or can be before one has decided to write a poem for the hell of it. Or to order.

I set myself exercises - to write to a certain metre for instance - in order to shake things up.

I write sequences and make diary notes to keep myself to it. It is a job.

Collaboration requires work. If your colleague has done a lot of work then you don't want to let him or her down especially when you suspect they are doing it either to keep you happy or because they enjoy the work.

& I set myself various Oulipo-style exercises though now it has become so much a part of my practice that it may not even show – I am nearer to Ms Mayer than the original Oulipo.

I just went back to see what the third question was and see that I seem to have answered it.

In case I haven't it was going to be something like rewriting and rewriting and rewriting

Notes, by Lawrence Upton

- Ms Epperson and I have agreed that this text be published on my website. I shall follow my usual practice in such matters, where the work is collaborative, and declare it joint copyright. Ms Epperson has not had the opportunity to approve these notes.
- Richard Kessling and I are lifelong friends. He does not share what is perhaps my obsession with poetry; but he has an interest of considerable depth in it. Most importantly, it seems to me, he is concerned for clarity of expression and avoidance of waffle. We have written a number of poems together.
- *Writers Forum Workshop has a ramshackle blog (my responsibility) at wfuk.org.uk*
- You can find a list of the work I have made with John Drever at lawrenceupton.org - in the collaborations section, which links to other collaborative work I have made.
- Finally, I am not at all sure about my generalisations on women writers: I'll leave it at that!
- The magazine is called **Pocket Litter** I refer to, which published a long collaborative poem by me and Richard Kessling. The two issues are **Pocket Litter March 2013** and **Pocket Litter Summer 2013**. They are free pdfs and anyone may have one. Please email info at [wfuk dot org do uk](mailto:info@wfuk.org.uk).