

A Way of Seeing and Being: an interview with George Ttoouli

Rupert Loydell: Your new book *from Animal Illicit* contains ‘parts from two poetic series’. Is it a selection or a rescue process? I’m thinking that the section headings – ‘Composing’, ‘Decomposing’, ‘Recycling’, ‘Upcycling’ – might be a clue?

George Ttoouli: You know, I lost track. There were so many recombinations along the way, I may only have included a couple from *Fragments from an Imaginary Landscape*. Then again, some of those recombined into longer pieces and joined the other series – like Lorine Niedecker’s shuffling of fragments across poems and sets to generate new meaning.

The Broken Sleep formation concocts a temporary assemblage into a spurious body without organs. I really didn’t want to use section headings for a long time. I hate the idea of rigid structures – hence the page numbers. I hope people focus more on the page numbers, which is my version of William Carlos Williams’ chapter titles in *Spring and All*.

I feel like these poems have been selecting/rescuing me, rather than the other way around. An extreme form of what Arundhati Roy said, about stories commissioning us. Each time I recombine them into new contexts and meanings, it gives me hope that among the infinite social organisations possible upon our finite and slippery Earth, so many have the potential to see us to the absolute heat death of the universe. Wouldn’t that be great? To sustain an unbroken chain of civilisation for millions of years, to call ourselves an old species and reconcile ourselves with annihilation.

RL: The two series are ‘about ecology and the climate crisis’. I’m not denying either are important or exist, but how does poetry change anything by discussing these topics or engaging with wildlife or plants? And isn’t poetry always so much more than content?

GT: Recite a poem and you contribute to the air quality in your range; print it and you hold a piece of remade nature – wood pulp, inks, bleaching and glue and printing processes. Poems are never free of subjectile conveyance; nor of content. I think a lot of poetic experimenters, particularly those boiler-plated out of US patriarchal-academia, eschew personality to resist power structures, yet that denial covers their abuses of power while disenfranchising their own embodiment within the poem. The lyric I is a construct. The self is a construct. So what? I remake my self with every word.

So too the climate crisis, which is a horror story we tell ourselves. I’m fascinated by horror. In the manner of great genre writers – Ursula Le Guin, or M John Harrison – who undid their initial constructing urges across a series – I tried to undo the stories I believed about the state of nature, which is also the state of ourselves. Not to say I’m not sad about what’s happening, but I *poetry* to mediate the feelings of powerlessness and guilt these narratives instil. The aesthetic discussion of poetry’s content vs. form binary is something I processed in my thirties. I’m trying to think post-binary these days.

RL: You mentioned in passing the other day what seems in hindsight a fairly brutal bit of criticism I gave you at Warwick University (me a Visiting Fellow, you a student), when I suggested that you were writing poems that fulfilled what people expected of poetry (or something like that). You certainly write very differently now, and I’d love to hear your

thoughts about poetry and poetics.

GT: When you gave me that *honest* feedback, I was reaching the end of a formalist phase in my writing. You helped me restore my heart to that intellectual void. Later, I had to unlearn certain other mentors' tastes and I oscillated back to formality, that time Oulipian. It took years for me to let emotions back in. *from Animal Illicit* filters deeply personal emotional outpourings through scientific forms, like transects and quadrats, without denying, or polarising, either.

In the manner of Robin Blaser's *randonnée*, I treat poems as breadcrumbs dropped along the path of my life. I think I have around 6-8 series on the go, each with a different formal aesthetic, or purpose. Some I ignore for years, and they resurface around rare emotional strains. Others are like a haiku hobby, re-enacting formalist phases, and I'll delve in and produce a massive string out of a mixture of dream and diary and found text fragments and spend days twiddling the syntax of a couplet. Some are written 'in the field' and never edited.

The tl;dr version: I practice a pluralist poetics / I have a short attention span.

RL: In a similar way, how do you approach teaching creative writing? I'm still very much of the liberal arts persuasion: sharing and discussing examples, setting challenges or problems, sharing processes and forms, all with the aim of facilitating a writer's own way of writing. I certainly don't want classes full of Rupert Loydell clones! Without getting sidetracked into higher education politics, tell us about your pedagogy.

GT: I totally agree with you: 'facilitating [improvements in] a writer's own way of writing'. If you're not there to improve then drop out, write your fanfic and pocket the tuition fees. For me, a good creative writing workshop establishes conditions designed to facilitate participants' own making within a learning context; and, in order to learn, you have to get outside your comfort zone. The liberal arts model is just one way of doing that.

I was influenced by some wild teachers, not least Peter Blegvad, who I'm still in touch with. (I just bought a copy of his latest two books, *Marvellous Moo* and *Imagine, Observe, Remember* – two beautiful and numinous artefacts.) And I've done some dangerous and difficult things to people in my classes in the past, though I reject the US 'bootcamp' model of writing workshops. Though some people still complain about *that time George ripped up people's work in class*, it was a necessary antidote to the complacency of over-praise other colleagues heaped on their heads, and which stunted their growth as writers. Creativity, too, is an infinitely developing resource in this finite universe.

RL: What next can we expect from George Ttoouli in the poetry department? Do you have new projects on the go?

GT: Too many! And not enough time to edit my typically verbose drafts.

Last year I finished assembling and play-testing a playable card game version of a poetic series called *Parchment Scalpel Rock*. I still don't know what to do with it. I've an angry prose poem series with working title, *extinction*, but I'm struggling to find its light. I'm collaborating slowly with Theo Chiotis, who is one of the smartest humans I've ever met, and encouraged me to use two important words more often: 'fuck' and 'off'. The first, 'Epoché', was published in the wonderfully plural magazine, *Poetry Birmingham*; the second, 'Dasein',

may happen in 2021. And I've more 'ecology and climate crisis' poems. Lately I've been transecting people speaking about ecology at live events.

None of this stuff likes the idea of being trapped in a book, so I may end up pulling a Luke Kennard and writing a sonnet sequence. Or some fanfic.

RL: Thanks for your time.

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