

Conducted by Kai Carlson-Wee

In the question and answer session following your reading in Madison last fall (October, 2010) you were asked about the aesthetic motivations for starting up *H_NGM_N* and you responded by saying that one of the original goals was to create a journal that you yourself would have wanted to read when you were in college, something that seemed more dangerous and/or spontaneous than many of the journals you encountered at the time. Could you talk a little bit about this division of aesthetics, say, between traditional print journals and the journals that appeal to the youths of today?

I don't know if I want to draw this line on aesthetic grounds. I don't want to get caught up in the lines of antagonism, or of making claims in favor of one thing, or pronouncements against something else. There are many traditional print journals that I love & respect for two big reasons: 1) they deliver challenging & complex creative work that has the potential to make me a better writer & person, & 2) they have done it over time, against obstacles, slowly & consistently building a tradition that is at least as valuable as the need to push against it & expand it.

You're definitely right about what I said in Madison—*H_NGM_N* started out of my desire to contribute to poetry by creating a space for the values I believed in—love, speed, intelligent thought, combustible language, & INCLUSIVITY. I think the division you speak of comes from the perception of the audience—basically, readers feel as if some journals are MORE responsive to the VOICE OF THE TIMES, & thus are more open to including them, than others.

So "the youths of today" can more readily SEE themselves in *H_NGM_N* than they can in *Ploughshares* (both in terms of imagining themselves actually being in the table of contents, but also in terms of seeing their own concerns & obsessions & energies reflected back in the work currently published there). I think an open door should always appeal to us more than a closed door. All of which may answer your question. I certainly hope that it's true that people respond to & respect & love *H_NGM_N*.

***H_NGM_N* BKS has recently published Matt Hart's book [Wolf Face](#), and your latest collection *Big Bright Sun* has just come out with BlazeVOX Books. Is it true that you and Matt have nicknames for each other corresponding to the titles of these recent books? Is there some kind of conspiracy here, or is this part of a larger dialogue of intersecting projects?**

Matt & I have been friends for a long time, so I think the metonymy of using book titles as nicknames is natural for us! But it's not for conspiratorial purposes. I think there is a

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larger dialogue going on between the two of us, one that is both on the surface (in terms of the ornament, subject & address of the poems) & one that is buried (in terms of motivation & hopeful reach of the work).

On one level—several of my poems are directly addressed to Matt, or reference him in some way, & I know several of Matt's poems work the same way. Also, we've had a lot of shared experiences & those find their way into our poems; we met in grad school 12+ years ago, & are lucky enough to have found ways to keep navigating through the world together.

But on another level, I think Matt & I are having a complex & generative discussion, through our individual poems, about the place of art in the artist's life, of how best to be a human BEING, instead of a human IN STASIS. Our innate sensibilities—what we respond to in our experience of HAPPENING & our experience of LANGUAGE—are similar & we've easily settled into an incredibly responsive & mildly competitive dynamic. I'll read a poem by Matt & want to either 1) respond directly to assertions & suppositions that the poem has made (either by extension or argument) or 2) respond indirectly through the deployment of language & rhetorical structure.

But *Big Bright Sun*, as a nickname, is pretty clunky. It won't stick. There's a poem I wrote floating around called "Defender to Amplifier" & one by Matt called "Amplifier to Defender." I think these are nicknames we'll defer to when using our real names might be too dangerous.

I know you've studied Romantic poetry in graduate school and I read somewhere that the Lyrical Ballads projects between Wordsworth and Coleridge was an inspirational model for your blog collaborations with Matt. Do you see Romanticism coming back into fashion in the near future?

I'm always a little distrustful of movements & appellations since all they do is put limitations on our understanding of complex issues. However, it does seem to me that we are writing & reading & talking about poetry at a moment when some of the values put forth by Romantic poets are experiencing resurgence. I think we're seeing a return to the values embodied in the high drama & passion you find in poets like Shelley & Clare, the esoteric mysticism & human power of Blake, the raw energy & intricate thought patterns of Keats & Coleridge, the intimacy of Charlotte Smith.

I think, for me, the elements of Romanticism have always been about a triumph of both the HUMAN & the SELF, writing that in its fundamental core believes in feelings & emotions, that seeks to understand & build a loving & tender connection between people, & with their environment. Romantic writing started to seem quaint & naïve in the face of the crisis science & industry brought about. There's been a lot of water under the bridge since then but I know I feel like I'm living in a time where I'm forced to

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navigate a delicate balance; the machinery of society seems in some ways to be fixated in direct opposition to individuality, while some of the greatest triumphs have to do with the ways in which we are able to come together through technology. Today, many people seem to be writing from a place where they are trying to fight their way to a better understanding of the SOCIAL instead of defaulting & being consumed by the MEDIA.

In your work there seems to be an endless tension between using Romantic sentiments honestly (Love, Beauty, Joy, etc.) and using them ironically, or at least using them in reference to the way those sentiments have been defiled in the hands of contemporary culture, and have, in many ways, been turned into meaningless shells. Your work seems determined to rediscover the meanings of these sentiments, and make them feel peculiar and familiar and new. For example, in the poem "For My Mind is in Constant Baffle" (from *Big Bright Sun*) you write:

**Can we not see that big element
in the sky? This text depicts love,
beauty & thunderbolt.
Is my text your text? Can we say it together
& will the true sounds in it sound true?**

How do you feel about these big bright Romantic gestures? Is the relationship fraught? Are people learning to understand each other?

This tension comes through in my work because it's the tension I feel in my life. The Romantic sentiments you mention are the exact reasons for being alive, in my opinion. But somewhere along the way, it seems like if you talked about these things directly, people viewed you as an amateur in some way—as a writer or as a thinker. It's because, maybe, of the thin line between sentiment (real & true human emotion) & sentimentality (an excessive or unearned portion of the same). But I think a writer can be sentimental without being a sentimentalist. So finding ways to reinvigorate, recharge & reify those Romantic concepts is one of my crucial aims as a writer. I want to help people be free to feel again, without shame or irony. I laud connection over detachment & would rather not be cool when I can be hot. These are values I care an awful lot about & reclaiming them, finding ways to treat them in a way that both acknowledges the problematic aspects of their usage while seeing clear to a relevant & earnest new definition, is one of my goals.

Seen another way: writing teachers always tell students not to begin a sentence with the word "because." Students start to think that the reasons teachers say this is to warn them away from a mistake. But, it's not a mistake; it's hard, it sometimes leads to mistakes, but it's not inherently, out-of-the-gate, wrong. Love (& Beauty! & Joy!) presents the writer with a similar challenge.

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Is it true that you used to be hardcore into comics? In what ways have comic books influenced your poetry?

True, I grew up reading comics; I learned to think, & even shaped fundamental parts of my identity, in relation to comics. I worked in a comic book store for about four years, on & off, through college & a bit later, & still have probably upwards of 30,000 comics stored away. The number doesn't increase all that much these days, though I'm still completely in awe of the kinds of narrative development possible in comic books (see David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp*) & still read quite a few indie comics.

The influence it's had on my work is obvious, & also difficult to track. My first book, *Sensational Spectacular*, is made up of many different series of ekphrastic poems that all respond to comic book covers from the Silver Age, so that's one pretty obvious influence. I riffed on the overblown images & crazy situations notated there because they seemed to be TRUE in terms of how I perceived the world. But also, more crucially, comics are authentically ME; William Stafford could write the names for specific trees & deer because those were an integral part of his daily life. But not for me. I need to develop a language for dealing with MY world, MY feelings, & comics helped me do it.

But maybe the more lasting influence has been the pace of comic books I grew up on—exuberant speed, with energy & vitality, populated by characters who were (more or less) human dealing with situations that were (more or less) larger than life. I mean, in general, there's a sort of willful naïveté inherent in comics (of the superhero variety anyway) that really informs my work. I hope this doesn't sound too simplistic, but my poems & my worldview have been steadily informed by the sense that there IS right & wrong, & that it takes a kind of earnest & relentless attention to discern the difference.

We've already talked a little bit about the future of poetry, but in thinking about things from a publishing standpoint, do you see the demand of digital media pushing poetry into a more collaborative and collective environment? Do you see things shifting? Do you hope things will shift? Where will this great wheel take us?

Things are definitely shifting. The first online issue of *H_NGM_N* hit almost ten years ago. At that time, there were only a few other online journals, nothing like the rich & varied landscape that we have today. I love that there are so many homes for good poetry, that the conversation is chock full of options with such vitality. Having more options doesn't necessarily mean that it's easier to get published, or that the quality of the work being published is going down at all, as some decry. I just think, primarily, it's great to look out & see it all happening; we can worry about the other things later. It's most importantly a sign of good health, & I think the digital media has allowed people to see a place for themselves in the conversation.

So things are shifting, things have shifted, & I hope things continue to shift.

Ultimately, it's all about finding ways to promote & distribute good writing. Digital media is providing new ways to do that, without obliterating the old ways. If there is a

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great wheel, I'm happy to be one of the spokes. I think that's the most any of us can ask—to get the privilege of being part of the mechanism that helps keep things turning.

—NATE PRITTS

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link:

http://english.wisc.edu/devilslake/features/interview_pritts.html