Some Remarks on Collaboration

Tom Whalen

1. I’m trying to think what isn’t a collaboration, but when nothing comes to mind, I wander about my Arbeitszimmer, scanning the shelves, lost in thought, before returning to my remarks concerning activities requiring, if not a multitude, at least one other mind.

2. “To be a fly on the wall,” thinks the narrator of a nonexistent novel on her way to her mother’s wedding to a fifth husband, clear indication the mother knows a thing or two about collaborations.

3. Translators raise their heads from dictionaries now and then to ponder how to translate, for example, a sentence by Robert Walser that I’m convinced demanded of him a close collaboration with nature: “Den Fischen fehlen die Arme.” Should I and my more experienced collaborator (Susan Bernofsky, in this case) choose the concise “Fish lack arms” or more closely mirror the music, e.g., “On fish one finds no arms”?

4. Proust in one hand, Ionesco in another, I strolled along the Champs-Élysées as if I were the saddest flâneur on the road to everything.

5. Plotting novels is a child’s game more than one can play, like building coastal cities in a bed of mud beside my family’s front porch in Lake Charles, Louisiana, although there wasn’t I creating my fantastic waterways, as far as I can remember, alone?

6. In German one expresses the notion of a narrator’s desire to be a “fly on the wall” as Ich spiele Mäuschen, that is, “I play little mouse.” One late spring afternoon in 1982, in my apartment on Magazine Street in New Orleans, Mike Presti and I concocted a back-story for the Encyclopedia Mouse elaborate enough for us to compose together The Camel’s Back and for me to write over the next three decades four more featuring this highly intelligent, possibly reliable,
narrating rodent. Three decades in the baroque universes of the Encyclopedia Mouse, five short novels following his exponential tale, playing little mouse.

7. When Walser, after several weeks of sleeplessness and depression, voluntarily admitted himself to Waldau Sanatorium in 1929, the doctor who initially examined him noted in his evaluation: “Finally admits to hearing voices.”

8. Usually when I collaborate with an author or translator I find it necessary for one of us to be the final authority. Sometimes it’s me, sometimes the other. In the case of A Newcomer’s Guide to the Afterlife, it was Daniel Quinn who instigated and directed our collaboration from a distance (we’ve never met) and made publication of the book possible. In the case of film scripts, the directors I’ve worked with always have had final say, as is appropriate, the writer only a notch above a narrative lackey, so to speak.

9. According to many, a collaboration is more dilution than addition—like Larkin’s view in “Dockery and Son” of what a child would have been for him, had he fathered one.

10. Is there a centrifuge that can isolate entirely the individual from the collaboration?


12. The last page of A Newcomer’s Guide to the Afterlife is a good example of this curious fiction’s three-way play: the collage, purportedly a photograph of the Road at the Valley of Stelae, is by Greg Boyd, who supplied all the book’s illustrations; the selection of the illustration, the caption, and the placement of it at the end of the book are Daniel Quinn’s; the concept and most of the text concerning the Road in the afterlife are mine.

13. Wordsworth and Coleridge, Pound and Eliot, Borges and Bioy-Casares, the Brothers Strugatsky, the Brothers Quay, Dorothea Viehmann and the Brothers Grimm . . .

14. Muses, memories, friends, family, editors, spouses, artists living and dead . . .
15. Of course not everyone enjoys mixing it up like I do. “Look right, look left, I dwell alone,” wrote Christina Rossetti. I would gladly dispute her if I could.

16. Is it easier or harder to enter the dream of language when one works on a collaborative project?

17. “It was, wasn’t it, as with the greatest levity and astonishing velocity thinkable one stood up from where one sat to stand speaking to the person one was a moment before and now no longer was, and yet remained that person still, because one is seeing oneself in imagination, which enriches life, which I employ as often as I want or can or may, which throws me off balance and always restores it, which is the continuous emotion for the sake of which I always and never go too far, which as today for instance, multiplies me or at least doubles me now and then, which is strange and is pleasurable and keeps me active and therefore rejuvenated and foolish, so that one can experience being pleasured alive, so that it won’t be all too self-evident, and not too lonesome, either.”
–Robert Walser (tr. Christopher Middleton)

18. Nabokov, so it may seem, disdained creative collaborations, noting in his foreword to Lolita: A Screenplay, “There is nothing in the world I loathe more than group activity, that communal bath where the hairy and slippery mix in a multiplication of mediocrity.” But is someone who writes that aesthetic bliss is “a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected to other states of being” not one of the world’s great minglers?