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Response mode: taking everything and the genre

Abstract:

This hybrid paper of creative and critical writing reflects on my explorations of poetry. I write in what I call ‘response mode’, which is a group of behaviours, beginning with impersonation, and also open to understandings gained from other art forms. After studying the style and techniques of other poets, I move towards a mid-point between another poet’s voice and my own, effectively, a new, hybrid voice. The engagement with literary ancestors enables evolution towards an expression that is more fully my own. Stealing the designations of genre ensures a continued experiment. The challenges and variety of voicings made possible by prose poetry and haibun are important. The haibun influences other new hybrid forms, which encompass found poetry and appropriate language in a way which is redolent of the times. We take from exhibitions, songs, film, poems, conversation. Poets eavesdrop; I do it on the bus. If there is stealing, it is on a spectrum, which includes intertext. My poems draw from Gerard Manley Hopkins, Yunna Moritz and Alan Loney, and from sculptor Cori Beardsley, who suggest to me fresh possibilities.

Biographical note:

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Key words:

Poetry – response – stealing – collaboration – genre

you told me
so many things
about your past
I don't know which
are my memories, which yours

(Bullock, 2012)

This hybrid paper of creative and critical writing reflects on my explorations of poetry and my experience of taking ideas and techniques from others. I write in what I call 'response mode', which is a group of behaviours, on a spectrum from impersonation to stealing. My creative work often begins with an element of impersonation, which I believe is a valid aspect of learning. It also values understandings gained from other art forms. After studying the style and techniques of other poets, I sometimes move towards a mid-point between another poet's voice and my own, effectively, a new, hybrid voice. The engagement with literary ancestors enables an evolution towards an expression more fully my own. Stealing the designations of genre ensures a continued experiment. The challenges and variety of voicings made possible by prose poetry and haibun are important. The haibun influences other new hybrid forms which encompass found poetry and appropriate language in a way that is redolent of the times.

The unacknowledged aspects come closest to stealing, since what marks plagiarism out is the lack of acknowledgement of source. It is easy to slip into use of the word 'stealing' as a metaphor, which is rather inaccurate. We all 'take' from exhibitions, songs, film, poems, conversation. Poets eavesdrop; I do it on the bus. But if there is stealing, it is on a spectrum. This spectrum includes intertext, which is born in the interface between the writer's and reader's experiences, even if it is complicated by the thought that 'theft is what the giver brings' (Loney, 1994: 36). My work draws from the poets Gerard Manley Hopkins, Yunna Moritz and Alan Loney and from sculptor Cori Beardsley, who suggest to me fresh possibilities of form and content. I would be loath to call these works collaborative since we did not 'labour together', yet it could be argued that such responses sometimes constitute collaboration.

As the tanka poem that opens this piece suggests, the performance of the role of the writer relates to memory. It narrates the reality of intermingling lives and the fact that single origins become lost in time, just as originators and those who have motivated artistic excellence become obscured. My poems also celebrate, respond to and take from other art forms. Cori Beardsley's sculpture in clay yielded two poems for me. The first of these was written for the artist, following an exhibition at the Canberra Potter's Society (February, 2016). It articulates what the sculpture is doing, steals its theme, preoccupations and atmosphere:

erode

for Cori

she folds her body forward
eyes fall into rivers
her head rests on the mountain
hair streams down its sides
teeth clatter through valleys
legs split into fissures
toes roll in a rill
she lets out three final breaths
and a crack spreads across the synclines
of her face

(Bullock, 2016)

I have described what I felt the figure in the sculpture was doing; the writing reflects the way in which the body was part of a landscape, or the landscape was part of the body. There is an element of stealing in the response, since I take some important elements from the original. It is a stimulus to which I respond. It is debatable whether I introduce original themes. But I do add the details of eyes falling, the head resting, teeth clattering and of moving water. I extend the theme of death with the reference to ‘three final breaths’, a gesture which followed a conversation with the artist in which I recalled the experience of watching an animal dying.

A second, new poem responds to a show at M16 Artspace, Canberra (April, 2016):

welcome to the tables

inspired by Cori Beardsley’s exhibition ‘Touch’

down to bones
the fish woman’s gills
massaged open

marauded here
the body
blade-ankled

concerning death
the back smooth or
feet disjointed

hollow eyes
the end
beginning

a clay mind
by trepanning fingers
released

In this exhibition, life-sized clay figures laid out on tables were first assembled by the artist and then ‘massaged’ by her hands into very altered shapes as they were stripped of much of their clay flesh. The exhibition reflects her other occupation as a masseur and evokes the vulnerability of the human body. The results are quite shocking, especially in the video which accompanied the show. Meditations on death are comparatively rare in the West, and I found the work to be a liberating invitation to contemplate mortality, in a haiku sequence. I interpreted the deteriorated states of the figures as skeletons, some with gills. Hollow eyes suggested the proximity of death, and the heads of some figures seemed like victims of trepanning. Since I do not know fully what the artist intended, the poems cannot be said to be a direct translation from one medium to another. One could call these responses an imposed collaboration, as permission was neither asked for nor given. It is of a kind that some commentators have characterised as collaboration, under a very broad view of that term (Brophy 2016; Webb and Hetherington 2016). In Brady and Brien’s categorising of types of collaboration, it could be regarded as either Conceptual or Subject Collaboration (2003, n.p.). The fact that the stimulus for the poetry is freely acknowledged suggests that it is not entirely a matter of theft.

Impersonation

In other disciplines, particularly musical composition, studying the style of acknowledged masters and writing in their fashion is seen as an important aspect of learning. Impersonation engages us with what is possible in a form, through different styles and the specific techniques that an earlier practitioner employed. As a teenager, I copied the tone and verse forms of Thomas Hardy’s poetry, and I am not averse to revisiting this mode of learning. My poem ‘left in the dark’ was inspired by the sprung rhythms of Gerard Manley Hopkins and is a fond parody of it; an extract reads:

the freaking fracked-on foreclosed mortgaged
 kindness-on
roused the rabbled populace in Istanbul
 in, three
da(ys)zedly hence had found instruction
 folded on three
solved threats of soldiers' savagery
 tear-gas tanked & vehicle-armoured
goggles, gasmask & lightbulb paint
 full
the joint scratched made access to the bulb
 & filled, hurled
the windscreen blinded with the reek,
 the rock of, democracy

(Bullock, 2013)

Such a poem begs the question, how does one create something new with it? The poem is part of a series of homages to literary ancestors; its originality lies only in transposing Hopkins' poetic mode into a contemporary setting. Other responses, however, break fresh ground.

Becoming a mid-point

An immersion into another poet's writing which is all-enveloping, and can even feel overwhelming, sometimes leads to more distinctive results. Reading Russian poet Yunna Moritz seemed to fuse my senses, or make me aware of a different sensory experience. This culminated in writing a poem which adopts some of her tropes, and tinges of a similar surrealism:

echo

reading Yunna Moritz

I am going away to a land of myself
where in the woods I may bury me
and rest through winter, at least
so long, and perhaps like a crocus

I will rise. And you, disembarking from the train
and asking a young boy how to find
the forest, will reach me there.

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You will kneel down reluctantly

to sit in the damp grass beneath
the trees and the starlings on their way
to somewhere else and you
will notice a tinge of purple

on white; it will be me
but you won't pick the flower
thinking it's too early. You'll go back
to the village to drink brandy and relax

believing you have seen the place.
In the meantime I will put forth
another shoot and tomorrow
a blue dog lies beside me,

sniffing and scratching.
Leave me for the porters,
the carrying of cases and delighted lunches!
I have reached the woods.

(Bullock, 2010: 64)

The process of assimilating Moritz's voice and embracing her techniques leads the style of the poem to emerge as a kind of mid-point between that voice and my own, effectively, a new, hybrid voice.

In my manuscript *Under the Influence* I explore this approach further. The collection celebrates the writing of some very different poets and responds to their writing in specific ways. The first section takes the form of a letter, directly addressing an imagined Emily Dickinson in a sequence of 32 short poems, taking her themes, such as solitude, as my own, yet bridging the sense of isolation by 'writing' to her. The fourteen poems to Charles Bukowski borrow from his conversational and irreverent tones, with abrupt and forthright reflections on isolation and inspiration and enact a kind of fantasy role play. Other poems are addressed to literary ancestors and mentors, such as Marianne Moore, Vasko Popa and Alistair Paterson, including the poem 'left in the dark', already discussed. The strategy of finding a hybrid voice evolves further with a group of poems which reply directly to lines from Sylvia Plath. Many of her lines written as statements seem to me like questions to be

answered. Study of her use of personification and hyperbole and the transposing of real events into extraordinary imaginative scenarios allowed me to write with a freer enjoyment of imagination. Responses allude to relationships, fear and grief, as well as literary influence. Importantly, they provide a vehicle for expressing grief at the loss of a brother in the poem 'the invitation', the first section of which reads:

where you skated
ice held

where a voice was raised
you fell through

sedulous brother
of DNA and likeness

I was never
like you

walking home in the dark
to a dark house

a bronzed wall
full of fire
that could not
slake the cold

ice on the inside
of the window
where I hovered
like your vampire bats
ready to drink the morning
too tired to feed

I keep legends
going as songs
you found me
an old mandolin to play
the best thing
that ever happened (Bullock, 2014: 21)

Stealing the designations of genre

Another poet whose work has helped me to make progress in my own poetic evolution is Alan Loney. My prose poem sequence ‘A little less erasure’ is inspired by Loney’s ‘The erasure tapes’. The impact of the conflating of ideas through the sentence, rather than the line, appealed to me. There is no line here to control reading and less attendant sense of organisation (Hartman, 1980: 13). An associative freedom pervades this stream-of-consciousness monologue. The fragmentary ‘speech’ evokes the incomplete whole. The *in medias res* strategy of beginning and ending each page with a half-begun or half-finished sentence is another fragmentary technique:

a light moving around walls, on wallpaper recalled only in the kitchen, in small tears, a bright red berry or flower, and black stalks. To lop the top off memory’s silo, here, in that room, or all the rooms one lay awake in, to get at what day and night light showed, and now does not.
(Loney, 1994: 35)

I take Loney’s material as a signal for my own writing about memory, and particularly of a father figure. The subject is, in part, the mind and its connections, which enfolds the universal with the particular, the subjective with the objective, collapsing distinctions in typically postmodern strategies. The uncertainty regarding memory is part of its erasure: ‘These are, and are not, the words of the ancestors’ (Loney 1994, 35). I begin by borrowing a phrase such as this, evoking my own portrait of a father, and allow my own memories to flow. I write a sequence of thirteen short prose poems, in response to his more substantial sequence of thirteen full pages. My ‘erasure’ also includes getting rid of almost all punctuation to allow ideas to intermingle more fully, and in this way take Loney’s dismissal of the question mark (see below) even further:

The words of the ancestors could cuff me that’s the main a fist meant you were stronger ‘I can still hit harder than you ya know’ a father said to his son and nothing not the tablecloth never changed in gingham with dust honoured creases stains nor the broken window because a shoe after tormenting a sister nor the perspex homemade doubleglazing could let in or out love
(Bullock, 2016)

Loney’s statement, ‘Theft is what the giver brings’ is nuanced later in his poem by the statement, ‘What do I owe, that is, who are they, that have already given this to me in advance’ (1994: 46). I was certainly mindful of some version of this when responding to the particular poem that this quotation comes from. Loney is alluding to the gift of life that the parents offer the child, and what they pass on, unwittingly. I wrote about the multiplication of their sets of DNA and the mysteries and trceries they bring.

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In another section, I steal Loney's preoccupation with a father who wastes money and turn it in another direction, and pick up on a general concern with points of view (1994: 39). I steal Loney's tendency to pose all questions as statements (the question mark does not make an appearance in 'The erasure tapes'). I riff on the deliberate obscurity in Loney's text around the use of the second person 'he', which most often seems to be the father, but sometimes the self and occasionally a brother:

He gave her the money she wasted bizarrely assuaged his guilt at her previous misdemeanour which he nevertheless punished these are the days of points of view the assertion of one thing not the denial of another it's hard to live this rule we discuss and chart add to our 'knowledge' only what i can do is knowledge can i learn by heart without you suspecting me of being him
(Bullock, 2016)

Again, there is an element of what I call 'mid-point', hybrid writing. As with Plath, though, I feel liberated to find a new voice, working on the assumption that I will have many during a career, in the manner of a method actor. To the idea that 'self's a tale not to be told, in a world not to be written' (Loney, 1994: 43), I reply with ideas about energy transfer and try to harness the energy of stream-of-consciousness writing:

Where cows and goats graze patterns of energy will one day include measured thought what neurotheologists are working on comes back to cricket in the summer love solitude grass swishing wet ankles and under under is why it's possible mycorrhizal telephones whisper minerals through the forest if this wasn't true i wouldn't believe it or tell you what i can and marvel
(Bullock, 2016)

This sequence reflects another important aspect of one's poetic evolution and experimentation, which is to steal the designations of other genres. It has been observed that the Modernists had 'a desire to escape the blatantly conventional aspects of form' (Pinsky, 1976: 3); poets revolt against dead form (Holden, 1988: 1-3). The prose poem has been much discussed for its so-called subversive tendencies (Delville, 1998: 10; Murphy, 1992), and is an example of the testing and disruption of boundaries of genre. The attraction of prose poetry is that it has tremendous potential for experimentation since it is composed of, 'two independent but correlated artistic systems' (Lotman, 1976: 25). This potential has been articulated as the ability to 'draw on the resources available to both fiction writers and poets' (Alexander, 2016: n.p.). It takes the language of criticism and the advantages of narrative to its own ends (Fredman, 1983: 10). For practitioners, it is now so well-known, at least in Australia, that one commentator suggested the prose poem is no longer subversive at all and may even be considered a form rather than a genre (Smith, 2014: 9-10). Its attraction was brought home to me by Loney's poem in a striking manner.

Of course, some forms still have plenty of life in them, some so much so that they seem under-utilised by western poets. The haibun is another structure with great potential for experimentation with voice. In haibun, two very different elements occur in juxtaposition: prose and haiku, and the resources of prose and poetry mentioned above are nuanced by the presence of haiku as the main poetic structure. The stealing occurred long ago, when Basho wrote his first travel sketches with accompanying haiku. He had already originated haiku from the practice of renga (social, linked writing) and, indirectly, from tanka (since

collaborators wrote sequences of tanka between them). Basho began to write the leading observation, the hokku, for its own sake and at that time what we now call haiku was born.

But the haibun experiment has not reached its end. Contemporary haibun sometimes include lineated sections, which enhance its multiplicity even further. Haibun seem collaborative, even when written solo. I think of them as ‘self-renga’. One links and shifts from prose to haiku and back as one would in renga. Haibun has an inherent heteroglossia, as the movement between structures creates varieties of voice. The potential to adopt or steal other personalities is present in all writing; the contemporary haibun may harness this potential more than most forms.

We become many voices partly because of intertext, since the text itself is prone to traces of other texts (Derrida, 1997: 56). We are imbued with elements, events and memories of other lives, we draw on these, not always realising whose memories are whose. New Zealand poet Michele Leggott suggests that her writing has a ‘cast-list’ of seven: ‘I, you, he, she, we, you (all), and they’ (1996: 62), a grouping which can generate heteroglossia. The assemblage idea, that ‘each of us was several’ (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1988: 3), finds accord with Leggott’s theory.

My experiments with haibun have taken place over a long period. ‘Funky Junktion’ and ‘Karangahake Gorge’ (Bullock, 2009) include lineated poetry. ‘Auckland Days’ also steals the artists’ notes from paintings exhibited in the Auckland City gallery (Bullock, 2008). Thematically, ‘Transfusions’ steals an idea from J Pieloor that a poem might undergo a transfusion as its starting point. It then moves through a series of formal transfusions in its five short sections. The first two sections counterpoint prose with lineated poetry; the third is a classic haibun in miniature, with the minimum of one sentence and a single-line haiku; the fourth is a conventional narrative fragment, and the fifth is a stream-of-consciousness fragment. The latter two sections evoke the debate as to whether a haibun can be called such when it is composed solely of prose. Within this one piece, I try to suggest several variations that are possible in both the prose poem and the haibun. Again, I am stealing from other genres and their designations in this new poem:

Transfusions

from an idea by J Pieloor

This poem is having a transfusion, lines replaced by endless

~

This poem is having a makeover:

sharpened grammar shapes breath steps
into the shower falters but doesn’t elide
or look for help because its weaknesses

can be accommodated we like to put it

that way

~

His caverned laughter as he reaches to one side whilst on the rock face, muscles tense, tips of fingers holding firm in crevices

the chime of rain late spring

~

The story begins in the town of Ashhurst where the smoke of the first factory forms background to the thrushes that jostle the earth in the new-ploughed field. Jacob harnesses the horse.

~

Its incredible this floors been mopped three times today Ive never seen the place so clean where did you come from I bet you wont stay long they never do Im going to see Jean in the next ward I don't spose youll be here when I get back but if you are could you make sure the dessert is nice and cold last time it was lukewarm and it spoils the raspberry fool

I have sought ways to allow the haibun to influence other new hybrids, in poems which are effectively 'haibunised'. This takes the concern with the cross-pollination that a hybrid voice makes possible – largely a matter of content and style – into concerns with form. Sometimes this is achieved by book-ending lineated poems with haiku or interspersing them throughout. They are also fused with found poetry. A number of these experiments were published in the chapbook, *tracer* (Ampersand Duck, 2015). 'Redex', 'Primage', 'Breed' and 'Volumetrics' are what I call 'reductive symposia poems', written following the Codex Book Fair & Symposium, Melbourne; the Poetry & Image Symposium, University of Canberra, 2014; a talk by Brian Reed, Visiting Fellow, at the Australian National University, and The Value of the Humanities Conference, Australian National University (all 2014). They steal the major ideas and strange uses of language uttered at these literary events. They make use of page space to accentuate the often accidental interstices of language, and all contain haiku.

My poem 'sem' interlaces original ideas and imagined situations with eavesdropped conversations; haiku; quotations from written texts, exhibitions and public signage; suggestions and questions from friends and colleagues, and graffiti (Bullock, 2015). Different speakers are scored across the page. I have explored this collage-like technique in a number of other poems. They fuse as many forms as possible; their different relationships produce novel aesthetics and provisional meanings, which I believe reflect the times. The most recent poem of this type boasts a type of inclusion that is new to me, for which I will give some background.

I often hear someone say something that I think is a great line. I used to ask them if I could steal it. They always said yes, and I never used it. Then I started saying, I might steal that, which invariably met with agreement, and I occasionally used it. Now I steal, without asking, and almost always use the words. Is it the illicit nature of the act that makes it exciting? Of

course, Eliot's maxim 'Mature writers steal!' is hard on my heels (1921). But the new poem below includes a line which a colleague *asked me* to insert into a poem:

lips du

The Matrix was a doco

alright then, I'll come

I won't reveal your font secrets

he gave a soft no

*poetry? I'm so glad the University is doing
something as useless as that*

he's dead with black eyes like fish

I have your lips on me

eye aye

Vudu

I would like to acknowledge Paul Collis' line 'he's dead with black eyes like fish', especially since it was offered so freely. This is clearly an example of collaboration since it was given with permission. If Loney's statement: 'theft is what the giver brings' (1994: 36) is correct then almost everything is theft. But isn't everything already given, and we take from it, with various levels of acknowledgement.

Another form of collaboration that I would like to acknowledge is an example of what has been termed Hidden Collaboration (Brien and Brady, 2003: n.p.; see also Whidden, 2007: 74-75): my partner's editing of this paper.

The responses recorded here begin with the imitation of style and move through a spectrum of borrowing/taking and stealing ideas, content, form, tone, language and genre, and collaborating. The progression from hybrid voicing to hybrid forms is particularly important for creative practice as research, since adaptations of form are necessary to facilitate continued engagement with society, as its mores and expectations alter. These responses, and

the experiments which they engender, help outline the movement of language (Derrida, 1997: 7). They are reflective of the spirit of our age and its use of multi-media, snapshot images, jump-cuts, intertext and graffiti. More than ever before, we access beguilingly diverse examples of language. We need to assimilate that plethora somehow, and one of the ways to do so is to take ownership of the language that presents itself to us for response.

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