Talking Back: The Role of Poets and Poems in Literary Conversation

Great critics of literature have always theorized, in one way or another, that poetry is a traditional art-form. That is not to say it is stale or repetitive, but that it is *based in tradition*. To write good poetry we must read good poetry, and so on. But why, then, has it taken so long to address the root of poetic influence, and its place in the field of modern literature? Perhaps because until now we’ve taken the tradition for granted, not appreciating that every great poem is the result of other great poems, who were written by poets who influenced and were influenced by other poets. To address the influence of poetry on other poetry, we must first recognize that no poem is exempt, and no poet exemplary. To write poetry is to take part in a tradition of consumption and expansion in a literary conversation that’s been taking place for centuries. Because of this immense institution, it is equally important to understand why the conversation came about, and how, exactly, recognizing influence plays a role in its progression.

After hundreds of years of studying and writing poetry, it seems we still rely heavily on one rather ambiguous aspect on which to judge poetic writing: the authenticity of the poem. But as many poets and critics have already pointed out (many with more merit than myself), authenticity is possibly the single most deceptive element any art or artist has to offer. T. S. Eliot, a major modernist poet and literary critic in his own right, stipulates that “we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else” (Eliot). Few members of the literary community, or a consumer of art in general, may be able to intelligently disagree. However, Eliot goes on to tells us, “you cannot value [the poet] alone;
you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.” This idea that all poets and artists work within the confines of an ongoing literary conversation does not belong to Eliot alone, but has been explored by many writers and critics since his time.

Harold Bloom addresses this very assertion in his book *The Anxiety of Influence*, in which he explores the ever-changing relationship between poets and their literary fathers, poems and their literary precedence. He explains that “we need to stop thinking of any poet as an autonomous ego... Every poet is a being caught up in a dialectical relationship (transference, repetition, error, communication) with another poet or poets” (91). Here, Bloom focuses on the poet, as opposed to the poem, as being caught up in the “dialectical relationship.” but this is only because, if we are to treat poets as the acting force behind poetry, the doers of poetry, we must assume their product, or their poems, are also an integral part of this relationship. Bloom refers to the effect previous poets have on modern poets as *Poetic Influence*, which he defines as involving:

- two strong, authentic poets,—always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, or perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist. (30)

Bloom insists that both poets must be strong as well as authentic (that word again), but the inevitable poetic influence by which they both suffer is the result of an egregious, and, if not intentional then certainly beneficial, misreading of poetry. In later versions of his book, he goes on to explain that “the strong misreading comes first; there must be a profound act of reading that is a kind of falling in love with a literary work. That reading is likely to be
idiosyncratic, and it is almost certain to be ambivalent” (xxiii). While Bloom may be correct that
the falling in love with a poem is what inevitably sparks its misreading, I would argue that while
the misreading may be essentially idiosyncratic, it is most definitely not ambivalent.

Bloom himself says that to be a recipient of poetic influence, you must also already be a
strong and authentic poet. No poet strong in writing and in mind would be ambivalent in her
feelings towards a previous work, especially not if that previous work then fathered a poem of
her own. Then again, perhaps I am taking intentionality for granted. I would be more inclined to
agree with Eliot, that “we should be none the worse for articulating what passes in our minds
when we read a book and feel an emotion about it” (Eliot). This, I believe, acts as a better
summation of poetic influence than Bloom’s verbose definition because, it is the feeling that
sparks the birth of a new poem, the emotion itself, that is authentic. Not the poem resulting
from it. Nevertheless, the emotion and resulting poems are inarguably a small piece of this
Poetic Influence, and can effectively serve a purpose other than mere poetic perpetuation.

In line with Bloom’s theory, George Steiner, a literary critic and essayist, has also
explored the implications of previous artists on their respective successors. While Steiner’s
focus is rarely on the field of poetry, his ideas translate quite well. For instance, he approaches
the relationship between George Eliot’s Middlemarch to Henry James’ The Portrait of a Lady in
exploring the literary effect Eliot had on James. In Real Presences he says:

A felt apprehension of how the latter grew out of the former, of the ways in which
Henry James’s narrative organization and dramatized psychology are a re-
thinking, a comprehensive re-reading of George Eliot’s flawed masterpiece; a
grasp of the manner in which the coda of The Portrait of a Lady fails to resolve the
implausibilities of motive and conduct which James had registered in the
dénouement to Middlemarch)—these will make us party to a critical act of the first
order. The one novel comes to live in and against the other. (14)
Here, Steiner illustrates two momentous ideas on which this essay will progress. One, the influence that Eliot had on James is traceable, significant, and not necessarily positive. This last note is important because poetic influence simply exists, without regard to qualitative impact. Whether a work is positively or negatively effected by another is not the point, but that it was effected nonetheless. Secondly, Steiner begins to form an argument regarding writing and re-writing as a critical act, wherein the one artist’s response (or writer’s, poet’s, singer’s, etc.) to his predecessor does not only involve the creation of a new work, but an inherent criticism of the former. He argues that in order to be effected by one work and respond to it in kind shows a great depth of understanding of that work, more so than any literary or art critic could hope to possess. He argues that, “such understanding is simultaneously analytical and critical. Each performance of a dramatic text or musical score is a critique in the most vital sense of the term: it is an act of penetrative response which makes sense sensible” (8). Like in a real conversation, the ongoing historical conversation of poetry relies upon its conversers to understand when they are spoken to, and reply in such a way that others may also understand. It is both an internalization of what has been said in the past, as well as a turning around, distorting, and ultimately expanding the conversation with a reply.

However, where Steiner argues that artistic response is the only valuable (and yes, authentic) venue of criticism, Bloom believes the two may coexist. He suggests that, “authentic, high literature relies upon troping, a turning away not only from the literal but from prior tropes. Like criticism, which is either part of literature or nothing at all,
great writing is always at work strongly (or weakly) misreading previous writing” (xix).

The differentiation between Bloom’s and Steiner’s arguments is minor at best, though. Yes, Bloom may grant more merit to literary critics than does Steiner, but both seem to have drawn a similar conclusion. Inherent to poetic influence, or the process of being effected by a poet or poem, internalizing those feelings, and writing a new poem, is an act of criticism. Every poem written in response to another has, in one way or other, attempted to accomplish something left unsatisfied by the original. Because of this, every response or literary conversational reply is essentially critical of its parent text, even if the influence was positive—even if the poet is responding unintentionally. Steiner sums it up best when he states that “the material of interpretation and of judgment is, in the main, provided by artists... Thus, structure is itself interpretation and composition is criticism” (16, 21). While academic critics may be able to study and research the surrounding theories and ideas involving one poem, they will never be able to distort the fabric of the poem itself; only another poem may do that.

After addressing the value of poetic influence and the ways in which poems act as art-in-literature as well as academic criticism, it’s important to note the temporal aspect in which poems effect other poems. When one poem influences the writing of another, the conversation is advancing, moving into the future. But poetry can, and often does, work backwards as well. Poems that are written in response to other poems are in the unique position to accomplish three very important things: they can contradict the original poem, asking the reader to reevaluate their initial stance; they can act as an expansion of the original, stressing its limitations; and they can enlighten
the original poem, working within the substance of the poem itself to improve, reinvent, or detail elements the first poet spent too little time addressing. The ways in which poems are able to address their influences, and in turn influence the influencer, is one of the remarkable feats of this great ongoing literary conversation. The reader is given the chance to return to the initial work after having read it’s offspring-poems and consider, as if for the first time, it’s impact.

The first way in which a poem may retroactively effect its predecessor is by contradiction. Initially this may sound like an oxymoron; How can any poem be considered a response, or even in the conversation at all, if its very purpose is to oppose its parent poem? To address this concern, I turn again to Bloom. He stipulates that “to do just the opposite is also a form of imitation, and the definition of imitation ought by rights to include both” (31). If a poet writes with such intention as to contradict that of another poet, he is admitting to just as much influence as the poet who attempts to accurately mimic another. In fact, the contradiction is intrinsic to the new poem’s value in the literary conversation. As Eliot wrote, “To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new” (Eliot). In order to participate in the sphere of poetic influence, there must be a distinction between imitation and influence, and simple replication.

In order to better illustrate the impression a poem may have by contradicting its parent, I turn to an obvious example: Billy Collins’ “Litany.” After reading Belgian poet Jacques Crickillon’s “You are the bread and the knife/ The crystal goblet and the wine”, Collins responded with a literal, but nonetheless extraordinary, contradiction. After
using Crickillon’s opening lines as his own, Collins goes on to tell us “you” is also the morning grass, the sun, the baker’s apron, and marsh birds in flight (3-6). Suddenly though, and with an amusingly flippant turn in the second stanza, Collins says “However, you are not the wind in the orchard,/ the plums on the counter,/ or the house of cards./ And you are certainly not the pine-scented air./ There is just no way you are the pine-scented air” (7-11). The speaker goes on to catalogue all of the elements the intended subject is not, as well as listing a few that he himself embodies: “It might interest you to know,/ speaking of the plentiful imagery of the world,/ that I am the sound of rain on the roof.” Using Crickillon’s poem as a spring-board, Collins allows the reader to draw conclusions about his own poem as well as the previous, some even without having read it. Suddenly, instead of being swept away in broad, romantic images of a lover embodying the daily objects of the speaker’s life, the reader re-considers the language itself, and the ways in which we describe our loves.

Collins’ tone also adds an element of contradiction to Crickillon’s work because, without Collins’ shadow of mockery, readers like myself may not have considered that we too could be present in the enumerated objectification. Why continue to insist, with quips as overused and stale as “You are my everything,” that the subject of our love or desire must inhabit and embody every aspect of our lives? Having read Crickillon’s poem, we may have found it romantic—sentimental even—but somehow, Collins easily reminds us how naïve and unreasonable it is to continue to use language such as that. While Collins’ “Litany” acts as an obvious example of poetic contradiction (most lines directly antithetical to its parent line), it is no-less impactful in its influence. Moving
backwards, the reader is able to draw conclusions about the previous poem before it
draws them about the present poem, an achievement made possible by an established
and ongoing poetic influence.

The second way in which a poem may work to retrospectively influence its
parent is through an expansion of the original text. To do this, most often the response
poem must openly address the poem to which it is responding (while that was also the
case with the Collins example, it is not always necessary when contradicting another
poem). This can become complicated, however, in situations where the response poem
is not so much responding to another individual work, but a theme, or image, or even
entire oeuvre from someone else in the history of the poetic conversation. Bloom
addresses this by reminding his readers that “no poem has sources, and no poem
merely alludes to another” (43). This will work as an important reminder in this essay as
well. While I have and will continue to provide (at times obvious) examples of how
poetic influence can manifest itself, it is important to remember that no one poem can
be wholly dependent on another, and no one poet can be solely influenced by another.
Inherent in this conversation of poetic influence is the idea that all conversers are privy
to the works of all other conversers. And, like in a never-ending game of poetic
telephone, one poet’s influence may be expressed by one, interpreted by another, and
distorted by a third. That is to say, all poetry is influenced by all other poetry, and while I
am focusing on finite examples of intentional influence, that is only a small
representation of the possibilities.
In order to more directly demonstrate the ways in which a poem may expand on another, I will turn to a perhaps more well-known example, that is, Sir Walter Raleigh’s response to Christopher Marlowe. In 1599 Marlowe published a poem titled “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,” in which the speaker (the shepherd) promises earthly riches to his love if she will come be with him. The fifth stanza particularly illustrates the essence and tone of the poem: “A belt of straw and ivy buds,/ With coral clasps and amber studs;/ And if these pleasures may thee move,/ Come live with me and be my love” (17-20). Marlowe expresses an earnest yearning from his speaker, laced with verdant imagery and richly choreographed promises that, to the reader, resound with pomp and sincerity. However, one year later, Sir Walter Raleigh wrote a poem in response to Marlowe’s called “The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd.” Using many of the same elements discussed earlier, Raleigh effectively contradicts the message of Marlowe’s original poem with his response. In the opening lines, Raleigh immediately addresses the conclusion he knows Marlowe’s reader has drawn. He writes, “If all the world and love were young,/ And truth in every shepherd’s tongue,/ These pretty pleasures might me move/ To live with thee and be thy love” (1-4). Raleigh does what Collins did; the reader suddenly realizes she forgot to consider the impermanence of Marlowe’s promises, as Raleigh reminds us “The flowers do fade, and wanton fields/ To wayward winter reckoning yields” (9-10). He even points out that the shepherd has given us no reason to believe he is sincere, as truth may not lie “in every shepherd’s tongue.” Raleigh goes on to address, almost line for line, every claim made by Marlowe’s shepherd, and finds fault with them each. Finally, in the fifth stanza, written
to parallel Marlowe’s, the nymph replies, “Thy belt of straw and ivy buds,/ Thy coral clasps and amber studs,/ All these in me no means can move/ To come to thee and be thy love” (17-20). While “The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd” may exemplify many aspects of poetic contradiction, it’s the effect that the two poems have in tandem with one another that makes it so impactful.

Raleigh didn’t simply reply to, or even simply contradict Marlowe. He expanded the entirety of Marlowe’s poem until he made it such that they work better when treated as two-parts of one. Raleigh literally replied to Marlowe in their poetic conversation, he took what was one-sided and made it whole. Raleigh wrote a new poem that, because of Marlowe’s influence, addressed the pieces the former didn’t. He gave a voice to what was an otherwise implied void, and, because of that, effectively expanded Marlowe’s poem into his own, making it more than it originally was. So again, though he reached back only a year, Raleigh was able to return influence onto Marlowe’s poem, address the pieces that were broken or missing, and provide more substance than was previously present. The “providing more substance” part is also vital to the last way a poem may retrospectively influence its own influencer: by enlightening the original poem from within its own subject.

One poem’s ability to enlighten another is perhaps the most monumental of the three actions discussed because it must work within the established realm of another poem without monotonous or gluttonous repetition. It must only take what the original poem offered and live within that context, bringing depth, not width to its influencer. To best illustrate this phenomenon, I turn to a somewhat unlikely example. Elizabeth
Bishop wrote “The Prodigal” as an enlightening extension of the bible story involving the prodigal son’s return to his father after spending his inheritance frivolously and becoming so destitute he was made to live in a sty with hogs (Luke 15:11-32). While Bishop’s poetic response is not to a poem, per se, I would argue that the Bible’s influence on English Literature (and literature as a whole) is vast and expansive, and dates back hundreds of years. Given the numerous poems that have been written to include some aspect of biblical doctrine, it is on this precedent that I will continue.

Bishop effectively enlightens the reader to the bible story by magnifying the detail of the pig sty to such a degree it becomes the only relevant aspect of the original story. Given its religious implications for the Jewish faith, it makes almost too much sense for this to be the scene of her poem. She spends the entirety of her poem in imagistic description, throwing the reader into scenes like, “The floor was rotten; the sty/ was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung” (3-4). She insists that the reader not focus on the father, or the frivolity of the young son’s actions, but instead live with the boy in filth, let her fill her nose with “the brown enormous odor” and to shudder with him as he feels the bat’s “uncertain staggering flight” (1, 25). She insists we live this moment with the prodigal son because to Bishop, this is the moment that matters most in the story. She enlightens us not by expansion or reinvention, she has no intention of changing the ending. She instead forces her reader to forgo the ending for a moment, to forget that “The Prodigal Son returns,” and focus on where he went in the first place. In the original story, the ending is the most memorable and meaningful part because that is where the moral lies. But because Bishop chooses the pig sty as her place of
enlightenment, the reader now more fully understands the significance of the son’s return. Like with Collins and Raleigh, Bishop works backwards. She is somehow able to add to a centuries-old story without changing it at all, simply developing it internally, working with the substance that was already there, and enlightening her readers by granting it depth.

In discovering the expansive history of poetic conversation and poetic influence, the question of authenticity now seems irrelevant. Authenticity may now be described as the extent to which a poem or poet takes on its predecessors, either intentionally or not, and creates new work within the context of the ongoing conversation. It is neither total conformity, nor is it total retaliation. The influence that old poems have on new (and, as we’ve discussed, vice versa) is all-encompassing. The only way to avoid poetic influence in the conversation is to remain silent, or create nothing at all. However, we have found that it is in the creation that poems become not only catalysts of influence, but also themselves become influencers, and the cycle continues. Whether a poet contradicts, expands upon, or enlightens a former or future poet, the success is in the creating, and in keeping the conversation alive.
Works Cited


Steiner, George. *Real presences: is there anything in what we say?*. Faber & Faber, 2010.