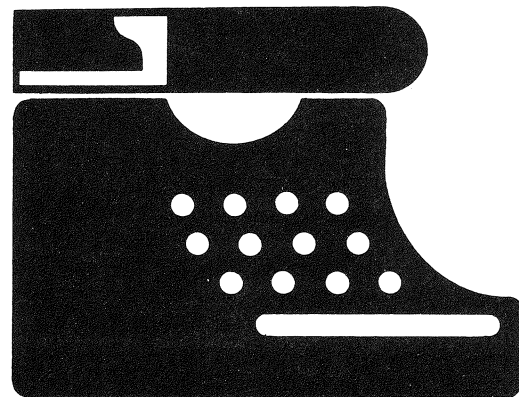


Teachers & Writers



Bi-Monthly • January-February 1984

Vol. 15, No. 3

Special Issue!

THE QUESTION OF INDIVIDUAL AUTHORSHIP

Renga: Teaching a Collaborative Poem

by Jeffrey Schwartz

IN 1969 FOUR POETS DESCENDED INTO A HOTEL basement in Paris for five days to write the first Western renga, a chain poem invented in Japan around the 8th century. From Italy, England, France, and Mexico, the four poets worked simultaneously in four different languages on one collaborative poem. Each worked in view of the others, constantly sharing words, ideas, and sensations. In his description of the experience, Octavio Paz, the Mexican poet, writes about feeling alternately ashamed and voyeuristic to be sharing such a private act as writing with his fellow poets.* He also writes about how the Japanese renga clashes with the Western

*[Editor's note: see Paz's piece in this issue.]

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Romantic tradition that focuses on the writer or the subjective 'I' behind the poem. The renga, on the other hand, focuses on the work itself. The 'I' is obliterated and replaced by the collective consciousness of a small group working as one.

For anyone not used to writing with others, collaborative poems are as frustrating as they are fun and challenging. To a degree each writer must sacrifice his or her individuality in order to write the part of the poem that will conform to and extend the stanzas that came before. For students used to writing solely about their own experience and from their own point of view, writing a renga is one of the best ways to snap into a different perspective. As the renga grows, the writers must fit themselves into the points of view of their fellow collaborators, scrutinizing the poem for patterns and directions, struggling to add their individual touches to the group work.

The renga works very simply and can take as little time as a class period to as long as six weeks to complete. Normally when I teach it to college students, I have them work on a stanza per day so that the first draft is completed in one week and revised in the next. After giving the students some background on the renga, I ask them to bring in a stanza the next day. I tell them the stanza can be any length, though they must consider that whatever form they initiate, everyone else will have to follow. No revisions of other writers' stanzas are allowed at this point. Students work in groups of five so that each completed renga will be five stanzas long, one by each group member. Although they know whom they are working with, I try to make the process as anonymous as possible by asking them to leave off their names until the end and also by arranging the order so that they "pass off" to a different collaborator each time. At the end of the fifth day, the completed renga goes back to the originator for a title.

Between working on each stanza, we discuss the kinds of constraints each writer faces and how they differ as the renga progresses. Students become aware of how much more difficult it is to develop someone else's idea. When we write poems, our notion of what's to come doesn't halt abruptly when we reach the white space between stanzas. Students find that their choices for where the poem may go become more and more limited as stanzas are added. In addition to developing the subject matter of the poem (which soon begins to have a life of its own) each writer must concentrate more closely than usual on particular elements of craft—the number of lines, line length, punctuation and capitalization, diction, imagery, tone, point of view, and especially syntax—to conform to the pattern set by the first stanza.

Here are two renga with a lot of surprises, but with a lot of coherence, too, because of the way the writers use plot. Notice in "Take Two" how enjambment invites the next stanzas.

Take Two

Into the vestibule you came
carrying two bottles of wine
a perfect dinner guest.

Wearing a pin-striped suit
wide yellow tie
and yellow-striped socks

you were meticulously dressed
and walked the stairs to my door.
Wine tucked under your wing

you proffer Golden 100s and silver lighter
to my lipstick smile.
Fumée blanc and chianti are set aside

the taste lingering
as I gladly
help loosen your tongue and tie.

—Alice Alfonsi, Anna Coleman, Louise Crocoll,
Gina Fleitman, and Judith Meiksin

As the suspense story unravels in "The Risk of Poker," there's an unusual coordination of flashbacks, association, points of view, and the languages of both description and instruction.

The Risk of Poker

Graffiti on the walls
An ominous ticking.
Cigarettes, matches
Deck of cards
Top the nightstand.

"Drive 75 miles south
Past Alberta, find
The Bates Motel,
And wait there."
That's all they said.

Room 14 ticks.
Clock says 11:15 p.m.
I wait with apprehension
And worry, my two dogs.
Message under the Ace of Spades:

AT MIDNIGHT, OPEN
THE MEDICINE CHEST, ON
THE LEFT SIDE OF THE BOTTOM SHELF
ARE TWO BLUE PILLS, DROP THEM
IN A GLASS OF WATER, AND DRINK.

I drink, and like Alice,
Fall into Wonderland where
I stand outside my body
Lying next to a dog-bitten
Flea collar & the Queen of Hearts.

—Susan Bossi, Julie Harris, Rob Packard, Marge Palcsey, and
Jeff Schwartz

When Paz and his collaborators wrote their renga, they chose the Western form of a sonnet as the chain in order to approximate the original Japanese tanka or haiku chains. When I teach the renga, I concentrate more on the collaboration than the form. Students' own forms will be strict enough and will raise the same issues of group writing that the more traditional sonnet or tanka would raise. Here are two renga where I think the writers have worked successfully within the formal limits initiated by their precursors:

Four that's dots enough
a piddle of hearts or a pot
of lame spades always
making for matches in cards
what is red as points
plays as four in a pack

Five what's riddle of suit
black lain up on pile jokers red
darkens score or air
what is not hearts knows that
what is red as points
plays as four in a pack

Six who's jokers triddle
join the club of spaded hearts
gathering midnight fog
of shade no pair can secret keep
what is red as points
plays as four in a pack

Seven it's said almost dead
reach to find blood stain mark
no longer fiddle black
even shaded cards reveal in time
what is red as points
plays as four in a pack

Eight where's leopard spot
thirteen in plastic pile
rearranged by fingers
set up even straight
what is red as points
plays as four in a pack.

—Scott Allburger, Tom McCarthy, Andrea Olsheskie,
Kathy Phillips, and Debbie Small

About Pittsburgh

Below Pittsburgh,
yesterday's coal galleries
undermine today.

Around Pittsburgh
depleted mines, idle mills
become handicaps.

Above Pittsburgh
rusted smokestacks seem immortal
thrusting into clouds.

Inside Pittsburgh,
buildings hang over people
in heavy depression.

But beyond Pittsburgh,
natives recall their rivers and hills,
their beer, ethnicity, even their bridges
with pride.

—Susan Bossi, Julie Harris, Rob Packard, Marge Palcsey, and
Jeff Schwartz

Though our discussion of the renga starts after reading Paz's introduction to *Renga (A Chain of Poems)* by Octavio Paz, Jacques Roubaud, Edoardo Sanguineti, and Charles Tomlinson (New York: George Braziller, 1971), I make it clear our rengas will be different from his experience in France. We won't lock ourselves into the basement of the Ramada Inn for five days or write in four different languages, but we will write a unique collaborative poem that will stretch our imaginations in a way we haven't written before. I often write with my students, too, which gives me an inside perspective on their struggles and teaches *me* what kinds of poetic constraints to pay attention to. When we are finished we have a set of poems that each of us has shared in producing, and though we can sometimes identify individual voices in the poem, we read the renga as a whole.

With the anonymous but familiar pieces before us, we look for surprises in the poems and talk about how they succeed and how we read these group efforts differently than single-author poems. To get the students to appreciate even more what Paz calls the "crisis of the notion of the author," I ask each one to revise the particular renga he or she started. In that way, they can see how the poem changes under one person's editorial control. They are free to add, delete, or change the direction of the poem. Essentially, I am asking them to shape the group-written renga into a more traditionally defined coherent whole and to pay closer attention to their choices and constraints in writing.

The renga is a very good assignment to follow reading almost any contemporary American poets, since most emphasize writing from experience and often blur the line between autobiography and poetic subject. The renga, on the other hand, can take the writer's experience as a starting point, but must always reduce that individual's experience to suit the poem. More gets imagined (as opposed to borrowed from real life) in a renga, and students learn to discover unexpected meaning by following the language of the poem. ●

Writing Renga

by Octavio Paz

IN CONTRAST WITH THE CONCEPTION OF A LITERARY work as the imitation of antique models, the modern age has exalted the values of originality and novelty: the excellence of a text does not depend on its resemblance to those

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of the past, but on its unique character. Beginning with romanticism, tradition no longer signifies continuity by repetition and by variations within repetition; continuity takes the form of a leap, and tradition becomes a synonym for history: a succession of changes and breaks. The romantic fallacy: the literary work as an odd number, the reflection of the exceptional ego. I believe that, today, this idea has reached its end. Two significant indications, among many others: surrealism, in rediscovering inspiration and making of it the very focal

point of writing, put into brackets the notion of author; the poets of the English language, for their part—particularly Eliot and Pound—have shown that translation is a process indistinguishable from poetic creation. Our century is the century of translations. Not only of texts but of customs, religions, dances, erotic and culinary arts, fashions, and, in short, all kinds of usages and practices, from the Finnish sauna to yoga exercises. History itself seems to us an imperfect translation—full of gaps, thanks to the stupidity and interpolations of perverse copyists of a lost text which the philosophers, from Hegel to Marx to Nietzsche and Spengler, endeavor to reconstruct. Doubtless other epochs and other people have also translated and with as much passion and care as ourselves (for example: the translation of Buddhist books by the Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetans), but not one of them was conscious of the fact that, in translating, we change what we translate and above all that we change ourselves. For us translation is transmutation, metaphor: a form of change and severance; a way, therefore, of ensuring the continuity of our past by transforming it in dialogue with other civilizations (an illusory continuity and dialogue: translation: transmutation: solipicism). The idea of universal correspondence is returning. Certainly, we no longer see the macrocosm and the microcosm as the two halves of one sphere, but we conceive of the entire universe as a plurality of systems in movement: these systems reflect one in another and, reflecting, they combine like the rhymes of a poem. Thus they transform themselves into other systems, increasingly transparent and abstract, into systems of systems, veritable geometries of symbols, until they reach the point where they cannot be detected by our instruments of observation and end up by evaporating—once more like rhymes which lead into silence and like the act of writing which finishes in nothingness.

Immersed in the world of translation or, more exactly, in a world which is in itself a translation of other worlds and other systems, it is natural that we should have tried to transplant into the West an oriental form of poetic creation. It is scarcely necessary to explain that we have no intention of taking over a genre, but rather of putting into operation a system for the production of poetic texts. Our translation is analogical: we are not concerned with the renga of Japanese tradition, but its metaphor, one of its possibilities or avatars. But why the renga and not some other form—Chinese, Eskimo, Aztec, Persian? In the present moment of its history the West is meeting with the East at various points—meeting without touching, moved by the logic of its own destiny. One of these points is poetry. Not some idea of poetry, but its practice. And the renga is, before everything, a mode of practice. I perceive two kinds of affinity: the first, the element of combination which governs the renga, coincides with one of the central preoccupations of modern thought, from the concerns of logic to the experiments of artistic creation; the second, the collective character of a game, corresponds with the crisis of the notion of author, and with the aspiration toward a collective poetry.

The element of combination consists in the making of a poem by a group of poets; following a circular order, each poet in succession writes his stanza in turn, and his intervention is repeated several times. It is a movement of rotation which, little by little, delineates the text, from which neither calculation nor chance is excluded. I will go further: it is a movement in which calculation prepares for the appearance of chance. I underline that the renga is not a combination of

signs, but a combination of makers of signs: of poets. As for collective poetry, one has no need to state that it is one of the modern obsessions. It is an idea that was born with romanticism and which from the very beginning was a contradiction: belief in the anonymous and impersonal nature of inspiration is not readily compatible with the belief in the poet as a unique being. Romanticism exalted simultaneously the I and the we: if the poet is a collective being who sings, the people are a poet with a hundred thousand eyes and a single tongue. Homer is not a real name, but an appellation: it implies a community. Criticism very quickly destroyed the hypothesis of the anonymous, spontaneous, and popular origin of epic poetry. One of Nietzsche's first essays was dedicated to showing that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, by the mere fact of being poems, postulate the necessary existence of a poet, a Homer. Nietzsche's argument is memorable because it contradicts equally the ideas of the romantics and those of the classicists: Homer is not so much a real historical being, as a formal, aesthetic condition of the artistic work. The Homer of Nietzsche is neither the folk of the romantics nor the formidable blind poet of tradition; rather than an author with his own name, he is a consequence of the perfection and unity of the poems. Nietzsche implies that it is not the poet who creates the work, but the opposite. Thus he inaugurates a new conception of the relations between the poem and the poet. However it was the surrealists who brought to an end the idea of the author by resolving the contradiction of the romantics: the poet is merely the place of meeting, the field of battle and of reconciliation of the impersonal and masked forces that inhabit us. Inspired by one of the maxims from Lautréamont's *Poésies*, they affirm that poetry must be made by all and for all. The games of the surrealists had in common their accentuation of the collective character of artistic creation—in the same way that automatic writing rendered manifest the impersonal nature of inspiration. The affinities and analogies between games of the surrealists and the renga are numerous and profound. More than coincidences, they are rhymes, correspondences: one of the meeting points of East and West. But the differences are not less notable. I will limit myself to pointing out the most important: surrealist activity destroys the notion of the work in the interest of replacing it by the poetic act; in the renga the authors disappear as individuals in the interest of the common work. On the one hand the poetic experience is exalted, on the other, the poem. In the first case: the preeminence of subjectivity; in the second, of the work. In both, the intrusion of chance is a condition of the game, but the rules which originate the game are distinct and even opposed. With the surrealists chance works in an open space: the passivity of critical consciousness. I note in passing the paradoxical character of this passivity: it is voluntary and deliberate, the result of the critical activity of consciousness. The surrealist poet tries to attain that state of absolute distraction which invites and provokes the discharge of concentrated poetic energy. In the renga, chance works as one of the signs of the game—the nameless sign, the invisible current which accelerates or retards progress, the force which turns the steering wheel and changes the direction of the poem. Chance does not appear in a free space but on the track laid down by the rules: its function consists in distributing the regularity of writing by interruptions which distract the poem from its goals and orient it toward other realities. In the surrealist game distraction implies maximum concentration, the *explosion fixe* of André Breton; in the renga maximum concentration pro-

duces the liberating distraction, the gap through which the instantaneous flow of poetry bursts forth. Are we confronted by the same chance, or can we designate with the same name two distinct forces having in common only the power of troubling our mental and vital systems?

The practice of the renga implies the negation of certain cardinal western notions, such as the belief in the soul and in the reality of the I. The historic context in which it was born and developed did not know of the existence of a creator god and denounced the soul and the I as pernicious illusions. In the Japan of tradition the social cell, the basic unity, was not the individual, but the group. Further, each in its own way, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism, fought against the idolatry of the I. For the first it was a chimerical entity: from the point of view of true reality (emptiness) the ego is not so much an infirmity as an optical illusion. Confucianism and Shintoism, for their part, restrict the individual within the double yoke of "filial piety" and loyalty to the feudal lord. For all these reasons, it seems to me that the renga must have offered to the Japanese the possibility of going out from themselves, of passing from the anonymity of the isolated individual into the circle of exchange and recognition. Also it was a way of liberating themselves from the weight of hierarchy. Although it was governed by rules as strict as those of etiquette, its object was not to put a brake on personal spontaneity, but to open up a free space so that the genius of each one could manifest itself without doing harm either to others or oneself.

A practice which contradicts the beliefs of the West, the renga for us was a test, a purgatory in miniature. As there was no question of either a tournament or a competition, our natural animosity found itself without employment: neither a goal to be attained nor a prize to be carried off, no rival to be vanquished. A game without adversaries. From the first day, in the basement room of the Hôtel St. Simon and during the following days, from March the thirtieth to April the third, irritation and humiliation of the I:

—A feeling of abandonment, rapidly changing into disquiet, then into aggressiveness. The enemy is nobody, the anger involved nobody, I am the mask of nobody. One goes from humility to anger, from anger to humility: to write as well as one can, not in order to be better than the others, but in order to contribute to the elaboration of a text the aim of which is to represent neither me nor the others; to advance unarmed across the paper, to lose oneself in the act of writing, to be nobody and oneself at the same time.

—A sensation of oppression: for a Japanese the circle of the renga is a space which opens up, for me it is a snare drawn tight. A trap. I hear the subway trains passing close by. (Clamor: Homeric metaphors for a stormy sea, those of the Vedic hymns on thunder, the iron cataracts of Joyce.) I hear the steps of people entering and leaving the hotel. Renga: school, station platform, waiting-room. Someone comes downstairs and asks us if we have seen a case. Seeing us, each one bent over his sheet of paper, he draws back, murmurs an apology and disappears. Renga: a chain of poems, chain of poems-poets, chain of chains. Murmurs, whispers, bursts of stifled laughter. Drought, electricity in silk, in metal, in the paper on which I am writing. Suddenly, like a curtain which is drawn back, time opens: there appear Marie-Jo, Brenda, Luciana. The wives put an end to this sea storm on dry land. Now we speak aloud, laugh, come up to the surface.

—A feeling of shame: I write in front of others, the others in front of me. Something like undressing in a cafe, or defecating, crying before strangers. The Japanese invented the renga for the same reasons and in the same manner in which they bathed naked in public. For us, the bathroom and the room in which we write are totally private places, where we come in alone and where we realize acts that are alternately infamous and glorious. In the bathroom we wash, make our confessions, beautify ourselves, purify ourselves, talk to ourselves, spy on ourselves, absolve ourselves. . . each one of these acts and the rites and excitements which accompany them, has its symbolic (sacramental/excremental) counterpart in the study of the writer: table, lamp, papers, books, chair, typewriter. The difference is that the bath-tub is unproductive whereas in writing we produce texts. Refuse or desires—what is the initial material of the writer?

—A feeling of voyeurism: I see myself manipulating sentences, I see them come together, fall apart, come back into shape. *Les mots font l'amour* on my page, on my bed. Beautiful and terrifying promiscuity of language. Embrace becomes struggle, struggle dance, dance a wave of the sea, the wave a wood. Dispersion of signs. Concentration of insects, black, green, blue. Ants on the paper. Volcanoes, scattered archipelagoes. Ink: stars and flies. Writing-explosion, writing-fans, writing-morass. Pause: he who is writing stops, lifts his head and looks at me: an empty look, a full look, a stupefied look, a lofty look. Writing, playing, copulating: dying? The eyes cease seeing—and see. What do they see? They see what is being written and in seeing it erase it. Writing is reading and erasing written signs in a space which is within and outside us, a space which is ourselves and in which we cease to be ourselves in order to be what or who?

—A feeling of returning: I go down into the magic cave, the cavern of Polyphemus, the hiding place of Ali Baba, the conspirators' catacomb, the cell of the accused, the basement for those punished at school, the grotto beneath the sea, underground room (Proserpine, Calypso), vagina of language, belly of the whale, pit of the crater. The underground workers, gnomes of the word, miners of signs, drillers and dynamiters of meanings. Moles, rats, worms. Venerable serpents, august dragons: guardians of the buried treasure, the iron coffer full of dry leaves, the treasure of foolish wisdom. Shame, pride, mockery. Passage from anguish to laughter. From striking oneself a blow of contrition to a somersault, from isolation to fraternity. Complicity in the common task; respect without respect for others: I laugh at myself in laughing at you and thus I honor myself and honor you. Community in laughter and silence, community in coincidence and dissidence. Joy underground.

Renga, bath of consciousness, confrontation with myself and not with others: I have undergone neither a struggle nor a victory.

Renga, a spiral, round and round, for five days in the basement of a hotel, each return nearer the light, each circle wider.

Renga, mining-out of language; we make our exit through a gap of silence, on the fifth day, into freezing noon. Dispersion of the spirit, at the crossroads of the boulevard St. Germain and the rue du Bac: Gloucester, Dijon, Salerno, Pittsburgh.

Our attempt naturally enters into the tradition of modern western poetry. One could even say that it is a consequence of its dominant tendencies: the conception of writing as a com-

bined act, the narrowing of the frontier between translation and original work, the aspiration toward a collective (and not collectivist) poetry. And now let me try to bring out the central characteristics of our renga, the trait which distinguishes it radically and totally from the Japanese model: it is a poem written in four languages. I add and I underline: in four languages and in a single language: that of contemporary poetry. Curtius demonstrated the unity of European literature. Today this unity is more visible and more intimate than in the middle ages or in the past century. It is at the same time broader: it extends from Moscow to San Francisco, from Santiago to Sidney. In German, Polish, Roumanian, or Portuguese, the poets of our time write the same poem; and each version of this poem is one that is distinct and unique. Góngora, Donne, the romantics, the symbolists, and our masters and predecessors of the first half of the twentieth century did the same thing. There is not (there has never been) a French poetry, an Italian, Spanish, or English: there was a poetry of the Renaissance, a Baroque poetry, a Romantic poetry. There is a contemporary poetry written in all the languages of the West. If a Frenchman, an Italian, an Englishman, and a Mexican participated in this first attempt to transplant the renga, in future gatherings (for I am sure that other rengas will be written) there will be Russian poets, Germans, Brazilians, Catalans, Greeks, Hungarians. . . all the idioms of the West. On the other hand, although it is desirable, the confrontation with poets of other civilizations seems to me a little more difficult, at least for the present. The reason being that our renga involves two contradictory but complementary elements: the diversity of languages and the community of the language of poetry.

The classic Japanese poem, the tanka, is composed of two verses, the first of three lines and the second of two. Nothing is easier than to divide up a tanka: 3/2, word/echo, question/reply. Once divided, the tanka goes on multiplying. It proliferates by parthenogenesis: 3/2/3/2/3/2/3/2. . . a verbal fissuring, fragments which separate and link up: the shape described by the renga has something of the slenderness of a snake and the fluidity of the Japanese flute. Looking for a western equivalent of the renga, one thinks of the sonnet: on the one hand it is the sole traditional form which has remained alive up to our own times; on the other, it is composed, like the tanka, of semi-independent and separable entities. However, the structure of the sonnet is much more complete than that of the tanka. While the latter is composed of only two verses, the number of divisions of the sonnet varies by virtue of the principle of duplication: the first part of a sonnet is composed of two quatrains and the second of two tercets. In the tanka the relation between the verses is that of odd/even; in the sonnet it is simultaneously even/even and even/odd, since the second section is divided into two "odd" parts. Repetitions, reflections, redundancies, and echoes which permit a great variety of combinations. Rimbaud's "Sonnet des Voyelles" is a single phrase; the Petrarchan sonnet (eight and six lines) is dualistic and extends the themes of courtly love; that of four verses is a cube of sound, a self-sufficient argument, almost a syllogism; that of three terms is dialectical, of the passions: it affirms, denies, and ends in the incandescence of paradox; the Elizabethan sonnet is more music than a verbal monument and, if one compares it with that of Góngora, more inductive than deductive. (The relations between the forms of the sonnet and those of logic are extraordinary and uneasy.) In the Japanese renga linear succession proceeds in a

zigzag, by opposition then reconciliation of terms: the poem returns on itself and its mode of unfolding is by way of dialectical negation. In Japan it fluctuates from 3 to 2, from 2 to 3, from 3 to 2; in the West there occurs a continual metamorphosis through the struggle and reconciliation of contraries.

The renga is divided into various sequences or modes. The model for this arrangement is the movement of the seasons or that of the twenty-four hours of the day, the passage from dawn to night. A linear and circular composition, a design of extreme simplicity and extreme elegance which, in the sphere of music, corresponds to melody. We have radically modified these musical and linear characteristics. It is significant that we did this without exactly realizing what we were doing, guided perhaps by the same instinct which led us to choose the sonnet and to conceive of our renga, not as a river which glides on, but as a place of meeting and opposition of different voices: a confluence. We decided to divide our poem into four sequences and that each one of us should set the mood (it would be too much to speak of the theme) of a sequence.* As we had at our disposal only five days in which to compose the poem, we chose to write the four sequences at the same time. I must explain: the first day we wrote the first sonnet of each of the four sequences and so on each day. At the end of our writing, reading the text for the first time, we discovered that we had replaced the linear, melodic order by counterpoint and polyphony: four verbal currents which flowed simultaneously and which wove between them a network of allusions. Each sequence is composed of seven sonnets which must be read one after the other, although this order leans on a text composed out of relations of the sequences among themselves. The solo of each sequence (read vertically) moves forward over the ground of a dialogue of four voices (read horizontally). I would like our renga to appear not as a tapestry, but as a body in a perpetual state of change, made of four elements, four voices, four cardinal directions which meet at a center and disperse. A pyramid, a pyramidal pyre.

Some readers will object to the renga as a feudal and courtly survival, a fashionable game, a relic of the past. I do not know whether this accusation is right for Japan; in the West the practice of renga could be salutary. An antidote against the notions of author and intellectual property, a criticism of the I and of the writer and his masks. Writing, with us, is a sickness, at once shameful and sacred. Thus to write in public, in the presence of others, seems an intolerable experience. Notwithstanding this, to write in public *with* others carries quite a different meaning: the construction of another space for the manifestation of the plural word, the place of confluence of different voices, currents, traditions. Antidote and contradiction, the renga in the West is neither a method of writing nor a new path for poetry. Renga: a poem which effaces itself as it is written, a path which is wiped out and has no desire to lead anywhere. Nothing awaits us at its end: there is no end, anymore than there is a beginning: all is movement.

—Translated by Charles Tomlinson

*The last sonnet of the last sequence (IV, 7) was not written.

Lawrence Stazer :

The Use and Pleasure of the Hoax

by Robert Hershon

THERE HAVE BEEN MANY POETS WHOSE WRITING lives were brilliant, but brief—Chatterton, Marlowe, Keats, Shelley, Rimbaud, Burns, Stazer.

Lawrence Stazer's public career was the shortest of them all. It lasted about an hour. Here's why.

A few years ago, I was teaching two high school courses for Saint Ann's, a private school in Brooklyn. One course was a poetry workshop, an elective in which the students, presumably, had a particular interest in poetry. The other was a senior English class, mainly concerned with contemporary European novels. I don't think most of the students in this class actually hated poetry, but they weren't crazy about it either. Their occasional attempts to write it were, at best, reluctant; they did not pour forth.

For the past few years the school had provided a generous budget for poetry readings and the students had become a discerning and enthusiastic audience. Among the many poets who had read at the high school was Bill Zavatsky. He had read his memorable Roy Rogers poems, written in homage to the Cowboy King by a fictitious young Japanese and painfully transcribed from short-wave radio broadcasts by their translator. The poems had provoked a certain amount of discussion. This, in turn, had led me to introduce a similar work, correspondence between "Dr. Thalo Green," Director of the Design Conceptualization Institute of Brooklyn, and a group of Harley Elliott's poetry students from Kansas Wesleyan College. The letters were detailed responses by Dr. Green to student assignments which had been carefully destroyed before he could read them.

The week after Zavatsky's reading, during those odd moments of time usually reserved for baseball talk or the teacher's life story, we talked about Piltdown Man and the Cardiff Giant, the epic poems of Ossian and the one-word poems of Joyce Holland. My poetry class was momentarily diverted but eager to get on to more serious matters. The English class, though, accepted the invitation: a student named Danny Rosenblatt said, "Let's invent a poet." The other eleven students in the class agreed. I think some of them thought it would be fun and the others saw it as some sort of revenge for having had to sit through all those damned poetry readings.

We named him Lawrence Stazer. Stazer is an anagram for *ersatz*. We invented quite a detailed biography for him. He was young, which was why he wasn't terribly well known. He hadn't yet published a book, which was why one couldn't be

found in a store, but a manuscript had recently been accepted by a Very Big Publisher, which was why he deserved everyone's attention. All we needed was his life's work.

Stazer's poems were written in a number of ways, some in class, some at home. There were group poems and game poems, tender poems, angry poems, poems that had to contain the words "Ashtray," "Portugal," and "savings bank," short poems, long poems, poems that parodied other poems, poems that stole from other poems, poems designed to be opaque, poems written at blinding speed. In short any kind of poem we could think of.

It was spring. The weather had grown sweet and tempting. It was the time of year when high school seniors, many of whom already have enough credits to graduate anyway, start becoming restless and then invisible. I had thought that Stazer would at least keep them indoors, but then something even nicer began to happen. As the persona of Stazer grew bigger and more solid, the kids were more and more comfortable hiding behind him. People who wouldn't write a poem of any sort a few months before were now writing, as Stazer, with ease and delight. They were saying things they would never venture in their own voices and, with a sense that none of this counted as "real" writing anyway, they were saying them in a wonderfully relaxed what-the-hell style. They were also reading more poetry and talking about it more.

The students had discovered what many poets had discovered before them, that it's sometimes easier to discuss painful or revealing feelings if you're using someone else's voice. A class could develop a persona—or maybe two or three—and simply use that voice or voices to write various kinds of work. A good school library should be able to produce some models. Recent ones that come to mind include John Berryman's Henry poems and Robert Peters' *The Gift to Be Simple*, an entire book written in the voice of Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers—which prompts me to note that the adopted personality could certainly be that of a real figure, celebrated or not. Writing in another voice needn't be synonymous with perpetrating a hoax, but I found that the hoax added another element and helped sustain interest over the months. It may be revealing that the class that stayed with the Stazer hoax was not the class that started out with much interest in poems.

Stazer's first name, Lawrence, was the result of a promise I had made to the class: if Stazer's work was good enough, I'd see to it that he got the chance to give a full-scale reading. And I had an impersonator in mind. Poet Larry Zirlin had all the necessary qualities: he was young, he was unknown at Saint Ann's, he could think fast on his feet, and he always looked sort of bad-tempered.

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The head of the English department wasn't wild about scheduling still another reading—even some of the English teachers may have been getting poem-weary—but he agreed to it. A couple of weeks later, about 150 high school students and the English faculty gathered in the Harcourt Room. I gave Stazer a fulsome introduction. Larry cleared his throat several times and began to read the poems, with conviction and intensity. The audience was polite. As the reading went on, they stayed polite, if a bit confused. Occasionally, a lone, unsure laugh would start up, but, in the face of Larry's total gravity,

it would soon trail away into nothingness. Afterward, there were questions about when he started writing and who his major influences were. He didn't miss a cliché.

Stazer had a two-month gestation period and a one-hour life. During all that time and for weeks afterward, I don't believe that a single person who was in on the creation revealed the secret to an outsider. If you've ever worked in a high school, you know that's a remarkable record, for students and teachers alike.

A Stazer Sampler

Awaiting the Auditor

the security and exchange commission
splits open like an oyster
there are no pearls

the day holds still and the
stream of life runs white

bums steam open like rotting wallets

Sun Up

the sun's up to the fourth slat in the blinds
the cat stretches and lies on my lover's legs
the clock ticks slowly toward six o'clock

when i was a boy, grandpa
your shiny grey beard, your wise blue eyes
and the way your nostrils flared at dinner
when my little league team had lost
you were a lighthouse when the dark days came
now your mangled body, the foundations of my heart

Cisco

he was tired that morning
a sleepy texas town
with tumbleweed in the streets
and barmaids with lace garters
didn't tempt him at all
only vodka and milk
to bring out the stars a little
in his clouded head
and last night was there a last night?
Caramba

A Continuity

The rainbow falls down, hung over
And the birds, stripped of their feathers
screaming in the wind

She fell on the ice
and the bells were ringing softly
The chair slid across the room

and I looked for you in Gimbel's

The floor sat promptly on the spot
The pencil had no point

His nose fell off
his ears
his elbows

and I looked for you in Bloomingdale's

The flatness was too much for me
Once that snow was white

Orange! Orange! Orange! he shouted
How he loved the word

Flying bugs eat my eyes
but beneath the stars, the barking dogs
an empty quart of ginger ale
and the shoes marching by themselves
the despairing gestures of the empty gloves

And I looked for you in Macy's

An L. L. Bean shoe seen
through the crack in the door
and the things we said mattered

Now I can't keep my matches from going
out

Like a Chocolate

Like a chocolate bar melting
in the pocket of a heedless child
your love is wasted on me
a cold stone round and flat
warm room damp fire

Like a hard candy that will not melt
even after days of the tongue
tongue melts candy melts
warm tongue cold room

Monday Nights

I hate Louise, I hate red hair, what's left?
Fat bears eating jelly donuts

The roof shingles are falling
And just whom are they falling on?

Algeria, 1972

i hear nothing, for my ears are blocked
i see all for my eyes are open
i speak not for my mouth is stuck
i shit not for my bowels are blocked
wander in the everlasting night
a stranger to this town
and stop just stop
and be absolutely still
and gather dust until i might be
a chair a boulder a toothbrush

A Day in the Country

O dogshit, nothing like a sweet red rose
O shit, how unreflective and unlike
the cool still pond

Why don't sidewalks flow like green hills?
Why don't cars move silent as cows?
Why don't buildings burst into leaf?
Up the plow, down the jackhammer

To be buried alive!
To feel the root of the
blueberry bush
tickle my nose

Homage to Thomas Hardy

And I saw dunes as high as mountains
The lovely lovely lovely little lillies

And boxes of windows, pockets filled
with doors. Everything knocking knocking knocking

The oval out of plumb, the biting cold
biting her cheeks the birds

flew like dying dogs
My hands are wings

My foot neatly in my back pocket
I rode in the wind

My head bounced softly

THERE IS, OF COURSE, A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HOAX AND FRAUD. LITERARY FRAUD (SUCH AS THE Clifford Irving/Howard Hughes case) is rarely interesting or literature. Hoax can be both. Two good examples are the Spectra hoax and the Ern Malley hoax.

The Spectra hoax (see the book of the same title, edited by William Jay Smith and published by Wesleyan University Press in 1961) involved the creation of a fictitious literary movement, complete with esthetic statements, articles, letters and a body of work by three mysterious (and talented) poets.

The Ern Malley hoax was less good natured, but the joke turned out to be on the perpetrators, as Kenneth Koch explained in the special collaborations issue of *Locus Solus* magazine (No. 2, summer 1961): “*The Darkening Ecliptic* was a collection purporting to be the complete works of Ern Malley, but actually written as a hoax by two Sydney (Australia) poets, James McAuley and H.S. Stewart. McAuley and Stewart sent Ern Malley’s works to Max Harris of *Angry Penguins* who was so taken with them that he declared Malley one of Australia’s greatest poets and forthwith published his entire *oeuvre* (in 1944). Though Harris was wrong about who Ern Malley “was” (if one can use that word here), I find it hard not to agree with his judgment of Malley’s poetry. The following “confession” by McAuley and Stewart may help to explain some of the profundity and charm of Malley’s poetry:

‘We produced the whole of Ern Malley’s tragic life-work in one afternoon, with the aid of a chance collection of books which happened to be on our desk: the Concise Oxford Dictionary, a Collected Shakespeare, Dictionary of Quotations, etc.

We opened books at random, choosing a word or phrase haphazardly. We made lists of these and wove them into nonsensical sentences.

We misquoted and made false allusions. We deliberately perpetrated bad verse, and selected awkward rhymes from a Ripman’s Rhyming Dictionary.

The alleged quotation from Lenin in one of the poems, ‘The emotions are not skilled workers,’ is quite phoney.

The first three lines of the poem ‘Culture as Exhibit’ were lifted as a quotation straight from an American report on the drainage of breeding-grounds of mosquitoes.’

Their three rules of composition were given as follows:—

1. There must be no coherent theme, at most, only confused and inconsistent hints at a meaning held out as a bait to the reader.
2. No care was taken with verse technique, except occasionally to accentuate its general sloppiness by deliberate crudities.
3. In style, the poems were to imitate not Mr. Max Harris in particular, but the whole literary fashion as we knew it from the works of Dylan Thomas, Henry Treece and others.’”

—Editor

Individual Writing : In a Collective Country

by Bill Bernhardt

VISITORS TO CHINA (AND THE CHINESE THEMSELVES) are fond of contrasting the individualism of the West and collective consciousness of the East. The westerner, so this argument runs, thinks of himself only as an isolate, whereas a Chinese perceives himself or herself primarily as the member of a group such as a family, clan, the unit where he works, or his countrymen as a whole. Like most clichés, this formulation contains some truth. Still, however they think of themselves or we of them, the fact remains that there are a billion discrete individuals living in the People's Republic of China and each one is his or her own person, with personal likes and dislikes, a unique face, and a distinct voice.

When I think back to the teachers and students with whom I worked during my 17 months in China, what comes to mind are images of those individualized faces and echoes of those voices. And what formed and expressed those faces and voices was each person's inner life and experience, no less individual than my own.

Of course, people in both countries—the United States and the People's Republic—are taught in school to write as if one's inner life and voice didn't exist. Assigned “public” topics, such as gun control in the U.S. or modernization in the P.R.C., generally elicit the same sort of characterless mush. Invited to write from their own experience, however, people in both countries produce writing that is full of images, unexpected turns and phrases that stick in the mind long after the writer's name is forgotten. In both countries, although the students' personal writing is their best writing, the educational authorities tend to tolerate it as a “step” on the way to a more formal, impersonal mode of expression.

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When the Chinese students and teachers write about themselves they don't necessarily write about the things foreigners want to know about them. Like American students, they write about whatever *they* are thinking about. So we may be disappointed if we expect their work to answer our questions about life in China. For the most part, they give us perceptions and feelings rather than judgements and opinions. Reading what they have written reminds us: these are people just like us, in that they speak most often of matters outside the public sphere.

English is, of course, a foreign language for all of these writers. For years, it could be studied only through books, without access to the sounds of an English-speaking voice. Only recently have tapes, radio broadcasts, and English-speaking teachers from Britain and America brought the living language to Chinese ears. So it is not surprising that there are traces of “chinglish” in the passages below—English words fitted to Chinese phrasing and intonation. I could have, by the use of my red pencil, forced the writers to revise their work so that it would satisfy standard conventions of written English. In fact, they would have preferred me to do so. Perfectionism is a dominant value in Chinese academic life.

I have to admit that while reading these pieces I find a number of expressions that would probably grate on my ear if I encountered them in the students' speech. I couldn't allow any student of mine to say “arm-by-arm” instead of “arm-in-arm,” or substitute “not long” for “after a while,” without calling it to his or her attention. But as written, literary usage such departures from standard English seem not only valid but charming. They give the work a greater sense of particularity and liveliness. This response surprises me a little. I'm used to thinking that spoken English is the freer form of our language. I had forgotten the old and useful notion of “poetic license.” Perhaps we can discover certain potentialities of our own language only when it is used by sensitive foreigners forced to

make deliberate choices where we need only select a ready-made phrase.

For the most part, the people in my classes hadn't had much experience of writing as self-expression—in English or Chinese. Writing had always been an exercise in which expressiveness was subordinated to correctness. The notion that one writes to unlock the store of personal images and feelings was new to them, yet eagerly accepted when I encouraged them to transcribe the first thoughts that came, without conscious regard for the rules they knew so well. Here are some examples:

The snow flakes were falling down, down, quietly and softly. . . all was white. . . a small child peering out the door was so fascinated by the beauty that she ventured to stagger out into the deep snow until taken by some adults, crying desperately for what she was not allowed to enjoy.

I like Saturday. If there is a dance in our school I go there to dance, or share a walk outside with my girlfriend who is studying in another department of our school. She has a golden voice. I often enjoy some famous arias sung by her. We always sing as we stroll arm-by-arm. We walk on and on; at last we find a quiet place, sit down shoulder-to-shoulder talking about our life, feeling, affection and ideals. It seems as if the words came endless. From this we feel our life is valuable and worth appreciating. Sometimes we also keep silent in the dark.

One night in the fall of 1973. . . my friend and I came in secret to an empty house. The former owner had been thrown in jail for his soviet espionage activities. "They have a study full of books," he assured me. He let me stay outside the window sill and lurked into the darkness inside like a monkey. Not long, he poked out his head beaming happily. "Now lend me a hand please." Because he committed the excusable burglary in a hurry in my portion of the property there were several copies in English—I knew this by the words "the" and "rose." They were poetry books. How did an English poem sound? I wanted to read them and thus learned English. The poems were my only texts for quite some time. But, in fact, I could hardly understand them. They kept my English grammar confused until I came to college.

the leaves are lisping
down on the ground
a little girl of five
big for her age
was wandering alone
along a country road
which had many a curve and bent
she held in her bare hand
a brown bottle without lid
inside was a cricket
it got out and hopped away
while a running car ran it over
but no not over
for it leapt toward a safe spot
though pulling a wounded leg

I was planting sweet potatoes. The men's job was to carry water here from a hundred meters away. When we had nearly finished, I noticed an old man cutting down the wild trees beside the road. He put a branch into the cut and then banded it. I was curious to know what he was doing so I went there. "Why are you doing this?" I asked. "To make these trees produce pears," he answered, while wrapping a piece of cloth on the joint. I was very attracted. Immediately I fell in love with it. I carefully watched him operating. Suddenly an idea came into my mind, "Why not do this with young cotton plants? So we can have cotton trees, then people could do less work to grow cotton." I told this to the old man and asked for his advice. He smiled and said, "You may have a try. I have no experience of that."

I saw a tall tree before me. So many cotton flowers were hanging on the branches. They were as white as clouds, as big as bowls. Near it, there stood a wheat tree. The shape of the grains was like dates with a pale pink color. It was so magical that I could not believe my eyes. I opened my eyes widely to make sure that I was not in a dream. The scene was so clear, how could it be a dream? I wanted all the villagers to see this wonder. I went to call them. . . they laughed at me; they didn't believe it. I persuaded them to follow me. But to my great surprise, when I came back there was nothing left on the cotton tree. The wheat trees had all gone. There were two deep pits where the trees formerly were. "Who has stolen the treasure trees?" I cried. Then I woke up.

I had a small black suitcase given by my mother, in which I put all my favorite playthings. I could sit by it for hours, counting my sweets, papers I had collected, putting the cobblestones in a bowl of water and watching their beautiful decorative patterns. Sometimes I told my toy baby many stories. There was a broken clinical thermometer lying at the corner of my small suitcase. Each time I looked at it, I could not help laughing at myself.

One day my little sister Ping-ping was ill. After taking her temperature, my mother asked me to put the clinical thermometer back in the drawer, warning me, "Hold it tight! Don't drop it! It's easy to break." I didn't pay any attention to it before my mother's words, but now it interested me so much. I looked at it, thinking, "Why? What if I drop it?" I loosed my hand and let it fall on the ground. It broke in two pieces. My mother was very angry. . . I was beaten for the first time. But strange to say, after punishment I still felt a bit of satisfaction.

Outside my window
Stands a poplar tree,
Grand and straight
With bald branches stroked by the early spring wind.

Weeks ago on its twigs
Appeared small buds.
Oh, not leaves they were,
But flowers of the poplar.
Gently a breeze passed by
Like upside-down millets they swing and swayed.
Yet the flowers began falling down,
Springling about under the big tree.

Again on the twigs
There spring out small buds.
Well, tender young leaves they were,
Light green sheeted in soft downs.

Through them penetrated gleams of the setting sun,
And what a light these little pieces shining!
Not orange, nor golden, nor green,
Only a mixed color of these three.

Outside my window
Stands the poplar tree
Murmuring and whispering,
Quietly it is talking with the night wind.

What is happening in these passages is that the writers are discovering what it means to write for oneself. In my experience as a teacher, this is the stage of writing that is most neglected—and also most crucial—in schools everywhere.

PLUGS



Renga: A Chain of Poems by Octavio Paz, Jacques Roubaud, Edoardo Sanguineti, and Charles Tomlinson is still available from its American publisher, George Braziller, Inc., 1 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017 for \$2.95 plus \$1 shipping.

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Teachers & Writers Collaborative receives support from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a federal agency.

Our program also receives funding from Districts 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, Manhattan; District 8, Bronx; Hunter PA, PS 87 PA, PS 3, PS 75, PS 84, Manhattan; PS 48X, PS 62X, PS 138X, IS 52X, Bronx; PS 107K PA, PS 321K PA, Brooklyn; District 27, Queens; Lynbrook School District; Plainedge School District; Columbus School, Ward School, Webster School, New Rochelle; the Arts Connection of the NYC Dept. of Cultural Affairs; NYC Board of Education. Teachers & Writers is particularly grateful for support from the following foundations and corporations: ABC, American Stock Exchange, Atari Institute for Action Research, Inc., Avon Products Foundation, Bankers Trust, Chemical Bank, Consolidated Edison, The General Electric Foundation, Mobil Foundation, Morgan Guaranty Trust, Morgan Stanley, New York Community Trust, New York Foundation for the Arts, New York Times Company Foundation, Henry Nias Foundation, Overseas Shipholding Group, Helena Rubinstein Foundation, The Scherman Foundation, Variety Club.

This publication is available in microfilm from University Microfilms International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106.

Our printer is Philmark Lithographics, New York, N.Y.

ISSN 0739-0084