

ON THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF HYBRID FORMS

A POETICS

Consider for a moment the word “hybrid” derived from the Latin *hybrida* meaning mongrel, a child the product of high and low class, a sign of mixed breeding. Degenerate. To be of mixed origin or composition, in Biology, an organism simply the offspring of two different species; in Sociology, cause for walls: the racially segregated, religiously discriminated, sexually ostracized. And in Literature, walls that divide four genres: poetry, fiction, drama, nonfiction. What happens when the walls crumble, when the genre your MFA program accepted you for and trained you in becomes insufficient to do the work you need to do? Horse + donkey = mule. Poetry + Essay = ? When the genres cross-pollinate, what is the product, what do we call it, label it, name it? This thing that retains the elements of its two origins while being synthesized into something new. The “either/or” replaced with “both/and”, these chimeras: prose poems; dramatic monologues; novels in verse; shaped poems; comic book poems; the ekphrastic, to name but a few. But why this impulse toward hybrid forms? What can they accomplish that single forms in themselves cannot?

Let us start with the English language. I speak, write, think and work throughout the day in a language at once multiple and hybrid, from English's hard, monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon and Germanic roots, Auden's “good mongrel barbarian English / which never completely succumbed to the Roman rhetoric” and gives us many of our concrete words; to its polysyllabic Norman invasion infusion of French and Latin where we derive our language of concept and abstraction; to immigrant cultural mixings (most recently with Spanish) and our steps toward becoming cyborgs with binary and IM computer speak; to the inevitable world power collision with Chinese. As Virginia Woolf writes, “English is a mixed language, a rich language; a language unmatched for its sound and colour, for its power of imagery and suggestion...” And if the very words with which we work, our basic tools “of imagery and suggestion” are of a hybrid nature, and the “sound and colour” of those words can and often do dictate form, then the forms themselves can and often times must go hybrid. But what do I mean when I refer to hybrids, to hybrid forms, and to whom do we look for such forms? Where will we find such writing? In her book *Art Objects*, Jeanette Winterson writes: “[W]e can only look for writers who know what tradition is, who understand Modernism within that tradition, and who are committed to a fresh development of language and to new forms of writing.” This is the spirit in which I work and the spirit for which I look when I encounter new writers: work that is in conversation with the tradition and Modernism while taking cues, breaking and building from it, work that wows me with images and wording that capture experience in a simultaneous wave of the familiar and the alien, work that defeats my expectations from first visual encounter with its shape on the page to what happens technically within each line and with each break. And increasingly in my own work those “new” forms take hybrid shapes, rooted in the tradition of poetry, but fusing, borrowing, grafting so that the root forms transform in the mash-

up.

Some examples: the dramatic monologue is a hybrid form that combines elements of the lyric, the narrative, and the dramatic. Characterized by a performative multi-vocality, the form absorbs an emotional expressiveness from lyrics, a speaker who is not the poet from drama, and elements of mimetic detail and retrospective structuring from narrative. The form appeals to me not in that it is “new,” but in how it can be deployed in our time. My recent poems tend to fracture themselves not only across the plane of the page visually but also in the ear: there is always more than one voice speaking. Think of Eliot's *Wasteland* or Forche's *Angel of History* if you will, but I find myself drawn more and more toward forms that allow some sort of multi-vocality. I do not experience the world in a single voice or vision, and so the language that erupts on the page must register the slippage and fracture of daily life. Dramatic monologues allow me this in that they present multiple voices: the voice of the poet and the voice of the character as the poet channels that character's voice. To take it a step further, factor in the reader and we as readers become the speakers as we read his or her utterance; the speaker becomes us as they listen to their utterance re-spoken; and the utterance inscribes both speaker and auditor, creating a slippage of identity and roles that ultimately leaves everyone transformed in the triangulation.

In fact if there was one word central to my idea of hybrid forms it would be *transformation*—both how they transform the forms from which they draw and how they transform the reader's expectations and experience on the page. Delve deeper into the dramatic monologue with me: sexuality and erotic subjectivity are a common aspect of the genre as outlined by the critic Cornelia Pearsall: “The form...from the start dealt in transformations involving myriad sexualities, controversial contemporary and historical figures, and tangled affiliations and prejudices.” There is an inherent political aspect to the form, as the speaker strains against the restrictions of the society that their monologues go far in representing. The voice in a dramatic monologue seeks transformation, seeks, through the act of utterance, a metaphorical death both of something within the self and something at large in their cultural-historical moment, a death that precipitates a rebirth: “...a speaker seeks a host of transformations—of his or her circumstances, of his or her auditor, of his or her self, and possibly all these together—in the course of the monologue, and ultimately attains these, if they can be attained, by way of the monologue” (Pearsall). These voices speak urgently to us; they implicate us as the auditors in their social critique, depend on us to complete the rhetorical exchange of the poem, rely on us to help produce meaning, and to make sense of the three-way mirror they hold: one angle directed at the speaker, one at us as auditor, and

one at the social moment critiqued. As the three images reflect and superimpose over each other, a loss of self becomes imminent, and as Pearsall reminds us, one threat of the genre is self-annihilation: “The act of the dramatic monologue, its performance of thoughts, simultaneously creates a self and alters that self, and may perhaps ultimately destroy the self it held so dear.”

Hybrid forms possess this transformative power, the power to alter, the power to create from what they destroy. When one thing joins with another and becomes something new, the core self is simultaneously retained and annihilated, transformed like the butterfly that completely liquifies inside its chrysalis, reassembling its parts to make a new form. My draw to dramatic monologues, to identifying and then identifying with a distinct other, a voice at once my own and not my own has led to an even greater play with voices on the page. I find characters peopling my poems more and more, and even as they speak other voices find their way into the margins, like the drag queen who stops to perform a song in the middle of “Interview with Ms. Hortense Corpulence After Her Final Holiday Cruise Line Performance,” a song that takes its cue from Lucille Clifton's famous poem “Homage to My Hips”:

I'm gonna compete on Jenny Jones—no
 make that Riki Lake—
 and grace a stage one of ten contestants
 in my low-cut one-
 piece, sparkling high slit, peacock boa
 and talent! Look out
 you skanks, listen to this diva belt it :

*These hips, these hips need mambo
 and flamenco as they swivel
 and slip, as they slink through tight
 places. Try to grip these hips; they
 rip with volt. Try to own these
 hips, they buck wild as a horse. These
 hips zip out doors, they counter and
 tease; they whip out a rhythm
 close to ecstasy; en-trance, they
 trance, put a spell on a man
 then silence his lips with one dip...*

Or the square dance caller who interrupts the earnest lover recounting his latest tryst in the poem “Square Dance”:

Mark your corners and take the floor

caught in the lobby's indiglow / finger
prints ghost the glass / the gold door

handle worn / dull like your storm
door when a sun / square slides over the white

Count One and Two and Three and Four

aluminum the shallow / X relief
where diags form / triags where

each edge casts / a shadow / you
thumb the handle the way / you thumb the black

Honor your partner honor your side

Or the inner monologue of a fresco worker as he polishes his finished wall in the poem
"The Fresco Worker Appears Suddenly in the Picture":

When he rubs his hands for blood flow it snows.
If I were a leper, if I were a snake... Shavings skim

the fresco's surface as strips separate, peel, palm
creases deepened. ...*would I cease to hold these hands*

together, would I slough, erase my face...

Or the letter from a lover away at war read by a grandson to his grandmother in what I
can only describe as a short story in verse, "Platos de Sal," an interpretation and
modernization of the Bible's same-sex relationships between Jonathan and David and
Ruth and Naomi:

... 'Don't tell
your mami,' she whispered. He tore the red
and blue, AIR split from MAIL like fingerprint
from skin—paper edge a hairline in his
thumb. 'What news does your Juan send? You're bleeding...'

¿Que? Dónde.

David sucked the flat of his thumb then pressed

mytho-poetic *Sandman* series, one of which included an appendix comic book script. It read a bit like a screenplay with Gaiman indicating speakers and dialogue while writing blocks of description to guide the artist in illustrating the panel. At the time I was working on a narrative sequence of lyric poems—*The Melete Project of Los Alamos*—that were the utterances of Nix, the main character, a sort of post-modern Frankenstein's monster/weapon created in a government compound. Reading Gaiman's script inspired me to bring this very American myth and story that framed his lyric utterances back on the page to give the lyrics context and to allow the other main character, his creator and lover Dr. Sol—the Dr. Frankenstein of this piece—to have a place to speak. I found great possibility in describing the action of each panel the way I would engage a poem, say, about a painting. The first draft was a simple screenplay with the poems interspersed. And then one July night I was reading this draft to a friend when he stopped me and asked “Have you considered putting the text in actual panels?” I re-read Kenneth Koch's comic book poems and then spent twelve hours the next day learning how to draw frames and panels on my computer, cutting and pasting and altering the screenplay as I went. That night I showed up at his place and dropped the new draft on the kitchen table. “Panels,” I said, as I stood transformed, the coming together of panel and text changing the way I wrote, forcing me to do something new. The text occurs in panels on the page like a comic book, but without the pictures. The framing device of the panel acts like a line or stanza or image break, the reader forced to engage and create the missing image by the clues offered by the text within the panel. Here are the first three panels from *Blur Effect*:

Panel 1	Panel 2	Panel 3
GLASS CYLINDER GLOWS DIAPHONOUS WALLS PURE LIGHT MAGMA TUBE FED STALAGMITE ANCHORED STALACTITE	MAN FORM FLOATS SUSPENDED WITHIN CYLINDRICAL LIQUID. WATER DROPS PING. MAN FORM EMITS ITS OWN SOFT LIGHT.	CYLINDER NO LONGER CAVERN ANCHORED. METAL REPLACES ROCK AS BASE CAPITAL FLARE WIDER THAN THE SHAFT MIRROR EACH OTHER, SMOOTH. NO MAGMA FOUR WHITE LIGHTS SIGNAL THE COORDINAL POINTS A COMPASS—ONE ABOVE ONE BELOW.

I like hybrid forms in that they create third spaces, unclassifiable categories, and if you consider yourself “other” for whatever reason—be it skin color, gender, sexuality

or what have you—these “new” forms are sometimes the only forms that can fully capture your experience and identity as someone orbiting the mainstream. It also allows you to keep one foot at page center, learning and working in texts deemed “normal,” “acceptable,” “traditional,” able to transform those traditional forms from within while not turning your back on the privileged white space the margin can grant as you begin to play and break those traditional forms. Winterson writes: “The riskiness of art, the reason why it affects us is not the riskiness of its subject matter, it is the risk of creating a new way of seeing, a new way of thinking.” When you possess eyes and a way of seeing those in the center do not have, hybrids not only transform the genres from which they draw, but transform, like all great literature, the reader's way of seeing the world, and more importantly, how they think and feel about it. I leave you with Virginia Woolf's dictum in her “Letter to a Young Poet” to chew on and mull, an expectation as relevant now as it was when she wrote these words in 1931: “That perhaps is your task—to find the relation between things that seem incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity, to absorb every experience that comes your way fearlessly and saturate it completely so that your poem is a whole, not a fragment; to re-think human life into poetry and so give us tragedy again and comedy by means of characters not spun out at length in the novelist's way, but condensed and synthesized in the poet's way—that is what we look to you to do now.” That is the task with which I intend to keep wrestling, on which I intend to keep working. Perhaps others will too.

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Published in Issue 7 of [Memorious](#).