

COLLECTIVE WORKS

DAVID WEINBERGER

Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts

Poetry written by committee? It should not be possible, yet my family and friends often play a game which produces something like poetry. Short stories, too.

The game is very simple. Four or five of us sit in a circle. We each write a poetic-sounding line on the top of a piece of paper and then fold the sheet down so no one else can see, leaving only the last word in the line (appropriately punctuated) visible. We each pass our sheet to the person next to us who writes another line and folds it down. And so forth, until everyone has written one line on every sheet.

Some nights the resulting 'poems' -- out of respect for the art, perhaps we should call them pseudoems -- are meaningless and only barely amusing. But other nights we get surprising and consistent results. For example,

Where were the words?
The chiming steeple calls the tune
Through the answers of your eyes
That never sought my own.

If this were a real poem, it would not be hard to find a meaning for it. It is about language. The poet feels cut off from his source which is nothing but language itself. Language (the chiming steeple) beckons the poet yet then refuses his artistic entreaty, for language's beckoning does not single out this or that person for its call. Thus language's eyes have never sought the poet's own, although the nonlinguistic appeal of language itself announces to all who can heed its presence. This turning-away by language turns out to be the true source of poetry, as the pseudoem under discussion makes clear: language's renunciation of the poet results in the pseudoem.

Or something like that. As may now be obvious, much of the fun of this game consists in the discussions of the pseudoems.

Sometimes one has to make allowances for a certain poetic vagueness, as in the following pseudoem:

What does the sparrow mean by this it sings?
I saw a droplet singing as

Soon as it was seen,
But never thought or uttered.

This pseudoem is ambiguous. Who was failing to think and utter? Me? The droplet? Or does this point to the fundamental unity of self and droplet? Surely the pseudoem has in mind Aristotle's doctrine of the identity of the knower and known, although perhaps in its later formulation by Brentano or Husserl. There is a sophomore term paper in here somewhere.

Certainly not all pseudoems are in the same style. Sometimes we get concatenations of images which yet manage to have a Higher Meaning:

Boyhood memories jarred by faded house and storefront,
From window to window, laughing at their reflections
From a two-way mirror.
The glass was cracked, the image gone.
This is never so true as in a year of joy.

Or,

Bubble colors changing on the air,
You swallow and it burns
The frost's flame shivers and dies,
Is reborn, never is noticed.

Or,

This searching hand upon the ancient stone
Too dull to burnish your study
Of the meanings of a face,
The face of the guilty one.

We occasionally find that we have produced a parody of a poet. This becomes more remarkable when one considers that we have written our lines knowing only the last word in the prior line. T.S. Eliot has still managed to influence the following pseudoem:

Furtively, he closed the door.
They came, they went, they walked the floor.
"This isn't what I meant," they
Left without looking back,
Through the portals of Fate.

Every effort must be made to render the pseudoems sensible, for sometimes they contain references to private events in the pseudoet's life. For example,

Softly she turned
To look into my lover's eyes
So I put on my glasses.
A timid soul, a mouse;
And the cheese was spread throughout the house.

In this pseudoem, the 'she' obviously refers to the Other Woman, whereas

the poet is the mouse. Cheese, then, must stand for temptation.

Or consider the following pseudoem:

The English garden blooms profusely.
 The rain fell in torrents throughout the day.
 And like the moon by day,
 And the day after, until the end of all to be --
 The meek first, and always the last.

It does not make much sense until one applies a certain interpretative transformation: reverse the order of the lines.

There is a rather sneaky variation on this game. After all the pseudoems in one round have been read out, announce that you would like to hear each participant's total contribution read as one poem. You have written the first line of one pseudoem, the second of another, the third of another, and the fourth of another. Have them read out in the order in which you composed them, and do the same for all other participants. The resulting pseudoems usually show the consistency of each contributor, and often reveal something interesting. For example, the shy one among us has written four steamy lines, the pacifist has written four bloodthirsty lines.

We also have had fun with another variation. If four of us are playing we let the sheets go around twice so we get eight-line compositions, and we write short (very short) stories. If five or more play, the sheets only go around once. Instead of fiction, we should call these stories 'artifiction'.

Often we find that if we make up a title afterwards, the artifictions become more meaningful. For example, after hearing this one, we decided to call it simply "Waiting".

The darkness felt cool on his wounds. / Slowly he felt consciousness returning. / It was a quarter past twelve, and he knew. it was too late. / The clock was always ticking, the hour always late. / No, that wasn't true. Not any more. / Then, deep in the grocery bag, he found one, / one more time. Time was the only thing he had. / It had been that kind of year.

The following artifiction, called "The Third Ring", makes three points:

She was the fat lady from the circus; he was the sword swallower. / The razor needed stropping, and he was ashamed he could not bring himself to find it. / What was it? Who the hell cared? / He had no feeling left, only a plan of action. / We had always acted, pretended. / He thought for once he had understood. / "Look where the light is," she murmured kindly. / Her kindness was the final insult.

First, this artifice demonstrates the importance of the last line. A mediocre artifice can be saved by a good last line. Second, it shows that artifice, as well as pseudoems, can end up in someone else's style. "The Third Ring" sounds to me like a parody of Donald Barthelme. Third, it shows how laziness can mar a work. The line "What was it? Who the hell cared?" was written by someone losing interest in the game, and who resented being passed the word "it" as the last word in the line before his.

Sometimes at the bottom of one or two of the sheets we specify a genre. For example, the following piece had "Cowboy Story" written at the bottom so everyone knew to aim his remarks in that direction.

The white horse still seemed out of reach. / He raised his arm
and threw the lariat over the highest branch of the infamous
hanging tree. / "That noose's been waiting for me ever since I
was a buckeye crawdad," he said. / So he drew the gun again. /
They'd hang him this time, he was through. / And they really
began to let go, whooping and hollering and wavin' their hats. /
"Put up them guns, boys. We don't take to outlaws too kindly
in this town." / "What town?" the horse ventured.

Although I enjoy this artifice (mainly because of the twist ending, so well set up by the first line), I am not very fond of this variation, for too often everyone writes a funny line exaggerating the genre's style, and the result does not hang together very well. Some genres are too easy. We have never had luck with science fiction; hard-boiled detective artifice comes out better. The following "True Confessions" artifice worked out fairly well, but too often the ones in this genre are just silly. We entitled it "I Loved Two Men -- And Lost Them Both":

Lean and tan in the summer sun, Brain strode / into a church
basement where he seized her hand and said, / "Love knows
only what it believes." / "Oh well then ...". No words would
come. / And then he went. / The two of them gazed, aware only
of each other, into one another's eyes. / The tears would not
come. Not yet. But soon.

A few hints may make the game go more smoothly for you. First, in artifice, avoid naming your characters, for it is extremely unlikely that the people writing after you will use the same names. Second, try to end your line with a provocative word, and, if possible, some punctuation. Third, don't always go for the big line; be willing to set up the person after you. For example, in "I Loved Two Men -- And Lost Them Both", the author of the second line generously ended on "said", setting up the next person for some enjoyable quotation. Fourth, read each pseudoem out loud twice; sometimes the meaning does not fully emerge on the first reading. Also, read them dramatically, striving to imbue them with significance. Fifth, encourage speed. They seem to come out better when the participants have written quickly, instead of

pondering. There really is nothing to ponder anyway. Finally, discourage participants from trying to be funny. One person I know thinks that there is nothing funnier than inserting into pseudoems lines like "He smelled like a dead fish and the flies were retching". We do not play with him any more. The aim is to write a line which will blend into the whole, not one that stands out.

It would be unethical and otherwise improper to submit pseudoems anywhere as real poems. Especially if they were to be published.

HOW TO MAKE AND SELL ORIGINAL CROSSWORDS

William Sunners, the author of a 256-page book published by Sterling (1981) for \$12.95, has constructed and sold crossword and other word puzzles for nearly half a century. Delayed in publication more than a year, this book presents in considerable detail the "tricks of the trade" that he found useful in developing his markets, and describes the types of puzzles (words with pictures) which he found most saleable. The book is aimed more at the word-tyro than the average Word Ways reader: for example, he devotes one ten-page chapter to the numbering of the boxes in a crossword, and in another chapter he advises the would-be submitter to avoid "erasable bond" (slippery to handle, soils editorial fingers) as well as controversial commemorative stamps! One-fifth of the book contains a listing of Webster's Collegiate words by letter-length, and another section reproduces 33 blank diagrams for the constructor unable to design his own.

Sunners' book provides a glimpse of a number of successful word-puzzle ideas of the past; the reader should bear in mind, however, that it is hazardous to predict from these what form the money-makers of the future will take. He strongly urges his readers to go after untapped regional and special-interest markets (fraternal and religious publications, educational magazines, etc.) instead of the more prestigious markets such as Games or the New York Times -- wise advice, if his readers are as inexperienced as he assumes.