Poets in Dialogue, Dialogues in Poets

R.A. Goodrich

Deakin University

Is there something noticeably peculiar about dialogues with poets when transformed into writing, be it in electronic or printed form? The pauses and hesitations, the thrust and parry, the slurrings and overlappings of ordinary speech by and large disappear. In their place is an artifice, a deliberate creation of a script, with questions and responses clearly marked for our attention. Might we be approaching a tidied duologue which, some might also cynically remark, largely reproduces a dual monologue? Moreover, when poets are in dialogue, with whom or what does the poet converse?

Curiously enough, of the three skilled interviewers figuring in this special issue of Double Dialogues, the one whose script most closely allows for something of the rawness of our spoken utterances is the one who candidly admits to the dawning realisation that, as her discussion proceeded in front of an audience, she "became more and more aware of...the increasing distance...opening up between [her] sense of poetic language" and that of the poet. Yet she felt constrained; her "own poetics had (quite rightly) to sit quietly shivering to the side" whilst Robert Gray "spoke to his audience about his work." In so far as two of the poets, Robert Gray and Alec Hope, are questioned in front of an audience, the "I-you" or "rhetorical" relationship (to adopt the terminology of James Moffett (1968: 18)) has suddenly been expanded to include a self-speaking and listening on behalf of others physically yet silently present. With or without a visible audience, the longer one of the parties converses without interruption, the more, observes Moffett, "his discourse is likely to subordinate his relation to the listener in favor of his relation to his content" (1968: 41), that is, to the "I-it" or "referential" relationship (1968: 18).

The foregoing comments, however, are not an attempt to uphold the cynical view that what we face in dialogues with poets is tantamount to a dual monologue. Rather, the dialogue or the interview—"conversation" usually betokening a shift towards the casual, the spontaneous, with or without the ballast of question-and-response—operates at an intersection of a number of features of speech and writing not always joined in the discourses of everyday. Take, as one random example, the following reflections which, at first, seem to draw contemporary readers into the tacitly understood 'game' of revelation and concealment (a 'game' popularly associated with stereotypical conceptions of interviewing performers, politicians, and sporting personalities):

My aim in conducting these interviews was...to get each of the historians gathered together in these pages to reveal things that a reading of their works does not reveal, or does not reveal so clearly; to encourage them to make explicit that which is so often implicit or assumed in their works (Pallares-Burke, 2002: 1).

Maria Pallares-Burke then shifts to consideration of the very genre within which she has been working, initially noting how 'interview' retains vestiges of its Old French meaning of entrevoir, namely, "to glimpse, see briefly or suddenly, or realize and understand vaguely" (2002: 1). Hence, she concludes, we face a "fluid genre based on a convention of informality and yielding a relatively unstructured and unsystematic...product," thereby making it "a genre somewhat intermediate between thinking and ordered writing" (2002: 1). Indeed, Pallares-Burke emphasizes that, to "reveal something of the person," her questions were rarely the same or forwarded in advance; the focus was "to make the respondents talk about the directions their lives had taken, their intellectual options...their reactions to the intellectual trends and movements" of the day (2002: 2). This constitutes a relatively open or person-centred approach, one explicitly followed, though hardly in an unstructured manner, by the series of attempts to explore the "mindscape and landscape" informing the poetic world of A.D. Hope in this Issue. The open-ended approach contrasts markedly with the twenty, two-hour, thirteen pre-arranged questions conducted with intellectuals in the cognitive sciences by Peter Baumgartner with the assistance of Sabine Peyr. Baumgartner & Peyr were concerned that even their relatively closed or ideas-
Once dialogues are recorded—be they audio-taped, video-taped, or even emailed (as in the case with Laurie Duggan)—the transformation of the performative facets involved into the written medium allows for multiple means of editing. Malcolm Cowley, for instance, when introducing the first of the Paris Review’s seminal Writers at Work anthologies, alludes to how, upon transcribing the material recorded, “it was cut to length, arranged in logical order, and sent to the author for his approval” (1958: 5). At times, the last phase resulted in further elaboration and could even include new questions. Although Cowley does not explicitly expand upon what might be meant by “logical order,” the remainder of his introduction highlights compositional processes, class and ethnic background, educational and occupational experiences, moral and artistic attitudes. Pallares-Burke herself, sensitive to the loss of “the original character” of her interviews conducted “as informal, spoken conversations,” concedes that she resorted to “cutting out the most obvious repetitions, pauses and circumlocutions, condensing passages, reordering and recomposing sentences” (2002: 4). However, she rationalises the foregoing as “the kind of editing that as listeners (but not as readers) we do automatically in our heads” (2002: 4).

However, what is transformed in the passage from the spoken to the written is not simply a matter of editing at the lexical and syntactic, semantic and organisational levels of text. To return to the above-mentioned framework of James Moffett (1968: 32-39), there is a major shift in time and space. Their joint immediacy in face-to-face encounters, especially where there has been no rehearsal or forewarning of questions and responses (although the broad topic and purposes may nonetheless be assumed by both parties), shapes a very different kind of language from that associated with deliberative writing. The distance or displacement in space and time characterising an act of writing is totally compressed for speakers and listeners. If, in effect, there is literally no time and space for them, then their unrehearsed, spontaneous speech is constantly improvised, fragmented, and rapid. To that extent, it tends to operate as a direct expression of ongoing perceptions and accompanying activities. Even when expanding the distance between speaker and subject along the “referential” or “I-it” axis by recounting events in the past or anticipating those in the future, such speech, and any response to it, is anchored to the very moment of its utterance. The act of writing—of transcribing and editing orally or electronically conveyed speech—is to operate language within space and time discontinuities where, in the absence of response altogether, the very act of communication becomes increasingly selective, composed, and public. In short, the published interview is not an act of mere transposition.

Before drawing this brief investigation into the nature of interviewing the poet to a close, one penultimate issue ought to be confronted. To date, we have vacillated between two terms, ‘dialogue’ and ‘interview.’ Whereas interviews typically connote disparities of expertise and presumptions of purpose, usually within institutional settings, dialogues generally signify an exchange of views amongst actual or imaginary persons, often with the aim of reaching agreement (as distinct from its achievement). Short of sheer stipulation, these cognate terms cannot be regarded as synonymous. Nonetheless, we have been talking of dialogues here in an effort to bring to the fore something of the widely disseminated thinking of Mikhail Bakhtin (1934/1935 & 1952/1953). We speak and listen, write and read, it seems, with the knowledge that the fundamental unit of language is not its individually distinctive sounds or words or sentences, but utterances; that utterances are constituted by exchanges in which we not only respond to the utterance of another, but that our utterances are also shaped in anticipation of his or her response; that we orient our utterances not only to those actually or potentially in dialogue with us, but also to previous utterances on the topic. According to Bakhtin, we understand that our utterances belong, not so much to “a unitary language” as “something given,” but to a language “posted” (1934/1935: 270) where, he adds, we language with the utterances characteristic of those shifting groups to which we belong—ethnically and generationally, professionally and geographically, and so forth—since each group conceptualises experience in so many different ways. We read in the knowledge that, all the while, utterances are replete with allusions to the utterances of others (except, of course, when action is foregrounded at the expense of allusiveness). If the Bakhtinian framework tells us much about how to read dialogues with poets, it may still be argued that it does not tell us why we would want to do so in the first place.

Certainly, we are exposed to all of the categories of interest listed by Cowley above—processes and background, experience and attitudes—all of which figure actively in this series of interviews. However, the eight dialogues here, contrary to appearances, are not designed to eke out a definition by which the putatively essential features and functions of poetry are uniformly enunciated by a Hart and a Duggan, a Smith, a Gray, and a Hope. Rather, we, as readers, witness an exploration of the processes by which each poet, directly or indirectly, situates himself within his craft, within a larger artistic “conversation” in which he is both participant and spectator. The interviewer, to that extent, becomes a means by which the poet discloses his part in that artistic “conversation.” He discloses how, in the words of Jeffrey Wieand, he has been
asking or answering a question, elaborating on what someone else has done or disagreeing with it, demonstrating that something is possible
to the point where his artistic contribution—the dialogue within the poet—becomes in this way

relevant to the existing practice, concerns, and interests of the kind of art he makes (1983: 418)

and, we should add, to the brute facts of the human condition he, and we, confront.

REFERENCES


