The University of Adelaide

Moya Costello

Textuality, Mutability and Learning to Write

Abstract

Imitation is an ancient pedagogical practice. It enables creative writing students to attain mastery of their craft. But it calls originality into question. Intertextuality is both a form of homage to predecessors as well as an attempt to create something new. In my own creative writing projects I have been influenced by and paid homage to Murray Bail, specifically his novel Holden's Performance*. I have written the faux biography of Harriet Chandler, a minor character in that novel. Intertextuality is characterised as a liminal space with the potential for change. Present in the master-apprentice or teacher-learner relationship is the potential for the texts and identities involved, temporarily fixed, to transform.*

Imitation, Ken Ruthven notes, is characterised by 'antiquity and durability … as a pedagogical practice for enabling literary apprentices to acquire mastery of their craft' (Ruthven 2001: 123). When teaching creative writing, Elizabeth Jolley used to suggest to her students that they 'copy out by hand … chosen poems or passages of prose … in order to develop a feeling for the rhythm and the energy and the beauty of language' (Jolley 1996: 61). According to Jolley, this caused 'open-mouthed bewilderment'. I assume (Jolley doesn't say why) that this is because students believed they should be finding their *unique* voice, establishing the credentials of or developing their *singular* talent, and avoiding infection from another style - even though our present moment is characterised by a mania, both in popular culture and high art, for making copies. The Hollywood remake is a commonplace; the fan zine is robust and ribald; and literary fiction is replete with examples of overt intertextuality.

The aesthetic cult of originality, Ruthven says, 'circulate[s] concurrently' with 'misgivings about the origin as an epistemological concept' (2001: 132). While authors, celebrated as original and singular, are treated to the spotlight in newspapers and glossy magazines, on radio and television (Bennett 1998: 250), we commonly experience, in those same media, texts as intertexts. Texts are bumping into other texts and holding conversations, changing themselves and

the other texts and the readers, writers, readings and writings of them, in a continuous global convention, itself the 'larger cultural or social textuality out of which [texts] are constructed' (Allen 2000: 36). So while texts may bring something new into being, they nevertheless do this by assembling 'a patchwork of traces' (Thieme 2001: 174), and are, John Frow argues, 'not structures of presence but traces and tracings of otherness' (Frow 1990: 45).

For one student in an undergraduate topic on reading and writing the short story, the plot of 'The Gift of the Magi' by O Henry (2006) held no surprises, no 'twist in the tale' for which O Henry's story is an archetype, because the student immediately recognised it from an episode of *Rugrats* which functioned, in this case, as 'the pre-text of the "original"' (Worton and Still 1990: 7). Authenticity, Ruthven argues, becomes unimportant when you direct your attention away from origins and towards 'the various uses made of [the text] by … different readerships that constitute its afterlife' (2001: 15). In that short story topic, when students were pointed to intertextual references to books and music such as *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* or 'Blue Moon' in Helen Garner's (2006) 'The Life of Art', they introduced apposite references into their own stories, and, moreover, tried on Garner's fragmentary and repetitive structure. And they reworked other plot lines in their stories, from various media in both popular culture and high art.

In my novel *The Office as a Boat: A Chronicle* (Costello 2000), and in my most recent longer work of prose, 'Harriet Chandler' (Costello 2004), I paid homage to Murray Bail, specifically his novel *Holden's Performance*. In the first project I was trying out/trying on, as one might a mask or dress-ups in carnival, Bail's use of the rhetorical strategy of foregrounding narrative process and the style of hyperrealism, both of which attest to the fictiveness of fiction, making its artifice transparent. I was learning my craft by imitation. The second project was overtly intertextual, a faux biography of Harriet Chandler, a minor character in *Holden's Performance*. At one point during my readings of *Holden's Performance*, I remember thinking that Harriet was a remarkable character. But Chandler wasn't Bail's primary project, so her story wasn't told in full.

The substantial part of Bail's project is a critique of 'the male national character's stereotyped tendency towards isolation and enclosure' (Beardwood 2001: 13). In late twentieth-century Australia the stolid, inarticulate Anglo-Saxon Australian male became a threatened species, his habitat and lifestyle encroached upon and shrinking. Feminism and gay rights reformed gender and sexuality, and multiculturalism and globalisation made interpersonal and intercultural communication skills *de rigueur* in position descriptions. But before that Harriet Chandler existed on the margins of the text, and of the nation too, as a woman living on the coast at Manly, a beachside suburb of Sydney. Harriet Chandler was both a republican, protesting against the Queen's visit in 1954 before the revived republican movement in Australia in the 1990s, and a feminist, protesting at a Miss Australia quest, before the second wave of feminism began to swell in Australia in the 1970s. She had polio, owned a car which she drove (adapted for her polio), almost certainly owned her house, and conducted her own freelance career as a graphic artist at a time when women's role as home-makers was being reified and reengineered in post-World War 2 Western culture. Restless, full of thoughts, unpredictable, combining insistence and fragility (Bail 1987: 305), she represented the disturbances of the female and the creative, and the unruly landscape of Sydney, particularly the mutability of the littoral, the shift, flux and boundlessness of the oceanic nature of an island continent. Beardwood describes this aesthetic - represented in Bail's next novel, *Eucalyptus* (1998), by Ellen and her unnamed successful suitor - as 'an experience of continuous revelation', 'an ethics of the never-

finished', 'an identity which is perpetually unsettled' (Beardwood 2001: 15-16). Harriet Chandler deserved a space for her story to be told. The aesthetic of mutability was a suitable focus for a study in intertexutality, itself about liminal spaces, border crossings and transformations.

Worton and Still capture the intention of my intertextual project when they describe imitation, quotation and/or plagiarism as 'making public a loving gratitude' to predecessors, while at the same time bearing witness 'to an agonistic impulse to demarcate and proclaim [the writer's] own creative space' (1990: 13).

To demarcate my own creative space, I aimed, in the faux biography of Chandler, to figure and foreground the female and feminine, even the feminist, art work and cultural practice, conviviality and contestation, colour, movement, a becoming (Costello 2004: 51). I had in mind writing an eccentric monograph in a minor key on an obscure subject (Costello 2004: 79), scribbling in the margins, making a fold, pleat or tuck in a gap in territory claimed by another, forcing myself into the cracks opening up there, playing in the fissure where the fabric had torn, the space that opens up with the coming undone, in between fraying bits that will not hold, making my own artefact imperfectly, loose and open, bound to come undone itself (Costello 2004: 1).

Supporting intertextuality as a pedagogical practice for teaching creative writing is Rob Pope's (2006: 2) suggestion that rewriting has 'a crucial role to play' in connecting 'practices of critical reading to those of creative writing'. He describes the act of changing other people's texts and generating your own out of them not as imitation but intervention (2006: 130):

> *Textual intervention* is the more or less deliberate challenging and changing of a text so as to put it off balance: to point it in a fresh direction or develop it in an alternative dimension … (Pope 2006: 132)

Rewriting in a transformative way, says Terry Threadgold, we want to make 'new discursive spaces' where 'the unthought' and 'the unspoken' are made 'visible and audible' (1997: 56).

In a postcolonial context, John Thieme describes 'con-texts' as works which are oppositional to their English canon 'pre-texts' and engage with such texts proactively - but noting as well that 'con-texts' emerge from 'the full range of discursive situations, many of which have little or nothing to do with the canon', and consider 'broader concerns' (2001: 4-5).

Just two examples of many works explicit in their intertextuality, and situated within a postcolonial context, are Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1977) and J M Coetzee's *Foe* (1988), where the pre-texts are Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1971) and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1985) respectively. Rhys and Coetzee enter into the postcolonial project by giving voice to the formerly, and formally, silenced. Rhys tells the story of Bertha Antoinetta Mason/Antoinette Cosway, the mad woman in Rochester's house in *Jane Eyre*. In *Foe*, Friday is literally silenced by having his tongue cut out; a new character, a woman, Susan Barton, is introduced who (re)tells the Crusoe/Cruso story to Mr Foe, and through her presence Coetzee playfully contests the idea of Daniel Defoe's originality and singularity.

To engage deliberately in intertextuality is to be at home with the knockabout, democratically inclined qualities of texts. To be at home with intertextuality is to be open to boundlessness, flux, fluidity - mutability. This is the liminal, carnivalesque space that intertextuality inhabits. Carnival is characterised as a

time of 'temporary liberation from … established order', where 'a special form of free and familiar contact' takes place among the usual divisions of 'caste, property, profession, and age'; everything is 'considered equal during carnival' which marks 'the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions' (Bakhtin 1968: 10). This liminal zone is one of transition between, for example, authors and texts, characterised by the phenomenon of becoming. Carnival is 'the feast of becoming' (Bakhtin 1968: 10-11), opposed to the immortalised and completed, to the pretence of the immutable, which includes 'authorial integrity and textual fixity' (Worton and Still 1990: 13).

A number of writers have discussed the making or coming-into-being process that results from 'exchanges between networks of bodies and networks of texts' (Threadgold 1997: 3). Anna Gibbs argues a case for the affective nature of some kinds of writing, saying they demand a 'visceral form of involvement':

> … the kind of involvement that may go so far as to challenge the fixity of our own bodily limits … to read such writing is to lend one's body to the words of another, to be - albeit temporarily - possessed by alien affects and to put ourselves at risk of being transformed by them. (Gibbs 2006: 159)

Further, Debra Malina sees the possibility of readers, having experienced the specific textual strategy of metalepsis or 'the transgression of boundaries between narrative levels' in fiction (2002: 1), becoming transgressive themselves in a social context, able to shift across hierarchies, binaries and borders (2002: 11). Ann-Marie Priest (2007: 8-9) refers to terms such as 'mediumship' and 'channelling' when describing the phenomenon of writers writing fictional biographies of other authors, risking 'transmuting' their subject into a version of themselves. As well, Jeri Kroll (2006: 206) notes that some authors 'revisit and alter' their own writing that is 'already in the public arena', and continue 'to participate in the life of their works, and in so doing, alter themselves'. Moreover, in theories of biology there are resonances with the disposition of texts. Zoe Sofoulis points out that 'metaphors of information exchange and circulation, coding … translation, misreading' are used. For example, 'auto-immune responses are interpreted as problems of the self misrecognizing itself as "other"', and the biomedical practice of transgenic engineering is one in which 'bits of the DNA "code" of one organism may be spliced' into that of a different organism (Sofoulis 2002: 89).

It's not the death of the originating author and text that is supported here. What is foregrounded is 'relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence' (Allen 2000: 5), and 'survival beyond innocence in an impure world' (Sofoulis 2002: 92).

Though it clearly acknowledges its debt to *Holden's Performance*, the 'multiple intertextual play' in 'Harriet Chandler' filters out to a network, complicating the relations with its predecessor, unsettling the idea of a 'direct line of descent' (Thieme 2001: 7). To take just one instance, because Bail's work is so characterised by etymology (Holden, standing in for the iconic Australian car, is the obvious case in *Holden's Performance*), I play with the source of Chandler's Christian name, suggesting, in a ludic fashion, a range of texts:

> Joy and Bart Chandler named their daughter for Beecher Stowe's stance against the pornography of slavery, and for Backer, the Norwegian impressionist, because they liked the way in Backer's painting, *Blue Interior*, the young woman's foot twisted back underneath the hem of her full-length dress as she sat in the light of a window, absorbed meditatively in her

> sewing; and the way the room contained a large pot plant, a vase and a painting of a boat. Not long after Backer died, Harriet was born.
>
> Bart Chandler read in palaeontology, archaeology, biology, history and politics. He was pleased with his daughter's naming. He learned that a Galapagos tortoise, which had been brought to Australia by Darwin, had hit the century mark and gone beyond it. The tortoise was called Harry, a mistaken gender ascription, and renamed Harriet. Longevity and a capacity for coevolution, Bart Chandler decided, had been successfully conferred on his daughter. (Costello 2004: 94)

Moreover, I have Chandler created by traces of texts other than Bail's. There are extracts from her travel diary:

> The Cycladic sculptures are creamy white. Thin limbs are plasticine rolled to smoothness in child's play. These small moderns are animated. The harpist from Keros is in a Breuer chair; the figurine's got a Modigliani head! (Costello 2004: 274)

There are extracts from a file about her protest activities, kept by an Intelligence agency:

> Agitator. Parents active communists. Crippled. Known to wear men's pants and go about without a brassiere (small breasts). 'Artistic' type. Consorts with similar … (Costello 2004: 217)

Finally, there is an article about her in 'the prestigious art journal *Women, Art and Oceania* (Costello 2004: 268):

> Manly and its surrounds had its share of eccentrics, and perhaps Chandler could be considered one of them. The painter Elaine Haxton was famous for her blue hair. Alex Screech, one-time proprietor of a Manly theatre, was something of a local identity, but Chandler in her own way made him immortal. She screened his likeness onto the New South Wales Trades and Labor Council banner. It is ubiquitous at every left-wing rally and march, and is on permanent display in the foyer of the TLC building ... (Costello 2004: 268)

Narratives, readings and meanings proliferate, spill out uncontrollably in a multiplying effect.

Bail's own work is characterised by intertextual and intratextual play. Dixon (1991: 35) and Thomas (1991: 81-82) see Bail as placing himself in genealogical relation to Patrick White by referencing White's (1990: 375) notion of 'the Great Australian Emptiness' (for example, see Bail's *Holden's Performance* [1987: 142, 223] and *Eucalyptus* [1998: 1-2]). Further, aware of the novel as an overworked form, Bail says that for *Eucalyptus* he 'went back, to myth' (Sheehan 1998: 10S); he deploys the archetypes of fairytale: the heroine in a tower, a task set for her suitors to win her hand, and her fall into the equivalent of a long sleep from which only the hero will rouse her. In regard to intratextuality across his own fictions, Bail has the name Zoellner mentioned, if not the character appear, in both *Holden's Performance* (1987: 14) and *Eucalyptus* (1998: 26). And Spinks describes Bail's narratives as engendering 'supplementary narratives' internally because of the double play of

their literal and allegorical meanings, with the effect of putting 'the totalising claims of narrative itself into question' (Spinks 1993: 13).

'Harriet Chandler' is one use made by one readership of *Holden's Performance*, and, thereby, it constitutes part of the afterlife of that novel - but only if we think of time as linear, unidirectional.

> But if the structure of time is imagined instead to be palindromic … it becomes possible … to describe as 'anticipatory plagiary' any author who has previously published what you yourself have just written. (Ruthven 2001: 140)

In an essay entitled 'Karmic Traces', Eliot Weinberbger quotes a seventeenth-century Chinese critic, Yeh Hsieh, saying:

> When what I write is the same as what a former master wrote, it means that we were one in our reflections. And when I write something different from former masters, I may be filling in something missing from their work. Or is it possible that the former masters are filling in something missing in my work. (Weinberbger 2005: 26)

Present in the master-apprentice or teacher-learner relationship is the potential for the texts and identities involved, temporarily fixed, to become unhinged and free-float, to transfer and transmute. For texts and narratives are under sail and oar, and on the wing in 'a plane of becoming' (Colebrook 2000: xx), decoding and translating at border crossings in a Bureau de Change.

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Moya Costello has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Adelaide where she is Research Assistant for the creative writing program. She teaches at the Flinders University of South Australia and online for the University of Canberra. She has three books published: two collection s of short prose, Kites in Jakarta *and* Small ecstasies*, and a novel,* The Office as a Boat: A chronicle*. www.moyacostello.com.*

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Text@griffith.edu.au