

Berrigan Sonnet Collage Exercise (An Aleatory Method)

In this exercise we create two poems with the material from one, learn how chance methods can enhance and inform our work, give us a better sense of how to break a line, if we don't already know and provide another tool for organic composition. One of the most fascinating poets of the 2nd wave of the New York School is Ted Berrigan (1934 – 1983). Berrigan hung out with the painters of the New York School in the early 1960's and was inspired by their collage method. His epic *The Sonnets* recycled old lines of his and repeated many lines and images. A friend of Frank O'Hara, he often used O'Hara's *I did this and I did that* method of writing. Pop culture, music and other art references inform the poems, as does Whitehead's *Philosophy of Organism*. In the 2000 Penguin Poets edition of the book, his widow, Alice Notley, writes:

There is a key line that occurs only once, in Sonnet L: "Whatever is going to happen is already happening." It refers to Whitehead's theory of time and states quite plainly how *The Sonnets* works, how events are forecast and then ripen, staying on as echoes, or as something built-in, through the use of repetition of lines. The line became sort of a motto of Ted's later in life, since it also means "If you aren't doing it now you won't ever do it." ... Whitehead writes: "In organic philosophy the notion of repetition is fundamental."

Here is how Berrigan used a particular collage technique in *The Sonnets*:

VX

1. In Joe Brainard's collage its white arrow
2. does not point to William Carlos Williams.
3. He is not in it, the hungry dead doctor.
4. What is in it is sixteen ripped pictures
5. Of Marilyn Monroe, her white teeth white-
6. washed by Joe's throbbing hands. "Today
7. I am truly horribly upset because Marilyn
8. Monroe died, so I went to a matinee B-movie
9. and ate King Kong popcorn," he wrote in his
10. *Diary*. The black heart beside the fifteen pieces
11. of glass in Joe Brainard's collage
12. takes the eyes away from the gray words,
13. Doctor, but they say "I LOVE YOU"
14. and the sonnet is not dead.

LIX

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3. He is not in it, the hungry dead doctor.
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Notice the thrill of *surprise mind* (Ginsberg's phrase) when we get the image of the narrator being *washed by Joe's throbbing hands*. A love of literature, references to pop culture, a playful irreverence and a sense of being in the present moment informs this sonnet and the entire series, but I'd suggest it's Berrigan's talent combined with Whiteheadian reality that's the key to its success.

To create a poem (two poems) like this, you start with going through your old notes, or old poems, or just use your memory. You can even take lines from other poets, but you may want to italicize those. Robin Blaser uses other writings extensively, but rarely cites his sources. He DOES italicize those stolen lines.

Be sure to include many imagistic ones that encapsulate an image or perception in one line. Just write the poem first, going on your nerve, then do the collage, but keep the lines tight. Four to five feet is perfect. Sometimes Berrigan got away with longer lines. Here's how I split up one of the collaged sonnets from my *Tuscan Sonnet Ring*:

1. Drunk w/ a New York accent he speaks
2. of Spring Herring chewing on pasta
3. not stopping conversation somehow
4. gulping down the same dish
5. I had only with the pepperoncini
6. I forgot about, but the veins
7. in David's hands, there can be
8. no other sculpture after this
9. for he is alive at five hundred
10. he is alive at five o'clock
11. and the sky remains biblical
12. when there is no rain
13. or cigarette scarred wind
14. or thunder of scooters
15. in the tunnel near the Fortezza
16. and yet not one Grappa ambulance
17. though thunder etches the air
18. above the Tuscan night.

1. Drunk on a New York accent he speaks
3. not stopping conversation somehow
5. I had only the pepperoncini
7. in David's hands, there can be
9. for he is alive at five hundred
11. and the sky remains biblical
13. or cigarette scarred wind
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18. above the Tuscan night.
16. and yet not one Grappa ambulance
14. or thunder of scooters
12. when there is no rain
10. he is alive at five o'clock
8. no other sculpture after this
6. I forgot about, but the veins
4. gulping down the same dish
2. of Spring Herring chewing on pasta.

So you write the poem, using an opening image or phrase to get you going. Like anytime you are writing organically, you can use the alluvial method when you get stuck, or you can pop in an old line, or a stolen one. Once the poem is finished (and you should be able to use the shorter length of the poem to help you *feel* the end) you can collage the poem, making two. You may want to have the collaged version appear first, or not. See what interesting connections, or shifts in meaning, are suggested by the new arrangement of lines. Collage can be disjointed, but in a longer series (Berrigan had 88 sonnets) the repetition can aid the enjoyment of those who are addicted to reason and meaning, (not that you'd want to write for *THEM* anyway.)

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Ted Berrigan, on the ideal line length.