“Talking Back: The Role of Poets and Poems in Literary Conversation”

“Talking Back” explores the ways in which poetic influence manifests itself in today’s field of poetry. Against the backdrop of critics Harold Bloom, George Steiner, and T. S. Eliot, I investigate the role of authenticity in modern poetry, and poetry as a whole. Because poetry is a tradition built upon the necessity of finding influence in another’s work, the authenticity of a poem has very little to with its originality. The influence of previous poems in a given poet’s work is not always explicit, but it is always present. No one poem can exist wholly by itself, it is always the product of poetry previously consumed by its maker in the context of an ongoing literary conversation. And while in most cases we assume poetic influence to be advancing in trajectory—always moving forward—I use critical theory (namely, Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*) to argue that poetic influence may move backwards as well, so that contemporary poets can influence the reading of their predecessor’s work. To illustrate this idea, I call on four distinct poems wherein poetic influence is able to move from the present to the past. I cite Billy Collin’s “Litany” as an expansion of its parent poem, “You are the bread and the knife/ The crystal goblet and the wine” by Jacques Crickillon. I also cite Sir Walter Raleigh’s response to Christopher Marlowe as an example of how one poem may complete, or expand on another, even if the “other” was a previous poem. Finally, I focus on Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Prodigal” to demonstrate how poetic influence may also work to enlighten a former poem, bringing it greater depth and meaning through another work written well after its time.