

University of Melbourne

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Exercises in creative thinking

Biographical note:

Professor Kevin Brophy teaches creative writing in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. He has had twelve books published, the latest a collection of prose poems titled *Radar* (with Nathan Curnow, Walleah Press 2012)

Keywords:

Creative writing – prose poetry

Guidelines

After readings and discussions of prose poetry from Charles Simic (2008), Lyn Hejinian (1987), Margaret Atwood (1994) and Russell Edson (2001), with critical input from Michel Delville (1998) and David Lehman (2003): produce a series of prose poems over thirty days in a continuous sequence—using dreams, chance impressions, reading material of all kinds, random thoughts, overheard phrases and imagined situations, exploiting extension techniques identified in readings and discussions.

The following examples are taken from a two-day sequence during a series written over sixty days:

Taxi

Alone in the street on a rainy night a man sees a taxi come round the bend, slow and careful, sketchy in the dim light, and he lets it go past, knowing it will not help him, knowing that this taxi driver does not really ever want to stop.

Memoir

No one believes you when you say you are murderer. You walk outside where no one is afraid of you but everyone still looks fearful, after spending an hour listening to a poet nostalgic for the wallpaper on vermin-riddled town houses destroyed by slum clearing gangs who drove bulldozers that with breathless metal whines left only dust that made its way into everyone's mouths and eyes. They took it home, those gangsters, to their wives and children. Yes, this is the outskirts of Liverpool, they said to the wives who bathed their tired husbands, yes, this grit between them in the bed that smelled of twenty years of marriage was the dust of wallpaper and brick someone (the poet) grew up loving. You tell yourself you must never feel nostalgic. You expect that you have shaken hands with several other murderers, men and women. There must be some, exiles from the circles nostalgia makes. But we are as rare as the magical hare in the woods.

I should have plans, you think, but *the days have been very long with nothing to do in them but think and wonder.*

City

We can rely on the streets to produce the beggars. we can rely on the trains to produce pickpockets and sleeping workers. We can rely on the lanes to produce the nights that fill every building with lost switches, blank windows, women at their pillows and men on their couches. Just as in a forest the only thing to do in a city is walk.

Local knowledge

You go up to a local and ask him where the post office is, and how to find a public toilet in this town, and he says he's been here only two days and knows nothing (except how to dress and stand and squint into the prevailing breeze like a local). It was just blind luck that he spoke a few words of the town tongue. You know what the chances are if you approach someone else, when, hey presto, you are being asked for directions by someone who has been here for five minutes less than you.

What it meant

It streaked across the sky then faded out somewhere near the horizon. It was visible for 59.8 seconds. Astronomers who had measured this visibility said it might have flown back out into space for this planet is sometimes a slingshot. It is possible that it was swallowed by the sea or it might be somewhere in Spain. It will be surprisingly heavy. It will be polished black, they said, and most likely no bigger than your palm. Its shape is unknown. They called it a fragment but they said it is eternal and has not broken from any larger body. It has no place to return to and it will never burn away entirely. It is a gift and a warning, an orphan and an angel.

Anxiety

Falling asleep he fell into a river, which closed over him. He woke and fell asleep again, falling from a bicycle onto stones then tumbling from the stones into a swift river, which closed over him. He woke and fell asleep again, slipping from the railing of a bridge into a harbor, which closed blue and silent over him. He woke and fell again.

Weather here

Today sunlight brings prams into the open, and each public bench has two young people sitting on it. Two swans visit this stretch of water here. Today, sunlight.

Works cited

- Atwood, M 1992 *Good Bones* Coach House Press, Toronto.
- Delville, M 1998 *The American Prose Poem* University Press of Florida, Gainesville.
- Edson, R 1985 *The Wounded Breakfast* Wesleyan University Press, Connecticut.
- Hejinian, L 1987 *My Life* Sun & Moon Press, New York.
- Lehman, D (ed.) 2003 *Great American Prose Poems* Scribner, New York.
- Simic, C 2008 *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth* Ausable Press, New York

Research statement

Research background

Procedural thinking is important in hard sciences (Hodges 1985). Rule-based thinking, however, does not produce creative solutions. Simonton notes the ‘messiness’ of creative thinking’ (2004: 42-3), observing:

Although analytical thinking is absolutely mandatory when scientists must justify their discoveries to colleagues, its place in the creative process must be more restricted. The combinatorial process functions in relative freedom from a priori constraints (171-2).

By ‘combinatorial process’ Simonton means time-consuming *stochastic* process of conjecturing, hazarding, guessing, until a new path through a problem is discovered (40-2). Neurologically, this looser, combinatorial thinking requires a re-balancing of the brain’s hemispheres. New information activates the right side of the brain (McGilchrist 2009: 95), the side that generates new knowledge. The left side (speech and rule-based thinking) tends to dominate daily life, preventing the emergence of new knowledge (32-91). It requires practice and effort to bring combinatorial processes into play in scientific thinking.

Research contribution

This project – where scientists will be guided with examples to produce prose poems – exercises the right-brain’s combinatorial processes. It will assist high performing scientists to hold thoughts in creative suspension, allowing new combinations into consciousness, and aims to test whether the practice of literary skills offers the possibility of extrapolation to thinking creatively about scientific problems.

Research significance

This project introduces transferable creative-thinking skills to research scientists.

Works cited

Hodges, W 1985 *Logic* Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.

McGilchrist, I 2009 *The Master and His Emissary* Yale University Press, New Haven.

Simonton, D 2004 *Creativity in Science* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.