

University of Melbourne

Kevin Brophy

The execution of the dinosaurs

Biographical note:

Professor Kevin Brophy is the author of eleven books, including four books of poetry, four works of fiction and three collections of essays on aspects of creativity. He is Coordinator of Creative Writing in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne.

Keywords:

Poetry – ethics – rhythm – Surrealism – environment

... the past which gnaws into the future Henri Bergson

Time is that which stops everything happening at once John Wheeler

We might as well we thought— it was only an afternoon's work—
We painted targets on them first then took out our slings—
No we hunted them down by beating buckets and tins
to drive them down to our bamboo traps
where we lined them up and took out our baseball bats.
You can't say we don't finish what we begin.

Yes we grieved. Our eyes, traitorous, kept expecting them.
The children didn't like it at first but soon got used to rubber versions.
Dogs ate the carcasses—dogs and birds—
dogs and birds and ants—dogs and birds and ants and time.
We ate some and the marrow made us feel young.

Yes we knew regret, who doesn't find that in the end.
Whole forests, plains and rivers became pointless
without their thoughtful bellows and yips,
their nightly sighs and mysterious rustles.
Forest breezes somehow smelled of them,
storms could not rid us of their footprints.

No swiping tails to knock down rats and gliders.
No more are we shocked at the sizzle
of seedy excrement on savannah dust.
They had been the cows of paradise for us.
There was no calling them back.
Our heads had not the musical horns they had perfected.

And besides our children preferred the toys by then.
Who could have predicted those monsters
(and most of them vegetarians)
would be immortal playthings once we executed them?

That sound in our chests ratcheting the future
from its dark past
unwinds with no end to endings and beginnings.
It is true the bones in our dreams are the size of didgeridoos
and deserts litter our conscience.

Research statement

Research background

Paul Riffaterre, Georges Poulet, J. L. Austin and others have made the point that texts are read, conventionally, as events unfolding in linear time – from a series of present moments out into past and future. The tendency of the present to push back into the past and out into the future offers potential for rhythm (patterns set up by what has happened and expectations of what will happen) and for confounding the usual direction of the ‘arrow’ of time. This poem plays with time and timing, offering a narrative confession while proposing an impossible possibility; offering effects suggesting a pattern (iambes, rhymes and near-rhymes) while working with the unpredictable line breaks of free verse. The poem recalls traditions of the surreal while aiming to renew questions of human values, responsibility and guilt. This poem aims to model a way of connecting absurdity with morality, aesthetics with ethics, the intuitive with the counter-intuitive.

Research contribution

This poetry takes up and tests a neglected tradition outside lyric free verse, performance poetry and language poetry (the three main streams of contemporary poetry), a tradition that includes contemporary poets such as James Tate, Charles Simic and Russell Edson. It renews a strand of surrealism not so much inspired by Freud as by an impulse to engage with ideas in politics, philosophy and physics.

Research significance

‘The execution of the dinosaurs’ aims to probe the potential of a relatively neglected poetic tradition for its possible relevance to opening aesthetic, ethical and humanising responses in readers.

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