THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF POETRY WRITING

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In his book, *Talking All Morning,* poet Robert Bly urges young poets to look inward to discover those images that are original and unique to each individual writer. He tells us that when the poet "touches for the first time, something far inside of him . . . [something] connected with what the ancients called The Mysteries . . . ," he has experienced the essence of creating.[1] Furthermore, Bly criticizes teachers who emphasize craft and technique before they have given the student the opportunity to experience this inner realm, before the student has had the chance to discover which emotions are actually his. In essence, he appeals to teachers to establish conditions that prompt students to look inward for their own unique insights. It is my intent in this paper to examine the creative process of poetry writing as defined by poets, such as Bly, who recognize that the potential for greatness in the writer lies within. To place the discussion in the proper framework, let us turn our attention first to the findings of psychologists who have conducted tests in hemispheric lateralization, and examine these findings in terms of their educational implications. At the conclusion of this discussion, I will look at specific exercises that prompt the spontaneous flow of images.

In a series of studies (1950), Roger W. Sperry and Ronald Myers discovered that when the corpus callosum — the conduit of nerves joining the two hemispheres of the brain — is cut, then the right and left brains function independently. Shortly after, Sperry and Gazzaniga (1957) determined that the major function of the corpus callosum is to transmit messages between the two halves of the brain.[2]

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Additional studies in the 1960s led to discoveries delineating the specialized modes of thinking for each half of the brain. Specifically, the left hemisphere organizes information into logical sequential units, and handles materials that are verbal, analytical, abstract and temporal (Bogen, 1969; Gazzaniga, 1970; Ornstein, 1972). The right-brain, which manipulates nonlinear and holistic information, deals with nonverbal, concrete, analogic, spatial, emotional, and aesthetic materials. More important, in view of our discussion, are the current findings which suggest that creative thinking requires the use of both hemispheres. In fact, in 1976 S. A. West released findings that attribute the most noteworthy acts of genius to figures who use both the intuitive right and rational left-sides of the brain. Carrying this line of thinking a step further, Brandwein and Ornstein (1977) observed that the creative person must learn to use the processes of both hemispheres collectively or independently depending on the task at hand. This is precisely what Alex Osborn endorsed in his studies of brainstorming. In 1952 Osborn noted that in solving problems creatively, the individual virtually cannot produce original solutions and judge them at the same time.[3]

Examples offered by Betty Edwards in *Drawing On the Right Side of the Brain* elucidate the "ways of knowing" each hemisphere controls. For example, "given numbers *a, b,* and *c,*" the left-mode determines "that if *a* is greater than *b,* and *b* is greater than *c,* then *a* is necessarily greater than *c.*" Conversely, the right-mode enables us to visualize imaginary or real things, as well as determine the spatial and holistic nature of things. We use the right-brain to dream, to think metaphorically, and to reorder ideas into creative combinations.[4]

Perhaps psychologist J. E. Bogen best delineates the distinct functions of each hemisphere. For purposes of clarification, any further references made to right and left-brain activity will relate to the "ways of knowing" cited in his chart below:[5]

Parallel Ways of Knowing

Left Hemisphere	intellect, convergent, digital, secondary, abstract, directed, propositional, analytic, lineal, rational, sequential, analytic, objective, successive

Right Hemisphere intuition, divergent, analogic, primary, concrete, free, imaginative, relational, nonlineal, intuitive, multiple, holistic, subjective, simultaneous

Artist Betty Edwards suggests steps teachers can take to encourage creative thinking. First, she urges teachers to familiarize themselves with the functions and styles of both hemispheres. Second, she feels teachers should set conditions that prompt cognitive shifts from one mode to the other. For example, students can read an assigned passage for fact and respond to questions that call for left-brain thinking. Later this same passage can be reread and examined in terms of imagery, or metaphoric thought. To elicit right-modal processing, students might be asked to write a poem, create a painting, a dance, or song. Third, the less the teacher lectures or controls the student's learning, the greater the chances are that right-modal thinking will occur. As much as possible, teachers should present information pictographically (chalkboard diagrams, illustrations), as well as verbally.[6]

An additional example she offers is to select an object or form, such as a tree, for the students to explore physically and mentally. The students can express their thoughts about the object by describing it in terms of the senses. They can imagine the inside of the object, or they can describe it from the point of view of another person. This experience teaches students that a label is only one part of the whole.[7]

Finally, to understand the heightened feeling that accompanies right-modal processing, Ms. Edwards points to the sensations one feels when daydreaming, reading, meditating, listening to music, or driving a car. She attributes the slightly altered states of awareness associated with these activities to a shift in modes.[8]

Researcher W. J. Gordon suggests using synectics, a technique which concentrates on metaphoric and analogical thinking, to bring about creativity. One exercise he mentions is to ask students to come up with an invention that fulfills a list of specifications. Collectively or individually, the students can brainstorm possibilities. Gordon claims that synectics enable students to use right-modal processing without ego censorship.[9]

Similarly, deferred judgment elicits creative thinking. This technique separates idea formation from judgment of

an idea's value. Psychologist Sidney Parnes conducted experiments in which students were first told to free themselves of inhibitions and think imaginatively, after which they were instructed to evaluate their ideas and choose those worth retaining. In line with this procedure, Jerome Bruner, a Harvard educator and psychologist, posits that ideas are fostered when one separates himself from conventional ideas and develops a commitment to express new ideas.[10]

A final method Gordon mentions is programmed visualization which provides students with the opportunity to perfect their imaginative ideas. During this activity, individuals use their feelings to guide them in altering an idea to make it better. Because the idea is visualized, the student often discovers images that may not have appeared to him otherwise. Later, he can realize the idea in a poem, painting, or other form of external expression.[11]

Jerome Singer, in *The Child's World of Make-Believe,* states that the individual most likely to experience an active creative life is the one who enjoys as a youth an imaginative fantasy life. Singer encourages not only teachers, but parents as well, to provide fantasy literature for children. As opposed to asking "why" questions about imaginative children's stories, he suggests asking "what if" questions. Among the books Singer cites that inspire creativity is Steven Kellogg's *Island of the Skog,* a story about a creature who lives alone on an island. One question children might be asked regarding this work is: "What did you imagine a skog looked like when you first saw the enormous footprints and the shadowy figure on the beach?"[12] Indeed, many researchers feel that fantasy and daydreaming should be encouraged since these functions multiply ideas and mix images and emotions in ways that lead to discovery.

Although society, in general, disapproves of fantasy and daydreaming, today we hear more about the imaginative life of creative individuals from researchers dedicated to supporting these activities. A doctoral candidate at George Washington University, Marketa Ebert, interviewed creative thinkers in the various disciplines and learned that writers, in particular, stretch their minds regularly through fantasy during which time they dream of unraveling plots for future writings. Maida Withers, professor of dance at GWU, contends that thinking aloud is an invaluable way to draw from the inner resources.[13]

By verbalizing images or brainstorming aloud, one develops lateral thinking processes. As opposed to vertical processing (left-brain), lateral thinking (right-brain) involves analogical reasoning to arrive at as many ideas as possible.[14]

One study, presenting the premise that we already possess within us information needed to lead to discovery in any field, is currently being developed by Susan and Win Wenger. Specifically, what this couple contends is that "the insights and solutions are *already* there for [us] . . . , in a subliminal mental hologram of impressions surrounding every problem, every question, every datum."[15] Methods that evoke creative thinking are brainstorming, formularized questions, change of perspective, and suspended judgment. In addition to these methods, the Wengers feel that an even better means of promoting imaginative solutions to problems is to sharpen the brain's integral thinking processes through such exercises as learning to sight-read and play music. These researchers also encourage the use of tape-recorders for preserving images that we express verbally. Since spontaneous visual imagery is a right-brain function, and verbal description of that imagery is a left-brain function, both hemispheres are being used and developed during the recording session. To elicit the imagery, the Wengers describe a process similar to Bly's meditation exercise:

1. Relax — perhaps concentrate on some part of the body (a clenched fist or a relaxed fist).
2. Describe aloud what you are already doing. (This helps you look inward for images.)
3. Describe these images to a friend or into a recorder.
4. Use directed images to picture some kind of threshold or transport device — then see what are the spontaneous images waiting for you beyond the threshold. (For example: Picture a closed door, on the other side of which is the solution to a particular problem. Then open that imaginary door to discover what the scene *is* on the other side of it.)
5. If, at first, visual images seem to elude you, begin describing aloud the idea of what ought to be there — but describe that in terms of color, shape, all kinds of visual and sensory details, in as sensory a way as possible. Do this and soon the images will be there in your awareness. Also find a surface to rub in

> that imagined or visualized experience, studying the tactile feel of a door, a wall, tree-trunk or other surface, to establish fuller contact with the experience.[16]

Each method the Wengers offer can be used in creative writing classes as an impetus for assignments. Teachers who are averse to using meditation exercises can establish an atmosphere conducive to creativity by playing background music while the students write.

One last exercise, which focuses on the use of color concept to heighten sensory awareness, is used frequently by teachers of gifted students at Irving Intermediate School in Fairfax County, Virginia. Mary Sykes, Ann Erickson, Daveley Walders and Mary Hutchins contend that color communicates as well as affects the behavior of living things. To illustrate how poets use color in their creations, they discuss Elinor Wylie's "Wild Peaches," the Beatles' "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds," Wallace Stevens' "The Man With the Blue Guitar" and May Swenson's "At Breakfast." After students have gained a sense or feeling about color, they engage in various activities that prompt the flow of ideas. For example, students may be shown the movie, *Hailstones and Halibut Bones,* an imaginative film that stimulates a visual response to color.[17]

Because advancements in knowledge occur most frequently as a result of creative thinking, it seems readily apparent that educators should encourage this way of thinking — a process that produces insightful ideas and often leads to novel solutions to problems. The exercises we have discussed in this section develop analogical, intuitive, holistic, and divergent thinking processes. Exercises used by contemporary poets are included in the final section as additional suggestions for prompting spontaneous, intuitive insights.

Recently, I asked several poets for writing exercises they feel have been extremely successful in tapping the creative flow of ideas. Although some of the poets said they do not consider exercises as the best means of eliciting images, most of the respondents claimed otherwise. In addition to the exercises I received from these poets, I have included two ideas of my own which may be of use to writing teachers.

I. William Stafford
Lake Oswego, Oregon

In a recent interview with Mr. Stafford, he offered the following suggestions: "I think I've learned from others the helpfulness of this kind of thing. Of course, all teachers are familiar with going into class, and the student says, "Well, I don't know what to write about. You tell me." I was reluctant to do that for a long time, and I still feel a little intuitive hazard about directing students in which way to write. But I've learned to do that from others who have had good success with it. My favorite exercise is one that arises naturally from the conditions of the encounter with the students under the conditions of the day — that is, things will naturally come up. Someone will come in and say something that may lead us. Another good way I've found is . . . often we're reading some literature in class that combines writing. We talk our way up to writing pitch and then start to write. I tell the students, "There's not enough time for all of us to say the things we want to say about this topic, so why don't you just write down what you would say if we did have time." They may go in all directions, but it comes from something we've built up to, in terms of interchange. So I can't say a topic, or a way to go at it, as much as I can say that we just easily make the transition from talking it out to writing it out."

II. Rod Jellema
Creative Writing Director
University of Maryland

Mr. Jellema suggests using short exercises that force the student to think quickly and spontaneously. His favorite is a five-minute exercise which the students respond to accordingly:

_____ is as _____ as _____.

(1) Fill in the first blank with *anything.*
(2) Fill in the second blank with *something surprising.*
(3) Fill in the third blank with a *sound* or an *action.*
(Any grammatical units may be used.)

Mr. Jellema has found this exercise extremely successful in his work with elementary students. (Poets-in-the-Schools Program, Maryland)

III. William Virgil Davis
Bristol, Connecticut

Mr. Davis, the 1979 recipient of the Yale Series of Younger Poets award, gives the initial line of a poem such as "The bicycle died . . . ," to students and asks them to complete the poem.

IV. Paul Zimmer
Athens, Georgia

Mr. Zimmer uses an exercise he calls *Sensory Reporting.* He places a stick in the center of the room for students to observe, after which he asks them to write a poem about the object using active language only. Students may not use adjectives or adverbs — only sensory language to describe the stick — and they are allowed to examine (feel, touch, etc.) the object if they wish.

V. Henry Taylor
American University
Washington, D. C.

Mr. Taylor suggested three exercises he uses. The first he calls *Animal Riddle.* Students are directed to write 4 lines of 8 syllables that focus on the sense of touch, followed by 3 lines of 10 syllables focusing on smell, concluded with 2 lines of 12 syllables that focus on hearing.

The other two exercises Mr. Taylor described as follows:

Say how you feel without saying much about how you feel.

"I start this by reading aloud a poem by Theodore Roethke, called 'Dolor.' It is a very hard poem for some little kids, because it's full of words like 'inexorable' and 'mucilage' and 'silica.' Sometimes I take the trouble to clarify all that, and sometimes, . . . I replace the hard words with approximate synonyms more nearly within the grasp of the kids. After I read it through a time or two, I get the kids to keep count while I read aloud only the concrete nouns in the poem. In thirteen lines, the poem contains about 23 concrete nouns. I tell the students, 'Take a piece of paper and make a list of six things you can see. Then shut your eyes until I tell you to open them, at which time I'll ask you to write down half a dozen things you heard.' I maintain a deep silence of a minute or so, to get them maybe to hear things that they've learned to block out — humming fluorescent lights, the heating system — and then I make a few noises: pencil sharpener, bounce the kickball, turn on water

if there's a sink handy, etc. Jingle keys, cough, whatever. They giggle some, and some remember to write that down. Now they have these lists, and I ask them to write about a feeling they have, or have had, using as many words from the list as they can, to explain the feeling, to make it come through. If they are stuck, I get them to begin by writing 'When I look at the _____' or 'When I hear the _____.' I remind them that, although Roethke begins by saying 'I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils,/ neat in their boxes,' he would have been equally believable if he'd talked about the ineffable cheerfulness of pencils. The things themselves are not intrinsically boring, exciting, happy, sad, or whatever; so they can say what they like. The idea is that one writes with nouns and verbs, and does not say flat out, over and over, 'I am writing a sad poem.'"

The weird bird

"I make a chart of three columns, and ask for: (a) a list of adjectives; (b) a list of body parts, with the suffix *ed* added; (c) a list of nouns made by adding *er* to verbs. I go around the room and get words from lots of folks, so we have something like this:

Red	Headed	Bouncer
Heavy	Nosed	Jogger
Slimy	Hipped	Kicker
Huge	Toed	Mixer
Tiny	Eyed	Reader

Then they pick one word from each column, either by some random process — the numbers of their telephone exchange, or the month and year of their birth, or something; these two methods often result in a lot of duplication since the kids are often from the same telephone exchange areas and are roughly of an age. Anyhow, each kid gets one word from each column, and behold he has a weird bird. So I read an entry or two from Roger Tory Peterson, and then they do something similar with the bird they've got. Sometimes it leads to a poem, and sometimes only to an extravaganza of the imagination."

VI. Peter Klappert
George Mason University
Fairfax, Virginia

Mr. Klappert provides students with detailed handouts

outlining the various experiments they complete during the semester. One exercise he finds successful in prompting spontaneous images is the *Motif Poem.* He gives students the following description and then reads sample poems, such as Philip Levine's "They Feed They Lion" and George Hitchcock's "When I Came Back To Dancing Misery," to demonstrate how these poets approached the motif poem:

A MOTIF POEM OF AT LEAST 15 LINES OR STROPHES (*after* revision!)

The poem should be along the lines of those on the handout and should be *surreal* unless, in doing this experiment, you stumble onto something really good in a more conventional, realistic, metaphoric or narrative vein. Choose a word or phrase which interests you, with which you feel some emotional and/or humorous rapport. Write as many lines as you can beginning with this word or phrase. Then revise, cutting out unsuccessful lines, changing the order, building in variations so that some lines contain the motif within them and some — perhaps — do not use it at all. Vary the phrasing of the repeated word or phrase. Try using some quotations within lines. This is to a large extent a loosening up exercise; again, let your intuitions and emotions take over. Save your mental censor for the revising stage.

TIPS:

DO NOT pick some pretentious and empty, highly abstract or trite expression (such as "Love is . . . " "Despair is" "Loneliness is") unless you feel inclined to be outrageous and irreverent about it. Choose your verb or verbs carefully. Try different jargons or dictions in some lines. Try non sequiturs. Keep your sentences from all having the same syntactic structure. If you feel really ambitious, set yourself two or three motifs — you might have the required repeating word or phrase and then certain kinds of nouns, verbs or modifiers which must occur in every (or every other) line.

VII. Daniel Mark Epstein
Baltimore, Maryland

Mr. Epstein offers the following two suggestions:

(1) "When I teach Myth, I try to explain it as an ancient science or way of explaining the unexplainable. Such as: how is the world held up in space? Atlas, who stands on the back of a giant tortoise. Exercise: Have the student ask an

impossible question about nature, such as, how do trees get their bark. Then have them invent a fanciful story in order to answer the question."

(2) "As a writing exercise in support of the theory that poetry rises from the emotions, I have had the students write blessings for those that they love, and curses for those whom they hate. If there are no religious objections from the class or the administration, the curses are usually the most successful in evoking powerful images. A similar lesson involves the student in the daydreaming act of imagining his or her own paradise, or own hell."

VIII. Maxine Kumin
Warner, New Hampshire

In a recent letter, Maxine Kumin, a past Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., explained two exercises she finds successful in the workshop situation:

(1) "Lately, especially with more advanced students, I've been experimenting with dream material. I ask members of such a workshop to keep a journal of recorded dreams and to work at constructing a poem based on the arbitrary and irrational content of a dream. The requirement for completion is that the poem 'solve' in some way the dream content — that is, make intelligible the symbols that occur in the dream, find the key to the puzzle the dream poses. I have found for myself that the kind of associating on paper one does when threshing out a poem can sometimes, not always, be applied successfully to the dream."

(2) "I've asked students to 'take off' from a nursery theme of some sort and to make out of the sing-song of a Mother Goose a poem that speaks to our adult condition: Little Bo-Peep can't get to sleep, or: Jack and Jill went up the hill/to fetch a Ford Fiesta. Sometimes I ask a group of students to set up a pair of quatrains, or a sonnet, with predetermined end-words that they, in concert, agree upon. Exercise poems can sometimes turn into real poems and even when they don't, they're useful."

IX. Carolyn Kreiter-Kurylo
Teacher/Consultant
Northern Virginia Writing Project

I offer the following exercises as additional suggestions:

(1) Select a surrealist poem, such as Russell Edson's "Counting Sheep," and read one or two lines of the poem to

the students. Ask the class to complete the poem by repeating *a specific phrase* several times. For example, in "Counting Sheep," I ask students to repeat "He wonders" at regular intervals. Allow the students approximately fifteen or twenty minutes to complete their writings. The time limitation prevents them from thinking rationally while writing and, in essence, stifles left-brain censorship.

After the students have completed the writing, ask volunteers to read their responses orally. (I generally give the class background information about the poet.)

(2) An exercise which elicits startling images is one I used recently with both high school and college students. I provide the stimulus by showing students a music box shaped like a grand piano, its smooth finish highlighting the delicate wood. I tell them to touch, observe, even listen to the music box to get a feel for the object. I say: "Write down whatever comes to you. Don't worry about creating a finished product. Simply look inward for what it is you have to say." After several minutes of running their hands over the surface of the box while listening to the strains of music — in this case, "Edelweiss" — students begin writing poems in which "ballerinas twirl on crystal wine glasses" and "dashing young soldiers clap and laugh and rush to catch the falling star." During subsequent sessions we refine the drafts by focusing on concrete images that best convey the "picture" described in the poem.

NOTES

[1] Robert Bly, *Talking All Morning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), p. 174.

[2] "Are We Educating Only Half of the Brain?" *The Gifted Child Quarterly,* Spring 1979, pp. 6-7.

[3] Paul E. Torrance and Salah Mourad, "Role of Hemisphericity in Performance on Selected Measures of Creativity," *The Gifted Child Quarterly,* Spring 1979, p. 44.

[4] Betty Edwards, *Drawing On the Right Side of the Brain* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, Inc., 1979), p. 35.

[5] Edwards, p. 34.

[6] Edwards, p. 197.

[7] Edwards, p. 197.

[8] Edwards, pp. 4-5.

[9] Mike and Nancy Samuels, *Seeing With the Mind's Eye,* p. 253.

[10] Samuels, p. 253.

[11] Samuels, p. 259.

[12] Ruth M. Noyce, "Children's Books for Right Hemisphere Stimulation," *The Gifted Child Quarterly,* Spring 1979, p. 151.

[13] Barbara Peters, "Private Lives: Creative Fantasy," *The Washington Post,* 21 April 1980, B5.

[14] Edward de Bono, *Lateral Thinking: Creativity Step By Step* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 149.

[15] Win and Susan Wenger, *Your Limitless Inventing Machine,* 3rd ed. (Gaithersburg, Md.: Psychegenics Press, 1979), p. 1.

[16] Wenger, p. 9.

[17] Mary Sykes *et al.,* "Tangerine Trees and Marmalade Skies," Irving Intermediate School, Fairfax County Public Schools, p. 2.