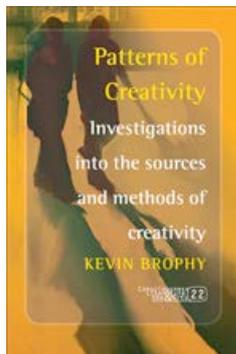


Macquarie University

Marcelle Freiman



Kevin Brophy

Patterns of Creativity: Investigations into the sources and methods of creativity

Rodopi, 2009

ISBN: 978-90-420-2720-6

Pb, 203pp, AUD 82.95

Patterns of Creativity is the latest of Kevin Brophy's three scholarly books theorising creativity, writing and poetry. His first, *Creativity: Psychoanalysis, Surrealism and Creative Writing* (1998) was a founding study in the development of academic creative writing. By 2009 Brophy has continued to contribute prolifically as both research scholar and creative writer. He has also published eight books of poetry (the latest being *Mr Wittgenstein's Lion* Five Islands Press, 2007), and it is as poet, scholar and writer that he so thoughtfully engages with further questions about creativity and the arts and about the role of consciousness in creativity and learning in his latest book.

Having read a number of these essays earlier—many have been published in journals including *TEXT*, *New Writing*, *Westerly* and in the collections *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice* (eds. Nigel Krauth and Tess Brady) and *Creative Writing Studies: New Writing Viewpoints* (eds. Graeme Harper and Jeri Kroll)—I was interested to see how they would fit into a book format. As a book, we're offered the chance to experience the full range of a writer-scholar's interests and to experience the essays' relationships to each other. In assembling a collection, thematic connections appear that are not available when pieces are read separately and these thematic areas are expanded with the essays contextualised anew. In book form (and it is clear that much thought has gone into the sequencing of these essays) the whole is indeed greater than the sum of its parts. The range of Brophy's concerns and the disciplines he is prepared to go to in searching for ways to answer the questions posed are many: neuroscience, art history and criticism, consciousness studies, philosophy

and literary theory amongst others result in a study of creativity and its patterns that is interdisciplinary, highly original and absorbing to read.

One of the most exciting things for researchers of creative writing seeking ways to understand functions of art and writing—the creative processes involved in creating art, and in this case poetry—is that approaches to the topics of art and poetry must be made in ways other than, although not exclusive of, literary or art criticism. The difference is in the reading position adopted by the creative writer as reader or researcher. Of course, writers and poets are also readers and critics (writing cannot be separated from reading, the writing process involves both), but the shift in orientation to researching as a writer incorporates investigations of the *process* that generates the product, rather than critically engaging with the product, the text, which is what literary criticism does. The writer researcher engages with how writing is made, and for Brophy this involves finding a language to articulate creativity and reading as process.

The first essay ‘Art and Evolution: A Partnership in Excess’ explores the place of creativity within the context of evolutionary human development. This requires looking at the role of art in human evolution, and concluding that in terms of evolutionary survival, art is ‘excessive’—it is not essential, and yet, Brophy argues ‘art brings us to the core of our being, for it manifests and expresses evolution itself—in all its glorious uselessness, excess and creativity’ (18). The origins of art are also social; art involves the human capacity for expressiveness, an aesthetic sense, and its function is communication. By engaging with evidence-based science, artists, critics and art historians can gain ‘unexpectedly insightful perspectives’ (21), but as Brophy cautions, ‘the tendency of the scientist is to arrive too soon at explanations that have in effect confined the experience, touch and intuition involved in art to functional terms that miss the subtleties at the centre of the practice of art’ (21-2). One of these subtleties is the role of the unconscious in creative artistic activity: it is more than the use of ‘consciously acquired skills’ (27). This argument is, of course, not new but Brophy reaches a convincing conclusion which has implications for creative writing in contexts of research and teaching: the ‘artist submits to a process outside their ego and outside their knowledge [a ‘not-knowing’], but not beyond their capacity’ (27), an explanation that provides space for creativity to occur, but also the application of learned skills and, as the next essay asserts, conscious attention.

‘Peculiarities and Monstrosities: Consciousness, Neuroscience and Creative Writing’ focuses, as its title indicates, more closely on the relation of thought and language to creativity: ‘How do forms of perception and understanding rise to our awareness?’ (32). To address this, Brophy surveys the role of consciousness: its definitions, differences and difficulties of definition. His interest here is on the speed of consciousness—or rather, its slowness in relation to decision making and intention which have been discovered to occur in a delayed manner compared to brain activity around sensory responses. In fact, ‘... consciousness is it seems a reconstruction of what has already been perceived, what has already been understood and what has already been decided’ (40). Creative thinking, says Brophy, involves an element of ‘waiting’—what creativity studies have called periods of ‘incubation, consolidation, a waiting for inspiration or insight’ (40): ‘the logical work has been prepared for

consciousness before a thought or an understanding arrives in it' (41). Presenting a range of research, he flags the counterintuitive idea that consciousness seems, from neuroscientific studies, to be 'a far more passive element in brain processes' (44) than we might consider; that 'insights seem to be connected with the simple maintenance of conscious attention upon a task' (43). He thus speculates that 'it might be possible to make particular uses of the permeable boundary between the conscious and unconscious to enhance learning, particularly in situations where creative and complex thinking is the skill being developed, as is the case in creative arts' (49). This statement, in addition to the research articulated in all of Brophy's work and his emphasis on creative writing as *art*, highlights the value of this book for those teaching and researching in all the creative arts, not only creative writing.

The third essay takes us into the classroom: 'Workshopping the Workshop and Teaching the Unteachable' examines the question of 'How complex is the relation of idea and feeling, feeling and idea, and how might the artist-writer manage it?' (54). The emphasis here is on the importance of 'workshopping the workshop and aiming to teach the unteachable when education in the creative arts is at stake' (56). These categories owe their awkwardness to the difficulties creative activity presents in simultaneously bringing ideas and excitement into play: 'It is, perhaps, rather in a *contest* between excitement and ideas, between intellect and emotion, that art is produced' (56). What is often lost sight of when students under stress take the path of least effort is this contest between excitement and ideas, and the fact that this most significant part of the writing 'needs to happen outside the workshop' (59) with the workshop providing audience and feedback 'as the natural consequence of the necessary and primary solitude of the writer writing' (60). The writing must come first, with students left on their own initially to confront the blank page—good professional practice if one is to continue as a writer beyond university courses. Brophy provides inspired examples of poems that enact such situations from which, no matter how apparently unpromising, poems are generated. Their readings show their capacity to 'enact' thought. It is a matter, according to Brophy, of allowing the mind to shape the poem, to tip 'images out of the mind into a poem' (61), to take up 'what is to hand and work it' (62).

These poetic examples transition neatly into the next essay 'The Shadow that is Light: Influence, Imagination and Imitation in Poetry'. Here Brophy's investigation turns to the question of 'imitation', that is 'the apparent paradox in the act of writing a unique or original poem and at the same time producing a poem that will fit a preconceived pattern or set of conventions by which poetry is recognised' (68). Through an articulation of the variety of meanings of 'mimesis' in Aristotle's *Poetics* we discover, perhaps surprisingly, that art based on mimesis is not done for the sake of 'strict likenesses or the production of copies' (71); it is an instinctive and human trait in all the arts and has 'the exquisite and instinctual purpose of pleasure. This pleasure is both motivation for the artist, and if the art is successful, it becomes present to the audience' (72). Alongside creating 'likeness' for and as pleasure, art also imitates its artistic predecessors. There is an almost too obvious clarity to this if we consider the use of exemplary texts as part of learning an art form, and it must be considered together with the paradox of bringing innovation to it. Brophy turns to T. S. Eliot's

1919 essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ as he develops his case for poetic influence drawing on modernist and then post-structuralist approaches. For Eliot, criticism is too much concerned with what is individual in a poet and insufficiently with how the poet’s predecessors ‘assert their presence and influence’ (77). Tracing nuances of this argument in post-structuralism, Brophy turns variously to Bakhtin’s ‘dialogism’, Kristeva’s ‘intertextuality’ and Barthes’ “‘tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (1977: 146)’ (80). While it might be argued that these familiar territories offer little that is new, my response is that the framing here situates these theoretical concepts in a new light, especially with regards to creative writing. They offer opportunities for creative, not only critical, responses and opportunities for creative reading through theoretically informed (even metaphoric) lenses through which to read poems and see where they take us. It is not surprising that the poet as researcher must find ways of negotiating post-structuralism and deconstruction. Re-inserting the *writer* into these predominantly textual approaches by contesting Harold Bloom’s combative ‘struggle’ (anxiety) of influence, Brophy sees influence less as a battle and more an adopting of creative identity (87). The seeming constraints of influence and imitation are alleviated by an ‘evolutionary understanding of influence’ that allows for ‘throwing emphasis on the experience of messiness, of dead ends, ... a general inefficiency of working methods so important to the arts’ (88)—a messiness and randomness characteristic of evolution which has its own creative impulse. Here we see the connection Brophy draws between creativity and evolution, the process allowing the writer to ‘disengage poetry from ... struggles that are part of poetry’s history, but do not go to the heart of the experience of being a poet’ (89).

The essay “‘Man-Moth” and the Flame of Influence: A Poet Reading Poetry’ brings praxis to the discussion of influence. There is, I think, some significance in this essay’s placing at the fulcrum of the collection, for it is with this essay’s detailing acts of both reading and writing that the emphasis of the collection shifts towards a sharper focus on writing and language. Through a detailed reading of Elizabeth Bishop’s poem ‘The Man-Moth’ Brophy explores how reading a poem in particular ways can generate one’s own poetry—making influence conscious, which is exemplified in Brophy’s own poem of influence, ‘The Dream of Moths’. In this essay, we learn ways of reading poetry adopted through the setting of ‘questions that lead eventually, through the essential but sometimes difficult process of influence, to the poet’s own poem’ (93). What is clear here, in contrast to contemporary forms of textual critical analysis, is the acknowledgment of ‘the poet’, the person who has written the poem effaced in the close reading practices of New Criticism and post-structuralism’s emphasis on culture and text. The questions are practical and perceptive: ‘How does this poem work?’—highlighting ‘analysis, poetics and prosody’, and ‘What does this poem show me about writing?’—‘extracting from the text what it has effected as performance’ (94). Then, more subjectively, ‘In what ways does it move me?’ and ‘Can I hear or sense the presence of a living person in this writing?’ Although the latter can be a distraction, ‘it is a useful question ... if it brings the reader to experience a text as it is enacted by another writer making progressive choices and exposing to view the risks and nuances of a performance—a performance that comes into its full existence as a collaboration between writer and reader’ (94). The fifth

question, ‘What evidence of reading is there in this poem?’ addresses the matter of tradition and influence: it ‘opens the way to this poem influencing a poet-reader’s next poem’ (94). The close reading Brophy advocates is not that of the New Critics, nor of any criticism: it ‘has its basis in my concern as a poet for learning from the ways matters of poetics and prosody have been negotiated by another writer. The choices or decisions enacted in a poem are the clues for me to what gives it life or kills its life’ (95).

This essay explores several approaches to reading in critical writing: those that rely too much on the capacity of text to be read as a reproduction of an author’s consciousness, or those who pay too little attention to the “intellectual and imaginative work that goes into a successful poem” (quoting Helen Vendler), who argues, says Brophy, to restore ‘a sense of complicity and intimacy with writers to her writing’ (97). The most exciting aspect of this essay is its emphasis on reading a poem as a performance *in time* – ‘as an act’ in the sense that J. L. Austin meant when he wrote of speech as performative. Brophy’s understanding that the poem ‘must achieve its existence as an experience rather than a meaning (it must be doing something, not just saying something—it has a “force” as well as a “meaning” and this force, this power to move us is more to the point than any meaning)’ (95)—provides a key statement on poetry. The value of this essay, and its centrality to the collection, is its insightful offering to creative writers and to teachers who are avoiding poetry because it is too ‘difficult’ for both teacher and student, too obscure, too hard to understand. Brophy hereby gives permission to the reader to trust his or her own responses through careful attention to the poem and how it is made.

The two more subjective questions asked of the poem in the previous essay, ‘In what ways does it move me?’ and ‘Can I hear or sense the presence of a living person in this writing?’ pertain to a sense of ‘aliveness’ in the writing, what Brophy attenuates in the next essay ‘The Politics of Style: Staying Alive’. This essay is a consideration of style, not as a cultivated fashion, which is a very limited definition of style; rather ‘What matters is whether we can find a style that works’ (112). Style is not imposed, it is the result of the decisions and choices a writer makes for the particular effects he or she wants to achieve. This relates to the earlier essays’ discussions of creativity and consciousness: these choices and decisions are rapid, intuitive or more, or less, consciously reflective. It also relates to the essay on ‘teaching the unteachable’: style cannot be a matter of advice nor even teaching:

The test of the success of a piece of writing cannot be how well the writer has found a balance between extremes or achieved both clarity and dignity but, I want to argue, how close what has been produced comes to a quality we would call *aliveness*. There is no balance to be sought, I would argue, between an elaborate and a plain style, but rather there is nearly always the ambition to achieve a style that communicates tinglingly rather than falling into a pattern that is so enclosed the work dies before it begins to communicate with its audience (116).

The sense of ‘a life’ within the writing is expanded in the subsequent essay ‘Repulsion and Day-Dreaming: Freud Writing Freud’, a case study of Freud’s 1907 essay “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming”, in which Brophy argues—in answer to

his own questions ‘Do we make our selves or find our selves? Or do we follow our selves through life?’ (126)—Freud’s essay is an example of how the narrative of his own helplessness from his early life experience ‘is imprinted on his ideas and carried in his writing’ (127). Brophy applies Freud’s own psychoanalytic ideas to his reading of Freud’s essay. While Freud disarms the reader by distinguishing himself as a ‘lay person’ different from creative writers, Brophy says ‘surely this is a sign of both his own day-dream of being a creative writer, and of the fact that creative writing is what he is doing himself in any case’ (138). Having established Freud’s own narrative as the subject of the essay, that its style includes a sense of confession, Brophy slyly points out that ‘Nearly a hundred years later ... [there] is no shortage of students wanting to fill classes, lectures and workshops in creative writing’:

... Creative writing, though, remains for the moment an uncanny phenomenon in universities, because I suggest, while it gives prominence to the strangely expressive power of unconscious desire and individual talent, it is bound by a commitment to critical intellect as long as it aspires to a place in tertiary education. Its connection with day-dreams (including erotic possibilities) and its unruly “power to say everything” in Derrida’s phrase (Derrida 1992) give it an attractive edginess in the academy. It has become a testing ground for the mind and the self. Almost anything could be said in a creative writing class (though nearly always the predictable is what emerges’ (139).

Although Freud wants to tie himself down to the predictable, as so often creative writing students also do, given this presence of creative writing in universities I think it is also possible to argue the role of creative writing in contributing to ‘graduate capabilities’ required by universities such as ‘professional and personal judgement and initiative’, ‘being creative and innovative’, ‘critical, analytical and integrative thinking’ and, of course, ‘effective communication’ (Macquarie University 2008).

The essay ‘Integrational Linguistics and a New Poetics for Thinking’ continues the theme of written discourse, in particular the language of scholarly writing in both research and creative PhD theses. The focus here is on language as communication, which is also about style. Academic writing should be considered as text ‘or as performance of a certain kind of text’ (145). This includes the ‘effect of critical theoretical movements that go under the banners of psychoanalysis, semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, Marxism, feminism and deconstruction’ which all insist in one way or another that any writing is caught ‘in the rhetorical strategies and undecidable uncertainties surrounding the meaning of words’ (145). This emphasis on text—both communicable and under question, creative and scholarly—is a force exerted on and within the PhD context. Another force ‘is the requirement that whatever the project is, it must be developed around a question that arises from a deeply informed position as both creative writer and passionate scholar. The creative work must be one way of tackling a problem or question’ (158). This requires the willingness to ‘work from a question or problem (a flash of intuition) at both creative and scholarly critical tasks’ (159). Brophy also explores the possibilities of bringing creative and scholarly writing closer together, considering the value and even the necessity in terms of human cognition and thought, of metaphor. Here, the poet offers research writers an approach to writing that can communicate and touch the reader, pointing out the dryness and plain bad writing of some academic prose. The following

essay 'Original Thinking: what does poetry have to do with it?' continues the exploration of metaphor in writings of philosophy, medical prose and other disciplinary areas. Brophy articulates the value of developing a capacity, in all forms of thought and investigation, for metaphoric connections—'a willingness to allow unconscious processes to take their course' (174) in research. This idea loops back to the first two essays in the collection, on creativity and consciousness. I urge research candidates and their supervisors to read these two essays, and to read them again.

The final short essay 'State of Play: a Tale of Two Manuscripts' rounds off the collection with a tribute to other poets who are at developmental stages of their creative work. Each manuscript has the potential for publication with further revision and editing: 'hard work and hard thinking while staying alive to the chaos and happy accidents of creative composition'. He concludes: 'This is the key, and it is perhaps one of the keys this whole collection of essays has been shaping to: to be responsive to what happens, what is thrown into the mind, what one comes upon' (184).

Coming upon this fine collection of essays when asked to review it has been a privilege. This book offers a great deal to those involved in the creative arts as researchers and creative practitioners, whether they are poets or not. The range of Kevin Brophy's scholarship interests is wide and always focused towards questions around the key themes of this book: a true indication of the potential of creative writing research to offer new ways of seeing text, creativity and writing. As a teacher, supervisor, poet and researcher I find this book inspiring and often exciting. A collection of essays need not be a set of disparate writings: in this case the commitment and integrity to the writing and scholarship ensure a coherence of the interests of what is, indeed, the life of a writer. I was only saddened that such compelling scholarship was not always treated with sufficient respect by the publisher's editing, as even occasional errors in proofing and layout and insufficient attention given to paragraphing made reading this book at times less than smooth. A small cavil, however, to my mind an important one given the calibre of the scholarship in this text.

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Dr. Marcelle Freiman is the current President of the AAWP. She is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing and English Literature at Macquarie University. Her latest book of poems is White Lines (Vertical) (Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers, 2010).