

How Writers Write Poetry 2014

CLASS NINE • Video Transcript

-Welcome back. Last session we told you to go out and find the deliciousness in the poem, to explore the pleasure of writing. This week we want you to rein it in. We're going to be talking about restraint based poetics, ways in which to use formal techniques and guidelines to add a little spontaneity into the poems. Our first speaker, Shane McCrae is the author of four collections of poetry, *Mule*, *Blood*, *Forgiveness*, and a forthcoming collection. He's also the recipient of a Whiting Award, of an N. E. A., and has a law degree from Harvard. He was a finalist for the Kate Tuff's Award and he is a professor of poetry at Oberlin.

-And one of the things we want you to keep in mind is that form can be a form of imprisonment only for the unimaginative. The poets will be talking today about form as a springboard for the imagination, as a kind of liberation, and we'll take, have another take on it from the Finnish poet, critic, teacher, translator, and editor, Teemu Manninen, whose most recent book of poems in English translation is titled *Bad Mother*. Enjoy.

- Hi, my name is Shane McCrae and I'm going to talk about this idea. I don't know if it's my idea. It's not especially fancy but I call it generative distraction, which makes it sound fancy and all I mean by that, in a broad sense, is that sometimes it helps when you're writing to have something to distract your mind. So, I'm going to start out. Well, no, I'm not going to start out with that. What I'm going to start out with is, I'm going to, in a very broad way, give you a sense of why this idea is important. So, broadly - poetry in English - Well, T.S. Eliot has this idea that he calls disassociation of sensibility which, those are also fancy words. All he really means by that is that up until, he thinks, around the seventeenth century poets in English apprehended feeling, you know, they expressed their feelings or they encountered their feelings with their intellects. So that there was a perfect union between, you know, head and heart essentially and that with the rise of two poets, John Milton and Dryden, whose last name I'm suddenly forgetting, there came a divorce between head and heart and he thinks that specifically, really what it is is a post-Milonic poetics; poets after Milton, really. Up until Milton and even in Milton you get a kind of poetry that is both emotional, it is full of feeling, but it is also incredibly intelligent. Once you get to Milton, or once you get to Dryden and Pope, their lives overlap but Dryden was first, you get - there's a certain anxiety about expressing feeling and people, poets lean far more toward talking about, you know, they write essays in verse and they're very what we would call now, technical, which is an inaccurate term, it just means that they are very thinky poems. They are poems about ideas but not in an emotionally compelling way. Not a lot of people like to read that poetry and this becomes incredibly prominent in the eighteenth century. So Eliot thinks or thought, he's been dead for a while - Eliot thought that poetry in English had never recovered from this disassociation of sensibility, that we had never gotten to a point where feeling and intellect had been unified. But I think that in this, as in many other things, Eliot was wrong and that the actual, the moment where that re-unification takes place is actually at the end, the very end of the eighteenth century. And the eighteenth century, as you all know, was the moment of, the highest moment, I think, of the head type poem and then 1797 when



(is that right?) when *Lyrical Ballads* by Coleridge and Wordsworth comes out, that is sort of one of the big launching moments in romantic poetry. But Wordsworth specifically, I think, re-introduces this idea that there should be a union between feelings and thoughts and the way he does that is essentially...The other thing about Milton, that you might have picked up, is that his poetry was marked the kind of ending point for a certain type of poetry and then poetry changes after that and stays that way for a while and then Wordsworth comes around and his poetry marks another end point and a new beginning. At that moment you get a reunion of head and heart but you also get, the way that he gets the heart in is he has poems that are spontaneous expressions, or at least seem like they're spontaneous expressions, and he specifies this. Like in the title he'll say, you know, I went on a walk last Sunday, I bought some McNuggets, on the way I wrote this poem, you know, the idea is he is trying to signal to the reader, you know, this kind of just poured out of me, you know. It's just spontaneous, unregulated feeling but I think that can be deceptive and I think this might be why Eliot was fooled. It can deceive one into thinking that he is just following his heart but if you read these poems and get past the prejudice that the title is trying to impose on you, you see that they are also thinky poems. They're, you know, they're, the intellect is in there. And Wordsworth doing this shaped the way people think about poetry in his moment. Very, very soon after Wordsworth people were already writing Wordsworthian, kind of spontaneous poems and the idea that that's how a poem should be hasn't really changed since Wordsworth. There have been a lot of...there have been a lot of movements I think, in one way or another, could have pushed against it but I don't think very many people have really - It's very hard to see outside of that to another way of doing poetry, very hard to see out of the spontaneous, you know, eruption of poetry and so that even if your poem is labored, even if it takes you years to do it, it has to feel as if, in some way, the poem is discovering itself as it goes along. Just as if you're talking to a friend and as you're talking whatever you're going to say is occurring to you as you're saying it. This is what we, as readers, look for in poetry now and so this is the effect that poets are trying to achieve. When I was a younger poet, when I was just beginning as a poet and when, you know, when I've talked to my friends who are younger poets or when I was and they were, I didn't recognize it at the time but the problem that we all had was that we wrote poems often based upon ideas about feelings or ideas that arose from feelings but always, or almost always, with an idea. You know, for instance, you know, my cat died, I was sad, I'm going to write a poem about how I was sad and my cat died, you know. And when I've spoken to younger students about this it's very hard for them to see what's wrong with that and so this idea of generative distraction has been kind of bubbling in my head for a long time because I've been trying to figure out a way to tell students that that doesn't really work. The reason it doesn't really work is you've got a controlling idea when you go into the poem. That makes the poem seem, to those of us, which is everybody, who have been raised to expect poems, at least in English, to sound as if they are just spontaneously occurring. When we read these poems that the poet had an idea that they wanted to express in the beginning the poem doesn't feel spontaneous it feels like an effort to get this idea out and ends up seeming kind of inert. And so what I wanted to do to sort of clarify how this works maybe a little bit is I want to read a poem by Keats who - this poem would've been written just a few decades after *Lyrical Ballads* came out, so you that you can get a sense of what I mean. There's a particular part in it that will exemplify this, what I mean about the poem seeming spontaneous and then I'm going to talk briefly about ways that you can get to, even if you know what you want to say, ways that you can make it so that you can make the poem sound spontaneous even if you have an idea from the beginning. So, that said,

I'm going to read, Keats wrote a series of really great odes and I'm going to read this poem called Ode to a Nightingale. A lot of people tend to think of, I mean the one that gets hot most often is Ode on a Grecian Urn but Ode to a Nightingale is just as lovely and it illustrates my point, I think, fairly well. So, Ode to a Nightingale:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
 Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
 One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
 But being too happy in thine happiness,—
 That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
 In some melodious plot
 Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
 Singing of summer in full-throated ease.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
 No hungry generations tread thee down;
 The voice I hear this passing night was heard
 In ancient days by emperor and clown:
 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
 The same that oft-times hath
 Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
 Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
 To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
 Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
 As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
 Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
 Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
 Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
 In the next valley-glades:
 Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
 Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

So you can't see it but if you get a chance you should look at this poem. It's constructed with these very elaborate stanzas, very elaborate rhymes and the moment that I wanted to draw your attention to is right near the end where he says "Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn" and then begins the next stanza, "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell." At that moment you can see that Keats is hearing himself and that's a sign of spontaneity. You can see that as he's writing it he's watching what he's writing and the poem is growing organically out of, or at least he's making it seem as if it is, and

Keats, my understand is, did write these relatively fast. The poem is growing organically out of the moment. Now, the way I think you achieve this if you have an idea already that you want to express is finding some way to distract your mind from that idea. I think it's essential that that idea stay within the poem itself. And what I mean by that is Keats had his elaborate rhymes that he was working with. There are many different ways that you can do it. You could say, I'm going to write a poem but I'm not going to use, you know, the letter e. There's a French novelist who wrote a whole novel without using the letter e and it was translated into English, also without the e, which is pretty amazing. You can set yourself any number of rules that you have to follow. The important thing is that the rules have to do with the making of the poem itself and by following those rules you distract yourself from what it is that you think you want to say and can find a way to say it that seems fresh because at every moment you're trying to get your thought to work within the confines of your form and so that ultimately the distraction allows you to express feelings that you, feelings and ideas that you knew you had to begin with but in a way that seems as if you're discovering them as you go along.

-So the question is, what actually is invention? What's literary creativity? And of course there are a thousand different theories in Western poetics alone but you might say that they could be divided between two kinds of theories broadly, very, very broadly. The theories which could be called the Penelope Theories. Penelope was Ulysses' wife, who was waiting for Ulysses to come back but there were suitors around her saying that you must, that Ulysses is dead, you must choose one of us as your new husband. So she was working at the loom all day saying, and when this tapestry is done then I will choose a husband but every night she would tear the work that she had been done, that she had accomplished by day, completed by day so the work was never done. So this is kind of like the model of the toiling artist, the artist who works and works and works and finds kind of his, through this kind of a work ethic, kind of finds a way to skill. Then there's the Athena Theories, the idea of the Palace Athene, the Greek goddess of wisdom and inspiration coming into, emerging into existence fully formed from the head of Zeus. So, the idea that, you know, classical theories of inspiration and, you know, trusting in instinct and intuition and things like this. And often, you know, writers will tend to fall not in one extremity but somewhere in between and we've seen all kinds of mixtures in the world. But as far as neurology and cognitive science about invention and inspiration and creativity goes, writing is probably one of the most complex things, the cognitive things as human beings can take apart from driving a car. And so, I mean, it would be foolish to think that there are easy solutions. It would be foolish to think that writing is either total freedom of inspiration or total constraint, totally rule based. So I tend to be, myself I tend to be drawn toward solutions or ideas which find some kind of inventive balance between these ideas of what writing is like and one solution that I've always liked is the one that was formulated by a group of writers that call themselves the Oulipo, which is French for the Workshop of Potential Literature. This was a group of writers that formed in the fifties, I think, around writers, philosophers, poets, mathematicians, who thought that writing - one of the founding members was a guy called Raymond Queneau who had this proverb that I've, this phrase that I've always quoted. He said that an Oulipian writer is a mouse, it's like a mouse that builds itself a labyrinth in order to escape from it. Somehow this strikes me as the perfect kind of metaphor for what I feel, myself, that writing is about, what writing is like. It's neither total freedom or total constraint but more like a self chosen constraint. And this, for Queneau, Queneau and a lot of the Oulipians this is because they thought

that all kinds of, writing is always under some kind of constraint. Grammar is a constraint, metaphor itself is a constraint, a line of poetry is a constraint, you know, given us by history and chosen for us by history and a literary institution. So we're always kind of writing trying to jump hurdles, formal rules. They come to us whether or not we like them and even when we think we're writing totally freely we come under unconscious constraints. Queneau was specifically disillusioned by surrealism because he thought surrealist writers, instead of being able to actually engage with the unconscious nature of the power of, of imagination instead kind of fell under the influence of unconscious constraints or chains. And, whether or not you believe that's true or not, still I think there's a power in thinking about writing in the way in which Oulipian writers think about it. Choosing a constraint for yourself, setting out upon a task, you kind of have to be very conscious of everything that you do. You have to be careful. You have to have a certain kind of fidelity to form, a faithfulness to the standards you have set out for yourself.

-So the assignment we want to give you this week is to write in a form, give yourself constraints, invent them or take a received form. Rick Kenney, who has spoken to us in a previous lecture once gave an assignment to a class I was teaching which seemed to me to be incredibly diabolical. He said, write a poem of ten words in which each word has one letter more than the previous word. And I thought, this is absolute craziness until I was driving home and I thought, I am the mare night forgot. You see what happens- your imagination gets engaged by obstacles so invent some obstacles for yourself. A poem that has to have six book titles in it. A poem that has to have four windows in it. Whatever those constraints might be, tell us what they are after you've written the poem and submitted it to the forum so that we'll have some sense of the kind of constraints against which you were letting your imagination go.

-We look forward to seeing the kinds of spontaneity and imagination that erupt from this. So, send us those poems.