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'We're all going to die': Perceptions and experiences of time among creative practitioners

Abstract:

This paper surveys briefly a range of modern ideas on the creative process and some possible approaches to understanding time, from scientific to philosophical, experiential and managerial. This paper argues that the relationship between time and productivity remains obscure, that the creative person's commitment to an excessive and unpredictable use of time challenges administrations to adjust their expectations and re-value the use of work time, and finally that newly conceived levels of trust need to be foregrounded between an organisation and its most creative employees.

Biographical note:

Kevin Brophy is author of fifteen books of poetry, fiction, and essays. His latest books are *This is what gives us time* (Gloria SMH, 2016) and *Misericordia* (Salt Wattle, 2016). He is a past winner of the Calibre Prize for an outstanding essay and the Martha Richardson Medal for poetry. He is a publishing editor at Five Islands Press, a life member of Writers Victoria, and Patron the Melbourne Poets Union. In 2015 he was poet in residence at the BR Whiting Library in Rome. He is Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne.

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1. On creativity

I begin broadly with 'creativity' because the research project mentioned in the abstract above and described in detail below is motivated by a deep interest in the history and impact of this idea and its practical implications for organisations that value the outcomes of creative practice.

Arthur Koestler's mid twentieth-century twenty-year project, published in a one-volume edition as *The Act of Creation* in 1964, tackles the origins and processes of human creativity in an elegant, unexpectedly lively, yet nevertheless dogged set of chapters that begin with an extensive discussion of how the joke works. Of course the joke, like a poem or a song is both a highly stylised procedure and a creative one. We know the joke's moves, we can predict the arrival of the turn, but we also know that the turn will throw us off our usual rails and out of our usual worldview. What do you call an Aboriginal piloting an aeroplane? Answer: a pilot (not one of Koestler's examples, though he has many)—is an example of the way the joke classically invites us in to unacknowledged or indulged prejudices and the expectations set up by its structure, then ignites a surprise twist upon us. Koestler uses the structure of the joke to make clear that we generally operate mentally within set matrices according to relatively fixed procedural codes, and this is the major reason we are, most of us most of the time, not particularly creative. It might also, equally, be the reason we are sometimes creative.

Koestler's aim was to throw light on what it is that physicists, mathematicians, and eventually artists are doing mentally when they are creative. He was drawn to the apparent paradox that in scientific fields of knowledge based upon objectivity, logic and proof, and centred in abstract symbols, the rare and most valuable creative contributions can turn out to be dependent upon mental processes that are 'subjective, irrational, and verifiable only after the event' (Koestler 1969: 147).

Arthur Koestler wrote his book during those decades in the twentieth century when the idea of creativity was in popular use, had cachet, and even political global interest. In his more recent and more inclusive account of creativity, Rob Pope (*Creativity: theory, history, practice* 2005) has noted that creativity only became a widely-used term in the 1940s and 1950s, a response perhaps to the need to adjust to rapid technological change, as well as an issue arising from the Cold War race between the superpowers to put astronauts into space. New approaches to education, for instance, seemed to promise more creative engineers and scientists. The psychologist and educational theorist JP Guilford encapsulated this mid-twentieth century anxiety when he wrote that we need 'imaginative solutions in a modern world' (quoted in Pope 2005: 20). Leading up to this time the hugely influential philosophical work of Henri Bergson (2003) (who himself published a book on comedy in 1900: *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*) on 'creative evolution' was widely read and discussed.

Coming to the crux of his inquiry from several angles, and focusing upon questions of process in thinking, Koestler observed that the word, *cogito* etymologically means 'to shake together' (con + agitare) (1969: 120). Echoing the work of Wallas and Poincaré, he pointed to the evidence for a personal time of so-called 'incubation' when, after exhaustive inquiry a personality is saturated with a problem all the way down to unverbalised unconscious layers, 'so that on some level of the mind it [the problem] remains active, even while attention is occupied in a quite different field' (1969: 119). Koestler noted how discovery's first decisive step is always intuitive, with 'the long donkey-work [of building evidence and proof] following the brief flash of insight' (1969: 135). He further enlisted Max Planck, father of quantum theory, in suggesting

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that there are artistic and aesthetic elements to the drive towards insight—in his autobiography, Planck wrote that the innovative scientist must have 'a vivid intuitive imagination for new ideas not generated by deduction, but by artistically creative imagination' (quoted in Koestler 1969: 147). Intuitions that arrive in the conscious mind with a force that brings conviction can of course be far from truly insightful, and can be as foolish as phrenology, as dangerous as racial stereotyping, or just simply wrong-headed. Though intuition might be indispensable to discovery, it is not always a guarantee of effective insight.

While Koestler's interest was in the processes of the individual mind of the person who makes a decisive and authoritatively recognised though unpredictable contribution to knowledge, Rob Pope, in his later review of much of the same material Koestler drew upon, develops a broader, less ordered view of the possibility that creativity arises from social conditions and shared enterprises. While Pope remains sceptical about whether creativity is 'anything at all' (2005: 52) and acknowledges the dangers of developing a 'corporatist model of creativity' (2005: 26) that is a blend of social engineering, education and commercialism, his expansive survey and meditation traces the argument over whether creativity is the preserve of the rare genius figure (historically overwhelmingly male) or 'a commonly available, essentially routine capacity latent in everyone' (2005: 53). He cites research that seems to point to the ordinariness of creative individuals, and to the fact that they do think in routine ways most of the time. Pope's corrective discussion is mostly concerned with creative practice in social and artistic contexts. His argument for a more democratic and less procedural understanding of creativity is valuable for reminding us that the dichotomy between a version of creativity that sees it as the preserve of the rare genius, and a version that allows all of us access to our latent creativity is a false dichotomy, for it is important to be aware that individual creativity does mostly arise out of organisations, structures, shared inquiries, and piecemeal contributions that lead eventually to breakthroughs, as much as it arises from the lightning strikes of lone insights. In this paper, my aim is to ask how we might understand the relation between creativity and time from the viewpoint of the individual as well as from the viewpoint of an organisation or system. Any individual in this contemporary world working on a significant social or scientific (and perhaps even artistic) problem will most likely be a member of a complex research organisation.

Koestler's thesis regarding individual creativity hinges on what he calls the 'bisociative act', a term that arises from acknowledgement that we really have no guidance on what is happening in the mind as a creative insight emerges. For Koestler, the individual's bisociative act is the moment of bringing a most unlikely but possibly fruitful combination of ideas into conjunction and then into consciousness (1969: 164). Henri Poincaré (1854–1912), himself an original thinker in mathematics and physics, arrived at the realisation that there must be unconscious processes that combine ideas in quantities, at speed, and across distances that the conscious mind is incapable of matching. This relatively mechanical model of an assistant unconscious processor seems a reasonable proposition in the light of evidence related to creative insights, but it falls down when we ask how one particular unlikely combination, the perfectly insightful one that might resolve a problem, is then chosen as the one to come forward into the conscious mind. Poincaré suggested it might be the seductive beauty of a new solution that brings its combination into consciousness (Koestler 1969: 114–16 and 164–65). This is a not wholly satisfactory explanation for the 'hard' sciences, which usually value logic and evidence above reverie and imagination. Poincaré himself, instructively, came close to formulating an expression of relativity theory in 1904, but

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did not, it seems, have the imagination to push his mathematical insights towards a new version of the relation of space to time and matter to energy (Koestler 1969: 234–35).

In one of his recent studies of creativity, psychologist of science Dean Keith Simonton (2004) exhaustively tests models of scientific discovery against surveys of careers in science, and concludes that individual scientific discovery might have a lot to do with logic, with the genius of individuals, and with the needs of a zeitgeist, but fundamentally the process of creative insight is a *stochastic* process. By this he means that the generation of chance combinations, trial and error, conjecture, intuition and imagination play *the* central role in scientific discovery. This process for Simonton is characterised by chanciness, digressions, probability without guarantees, and much time apparently wasted. Simonton enlists the example of the late nineteenth century physicist, medical inventor and discoverer, Herman von Helmholtz, in particular Helmholtz's vivid reflection on what it feels like to seek a new solution to a problem:

> I only succeed in solving such problems after many devious ways, by the gradually increasing generalisation of favourable examples, and by a series of fortunate guesses. I had to compare myself with an Alpine climber, who, not knowing the way, ascends slowly and with toil, and is often compelled to retrace his steps because his progress is stopped; sometimes by reasoning, and sometimes by accident, he hits upon a fresh path, which again leads him a little further. (quoted in Simonton 2004: 40)

Simonton's stochastic model, with its emphasis on chance combinations, seems to confirm the appropriateness of the prominence Koestler had given to the unsystematic and relatively intuitive aspects of discovery, invention and insight. Helmholtz's emphasis on necessary dead-ends, digressions and trial-and-error as a methodology offers a model that suggests many solutions or paths might come into the conscious mind, which must then be examined, critiqued and tested. This offers an accretive aspect to models of discovery.

It was at this point of his study that Koestler turned to poets for guidance on how largely unconscious or intuitive mental processes can lead to new discoveries. The observation he made was that, despite working exclusively in language, poets—at least those of the lyrical kind—seem to think in pictures; that is in a pre-verbal manner. Koestler observed that poets alternate between image and word— between primitive, largely unconscious mental processes and the so-called higher, more rational, language-based mental processes.

What might we learn from this? What might research scientists learn from this? Koestler suggests (1969: 169) we must learn the importance of relinquishing conscious control at certain points in any investigation.

In 1945 a questionnaire was sent out to eminent mathematicians in America in the hope of revealing something of their working methods (Koestler 1969: 171). A questionnaire was sent to Einstein, who became interested enough to attempt answers. In one answer he tried to describe what he called 'productive thought', noting that words or language seemed to play no role, but rather a visual 'combinatory play' was at work (1969: 171). Koestler called this reversion to playful, image-based, language-free thinking, 'a regression which prepares the forward leap' (1969: 173, 210). It is in time given to dreams too that visual thinking free from restraints becomes possible, and sometimes offers insights to the conscious mind the next morning (1969: 189).

Koestler constructed his reflections and analysis upon the principle that the conscious mind is not, in fact, governed by logic. It is governed by habit (1969: 207). He made use of reports of experiments by the mid-twentieth century Gestalt psychologist Carl

Duncker, who coined the term functional fixedness to describe the limited and narrow ways our conscious minds tackle problems that really require lateral thinking if a solution is to be found (1969: 189). Koestler referred to the experience of Otto Loewi, who was awarded a Nobel Prize for his elegant experimental demonstration of the role of chemicals in determining muscular response to electrical nerve pulses. The experiment arrived in Loewi's mind as a dream, which he scribbled down one night. The next morning he looked at his notes and found they were indecipherable. He had the same dream the next night, and got up and went to his laboratory and performed the experiment that solved a problem he had been working at for twenty years. The dream-insight connected a hunch he had in 1903 with an unrelated experiment he had performed on frogs' hearts in 1918. He had the dream in 1920.

Again, what might we conclude from these sorts of observations? That we should all do more sleeping? Or write more poetry? That we should educate and exercise the visual parts of the mind? All of these might be useful for encouraging the unconscious to do its work more swiftly and more deeply for us, or they might have little effect. We don't know how to streamline or control the processes that produce insights and discoveries, though we do have valuable reports and evidence regarding how they work.

Two points are worth noting here for the purposes of this paper. Firstly, surges of significant creation or insight are rare. And secondly, they nearly always take time, unpredictable amounts of time, and time that is often as much away from a task as on-task. Illness, fever, distraction and sleep for example can turn out to be opportunities for solutions to come into the mind. It is not only Sir Walter Scott who found that, upon opening his eyes after sleep, 'the desired ideas thronged upon me' (quoted in Koestler 1969: 211).

2. On time

From the above brief overview of Koestler's still remarkably prescient and useful reflections on creativity, and their aftermath and development in subsequent major discussions of creativity, it appears that the matter of time is one that emerges as an important factor. The work required for discovery almost invariably takes considerable and unpredictable lengths of time. In addition, the literature suggests that this time must be composed of time-out as well as time spent in focused pursuit of an answer to a question. This is part of the source of the tension all academic researchers feel when they know that they must publish their thinking within the time frame of a research grant or a performance review, while the actual thinking takes its own path and its own uncontrollable amount of time, often as if there is all the time in the world to 'waste' while possible answers and insights gather behind the scenes.

It is worth noting here that the time of the independent or amateur autodidact researcher who might have had extensive time to wait for solutions and insights to arrive in the mind has passed with Humboldt, Darwin, and Freud. Serious and expensive research now takes place in the context of well-resourced teams usually attached to prestigious research universities or hospitals. Nevertheless, creativity cannot work strictly within the limits of workdays or research grant periods. It remains the still wild element in a now largely controlled, often politically sensitive, highly accountable and confined process.

In turning to discuss time in relation to creativity, I must acknowledge that time is itself not easily understood or defined. Philosophers of time have their own history of seeking

what time might be or how we can meaningfully speak of it, what it might mean to human beings and how we might value and measure it (Bardon 2013). Time might be the most paradoxical but fundamental reality we know, or it might not exist at all as the thing our common speech makes it out to be. Among philosophers there are the idealists who consider that time is a human construct (e.g. Kant) and does not exist as an independent entity. There are, against this, the realists who consider we are subject to an absolute time (e.g. Newton), and there are those unconvinced by idealism or realism, who see time in terms of relations (e.g. Leibniz).

At the risk of over-simplifying the question of time, but in the service of bringing time usefully into this discussion of practices of creativity, I propose to highlight three largely incompatible ways of understanding and treating time—scientifically, experientially and organisationally. Each of them offers possible insights into the relation of time to creativity.

There is firstly the relative time that the disciplines of physics and mathematics have described for us over the past hundred years, a space-time many of us must accept as an accurate model of reality at least for the time being but can barely understand. Many of us do know, as interested non-specialists, that time is relative to speed, and that we do not so much live in time as 'upon' or 'within' a certain aspect of space-time. We understand, in addition, that this is not the final word on what time is or how it operates in reality, for quantum physics seems to make possible simultaneity, indeterminate reality, and mysterious cause-effect relationships across unmediated distance. Perhaps, for the purposes of this paper, the value of these scientific understandings of time is that within our universe and at sub-atomic levels time is not a settled constant, but somehow flexible, unpredictable and strangely complex. The fact that our minds work at a human scale, and our brains within both a chemical-electric system and at sub-atomic quantum levels, means we are subject to aspects of scientific time, both relativistic and quantum. It is not surprising that we cannot plot or time or even organise some of the most complex aspects of our thinking, such as the combinatory play that is involved in the production of creative insights. Scientific findings related to time point to the necessity of allowing the mind the conditions and the time necessary to do its most complex and perhaps its unique work. Time itself might be as complex a variable as is the neurology of the brain in understanding finally how creativity arises.

Then there is philosophical and experiential time referred to briefly above (time as we experience it, as we mentally organise it, and value it), most notably tackled in recent Western philosophy by Henri Bergson (1859–1941), the 1927 recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature and himself a mathematician accomplished enough to understand Einstein's relativity theory when it was first proposed. Famously (at the time) Einstein dismissed Bergson's ideas about time when he declared in the early 1920s that there could no longer be philosophical time now that physics had revealed the true nature of time (Canales 2015: 15–25). Bergson was determined to deal with the one way in which time is not at all like space or related to space: its one-directional nature. It goes inexorably from the past towards the future, at least in human experience of it. We cannot wander around in it like we do in space. He used the term 'duration' to describe the location of the self or the mind in that uni-directional time that physics cannot describe. This is the mind's ability to understand and perceive, for instance, music, or rhythm, or for that matter the trajectory of a narrative. The present moment makes no sense without its inextricable connections to the past and the near future. There is in fact, for Bergson, no actual present moment, but a cohesion of past-moving-into-present-into-future, creating an experience of time that has human meaning. You could

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not meaningfully read this paper without Bergsonian duration being an aspect of your existence in time (Bergson 2014: 12; Ruhe and Paul 1914: 105–9). Bergson wrote that the ego 'forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another' (2014: 100). He calls this 'a mutual penetration' (2014: 101) where 'succession is converted into simultaneity' (2014: 102). Human experience of time is then a 'rhythmic organization of a whole' (2014: 106)—which has no relation to space, to number, or to reversibility. Motion, trajectory, and music do not exist in space, but only through a quality of perception we bring to the world, a quality of perception that is wider and more complex than any series of present moments. If coherence in personal identity depends upon this sense of duration in time, then perhaps creativity is an extension of this facility, in that it necessarily brings not just duration in the present moment to bear on focused thinking, but brings many past influences, accidents, intuitions, similarities, analogies and associations into contact with thinking-in-the-present. From this perspective on time, it is apparent that creativity might have much to do with one's experience of the plasticity and porousness of what Bergson called 'duration'. It might in fact be that creative individuals have a facility for extending or dispersing the usual moments of duration in the present so widely that they become capable of including unusual ranges of experience.

From the flow of experienced personal coherence or duration in time, I turn to a framing of time that takes it far from scientific or personal time. This is what can be called managerial time. This is time that can be apportioned, measured and precisely valued. By the mid-1820s the mathematician, educator and engineer Baron Charles Dupin (1784–1873) had understood that, 'When division of work is put into operation the most scrupulous attention must be exercised to calculate the duration of each type of operation, in order to proportion the work to the particular number of workers that are assigned to it' (Wren and Bedeian 2009: 74). This thinking about time came to its most hubristic expression with Frederick Taylor's (1856–1915) so-called scientific management of workers' time through application of the stop-watch (142–44).

Despite continuing debates and continuing attempts at systematic control over timing work tasks, the relation of time to performance even in factory settings remains a key and still troublesome element in the management of a workforce. This relation between time and work or time and productivity becomes especially complex with a workforce of academic researchers aiming to make original contributions to their disciplinary fields. The challenge for employers and governing bodies committed to the production of creative solutions in basic or applied research, or the development and design of new technologies, is to know how to manage the time that is required, and reward not just success but creative failures, useful dead-ends and important digressions. Despite this complexity, many of today's most creative thinkers do work within large corporations and organisations, making use of grants, fellowships, infrastructure, equipment, endowments and philanthropic largesse that require accountability, transparency and measurement of outcomes if the system is to operate in a reasonable manner. The management of managerial time is a real problem when the most creative work is being undertaken, that is when the most intransigent problems are being addressed. There are difficult lessons here for organisations that aim to accommodate and nurture the production of discovery, insight, creativity and invention.

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3. On 'Understanding Creative Excellence'

With Distinguished Professor Jen Webb, Emeritus Professor Michael Biggs and Associate Professor Paul Magee I am part of Australia's first Commonwealth-funded research project in the field of creative writing. Our Discovery Project funded by the Australian Research Council (DP130100402) is titled 'Understanding creative excellence: a case study in poetry'. We are investigating the conditions, contexts and practices associated with the production of poetry. The justification for adopting poetry as a case study for creative practice is in part an outcome of the fact that each of the investigators is a practising poet, and partly it is justified by exactly the kind of discussion about creativity that Arthur Koestler conducted so magisterially in his long book on the act of creation. We have conducted semi-structured interviews, and recorded and transcribed them, with seventy-six poets (34 women, 42 men, mean age 58.7). Each interview took on average 90 minutes to complete. Our aims include developing insights into excellence in creative practice, and possibly to uncover some insights that will offer guidance on those organisational principles and processes that best support creativity.

Our interviews focused upon the practices of poets, and the contexts for their practice. We interviewed English-speaking poets from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, the Republic of South Africa, USA, Canada, Ireland, Scotland, and England across the years 2012–14. We had 25 questions to cover in each interview (see Appendix 1), but allowed interviews to develop as conversations whenever that was possible. Generally, we would read and become familiar with the work of each poet before interviewing. All the poets we interviewed had a relatively strong publishing record, many with works published in translation and works either winning or being short listed for major awards. We adopted NVivo (QSR International 2015) as software for qualitative data analysis. It can auto-code, in parent and children categories, a range of concepts we might wish to apply to the interview transcripts. It can also pull out instances of specific words, themes, phrases or terms from the interview transcripts.

4. On what the poets said about time

Across the transcripts of 76 interviews there were 2,263 references to time by interviewers and interviewees. This means that there was a reference to time on average once every two minutes during these interviews. We don't go for long without reminding ourselves we are in it or under it or managing it or remembering it. According to researchers at the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'time' is the most used noun in the English language (Carroll 2010: 1).

Given the many references to time, and the many meanings this word can have, my initial task was to discard most of these references to time. Mentions of time were not useful to the study when referring to those meanings of time that indicated a particular time, an occasion, a historical or personal time, repeated times (e.g. 'from time to time', 'all the time', 'most of the time'), the present time (e.g. 'grim times'), time as an opportunity ('this time', 'that time') or a beginning, time as a counting instances or episodes (e.g. 'each time'), work fractions ('half time', 'part time'), having time for something in the sense of being tolerant, an experience (e.g. 'a hard time', 'an easy time'), an allocated time (such as 'wine time' mentioned by one poet), times as a form of multiplication, or time as a discourse marker (e.g. 'how are we going for time?').

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I sought those instances where the poets talked about time in relation to their poetic work or production. In seeking these out, the number of references was reduced to 185.

One might wonder, why not ask straight out what the poets think about time in relation to work, ask them to report on experiencing time or how they think they make use of time. Recently the Department of Economics at Macquarie University produced a report on the Australian Book Industry. As part of this project the group released a briefing paper on Authors' allocation of Time (Zwar et al 2015). The result is a detailed record of the reasons writers lack enough time to do more writing. Their findings indicated that writers spend less than half of any working week actually writing or doing writing-related activities. Earning an income, caring for a family and studying were the major time-consumers taking writers from their writing. The problem with such a straight question is that it becomes a platform for a prepared, sometimes politicised self-pleading speech of self-construction. The answers hold no surprises or insights into the creative, dynamic relationship the writer has to time. The answers are possibly not as revealing, not as interesting, not as unconsciously expressive as a glancing reference in the flow of a conversation might be. By not asking direct questions we opened opportunities to bring in matters of time when they were relevant for the interviewee. Clearly they did want to talk about time, and they managed to do so frequently. Many also talked about the frustration of not having enough time to write.

Another reason for not directly quizzing the poets on their perceptions and uses of time was that we did not anticipate addressing this question to the data in this particular way at the beginning. Similarly, we became interested at one point in the use and meaning of music during the composing of poetry through the ways that poets talked spontaneously about music. Here, I am wanting to find those moments when poets did bring the question of time spontaneously into the conversation about their creativity.

It seems that possibly five different shades of time experienced in relation to creativity can be identified among the poets' comments. I have called them.

    1. Excessive time

    2. Waiting-in-anticipation time

    3. Connecting-back-to-the-world, or Incubation time

    4. Transitional time

    5. Squeezed or stolen time

They are in this order in this list to indicate the most commonly talked about to the least commonly talked about aspects of this time. The list does not indicate a chronological process, nor are the categories absolutely divided from each other. I will give examples below of what the poets said, in order to make the five shades of time more distinct and meaningful.

The first category of open-ended, excessive time, was sometimes embodied in those references to the fact that there is an apparent disproportion between the many hours spent writing and the very few poems (or very few good poems) that might be produced. The fact that poets comment upon this is a mark of their awareness that when one is 'at work' the usual assumption is that it is important to maximise output, not maximise time spent (hence my characterisation of this as 'excessive time' carries a degree of irony). The values and assumptions of managerial time throw their shadow even this far. 'I need these vast amounts of time', one poet remarked. Another noted that, 'It's a long investment … for very, very little return'. More than one called it a need for

'expansive time': 'I need an expansive time, whether that's just a day or whether it's a longer stretch of time, in which I don't have anything else to do. I find that anything less than that is really unhelpful.' The point here seems to be that the first commitment is not so much to produce a poem but to spend time with poetry (and the possibility of writing or completing a poem).

It was not unusual for poets to describe a process that went on for months and years as a poem emerged bit by bit, draft by draft. 'I would be a year on any poem before I would publish it', one poet remarked, 'And it would go through, you know, ninety or a hundred drafts. And there would be quite small changes towards the end, but I would consider them full redrafts.' There were eleven poets who described something like this process of working on or returning to a poem for more than a year, some of them eventually abandoning the poem. One even observed that there was no point spending a whole day writing, because the poem would take months to be completed anyway. Another spoke of a poem being completed after twenty years of work on it. This indicates a willingness to spend time as if it is the cheapest of resources, if considered in terms of efficiency. 'I need to waste a lot of time', one poet remarked, apologetically. Time is the slow deliverer. For those close to a poet and watching the process, this small return on time invested can be a puzzle:

> You know, my partner teaches and he has a bit of an appreciation for poetry but he certainly has a hard time with the idea of how much time it takes and the end product … selling so few copies. Like how do you ... he always ... I think it's very difficult. You often feel as though you're trying to justify that amount of time. And it is a considerable amount of time.

This excessive time is a generalised impression poets are left with ('I think the thing for me is giving something time'). It is not so much a category or step in the process separate from the others as a situation that pervades the whole process. One poet remarked, as many could, 'Sometimes you spend a lot of time on something and really, it's stillborn'. This reference to an excess of time is not always connected directly with inspiration or with seeking inspiration, for it can be time spent re-writing, refining and shaping poems that were initially written relatively swiftly. One poet spoke of spending five years re-writing one poem. 'There were little bits of inspiration in each part', she said, 'but there was an awful lot of hard work'. This strikes me as the kind of accretive, trial-and-error time that Helmholtz wrote of.

This is also a rhythmic process that holds in suspension an extended duration whose moment is the changing drafts of the poem's text. Bergson's argument with Einstein came down to the question of why anyone would want to use clocks to measure time, as if clocks reveal something humanly essential about time. Bergson made the point that clocks would be mere toys or ornaments if we had not, for some reason, decided to take them so seriously. He could not understand the belief that something profound had been revealed about time when clocks at speed slowed down as relativity theory predicted (Canales 2015: 50–60). The open-ended working process for poets who cannot tell how long or how many working sessions it will take to get a poem right means developing an attitude to the relationship between time and work that cannot be evaluated in clock time and cannot be anticipated accurately. Many poets interviewed were teachers of poetry in creative writing classes, and it was this process that they reported they have to teach and manage. One poet-teacher interviewed for this project put it thus:

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> Scribblings on the back of an envelope eventually, through many, many redrafts, become a public poem. And I think beginning writers confuse that, or don't understand that that's a spread of time and technique, and think it all happens at once and what they write is perfect and unsullied and should not to be worked on. And as teachers, especially of younger students, that's the crucial thing we teach them. That process.

Connected to this is the kind of time that I am calling a waiting-in-anticipation time. One poet spoke in these terms: 'I almost have to wait to see it or hear it. I have to just be open to it and when it arrives I'll sort of recognise it.' One described this as 'being present for the times when there is a flash'. This is a matter of trust, trust in time, and trust that the mind at the back of the mind will work away between and during working sessions. This attitude of readiness can pervade the life of a creative person. One poet tried to describe this in several different images:

> I think you carry around your inner world with you, like the snail metaphor I gave, and you're waiting, like Frankenstein's monster, for a sudden bolt of lightning and suddenly you're sitting upright. Or you're like a lump, to use the gospel simile, a lump of dough and suddenly somebody sprinkles yeast on you and you suddenly rise, you know? And you don't know where the external stimuli are coming from, and that's the excitement.

The categories of time I am proposing are not steps in a process, nor are they absolutely distinct ways of experiencing time. They are separated out here because they help in understanding a number of ways that the matter of time intersects with creativity. They nest into each other, they overlap, and form a palimpsest of ways of being in time. Another poet described this extended time of focused waiting as a professional skill:

> I would say one has to be disciplined, one has to be professional. You don't find Anne Sofie von Otter saying, 'I'm not in the mood to play this concerto' if the orchestra is out there waiting. You have to work at it. What I find with poetry is that if I put the work in, if I write and rewrite and rewrite and rewrite again, something does appear at the end of it. And it's not usually a question of mood but it is a question of time.

This might be time spent apparently working, usually drafting and redrafting or, as some poets call it, 'fiddling', though it has the character of a suspended time.

This time spent in extended focus, in anticipation, is often conducted or managed in that contradictory state of alert passivity. One experienced and older poet described this waiting for the poetic mind to do its work vividly and perhaps, resignedly in the following words:

> It [the work of the poetic mind] can happen in the middle of a thought, it can happen at the end of three hours of thought, or it can not happen at all. Mood isn't the term, but there is definitely a condition of consciousness that allows for the composition of poetry, and it's a quite shifty condition. Sometimes it works one way, sometimes it works in another … Something happens to you, you never really know quite what, and your mind starts working poetically. I can't force it, I just prepare myself for it, and wait for it, and try to be patient, which is never easy. And sometimes it happens, and sometimes it doesn't. That waiting is the hardest part of my life as a poet. I've never been very patient about anything … or anything besides writing poetry.

The third form of time, also closely connected to the two described above, is what Koestler called incubation, and I am suggesting this is time spent connecting to the everyday world, away from the task at hand. One poet, a teacher, talked about asking his students to sit somewhere and just note down what they see. It seemed a difficult task for them, the poet said, to look out at the world with no particular agenda in mind. In describing their working methods some felt it was relevant to say they spent a lot more time reading poetry than writing poetry, or they spent a lot more time not writing

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than writing. Some said they wanted more time to read, not more time to write. One called this 'a certain kind of weird time', a 'sensibility'. 'I spend a lot of time not writing much down', one poet said. One poet calculated that eighty per cent of writing time was spent not writing, but doing other things. Another noted how productive this time spent doing other things can be: 'I find I'm quite productive when I'm travelling, and that's partly about sort of seeing new stuff. It's partly also about, you know … especially if I'm travelling on my own, just having lots of time away from your usual sort of demands'.

More typically, the poets said, as one did: 'Sometimes it's better to let it go for a long spell and see if time freshens up an insight into the problems that are preventing satisfactory completion. This can work when suddenly it's quite clear and the problem is unstuck'.

Another spoke of this time as 'gaps'—months when the work needed to be put aside, and when she returned to it her view would be fresh and analytical, and her inspiration could respond to the poem rather than being muted by the self-satisfaction one can immediately feel after composing a poem. 'I'm talking about the gap between when you think it's perfect and you need to just have one last go before you send it away to a publisher, and then looking at it months later'. These gaps of time allow, we might say, some of the background combinatory play that Einstein and others spoke of. Leaving one's work alone for lengths of time was a common strategy poets mentioned. This is time used as reflective and corrective time or background sorting time, though there is no neat set of steps to lay out here.

Sometimes this time of not-writing can span many years, particularly when a poet has to undergo extensive professional training and/or has a heavy professional workload. The fact that this time has been a time of incubation only becomes apparent if the poet does return to a writing life. It can be time spent in apparent freewheeling distractions.

One poet described the time he spends in the morning before he truly writes in the afternoon or evening:

> Oh, I fuck about [both chuckling]. I do, I waste time; I daydream. I do another form of writing which is I daydream. I do shopping, I muck about, I walk, get out in the street, I read and it wastes time. I play with the cats. I mean, I get to the point, sometimes, when I will prefer to waste time daydreaming, unformed, than let myself see a movie or let myself read a book or let myself rhyme.

This poet went on to say, 'I trust my subconscious; most of my writing comes out of nowhere', reiterating the importance that these stretches of apparently unproductive time can have to the creative process. Another made the point in a similar fashion: 'it's just the process that's formulating itself mysteriously as you go along'. One poet used the image of a 'pause' button to make a point about this kind of time: 'So I think it's just like leaving a CD on pause. You have to have that next line, which is forming itself, paused in your brain and you walk around thinking about it on some unconscious level while you do the rest of the things you do. It's a combination of improvisation and strategy and calculation'.

The fourth category for time, which I have called transitional time, is that period of time-in-transition when the poet shifts from the usual clock-driven, busy schedule of events to the more un-timed, uncontrolled and open-ended relationship to time that can be needed for creative work to be done. In describing this movement, one poet spoke of the shift of orientation and attitude involved, saying, 'There is also a sort of need,

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there are times certainly where you sort of feel building up that you actually just want some time to go think about … and I think that's the sort of feeling that there's something going on'.

Sometimes it is a physical move to a different home or a new city that brings a poet to an attitude that can open them to productive writing. Some talk about needing to be in a particular space, a room or a corner of a room. One poet could only write when his family had left the house. Another poet describes this shift from a normal working self to the poet self in the following manner: 'I have to kind of make a transition. And it feels like, okay, now I'm just going to sort of wait or I'm going to open myself up to what comes, and I'm just going to be alert and I'm just going to allow things in I guess … and sometimes that's hard because we're used to being busy'. It can take on the nature of a liminal time too, 'Driving is something that gives me ideas, well sometimes. It doesn't happen all the time but I tend to get ideas or phrases or whatever at irritating times, like when I'm just driving fifty-three miles away from my desk, and I'm going be away all day. Or the other one is just on the verge of sleep'.

This transitional time is similar in nature to the time spent in alert anticipation, and is in effect the step in or across to that other attitude. In practical terms, it often means both physical and timed routines that assist with this transition. Even though habituated thought and routine might be anathema to creative thinking, routines and timetables remain important to bringing someone's mental state into readiness. A certain degree of structure and predictability in the environment of the creative person remains important.

Finally, many poets talked in terms of stolen time, carved out time, snatches of time, set aside time, allowed time, secret time. There is a degree of feelings of shame or foolishness attached to doing this kind of work where an outcome is not measurable by clock time. This is in one sense a facet of the first category of excessive time. We know there is a tendency to undervalue creatively artistic work in a busy world. Poets become acutely aware of these different ways of existing in relation to time, and find it difficult to sustain and justify their practice. One poet spoke of the short poems she wrote because of restrictions on time. She cut them, she said, to fit the time slot she had while her child was in care. Another poet who needed quiet in order to write would write in the middle of the night or while her husband watched rugby on television: 'my husband is a big rugby fan, so he would get up in the morning and go and watch a rugby match in one room and I would go and sit at the kitchen table and write and that was my quiet time'. Another poet, who happened to be married to a poet, provides a revealing counter example, for she was able to talk about this taking of time as an element in her life that in her instance needed no justification:

> To a great extent I've set up my life so that there's always been some time for poetry. Not enough time to write a novel but enough to write poetry. My husband is a poet, which means that nobody is going to say, 'Why are you bothering with that stuff?' So there's nothing unexpected, shall we say, about my writing poetry.

One poet mentioned the kind of discipline and rhythm he had to set up for himself if the time were to be given to poetry in a busy life:

> I only think a day is a good one when I have done some writing in it. And in order to find that time—because it suits me to be very disciplined—I get up at 5.30 and start working as soon as I can really, six o'clock latest, and I just keep at it until, well, as long as I can really. I don't have whole days, except at the weekend but then I'm zonked and I idle around and talk to my wife. Today is fairly typical: I have to teach today, so

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> I left home at 11 o'clock but at least I have had four hours writing. It makes the rest of the day less hard to carry, whatever the disappointments.

Another poet short of time due to motherhood and work noted matter-of-factly, 'Look, I really would like to be able to be dictated to by mood, but I can't … when I've got time I work on poems, it's like that'. Poets' relation to this kind of time is not simple, for it does seem to be the case for some that even when time becomes free or unstructured, the narrow trenches of time given to poetry are still just that: 'It's odd because I thought when I retired from university suddenly I would have all this time, and all I would want to do would be to write and finally I would do it. But I haven't felt the need, so I write just as sporadically as I ever did'.

How might these experiences and perceptions of time relate to managerial time? How might organisations and corporations deal with members who experience their most creative time in these ways? It becomes clear that questions of time and productivity are central to a creative worker, but perhaps with differing emphases. One poet had a clever anecdote showing that at times the fundamental differences between a poet and an engineer might lead to similar ways of using time:

> The man who was then Provost came up to me after about the second or third meeting—he's an engineer—and he said, 'I really appreciate how you're running these meetings, that you're doing it on the time-is-money system', and I said, 'No, absolutely not, time-is-mortality'—and there were a hundred people in the room at the meetings—'and we're all going to die'. And this little engineer's eyes, you know, are just like *this* [laughter] and he said, 'We should have more poets in administration. I never thought I would be saying that'.

When time is money, it is always short. When time is mortality, it must be 'spent' on what matters most (not on meetings!). Though outcomes in this instance overlapped beautifully, once a meeting was over, and real 'work' resumed, the creative person's commitment to an excessive and unpredictable use of time would challenge administrations to re-value the use and measurement of time.

5. Conclusions

What is the significance of the poets' comments on time? I have given a number of examples of poets' reflections and comments within each of the suggested categories for understanding time, but the contexts for these examples, their relation to each poet's professional trajectory, and the exact numbers of references to time that might come under each category have not been provided. One reason for not taking these further steps is a reluctance to expend time on quantifying and refining exercises that would provide only illusory exactness. Our population of poets cannot be called representative, though it is extensive. Our data is, importantly, qualitative and suggestive. It cannot be definitive but it can provide useful and insightful starting points for future discussion and future refinements of research into excellence in creativity. Whether I have cherry-picked quotes to fit with pre-conceived ideas about time, or the actual comments of the poets have driven these categories into existence, is a relevant question, and one difficult to resolve at this point. It would be possible and sensible to build upon this present discussion by conducting explicit follow-up interviews with a number of poets on the question of the relation between their work and time.

One aim for this research is to be able to talk with large organisations that do value creativity, innovation, research and the arts about how they might best nurture and

manage the working time of their most creative members. These organisations would be universities, colleges, galleries, museums, schools, high tech companies committed to innovation, think tanks, policy institutes; but could encompass banks and engineering companies. It might be, for instance, that a level of trust needs to be foregrounded between an organisation and its most creative employees, so that time spent in incubation-style activities is valued as highly as time spent at a desk writing up reports and conference papers. It might be that organisations must continue to provide infrastructure, routines, timetables that produce predictable environments within which transition time can be managed. It is also possible that organisations will see more creative solutions arise from allowing time to be consumed across the twenty-four hours of a day, allowing for instance access to facilities, desks and equipment at unpredictable hours. A balance of structure and freedom would require constant communication, a common agreement on vision and priorities, and high levels of respect going in both directions between employer and employee. Such arrangements would not preclude accountability or compromise questions of deadlines and limited resources. It is clear, I think, from the examples given above that the poets are very used to the compromises required, on personal and professional levels, once they have committed themselves to making poetry their highest priority in life.

A scientific understanding of time, I suggest, leads us to respect the complexity of the relationship between time and thinking. Attention to experiential time or philosophical time allows us to see that though time might be money, it is mortality as well when it comes to tackling the most difficult problems. And finally, it remains important to understand that managerial time has not arrived yet at a clear understanding of the relation between time and productivity—and that both the most creative employee and the most visionary employer must continue to explore this relationship through compromise, communication, rigour and flexibility.

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Appendix 1

The interview questions

A. Conditions and contexts

1. We start from the assumption that any poet is connected to the world: what are your points of connection to the world (e.g., job, education, family, publishers?). Which ones matter to you, in terms of your poetry practice?

2. What has sustained you in your writing life?

3. Can you remember where you first encountered poetry?

4. How much poetry do you read? How regularly do you read poetry?

5. If you were to describe yourself to a stranger, would you be likely to identify yourself as a poet?

6. When you do call yourself a poet, are you likely to add any descriptors to that (e.g. 'an Irish poet', 'a lyric poet', etc.)?

7. Does poetry provide you with ways to engage with social and political issues?

8. Are there ways in which you find your writing is changed by being at home, or by being away from home? For instance, when you move (house, city, country), how does that affect your writing?

9. How relevant, do you think, is a person's education to the type of poetry they end up writing, or the kind of poet they become? How relevant was your education to your subsequent poetic practice?

10. What part is played, in your own poetic practice, by your relationship to other poets? Did you have 'poet friends' when you were first starting out? Is it important to you to feel that you work in a community of poets?

11. In what ways is the writing sector (publishers, agents, university courses, bookstores, writers centres, writing groups etc.) useful to you?

12. Is there anyone who reads and comments on your early drafts? Do you usually agree with their comments?

13. How does it feel when your chosen reader is disappointed with something you've written? What do you do about it?

14. Are there any particular effects you would like to have on your readers?

B. Practices

1. Auden wrote:

> When we genuinely speak, we do not have the words ready to do our bidding; we have to find them, and we do not know exactly what we are going to say until we have said it, and we say and hear something new that has never been said or heard before.

How do you respond to this? And what processes do you use to find the words ready to do your bidding?

2. Do you find material in conversations and overheard speech? How do you feel when you take other peoples' words or experience into your poems?

3. Are languages other than English important in your practice?

4. What role does music play in your practice?

5. What critical voices do you rely on (people in your network, your own critical voice, the imagined voices of long-dead poets you admire etc)?

6. Would you say you have to be in the right mood to compose? Or is it, alternately, a matter of having no mood at all?

7. Insofar as you see composition as a matter of working with emotions, does composition feel like it involves intense working through of your own emotions, or is it more about working out how to elicit

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them from others?

8. How quickly do you compose? How quickly do you find you move from the initial impulse to a finished ('publishable') poem?

9. Are composing, and coming up with the right edits, similar processes for you?

10. When you are writing, why do you stop writing? How do you finish poems?

11. Is there anything your readers owe you?

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