



Poetry Circus

Eliciting Playfulness and the Unexpected Teaching the Poems of Kenneth Koch

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IN ADDITION TO BEING A CENTRAL MEMBER of the group of poets whose surreal, funny, and chatty poems came to be labeled “New York School,” Kenneth Koch (1925–2002) is well known as an innovator in teaching poetry writing to children. My pedagogy, like that of many poets who teach in elementary and high schools, has been deeply influenced by Koch’s writing about teaching poetry. In his books, *Wishes, Lies and Dreams* and *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* Koch explains his method: Students will read a poem, and then use a structural element in the poem as a starting point for their own work. For example, after reading Williams Carlos Williams’ poem “This is Just to Say” (in which the speaker says he is sorry for eating the plums in the icebox, but then brags, “they were delicious/so sweet/ and so cold”),¹ Koch suggests that his students write poems apologizing for something “you are secretly glad you did.” The young writers use the poem as a springboard to unleash their own creativity and wit. As Charles North elegantly describes, Koch’s method:

... is something of a “science” of “inspiration,” replacing the Muse, the empty desire to write, and even the celebrated anxiety of influence with the encouraging notion that writers are always and properly inspired by other writers, and moreover, that arbitrary rules (including “gimmicks”) can stimulate the imagination.”²

Over the last few years, I have found Koch’s own poems to be particularly fruitful models to use in conjunction with my own take on his method. The relationship between wildness and structure in Koch’s poetry makes it a rich source for poetry exercises and inspiration. Koch’s poetry, like his teaching method, is seriously playful. The emblematic Kenneth Koch poem is a game of mind that employs all five senses and convinces you there might be three or ninety more senses yet unnamed. His poems often start with a conceit and run with it until a pattern has been established and then broken. Some famous examples include his poem “You Were Wearing,” in which almost every line refers to some fashion item inspired by literature or history. (The first line starts, “You were wearing your Edgar Allan Poe printed cotton blouse.”) In his poem “On Aesthetics,” each section

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¹Koch’s own poem “Variations on a Theme by wcv” is a great example of a poet using his own exercise to generate a poem.

²Charles North, *No Other Way*, p. 58

describes a tongue-in-cheek brand of aesthetics (e.g., “The Aesthetics of Taking a Walk,” “The Aesthetics of Moss”).³ The pleasure of these poems comes from the freshness of the twists in the pattern, how with each repetition Koch finds a way to make the idea new. In addition, there’s a feeling of pure, disobedient joy that comes in the moments when Koch breaks an established pattern, as in “The Magic of Numbers,” where after writing in each section about a couple and how old they are when they meet, one section reads simply, “You look like Jerry Lewis (1950).”

The other element that draws me to Koch’s work is the way he is able to juxtapose surreal imagery with naturalistic, even autobiographical elements, so that one is no less strange than the other. Observations from life and surreal imagery are both figures to play with in Koch’s poetry circus. Take his early poem “Pregnancy.” It begins:

Inside the pomegranate is the blue sky.
We have been living out the year in Wisconsin.
Sometimes it rains there—tremendous green
drops!

This fusing of styles and elements is what gives even his shortest poems a feeling of being overstuffed, teeming with ideas and physical sensations.

Over the years I have taught many of Koch’s poems as models for children and adults. One of my favorite poems to teach kids is “To My Heart at the Close of Day” (see p. 15) from Koch’s book *New Addresses* (2000). In Koch’s poem, he addresses his heart as it swings a bat at a baseball game, the crowd cheering it on. I enjoy teaching this poem because it allows me to ask the students: What other games or activities might body parts play? What type of game would it be fun to imagine your heart, your lungs, or your stomach playing? Imagine your nose living in a dream world. If it took up a hobby, what would it be? In response, my students have written poems about brains driving trucks in the night, fingers dancing ballet, livers bowling in the swimming pool, and eyelids

taking a math test.

Here are some student responses to this exercise:

To My Hair Growing Slowly

EDDY, HIGH SCHOOL

Why are you so short?
I want you to grow long and bushy.
What can I do to make you grow?
Would you like a gasoline shampoo?
Would you like to be painted blond?

My Heart

KANIKA, 5th grade

My heart played basketball into the hoop of my eye
and I cried
and cried and cried.
Heart, cut that out before I can’t breathe.
Swim Swim in the liquid food of my stomach.
Splash Splash
it flows into my mouth.
You’re not good at anything. Are you?
No. I’m not. I’m just here to keep you alive.
Don’t you have anything to do?
No, stop asking questions. It’s boring in here.
If you don’t stop I’m getting a heart transplant to
replace you.
Okay, I’ll stop.
You better, I say.
I go to bed that night breathing fine. I’m just glad
my heart isn’t playing games anymore.
Then suddenly swim swim... oh oh?

And here’s a poem by a student at PS 10 in the Bronx:

To My Brain Going Boooooom

GIOVANNI, 4th grade

I know you are mad, but don’t explode.
I’ll buy you a monkey if you are good.
You’re just pink so don’t get mad. I could
paint you white or black or even gray.
I know these are your favorite colors
so don’t get mad. You are just
a little brain. You will grow.

³I strongly recommend the Rudy Burckhardt film of this poem: <http://www.worldcat.org/title/poetry-films-by-rudy-burckhardt/>

I find this last poem deeply moving and full of pathos. The structure of Koch's poem gives Giovanni a means to describe the feeling of not being able to understand or control his own anger. It's a profound sentiment, and a useful reminder that the emotional life of children is just as weighty as that of adults.

Another favorite poem I started teaching just this year is "To You." I brought the poem in as a response to a high school English teacher's request that I teach a love poem for Valentine's Day. Like many poets and poetry teachers, I dread having to read teenagers' love poems. I tend to think the purpose of poetry is to create moments where language has the opportunity to be reborn, to be fully alive, or to become "new" as Ezra Pound championed, but most of the love poems I've seen from my high school students are full of clichés. How can I ask young people to avoid these clichés when for most of them the cliché itself is the most appealing and known part of love? At the same time, I would never say to a student that certain subjects are off limits. While for me poetry is primarily about linguistic play, imagery, and the music of language, for young people it's usually primarily about self-expression (perhaps naïve self-expression), and I am not interested in taking that use of poetry away from them. In fact, just the opposite: I feel that I have much to learn from my students' more direct approach to language and poetry. The beauty of poetry is that it can explore the unknown—the subconscious and the magic of chance—as well as serving as a means to communicate emotion and ideas. The best poetry, like Koch's, straddles this tension between different ideas of how meaning works in a poem.

I hoped that by bringing in Koch's poem "To You" I could show the students a more complicated and playful approach to the subject of love and give them some tools to delve into figurative language,

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while still giving them some room to explore emotional states.

To You¹

KENNETH KOCH

I love you as a sheriff searches for a walnut
That will solve a murder case unsolved for years
Because the murderer left it in the snow beside a
window
Through which he saw her head, connecting with
Her shoulders by a neck, and laid a red
Roof in her heart. For this we live a thousand
years;
For this we love, and we live because we love, we
are not
Inside a bottle, thank goodness! I love you as a
Kid searches for a goat; I am crazier than shirttails
In the wind, when you're near, a wind that blows
from
The big blue sea, so shiny so deep and so unlike us;
I think I am bicycling across an Africa of green and
white fields
Always, to be near you, even in my heart
When I'm awake, which swims, and also I believe
that you
Are trustworthy as the sidewalk which leads me to
The place where I again think of you, a new
Harmony of thoughts! I love you as the sunlight
leads the prow
Of a ship which sails
From Hartford to Miami, and I love you
Best at dawn, when even before I am awake the
sun
Receives me in the questions which you always
pose.

¹"To You" from *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch*, by Kenneth Koch, copyright © 2005 by The Kenneth Koch Literary Estate. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

Recently I watched a third-grade English teacher correct a student whose metaphor she thought *wasn't true*. As a poet, I have a different idea of what makes figurative language successful. I am interested in metaphors and similes that create the feeling of something new, the feeling of surprise.

One way of approaching this poem is to ask what emotion it evokes. If I ask students how the poem makes them feel, most will say “confused” or “weird.” While not the terms a literary critic might use to describe the poem, they do get at the tone pretty accurately. What is it about these images that makes a reader feel so off-balance, so “whack,” as a student might say? I think it’s that so many of the images or concepts in the poem are of things that are incomplete or concealed. We don’t know how the walnut relates to the murder case; we only see part of the woman in the window (and only her head, which might suggest decapitation). We don’t know if the speaker is really in the fields of Africa or in the Africa “inside his heart.” The poem is full of rich, sensual imagery, but it also evokes a feeling of confusion and dizziness. Most tellingly, we never know if the *as* that repeats throughout is the *as* of a simile or the *as* that means *while*. This ambiguity is, for me, what makes this poem such a rich source of inspiration and, for more sophisticated students, a chance to talk about how metaphor can work in contemporary poetry.

Many teachers and students think of the two parts of a metaphor or a simile as being connected by a sort of equals sign. Often when I observe English teachers explaining how figurative language works, they use clichés to do it. For instance, a teacher might use the example “busy as a bee,” and then say something like, “You are busy,” and, “the bee is busy,” so therefore “busy as a bee” is a good simile. There’s a feeling that the more “accurate” (and obvious) a metaphor is the better. Recently I watched a third-grade English teacher correct a student whose metaphor she thought *wasn't true*. As a poet, I have a differ-

ent idea of what makes figurative language successful. I am interested in metaphors and similes that create the feeling of something new, the feeling of surprise. I often reference French poet Pierre Reverdy’s description of the “image” as a useful way to think about what makes an exciting metaphor. He wrote,

The image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional power and poetic reality.

To relate this quote to the construction of a simile, the larger the distance between the two parts of the metaphor, the greater the chance that the line will create a jolt of surprise in the reader and thus be an effective enactment of the chaotic feeling of being alive. What makes Koch’s poem so inspiring to me is that when he writes *as*, we never know if he is comparing two things, or whether these things are happening at the same time. If I ask students to use Koch’s syntax as a model, what I am really asking them to do is to juxtapose two images in a way that makes it unclear whether they are creating a simile. This ambiguity allows students the opportunity to create metaphors without getting too hung up on whether the two parts of the metaphor are “equal” or “true.” It allows room for play. It gives students space to discover what they feel, instead of starting from a predetermined idea of what they should feel. When I am working with high school students, I do not usually explain the theory of metaphors to them in these terms. I hope that by modeling a playful approach to language, my students will be able to follow my example and free themselves from narrow ideas of meaning.

Before the students start writing their poems, I hand out worksheets with blank spaces for the follow-

ing types of words:

- 1) a job
- 2) a type of music
- 3) a period of time
- 4) a type of food
- 5) a part of the body
- 6) a place in the world
- 7) a type of animal
- 8) a mode of transportation
- 9) a body of water
- 10) a color
- 11) a way of moving
- 12) something in nature

Before they make their individual lists, I ask the students as a class to make a similar list as a way of modeling what I expect from them. I chose the categories of words requested on the worksheet based on the types of concrete nouns Koch uses in his poem. The reason for asking the students to make this sort of list is twofold: I want them to start with some concrete nouns so it will be easier for them to be sure their lines contain specific, vivid imagery, and I also want to challenge them to use their imaginations to make connections between things that are not obviously or usually connected. After they make the list, I read Koch's poem out loud to the students, as they read along. We then talk about the poem briefly, focusing on the imagery and the emotions it evokes. I make sure to draw their attention to how the word "as" is functioning in the poem.

After reading and discussing the poem, I ask the students to make a list of emotional verbs, words like "love" that can be used to express how one feels towards another. Even though this lesson started as a response to Valentine's Day, I don't want students to feel that they have to write love poems if they don't want to. The purpose of the list is to give the students who might feel stuck an easy place to start. Emotional words or phrases students suggest usually include: "hate," "miss," "long for," "wonder about," "detest," "fear," "think about," and "forget." We then pick one of the emotion verbs to use for a class poem

that loosely follows the structure of Koch's poem. Let's say our emotion word is "fear" and one word on the list of words is "doctor" and another is "jazz." Our poem might start, "I fear you as a doctor plays blue jazz." When we are working on the group poem, I will return to Koch's poem and point out how long and complex his sentences are and how the way he uses connecting words like *that*, *because*, and *though* to extend his sentences gives the poem a feeling of movement. For the group poem I ask students to try to do the same. After we write four or five lines of a group poem, I will ask the students to pick one of the emotional verbs on the board and use the concrete nouns on their worksheets to write their own takes on Koch's poem.

Here are some examples of student poems that I think do a wonderful job of creating vivid, surprising imagery:

The Farmer on a Motorcycle

TAMAR, 10th grade

I wonder about you as
a rabbit pours cereal
on its head in London.

I wonder about you as
a singer sings rock music
in a yellow car.

I wonder about you as
a bike falls through
a waterfall into a
lake during the day.

I wonder about you
as a chicken swims
in mud.

I wonder about
you as a scarecrow
swings on
a jungle gym.

I wonder
about you

as a dog
walks on a treadmill.

Envy

MOLLY, 10th grade

I envy you
as a rock swims to Indiana
rolling through maple syrup.
(the good kind of course)
whilst watching a firefighter
carry a pig
in a wheelchair,
away from the pop music.

I envy you as
a navy blue sweater
proudly walks down the street
carrying a red balloon.

I love the way both of these poems capture the contradictions, complications, and paradoxes that are at the heart of a rich emotional life. These are the kind of poems that make me want to write. Like Koch's poetry, they evoke complex feelings without ever giving up a childlike sense of whimsy and play. 🐾

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