The Role of poetry in the Transmission of Divergent Thinking

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Abstract

The following presentation presents several ideas about the purpose of poetry within the transmission of memes. Poetry is a game that can free the individual and collective subconscious while revealing the underlying metaphors of culture and making proposals from what it is called divergent thinking. To avoid the polarization of ideas it is important to take into account out-of-the-mainstream ideas from other cultures and from non-canonized cultural identities.

1. Introduction

Once I defined poetry as: "an endless game that breaks conventional thinking and goes over the limitations of standard language"[1]. I can now see that the poetry game is not confined to the field of the verbal and can be found in every kind of genre. We could say that poetic thinking is the art of combining and recycling: the ability to relate things to each other that exist separately and that together are worth more than the sum of their parts, and the ability to see things from non-standard points of view.
It could also be explained in terms of convergent / divergent thinking.

2. Thinking divergently

The Wikipedia defines divergent thinking as a thought process or method used to generate creative ideas by exploring many possible solutions. Divergent thinking is often used in conjunction with convergent thinking, which follows a particular set of logical steps to reach a single solution, the so-called "correct" solution. Divergent thinking is not necessarily found in high IQ people but in those personalities which have traits such as nonconformity, curiosity, willingness to take risks, and persistence. It typically occurs in a spontaneous, free-flowing manner, such that many ideas are generated in an emergent cognitive fashion. Many possible solutions are explored in a short amount of time, and unexpected connections are drawn. After the process of divergent thinking has been completed, ideas and information are organized and structured using convergent thinking".

2.1. Divergence versus convergence

Convergent thinking is a term coined by Joy Paul Guilford as the opposite of divergent thinking. It generally means the ability to give the "correct" answer to standard questions that do not require significant creativity, such as in most school tasks and in standardized multiple-choice tests. For instance, to check if somebody has Alzheimer's disease there is a test where the person must choose the odd one out from three items. If the three words were "bicycle, spoon and apple", we should normally select 'bicycle' as the odd one out, since 'spoon' and 'apple' are both related to eating. But we could also *convergently* select 'apple', since a 'bicycle' and a 'spoon' are man-made objects and an 'apple' is natural. Still *convergently*, but moving towards divergent thinking, we could select 'bicycle', since a 'spoon' and an 'apple' are small and can fit inside a pocket. Using divergent thinking, Mafalda (a comic strip by the Argentinean Quino) would select 'spoon' because she hates eating soup (and she hates her mum when she serves her soup). On the Internet and in some films[2] we can find a story that presents a dilemma to exemplify the difference between convergent and divergent thinking, as explained in 2.2.

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[1] www.annaaguilaramat.net
[2] See *16 Blocks* by Richard Donner, 2006

2.2. Application in poetry

The important thing to note in the following example is that there is a further solution if we apply divergent thinking to a dilemma:

You are driving along on a stormy night when you pass a bus stop and see three people huddling on a bench, waiting for the bus:

1. An old women who looks as if she is dying.
2. An old friend who once saved your life.
3. The soul mate you have always dreamed of.

Your two-seater sports car only has room for one other passenger. You have a tough choice to make. What do you do?

You could pick up the woman, because she is going to die, and thus save her life. Or, you could take the old friend because he or she once saved your life, and you owe him a big favour. However, this may be your only chance to meet your soul mate and dream lover.

Most people I interviewed about this dilemma chose to pick up the soul mate of their dreams. Some people chose to save the friend. Nobody chose to save the old lady. But are they the only options? You could let your old friend take the car and drop the woman off at hospital on the way home. You would then be able to stay behind and wait for the bus with the person of your dreams. As a form of transmission, poetry is a flow of both 'logical & traditional thinking' (or convergent thinking) and 'creative ideas' (or divergent thinking).

2.2. Poetry and advertising

When listening to a poet from another country or cultural system we understand many of the concepts and feelings from that culture when we see how the poet is trying to pervert or *diverge* them from the standard way of expressing them. Once we understand the author's proposal we can deduce the set of culture-based ideas behind it.

One of my poems contains the following line (*L-Mental course of poetry*, in AAA *Càrrega de color*):
> Why you do think a nurse pours out affection and a whore does not?[3]

Here we find a number of ideas about sex, work, women, affection, money, charity. Those are convergent thinking. Divergent thinking would be to consider a whore as a kind of nurse (and the client as a kind of a patient). Of course, poetry can't decide. Poetry can't be right or wrong. It can only open minds and generate dialogue.

When translating concepts from one language to another we often forget the divergent thinking that would enrich the expressiveness of the receiving language. For instance, when the term 'flash' appeared in English in the field of photography, both Spanish and Catalan adopted it. In Catalan the spelling was changed to 'flaix' to reflect Catalan orthography. Using divergent neology strategies it would be possible to substitute the word for something more transparent in Catalan, such as the word 'llampec' (which means "lightning", as in a storm). When a language accumulates words adapted from other languages it impoverishes the semantics of its own conceptual system.

Let's see another example from advertising. There is currently an advert on Catalan television for a specific kind of beer. It uses the slogan "Don't lose the south".

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[3] I reluctantly refer my own poetry so I don't subjectively interpret that of other poets. I believe that finding out-of-the-mainstream arguments is essential to survive. I do not strive for non-canonical concepts to become canonical. I simply allow them to coexist under the same conditions. Poetry is a way to express ideas that are not going to be instrumentalized or used by others to dominate(???). See Aguilar-Amat, A., 2012. Using language to pervert mainstream thoughts can lead us to divergent ideas (as proposed in my poems) such as: being alone is normal and nice; sex is free and love costs money (for women); love isn't an everyday matter; death goes on, not life; time doesn't go on: I do; time is not a possession; women are invisible in history (sometimes this saved their lives).

This sentence 'converges' with the traditional aphorism 'to lose the north', which means to lose one's orientation and sense of purpose, since a compass always points north, thus helping orient themselves. The "south" is used to mean leisure, sun, beaches, party, relaxation and happiness. The message is "drink our beer, don't worry, be happy", which through convergent thinking is associated with the summer holidays (and perhaps partly through divergent thinking in these current times of austerity, when the compass seems broken).

Advertising will always take the convergent into account with the aim of enforcing it according to what the market has foreseen (selling). But poetry is art, which means the only purpose foreseen is to show the limitations In the sense of transmission very often we find that new meanings come from other cultures' poetical expressions. Therefore what I think poetry can do better is to reveal what are called out-of-the-mainstream concepts (see 3).

2.3. Other types of thinking

In addition to convergent and divergent thinking there are other types of thinking that can be involved in life and poetry:

Formal thinking or formal-operational thinking: This involves making decisions based on personal experience and logic. Post-formal thinking would be more complex, and involves making decisions based on situational constraints and circumstances and integrating emotion with logic or form context-dependent principles.

Scientific thinking: This is based on empirical and measurable experience. In Poetry it is seen as summing up feelings or demonstrations through the empirical world of emotional phenomena.

Symbolic thinking: This uses particular images or objects that echo the cultural atmosphere to revive ancient signs and give them a new meaning in the context of the author's society (e.g. mythology characters and stories).

Everyday thinking: This is traditionally observed in social groups whose lives have for centuries been limited to ordinary, routine activities (e.g. women). It is inexact and untidy, jumping from one idea to another while apparently not reaching consistent conclusions. For example: "Hmm, I forgot was I was looking for... Look, that guy cut his hair... Hmm, why is the sky so red? The onion is going to be burnt... God, I can hear keys in the door...

Fascist thinking: This involves projecting a few ideas on the realm to reduce its complexity and then obtain benefits through domination. A description is found in the following lines written by the Palestinian poet Saadi Yousif:

> *Of the surface of the earth, generals know only two dimensions*
> *Whatever rises is a fort, whatever spreads is a battlefield.*

3. Out-of-the-mainstream concepts

According to Molina (2006:30), translation studies have always considered two types of culture to be outside the mainstream: non-European culture and female cultural expressions, or post-colonial and feminist approaches. Although this seems a good starting point, perhaps there is a wider range of concepts outside the mainstream.

3.1. Is there a mainstream and, if so, what is it?

If we are to refer to concepts outside the mainstream we must accept a defined mainstream or canon; but the canon can be something undefined, as it can change across times and cultures and by including in the canon concepts that were previously excluded.

So the dividing line between the mainstream and the non-mainstream is unstable and relative and is the result of a weak comparison. But everybody has an idea of what is 'canonical' or 'normal' or 'main' or 'standard' based on his or her cultural heritage, upbringing or generational influences. The ideas that survive through transmission build the canon. In biology, life-forms can transmit information both vertically (from parent to child, via replication of genes) and horizontally (through viruses and other means). In culture, Malcolm Gladwell wrote, "A meme is an idea that behaves like a virus that moves through a population, taking hold in each person it infects." Memes (ideas, behaviours or styles that spread from person to person within a culture) can replicate vertically or horizontally within a single biological generation. They can also lie dormant for long periods of time. Imitation is an important characteristic in the propagation of memes.

It often involves copying a behaviour observed in another individual, but memes can also propagate from one individual to another through a copy recorded in an inanimate source, such as a book, a musical score or a poem. We must therefore understand 'mainstream' concepts as the memes that persist for a long time and are replicated faithfully through education or imitation, consequently becoming the basis for the established power and the dynamics of domination.

3.2. Let's play...

So both out-of-the-mainstream concepts and unusual point of views on language and reality are useful for the game of poetry that subverts the *status quo* and allows divergent thinking.

But then, what's the game of poetry useful for?
When it changes the point of view on reality through language, poetry can in fact change reality itself (this idea exists in quantum physics). It can either impel factive powers to act (science, economy) or let the individual exist independently from the factive powers.[4]
And how does it work and how can we play?

Take for example the simple sentence **'she was a sad/happy bird but now she is a happy/sad worm'.**
According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980), there are metaphors that underlie our conceptual language systems. One of these is the orientational metaphor, according to which "happy is up" and "sad is down". They reach this conclusion from observing the following expressions:

> I'm feeling up.
> That boosted my spirits.
> My spirits rose.
> You're in high spirits.
> Thinking about her always gives me a lift.
> Etc.
>
>   vs.
>
> I'm feeling down.
> I'm depressed.
> He's really low these days.
> I fell into a depression.
> My spirits sank.
> Etc.

Convergent thinking is therefore based on:
>   **"she was a happy (UP) bird (UP) and now she is a sad (DOWN) worm (DOWN)"**
But the much more interesting, divergent, poetical thinking is based on:
>   **"she was a sad (DOWN) bird (UP) and now she is a happy (UP) worm (DOWN)"**
In the last sentence we find an additional meaning related to being sad when we are 'what is expected' in our material world and being happy when we are just 'who we are'.

But since we can only change the logic when we already know the logic, the problem is that once we know the cultural logic, this becomes a framework of thinking from which we cannot escape. Once we feel uncomfortable with the common way of thinking, we can reverse the terms within the existing dualities, but it is difficult to place things at another level and adopt a new perspective out of the polarity (see Leech, 1974).

Regarding feminism, it is difficult to make the leap from masculine dominance to a place outside the concept of dominance.

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[4] One example of Poetry changing society is the International Festival of Medellin in Colombia, where since 21 years ago they bring one hundred of poets together to fight against violence. They have received an alternative Nobel Prize and has provoked a Movement called A Step Forward based on the 2011 Manifiesto (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lj-unpmZTa0, and http://ogunguerrero.wordpress.com/2011/08/12/manifiesto-de-creacion-del-movimiento-poetico-mundial/, by Fernando Rendón and Peter Rorvik.

A sentence like "Sex is for free and love is something you pay for" (*Càrrega de color*) is changing the perception of prostitution so that it is seen from women's point of view, but it is, still, part of the connection between love/sex and benefit.

3.3. On the concept of time

Opening up to other cultures can help one consider new focuses at the polarities. The orientational metaphors mentioned earlier are not arbitrary, but are the result of our physical and cultural experience. The metaphors can vary from culture to culture. For example, in some cultures the future is in front of us, whereas in others it is behind. Some African languages do not have a future tense, which means that when a speaker of such a language says "I'm visiting my mother", the action may have happened yesterday, may be happening now or may happen in the three years' time.

Coming back to "Metaphors we live by" (Lakoff & Johnson, op.cit.), let us look at the experience of time as money:

> You're *wasting* my time.
> This gadget will save you hours.
> I don't have the time to give you.
> How do you spend your time these days?
> That flat tire cost me an hour.
> I've invested a lot of time in her.
> I don't have enough time to spare for that.
> You're running out of time.
> You need to budget your time.
> *Put aside* some time for ping pong.
> Is that *worth your while?*
> Do you have much time *left*?
> He's living on *borrowed* time.
> You don't use your time *profitably*.
> I *lost* a lot of time when I got sick.
> *Thank you for* your time.

This metaphor is much more relevant in Northern hemisphere and Western cultures than in Southern hemisphere ones. In some places in the Southern hemisphere they might ask "Why should I go faster?" The purpose of time is time itself. In the Guarani language the word *arandú*, meaning "wisdom", literally means 'to feel time'.
In the words of Lakoff and Johnson (op. cit.):

> Many of our activities (arguing, solving problems, budgeting time, etc.) are metaphorical in nature. The metaphorical concepts that characterize those activities structure our present reality. New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our actions on, it will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to. Much of cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones. For example, the Westernization of cultures throughout the world is partly a matter of introducing the TIME IS MONEY metaphor into those cultures.

Mayan culture and its calendar are based on lunar months. A month is the time it takes the moon to complete a cycle, and coincides with women's menstrual periods. Somebody said that the minorization of women is based on their fear, and this fear begins with the stress and imbalance (let's call it 'jet/moon lag') produced by the twelve-month calendar. Relativity theory states that time and matter (energy, space) are the same thing, so we should be very careful when measuring and managing other people's time.[5]

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[5] Our calendar was based on the moon until the Egyptians changed it to measurements based on the sun because of the growth of the Nile. Today we use the Gregorian calendar, which developed from the Julian calendar. In Mayan culture a week has 23 days and a year lasts 6 months. Between one year and the next there are five days called 'Wayeb', which means

As science tools are limited in dealing with these kinds of questions, poetry becomes, among other things, a way to transmit other culture's concepts and complementary knowledge.

4. Outside means wide

We find that the difference between poetry creation and 'foolish' language is that the poet knows the underlying metaphors of the cultural conceptual system well as we have seen, and he or she changes them from a conscious attitude, while the fool simply has no purpose.

Assuming an author has a purpose, I believe that defining what is 'in' or 'outside' the mainstream is not essential as a starting point, but it should be taken into account when choosing the point of view from which to look at the world and practise divergent thinking. The better position to be in as an observer is always the **wider** vision as it allows you to consider more possibilities and then create new conceptual connections.

Therefore, the final hypothesis in this paper is that what is less mainstream has a wider perspective. Living at the peripheries of a border (of a country, a province, etc.) is more productive in terms of the information you acquire than living in the centre of a country, province, etc. A person living at the periphery understands what life is like there, but also knows what it is like in the centre. However, somebody living near the centre often does not know what happens at the periphery. I therefore consider that in terms of knowledge the periphery includes the centre. This may seem obvious according to mathematics or topology, but what about if we think of other aspects of the human condition? For instance, poor people know how rich people think and live, but rich people often ignore or are unaware of the plight of poor people. Women seem to know a lot about men's attitudes, but men are always saying they do not understand women. And speakers of a majority language usually do not learn a minority language, while speakers of a minority language are often fluent in the majority language.

Based on these observations, here is a proposed classification of what is inside and outside the mainstream:

Mainstream (narrow)	Outside the mainstream (wide)
centre	periphery
rich	poor
man	woman
major	minor
white (Western)	black (non-Western)
prose	poetry
outside	inside
academy	art
rational	emotional
colonizer	colonized
developed (progress-based)	undeveloped (traditional)
real	fiction

Other pairs of narrow vs .wide could be: adult vs. child, dual vs. multiple, heterosexual vs. homosexual, vs. right-handed vs. left-handed, oppressor vs. victim (Nelson Mandela observed his wardens for 30 years to learn to pacify South Africa), able-bodied vs. handicapped, etc.

This classification has nothing to do with 'pity' or protecting the weak or any other paternalistic patterns based on virility or the reverse of domination. It simply suggests looking at the world from the wider point of view. People may choose to ignore these aspects, which is fine, but for a writer (a watcher) it is compulsory, and the writer should also consider the angle from which to look.

'time coming out from time'. Different moments have different names. For instance, 'Aq'ab'al' is the darkest moment of night (??? This needs checking. The darkest time of night is at midnight, not just before sunrise. According to some sources it refers to the aurora formed by the first sunrays: http://www.mcd.gob.gt/2009/04/28/aqabal/), just before the sun starts rising. For me it is important to remember that all manuscripts and codices from the ancient Mayan culture were burnt by the colonisers, who considered them to be superstition when they reached the New World.

My proposal is similar to the idea expressed by Eirikur Örn Nordahl when talking about literary crisis (Literature in the Land of the Inherently Cute: *the Search for Literary Crisis*):

> (Practically) all political writing engages in representation and a form of adjudication – i.e. "picking a side". Classic social realist writing of capitalist societies not only represents the exploited classes, but furthermore represents them *against* their mortal enemy, the bourgeoisie classes; nationalist literature not only represents a certain land and a certain people, but it represents the land and people as different (unique) from other lands and other peoples; feminist writing represents women against male domination (and/or "men"); postcolonial literature represents "natives" or "immigrants" vs. "colonials", "locals" or "nationals"; pacifist writing represents those willing to "be friendly" against those who feel aggression is the only viable course of action; post-modern capitalist literature represents "the individual" vs. the alienating, dystopic horrors of society (and ritually asks: do I deserve to be selfish?). And, at least theoretically, if not in practice, vice versa (i.e. Ayn Rand represents the "energetic" bourgeoisie against the "lazy" classes who allow themselves to be exploited).

When the Cuban poet Reinaldo Arenas said "I write to take revenge" he was also defining poetry (and the act of writing) to discharge the painful weight of the absurd world on the individual.

I believe we should train the poetical dimension of our brains to be free and move beyond our hatred, if possible with a more developed attitude.

5. TIME-OUT project

TIME-OUT (Translation of Inferences Out of the Main Stream) is the project of a project at the Translation Faculty of the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

The aim of the project is to balance minorisation by using divergent thinking. The initial goal is to find concepts from divergent thinking related to time as a personal and cultural experience and social organization. The beneficiaries of the research will be work policies and social policies.

The method is based on searching for linguistic occurrences of the concept of time in written and oral texts produced by groups outside the mainstream like women, children, minority-languages writers, immigrants and other cultures. Concordance programs could be used to find sentences related to time.

If any reader of this article would like to provide input on concepts outside the mainstream related to time or other basic concepts, please write, since we cannot make progress in our understanding of the world without the help of others.

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