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Reflections From the Faculty

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Reflections from the Faculty
Assistant Professor of English
Michael Theune

Student Senate Professor of the Year

President Wilson, Provost Cunningham, Trustees, honored guests, fellow faculty, administration, staff, family, friends, and students, especially, you, students:

Spice rack

Guest star

Trombone

Turnpike

Awkward silence

Butter knife

Twilight Zone

Driving range

This is how we begin my sections of English 101: Introduction to Creative Writing: writing two-word—or, more properly, two-noun—poems. Though it may sound like an exercise in developing cool new band names—though I'm not so sure I'd want to be lead singer for Tyrannosaurus Karaoke—what we're after is a quality that I've come to call fitting surprise, a moment when language at once fulfills its expectations and leaps beyond them.

Fitting surprise is really difficult to make. It involves a lot of work and play. In English 101, students begin this process by playing the popular game Apples to Apples, and then make their own cards from lists of hundreds of nouns that they have developed, and then they spend hours tinkering with these words, playing with them to see how they fit, all to arrive at, maybe, two or three really good poems.

But, all this effort, all this experimentation?—*it's worth it.* Fitting surprise is a strangely magical quality, a quality central to so many of the pursuits of the arts. In writing, it is the essence of the sublime, or "bold experiment in language" that is embedded in a specific occasion, *and* wit, which, as one theorist states, "occurs when expectations are simultaneously fulfilled and surprised." It exists in drama. Trying to describe the difficulty of composing the end of a play, the philosopher Schopenhauer states: "We then [at the end] demand that [the] outcome shall be achieved naturally, fairly and in an unforced way—yet at the same time not have been foreseen by the audience." And it even exists in painting. Surrealist René Magritte who, knowing too well the image of a bird in a cage, and knowing how easy it would be to put anything else in that cage—"a shoe," "a fish"—sought out what he called "a new image," one "which will stand up to examination through having something final, something right about it: it's the image of an egg in the cage."

A fitting surprise is not just the property of the humanities and art. It is part and parcel of the social and natural sciences, as well. A new metaphor is thrilling, yes, but so is a revised hypothesis, or a shifted paradigm, that seeks to create a new coherence out of what had seemed previously to be anomalies. Science's Eureka! is not so far removed from Art's A-ha! (Although, admittedly, if you felt the need to cry out in such a way you probably did so by saying, in our ironic era, "Du-u-u-ude," or "Swe-e-e-et," or used some other polysyllabic expletive, or texted somebody lol or wtf!)

And these fields of knowledge, the disciplines of the arts, the humanities, the sciences, they all interact. I've seen such interaction often in my creative writing classes, even in the first week's two-word poems. What

kind of courses in history and politics, what kinds of insights into the myth-making behind nationalism goes into two-word poems such as

Fascism

Fairytales

Dictator

Diva

Elias Canetti writes:

In growing, knowledge changes shape. True knowledge knows no uniformity. All leaps in knowledge occur *sideways:* the way knights move on chessboards.

Anything that grows in a straight line and in a predictable manner is without significance. It is the skewed and particularly the lateral knowledge that is decisive.

I hope you've felt this kind of growth, that you've gotten a taste for it during your time at Illinois Wesleyan, that all your excellent teachers—my fellow faculty, University staff and administration, and your own peers—have not only taught you the specifics of your discipline but have revealed also how those specifics connect you with your larger life and with the wider world.

It seems to me as though this kind of connectivity is one part of the argument for a liberal arts education: *it all fits*—seemingly diverse discourses actually speak, and have a lot to say, to each other. The other part, though—for me, the really convincing part—is that *this interconnectedness constantly surprises.* The parts of this vast conversation are not just conversing with but sparking off each other, revealing each other anew in each other's light.

I hope that you have felt the joy of genuine intellectual and imaginative discovery. I hope you will work in this world to allow others the opportunity to feel such deep delight.

I hope you'll acknowledge the beginnings of the poems that have started today:

Commencement…

Future…

And I hope that in trying to discover what comes next you will surprise yourself.

Thank you. Congratulations!

Sources: Jessica Jones; Brian Lubek; Andrew Dorkin; Bennett Blakeman; John Rante; Longinus's "On the Sublime"; Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Poetic Closure;* Schopenhauer's *Essays and Aphorsisms*; Annie Dillard's *Living by Fiction*; Kathryn Lachey; Elias Canetti's *The Agony of Flies.*