

Prose

Extended and distributed creativity in prose fiction

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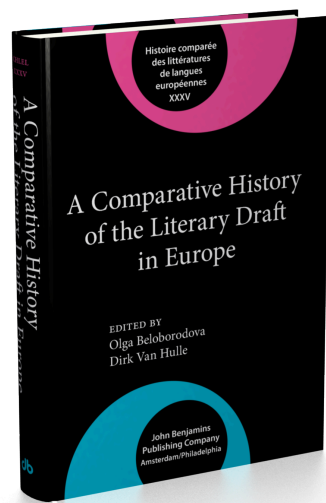
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1.4.3 Prose

Extended and distributed creativity in prose fiction

Olga Beloborodova

This chapter addresses and questions the seemingly solitary nature of prose writing, using two cognitive theories (extended mind and distributed cognition) that place cognition outside the boundaries of the human brain and advocate instead an inextricable connection between the brain and the world. Specifically, the tight coupling between the writing mind and literary drafts testifies to the crucial importance of these objects to the writing process, and a number of examples of creative collaborations (the Shelleys, Michael Field, Ilf and Petrov) demonstrate that creativity in prose writing is more often than not distributed and as such is not that different from those genres that are typically considered collaborative (such as drama). This distribution of cognition also applies to works that are not co-authored, as Beckett's correspondence shows. The conclusion relates the chapter's main ideas to the future of prose writing, namely the advent of AI and its impact on creativity.

Keywords: prose fiction, collaborative creativity, manuscript research, writing studies, cognitive science, extended mind, distributed cognition, literary collaborations, AI

Introduction

In 2010, Ian McEwan, a celebrated author of prose fiction, wrote the screenplay for a film adaptation of his novella *On Chesil Beach* (2007).¹ The film eventually came out in 2017, and McEwan reflected on the experience in a number of interviews. When asked about the difference between writing a novel and a screenplay, he said the following:

It's a sort of demotion from God to a little cherub, or General to Corporal. You become part of the process. Writing a novel is to address yourself to a finished literary form. The screenplay is not a finished form, it's part of the recipe, it's not the meal. It's very, very different [...]. Part of the pleasure of screenplay-writing is breaking out of the loneliness of sitting hour after hour in one place writing a novel; to be collaborating. (Dhillon 2018)²

The picture McEwan sketches sounds all too familiar: prose writing is a solitary, individual process, and making a film is collaborative. The aim of this chapter is to add much-needed nuance to the entrenched picture of prose writing as something that happens exclusively in the brain of the author, in an effort to dispel the equally entrenched “myth of solitary genius”

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1. The drafts of both the novella and the screenplay are preserved in the Ian McEwan Papers at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas (HRC-MS-4902, boxes 12.5–8 and 13; box 24.2–7).
 2. See also Chapter 2.2.1 in this volume.

(Stillinger 1991). Indeed, few concepts have endured so relentlessly as the idea that creativity, especially in the poetry and prose genres, is the product of a solitary mind. One of the reasons why this take on authorship has proved so resilient is that it has largely been fed by authors themselves. Samuel Beckett, for one, used to deploy the metaphor of a voice as a mysterious but nonetheless interior source of creativity. In his late prose work *Company* (1979), the opening sentence sets the scene: “A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine” (Beckett 2009: 3). The narrative agent or the “fabler” is at first presented as a composite (the voice, the listener, and the object of the voice’s stories – the listener’s past), ostensibly invoking a collective act of creation. In the last paragraph, however, the elaborate charade unravels and only one remains – “devised deviser devising it all for company” (30), to create the illusion that they are not “alone” (42) – the closing word of the text. Clearly, the implication is that “fabling”, or engaging in creative storytelling, is a lonely affair, although the origins of the voice are all but clear. The notions of voices, seemingly emerging from within, is a recurring motif in many of Beckett’s prose works.

In *Company*, Beckett once again displays his lifelong interest in the way the (creative) mind works, and this chapter adopts an equally cognitive angle in its discussion of prose writing. More specifically, I will be applying two cognitive theories that have gained currency in the past few decades. First, the author’s close relationship with objects such as drafts, notebooks and writing tools will be examined through the prism of the extended mind thesis. Then, the author’s interaction with other creative agents will be presented as instances of distributed cognition. I hope to demonstrate that the collaborative creativity that so characterises other media (such as stage theatre, TV and film) is also present, albeit in more subtle ways, in prose writing, and not exclusively in creative collaborations. In both cases (extended and distributed cognition), the literary draft in all its manifestations plays a crucial part in the creative ecology that collaborative creativity represents, as we shall see below.

It is common knowledge that the idea of author-God, the metaphor McEwan used in his interview, goes back to eighteenth-century Europe, when the status of the author changed dramatically. This means that the conception of authorship as a solitary activity is relatively new and predominantly Western. As Lorraine York points out, “a number of theorists of collective writing” argue that “the Western Romantic individuated artist – or, say, the individualist cult of Shakespeare – were closer to aberrations in the history of writing practices than transhistorical norm” (2006: 289). According to Martha Woodmansee, “research since the appearance in 1969 of Michel Foucault’s essay, *What is an Author?*, suggests not only that the author in the modern sense is a relatively recent invention, but that it does not closely reflect contemporary writing practices. Indeed, [...] it is not clear that this notion ever coincided closely with the practice of writing” (Woodmansee 1994: 15; also qtd in York 2006: 289).

That said, the development of the novel genre, typically a longer piece of prose that allowed for a greater deal of personal reflection than, say, drama or epic poems, and was also far less suited for oral dissemination, further strengthened the evocative and commercially viable presentation of the author as a solitary genius, at the time when authors had to make a living by selling their work in a competitive environment. Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century presented their work in similar terms, such as Wordsworth’s famous definition of poetry as

“emotion recollected in tranquillity”, or Coleridge’s description of *Kubla Khan* as “A Vision in a Dream”: he insisted that as soon as his reverie was interrupted, there was no way for him to finish the poem, which will forever remain incomplete.

The common theme of the solitary author, immersed in the depths of their mind, endured in the twentieth century. As mentioned above, Beckett’s characters often refer to voices that they ostensibly heard and tried to record, and this is also how the author sometimes presented his own writing method. According to Martin Esslin’s paraphrase of his conversation with the writer, “having attained a state of concentration, [Beckett] merely listened to the voice emerging from the depths, which he then tried to take down” (qtd in Esslin 1983: 147). Similarly, Ruby Cohn notes that “Beckett himself occasionally speaks of his oeuvre as though it has taken place in his absence; or as though he were a resonator for works that speak through rather than from him” (1973: 270). These testimonies by Beckett imply a writing process that is characterised by an author who is almost invisible, in any case passive, and a mere “transmitter” of whatever interior, if not intuitive, “voices” he may detect in his head.

Authorship and writing studies

Although evocative and poetic, the above description of Beckett’s creativity does not shed much light on how the writing mind works. A cognitive approach to writing and creativity may not be something traditional genetic criticism would easily endorse,³ but it has been used productively in writing studies, a field that, although strongly related to manuscript research, remains largely under the radar of textual studies. Though the remit of writing studies is typically not literature, a brief glimpse of the way writing studies models the cognitive process of writing could generate valuable insights.

Following the so-called cognitive turn in the humanities, writing studies gained ground in the 1980s, after Linda Flower and John R. Hayes launched their first ever cognitive model of writing (1981), which consisted of three large sections: the task environment (incl. the writing assignment and the audience), the long-term memory (incl. the author’s knowledge and writing plans), and a set of cognitive processes involved in writing (such as planning, translating and reviewing) (for details, see Flower and Hayes 1981).

The methodology Flower and Hayes used was having their (large) population sample – typically college students and staff – write short and not necessarily creative texts under controlled conditions and then comment on their writing process in real time by means of talk-aloud protocols. After this model, several modifications followed; the 1996 version by Hayes

3. As Louis Hay, one of the founding fathers of the discipline, stated, “[a]près avoir renoncé à ‘lire dans les âmes’, à revivre l’expérience intérieure de l’écrivain, la génétique a pu se donner une position critique autonome: elle vise les processus d’écriture dans la réalité de leur exécution, dans l’attestation d’une trace scripturaire” [Having renounced “reading in souls” and reliving the writer’s inner experience, genetic criticism has been able to establish an autonomous critical position: it focuses on the writing process in the reality of its execution, in the witness of a written trace] (Hay 1994: 19, translation by Dirk Van Hulle; see also Van Hulle 2022: 140).

includes the new category of “collaborators” to what was now called “the social environment”, and also adds “composing medium” to “physical environment”, both part of the now bifurcated “task environment” (for details, see Hayes 1996). In 2012 another modification by Hayes followed: this new version places an even greater emphasis on the distribution of creativity, adding critics (alongside collaborators) and transcribing technology (both in the “task environment”) (see Hayes 2012). Whatever the modification, the crucial and central element of the model remains the so-called “text produced so far” (TPSF), the emerging draft in perpetual flux that not only undergoes constant change but also largely determines its own revision.⁴

This brief excursion into writing studies was meant to demonstrate that although its standard model still seems to locate cognition inside the brain, the extracranial elements such as collaborators and writing technology have steadily gained importance. In fact, the cognitive model of writing as proposed by Flower and Hayes and especially by Hayes in later modifications could easily be interpreted through the prism of 4E cognition, a set of post-Cartesian theories from philosophy of mind and cognitive science that reject the principle of rigid mind-world dualism and propose instead a model of human cognition that is grounded in a continuous interaction with the environment.⁵ The overarching principle that encompasses all post-Cartesian cognitive theories is the following: unlike the traditional account of cognition, which assumes that sensorimotor and environmental factors merely *cause* cognitive processes to occur inside the brain, 4E cognition insists on a constitutive participation of extracranial components in cognition properly so called. Those extracranial components may include objects, as is the case with the extended mind thesis, or other cognising agents, as the theory of distributed cognition suggests.

Extended mind thesis

According to its founding fathers, Andy Clark and David Chalmers, the extended mind thesis straddles the (internal) human brain and (external) material objects in a so-called hybrid or extended cognitive system. Clark and Chalmers open their inquiry into the workings of the human mind by posing a simple question: “Where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin?” (1998: 7). The idea is that both elements – neural and extracranial – are equally important for extended cognition to take place: “the human organism is linked with an external entity in a two-way interaction, creating a *coupled system* that can be seen as a cognitive system in its own right. [...] If we remove the external component the system’s behavioural competence will drop, just as it would if we removed part of its brain” (Clark and Chalmers 1998: 8–9; original emphasis). Applying this principle to creative composition, the connection between a creative agent and the material bearer of the text produced so far, to borrow a key term from writing

4. For more on the cognitive model of writing and specifically on text produced so far, see Chapter 1.1.6 in the present volume.

5. Typically, 4E cognition includes extended, embodied, enactive and embedded cognition.

studies, is a good example of an extended cognitive system, and indeed writers of literature have been referred to as “extended mind-workers” (Bernini 2014: 363).

Whatever his own vision of his *modus operandi* may imply (see above), Samuel Beckett’s drafts are a prime example of a hybrid cognitive system. As the *Beckett Digital Manuscript Project* (BDMP) convincingly demonstrates, some of his autograph manuscripts constitute a veritable creative battlefield, with whole legions of “darlings” mercilessly “killed” and few making it to the next version.⁶ For instance, the first draft of his first published novel *Murphy* (1938) exhibits pages and pages of struggle to write just the opening sentence.⁷ Exasperated, Beckett starts doodling, just to stay on the page in order not to sever the connection between his brain and the material bearer of his emerging text. Because when that connection is severed, the hybrid cognitive system of creative writing comes to a halt, as in the case of Beckett’s later novel *L’Innommable* / *The Unnamable* (1953/1958), whose narrative ended when Beckett ran out of space in the notebook that contained the first (for details, see the Introduction to this volume).

Beckett may have been intuitively aware of the inextricable link between creativity and materiality, as he thematised it in his prose fiction. In his novel *Malone meurt* / *Malone Dies* (1951/1956), the bedridden and moribund protagonist, in an effort to pass the time until he expires, uses his exercise book to write down his story. It soon becomes clear that the exercise book is Malone’s most cherished possession. The materiality of the exercise book is foregrounded extensively throughout the narrative, as Malone provides a detailed description of the document:

It is ruled in squares. The first pages are covered with ciphers and other symbols and diagrams, with here and there a brief phrase. Calculations, I reckon. They seem to stop suddenly, prematurely at all events. As though discouraged. Perhaps it is astronomy, or astrology. I did not look closely. I drew a line, no, I did not even draw a line, and I wrote, Soon I shall be quite dead at last, and so on, without even going on to the next page, which was blank.
(Beckett 2010a: 35)

Remarkably, this description bears close resemblance to Beckett’s own extended vehicle of thought, namely the very notebook in which he began writing the novel. As Carlton Lake notes, the French original, *Malone meurt*, “was begun at the back of the fifth notebook containing the manuscript of Beckett’s novel *Watt*” (qtd in Van Hulle and Verhulst 2017: 36). Both the fictional and original notebooks are ruled in squares, and “the ‘first pages’ that Malone alludes to [...] do correspond to the last few pages of the *Watt* manuscript in Beckett’s notebook. There are some calculations on 46v and Beckett made three circular drawings on 48v that resemble planets and celestial bodies orbiting them” (Van Hulle and Verhulst 2017: 37). In his discussion of Malone’s

6. The BDMP (2011–), directed by Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon, is dedicated to collecting the wealth of Beckett’s draft material, scattered across the globe, and making it available to the community by scanning and transcribing the material. See www.beckettarchive.org.

7. The *Murphy* manuscript, consisting of six notebooks, is preserved in the Beckett Collection at the University of Reading (UoR-MS-5517).

description of his exercise book, Peter Boxall likewise finds it “difficult to resist the thought that Malone is describing in part the notebook which contains the opening of Beckett’s draft of *Malone meurt*, and which interrupts the manuscript of *Watt*, where that earlier novel had stopped, ‘as though discouraged’” (Beckett 2010:xii). The example of Malone’s exercise book points to an extended cognitive system on both the level of composition and of narration. To use Bernini’s aforementioned term, both Beckett and Malone qualify as “extended mind-workers” in their creative writing activity.

Another illustrative example of Beckett’s extended mind at work is his so-called “Whoroscope Notebook” – a kind of a commonplace book he kept during the writing process of *Murphy* and that contains a large number of quotes from a wide variety of sources (University of Reading, UoR-MS-3000). What makes such a document special and indeed unique is that it brings together different authors from different periods, genres and linguistic areas. They coexist and “collaborate” on its pages, forging a special kind of creative ecology, with quotations taken out of their original context and forming new contexts. The “Whoroscope Notebook” and other notebooks of this kind were a constant companion to Beckett’s authorship throughout his long career, serving as a source of more than just inspiration, but also – and most importantly – as a space where different minds meet and interact, revealing the surprisingly distributed nature of creativity.

Distributed cognition

As shown above, the extended or hybrid cognitive system that creative writing represents helps revisit the somewhat idealised image of the author as a mere vessel for either a divine gift (as the Romantics would put it) or some unidentified voices (as Beckett would put it). Producing fiction clearly requires offloading one’s creativity on some form of material bearer, and – given the crucial importance of text produced so far – it is often the material record of creativity that drives the writing process. Moreover, those material records, despite their largely private nature, are often “serialised” to be shared with a number of the author’s close friends and associates, so that they could give their feedback on the work in question. Such instances fall under the purview of situated or distributed cognition, a theory introduced in 1995 by Edwin Hutchins. The unique feature of this theory is that it “takes as its unit of analysis a culturally constituted functional group rather than an individual mind” (Hutchins 1995). Distributed cognition typically occurs in groups of people united in some common task. In such cases, rather than being brain-bound, “cognitive processes [are] distributed across the members of a [...] group” (Hutchins 2001:2068). A well-known and illustrative example of distributed cognition is the way an airline cockpit functions, with the crew interacting with each other and the tools at hand in order to fly the plane (Hutchins and Klausen 1996). By analogy, a theatre or film production is a suitable example of distributed cognition, because of all the different agents – both human and material – involved in it, and these media have been discussed in those terms in literature (for an excellent example in theatre studies, see Tribble 2005). As Ian MacEwan’s case

illustrates, prose fiction seems a less likely candidate for distributed cognition, but the following examples will hopefully prove otherwise.

Overt distributed cognition: Collaborative authorship in prose fiction

It is reasonable to assume that collaborative authorship is a strong example of distributed cognition. Among the most famous literary partnerships is that of Mary and Percy Shelley, covered extensively in literature and reflected in the excellent Shelley-Godwin digital archive.⁸ More recently, Anna Mercer published an in-depth study of the Shelleys' collaboration as creative artists for the complete duration of their partnership and marriage. In her study, she notes how the "shared intellectual climate" (Morton 1994: 10 qtd. in Mercer 2020: 3) shaped the oeuvres of both Mary and Percy Shelley, including the works they authored individually.

While *Frankenstein* is the most famous and best-studied example of the Shelleys' collaborative authorship, other works are perhaps even more interesting as examples of distributed cognition. The first joint work is the journal that Mary started in 1814 (after they eloped to Europe) and continued through 1815 (it is now preserved at the Bodleian Library, MS. Abinger d. 27). Inscribed "Shelley and Mary's journal book" by Mary, the first entry is in Percy's hand (Mercer 2020: 32). It is noteworthy, and indicative of their close personal and creative relationship, that such a highly intimate form of prose writing as a diary becomes their first collaboration, with (in some cases) the evidence of two hands in one short sentence (Mercer 2020: 32–33; for an example, see MS. Abinger d. 27, fol. 2r). Moreover, the journal turned into more than just a record of their shared life and experiences: "as time progressed, [they] developed an inter-textual connection with the Shelleys' creative writings, including published works" (Mercer 2020: 32).

Among other things, the journal found its way into a jointly authored and anonymously published travelogue called *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817). Its main part, titled "The 1814 Tour", is a reworking of the 1814 journal entries. The book also includes a preface by Percy, a number of letters by Mary and Percy, and Percy's poem "Mont Blanc". Although "The 1814 Tour" is generally attributed to Mary, the more precise authorship is more complicated, as most of the original journal entries were composed by both Mary and Percy (Mercer 2020: 56–57). Mercer discusses a fine example of distributed cognition at work across the boundaries of individual works, as one particular description of an Alpine landscape finds its way from "The 1814 Tour" into both *Frankenstein* and Percy's "Mont Blanc". As she notes, the passage "was reworked by MWS from PBS's entry in her journal from 19 August 1814: 'Their immensity staggers the imagination, and so far surpasses all conception, that it requires an effort of the understanding to believe that they indeed form a part of this earth'" (2020: 62). The same sentiment – that the Alps are otherworldly – recurs in *Frankenstein*, in Percy's 1816 letter (part of the *HSWT*) and eventually in "Mont Blanc" (62).⁹ As Mercer rightly notes, "[i]t is impossible

8. <http://shelleygodwinarchive.org/>. General Editors: Neil Fraistat, Elizabeth Denlinger, and Raffaele Vigilanti.

to tell which Shelley might have meditated on and then applied this phrase first" (62). Even a closer look at the drafts does not provide a conclusive answer, given the closeness of the Shelleys' relationship. This point is illustrated by another Alpine description (this time of the Mont d'Evian) that can be found in the *Frankenstein* manuscript (MS. Abinger c.57, fols. 73r–73v.). Written entirely in Mary's hand, the excerpt displays only a few corrections by Percy, thus creating the impression that Mary was the sole author in this case. However, this initial impression is misleading, as Charles E. Robinson has shown: a near-identical landscape can be found in Percy's Geneva diary (for details, see Robinson 2015: 126 and Van Hulle 2022: 95–96).

The above examples demonstrate what George Dekker refers to as the "collaborative spirit and nonpossessive attitude toward intellectual property", which incidentally stretched beyond the Shelleys and included their close friendship with Lord Byron, who was their companion in Geneva in the summer of 1816 (qtd in Mercer 2020: 5). It is indeed ironic that two of the most canonical representatives of the Romantic period, with its entrenched idea of the poet as *Originalgenie*, made collaboration part and parcel of their authorship, to such an extent that Percy wrote to Mary that her absence has a paralysing effect on his creative mind: during their forced separation on their return from Europe in 1814, he declares in his letters that "[he] cannot read – or even write" and that "[his] mind without [Mary's] is dead & cold" (qtd in Mercer 2020: 40). Thus, the interruption of the smooth distributed cognitive network severely impairs the cognitive activity of one of its constituents.

A much less well-known collaboration occurred at the turn of the twentieth century, under the pen name "Michael Field". This pen name harboured two gifted women writers, Katherine Harris Bradley (1846–1914) and Edith Emma Cooper (1862–1913). Arguably "the most public and prominent example of queer incestuous coupling" (Tate 2013: 182) in the late Victorian era (and possibly beyond), the lesbian aunt and niece made collaboration an intentional strategy for their authorship, which makes their case slightly different from the Shelleys and many other artists for whom collaboration was not an end in itself. That said, the choice of their (male) pen name indicates that they did not intend to make their joint authorship public, until Robert Browning – a close friend – accidentally spilled the beans and revealed their secret.¹⁰

The distributed cognitive system that Michael Field represented has resulted in a prolific oeuvre in different genres. Though known predominantly for their poetry and drama in verse, they have produced a large output of prose works. In a striking parallel to the Shelleys, Bradley and Cooper kept a joint diary with an intertextual title "Works and Days", preserved in a series of 29 volumes at the British Library (Add MSS 46776–804). Its digitised version is hosted by Dartmouth College.¹¹ The manuscript clearly exhibits the collaboration between

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9. In *Frankenstein*, the Alps are described "as belonging to another earth, the habitation of another race of being"; in Percy's letter, "[t]hey pierce the clouds like things not belonging to this earth", and in "Mont Blanc", the Alps possess "some unknown omnipotence" (Mercer 2020: 62).
 10. In using the male pen name, Bradley and Cooper wanted to cover up both their sex and their collaboration, fearing that their work would not be taken seriously if the truth came out. Alas their fear proved justified on both counts (Murray and Parker 2022: 4).

the two writers, as some (although by far not all) pages contain entries in both Bradley's and Cooper's hands. Moreover, the document reflects their position in the *fin-de-siècle* artistic circles of London – a highly fertile ground for their own authorship that they drew heavily from. Among their literary acquaintances were Oscar Wilde, Robert Browning, George Moore, to name but a few most illustrious representatives (Murray and Parker 2022: 5). Their association with the contemporary aestheticist and Decadent movement could be productively read as a modernist “weak network” (Saint Amour 2018) that presents modernist authorship not as the epitome of a strong, masculinist and individual genius, but rather as the result of a mutually enriching web of “weak” (read: broad) connections between creative brains – not unlike the distributed cognitive model that Hutchins envisages in his theory.

Apart from the joint diary, Michael Field also composed a collection of prose sketches titled *For That Moment Only* (Bodleian Libraries, MS. Eng. misc. d. 976.), recently edited and published by Alex Murray and Sarah Parker (2022). Incidentally, the idea to write prose was suggested to them by one of their friends and part of the “weak” network (Bernard Berenson), who thought they should “give up their archaic aesthetic habits and focus on cultivating a modern prose style” (Murray and Parker 2022: 6).

Much like the Shelleys, Bradley and Cooper authored their texts individually and then revised each other's work, and the editors of *For That Moment Only* supply helpful footnotes on who authored which sketch in the collection. Despite this established practice, Bradley romanticised their collaboration. In a letter to a friend, she uses heavily metaphorical language to describe their *modus operandi*: “The work is a perfect mosaic. We cross and interlace like a company of dancing summer flies; if one conceives a scene or situation, the other corrects, completes, or murderously cuts away. [...] Let no man think he can put asunder what God has joined” (qtd in Malfait 2015: 161). As Olivia Malfait judiciously points out, “Katherine's description of the collaboration acquires the status of a marital bond, as she invokes the words spoken by a priest at a marriage ceremony” (161). Be that as it may, the insistence on being perceived as “joined” means that Bradley and Cooper – or rather Michael Field – considered themselves to be one inseparable creative unit producing one inseparable creative body of work: the distribution of their cognition was a conscious and lasting choice.

Obviously, authors needn't be romantically involved to be great collaborators – examples such as Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford or T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound spring to mind. The modernist vibe that swept across Western Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century also precipitated an explosion of creativity in the young Soviet state and produced one of the most remarkable writing partnerships in the history of Russian and Soviet literature. Ilya Ilf (real name Ilya Fayzilberg, 1897–1937) and Yevgeny Petrov (real name Yevgeny Kataev, 1902–1942) were both representatives of the Odessa wave of Russian-Jewish literature that blossomed in the 1920s. Both budding writers and journalists, they met in Moscow in 1925 through Petrov's elder brother, Valentin Kataev, who by that time had become a famous author

11. <https://michaelfielddiary.dartmouth.edu/home>. For more on the diaries, see Dever 2022 and Field 2024.

of (mostly) children's literature. Ilf and Petrov ended up working for the *Gudok* newspaper, which – remarkably – also had Mikhail Bulgakov among its staff at the time. It was in fact Kataev who suggested that the two friends write a kind of a picaresque novel each, and he – the more experienced of the three – would revise the manuscripts after the fact (Odessky and Feldman 2015: 30). He also supplied a few ideas for the plot, stretching the distribution of cognition beyond the two co-authors. It was Ilf's idea to write one novel together instead. In September 1927, they began writing *The Twelve Chairs*, with the plot loosely based on Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Six Napoleons* but transported to the early years of the young Soviet state in the roaring 1920s. After reading the first instalment, Kataev withdrew from the project, stating that the draft was good enough without his interventions (Odessky and Feldman 2015: 30). The composition process was extremely swift (especially given that the work had to take place after office hours), and by January 1928 the autograph manuscript (fair copy) was finished.

Despite its relatively short creative life (which unfortunately ended with Ilf's premature death in 1937), the collaboration was impressively productive: the debut novel *The Twelve Chairs* (published in 1928) was followed by its sequel, *The Golden Calf* (1931), a short story cycle (1928–29) and a travelogue about their trip to the USA (1937). In a short newspaper article, written in 1935, the two collaborators describe their working method thus (their fascinating and humorous first-hand account warrants to be quoted in full):

The two of us started working together by chance in 1927. Before then, each of us had written independently. They were small stories, feuilletons, sometimes even rather dubious poems. When we started writing together, it turned out that we matched each other, as they say, complemented each other. Another thing became clear. *Writing together is harder, more complicated than writing alone.* But at the same time, it seemed to us personally to be more fruitful. We cannot recommend this way of working as necessarily yielding good results. But as for ourselves, we are convinced that each of us individually would write worse than the two of us are writing now. As for the method of our work, it is the same. Whatever we write – a novel, a feuilleton, a play, or a business letter – we write it all together, without moving away from each other, at one table. Together we search for a theme, together we shape it into a story, all observations, thoughts and literary embellishments are taken from the common cauldron, and *together we write every phrase and every word.* Of course, every step of the work is subject to mutual criticism, which is rather fastidious but impartial, and does not allow for compromises and friendly favours. Even this small note we are now composing together. And since we have already said that writing together is difficult, this is where we end.¹²

(Ilf and Petrov 1935; emphasis added)

This note is telling in its insistence on a truly collaborative creative process – even its title, “The Habit of Thinking and Writing Together”, refers to cognition as distributed rather than strictly individual. The distribution of cognition in their case seems to be more seamless than in the

12. Translated with the help of www.DeepL.com/Translator (free version). This is a conscious choice, in order to demonstrate yet another distributed cognitive system at work – I shall return to the advent of AI and its potential for creative writing in the concluding section.

case of the Shelleys or Michael Field: whereas both couples wrote clearly identifiable chunks of text individually and then revised each other's work, Ilf and Petrov claimed to practise collaboration in the extreme, "writing together every phrase and every word".

Turning to manuscripts in order to find evidence of this smooth and even distribution of creativity yields ambiguous results. On the one hand, unlike the collaborations outlined above, the genetic analysis of the drafts is not helpful, as the two collaborators agreed from the outset that Petrov (whose handwriting was better than Ilf's) would do the writing of all of their work, so there is no trace of Ilf's handwriting to be found in the autograph manuscripts.¹³ This means that discerning their individual input on the basis of material traces is an impossible task. On the other hand, it is unlikely that either author could live with this skewed picture of their authorship if the collaboration was not as fluent and mutually beneficial as they describe.

The smoothness of their joint authorship is even more striking if we consider their pre-collaborative writing period (however brief), which reveals marked differences between their poetics (for details, see Yanovskaya 1963). While Ilf tended to create general, often nameless types, Petrov's characters were very concrete, idiosyncratic individuals; while Ilf preferred the sketch genre with no explicit plot, Petrov composed plot-driven short stories; while Ilf focused on stylistics, making careful choices on how to verbalise his ideas, Petrov's early work is rooted in dialogue (Yanovskaya 1963). These differences, although striking, may have contributed to the extremely smooth working of the distributed cognitive system that powered their creative collaboration and produced a large body of jointly authored works which have earned their place in the Soviet literary canon and remain extremely popular to this day.

Covert distributed cognition: Samuel Beckett's correspondence

Although the most obvious candidates for this type of distributed cognition are publishers, editors and translators, I would like to zoom in on those cognitive agents that are not strictly speaking part and parcel of the business of literature but whose impact on the writing process is nonetheless significant. A good case in point is Beckett's correspondence. In the 1950s and 1960s, Beckett acquired the habit of sending drafts of his texts (mostly shorter plays) to a few of his English and French friends, thus including them in the revision process. It is important to note that these correspondents, unlike editors or theatre practitioners, were not in any way involved in the process of staging or publishing those plays, so their advice was sought solely for their critical input. Unfortunately, the letters of his correspondents are not always available, but it is clear from Beckett's own replies that he took their opinion into account. A large-scale study of authors' correspondence as a form of distributed cognition will probably unearth extensive "weak" networks and much collaborative creativity, and is as such worth attempting, despite all the difficulties that it may entail (such as accessing the letters).

In one specific case, Beckett's exchange with one of his friends, the French art critic Georges Duthuit, transcends the level of private correspondence more explicitly. Written in the

13. The Ilf and Petrov papers are kept at the Russian State Archive for Literature and Art (RGALI), fund nr. 1821, items 31–32 for *The Twelve Chairs* and 36–38 for *The Golden Calf*.

first half of 1949, the series of letters contains their discussion of contemporary art, with the focus on the subject-object relation of the artist toward their art, and the artistic expression of that relation. The series of letters represents a dialogue between Beckett and Duthuit, and the same issues later resurfaced (though never verbatim) in a fictional work called *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (published in *transitions* magazine in December 1949). The status of this text is interesting in its own right, as it oscillates between private conversation in letters and a published piece of prose that consists solely of three fictionalised dialogues between B. and D., each section dedicated to one particular artist. Referring to one of them in his letter of 9 March 1949, Beckett states that Bram van Velde's painting

is the first to repudiate relation in all [its] forms. It is not the relation with this or that order of opposite that it refuses, but the state of being in a relation as such, the state of being in front of. We have waited a long time for an artist who is brave enough [...] to grasp that the break with the outside world entails the break with the inside world, that there are no replacement relations for naïve relations, that what are called outside and inside are one and the same. (Beckett 2011: 140)

In *Three Dialogues*, a similar idea recurs when B. speaks of

the acute and increasing anxiety of the relation itself, as though shadowed more and more darkly by a sense of invalidity, of inadequacy, of existence at the expense of all that it excludes, all that it blinds to. The history of painting, here we go again, is the history of its attempts to escape from this sense of failure, by means of more authentic, more ample, less exclusive relations between representer and representee. (Beckett 1984: 145)

In his discussion of Bram van Velde, the painter who got it right, B. mentions "a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation" (Beckett 1984: 145). My suggestion is that the distributed cognitive system between Beckett and Duthuit, present in their correspondence, has generated the content of *Three Dialogues* to a very large degree.

Although fascinating in itself, the collaborative creativity between Beckett and Duthuit does not end there but spills over, albeit indirectly, into the genesis of one of Beckett's most remarkable prose texts, his novel *L'Innommable / The Unnamable*. He began writing it on 29 March 1949, so around the same time as his exchange of letters with Georges Duthuit. The problem of relation (or non-relation) is one of the most dominant themes in the novel, and some passages from the letters to Duthuit return almost verbatim, as in the following example: in his letter of 9 March, Beckett wonders whether one can "conceive of expression in the absence of relations of whatever kind, whether those between 'I' and 'non-I' or those within the former?" (Beckett 2011: 139). The same doubt returns, in a stronger form, in the opening paragraph of *The Unnamable*: "I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me" (Beckett 2010b: 1). Similarly, the evanescent borderline between inside and outside, suggested in the same letter and quoted above, becomes one of the main themes in the novel, as the following (crucial) passage demonstrates:

I'll have said it inside me, then in the same breath outside me, perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either

(Beckett 2010b: 100)

It is also striking how the last sentence of the novel, "You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" clearly echoes B.'s idea that there is "nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (Beckett 1984: 139).

Conclusion: Authorship and AI

By discussing a number of examples of extended and distributed cognition in modern prose fiction, this chapter has hopefully raised the question of the boundaries of cognition and – more importantly – of the nature of creativity when it comes to writing literary prose. The common denominator throughout the examples discussed here seems to be the formative influence of some extracranial entity or entities, be it objects such as drafts and notebooks, or overt and covert collaborators, on the writing process. This profound embedding of the author's brain in some form of a hybrid cognitive system undermines the ubiquitous myth of the solitary genius: distributed cognition can be discerned in the large body of literature, as we saw above, ranging from close collaborations (such as Ilf and Petrov) to "weak" networks (such as Beckett and Duthuit). The impact of distributed cognition is augmented by the constitutive interaction between the creative brain and the material vehicles of content, such as drafts and writing tools – the writer's extended mind.

In the past decade, these boundaries have increasingly come under pressure from an entirely different corner, namely Artificial Intelligence, and more specifically several attempts across the globe to amalgamate authors' creative output and that of writing bots modelled in the author's image. One of the first projects of this kind was developed in 2017 as a collaboration between the Meertens Instituut (Amsterdam) and the University of Antwerp: AsiBot (named after Isaac Asimov) was a creative writing interface that collaborated with users to produce literary texts and co-wrote a book together with the Dutch author Ronald Giphart.¹⁴ In 2022, researchers at KULeuven created an AI alter ego for the Belgian author Annelies Verbeke, although the "Annelies VerbekeBot" has ultimately failed to match its progenitor's level of craftsmanship, as the writer herself admitted (*Artificial Intelligence, Language, and Creativity* 2022).

14. Although the project is now discontinued, you can find more information on it on the UAntwerp's Platform DH website (<https://platformdh.uantwerpen.be/index.php/projects/asibot/>) and on the Meertens Instituut's webpage (in Dutch only, <https://meertens.knaw.nl/2017/11/01/iedereen-mag-met-robot-asibot-schrijven/>).

More recently, the advent of the so-called Large Language Models (LLMs, of which ChatGPT is arguably the most famous representative)¹⁵ has allowed the creative capacity of AI to improve exponentially and thus expand the potential for human-machine collaboration in creative writing. This development might open up a potentially novel area of genetic research – the study of versions produced by writing bots and how they are revised by their human collaborators. Whatever the future may have in store for us, the intrusion of AI into what used to be considered an exclusively human (if not divine) gift will further nuance the image of the author of fiction as a solitary genius whose creativity is exclusively generated by their interior mental activity.

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