

# What Is Creativity?

KATE RAY

## 1. The beginning

“**W**hat Is Creativity?”

The title of an essay Matthew Goulish has not written.

How can we, you may ask, and why should we study an essay that does not exist? If our purpose in this short journey (assuming that you will accompany me) is to understand the wily, wild mind of Goulish, our time may be better spent dwelling on an imagined essay rather than a written one. After all, according to Goulish, “sometimes the reader comes to the realization that all the printed words make up only half of the book. Silence makes up the other half. This realization may come at night, when the book has been opened, and one perceives the expansiveness of the world” (*microlectures* 154). Setting out to study that silence and to listen in hopes of discovery, let us then journey into that night by examining an essay that exists only in our dreams and our imaginations.

How do we begin?

Outward, working our way in, starting with the explicit and moving to the implicit. We begin with a breadcrumb trail of hints that Goulish has left for us in the essays he has written. He has bequeathed to us the goal of our journey, to find out what creativity is. Although he has not written “What Is Creativity?” we know that creativity is a significant and recurrent part of his vocabulary, a concept clearly central to his understanding of the world. So, like Goulish, we begin with four smaller questions:

- 2.1 What does it mean “to create?”
- 2.2 How does one create?
- 2.3 Who creates?
- 2.4 Who creates?

Keep in mind that our journey will not be easy. Goulish will intentionally mislead us. He will contradict himself and sometimes lie. We will hit a roadblock and will have to retrace our steps. That is not to say, however, that Goulish is bringing us on a pointless voyage, for I can assure you that we will have gotten somewhere by the end. We “proceed with no need to fear or to hope, but only to find new ways of understanding” (24).

## 2.1 What does it mean “to create?”

The word “creativity” is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the ability to create.” “To create,” in turn, means “to bring into being, cause to exist; esp. to produce where nothing was before, ‘to form out of nothing.’” But Goulish’s practices contradict the definition; our feisty essayist thwarts convention and breaks laws, daring to challenge implicitly the unequivocal word of the *OED*. Goulish does not create out of nothing. In his 203-page book, *39 microlectures: in proximity of performance*, there are 72 pages of source notes. Nothing more than a heavily annotated anthology, we might complain. Goulish would not disagree. He states outright that his book “represents a meeting place of many books, a catalog,” and he does not apologize (3). He points out that “early writers used beech bark paper, or even inscribed on trees. Today we print on recycled paper, not so much on what was once a tree as on what was more recently another book,” as if to say that creativity forms out of something (3). Goulish characterizes criticism, and even reading, as “creative” acts, even though they are not created from nothing and, therefore, do not satisfy the *OED*’s definition. So, along with Goulish, we must regretfully close the covers of the *OED*, or, more accurately, exit its reassuring Web browser.

Having cut our semantic safety lines, we are now free to fashion a new definition of creativity. Creativity, according to Goulish, is a new approach to something old. He suggests that “maybe we need new thoughts less than we need to decelerate, to reduce our thoughts, to refold them into other thoughts, and to recycle them” (3). In recycling, we are creating something new, even if it is just a new version of something old. Criticism, therefore, is a creative act. It cannot exist in and of itself but is always inspired by a piece of art. However, Goulish says that “the way a critique discovers and explores becomes as personal, intellectual, and creative as any artwork; not to offer a comprehensive analysis of the rain, but instead one singular approach to it,” is inherent in an act of criticism (47). Works can be creative and original in the sense that each of us is original, with different lives and experiences to

draw from. We apply those experiences and, most importantly, our imaginations to what we read, seeing new things, making unusual connections, and inevitably changing the work itself according to our own minds.

Consider Goulish's metaphor that "a book is the night," a statement that Goulish doesn't bother to elucidate (18). Now, we could turn to the source note, which references Marguerite Duras and goes into a long explanation about how the night can reveal "the expansiveness of the world," but if we do not want to turn all the way to page 154, it would be faster and, according to Goulish, perhaps more profitable to make our own meanings and our own connections. We could, for example, bring to mind that lighthearted saying that "the night is our oyster." If a book is the night and the night is our oyster, we may logically conclude that a book is our oyster.

Goulish himself is a prime example of the active reader. When he first started to write, he "began to write as [he] read, slowly, extracting the lines [he] felt [he] had written, or wished [he] had written, or thought [he] might like to rewrite" (18). Goulish does not read to uncover the meaning that the author might be trying to convey but takes away his own meaning and literally makes the words his own. He unabashedly helps himself to whatever word combinations or phrases he is fond of, takes them out of context and reuses them to convey his own meanings, but he does not view this appropriation as a presumption. He simply presents himself as the most extreme example of the subjective reader.

You may be feeling a little uneasy at this point. After all, if Goulish advocates such subjectivity in his reading and his writing, who's to say that I have not taken similar liberties with his words? If you have not read his works, I could misconstrue them to my heart's content and make new meanings from the quotes that I have extracted, and you would never know. Goulish could find no fault with me, since I would only be recycling his words. Still, you probably would not trust me, and rightly so. There are rules regarding the way we read, rules meant to grant authors some authority over what they have written. The trusting relationship between reader and writer develops out of a mutual understanding that the writer will allow the reader a fair chance to understand what is written and that the reader will remain open to those chances rather than barricade himself in his own mind so firmly that he cannot see what the writer has to say. These are the limits to the subjectivity of our interpretations. They are the limits that Goulish tests and pushes and occasionally violates in his creative acts.

If Goulish sometimes takes his subjectivity too far, it may be to represent a perspective that he believes to be largely neglected in our society. He

believes that the way we choose to define creativity points to a critical divide in the way that we look at the world. Goulish writes about a communication dilemma that he once ran into with a producer. He tries to make sense of it: “To state the problem: what some see as a single moment repeating, others see as a nonrepeating series of similar moments” (33). The problem is one of semantics and of perception. According to Goulish, “a moment consists of a small action in a small amount of time in a particular place. The moment exists inseparable from the action, the time, and the place” (39). Therefore, the modification of any one of these three controlling factors changes the moment altogether. Two moments can be similar, but they can never be the same. Life is made up of a series of moments each fundamentally different from another, and each therefore original; works that may seem to be repeats of one another are still creative. We could conclude that every work is creative, regardless of its similarity to another work. Such an argument might not hold up to the authorities, were we to be accused of plagiarism, but we can take comfort knowing that Goulish will take our side when we write to him of our impending lawsuits and unaccepted papers. Goulish would understand that we were simply recycling older works, and he would extol our creativity—‘a new approach to something old.’

## 2.2 How does one create?

The time seems ripe to turn to our second question: how to create? Ever-thoughtful, Goulish has some answers to this question as well: “How do we approach something? We approach it from any direction. We approach it using our eyes, our ears, our noses, our intellects, our imaginations” (46). Such an answer does not exactly provide us with a procedure to follow, but it again emphasizes subjectivity and the power of the imagination in the creative process. That power is extremely strong throughout Goulish’s works. In one example, Ernesto, a boy who has never been taught to read, attempts to understand a book by pairing made-up meanings to unrecognizable words and creating a story out of them, thereby learning that “reading [is] a kind of continuous unfolding within his own body of a story invented by himself” (35). By applying his imagination to an object otherwise meaningless to him, the boy creates. The power of his imagination overtakes what is there in actuality, and everything that exists to the boy exists only in his mind. Goulish is introducing us to exciting new possibilities for reading. If Ernesto can read a book without being taught to read, why might not I, with no previous training, read a book in French or in Japanese, or in Braille for that matter? Last

night, I *felt* a beautifully haunting story of war and loss and betrayal through my fingertips in the bumps on a sign that read “Stairwell A.”

As creation is a process of ‘unfolding’ inside ourselves, nothing of significance exists outside ourselves. In another of Goulish’s examples, he allegorizes the minds of people with people alone inside their cars. Nothing exists until it enters their field of perception, and so, in a way, “everything is inside [the] car” (101). In this bold move, Goulish implies that nothing would exist without a viewer, that by looking at the world, we humans give it meaning. He places tremendous importance on the person as an actor in the creation of meaning. He even goes so far as to say outright that the process of work becoming work “occurs when we realize it where it occurs. It occurs inside. We do not need to find a way into a work, since the work is already inside. Instead we realize a work and its harmony with our point of view” (102). We realize a work not by looking outward, but by looking inward.

### 2.3 Who creates?

Forgive me, for I realize that our thoughts have spilled over the flimsy divisions in our outline. We must now move swiftly ahead to try to catch up with those thoughts. It should be clear at this point how to answer the third question. Who creates? You create. The reader is the creator. Goulish has been telling this to his own readers from the outset. He asks his readers to “start anywhere; stop anywhere. Don’t worry about reaching the end. Don’t read the whole book if you don’t want to. . . . Read one line repeatedly for two days. Do whatever you need to with this book . . . ” (4). He recognizes his reader as the creator, and so grants his reader leave to use his book in whatever way would best inspire creativity. My particular copy of the book happens to be covered with hot pink post-it notes, written on and inserted at random pages by a friend of mine who felt that this would be most advantageous to my reading process. It has, indeed, been enlightening, as I now may read the sentences, “The writ Stupid ne, had some difficulty in getting into bed” (62) and “I talked to a friend who had a friend who once Does this even matter? the player pianos playing” (115). Unable to see Goulish’s words, and replacing them with what my friend has added, has brought me a whole new perspective on these essays.

It is for this new perspective that Goulish writes. The reader is critically important to him. He has even composed a section called “To the Listener,” in which he writes, “You are absolutely necessary for me—since it would be impossible for me to imagine this process other than in conjunction with a

constantly imagined percipient” (24). If creativity will not be achieved without readers, then Goulish’s book is nothing without them. He asks us to “consider this book like an interrupted performance. . . . The writer will not return. I have been asked to stand in. . . . Please remember I am only a substitute. In order to fulfill [the writer’s] intentions, I will not imitate them, but only point to them. I will need your help. You must read creatively” (4). Again, his plea to the reader appears to say that since creativity and discovery lie with the reader, his own book is only a jumping-off point, only one way of achieving an end. Goulish himself is “only a substitute,” and other books could have worked just as well. A book is no more than an opportunity for a creative unfolding. To Ernesto, the boy who cannot read, every book is whatever his mind reveals to him.

### 3. Roadblock

Stop. I warned you of this checkpoint. We must halt here in our journey because we cannot go farther in the direction that Goulish has been leading us. We have been carefully following Goulish’s statements and examples to their logical conclusions, and look where we have arrived: we have become superheroes! We can read in Braille, we can plagiarize without relinquishing our originality, we have proved books to be oysters, we can fill in our own sentences to Goulish’s essays. In fact, we do not need Goulish at all. Any other “substitute” would do, since the act of creativity takes place in our imaginations. And in our imaginations, anything can happen. Is it right to suppose, then, that we readers are now capable of anything?

The answer, of course, is no. The conclusions that we have reached are ridiculous. To put them to practical use, one would necessarily become too absurd to be effective in this world. No one could take seriously the girl who shut her eyes and was misled by incorrectly interpreted signposts in Braille or the boy who decided to study his textbook by reading backwards and skipping every fifth word. Yet these examples are easily as credible as others to be found in Goulish’s book. We must remember, in reading Goulish, that he is deliberately ridiculous. One’s only obstruction in understanding Goulish is to take him too seriously. Reading and rereading his works, on a studious search for meaning, it can become too easy to be deceived by his formal, almost lawyerly way of structuring his arguments, and to fall into the trap of treating him like a lawyer with an argument. Yes, Goulish has something to say, but one need only turn to the fourth section of his “Lecture in the Shape of a Bridge Collapsing” and read the words, “adaptive gonkulator, add some

sliced paranoia, Addicted to your partner?, addition to your chancre, ah Satan sees Natasha, Ahhh. So that's what tears are for!" to realize that, above all, Goulish has a sense of humor (4.5). He can be funny and absurd and over-the-top, and he relishes it all.

## 2.4 Who creates?

Knowing, now, the extent of Goulish's absurdity, we can turn again to the question of who creates. Since we have journeyed farther from when we last met this question, we can be sure that we have a new perspective and therefore will not be repeating. To better answer the question, let us review some of the illegitimate assumptions that we made.

It is not true that every book is the same, that Goulish is really just a "substitute." Goulish, as a writer, needs us, his readers, but we also need Goulish. The book that he writes could not be just any book; it is what it is, and it is written with these particular words for a reason. The act of reading is not completely subjective, because although we apply our own meanings and personalities to what we read, those meanings and our personalities are not fixed entities. Rather, they move and change and transform in an ongoing process as we continue to learn. Though we may shape a work that we read with our own interpretation, the work also shapes us.

The best answer to the question of who creates, therefore, is that both the reader and the writer do. They do not exist in separate spheres, but find some way to communicate across the infinite differences that divide them, and so give birth to creativity. In Goulish's own words, "We may then look to each work of art . . . for its moments of exhilaration, in an effort to bring our own imperfections into sympathetic vibration with these moments . . ." (*microlectures* 45). That "vibration" is reminiscent of the "harmony" between a work and our own point of view, which Goulish spoke of in his explanation of how work becomes work. In that essay, Goulish was relating people to windowless cars, but I would modify his metaphor. Everything is given meaning inside our heads, yet what is outside our heads is important as well and has the ability to change us. Through heavy tints and with much squinting, perhaps we can make out some of the shapes outside our cars. After all, new things enter our not-quite-closed minds all the time, and those things have the ability, when mixed with all of our internal components, to cause an explosion and rock the world inside our little car. That explosion could be our "moment of exhilaration" and from that moment we can create. I must also point out that I mean this "we" not in the royal sense this time, but to include

you, me, and Goulish together. A reaction cannot take place without two or more elements, and creativity cannot occur without both writer and reader.

#### 4. Why we might lie

Goulish is no idiot. He knows that he espouses an absurd doctrine, and he must be aware of the inconsistencies within his own writings. Why would he lead us so far afield, preaching such subjectivity that we can no longer take him seriously? We may feel disappointed, frustrated, even angry with Goulish. We experienced such moments of excitement and delight when Goulish opened the doors of subjectivity to us, and we believed reading could be anything we wished it to be. Stepping away from Goulish, bringing ourselves back to reality, was almost a disappointment. We may feel that we have learned nothing from him.

We must remember, though, that Goulish's goal was never to teach us exactly what creativity is. He never wrote an essay of his own about it, in fact. His objective all along was only to "find new ways of understanding." Perhaps we needed those moments of excitement and exhilaration and those false epiphanies. Even if some of our exhilarating realizations were invalid or downright absurd, we did indeed glimpse a new way of understanding. At least those moments served to break down what we thought we knew, so that we could be more open to alternative ideas. To bring us closer to the truth, which is always somewhere in the gray area between objectivity and subjectivity, Goulish took on an extreme persona. He told us what he wanted us to hear through indirection. By paying careful attention to that indirection and listening in on the gaps of his argument, we have uncovered another Goulish, a compelling, though not as radical Goulish, a Goulish who blurs the lines between subjectivity and objectivity and has some method behind his madness. In communicating with that quiet Goulish, the one hidden in the silence of the printed page, we can find our exhilarating, sympathetic harmony and together yield creativity.

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