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Cover Page Footnote

Dennis Young is Visiting Assistant Professor at George Mason University where he teaches interdisciplinary writing, advanced expository writing, and world and British literature.

Re-Visioning Psychology in the Writing Class

Dennis Young

*Call the world, if you please, "The vale of Soul-making."
Then you will find out the use of the world.*

John Keats

Why Soul Matters

The awe I felt reading Greek mythology when I was a child is still with me today. I marvel at the characters and the insights into human behavior that these stories depict. The ancient Greeks were profound psychologists, their stories always probing psychological depths. For them psychology meant something different than it does for us; the "logic or discourse of soul" (a literal translation of the word psychology) was not an abstract system of thought but was grounded in poetic figures and mythic tales. These myths have not lost their ability to move us through their archetypal power because they express and embody soul.

Soul is rooted in the main ground of the Western educational tradition, extending from the Greeks through the Renaissance and the Romantics to depth psychology and beyond. An admittedly difficult and elusive term, soul nonetheless resounds in discussions of the purpose and goals of education. In Book VII of *The Republic* Plato wrote that soul was the heart of education, positing that all learning is a kind of recovery of that clarity of perception characteristic of childhood. Philosophers and psychologists as diverse as Emerson, Whitehead, Dewey, Jung, and Bruner have all intimated a mutual relationship between education and the cultivation of soul. For a stunning range of writers, soul is that center of organized power, of desire, of feeling, of awareness, of freedom, of choice. Considered this way, it seems somewhat redundant to speak of bringing soul back to the classroom; it already is in the classroom; it just isn't often acknowledged. Because teaching writing always involves interpersonal relationships, student motivation, personal histories, and other psychological *insistences* that shape awareness and foster learning, it seems worthwhile to reconsider—or *re-vision*—psychology in the writing class.

James Hillman's work in archetypal psychology helps us do that. I first became interested in Hillman's work while studying poetry in graduate school, discovering in his penetrating examination of the imaginative life and his rich description of archetypes a language to interpret the complexity of the psyche.

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I further found that the insights of archetypal psychology provided a method and vocabulary to interpret the subtle dynamics of learning and teaching. It was abundantly clear that a classroom psychology that does not attend to the psychic drama of student lives remains superficial.

I'm not the first to recognize that the archetypal approach helps us reclaim the psychological dimension of the writing class. The recent call for a "poetics of composition" (Gates, 1993; Owens, 1993), the attention to postmodern notions of knowledge, teaching, and subjectivities (Faigley, 1992; Gere, 1993; Welch, 1996), the renewed interest in the noncognitive domain (Brand, 1989; Brand & Graves, 1994) and the psychoanalytic insights into teaching/learning writing (Brooke, 1987; Davis, 1987; Felman, 1982; Jay, 1987; Schleifer, 1987; Tobin, 1993) all pay singular attention to the psyche in the writing class. Sessions at composition conferences—sessions that did not occur five years ago—now focus on such issues as spirituality, healing, meditation, and archetypes. Archetypal psychology provides a *poetics* of the classroom and suggests coordinates for understanding the place of discourse in shaping psyche and in understanding how archetypes underwrite rhetorical ways of making meaning.

Archetypal Psychology and the Imagination

Archetypal psychology is about the imaginative life, soul—not ego—and healing. Because archetypes relate fundamentally to cognitive and noncognitive realms of behavior and thought, they are central to a fully imagined psychology of students and their writing. As Hillman (1975) defines them, archetypes are

the deepest pattern of psychic functioning, the roots of the soul governing the perspectives we have of ourselves and the world. They are the axiomatic, self-evident images to which psychic life and our theories about it ever returns. (pp. xiii-xiv)

And they are the "frames of our consciousness" (p. 127). Consider the Greek root of the word itself: *Arche* implies a search for beginnings, and the initiating force of a beginning; *typos* means fundamental outline or structure. For archetypal psychology, "development of soul" and "the cultivation of imagination" are pivotal (1983a, p. 4); "depth" is identical with the imagination. If the "image is psyche," as Jung (1975, p. 23) believed, then being is essentially imaginal. The word *imagination*, Hillman (1983c) said, is preferable to *unconscious* because "the unconscious is an abstract noun to cover over the cultural implications that are in the imagination" (p. 32). Since we are always behaving with imagination and always within the borders of an image, *soul* is not so much an entity as an on-going event, the *deepening* of events into experiences, the union of formative forces that give shape to psychic life with that psychic life itself shaped by them.

By using the term *imaginal* as opposed to *imaginary*, Hillman hoped to undercut the real/unreal distinction and to propose instead that the imaginal not be assessed in terms of a narrow, utilitarian conception of "reality," but a broader and more multifaceted one which gives credence to the imaginal (Corbin, 1972).

Like Jung, Hillman's psychology is grounded in myth and archetype, though Hillman sought to "annul [Jung's] metaphysics so as not to lose his psychology" (1989, p. 215). In other words, while omitting Jung's metaphysics and wishing to recover soul free of philosophical idealism and religion, Hillman (1983b) revived Jung's work in archetypes. And he in fact helps us to reconceive Jung as well as Freud and the psychoanalytic tradition. Hillman refigured Jung's Kantian metaphysical theology and his collective unconscious, and he revised the archetypal self, which for Jung was equated with the God archetype, leading Jung into a version of philosophical idealism. In place of Jung's one, all-powerful God and the notion of cosmic Creator and His privileged perspective, Hillman outlined a "polytheistic psychology" that privileges the aesthetic value of the image. In this regard Hillman betrayed the influence of Nietzsche as much as that of depth psychology. Following Nietzsche, Hillman deconstructed philosophical idealism and rejected theology and its literalizations altogether.

While Hillman did not claim to have founded a school of thought, his singular desire to recover psyche through myth, image, and language made him especially relevant to teachers of writing, because writing, in one way or another, is imaginative.¹ The writing class is a constant process of gaining perspective and positioning self through the language of multiple discourses and "fictional" masks which are *not* exclusive to creative writing courses. Each time students sit down to write for us they not only have to "invent the university," as Bartholomae (1985) said, they also have to invent another version of themselves.

Hillman's (1980) radical view of soul as nontheological and grounded in the imagination, I believe, helps teachers to reclaim the word and what it implies. Archetypal psychology makes it possible to re-imagine students (and ourselves) not as whole, unchanging, literal egos striving for self-satisfaction, but as souls constituted by the shifts of thought, language, and experience. Such a perspective is important for writing teachers because language makes such awareness possible; without language we could have no introspection (p. 21). Imagining soul in part relies on the diversity, richness, and precision of the language that brings it forth.

Words are powers which have invisible power over us. They are personal presences which have whole mythologies: gender, genealogies (etymologies concerning origin and creation), histories, and voices: and they are guarding, blaspheming, creating, and annihilating effects. For words are persons. (1975, p. 7)

Meanings, ideas, and images cluster around words, which produce verbal archetypes. Writers engage that archetypal *poesis* or making in the activity of writing. We learn to write not so much by imitating texts but in part by identifying with persons and language that shape us. For example, I hear language echoes of my family members and influential teachers whenever I speak in the classroom; my written words seem inextricably bound to the language rhythms and word pat-

¹Every time we write, we not only have to imagine our audience, which, according to Walter Ong, is "always a fiction," but we also have to imagine a persona, e.g., mask.

terns of those close to me. Helping students claim their own language and thereby reclaim the meaning of their learning constitutes part of our task as teachers of writing.

Reclaiming Education

The metaphor of reclaiming found in the title of several books on teaching (i.e., *Reclaiming Pedagogy*, Donahue & Quandahl, 1989; *Reclaiming the Classroom*, Goswami & Stillman, 1987; *Reclaiming the Imagination*, Berthoff, 1984) is powerfully archetypal. It is Freud's own metaphor in his discussions of dream work and is reminiscent of Jung's metaphor of archeology. Do we also wish to *reclaim* soul (psyche) for studying how people learn—the soul that is conspicuously absent from most discussions of contemporary psychology and education? We certainly need to reclaim the idea of soul from Allan Bloom (1987), who in *The Closing of the American Mind* appropriates it to demonize the Left, uphold the eternal verities of the Great Books, and thus overlook what he sees as the accidental particularity of immediate lives.² What attracts me to Hillman's archetypal perspective is that it takes seriously our culture's most persistent psychological need—to know thyself.

When Socrates refers to the oracle of Delphi in his discussion of soul in *The Apology*, he suggests that "self" in "know thyself" is "soul" in distinction to "ego" (the Cartesian "I am," which separates knower from known). Surely the ancient injunction to know thyself has not lost its appeal for educators, especially writing teachers. Knowing oneself, as I understand the phrase, doesn't mean isolation and vigilant inwardness, but active, reflective introspection and connection with the *daemonic* through acts of purposeful communication. Janet Emig (1983) recognized the mythic dimension of writing when she called up a "hierarchy of daemons" (p. 51) in "The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing." Her choice of words recalls Greek philosophy and myth and is explicitly archetypal. Even Eros (love) was a *daemon*, and it is Eros that moves us to engage Psyche and that, according to the persistent Platonic tradition, moves us to desire knowledge. Knowing oneself is essentially mythic and archetypal.

Current debates in composition about what and how to teach, the nature of discourse communities, the place of critical theory in the classroom, and literacy and the culture wars bring me invariably back to the inner lives or the underlives of students themselves. Theoretical considerations, to be meaningful, have to be grounded in real lives. When I think of myself as a teacher, I think of particular students who worked through problems in their writing and achieved fluency as they struggled to find meaning in psychological conflicts. I think of Angela: While discussing a poem about the loss of a child, she unexpectedly broke down in tears and in a critical analysis of the poem wrote about the loss of her own infant. She made connections in the act of writing about a loss that understandably

²Bloom's subtitle is "How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students." His version of soul is based on a fantasy of a "Golden Age of Literacy," when elite "truth seekers" were undeterred by "accidental lives" (p. 380). Bloom always stays within an archetypal philosophy with its commitment to coherent unity. But soul is best imagined poetically as being beneath in the underworld, immanent—the deepening of events related to pathology and affliction.

penetrated her life and had profound implications for it, coloring her sense of herself as a student, as a writer, and as a woman. The writing did more than merely bring conflicts to the surface; it was an act of healing. And there was John (whom I discuss in more detail), a twenty-two year old recovering addict and alcoholic who wrote about his decision to go to college and about the transformation of values that took place. His examination led him back in memory to the early, life-affirming influences of his French speaking grandmother who read stories to him, instilling in him a love of learning that he had to recover to achieve some balance in his life. And Janet, who, reflecting on the writing she'd done over the semester, veered off into a discussion of her fear of God's punishment because of flights of promiscuity and drug use, and her realization of the compulsive emptiness of her tendencies; writing was a way to work through, interpret, understand.

Their stories emerged in essays they wrote about the importance in their lives of reading, writing, and education. I did not ask for personal narratives; their stories were insistent, because they had no choice but to recover a neglected side of their lives, a side that cried out for scrutiny and care. As Thomas Moore (1994) in *Care of the Soul* (a distillation of Hillman's theories) points out,

[C]are of the soul begins with observance of how the soul manifests itself and how it operates. . . . When people observe the ways in which soul is manifesting itself, they are enriched rather than impoverished. They receive back what is theirs, the very thing they have assumed to be so horrible that it should be cut out and tossed away. (pp. 5-6)

My students entered the realm of soul by reflecting; they came to better understand themselves and their world by engaging in *healing fiction*, their essays constituting what Wallace Stevens calls "cries of their occasion." Their writing was enhanced—enlivened—by their attention to soul, revealing that the individuation process is not a matter of choice but one that we are bound to out of necessity.

The stories of these students betray archetypes of defeat and pain, decay and growth. As teachers, how can we ignore such powerful expressions of psyche? Nurturing student writing means attending to the shape of experience and soul-making. Working closely with John on his paper, I recognized this. At first I did not want to go into the difficult experience he approached in his essay; I wanted instead to talk about formal matters like organization and syntax. But to get him to rethink and revise his paper to bring it to maturity, I had to draw out the details by asking John questions to help him understand the profound implications of his experience, and thus to strengthen his work. I realized that to help John write this particular piece about the place of education in his life, I wanted to make evident to him that writers use their experience and memories by descending into themselves to create powerful writing. That these images and insights are what make writing worth reading John had never seriously considered. John then referred to some pieces we read by Salinger (*The Catcher in the Rye*), Angelou (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*) and Joyce ("Araby") that seemed

somehow to offer troubling mirrors of his own dissolution and longing. He was able to gain sympathetic insight into his own condition, he told me, by identifying with the crisis and psychological trauma of the main characters.

I encouraged him to see that the worlds he encountered in these literary pieces were not so unlike his own, that the authors drew on the conflicts and dilemmas of growing up to create engaging pieces. His past experience of writing, he told me, was largely a sterile exercise in disembodied prose in a style that left no room for awareness and growth. "In high school I would be counted off for writing like this. Can I really write about this in this way? Is it OK?" he asked me.

I asked what he meant by "this way."

He replied, "In high school my teachers looked to see if my writing was right; they didn't care that much about what I said. Now you are asking me to tell you the stuff that really matters, the gory details. Are the details true? Well, yeah, that's the way I see it."

I simply said, "Yes, you can write this way." It was as if John, who had been playing the role of the obedient student trying to please teacher (or his fantasy of teacher), for the first time saw amazing possibilities for his paper. Instead of "My grandmother was a big influence on my life," he was moved to write:

After my mother and father were through fighting and I was through crying, my grandmother always read to me in French and English. This memory of her love of books helped me decide that drugs and alcohol were dead-end excitements. I knew that I had to return to the way I felt when I read books with her in her room when I was small. My grandmother's death left me empty, but this memory helped to keep me from destroying myself.

John seemed to realize the power of memorable images and confronted his depths in the form of his mother, father, grandmother, drugs, darkness, tears, trauma and death—the stuff of soul. The influence of his grandmother, far from a mere abstraction, resonated with life-sustaining meaning. John told me well after the semester ended that the activity of writing made it possible for him to "face my demons" and "face my future without drugs. . . . I think I learned something about myself that I didn't know was there."

John's piece constituted testimony of the emotionally possessive effect of archetypes on his writing. Both of us, I believe, felt pulled down below the level of the institution-driven teacher and student. His writing and our interchanges about it made me realize that as a teacher I must attend to the psychological richness of students' stories and their ways of knowing experience. Had I attended to textbook issues of writing disembodied from the actual psychological process of struggling with painful memories, I would have lost an opportunity to appreciate what mattered to John. Had I shied away from his personal struggle, his prose would have remained flat, generalized, and unregenerative. Conflicted yet creative energies strengthened the drama of his essay and surely made it worth reading—and worth writing. I do believe this was a turning point in his writing. He seemed to gain a confidence and maturity I had not seen before. His seriousness was evident in class discussions and in his reactions to me after class when

we'd talk about the day's readings or writing. He wrote to me after the semester to say that the course was "great for students who want to improve their writing," which I admit surprised me. I thought he would have said something about his revelations and discoveries in the essay on his grandmother, and would perceive the writing as only incidental to the process. But he apparently understood that writing was primarily instrumental in disclosing himself to himself, that the very act was like a wedge that brought him through the depths into understanding.

The archetypal pattern seems clear, but needs interpreting. I think of Keats' (1993) famous line to his sister and brother: "Call the world if you please, 'The Vale of Soul-making.' Then you will discover the use of the world" (p. 839). Without claiming too much from this anecdote, I do think we both discovered the "use of the world" by making soul through writing. Refusing to ignore the depressing nature of John's experience, we entered a kind of underworld, so to speak, an aspect of existence that usually doesn't see light in academic precincts or in everyday business. That world of torment and trauma is there but denied or suppressed. On this occasion we didn't deny it but worked it through to awareness. The intimacy was unsettling in part because conventional wisdom has it that writing teachers are not supposed to engage students or consider psyche.

I hear my critics saying that such a teaching style is bound to be problematic or not our job as teachers, but surely there is space in the university for what JoAnn Campbell (1992) calls the "intimate classroom": "An intimate classroom invites students to use the facts of their lives, beliefs, and experiences to enhance their knowledge, as a means of connecting with a topic and each other, and as a legitimate foundation for further inquiry" (p. 480). Teaching as "healing intimacy rather than a new form of control" (pp. 480–481), like that modelled in *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), constitutes a promising alternative to the dominant modes of teaching that position students as listeners to lectures, as readers of worded texts, and as memorizers of information. These modes ignore the needs of soul, but I cannot.

The Soul of the Writing Class

Begin with where they are is a truism for teachers. Interpreted philosophically, the statement intends to help us see students as language users who seek to find and create forms and shape awareness. Redefining who students are and where they are psychologically is also crucial to understanding student development. It means that we need to see through the empirical fictions that govern our views of perception, psyche, and world. Being aware of soul in the writing class does not mean that participants enact a confessional group therapy session. It does mean that we remain open to the experiences that matter for students, and that we allow moments of confusion, emotion, failure, and silence—for in the construction of meaning these things count, too.

Soul emerges in all kinds of discourse, rhetorical situations, and classroom interactions. "You can't open your mouth without an archetypal perspective speaking through you. Rhetoric doesn't mean just the act or system of persuasive argument; by rhetoric" Hillman (1983c) states, "I mean that all speech is rhetorical in that every archetype has its own mode of rhetoric, its own way of

persuading you" (p. 119). The rhetorical turn to archetypes occurs when we see them as structures of consciousness and embodiments of soul. The mythic element in writing is important in part because it provides a vocabulary of psyche. It's hard to express emotion and psyche, to name what is important. By naming the emotion and the experience, John called forth its significance and gained the motivation necessary to write seriously. This motivation to reclaim experience gave soul to his writing, revealing that writing is seldom a mere choice between personal and academic discourses. Richard Miller (1996), reconsidering the place of the personal in academic contexts, points out that writing is "transformative, . . . an activity whereby we *remake ourselves* (my italics)"; it is a process of "learning how to make oneself heard in a variety of contexts" (p. 282). We need to learn, Miller goes on, "to hear what . . . students are saying," to help them entertain alternative constructions of themselves and to re-vision "the components and possible trajectories of one's lived experience" (p. 285). This plea for making students' lives central in an academic setting is consonant with attending to soul in writing as one way to elicit engaged and meaningful work.

I began this essay with a reference to Greek mythology, and I would like to end with a familiar archetypal image as a visual reminder of what the writing class is. Hermes, god of borders and *hermeneutics*, is a constitutive figure for the writing class. Hermes recalls the inevitable chaos and ambiguity—as well as the organizing force—of the hermeneutical act of composing. Hermes is, Hillman points out, a "healing fiction . . . guide of souls. . . . He appears in the interpretive act; his gift is the insight" (1983b, p. 30). He is also the eloquent, mercurial trickster who twists words, who makes new and unexpected meanings, and who escorts us to the soul of words; he is, after all, the god of writing. Hermes then embodies the perfect image of the elusive nature of teaching and learning writing. He reminds us that the subject of writing resists clear and stable definition and that psyche is forever out of sure reach and, at the same time, always present. Hermes then gives us a word and an image for representing the writing class and for revealing the emotional complexity of learning/teaching writing. As a writing teacher, I privilege Hermes and use him as a guide through the psychic landscape of the classroom, a place of learning and a place of healing. ☺

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