

1995

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Hildy (1995) "Images at the Heart of Things: The Writer's Unconscious Speaking," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 1 , Article 13.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl1pg29>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol1/iss1/13>

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Cover Page Footnote

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Images at the Heart of Things: The Writer's Unconscious Speaking

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Years ago Janet Emig (1983) pointed out that we know little about the effect of writer's unconscious on their writing. She remarked: "There is no wisp or scent anywhere that composing is anything but a conscious and antiseptically efficient act. Nowhere in such an account is there acknowledgment that writing involves commerce with the unconscious self" (p. 48). I recall being struck by the need for such research when reading a story told by Fan Shen, a Chinese student new to the American classroom. A kind of extended reverie, her writing was an example of the concept of "yijing," which is "a creative process of inducing oneself, while reading a piece of literature or looking at a piece of art, to create mental pictures, in order to reach a unity of nature, the author, and the reader" (1989, pp. 463-464). Intrigued with her response to the assignment, I wondered then why we so seldom allow our students the wholeness of their intellectual processes in a way that could include such unconscious imagery. If, as Wallace Stevens once said, "A poem is at the heart of things," surely the mental images evoked in readers were also reflective, from a Jungian standpoint, of not only self—but soul. Such writing is potentially rich with meaning for students. Yet we rarely see it, as Moffett (1994) explains, "because writing to heal and to grow...is alien to universities" (p. 258). Despite several decades of research in writing, we still know so little about this cognitive area. Yet, in my research into the cognitive processes of writers, my students have discovered many compelling mental images which, like Fan Shen's, seem to be examples of the personal unconscious of writers speaking.

Beneath the usual concerns of purpose, audience, thesis, and structure, writers are really often preoccupied with issues far more reflective of self and soul. Their mental images are ones of trying to learn the lessons of life—why something has happened to them, what an event has meant, or how they can establish a sense of connection to others. Through the work of two writers who participated in a study of mental imagery in writing processes, I wish to illustrate some ways that the unconscious may contribute to the intellectual activity of writing.

Mental Images and the Unconscious

From a Jungian perspective, the personal unconscious is assumed to be as much a part of an individual as conscious awareness. The unconscious is not just

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a repository of repressed thought, like infantile tendencies that are better left undisturbed. Rather, it contains all the psychic material that has not yet reached consciousness, the “seeds of future conscious contents” (Jung, 1971, p. 71). Jung said: “The thought we shall think, the deed we shall do, even the fate that we shall lament tomorrow, all lie unconscious in our today” (1968, p. 279). Dreams and fantasy are its common modes of expression. But these narrative forms of discourse are really grounded in images, conceptualized in psychoanalysis as the “royal road” to the unconscious. Images often communicate core human concerns that underlie everyday reality. They deal, you might say, with issues of eternity, not time. “[A]n image presents a claim,” as psychologist James Hillman (1983) says, “—moral, erotic, intellectual, aesthetic—and demands a response” (p. 14). We may be accustomed to thinking of an image only as a passive pictorial representation rather than as an enlivened rhetorical vehicle. Yet, it is through image that the unconscious, or soul, is said to speak. As Hillman goes on to say:

The primary intention of this verbal work with image is the ‘recovery of soul in speech...which at the same time reveals the erotic and aesthetic aspect of images—that they captivate, charm, persuade, have a rhetorical effect on soul beyond their symbolic content. Many images represent motifs in our individual lives. (p. 15)

As Jung explains: “These images are balancing and compensating factors that correspond to the problems which life confronts us with in reality” (1970, p. 44). Yet, for all their psychic and rhetorical power, such images are not easy to translate into conscious endeavor. Many times, as the two cases that follow illustrate, their meaning can be best captured artistically or philosophically. They appear to drive writing from what I call the “metaphoric substrata” (Miller, 1994, p. 114), those figurative layers of symbols beneath our conscious awareness from which writers fashion abstract meaning.

Image psychologists (Klinger, 1978; Pope & Singer, 1978) who conduct naturalistic research on images in thought, say that we are constantly generating a steady stream of mental images. This stream forms the “flow of thought,” which is itself composed of bits and pieces of different mental representations of meaning. Images are ongoing, lively, and complex. They contain traces not only of actual outside visual stimuli that we deal with day-to-day but of our deeper personal concerns. Such a view of the mind runs counter to the kind of cognition embraced by the rationalist academy in which conscious, logical thought is emphasized. Yet, as Klinger (1987) and others have pointed out, we are not as “conscious” as we might expect. In his experimental work, he finds that most people are absorbed in the contents of their unconscious at least 25 percent of their waking hours. That is, we are immersed in states that are dream-like—preoccupied with images arising spontaneously in reverie.

In the processes of writers we still know little about the effect of images generated by the unconscious. Early on, Mandel (1980) proposed that much of the writing we do originates there, that “planning” is largely a process of responding to unconscious impulses. Flower and Hayes (1984) in their protocol studies noted at one point that beneath writers’ verbal articulation lies what they

“multiple representations” of meaning, including images, metaphors, and geometric patterns. More recently, studies have pointed to some specifics. Graves and Becker (1994) have explored the effects of using cultural archetypes to guide writing, and Mullin (1994) has discovered what she calls “traces” or eruptions of unconscious material that periodically disrupt texts. Fleckenstein (1994) has found that mental imagery coincides with writers’ fullest engagement with their texts. And Worley (1994) teaches her students imaging techniques that they can employ deliberately as a way of familiarizing themselves with what is an unrecognized and often unconscious part of writing.

In my own research on mental imagery (1993; 1994), I have found that it is an ongoing part of the thoughts of writers as they work. In a study of 148 writers, I assigned a writing task during which I interrupted them three times at approximately eleven to thirteen-minute intervals and asked them to fill out written thought-sample questionnaires. Such self-reports are based on standard measures of internal imagery (Anderson, 1981; Klinger, 1978; Sheehan, Ashton & White, 1983). Writers also indicated where in their texts they had been interrupted, so that I could compare the images in their thoughts with what they were actually writing at the moment. On a post-sample questionnaire, participants also reflected on their writing, particularly on any images that had been outstanding for them. Later, I spoke with twenty-nine students in extensive (1 1/2 hour) interviews to gather retrospective accounts of their imagistic activity and to understand them as writers generally—their history, attitudes, and habits.

Results of this study revealed that fully half the thoughts of writers contained some evidence of visual activity—far more than most composition specialists might suppose would be characteristic of responses to an abstract writing project. Mental images were ongoing for most writers, though they varied in intensity, clarity, and detail. Yet 41% of the images reported in written thought samples never actually appeared in the texts themselves. Therefore, thought processes rich with images are not necessarily reproduced in the actual writing that is underway. Furthermore, on post-sample questionnaires, 51.4 % of the time participants identified a controlling image as containing the essence of their main idea. Taken together, what these findings suggest is that there is a great deal of imagistic and unconscious mental activity that we know little about since this material is seldom captured in studies of writers’ cognitive processes (Brand, 1987; Flower & Hayes, 1984). Yet, it is precisely here that a conjunction of images, emotions, motives, and private purposes may be found. Here the unconscious appears to affect writing in many ways, most often generating insights that reflect deeply personal issues of individual writers.

The Unconscious Speaking Through the Mental Imagery of Two Writers

Warren and Ethan, two of the writers who participated in the study, illustrate how issues arising from unconscious mental imagery are translated into conscious awareness, with Warren writing about his creativity and Ethan speculating philosophically. Even in response to a fairly bland writing prompt (Explain to me how you learn best), their thought processes appeared more driven by the unconscious

than previous research has indicated. Perhaps other students are also inscribing such psychic contents in their work without teachers knowing it.

Warren: Establishing Connections With Others

Warren, an architecture student, was strikingly preoccupied with images of his personal relationships. In fact, if images from the unconscious reveal themes that are current in an individual's life, family would be Warren's chief concern. In his case, interest in personal connection underlay much of his creative work in architecture and furniture design. For example, he told me that recently he had crafted a special table only one and a half feet high. The inspiration for the unusual design originated in a daydream he had about a picnic table for himself and his friends that he could set up on the slope of a hill. Unlike the sterile designs of so much of modern mass production, his vision of human connection infused the style of the piece with meaning. His interest in architecture was also rooted in a pivotal family experience, in which, as a teenager, he collaborated with his father in remodeling his bedroom. Warren was allowed to put forward his own ideas, and it was from this warmly recalled family project that his own design interests later developed.

Such underlying relational concerns extended also to writing. One of Warren's earliest memories was of talking his third grade friends into giving up recess to perform a play he had written. During our writing session, two of the thought samples revealed family images. In the first, he was interrupted in his text at a point at which he was explaining why he did not want to study foreign languages:

I know I almost feel guilty for this kind of an attitude. I must stress I'm not prejudiced. I just don't seem to have any interest in language. I guess I like to learn what seems to enlight [sic] me for my everyday interests. Here I am an architecture student and classes that I can tie relevance (STOP) to—that is exciting. It may seem ironic that an architecture student is not interested in foreign languages but that's the way I am!

In his written thought sample he reported:

Sure I bet your [sic] thinking that someone with an attitude toward foreign language like me and thinks he'll make a good architect is foolish. Don't get me wrong. I love foreign architectural variety. I just realize you can't do everything, and I've chosen not to try to fluently speak a foreign language.

As he explained in our interview, his playful defensiveness stemmed from mental images that he was seeing of his sister with whom he had a mock disagreement over the value of foreign cultures. As Warren put it, "She teases me about being a bigot—the kind of American the French don't like." Though the reference to family never entered the actual text, it was this personal connection that enlivened the thought for him. He cared what his sister thought as much as he did the readers of his writing sample.

During another interruption the thought of his grandfather seemed to generate a series of remembered images. In the text he wrote:

I'm motivated to draw so I can bless people around me with touching pictures (**STOP**). For example, I strongly desired to draw a picture of my family. And I strongly desire to draw a picture of my grandfather before he passed away.

At this moment he was actually seeing all the pictures of his grandfather that he wanted to draw—even specific scenes of him hiking in the woods. In this image he wanted to use art to connect to his grandfather, just as in the previous image he worried that his views on architecture would alienate his sister. For Warren, these ongoing images of family reflected a concern for using his creativity to express this love and care. In all his creative efforts, whether writing, architecture, or furniture design, his mental images seemed to reveal his underlying wish to create and sustain relationships with family.

Ethan: Exploring the Function of Faith

Ethan, an English and philosophy major, was focused on the tension between what he felt was demanded of him in academic writing and what he really wanted to say. Ideas that most concerned him were philosophical searches for meaning in human experience. Yet he recognized that much academic writing was concerned with simply conforming to convention. As he said: "After you've written for a couple of years, you get the forms—introduction, ideas, conclusion. That's all you can really do." But he found on reflection: "I always read a page and think, God, this is really boring." Still, he was seizing chances in which to explore safely the issues uppermost in his mind. The writing sample he produced for my study provided just such an opportunity.

Ethan was aware that he had been mulling over the question of the function of spiritual faith throughout the past year. In a medieval philosophy class, he had been exposed to the theoretical concept of faith, principally the idea that hope can sustain people through life's vicissitudes. But he questioned how deeply he "knew" what he had learned: "We take a test. I can write down such things as 'We only must believe in order to understand.' Or 'Reason inspires faith and faith inspires reason.' It all sounds so correct; the professor grades my test. I get an A. Thus I 'know' these things." In the writing sample for the study, he found himself unconsciously sifting through mental images of people he had encountered on his job—a search that ultimately enabled him to explore the concept of faith more fully. As an intern in a county attorney's office, he escorted families of murder victims to court and remained with them throughout their ordeal. At his first thought-sample interruption, he was mesmerized by these recollections. He said to me in our interview:

I didn't think of what I wanted to say—just thought of a woman in the courtroom her face, the suspect and the way he looked, impenetrable eyes—you want to get the feeling....Everyone's life has a life that extends far beyond them. How do they deal with a murder?

From the multiple images that surfaced he selected two cases to explore.

Later in the essay he was interrupted just as he began to expound on the function of faith:

To this I say, what is wrong with faith, what is wrong with believing in this greater justice, this one single concept that makes people live when there seems to be nothing to live for. I now (STOP) understand these lectures of these great men.

In both the written thought sample and in reflecting back during our interview, he explained that he again saw multiple images as he wrote this section. Not only did he visualize himself as an orator speaking to an imaginary audience and anticipating their response, but he also saw past conversations with people over similar issues on which he wished he had spoken his mind.

Ethan found this opportunity to write about something especially satisfying. He noted too that at other times, genuine commitment to an idea had led to much the same writing style. In a paper on Rupert Brooke, for instance, he recalled also saying in ringing oratorical fashion, "To this I say...." And on another occasion: "Yes, in a Henry Miller paper—same thing—I really believed in what I was trying to get across." He summed it up: "There are certain things that you just read and understand; then there are other things where you say, 'Yes, I know that!'" For Ethan, the mental images of the families of victims that had haunted him for a year finally found expression in an essay that enabled him to explore the philosophical issue of human resilience.

Writing as "Unconsciousness-Raising"

Annas Pratt (1985) has characterized the exploration of repressed feminine archetypes as "unconsciousness-raising," and this term might also aptly apply to the writing generated by the mental images of Warren and Ethan. In embracing the role of the unconscious in composing, some counterbalance is provided to the dominant rationalist view that emphasizes an impersonal reason (Johnson, 1987; Lloyd, 1984). This rationalist tradition and the discourse conventions that have arisen from it have a long rhetorical lineage (Brody, 1993). Yet, as Esther Harding (1971) has noted, academic thought devoid of spirit is likely to become increasingly sterile. The psyche or spirit that is repressed will, in turn, become more energized and compelled to seek expression elsewhere. Indeed, as Brand and Graves (1994) have said of our need to go beyond rationalist definitions of cognition: "The greatest need for growth in composition studies lies now in the ways we create meaning beyond what is currently considered acceptable knowledge" (p. 5). The heartfelt writing of Warren and Ethan suggests too a way in which students can develop themselves both as individuals and as writers. Rather than appearing as inappropriately confessional, this expression of the unconscious self manifests what Jung (1968) has called an individual's "reality in potentia" (p. 279). Some students, like Warren, may find their unconscious concerns covertly inspiring their writing. Others, like Ethan and Fan Shen, may produce new and energized shapes of discourse. Thus, "unconsciousness-raising" may lead to significant changes in the ways we describe cognition, the development of the writer's self, and the writing processes and products that emerge from it. ☺

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