

2006

McLuhan's Warning, Frye's Strategy, Emerson's Dream

Rich Murphy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Instructional Media Design Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Murphy, Rich (2006) "McLuhan's Warning, Frye's Strategy, Emerson's Dream," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*. Vol. 12 , Article 8.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl12cInp>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol12/iss1/8>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

McLuhan's Warning, Frye's Strategy, Emerson's Dream

Cover Page Footnote

Rich Murphy has published poems in hundreds of literary periodicals including Rolling Stone, Poetry Magazine, and Negative Capability. He taught poetry at Bradford College and until recently at Emmanuel College in Boston, where he was also Director of Writing Programs.

McLuhan's Warning, Frye's Strategy, Emerson's Dream

Rich Murphy

*Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands,
and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the
poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when
they are so engaged?*
—Henry David Thoreau

*So I cracked up. My brain, literally, snapped under the weirdness of being a
Poet, a successful one and being BECAUSE OF MY JOB (which all agree is
noble and good and all that) an outcast.*
—Lew Welch

*The end of human activity is not rest, but rather richer and better human
activity.*
—Richard Rorty

I have two old friends of thirty-five years. For the last twenty years the only time we see each other is on New Year's Eve when we go out to dinner and back to one of our homes. They have been married since I first met them; I have been through a few marriages, periods of celibacy, relationships. To them my life has been "crazy" and often a source of vicarious entertainment because of the stories I would bring to the impending new year. At best one of them may have seen me as a clown twisting conventions into balloon animals. They have lived their lives within the social conventions of late twentieth-century America, returning to the same vacation spots, following the same rituals of daily life, and remaining at the same jobs. They view change with suspicion and fear, a source of depression. One had a computer on his work desk for ten years before he turned it on. The other can't sit quietly in a room for more than a couple of minutes, so there is no opportunity for reflection or self-conscious decision making, never mind creating. Both have been relatively successful men living middle class lives. Both men have played by the rules and will retire early. They have lived the mass media's American dream and have only woken to pull the blankets tighter to the chin. In the richest and freest country in the history of the world, a country at the height of its powers, this is the best that our higher education system can do in a democracy where each individual is said to be most valued.

Rich Murphy has published poems in hundreds of literary periodicals including Rolling Stone, Poetry Magazine, and Negative Capability. He taught poetry at Bradford College and until recently at Emmanuel College in Boston, where he was also Director of Writing Programs.

In literature and even in film there are plenty of examples of protagonists living a different American dream or living the negative to the American dream, a kind of warning for those reading. The American dream in literature is one where the character takes his/her life with all its foibles and problems and creates a life that is his/her own on the margins of society. College graduates, even high school graduates, have read many of these novels and autobiographies. What keeps students from embracing the creative function in these characters is a misunderstanding of the relation of fiction and someone's personal story to their lives. Perhaps they don't know how to read or watch a film. Perhaps the circumstances of their lives seem too frightening. In any case, being an audience to the rich examples in literature and film isn't enough for citizens to stop being audiences to their own lives. Attempts at meta-literature during the last half of the twentieth century invited the audience to involve itself in interpretation. So, in the spirit of postmodern theater and fiction, perhaps it is time to bolster college-level literature courses with literary writing and give the writing programs equal legitimacy in a further attempt to involve potential audiences.

I am writing this essay as a poet and instructor, and I will attempt to explain the value to the college curriculum of poetry as literary writing. My audience is made up of faculty who teach writing in the arts and humanities, faculty who teach writing as an art, faculty and administrators interested in the place of poetry as literary writing in "writing-across-the-curriculum" programs, college graduates who have had the opportunity to take courses in poetry, and folks who haven't taken those courses but who read and write poetry or other kinds of literary writing.

I will be referring to poetry in this essay. However, all literary writing (whether fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, or writing about literature) practice the same associative and inductive reasoning skills. Literary writing gives students practice using associative and inductive thinking skills necessary for creative lives. I wish to help bolster the legitimacy of poetry and other forms of literary writing in academic and nonacademic cultures by calling attention to how they are tools for citizenry.

Though in "The Poet" Ralph Waldo Emerson calls out for the first American poet, he also sets the bar for the citizenry suggesting that the impressions of nature on all citizens should make them artists: "Every touch should thrill. Every man should be so much an artist that he could report in conversation what had befallen him" (249). Here and elsewhere in his essay, Emerson is suggesting that in a democracy everyone could be, should be, a poet. I think that he would even have been satisfied with each citizen being "of subtle mind, whose head appeared to be a music-box of delicate tunes and rhythms, and whose skill, and command of language, we could not sufficiently praise" (250). Given his numerous essays that call the American citizen to the poetic task, I believe that he hoped that someday every citizen in a democracy would have enough of a "subtle mind" to recognize and remember that he or she mediates his or her reality. He wished for each citizen to be a "contemporary" poet, to remember to always be open to the awe of living life, and open to the sensibility of a poet. From his first essay, Emerson tells us this. In "Nature" he states that it is up to every man to find his own truth. In fact, the essay is a call to Americans to do just that, find America's own truth as a nation:

We must trust the perfection of the creation so far, as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy. Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth. In like manner, nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition, that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature?

That dream of citizen-poets has been lost to American society.

Joseph Brodsky calls attention to the ever growing divide between poet and citizen when he reminds society of its responsibility:

the social function of a poet is writing, which he does not by society's appointment but by his own volition. His only duty is to his language, that is, to write well. By writing, especially by writing well, in the language of his society, a poet takes a large step toward it. It is society's job to meet him halfway, that is, to open his book and to read it. (qtd. in Stephenson)

He takes for granted the gap between reader and writer, and the "duty" and "job" recall labor instead of the sense of play found in literary writing. In fact, there seems to be something desperate in Brodsky's placing responsibilities. American culture seems to have come to validate Marshall McLuhan's speculation that it fosters "a conspiracy to make the artist a frill, a fribble, or a Milltown" (66). I don't believe the literary arts or any other art form was ever popular in the United States. However, I am attempting to affix to literary writing greater value than it has had, even in the academy.

The divide in book culture between literary writer and reader is assumed and supported in the academy. In *Differentials*, Marjorie Perloff also assumes that there has been a decline in the arts and humanities and attributes the problem at least partially to curriculum changes over the past few decades: "without clear cut notions of *why* it is worthwhile to read literary texts, whether by established or marginalized writers, in the first place, the study of 'literature' becomes no more than a chore, a way of satisfying distribution requirements" (15). Perloff urges a change in pedagogy in literary studies. She suggests, "What is urgently needed . . . is a more 'differential' and inductive approach to literary study, indeed to the humanities in general" (16). Though I think the problem for the arts and humanities is one that has its roots deeper in our history, I agree with her thesis in its focus. However, I am interested in "*why* it is worthwhile" and how a teacher of literary writing brings about its value to students so that its legitimacy may be secured.

McLuhan had insight into the predicaments of the artist and audience (literary writer and reader). He rightly defined the artist broadly: "The artist is the man [sic] in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time. He is the man of integral awareness" (65). His definition is in keeping with Emerson's poet as the man who "announces that which no man foretold . . . the true and only doctor" and fine tunes Northrop Frye's notion that the poet doesn't make any particular or specific statements (63). He or she tells us not what happened, but what usually happens. While Aristotle refers to the difference between fact and that of universal truth, McLuhan suggests that the poet perceives new patterns of understand-

ing. Neil Postman, one such "artist," refers to the arrival of 'new knowledge' as "great media-metaphor shift[s]" (16). These new patterns that at first disturb older patterns of understanding become conventions that are lived by.

McLuhan assumes there is much one can do about those social mythologies. Later in his book, McLuhan argues the value of the artist as the "man of integral awareness" (65). He says, "The artist can correct the sense of ratios before the blow of new technology has numbed and subliminal groping and reaction begin," and adds, "in experimental art, men are given the exact specifications of coming violence to their own psyches from their own counter-irritants or technology" (65). McLuhan is referring to the process of the creative act that allows the artist to stand outside the conventions that engage the rest of the society. The attributes he gives the artist are those of knowing how to live among old, new, and future conventions, using the attributes to think outside conventions' boxes whether they be social or academic, using the conventions to create his or her life. He writes, "The ability of the artist to sidestep the bully blow of new technology of any age, and to parry such violence with full awareness, is age old" (65). McLuhan suggests that all creative people have this ability which allows them to avoid becoming irrelevant by new technology or lost in it.

He goes on to state that artists have the "exact information of how to rearrange one's psyche in order to anticipate the next blow from our own extended faculties" (66). McLuhan is explaining the functioning imagination and its ability to anticipate change and wonders "if men were able to be convinced that art is precise advance knowledge of how to cope with the psychic and social consequences of the next technology, would they all become artists? Or would they begin a careful translation of new art forms into social navigation charts?" (66). Teachers whose lives involve the arts can use McLuhan's remarkable insights to their advantage because he adds legitimacy to their work. However, to use his insights to validate poetry, teachers need first to recognize it and then to call students' attention to it. They need to allow students to discover ways into art. Teachers who teach poetry writing will find Frye a good guide to this end.

By explaining literary writing, Frye moves us beyond McLuhan's implicit goals to practical strategies. In *The Educated Imagination*, Frye reinforces McLuhan and Emerson. He states, "The literary writer isn't giving information, either about a subject or about his [sic] state of mind: he's trying to let something take on its own form, whether it's a poem or play or novel or whatever. . . . The writer of literature can only write what takes shape in his mind" (46). Frye is explaining the concentration that allows form and content or that allows content to determine the form of the student's writing.

For writers to concentrate on the shape of a piece of literature, they will need to put aesthetic distance between themselves and the conventions about which they wish to write. Once aesthetic distance is achieved, they may also achieve integral awareness or the ability to recognize the possible contexts for the conventions that they will be using. The awareness allows writers to live and work outside, among but not within conventions, or at least not immersed in the conventions upon which writers wish to concentrate. By working outside conventions, writers control their use, which ones are used and to what extent. This effort creates new *possible* conventions, from which derives the cry "make it new." Integral awareness becomes an experience of the sublime when writers, working among the conventions, recognize that the only conventions they have are the

ones they make. Student writers will soon want to learn how to use references to the sublime in their writing. Presenting the unrepresentable in poetry is the distance a poet travels within a poem.

I explain how to live among conventions with integral awareness to students using my version of *Alice in Wonderland*. When Alice is very small, she is a mouse in the house, lost in the convention of home or perhaps marriage. McLuhan and Quentin Fiore put it this way: “One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water, since they have no anti-environment which would enable them to perceive the element they live in” (175). My Alice is unaware of the water, that she is McLuhan’s fish. When Alice is larger than the house and wears the house as a garment, her head out a chimney, her arms out windows, the house’s peak rests along her shoulders as though it were a dress, and, her legs through the house’s floor, Alice is using the convention of home or marriage as a tool. She is well aware of her environment and is making it her own. The difference is one of control and lack of control of those conventions. In a world where new knowledge creates the crisis of the day, students need to learn how to use old conventions as tools so that the crisis of tomorrow doesn’t overwhelm them but rather is anticipated. After all, from the crises of the day come the conventions of tomorrow.

Once students understand how to give shape on the page to what takes shape in their minds, the teacher of poetry or other literary writing then focuses students on bringing each of what Frye calls the two dreams of literature (wish fulfillment and anxiety) into conscious visions and letting their ideas take shape on paper. By helping students focus in this way, the teachers invite students to experience McLuhan’s integral awareness in multiple ways. Students also begin to obtain a sense for the exact proportions necessary to prepare their psyches and prevent their reacting to each new knowledge and their own extended faculties. Student writers get this practice first by writing each kind of dream and integrating it in their writing of one work. The practice allows students to imagine how the next blow or paradigm shift might impact their worlds and how to adjust successfully to maintain their lives as creative project. Living among and not in conventions is what should be expected of an educated person.

When students take time to explore metaphor, they are given permission to resist the coercive cultural performative impulses while concentrating on allowing their topic (in relation to the context to the world around it) to take on its shape in their minds. When students work with metaphor, they begin exploring and inhabiting other worlds, other possible worlds whether those worlds are anxiety ridden or ideal or somewhere in between. What students discover is that this exercise is play and that the play of childhood is not alien to the adult world; in fact, it’s integral to it. Play becomes their work, and work becomes play in that a poet takes words seriously to have fun with them. The development of the imagination isn’t simply for children. Once the ambiguity of possibilities is arrived at in writing, students may also be led by language play to choose or create career paths and lifestyles that resist coercion, intimidation, and alienation.

Instructors who move beyond metaphor do students the greatest service by also introducing them to postmodern poetics, and they will continue to find Emerson a guide. When students understand Emerson’s poet as “namer” (“Poet” 249) and recognize that “we live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them. Under the oldest mouldiest conventions a man of native force pros-

pers just as well as in the newest world, and that by skill of handling and treatment" (275), they become empowered and may begin to understand what Ferdinand de Saussure meant by signifiers. They realize that art may be created to illustrate the alternative possible conventions to those provided them through social "reality." Students are empowered to create their own poetry and reality for themselves. When we take the idea of naming seriously, we move beyond symbolism into the world's mystery that we have been a part of all along, or, as Wallace Stevens instructs, "Phoebus was/A name for something that never could be named" (381). Now, to use words to communicate in a world without names, the writer must abandon the names of the English language and create temporary names for the subjects and objects around them. The empowerment of naming when composing a poem aids students because they are composing their own reality.

In *The Poetics of Transition*, Jonathan Levin illuminates the linkage between Emerson and postmodern poetics. He explains the imagination's function in "naming" or what he calls the aesthetics of pragmatism as follows: "The pragmatist imagination is the site where this reincorporation is endlessly negotiated. For the pragmatist, imagination is exercised in full awareness of its limitations. Pragmatists posit the ultimate value of imaginative activity even as they underscore the inadequacy of any metaphor or narrative that activity might produce" (196).

The practice of a "poetics of transition" brings students into the world of wonder that is the one they inhabit. It allows them to remind their readers of the sublime that is with them always. The pragmatist imagination is one integrally aware. Students also then create their own conventions by picking and choosing among the various parts of them. When writing poetry using symbolism, writers take it as far as the metaphysics of creation mythology. When writing postmodern poetry, writers take it to the more epistemologically honest edge of knowledge and conventions where they might find the "unpresentable" sublime, the experience of being alive. The creative experience of the postmodern writer is sublime because of the terror of no logos and because of the possible worlds this allows the writer to suggest. The experience is one of Nietzsche's cosmic dancer turning work into child's play and of Sartre's "condemned to freedom." It is also Jacques Derrida's aporia, McLuhan's integral awareness, as well as Emerson's skater confronting the surfaces of things.

The benefits of students writing a postsymbolist poetry using a "poetic of transition" are clear. Not only do students write poetry that confronts the conventional names of things and avoids symbolism which requires interpretation fixed by culture, but they also learn more easily the relation between art and their lives. The idea of the sublime becomes accessible in each of their realities day to day because the students must consider the conventions before treating the subjects and objects they are writing about. The writing is more genuine. It becomes experiential. The writer and reader may come away with the experience of being alive. Each line of poetry reminds the reader and the writer of the limitations of language—the limitations of convention—and points to the sublime.

Mark Federman, Chief Strategist at the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto, may help clarify the experiential nature of literary writing to students and may clarify how the practice resembles the students' world. In "The Cultural Paradox of the Global Village," in referring to contemporary art, he explains:

It is experiential, as opposed to prescribed, pre-scripted and

doctrinaire in its constructive chaos. Previously, physical objects in relation to local geography allow us to determine much about identity. Now, in an age of instantaneous communications that eliminates the effects of geographical distance and time zones, the identity is oriented by means of “scapes” that juxtapose multiple diverse environments from around the world. Thus the future, especially for emerging societies, is always elsewhere, constantly in flux, formed according to relational, as opposed to regional, patterns. Transnational traffic of ideas and experiences that are now abstract, form a new order that is ironically and paradoxically unstable, irregular, incomplete and undefined relative to our historical and physical experience. This is the new norm to which we are slowly becoming socialized. It is “broken” in our conventional sense, but that is its virtue in the reformation of the global society. In this case, the state of being broken is not a destructive force but a liberating one. As McLuhan said: “Breakdown is breakthrough.”

In his explanation Federman articulates the correlation between the world within which the writer writes and the kind of writing students would be attempting. The writing responds to the postmodern world, preparing writers for the kind of thinking they will need to do today and tomorrow. By implementing educational strategies for a postsymbolist literary writing, instructors are giving students the courage to create their own lives. By augmenting the value of literary writing throughout the educational system, we also heed McLuhan’s warning, practice Frye’s implicit strategy, and fulfill Emerson’s dream. What better mission for a democracy.

As a professor teaching literary writing at a small liberal arts college that is becoming more and more practical, more and more vocational, I see my job as becoming more and more difficult and more and more important. I am “the little old man who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he[sic] is about to pass” (Campbell 69). As in the Joseph Campbell’s chapter “Supernatural Aid” in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, I dispense a possible antidote to the wasteland that students will engage upon leaving college (69). I am comfortable with my efforts with those students whose concentration is Writing and Literature. However, the prognosis for general education students attending a class of literature or a class of literary writing seems poor to me. I doubt whether any of them have been able to use the medicines of aporia to create their own lives. I don’t know whether the vaccines have inoculated anyone from the mass media world of advertisement. I do know that many of our students who are Writing and Literature concentrators and general education students from other majors long to fill job openings in the marketing career path, so the chances of any of these graduates deliberately creating their own lives looks dismal from this vantage point. I cannot report that a cadre of students is out there reshaping the world in their images. I’ve been teaching twenty years.

Instead, I continue to loaf and invite my students “to lean and loafe at [their] ease and observe a spear of summer grass” (Whitman 63.) For many students this will be the last time they will have the opportunity to resist the coercive social forces of convention that motivate them to be useful in established ways. For

others, they will return at forty on Sunday afternoons after cutting suburban lawns to enrich sick souls with efforts in writing, a brave gesture against the overlapping conventions imprisoning them. Perhaps when my beard is whiter, I will learn of a former student or two who wrestled the dragon forces of the mundane death march to create an original life. Perhaps writing would no longer have had anything to do with that life. That would be fine. That would be a start, a citizen making a stand in integral awareness to become the poet of his or her life. Emerson would love it. ☺

Works Cited

- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton/Bollingen Series, 1968.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The Poet." *Emerson: Essays and Journals*. Garden City, NJ: International Collectors Library, 1968. 247-67.
- . "Nature." American Transcendentalism Web. January 10, 2006. <<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/nature.html>>.
- Federman, Mark. "The Cultural Paradox of the Global Village." *The McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology*, 2006. <www.utoronto.camcluhanCulturalParadoxOfTheGlobalVillage.pdf>.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Educated Imagination*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1964.
- Levin, Jonathan. *The Poetics of Transition*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: Signet, 1964.
- McLuhan, Marshall, and Fiore Questin. *War and Peace in the Global Village*. New York: Bantam, 1968.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*. Tuscaloosa: The U of Alabama P, 2004.
- Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Rorty, Richard. *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991. 39.
- Stephenson, Wen. "The Matter of Poetry." *The Atlantic Online*. April 1, 1996. May 11, 2002. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/poetry/poetint.htm>>.
- Stevens, Wallace. "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1978.
- Thoreau, Henry David. "Economy." Chapter 1-D, *Walden*. The Thoreau Reader. January 10, 2006. <eserver.org/thoreau/walden1d.html>.
- Welch, Lew. "Manifesto: Bread vs. Mozart's Watch." *How I Work As a Poet*. Berkeley: Grey Fox P, 1973. 3.
- Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself." *The Complete Poems*. New York: Penguin, 1982.