

‘MIRROR IMAGE’

TEGAN GIGANTE: CREATIVE PROJECT REVIEW

For the creative project I chose to compose a collection of poems to present to the class and wider program community as a recital and a printed booklet. During the course of the year I have written about two dozen pieces, more or less related to materials and ideas explored through the MA. I selected eight that were the most direct responses and memorised them for the presentation. In terms of creative praxis, the process can be expressed as comprising two parts: the act of composition and the reflective *tropos*, bringing the poems from the realm of the subjective to the ‘universal’ audience. The moments, images and narratives of the poems must find resonance with other people to survive. The activity of writing the poem has its own mystery; it is a way for various ideas and experiences that have been fermenting in the inner, inarticulate world to surface and make connections that I hadn’t previously considered; it involves ordering a “jumble of promiscuous sensory input into a meaning-bearing structure” (Nelson, 2001, p. 188) In memorising the pieces I re-internalise them; having been shaped into form by consciousness I can then consider each line, verse and aspect in the process of adding them to memory. This also helps them gain an aesthetic euphony, as I need to recite them to learn them, feeling and noticing the effect that is evoked by their sounds. In addition to sound, they become very vivid as a progression of images, activating a visual imagination and creating a landscape in the mind. The use of images in connection with memorisation of words is an ancient technique: creating an imaginal journey through inner landscape in the mind’s eye that follows a series of ‘landmarks’, each image representing a series of words. The ancient poets and bards used this as an effective method for remembering epic verse (Nelson, 2001, p. 195).

Although a theme or an idea will initiate a poem, lending a spark to start the process, I often write quickly, and the lines come to my mind *prior* to any intention or reasoning. What comes out are often surprising connections between. For example, in *Filter Theory* I began with the idea of the filter theory of consciousness in *Authors of the Impossible*, exploring the participatory nature of perception and the role of the imagination in constructing each experience of reality (Kripal, 2010). While writing it the phrase from Plato popped into my mind – “Listen to a likely story...” – and only later, upon reflection, did I link the two ideas. We help to build our ‘reality’, ceaselessly making thousands of sensory decisions a minute about what to register and alert to consciousness; we make *narratives*, living inside our own

myths and stories in a creative, imaginative process. There is no definitive truth or story, nor completely adequate system of organising information about the world. Facts are doomed to fail in this quantum, artistic, illusory participation between ourselves and an interactive universe. It is *stories* that offer a true insight to the actual experience of navigating reality. At a metaphysical level, we write stories about ourselves and about our encounters with the entities and environments around us; all philosophies, histories, cosmologies and theologies, are approximations, metaphors and paradigms to help us construct a system of integrating knowledge into a coherent framework. The truth is not in the content but the insight into the nature of the form: all content is delivered wrapped up in language, structure and perspective. In the final verse, I bring in Kripal's hermeneutic theory that we are simultaneously writing the cosmic script and being written.

An interesting feature of poetic investigation of ideas is the 'post-cognitive' process of connections. I write the poem, then in reflection I can unravel the streams of influence, the juxtaposition of subconscious sources. It is also true that during the creation I am actively synthesising stored memories: concepts, phrases and images previously independent become fused and assimilated while I write. The final process is this exploration, a kind of third pass of swooping into the poems and garnering meaning.

Sophia

The question of our own personal meaning of Sophia was raised during class. Wilma spoke about how her own transcendent experiences have shaped her life, initiating a desire for more knowledge and the pursuit of teaching and learning environments. Others in the class felt grateful for a feminine representation of divinity in the context of a patriarchal Judeo-Christian heritage. I closed my eyes to allow my own feelings and associations to surface; in the periphery of my mind's eye I saw a beautiful bird. I visualised woods around me and tried to clarify the image of the bird, which had a glorious paradise tail, but the bird was flying away from me through the trees and I felt the full sense of compulsion to follow. I identified the feeling immediately as that great and driving need to keep following the path towards understanding and knowledge; what Plato would call the *Eros to Know*. All year we have discussed the concept of 'discernment' in the context of a second epistemology: in this sense knowledge is not a noun but a verb, a quality of the knower rather than the qualities of the thing to be known. I have

found this idea in Christian theology before and feel like I have rediscovered it this year from other sources.

Sometimes I feel that the metaphor of ‘searching’ for knowledge can be misleading: it is not information that I am looking for, nor ultimately systems of inquiry. The search is rather a refinement of my own faculties, my own ability to perceive and speak truthfully and clearly. The term *discernment* seems to me to convey the sense of inner judgement when I encounter any particular data or idea: the gauge that signals to me whether or not I am on the right track: “Looking for elusive truth/ for clear and wiser sight”. This idea is linked to *certainty* which I will discuss further with the next poem. One connection within the poem (that I only made while writing this essay) is the subtle theme of divination in this process of refining discernment. The line “Hints and signs to guide me/ to remind me to believe” refers to both formal divinatory methods and the language of the cosmos that seems to offer spontaneous guidance in the form of synchronicities, appearance of symbols, and other meaningful events. Given that the poem is about a bird I would also suggest an unintentional reference to augury.¹ There is always more to a poem than I expect when I review them later; layers of meaning are revealed to myself that I wasn’t aware of at the time of writing. In this sense I find poetry an effective method of inquiry, to show me my own thinking patterns and allow hidden connections to come to consciousness.

Knowing

Sometimes I feel uneasy trying to shape intuitive, transcendent experiences into a rational discourse; William James suggested that “we instinctively recoil from seeing an object to which our emotions and affections are committed handled by the intellect as any other object is handled” (James; from website accessed 01/03/2014). I have been both attracted and resistant to this process during the course of the MA. The poem carries the theme of *Sophia* further and incorporates my long-term passion for Eastern philosophy, particularly the perennial philosophy as found in the teachings of Ramana Maharshi, Bede Griffiths, A.K.

¹ Signs of this kind are among the most significant and meaningful experiences I have had with divination. Patrick Curry’s lecture on enchantment comes to mind: when I see a special arrangement of trees, or a bird that seems to be communicating something to me, I feel as if the universe is communicating directly to me without me even asking the question. The quality of ‘encounter’ without premeditation is a key characteristic of these experiences. A few days before leaving the UK I saw a legless newt in the woods near Canterbury and knew immediately that it signified integration. Being a classic Alchemical symbol of conjunction, it carries this universal meaning as well as a personalised context. Integration has been a recurring theme this year and I felt as if this amphibian appearance signified a measure of success for both myself and the course.

Coomeraswamy et al. The insistence of Advaita Hinduism of mastering thought processes and not getting too caught up with any single mode or object of inquiry, avoiding identification with the mind and practicing being a witness to thoughts and sensory data. There is a subtle distinction between Platonic and Eastern conceptions of gnosis in that Eros, the desire to know, is fundamental to Plato and an obstacle in Indian thinking. The difference between the sentiment of *Sophia* and that of *Knowing* is that in the former I express the desire for knowledge, a sense of travelling a path towards somewhere or something as yet unrealised; in the latter I convey that abiding knowledge which is not seeking anything outside, that I have the fullest sense of during meditation, allowing thoughts to come and go without attaching too much importance to any of them. It is not the thoughts, nor my thinking faculties, that is the primary agent of knowledge. When I fully inhabit the stance of pure consciousness, what Heidegger would call *dasien* (Cheetham, 2005, p. 19) and Aristotle calls *ousia* (Milne, 2013 pp. 13-14), I find a most calm certainty in this quality of knowing. Prior to judgements which always bring doubts, is the constant inner awareness; *jnana*; gnosis.

Mirror Image

I wrote this poem during my research for the Module Three essay; reading Patrick Curry's book *Pulling down the Moon*; Geoffrey's *Moment of Astrology*; Wilhelm's introduction to the I Ching, and after hearing Lindsay Radermacher's lecture on astrology. At the time a friend asked me the challenging question of how divination using the stars can remain accurate when there are such different systems employed in different cultures; the same stars seem to be configured into different constellations and represent different things. This is still somewhat unresolved, but I feel that this year one of the really valuable tools I have picked up is a much better vocabulary to be able to articulate subtle and difficult ideas like this one. The words in this case are 'causality' and 'signification'. With this distinction in mind, I really began to understand the profound psychological and cosmological implications of communicating with the world in its own language without needing to answer the question of provenance.² By deriving a system rooted in the macrocosm, whether it is with archetypal images or groupings of distant stars, we see ourselves *reflected*. Understanding divination in its various guises as a form of practical Hermeticism, in which we experience the profound correspondences between different aspects of a universal order, it becomes a participatory practice of union with the

² (This doesn't mean I'm not still turning over the causality question in my musings...)

subjective and objective worlds. It is this feeling which I tried to capture in *Mirror Image*, as well as the relationship of poetry and the symbolic attitude to the imagination and metaphoric mindset required for divining.

The Poem

One night, laying in bed with a stack of books on the side table, I plucked out a Ted Hughes collection I had brought home from the library and leafed through, looking for something that caught me (Hughes, 1989). I found the title poem, *Wolfwatching*, and with the first line I knew I could never unread this poem. The narrator is a witness to a pair of wolves trapped in a London zoo enclosure, carrying a horrifying bleakness and a deep apprehension of wrong, and I felt the poem enter my body and utterly transform my state of being. The poem is complex, at once a powerful sense of honour and respect for these wild animals and the futile outrage at their incarceration. I felt the wolf meant so much beyond the borders of the page; that urban society has somehow trapped our own wildness, our non-rational embodied nature, that waits, almost hopeless, encircled somewhere within our personal and collective psyches. *Wolfwatching* inspired me to take up my pen, needing to voice a response to so intense an encounter, and what emerged was as much about the shocking power of art to transform as about our animal natures. It reminded me that poetry is so much more than entertainment. It is a form with the potential for initiation into alternative modes of perception; it can completely hijack the subjective boundaries and fly us out into the worlds beyond. The experience of reading Hughes' masterful lines reminded me of the enormous importance of art, made not as ornament but with magic. I had been just forming embryonic thoughts about my thesis, and this poem sharpened my resolve about the capacity for poems to effect profound change. The shifts can be subtle, not changing the world with street demonstrations or political action, but by rubbing at the edges of the Cartesian duality and materialist monopoly that frame our cultural paradigms.

From *Stop, Don't Read*

Stop, don't read, or if you read, realise
That those first words unheeded, these the next
Commit you to the immutable fact
Of your reading...

Every line or word, each syllable

Becomes the history of what you are

(Sworder, 2013)

Vision

Vision is also the result of a powerful experience. On the upper level of a bus heading into the beautiful Elham Valley to the west of Canterbury, on a glorious sun-filled Spring afternoon, I saw from the window, looking down into fields of grain crops, the movement of the sea of green in the light wind. From a totally ordinary, distracted busy mind, I shifted completely into another state of awareness. I was mesmerised by the sight and the moment felt so filled with significance, charged with meaning and compact with transcendence; an unlooked for, unexpected, enchanted encounter with the world. Later, writing the poem, I really felt the inadequacy of language to convey this type of experience, though the form is so well suited. Many times in the next while I recalled the moment on the bus and the state of being that it generated. I didn't examine it critically, just enjoyed the recollection; it was the process of writing that really unravelled the nature of the event. For this poem I tried to re-imagine the moment of the experience, bring it forward in memory and re-create the embodied state of being; then I wrote in the first person, as if the felt experience was happening simultaneous to my reflection. I noticed more – I believe the qualities were there in the initial episode without my noticing, only surfacing to consciousness in the dramatisation. The key quality that struck me then was the dissolution of boundaries between myself and the world; what I had experienced as a sort of light trance, becoming lost in the waving fields of wheat, was a softening of the often rigid borders between the subjective world and the rest of creation. The event had felt timeless, the bus moving past down the road, though I felt as though we had stopped, that time had stopped. Reflecting back, I saw how fleeting it had actually been, the resumption of ordinary time and state of self.

It seems significant that so many of this type of transcendent experiences occur within natural environments. It is so much easier to connect with living things, and from connection, the possibility of union. Our default is to communicate with other humans, as the least 'other' to us, though I wonder if that is because our culture is predominantly practiced by urban dwelling and manufactured environments that we are so firmly placed within the subjective world. The other key feature of the experience was *beauty*: the sight of the movement of the wind rippling on the grass, above any other descriptors, was *beautiful*. Around this time we

discussed Plato's *Symposium* in class and this experience was my inner reference to the idea that beauty is intrinsically tied to initiation into union with the cosmos, that the goal is to recognise beauty in what is closest to us (i.e. young, beautiful boys: other humans) and to gradually widen this appreciation to the beauty of the whole created cosmos.

Filter Theory

The initial idea for this poem came from a chapter in *Authors of the Impossible*, in which Kripal discusses various non-conventional theories of consciousness in the context of the dominance of behavioural, cognitive and neurological models in modern psychology.³ One of the alternative theories that particularly attracted me was the 'filter theory': that the function of consciousness is to select and arrange sensory data and cognitive processes from a much broader field of input than we register in our awareness. Thus, our analysis of an objective 'reality' is highly individualised and certainly not definitive. Writing the poem I remembered Robert Anton Wilson again and his coined phrase 'reality tunnel', from which I wrote the verse "(goggled, blinkered/ tinkered thinking, / tunnels, visions, / cryptic clues). Plato also makes a cameo with the line "Listen to a likely story"; although he uses this line to introduce a mythological narrative in the Myth of Er, I have always felt the same phrase lurking behind his dialogues, that he always challenges us to discern the truth rather than merely accept the theory. As the *Timaeus* argues, any "description of a likeness of the changeless, being a description of a mere likeness will be merely likely; for being has to becoming the same relation as truth to belief" (Plato, trans. Lee, p. 42). In some way, all systems of thought are relative paradigms and constitute *stories* as much as fiction. In retrospect these ideas complement each other well, various authors including Kripal, Anton Wilson and Plato coming together in quite a playful and light poem about the nature of perception and consciousness. The last verse serves to frame the whole piece in terms of Kripal's theory of hermeneutics, the broad theme of *Authors of the Impossible*, in which we are simultaneously writing and being written: "Create the game/ and write the rules,/ then forget/ the author here/ is you".

³ Unfortunately, I no longer have access to the book and didn't make a note of the authors cited by Kripal...

In the process of writing the poem I connected a number of different conceptual frameworks, a synthesis of a few favourite writers and ideas that only really became conscious upon later critical reflection.

Panta Rhei

Panta Rhei is a maxim from Heracleitus, the pre-Socratic philosopher who prefigures many of the basic metaphysical propositions adopted by Plato. The phrase literally means ‘all things flow’, the principle that everything that sense perception can consider is in a state of flux, and no static or fixed observations are possible. The poem is connected to *Filter Theory* but is concerned with the nature of the objective as suspiciously unreliable rather than our own subjective capabilities of assessment. Perhaps unreliable is the wrong term: rather I mean *unstable*. Everything we observe in our manifested environment is in a process of change. We may discern attributes and qualities or quantities and make the convenient assumption that these are, at least temporarily, in a fixed state; in actuality all physical ‘things’ are more accurately described as ‘processes’. When our senses cannot discern changes taking place, there is still a molecular exchange, a play of forces happening beyond the section of the spectrum that we are able to register. The relativity of time allows us to perceive only processes taking place on a similar scale to our own observation: we cannot observe with our senses the slow breakdown of stone into sand, of marble into dust. During visits to museums and galleries this year I felt a keen awareness of this relativity as I walked through halls of classical sculpture, my own life a brief flicker in comparison; the life of the statue yet brief in the context of the vast span of aeons of the life of the earth. We construct an experience of solidity that is conditioned by our own temporal perspective; change the perspective and we come closer to a view of the manifest universe as “a kind of neutral plastic material on which changing impressions are stamped by the things which enter it, making it appear different at different times. And the things which pass in and out of it are copies of the eternal realities...” (Plato, trans. Lee, p. 69).

The inspiration for the poem actually came from a chapter in *Authors of the Impossible* in which Kripal is interviewing the Ufologist Jacques Vallee. In Vallee’s office is an enormous stained glass window; he explains to Kripal that the window is a reminder of the nature of perceptible reality (along the lines of the filter theory), with a Platonic allusion to the sun as it enters into the spectrum of consciousness and is coloured and split, to cast shadows and patches of light in the room of the interior. Thus, the first lines of the poem: “This stained glass reality/

this lovely lens...". In the concluding verse I reintroduce Plato; "What came to be/ so yet becomes/ to be remade", referring to the section in the *Timaeus* that discusses the distinction between being and becoming; according to Plato, "sensible things are objects of opinion and sensation and therefore change..." (Plato, trans. Lee, p. 29).

An apple for the goddess

The final poem of the collection was written a few weeks prior to the conclusion of my stay in the U.K. It is a reflection on many of the themes of the MA and also on the nature of the creative process. I have created and participated in many spiritual rituals during my adult life, each one with a different character and marking many important thresholds in my personal life. During the course of this year I have attended a number of Christian rites, pagan ceremonies, a Catholic Easter procession through candlelit village streets in southern Spain, as well as all the small and private rituals such as lighting incense for a Tarot reading or a fire for the full moon. One of the deeper effects of this MA is a much more conscious and reflective participation in 'spiritual' activities. I wonder more now what exactly is happening, noticing better the quality of changes in my state of being or awareness during ritual or meditation. The experiences that inspired this poem occurred near the end of my journey in the northern hemisphere, so that I was bringing the culmination of all the personal transformations and developments of thought since the beginning of the program. The first was in Glastonbury, a small group ritual on the side of the Tor to mark World Goddess Day in early September. We assembled a simple shrine in the grass within a fruiting apple orchard. We chanted an ancient Greek hymn as each person in turn rose from the circle and placed an offering on the shrine. I had brought a really unusually shaped apple, exactly like a three-dimensional stylised heart. As I nestled it in the grass and said a silent prayer, I had a moment of critical thought: to whom, or what, did I gift the fruit, and why? What is the significance of sacrifice? Would it matter if we gathered the food offerings at the end of the rite and shared them as often happens? Later when I sat to write the poem I had these questions in mind. I also was very interested in the way my state of being is able to totally shift during intentional rituals like this one; the influence of what psychologists call 'set and setting'; the role of the ritual activities in changing modes of consciousness. Most of all I applied the concept of signification: the participation in a process of applied meaning that creates the event. In the divinatory ritual, it is the "*significant presentation of the symbol to consciousness*" that provides the link between the personal and the universal (Cornelius, 1994, p. 41, *author's italics*). In this case the symbol was the apple: were there deeper layers of meaning?

A few days later, a classmate and I drove the pilgrim route from London to Walsingham in Norfolk. The village is the site of a Christian church built around a shrine to 'Our Lady of Walsingham', the Madonna avatar that appeared in a vision to a local woman in the eleventh century. Since then (with a four-hundred-year interlude thanks to Henry VIII) the shrine and chapel has been a pilgrimage site. Although nominally C of E, the whole affair seemed very close to Catholicism. We attended several services over a few days, including blessing from the Holy Well, anointing with oil, the 'laying on of hands' for healing by the convent sisters; all accompanied by rich rituals such as the revelation of the Holy Sacrament and the swinging of incense censers. It was not the first time this year that I have experienced consecutive pagan and Church ceremonies; on this occasion I felt no tension at all, only the parallels and complementary qualities of the relationship between the two traditions. I particularly enjoyed the sermon by the Bishop at Walsingham. He held up the lovely glass jars used in the Eucharist, one filled with oil and the other water and spoke of the mystery that these ordinary, everyday substances are somehow transmuted by ritual into sacred materials. He also spoke of the Mass in which the wafer and wine become the body and blood of Christ. It seemed connected with the apple; in both events the intentional activity of ritual and an infusion of significance in the process of participatory symbolism were for me the key to understanding the mystery.

A week after these consecutive rituals, I stayed with my aunt in her country house in rural Kent. She has an apple orchard, and we spent a day picking fruit and baking them with wine. I felt like the two sets of spiritual symbols were being connected in the oven: the wine of the mass and the apple for the goddess. Plucking the apples from the tree I was filled with gratitude; buying food from the market seriously diminishes the awareness that the world brings forth, year after year, all that we need to sustain ourselves. We are eating sunshine, rain, minerals found by roots and carried to the fruiting body of the plant so we may be nourished. It is the most basic, foundational fact of our being alive; it is also a mystery. The biological processes are known to science; to the philosopher it is left to wonder the perfect order of things that what we need is exactly mirrored by what we are given.

I wrote the poem the day of apple-baking, sitting in the sunny autumn kitchen, basking in the sweet ripe scent filling the room. As I came to the final verse, I felt as if I apprehended the intrinsic meaning contained within the apple. I frame it in the poem as if it occurred to me

while I was engaged in the initial ritual, though I was only as I reflected in writing that it surfaced to consciousness:

I realise the apple is a vessel
bearing my true, hidden gift:
I bring the goddess acknowledgement,
gratitude, this small gesture of return.

Another level of the significance of the symbol that emerged while writing the poem relates to creative expression. Although I write poems for many reasons, the deepest cause lies in the processes of inspiration; life is a multi-coloured gift being ceaselessly given, we are fed in the forms of not only food but relationships, experiences and ideas. It is as if something speaks to us in a complex language of image and thought and we are invited to answer. I imagine a kind of cosmic hermeneutics in which all our expressions are responses to the astonishing phenomenon of existence. The “gesture of return” is the fruit of our considered answers; the seeds are planted in our psyches as concepts, events, a painting once seen or music heard, and we take them inside us and germinate them. What grows can then be offered back to the cosmos to become a seed for something else, a planted idea or image that is taken in elsewhere and sprouted.

The ritual of offerings can be a way of expressing gratitude for all the offerings given to us; in this case the archetype of the goddess represents the manifest world of creation and generation, the autumn harvest of crops a sacred gift from her to us. The props and objects that are given spiritual significance during ritual has the wider metaphysical implication of the sanctity of matter; that inherently everything has the capacity for being the vessel of the numinous: it all depends on our participation.

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