

Trance, Text and the Creative State

Abstract:

This paper aims to explore one aspect of creativity described by many writers, artists, psychologists, neurologists and philosophers – the ‘splitting’ of normal consciousness whilst in the creative state. The central feature and definition of the creative state (Fromm 34), whether of deep trance or reverie/daydream, is the narrowing of focus with a lessening of external distraction, and subsequent heightening of concentration and imagination - a state of ‘relaxed concentration’. This state of creative absorption essentially ‘opens’ us to an experience where the subject/object dichotomy inherent in normal consciousness is undermined (or, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphor, whilst composing our own creative work or reading the creative work of others, each of us are deterritorialised and reterritorialised, by an openness to experience, and knowledge, and information. We are, each of us, ‘shared around.’)

It is well known that the Greeks generally regarded creativity as a divine gift, oracular in nature. Socrates is said to have attributed his own creative and intuitive faculty of ‘understanding’ to the presence of his own ‘daemon.’ (Harding 14) This communion with the Muse, who provides the insight necessary for true poetic inspiration, is in terms of process, linked to trance ability. For those Greeks such as Socrates and Plato, to whom wisdom meant the exercising of the rational faculties, this ability to utilise the irrational was to be admired, and yet suspected. In the *Ion* Plato was however able to admit that:

The Muse first of all inspires men herself; and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration. For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired as well as possessed...For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him. (Dent 501)

The references to the creative ability of the poet being dependent upon trance ability are clear. The 'true' poet, like the oracle, composes not through deliberate rational process but by means of dissociation, and detachment, opening up to the influence of the Muse, who is feminine.

Aristotle similarly recognised this possibility for a shared writer/reader experience, although he is said to have disagreed with the Platonic belief that poetry could be dangerous because it excited emotions best kept under control. (Gowan 281) Aristotle instead believed the 'purgative' effects of this emotional excitement to be healthy. Aristotle was convinced of the benefits of verbal creativity as instructive, recognising the philosophical and cognitive importance of the exercising of the symbolic and metaphoric faculty of creative thought. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle described the crucial importance both of creative visualisation, and the importance to the writer of actually participating in 'feeling' rather than merely describing, through pretence, the emotions:

The poet should as far as possible visualise the actual scenes. In this way, seeing everything most vividly, as if he were an actual spectator of the events, he will be able to devise what is appropriate...Of writers with equal abilities, those who can actually make themselves feel the emotions described will be the most convincing.' (Dent 30)

Similarly, the Roman writer Longinus, in his *On the Sublime* asserts that verbal creativity is borne out of trance. To correspondingly have the desired effect, in essence, for a poetic text to 'work', the trance, or Platonic 'suspending' must be similarly effected in the reader. 'The effect of elevated language is, not to persuade the hearers, but to entrance them.' (100)

Longinus likewise recognised that this communication of 'entrancement' is most forcefully produced in the reader by the text which translates most effectively from language to image:

[P]owers of persuasion are to a large degree derived from images - for that is what some people call the representation of mental pictures...the word is applied to passages which, carried away by your feelings, you imagine you are actually seeing the subject of your description, and enable your audience to see it.' (121)

Early Christian doctrine in the Gospel of Saint John, on the other hand, taught that Christ represented the Word of God, or the Logos. According to Saint John, the 'Logos' is the means by which one mind reveals itself to another. By this conception, the creation of the universe as undertaken by God was allied to and assisted by Christ as God's creative Word. St. Augustine, influenced by Neo-Platonism, believed in a transcendent God who created and maintained the physical and mental attributes of the universe in his divine mind, or imagination. This conception led, after the Renaissance, to a general belief that the writer, through the use of language, in the state of creative absorption (where one has access, through meditation, to a transcendent God outside of time and space) was able to receive divine inspiration and assistance in the creating of works of beauty. One famous example can be taken from Milton, who in *Paradise Lost* makes explicit the connection between the Word of God and the words of the poet, as well as literally invoking the...*'Heavenly Muse...I thence Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song...That to the highth of this great argument I may assert eternal providence.'* (Lerner 101)

The mystery of the creative process, where ideas may well up involuntarily, is thus ascribed to a transcendent (because unwilled, sudden, from outside of conscious thought) divinity. And

yet, Milton's creative process, in terms of his experience of the arrival of inspiration, matches exactly the experience of many modern writers, most of whom now prefer the metaphor of the unconscious. Milton's friend, John Phillips, described Milton's experience of poetic inspiration as '[h]ee waking early had commonly a good stock of verses ready against his Ammanuensis came; which if it happened to bee later than ordinary, hee would complain, saying hee wanted to be milk'd.' (Harding 67)

The Romantics, of course, famously continued the mystical line, in the name of reifying the artist as 'seer.' William Blake's theory of the creative imagination, for example, was profoundly influenced by the writings of the mystic Jakob Boehme, who believed that (in what may be seen as an early metaphor for the conscious/unconscious dichotomy in the human mind), just as there existed in the mind of God an opposition between love and wrath, so too the human faculties of imagination and will/reason were borne of this antithetical relation. The real nature of humankind existed in the imagination, sustained by the divine nature of the imagination, and it was through the imagination that the creative human is able to transcend the limited and false ordinary reality, and return to unity with the divine, wherein exists our real and eternal nature. (Ford 53)

However, it might also be said that the arrival of the Romantic movement represents a vital point in the historical progression *away* from a belief in the divine origins of inspiration, towards a more self-based psychological explanation. When Coleridge talks, for example, of the creative product as 'determined by the balance between two fundamental tendencies, "spontaneous impulse" and "voluntary purpose" (Ford 203), we again recognise in his words a description of the splitting of consciousness in the creative moment between the creative and selective, unconscious and conscious aspects of thought described by modern psychology.

We are fortunate in that the Romantic poets left much in the way of explanation to describe how each of them experienced the creative state. Shelley for example, famously believed that the poet as *seer* expressed in verse his or her vision of an 'eternal' reality, witnessed during altered states of consciousness, in a state of passive concentration, which was difficult to maintain. Keats is said to have been particularly sensitive, not merely while absorbed in the creative state, but also in his waking hours. This ability to become 'absorbed' in his world and his work is something that Keats identified as an essential ability of the poet. (Webb 221) Keats's notion of Negative Capability describes how the poet, rather than groping or seeking for final answers to perhaps unanswerable questions, instead merely 'opens' him/herself to sensitive experience. This openness, as we shall see in a further chapter, has exact parallels amongst the research of those recent psychologists eager to identify the common traits of the creative person. While results and descriptions vary, the character trait of 'openness', both emotional and ideological (toleration of ambiguity), is the one recurrent trait (Fromm 53), apart from what might be described as an ability, also recognised by Keats, to 'concentrate.' This concentration is no mere passive ability to maintain the trance state, but also involves the concurrent use of the selective reasoning faculty, to judge and select deliberately. In this sense the mind is divided or split into two strains, the one passive and open, the other selective and controlling. (Fromm 57)

For many Twentieth century writers, with a few notable exceptions such as Yeats, Graves and Eliot, there is a consolidation of the psychological metaphor in terms of describing how the mind creates. This metaphor of the conscious/unconscious dichotomy was to lead those such as the Dadaist, Surrealist and Beat writers to increasingly trust in the unconscious as the source of creative inspiration. For example, while much has been written elsewhere about Freudian/Lacanian and Surrealist descriptions of creativity (notably in Kevin Brophy's excellent 'Creativity'), William Burroughs and his collaborator Brion Gysin, influenced by Surrealism and the Dadaist poet Tzara, utilised the technique of 'cut-up' because '[c]ut-ups establish new connections between images, and one's range of vision constantly expands'

allowing the writer to escape 'the mental mechanisms of repression.' (Burroughs & Gysin 4) This is a movement away from self-expression towards an examination of the way the language 'virus' creates the illusion of objective representation, and an exposing of the way (as Bakhtin, Kristeva, Deleuze and others have done) objective language forces upon us an illusory unified subjectivity.

What appears to have been the main cause of ascribing creativity to a divine, transcendent source, or a fractured self, is the fact that often inspiration seems to arrive involuntarily, sometimes against the writer's will. When Kipling states that 'I watched my pen write' and when Rimbaud declares 'I is someone else...I witness the breaking forth of my thought: I watch it, I listen to it' (Gowan 280), they are both describing essentially the same thing: the dissociation from external distraction, and utter absorption in the task at hand, without totally losing self-consciousness. This describes the two strains of thought working together, the 'witness' phenomenon or controlling aspect of thought regarding the 'creative', uncontrolled aspect of mind at work. When this happens it would seem natural to ascribe this apparent unwillful creativity to another, as Dickens did to 'some beneficent power' George Eliot to a 'not herself' Kipling to his 'daemon', R.L. Stevenson to his 'Brownies' or 'Little People', and Saul Bellow to his 'prompter.' Nietzsche (cited in Gowan: 280) described how:

Everything occurs quite without volition, as if an eruption of freedom, independence, power and divinity, the spontaneity of the images and similes is most remarkable...The concept of revelation, in the sense that something, suddenly, with unspeakable certainty and subtlety, becomes visible, audible, something that shakes and overturns one to the depths, simply describes the fact. One hears, one does not seek; one takes, one does not ask who gives; a thought flashes up like lightning, with necessity, unflinching formed - I have never had any choice!

For this reason, towards the end of the 19th Century, various thinkers were therefore led to question Descartes' Cogito, in the sense that the proposition 'I think' did not appear to take into account the recurring recognition among artists and intellectuals that often it was not the 'I' in the normal sense of the word, which does in fact do the thinking. As has been noted, there is often the sense among creative thinkers that the thinking is done partly or largely by an 'Other.' William James instead posited the proposition 'it thinks' while Myers proposed that a large part of our thinking is done by what he termed a 'subliminal self' which is only able to get its information through to us under trance conditions. But it was Eduard von Hartmann, in 1869, who located what he called the other 'thinker' in the unconscious mind, from out of which '...only what is already selected emerges from the night of the unconscious.' (Inglis 11)

This belief was taken up whole-heartedly by Freud, for whom the difference between the creative and the less creative lay in the creative person's being more able to access the unconscious. Unlike Freud, however (who found the correlation between the childlike imagination and that of the writer to be the result of an unfulfilled childhood, where adult fantasy and reverie are the result) humanistic psychology, on the other hand, generally views creativity as constructive and healthy, and has therefore tended to provide descriptions of how the creative state operates, and how it can be achieved. Although these descriptions vary, what each has in common (nearly two hundred years after Blake's own similar formulations) is the recognition of the importance of trance absorption and dissociation, as well as the recognition that there exists in the creative process the utilisation of what might be termed two 'strains' of thought, together with the identifying of the essential similarity between the childlike and creative imaginations. For example, Erica Fromm (1992) talks about the difference between 'primary' and 'secondary' process thinking, where primary process thinking is trance-based and involves 'thinking in non-verbal imagery' while 'secondary process thinking occurs in words and in sentences - in language rather than in imagery, pictures and symbols.' (From

136) Erica Fromm's examination of the differences between primary and secondary process thinking is similar to the neurological description of the relationship between the co-ordination of the right and left hemispheres of the brain. These descriptions of the seeming dichotomy between rational/irrational 'strains' of thought, such as Koestler's 'bisociation', for example, have resulted in descriptions as historically varied as 'Nietzsche's (1872) Apollonian versus Dionysian, Reigl's (1901) objectivistic versus subjectivistic, Wolfflin's (1915) linear versus painterly, Sorokin's (1941) ideational versus sensate, Sach's (1946) ethos versus pathos, Worringer's (1957) abstractive versus empathy, Werner's (1948) Dedifferentiated versus differentiated, McKellar's (1957) A. thinking versus R. thinking, or Berlyne's (1965) autistic versus directed thinking.' (Boden 164)

More recently, neurological research too has supported many of the claims of these psychologists. Much of this research has centred on the discovery that the brain consists of two hemispheres, which measurably process and release information according to its nature either as language, speech or logical proposition, or alternatively imagistic, musical, metaphorical and analogical thought. How this relates to the creative moment can be seen in the way, during hypnotic, dream or creative states, the brain shifts its cognitive processing more towards the right hemisphere. However, as many writers and thinkers have noticed, creative thinking is not always passive, but generally also involves selective concentration, or what might be termed 'strategic intuition' with regards to selection of what is appropriate to the task at hand. To this end, Crawford and Gruzelier (1992) have described how, in the highly creative person, there exists an ability or willingness not only to utilise the right hemisphere, but also a correlated and necessary (to undertake and maintain concentration) ability to utilise the left hemisphere, so that those with creative ability are able to 'exhibit greater hemispheric specificity...depending on task demands.' (Fromm 263) This seems to explain the awareness of two 'strains' of thought, operating alongside one another, the one introducing previously unavailable material, the other selecting, consciously thinking, controlling 'strategically.' Similarly, the conclusions described by Bogen and Bogen (1969)

are based on the discovery that one hemisphere alone is able to support a personality, leading them to conclude that 'the individual with two intact hemispheres has the capacity for two distinct minds.'(Rothenberg & Hausman 257) Not only does this tally with recent neurological descriptions of creative thinking as a distinct form of communication 'between separate cortical modules that have not been previously associated...between regions of the brain that ordinarily are not strongly connected' (Heilman et al 369), so that, according to William James '[i]nstead of thoughts of concrete things patiently following one another in a beaten track of habitual suggestion, we have the most abrupt cross-cuts and transitions from one idea to another...' (374), but also the sense explicit in Paul Valery's description of his own creative practice whereby '(w)hen it is at work, the mind is constantly going from Self to Other.'(Rothenberg & Hausman 258)

This characteristic of the 'splitting' of the artist/readers' subjectivity while in the creative state also has resonances in the fields of philosophy, aesthetics and critical theory. For example, while the rationalism and materialism of Descartes, Hobbes, Bacon, and Locke, and the poetry of their influence was to result eventually in Romanticism, and a return to the reifying of the artist as 'seer', Emmanuel Kant also set himself to some degree against their thought. The result was Kantian aesthetics, and his belief that the poet does not merely 'imitate' nature, nor antecedent experience, but in fact, in a process which cannot be explained scientifically, appears to spontaneously, uniquely and unpredictably break the rules which govern ordinary perception. While this version of creativity is not attributable to anything outside the artist's individual consciousness, it nevertheless allows for the possibility of genuine originality, genuine inspiration. Accordingly, Kant is cited (38) as recognising that involuntary aspect of creativity whereby the artist, through the animating principle of a 'spirit' creates, although the artist does not 'know how he himself has come by his Ideas; and he has not the power to devise the like at pleasure or in accordance with a plan....'

Schopenhauer, cited in Young (12) similarly believed what he described as 'personal aims' to be incompatible with aesthetic participation in the creative text. Thus:

[P]articipation involves a special type of consciousness...Anything which is a genuine work of art must be created out of this *state*, created with the intention of prompting and aiding the recreation of a similar state in the mind of the reader...How does this happen? It happens when we "lose" ourselves in the object of perception so that 'we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception but the two have become one since the entire consciousness is filled and occupied by a single image of perception.

A more clear vision of the creative state would be hard to find. Similarly, Nietzsche, who was influenced by Schopenhauer, placed great importance on the ability of art to express the reality of immediate experience. For this reason, utilising the 'message in the medium' and predating the 'horizontal' and creative practices of Deleuze, Derrida and Kristeva, Nietzsche often wrote in a style which reflected the importance he placed upon art to express this truth, outside the restrictions of rational discourse. This is because Nietzsche recognised that the 'reality' communicated by this method was better able to express 'the affirmation of life in a spirit free of the mind's usual, familiar and secure habits of logic.' (Birenbaum 4) As was noted, Nietzsche experienced at first hand the non-volitional arrival of thought indicative of the creative moment, of thought witnessed as hypnagogic imagery. This thinking in images, the experience of which is so common to writers, and so important to readers, is in fact the norm amongst creative thinkers. (Gowan 240) Einstein is described in Raffel (86) as doing his best thinking in images, 'long before any connection with logical construction in words or other kinds of signs.'

Heidegger similarly noted the problem of theorising from a position 'apart'. The inevitable result of this species of analysis he believed was misinterpretation. This is because we are necessarily and always 'in' the world, always merged with the *Dasein* or 'givenness' of experience. To step back and seek impartiality from a contrary position merely results in illusion, and the paradoxical loss of the experience of reality. The truth of this essential intersubjectivity between individuals and objects is recognised in moments of absorption, where the illusory nature of the subject/object dichotomy is realised. In moments of creativity the unity of the 'life-world' is understood. For this reason Heidegger, like Nietzsche before him, reified creative language, particularly poetry, because of its ability to avoid the misinterpretations of rational theorisation and allude to, or express indirectly, that which cannot be directly said. In other words, because Heidegger said that '(t)he essence of being is never conclusively sayable' (Guignon 26), it is left to the figurative, symbolic and affective aspects of poetry to provide, in the absorbed mind of the reader, recognition of that more 'primordial' and actual absorption, which he believed to be the truth of reality.

Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari have also chosen on occasions to use a 'horizontal' creative language. Influenced by Nietzsche, their use of a stylised language can be seen as an attempt to communicate their philosophy in both form and content, believing as they do that such language best undermines the self-consciousness reinforced by more rational discourses. As well, Deleuze and Guattari in 'What is Philosophy?' utilise what they call an 'immanent' interpretation of the text, which, unlike Structural, Linguistic or Psychoanalytic criticism, does not impose a transcendent meaning upon the text. There is a tendency, they state, for every 'discipline to create its own illusions and to hide behind its own particular smokescreen.' (6) In other words, the application of ready-made concepts they find self-serving, self-propagating. The theoretical tool, when applied to the interpretation of a text, by its very nature will proceed to carve/create meaning in its own image, reflect itself, find itself in the complexity that is the text and call this the 'truth.' Rather, because for Deleuze and Guattari consciousness is merely an effect of what could be called a relational network, or

positive field of force or energy, and because everything is related in this connective synthesis, they prefer to examine the literary text in terms of its effects, thereby 'seeing how it works.' (Lingis 152) Reading the literary text involves a mixing with, becoming part of the bloc of sensations of the text as long as the experience lasts. According to Deleuze and Guattari it is the aim of all good art to transform, to bring the perceiving subject to the state of becoming, of fabulation, of deterritorialisation and subsequent reterritorialisation on the plane of composition, through the experiencing of the bloc of sensations which is the text, to a state of being one with the text, and thus with the cosmos/chaos, or what Joyce called the 'chaosmos.' (Gowan 223) The writer enables this process because of the way he or she 'twists' language. According to Deleuze, the writer is 'a foreigner in his own language; he does not mix another language with his, he shapes and sculpts a foreign language that does not pre-exist within his own language.' (Boundas & Olkowski 25) The possibility for true originality and communication of this exists, and the writer is one who 'invents affects' and who communicates these to the reader. 'Art thus enjoys a semblance of transcendence that is expressed not in a thing to be represented but in a paradigmatic character of projection and in the symbolic character of perspective.' (Deleuze & Guattari 193)

What Deleuze and others (Kristeva, Lacan and Irigaray, to some extent) attempt to explain is what essentially amounts to two different perspectives of reality, derived from two 'states' of mind, unified during what Hunt and Sampson have described as the process of 'reflexive thinking', that is, the doubling of the 'deeply personal' and the 'impersonal' selves in the creative state. (Hunt & Sampson 2) These states of mind, or what might be termed the 'selective' and 'creative' appear to exist in each of us to a varying degree. Just as in the time of Plato, Blake, and Nietzsche, art has power because of its ability to subvert a dominant ideology presented often as the voice of reason, of objectivity. And yet, generally, it is not a case of 'either or.' We each of us shift between the states of active engagement with outer perception, and day-dream, fantasy and sleep. The real shift occurs when self-consciousness is lost, when the boundary between subject and object is blurred. The move is from

propositional language to figurative and symbolic understanding, and feeling. From outer perception to inner creation, of correspondence, of image. In a state which is measurably (in terms of brain activity) different. A state in which experience appears richer, involuntary. In which the normal dichotomies between subject and object can appear dissolved. This is the creative state in which art is made, and in which, if the writer's art is effective, the reader participates.

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