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## Writing from the Big Brain: An Argument for Image and Process in Creative Writing Education

I've been thinking a lot about the relationship between word and image, as I fitfully attempt to move through the project that has defined the last several years of my life: a sprawling creative-nonfiction book based on an unpublished memoir by my great-grandmother. The book concerns my own female ancestors and the ideas I internalized from them about bodies and discipline and power and creativity and what it meant to be a Good (White) (Christian) Girl. I've explored all of this while experiencing infertility, pregnancy and the birth and infancy of my first child—deeply immersed in the messy, uncomfortable realm of the body, aware more than ever of the need to translate the body's shadows and messy, fleshy truths into words. (But how?)

For reasons I didn't fully understand, I found myself drawn for inspiration not only to creative nonfiction exploring similar themes (Maxine Hong Kingston, Gloria Anzaldúa, Maggie Nelson) but also, specifically, to hybrid visual-verbal memoirs (Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, Nora Krug's *Belonging*, Anne Carson's *Nox*, Anna Joy Springer's *The Vicious Red Relic, Love*). In 2015, I took a comics class and started exploring my ancestors' stories in this format—and was surprised to find that formal problems that had previously stymied me seemed easily resolved once I had the tools of literal image at my disposal. Visual metaphor became structurally load-bearing; more importantly, there was something about moving my hand across the page, in marking lines, that allowed the material itself to *move*—to unstick itself and begin to transcend the cramped conditions of its origin.

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It seemed so obvious, once I'd figured it out: a drawn line cannot leave the body behind. Whether it's polished or raw, loopy or straight, a drawn line cannot ever be anything other than a mark made by a body. A graphic narrative is, among other things, a record of a body's attempt to make sense of a story. As I continued to develop this work, I also paid more attention to my dreams and learned to practice a style of trancelike visualization called shamanic journeying. I didn't do either of these things *for* the sake of my writing, but found that they made my writing deeper and richer; it was like I was developing fluency in the visual language of my subconscious, or my soul, or my body—or all of the above, intertwined and enmeshed.

The part of me that imagined worlds into language was not, as I'd previously assumed, what my friend Jesslyn calls the “Little Brain” (the brain in the skull) but rather the Big Brain. The Big Brain is the body—the *whole* body, all the layers of it, including the energetic and emotional layers that are tricky to name. The Big Brain is a distinct yet porous entity, comprised of neuron and sinew and memory and intuition and what some of us might call spirit or soul. Tapping into the Big Brain and playing with its capacity for image, I saw how imagination is, or can be, a form of sight—a method of accessing truth. Images, conceived and stored in the body, want to emerge into art; it helps to think of art not as something we create, *ex nihilo*, but as something with its own independent life that comes *through* us.

I've thought a lot about what this experience, and these ideas, mean for creative writing education. I've wondered: if I were in an MFA program now, what kind of education would actually support my process? Might *all* writers—not just ones working on self-consciously hybrid texts—benefit from pedagogy that takes the entirety of the Big Brain into account? How might writing education be transformed if it ventured beyond the confines of the Little Brain—if it explicitly refused to leave the rest of the body behind? I'm specifically interested in a pedagogy that includes intentional encounters with visuality, and consideration of what we might call the energetics of Images.

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These questions are relevant for writers and educators in all genres—but I’m particularly curious about how Image and process work in nonfiction. It takes a particular kind of writerly courage to tell the story of one’s own bodily experience; as Melissa Febos discusses in her book *Body Work*, such work is often dismissed as “navel-gazing,” perhaps because “the navel, as the locus of all this disdain, has something to do with its connection to birth, and body, and the female” (18). Writers need support for doing the kind of generative “navel-gazing” that Febos celebrates—an exploration of self on the page that opens up into realms beyond the self. Writing pedagogy that stays locked in the Little Brain, that limits its focus to what the Little Brain can verbally name and analyze, is unlikely to help any of us get there. What we need is attention to the phenomenology of the writing process, and curiosity about the relationship between image and word, between body and world.

### **Learning to Fish**

It seems important to name, before moving forward, the three kinds of images I’ll be referring to in this essay: “image” in the strict sense of a picture or visual representation; “literary image” in the sense of an arrangement of words evoking a specific sense-picture (usually a visual one); and Image in the sense of an energetic presence that inspires or animates a work of art (including a written work). This final entity is the one I’m most interested in exploring here. It has been defined in various ways: as “an intellectual or emotional complex in a moment in time” (Ezra Pound); “a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche” (Gaston Bachelard); and for Lynda Barry “something that is more like a ghost than a picture.” Going forward, I will capitalize *Image* when referring to this entity.

Barry—a writer, cartoonist, and educator who claims to have spent her entire career chasing after the question of “What is an Image?”—describes the Image as “something which feels somehow alive, has no fixed meaning and is contained and transported by something that is not alive—a book, a song, a painting—anything we call an ‘art form’” (*Syllabus* 15). Notably, this definition of Image contains no

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specifically visual language. For Barry, Image is energetic, perhaps even ecstatic: a quality that has to do with perceived animation or life (dare I say spirit or soul?) rather than visuality.

In fact, for Barry, Images are not even found exclusively in works of art: “Images are also contained by certain objects that young children become deeply attached to, like a certain blanket a certain child can’t stand to be without...The blanket has come to contain something the child interacts with as if it were alive” (15). Unlike the purely visual qualities of the object, apparent to any observer—the blanket’s blueness, or fuzzy texture—this kind of Image emerges from somewhere within the child, drawn out from the object as though by magic.

Gaston Bachelard defines the “poetic image,” in *The Poetics of Space*, as “a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche” (xi). This definition extends Barry’s notion of the Image as stored within the body, drawn out by something external (the way the blanket draws out Image from within the child). Bachelard’s reference to the “*surface* of the psyche” suggests a layering of inner realms which exist at various levels of conscious awareness; the image comes into being precisely at the nexus between Psyche and World. For Bachelard, as for Barry, the Image is prelinguistic, “at the origin of the speaking being”; also like Barry, he also believes that the Image “has an entity and a dynamism of its own”—in Barry’s words, it feels “somehow alive” (xii).

Ezra Pound famously defined the Image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in a moment in time” (Caws 350). As this definition—from which mention of visuality is entirely absent—suggests, the visual accuracy of the Image, its descriptive power, is not the barometer of its worth. Though Imagists such as Pound and H.D. were known in part for the crystalline clarity of their literary images, visual accuracy was never their primary goal; in fact, Pound was quick to denigrate a rote devotion to visual description. “Don’t be ‘viewy,’” he writes in “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste.” “Don’t be descriptive; remember that the painter can describe a landscape much better than you can, and that he has

to know a deal more about it.” As Robert Duncan put it in *The H.D. Book*, the imagists “were working toward an intensity, a concentration of poetic force” rather than visual accuracy (45)

*Presence, force*—such words ascribe to the Image a power, a capacity to act upon its environment, that separates it from mere *existence*. Pound’s language is useful for distinguishing between the literary image in the way it’s usually discussed—any description or arrangement of words that brings a visual or sensory image to the mind of the reader—and Image, which is something trickier to name, precisely because it cannot be pointed to on the page in the way that a visual description can. To name it, one must rely upon language that veers away from straightforward literary analysis and enters into the subjective, the energetic, even the spiritual. To speak of an Image’s *presence* or *force* is to respect the Image as a distinct entity with heightened density and impact—perhaps even as a kind of living being in its own right.

Countless other creators who’ve theorized the creative process describe Image as “alive” in this way. Interestingly, several of them use a very specific metaphor: that of the fish. In her influential book *The Artist’s Way*, Julia Cameron describes art as an “image-using system,” echoing Barry’s description of art as a transport system. Cameron’s book, a guide to help artists of all kinds (including writers) move past creative blocks, speaks of the importance of maintaining an “inner well” of images to draw from when creating new work: “an artistic reservoir...ideally like a well-stocked trout pond” (20). She urges artists to “maintain this artistic ecosystem...[or] our well is apt to become depleted, stagnant or blocked” (20). For Cameron, we need to pay attention to the whole system that supports our creativity, and not just its products. Even if there were some reliable trick to catching fish, an purely extractive attitude toward fishing would quickly leave us with a ruined and depleted pond, unsuitable for future use.

In order to keep the pond well-stocked and the ecosystem healthy, Cameron suggests keeping a journal and going on weekly “artist dates” in which the artist spends dedicated time with their “inner artist”—whether this means going on a walk or playing with finger paint. Artist Dates, she argues, encourage the artist to interact more attentively and reciprocally with the sensory world: “Art is born from

attention...it is a wordless language even when our very art is to chase it with words. The artist's language is a sensual one, a language of felt experience. When we work at our art, we dip into the well of our experiences and scoop out images" (21). In this language of "dipping" and "scooping," Cameron echoes Barry and Bachelard's conception of the Image as somehow already living within the artist, yet made "salient" when brought to the surface.

In his essay "Souls on Ice," poet Mark Doty limns this process, charting the genesis of a poem from start to finish; his account resonates nicely with Cameron's theory that art begins in "attention" and draws from "a well of sensory experiences." Seeing a stack of frozen mackerel in a grocery store (yes, more fish!), something about the image captures Doty's attention; it's only after he's spent some time with the image, toying with language and noting the underlying themes of his metaphors, that he realizes he's *really* writing about his dead lover.

Doty claims that his imagination often compels him, in this fashion, to pay attention to particular features of the visual world, which then become the central images of his poems: "I've learned to trust that part of my imagination that gropes forward, feeling its way toward what it needs; to watch for the signs of fascination, the sense of compelled attention (*Look at me*, something seems to say, closely) that indicates that there's something I need to attend to" (Doty). In this way, Doty attributes not only life but a kind of wisdom or precognition to the poetic metaphor. "Our metaphors go on ahead of us," he concludes. "They know before we do."

As Ocean Vuong and others have noted, the word "metaphor" comes from the Greek "to carry over," which makes me think of Barry's description of art as a "transport system for living images." (It also makes me think of the uniquely indigenous metaphor for the essay form used by Elissa Washuta and Theresa Warburton in their introduction to *Shapes of Native Nonfiction*: the basket.) In literature, Image often tends to flare into being through metaphor or figurative language—language that is uniquely suited to capturing that moment when, to echo Bachelard, Psyche meets World. Doty writes movingly of how,

though he couldn't have known it when the mackerel caught his attention in the supermarket, it seems obvious in retrospect that their "sudden salience" in his experience had something to do with the grief that saturated his life at the time. "The poem was written some six months after my partner of a dozen years had died of AIDS," writes Doty, "and of course everything I wrote—everything I *saw*—was informed by that loss, by the overpowering emotional force of it." The metaphor and the Image it brings to life is thus born from a distinct confluence of sense and emotion, of visual attention and spiritual need. This is no accident; particularly with traumatic or painful subjects, Doty writes, some affective envoy is required to "serve as a container for emotion and idea, a vessel that can hold what's too slippery or charged or difficult to touch." Such containers seem to emerge from the sensory realm: involving *first* the body, *then* language, in the "retrieval of material." When the memory is too painful to deal with directly, the little fish—the Image—can carry it safely to the page.

Visionary filmmaker David Lynch describes his own artistic process in a similar fashion—also, interestingly, picturing ideas as fish: "You have to have patience, and a desire for an idea is like...putting a little bit of bait on a hook and lowering it into the water. And then you don't know when they're going to come or what will trigger them. But lo and behold, on a lucky day, bingo. You'll catch a fish. You'll catch an idea" (Lynch). The waters in which idea-fish swim are obscure, unconscious, but the writer can lure them into consciousness through patient waiting.

I don't fish myself, but I know that it mostly involves sitting around. It's as Gertrude Stein said: "It takes a lot of time to be a genius, you have to sit around so much doing nothing, really doing nothing" (Malcolm). But there's a difference between sitting around and fucking around, a difference between "really doing nothing" and wasting time.

"Really doing nothing" can look a lot of ways; Cameron's tool of the "Artist Date" is one way to take time for deliberately non-purposeful sensory attentiveness and play. Doty might not have been on an

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official Artist Date when he glimpsed those frozen fish in the supermarket and became captivated—but he was clearly in a state of mind that was open, receptive and alert.

Like Doty, I often find myself getting ideas while doing mindless chores; time in the car or shower can be surprisingly fertile. At these times, my mind is both lightly occupied and idle; I'm involved in some gently embodied reciprocal interaction with the visual or sensory world, not trapped in the analytic machinations of the Little Brain.

In any case, once the lucky artist has “caught” an idea—reeled in that little fish and fallen in love with it—they enter (if they are attentive and lucky) a particular kind of creative trance. This is a difficult state to describe; for my money, the Imagist poet H.D. did it best, in *Notes on Thought and Vision*, with her concept of the “over-mind,” in which she uses the metaphor of—wait for it—a jellyfish. This state is like “a cap of consciousness over my head,” H.D. writes. “When I am in that state of consciousness, things about me appear slightly blurred as if seen under water.... It is like a closed sea-plant, jellyfish or anemone. Into that over-mind, thoughts pass and are visible like fish swimming under clear water” (19). (H.D. also asserted that she wrote from not one brain but two; fascinatingly, she claimed that “the brain and the womb are both centres of consciousness, equally important” (21).) H.D.’s “over-mind” is an intriguing metaphor for the slightly altered state in which the writer is able to perceive and interact with Image; note how the fishlike “thoughts,” for H.D., are separate entities with their own life, adjacent to her body, located distinctly outside of the Little Brain. This state might seem strangely passive, as though the artist is observing rather than creating; yet this notion resonates with many of my own experiences, and many accounts I’ve read, in which immersion in a creative flow-state feels as though one is transcribing rather than writing—“receiving” or simply noting down Images that feel as though they’ve arrived from elsewhere, despite their startling intimacy.

From the combined accounts of these thinkers—a small yet intriguing sample—a picture of the creative process starts to emerge. Most describe their process as, essentially, an extended interaction with a



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living entity: an Image. In this process, the artist's deepest levels of consciousness somehow merge with the external world through some alchemy instigated by a certain quality of attention in which subject/object distinctions dissolve, as do distinctions between "living" and "nonliving" entities. From this alchemy, a heightened state of vision is achieved, and an Image is born into a work of art. Their collective emphasis on visuality is striking—especially because most don't create visual work, and none of them is concerned with reproducing the visual world mimetically. Visuality, here, seems to function primarily as a uniquely capacious "carrier" for something transcendent. It's "vision" in the sense of Visionary, "image" in the sense of "imagination"—sight is involved, but not straightforward sight. It's an *inner* sight—one that has some relationship to the outer sensory world, yet manifests in a kind of alchemy with the artist's unique inner experience.

In fact, this alchemy is precisely what Image seems to offer. When describing H.D.'s work, Duncan writes that her best images "conveyed not only the appearance of things or the sensual feel of things and moods, but experience, the reciprocity between inner and outer realities"; it is perhaps this "reciprocity" that Cameron gestures toward with her metaphor of the inner well, constantly re-stocked with fresh experiences from the outer world (42). Bachelard, too, describes a kind of "reciprocity": "At the level of the poetic image, the duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions" (is it just me, or does this description make you picture a leaping fish?) (xv). Ellen Bryan Voigt sums up this process nicely: "the image represents not so much the object, but the object as perceived by the subjective artist...image can supply not only what the writer-as-camera uncovers in the empirical world, or what the writer-as-ecstatic isolates and articulates from the whirl of the individual psyche, but the moment when both are fused in objects seen, heard, smelled, and rendered with human response still clinging to them" (qtd in Czerwiec 91). This ambient aura of "human response," somehow infused into the literary image on the page, may be one way to describe the mysterious "life" of Images.

Perhaps it's because the Image and its role in the creative process is so difficult to describe without resorting to hallucinatory or animistic language—language that conjures the transcendent, the notion of merging with something greater or at least *other* than oneself, with its own independent life-force and intelligence—that it has remained such a slippery entity.

The Image clearly has some relationship to visuality, and to sensory experience generally. Perhaps this has to do with the way that we encounter the visual/sensory world: holistically, pre-linguistically, with all of the Big Brain. But this nonlinear relationship is difficult to chart or describe without slipping into the register of metaphor.

Speaking of metaphor, it's deeply striking that all of these thinkers seem to independently have arrived at the metaphor of fish—but when I think about it, it makes a lot of sense. Fish, like Images, are slippery and alive; they emerge from a mysterious, watery substrate. Ideas come from some realm that seems “other”; perhaps it is outside of us, or perhaps it's a level of our psyche that's not always available to the conscious mind. (The ocean, famously, is the part of our Earth that remains least mapped, least penetrated and explored, by human eyes and hands and instruments). Anyhow, the idea-fish live somewhere in this murky substrate, and we learn to “catch” them through intuition and through lots and lots of patience. They are *there* for us, but only if we'll take the time to learn how to perceive them.

Despite the genuine diversity of ways that writers/artists have conceived of the creative process, there are many striking similarities between them (in the examples I've given, the emphasis on embodied sensory experience; the abundance of vision-based metaphors; the understanding of the writer/artist as interacting with a fishlike living entity somehow both internal and external to him/herself). One can find many more illuminating descriptions of process in the work of Anzaldúa, Annie Dillard, Renee Gladman, Linda Hogan, and many others—and that's just focusing on creative nonfiction. Given the richness and mysteriousness of this “process literature,” I believe that creative writers stand to benefit from a

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consideration of how they personally conceive of Image, and how they might develop a more conscious relationship with it.

First, though, I want to continue untangling the lower-case visual image from Image, and to consider why their relationship—both their actual relationship and their misleading conflation—has led to the marginalization of both in the academy, and in the culture at large. Though the Image and its lower-case cousin, the visual image, are distinct entities, their relationship is worth exploring, especially for those of us who work primarily with the written word. This relationship may be particularly helpful to elucidate for writers of creative nonfiction: those who utilize the tools of poetics, including metaphor and literary image, to evoke the embodied experience of a particular self at a particular time.

I know that for me, in my own tentative evolution from fiction into creative nonfiction, this issue of Image suddenly became pressing. I had written fiction in a way that seemed to rely entirely on my imagination—on what I could see when I closed my eyes. But to interrogate my own embodied experience, in a way that went beyond simply recording it, I had to consider and re-consider the relationship between body, world, and word—not in theory but in practice, as praxis. How could I use the tools of imagination and inner vision to go deeper into embodied experience? Inversely, how could I go deeper into my embodied experience to access something insightful and visionary? How could I represent both on the page, in a way that used the art of words but didn't betray the depth and confusion and richness of the prelinguistic, of the somatic? There was no map for this—but in the work of those who inspired me, from Kingston to Carson to Bechdel, image and Image, and the relationship between the two, seemed key.

Perhaps Febos puts it best: “Navel-gazing is not for the faint of heart... To place our flawed selves in the context of this magnificent, broken world is the opposite of narcissism, which is building a self-image that pleases you. For many years, I kept a quote from Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* tacked over my desk: “The work of the eyes is done. Go now and do the heart-work on the images imprisoned within

you” (20). Rilke, as quoted here, seems to concur with Bachelard, Barry, Cameron, Doty, et al, on the difference between the surface flimsiness of image—of that which we perceive with the eyes, or that which we construct with the ego—and the depth and life-giving force of the Images stored deep within the body, which can be carried onto the page only through spiritually and emotionally honest art.

### **Untangling Image and image**

In some ways it's unsurprising that our language around Image is impoverished, and that this fishy trickster-like entity would eventually become conflated with its more literal counterpart. Robert Duncan writes, “By 1937, twenty-five years after the birth of Imagism, all reference to the word *image*, once defined as presenting an intellectual and emotional complex, had been dissipated, and the term had come to indicate whatever in a poem brought a picture to the mind of the reader” (47). The confusion is understandable, given that the same word refers to both types of image, and the fact that they often overlap. To put it in Pound's language: distinguishing between an Image and a merely “viewy” description that lacks Presence would require readers and critics not only to buy into this distinction but also to discern what Presence is and how it manifests in a verbal image—a difficult ask, given our limited language for such matters.

As Heidi Czerwiec notes in her discussion of scholarship on the lyric essay, “there isn't a lot on the image in the lyric essay—most just point out lyric essays use a lot of descriptive imagery, or they may talk about hybrids incorporating visual elements as part of the text” (90). Czerwiec is interested in going beyond such accounts to investigate “how images function lyrically to reveal a specifically lyric process of mind” (90). In other words, images *do* something, besides just existing on the page ornamentally; in Czerwiec's terms, they enact thought. I agree—and I would go further and say that the Image, when imbued with the kind of energetic density described by Pound, constitute the very beating heart of the work. Thought is one element of it, but so are emotion and sense-memory and something like spirit or

soul. While a “viewy” description might describe a sight or landscape for the simple purpose of cataloguing, of accurately recording detail (I think of the heavy descriptions in 19<sup>th</sup>-century social novels), an Image does so while also lending a kind of psychic gravity to the work. Think of Annie Dillard’s description of the titular event in “Total Eclipse,” infused with strangeness and a terror of mortality: “The sun was going, and the world was wrong. The grasses were wrong; they were platinum. Their every detail...shone lightless and artificially distinct as an art photographer’s platinum print” (101). Like Doty’s fish, this Image is beautiful and visually detailed, but it gains its force from the way it’s infused with its writer’s terror of death, of nonexistence—the uncanny sense of dislocation, of witnessing her own life from the other side of time.

The Oxford English Dictionary’s first few definitions of “image” have little in common with the Image as discussed by Barry, Cameron, et al. It emphasizes visuality and artifice; the first two definitions offered are “An artificial imitation or representation of something” or “a likeness, portrait, picture, carving, or the like.” It’s not until the fifth definition that we get anything approaching Image: “A mental representation of something (esp. a visible object) created not by direct perception but by memory or imagination; a mental picture or impression; an idea, conception.”

The tension between the definitions of image and Image—and, relatedly, of “image” and “imagination”—is instructive. It points to the primacy of the visual in our culture over other bodily senses—a relic of the Enlightenment, which sought to describe the world in empirically verifiable terms. To this way of thinking, visual images are (or seem to be) much “realer” than smell or touch or sound or taste (or, needless to say, memory or emotion or imagination). You can point to an image. College freshmen, high in their dorm rooms at 2 a.m., may occasionally muse on the striking notion that “the colors I see might not be the colors you see”—but by and large, in our daily lives, we tend to think of images as stable, externally verifiable, and belonging to a shared reality.

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Perhaps for these reasons, the visual “image” has become so culturally powerful that we shouldn’t be surprised it has colonized the Image as a whole. The conflation between the two also, somewhat paradoxically, points to the ways in which Western culture mistrusts the visual—devaluing the image as a particularly seductive and real-seeming “imitation” of some more enduring truth. The OED definition suggests that the image—a “likeness,” something “artificial,” might deceive us or lead us astray. To the “enlightened” Western mind, language, supposedly a more logical and rational way of organizing experience—depending as it does on the less fallible “inner light” of reason—is often pitted against the unreliability of the visual.

Because of this rarely-acknowledged cultural doublethink, it’s impossible to discuss the image without falling into cultural snares laden with implicit values—as W.J.T. Mitchell insightfully discusses in his book *Iconology*. Mitchell writes, “Every theoretical answer to the questions, What is an image? How are images different from words? Seemed inevitably to fall back into prior questions of value and interest that could only be answered in historical terms” (3).

Mitchell illustrates how, throughout Western culture, images have often been conceptualized as secondary to both the world itself and to the word. The image-word binary, dating back at least as far as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s 1766 essay “Laocoon,” lines up with many other value-laden binaries: among them feminine/masculine, irrational/rational, and natural/cultural (*Iconology* 43). Western culture, in privileging the second item in each of those binaries, has therefore always expressed a fraught relationship with visibility. ([I’ve written elsewhere about how the lyric essay](#), in bridging some of these binaries, provides formal opportunities for challenging them; this may have to do with the particular space the lyric form makes for both image and Image).

But visibility is not uniquely resistant to the tidy organization of experience that language, in theory, promises; *no* element of experience, internal or external, can be completely captured in language. Furthermore, vision itself is a creative process. As Gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim describes, the eye

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and brain collaborate in our construction and interpretation of the visible world: “Far from being a mechanical recording of sensory elements, vision [is] a truly creative grasp of reality—imaginative, inventive, shrewd and beautiful” (viii). Arnheim continues: “the mind always functions as a whole. All perceiving is also thinking, all reasoning is also intuition, all observation is also invention” (viii).

I believe that it’s partly because of the privileging of the verbal within the academy, and the difficulty of describing the phenomenological complexities of visual experience in language, that the Venn-diagram overlap between Image and image exists. The visual may be privileged relative to the other four senses, but it’s still a *sense*—still a mysterious process of the body, uncapturable by language or logic; this creates a kind of mystification around images, one that engages all of our taken-for-granted cultural superstitions around the processes of perception and imagination and their role in art-making.

Mitchell’s work both intentionally and unintentionally illustrates such superstitions. He astutely outlines the many implicit binaries latent in our cultural discourse around images—yet he himself falls victim to some of the very prejudices encoded in these binary constructions. His book *What do Pictures Want?* is premised on the notion that we seem to treat visual images as if they’re living, according them outsize power and capacity to act upon us; therefore, he suggests, it would be a fruitful exercise to approach images with the conceit that they *are* living, and to ask them what they want. But Mitchell is careful, again and again, to qualify his statements—to make it clear that this conceit is an intellectual exercise, not an ontological position. In other words, he bends over backwards to make it clear he’s not advocating animism. “We are stuck with our magical, premodern attitudes toward objects, especially pictures,” he writes, “and our task is not to overcome these attitudes but to understand them, to work through their symptatology” (30).

Why think of these attitudes as “symptoms,” something we’re “stuck” with? Such an attitude seems both culturally chauvinistic and incredibly limiting in terms of potential perspectives for understanding human experience. In many cultures (including the ones with the sanest and most

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sustainable relationships to the natural world), “animism” is hardly “premodern”; it’s as contemporary and relevant as it ever was. But even without any awareness of this fact—even if one only limits oneself to accounts of the creative process by the very artists anointed as geniuses by the “modern” Western academy—it seems short-sighted to dismiss animism as a possibility, given that so many practicing artists and writers persistently speak of their characters, images, and finished artworks as *alive*. Why not take them at their word? Why not interrogate what is meant by “life” here, and accept the galvanizing invitation to question false boundaries between the living and the “nonliving,” the artistic subject and the artistic object? One might or might not end up embracing an animistic worldview at the end of this inquiry—but the fear of it, as a kind of contagious possibility, seems to be preventing the inquiry from happening at all.

This maddening refusal to touch anything resembling spirituality or “superstition” also helps account for the academy’s inability to address *process* in any sort of helpful way. Once a writer has been canonized—once their works have met with the stamp of cultural approval—their discussions of their own process are viewed, retroactively, as evidence of “genius.” If they describe their process in spiritual or hallucinatory language—like H.D.’s description of the “over-mind”—this is seen as artistic eccentricity or quirk. Or sometimes—if the truly visionary nature of the artist’s process is recognized—as evidence that the artist, the Genius, is different from the rest of us; the Genius has different needs, the Genius may be a little bit crazy, but the Genius is Special. The quality of the work justifies the eccentricity of its means, and we non-genius peons would never understand anyway.

But the truth is that nothing separates a “genius”—a Joan Didion or Toni Morrison or Anne Carson or James Baldwin—from the rest of us, at least in terms of process. Individual writers and artists may have varying levels of innate talent (I’m not sure what “talent” is, or whether it exists; that’s a subject for another essay); they definitely have varying levels of dedication, perseverance, and access to crucial privileges like money and education and whiteness. But the process, while inflected by each person’s



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specific preferences and capacities and limitations, is remarkably similar; listen to Morrison or Didion or your eight-year-old niece describe what it's like to make something, and they'll likely share very similar experiences.

As Picasso put it: "Everything you can imagine is real." The trick is not to be born with the accident of Genius, or to find clever ways to simulate it; the trick is to develop, or recover, a relationship to the reality of Images, to make friends with your own imagination.

As writer Elizabeth Gilbert lays out in a popular TED Talk, "genius" as a concept has evolved over time: from the original understanding that genius was something everyone *had*—an accompanying spirit that spoke through the creator—to the idea that genius was something one *was* (or, more likely, *was not*). This attitude has long inhabited English departments—and, as such, it's found its way into creative writing departments, too. Educators may sincerely believe in their students' capacities to create worthwhile work; at least some of them understand the democratic nature of genius and their role as educators to nurture it. But even those whose understanding of genius is least hampered by individualism and hierarchical thinking tend to lack a conscious awareness of this distinction, the language to communicate it, and the tools to empower their students.

This is where we come back, full circle, to image and Image: we have to stop being afraid of either, of both, and of their relationship to each other. We have to stop separating image from Image, and both from the Word. We have to recognize the ways in which the biases of the Academy, and of the West in general, have divorced us from the profound, holistic relationship to art that many of us had as children—in which we approached it both reverently and irreverently; in which magic was copresent with the mundane, in fact *was* the mundane; in which we accepted matter-of-factly that everything, including our words and pictures and yet-to-be-born ideas, were alive.

### **Peeling Back Language**

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This is part of the reason, I think, why we continue to privilege the workshop in creative writing pedagogy. Given all of the persistent Enlightenment-era biases outlined above, it's no surprise that verbal critique is the most prized form of discourse. The ritual of gathering in a room to *verbally* critique one another's *verbal* work seems to legitimate creative writing programs—already inherently questionable because of their “creative” bent.

But if the university is a space that might incubate creative writers (if not for the sake of Art Itself, then for the prestige that these nascent geniuses might eventually lend to the institution), then creative writers need space within the university to engage in something other than verbal critique and analysis. Writers need space to investigate and nurture process; to collectively experiment with various ways of approaching embodied sense, memory, and image; and to discuss what Bachelard calls “phenomenology of the imagination”: how does it feel to write? How do images arise to our consciousness? How do we know when an image or Image is worth paying attention to? Do we think of our Images, our characters, as “alive?” Why or why not—and, if so, how?

We need not identify as animists in order to put this into practice—though it would help if we didn't reflexively denigrate animism, either. Whether we think of our images' “life” as real or as metaphorical—emblems or envoys of our *own* interior life—is not a question that needs to be answered. It is a question I personally find very interesting, but it's probably not one that *can* be answered—certainly not with the verbal and analytic tools of academic writing. In any case, one needn't answer it in order to learn how to live in right relationship with Images themselves.

If it helps, we can use the supposedly more “rational” tool of cognitive science to justify making space for these discussions. Separate spheres of the brain govern different modes of engaging with the world: the rational left brain governs logic and language, seeking to analyze, reduce, and dissect, while the intuitive right brain governs images, spatial relations, and holistic perception, seeking to combine, connect, and relate. The left-right distinction might be an oversimplification, but it can be a useful one. The left brain

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is what we engage in workshop critique; the right brain is what understands Image, what helps us catch idea-fish, what helps us instinctively sense the length and shape of a line.

Betty Edwards, in her books *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* and *Drawing on the Artist Within*, seeks to utilize this science in pursuit of a similar goal to Barry's and Cameron's: liberating people to become more attentive, more playful and more creatively productive. Edwards describes how "L-mode," or the way of thinking dominated by the left brain, can easily come to dominate our interactions with the world when we don't consciously make space for the more playful, holistic "R-mode." Edwards describes how L-mode also dominates *the way we think about thinking*: "language seems to prevail over the nonverbal brain half to the extent that the age-old question 'Can there be thought without words?' has been endlessly pondered and debated...Because the verbal system is not well suited even to describing its silent partner, R-mode remains largely outside of everyday conscious, verbal awareness" (13). In other words, despite the importance of the holistic R-mode for many activities—from art-making to freeway-driving—it resists description, precisely because of verbal L-mode's impulse to classify and categorize.

Edwards, a drawing teacher by profession, offers up drawing as a way for her readers to engage more directly with R-mode and, thus, to increase their creative capacity in general. She pitches her book to a general public, not to artists in particular; the point, Edwards argues, is not for her readers to become excellent artists (though their drawing skills will improve) but for them to use drawing as a way of accessing "the artist within." Because drawing stimulates the right brain, the more a person draws, the less bound she'll be by the limiting logic-oriented left brain.

Edwards' book uses cognitive science rather than spiritual language, but it arrives at some of the same conclusions as the other thinkers cited above: the creative process defies and, in fact, is hampered by logical explanation; also, engaging directly and bodily with the visual world (in this case by drawing) frees one to be creative in all sorts of ways, not limited to the visual. Edwards' book, and brain-hemisphere theory in general, also provide a potential explanation for the slippery, quasi-animistic language used by the

thinkers cited above to describe the Image—as well as the commonalities within these thinkers’ descriptions (embodiment, visuality, sensual perception in general, a sense of connection or communion, a feeling of being outside of linear time).

With brain-hemisphere theory in mind, we can skirt the dizzying spiritual questions implied by such language (though I do think those are worth considering, separately, in their own right, by each individual artist/writer) and acknowledge that such wild descriptions—ghosts and jellyfish and wells full of trout—are results of L-mode’s comically fraught attempts to describe R-mode’s holistic, playful, image-based ways of thinking, feeling and perceiving. Even if we take a wholly scientific approach to creativity, we should be able to appreciate such process-descriptions for the glimpses they offer into individual artists’ ways of experiencing R-mode, and use them as jumping-off points for our own attempts to explore and articulate our own experiences.

Also: if Edwards’ theory and methods are valid, then it stands to reason that creative writers would benefit not only from spending more time in R-mode generally, but perhaps specifically from drawing. It’s certainly been helpful for me—but I’m hardly the only one. In her book *Calamities*, Renee Gladman describes a drawing practice that she engaged in for a period of time when she was blocked as a writer, during which she came to feel that writing and drawing were complementary forms of thinking. She quotes artist Monica Grzymala: ‘Drawing is a process of thought which is conducted by the hand,’ and wishes that the quote had ended ‘Thus, drawing is writing’ (105). Gladman continues: ‘You could draw to think; you could trace your hand along that wall, build something’ (118).

Though Gladman intuits qualitative differences between writing and drawing, she describes her drawings as somehow more naked and raw: the drawings ‘‘were underneath, something appearing out of something being exposed, and I wanted to say it was language with its skin peeled back’’ (102-103). Perhaps other writers would benefit from the ‘‘peeled-back’’ language of drawing: not only as an activity itself but as a way of uncovering new dimensions of language, dimensions that feel less constrained, more

naked and “exposed.” When words don’t arrive, or when words seem too limited, the “peeled-back” language of drawing might provide a bridge.

### **Celebrating Process**

Everyone—from agents to publishers to diverse communities of readers—wants more writing that carries that undeniable know-it-when-you-see it *zing* of vitality. If we want more of this work in the world, we have to be more honest about the conditions that support its creation and the conditions that, often inadvertently, police or gatekeep the creative impulse rather than nurturing it.

In light of the discussion above, and my own experience, and many conversations I’ve had with fellow-writers and students, I believe that aspiring and practicing creative writers would benefit from the following distinct yet related practices: exercises and daily practices designed to stimulate visual/sensory memory and visual/sensory *attention* to daily life; exercises and practices designed to encourage a more conscious relationship with dream-life, the subconscious, and spiritual “elsewheres”; drawing exercises and the development of a daily drawing practice; exposure to, and experimentation with, other forms of visual storytelling (collage, photography, comics); and reflection (individual and collective) on process and inspiration.

These ideas will surely face obstacles in being implemented in the academy, due to the anti-image and anti-process strains within many departments. However, I believe that they stand a better chance than ever before, due to increased enrollment within creative writing programs; increased ambivalence with the workshop model; and growth within the fields of image theory, affect theory, and interdisciplinary learning. Hopefully, this essay can help communicate what potentially stands to be gained by giving such methods a try.

Plus, formal academic institutions are hardly the only places where creative writing education happens; the suggestions above could be implemented by anyone, from informal peer groups to

independent online writing instructors to facilitators of writing workshops at community centers or hospitals or prisons to individuals in their own homes. But I want to particularly address myself to formal academic institutions—because they are the most resistant to change; because they are the places designated by the culture to offer formal stamps of aesthetic and professional approval; and because the biases of the dominant culture are most obvious there. It's exciting to imagine the potential that could be unleashed if the stodgiest and most uptight of our institutions actually became transformational creative incubators.

Our culture is tilted in so many ways towards making the creative process as difficult as possible, in as many unnecessary ways as possible. Writing programs didn't invent the problem, but they've been complicit in perpetuating it. We need programs that offer not only a sense of community and encouragement, but also specific tools for tuning out the *unnecessary* difficulties so that one can focus on the real, productive, juicy, soul-shaping difficulties of artistic practice. We need programs that nurture *whole* writers—ones that honor the big and little brains; the visionary as well as the rational; the sensory as well as the verbal; and the process as well as the product.

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