

Defining Logic, Defying Logic: Reflections on the Logic of Imagination



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I have spent a fair amount of time groping towards a certain way of imagining the imagination -- what I have attempted to quantify as an imaginal logic.

I have also spent a fair amount of time pontificating about its importance, like an old-style evangelist standing on my box in Hyde Park, shrieking against the despair of deified empirical thinking. "We must learn to value the imagination! It is the way to the mythic, the way to soul, the only reflection that can begin to capture a true representation, aware of its own distortions!"

I have been in love with the concept of imaginal logic, both because it began to capture something that I have for years believed, and somehow on a cellular level known to be important, and also because, in the immortal words of Monty Python heroine, A. Elk, "It is a theory, a theory of which it is mine." A. Elk's theory, after an enormous build-up, eventually emerges as "dinosaurs are very small in the front, large around the middle, and very small in the back."

It has occurred to me to be concerned that my theories of imaginal logic perhaps carry much the same weight and intuit the same depth.

This is a serious wounding in my thinking! Just how shallow and distorted are my reflections?

This question comes from a woman who spent the first twenty years of her life in front of mirrors in dance studios daily, gazing with addiction at herself. Of course, I was near-sighted most of that time, and when I finally got contact lenses, only wore them for two classes. The elegant sylph that I had seen reflected in the glass disappeared into a different kind of truth: five foot three, with lines not nearly as superb as I had known them to be. I did not want to see my reflection that clearly.

Perhaps there is something to be said for a bit of a lack of clarity. Perhaps the sylph that I imagined myself to be was somehow as truthful as 20/20 vision. (It certainly was more rewarding.) Perhaps the distortion that always accompanies any reflection is not only inevitable but also, somehow, desirable.

Perhaps, ultimately, this distortion is key to a theory on the logic of imagination: such a theory defies codification and definition, and slips, eel-like, from my comprehension.

So far, I have been content to discuss what it is not: not Aristotilian, not Cartesian, not respected by our logos-driven culture. It has become an exercise in Zen Buddhism: I cannot describe what it is, so I define it by negation. Somehow, it becomes a koan, where meaning dances in the edges of comprehension, flashing past our eyelids almost before we can identify it.

Yesterday has a queer sound
I thought I was thinking
But it was only the alarm clock
Partner yourself
On either side of the mirror
I think it's bedtime
Melander, 1997

Before I begin to unravel what the poem above means to me, I invite you to take a moment to reflect on what it might mean to you. Meanings shimmer and reflect both themselves and their perceivers, and while the gift of translation is a rich one, it also runs the risk of deflecting the authenticity of the experience at that initial moment of contact with the original thought.

So before I move on, I invite you to be still with the poem for a breath or two, allowing its truth to work on you without my interference. As Hakuin says, “for the details, see the verse” (Cleary 351).

That said, I wrote this poem several years ago, after a moment of being caught in the liminal world between wakefulness and sleep. I heard my alarm clock go off, and in a swirl somewhere within the interplay of conscious and unconscious thought, I had the idea that sound of the clock was something vastly important that emerged from my head. This moment on the edges of consciousness is often when I do my best thinking; if I can turn my rational mind off enough and still hover above sleep, I enter into a world that glistens with possibilities and my imagination can create its own intuitive links not bound by the linear logic of a waking day world in 21st Century Western culture. At this moment, however, the opposite had happened.

I had claimed ownership of and apportioned meaning to the blaringly artificial and invasive noise of an electric alarm slamming me awake into my responsibilities. The idea of this paradoxical duality began to work on me, and caught by the irony of my assumptions, I began to try to melt that dualism into comprehension.

As my incoherence transposed itself into a poem, it became its own koan. The process of having a “non-thought” sparked, along with an amused sense of self-awareness, a thought that became a poem. Where then, is the validity of the “non-thought”? If it can move us towards a thought, which in then in turn moves away from any kind of obvious, pedestrian “sense,” does it become part of an infinite, spiraling riddle back and forth between imaginal and linear logic that begins to birth a different kind of understanding?

Koans seem to stand on their own accord, self-contained and with a crystalline quality. Multifaceted, compressed like the proverbial diamond into a brilliant reflection of a larger truth, the flashes of their facets inspire similar flashes of illumination in the reader.

All imagining, on some level, is sparked by the minutiae of something that catches our attention: a word, a leaf, or an idea, which then moves outwards into larger relevance. As such, koans perhaps become a unique kind of a mirror, teasing us towards comprehension, frustrating us with their seemingly disjointed irony, and if we sit with them long enough (or quickly enough, which is the joy of their mercurial nature and message), we begin to see into our own thought processes. They move from being the noise of the alarm clock into the sound of a quiet revelation.

It is perhaps in this moment of process that a logic of the imagination begins to become apparent. As we gaze into the mirror, be it a still pool of water, a convex or concave lens, flat, or shattered into a million pieces, we can try to become aware of not only what we are seeing, but also how we are seeing it.

Dusk's circus ends
And Gaston's rêve revs
In silent lavender
Between pianissimo finger strokes
And the breath of candles...

A beautiful, dangerous innocent
With suckled juice of grapes
Running down his wrists
Gulps starlight and the smell of firs
Drinking himself in
And I wonder
Did he see stars shining through sighing pine boughs
And hear the egg of his death in sparkling sentimentality?
Or did he journey
With a vast roaring of ancient trees
Swirling towards an instant of
Crystallized crucifixion
Transfixed by his own horrible beauty?
Melander, 2000

Again, I invite you to sit with this poem and its mirror for a moment before I plunge into my description of its motivation and meaning. What truths and distortions flash off of its surface? Are they truths about you? About me? About the crystallization of crucifixion?

I wrote this piece at Christmas time, on an evening when my husband and I had returned from a rather frantic shopping trip surrounded by the Christmas-amassing masses, with traffic and crowds and long lines at the checkout counter. We had just pulled a sharply fragrant fir into our house, set into its place of honor in our front window for the better enjoyment of the holiday spirit.

The day slipped from California gold into that uniquely glowing moment of purple just before darkness, and my husband was stringing small lights that twinkled white and purple deep into the branches of the pine boughs as George Winston graciously joined us in his quiet rhapsody on the season. I sat, ready, for inspiration to strike, hoping for some words that might become a glass into which I could gaze about the evening and the holiday. Nothing happened. I was reflecting without reflection: an imaginal vampire. I lay back on the couch and begin to doze; instead of

looking at my reflection too closely, I allowed the mirror to slip sideways, giving up on grasping a sharp image.

I am continually struck by the synergistic, magical moment when imagination springs to life. It does not come as bidden.

Occasionally, it appears on command, but without a moment of bowing -- it is no jester come to entertain the king, and can whisk away to the edges of my mind before I can grasp any images in my greedy fingers. Instead, I find that it is only by most careful invitation, a clearing of the dust and rubble of my daily considerations, that imagination wanders in, granting boons with no sense of duty.

Certainly, I am not the first to realize that in those moments of drowsiness while consciousness and unconsciousness waltz together right before sleep imagination joins the dance; it was no accident, Freudian or otherwise, that Sigmund Freud invited patients to lay upon his couch, inviting *dream kline*.

What I have not been able to ascertain, for all of the moments of such visitation I have been gifted with throughout my life, is whether the imagination is drawn by that dance or is its creator, i.e. if it is the reflection or that which is reflected. In *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*, C.G. Jung suggests that there are two ways in which art is born: the first by the artist consciously crafting his work, finessing his material with careful strokes, and second, what Jung describes as works of art that arrive "fully arrayed."

Jung says of the artist caught in the grip of this particular visitation, "While his conscious mind stands amazed and empty before this phenomenon, he is overwhelmed by a flood of thoughts and images which he never intended to create and which his own will could never have brought into being" (73). While I have experienced both of these modalities, for me it is generally some combination of the two, wherein conscious and unconscious thought both shape and are shaped by one another, imagination leading me on a merry chase.

It is in this combination of modalities that philosopher Gaston Bachelard's intuited insights on imagination ring the most true. For Bachelard, it on some level does not matter where the initial image comes from, but instead it is the movement forward (and backward) from that image—that merry chase—that is the aegis of the imagination. He conceives of the imagination as the “voyage into the land of the infinite” (23), suggesting that the image itself is merely the starting point for its own movement.

So there I sat in my living room, trying to let a sideways glance into the mirror allow some spawning of a poem, and my husband asked me what I thought of his tree-lighting process. I was irritated at the interruption, for he specializes at bursting into my thoughts just as I think there is an interesting color hanging at the edges, waiting to be invited in for inspection, but he is the lighting designer in our household, and savors this annual tree festooning like a child.

I bit back my short retort and looked up. It was, of course, beautiful. It was Martin Luther's mythical tree, stars caught among its branches, beckoning the heavens themselves into our house for Christmas. It was the *tannenbaum*, and before that, the tinne of the Gaelic holly tree, sign of the Sun God, evergreen. And then I was swirling.

The tree had suddenly become a sacrifice, cut from fresh-aired forest to die for us this December as we celebrate a festival of life, carrying the very lights that symbolize our triumph over darkness and death even as it dies.

I was flung headlong, losing my breath, literally, as the tree became a whole series of images: the Celtic Sun God, dead and reborn at the Winter Solstice; Dionysus, joyously wild and divinely incarnate after his sacrifice; and Christ born in this incarnation of this holiday.

And it became the symbol of their death as well; the wood upon which these gods of life die, crucified.

As Theseus says in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, “the poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling/Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven” (5.1.12-70). I had just that sensation as I looked at that tree, seeing it simultaneously as a five-foot fir that had landed in our living room, and something huge, elemental and many-layered.

I found myself whirling back and forth between the concretely infinitesimal and the infinite. I was faced with a thousand memories, older than my own, and felt a roaring of time swirling as this prosaic little Christmas tree became eternal. I found myself wondering if Dionysus or Christ ever had the same feeling about themselves.

Did either of them ever look upon a tree, backlit by stars and suddenly imagine his own miserable death hanging in front of him? And by extraction, is there inherent in the process of our own imagining our endings as well as beginnings? Bachelard writes, “the imagination is essentially open, evasive. In the human psyche, it is the very experience of opening and newness” (19).

In many ways, I believe that he is right. But in the mythopoetic nature of imagination, it must contain its opposite, so to be about beginnings must be, on some level, to also be about endings. Perhaps the equation is as simple as being open to the newness of closure.

I was trying to capture the elusive spin of the imagination by imagining the imaginings of the imagined. I was reflecting upon the reflections of the reflected, which opens up a whole other line of thinking about imagining, one that opens magic and wonder, but also an enormous sense of responsibility.



I've seen
The scene
Obscenely.
Eyes scheme
Extremely.
Unseemly?

Melander, 2002

Perhaps the most wounding question I can ask about my thoughts on imagination is not if they are valid, but if they are in turn wounding. As writers from Aeschylus to Tolstoy have suggested, the imagination is a sharp-edged sword, and can show us not only the delights in an enchanted forest on a midsummer's night, but the payment exacted for daring to imagine, as in the case of Prometheus, or the horror of our own death, as suffered by Ivan Ilych.

However, it had not occurred to me that the very act of imagining someone or something (and thereby both reflecting and reflecting upon them) could be wounded. As Luce Irigaray writes in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, "what if the 'object' started to speak?" (135).

Irigaray takes issue with the assumption of man's "empirical relationship with the matrix that he claims to survey" (134). While I do not subscribe to her thesis that the penetrating nature of imagination has disserved women while it has served men, she raises a vastly important point about objectivity and, by extraction, objectifying.

We have the ego-driven assumption that when we look upon a reflection, we are the reality and the reflection merely stares back at us, unchanged and unchanging, except as it reflects our truth. We are willing to accept (indeed, must accept) that there is distortion inherent in every reflection.

However, we tend to think of that as only a failing in the reflection itself, and fail to see that failing within ourselves. But that falls short, and does not reflect the reach and swirl of imagination.

As I imagined the poem about a dying god's imagined death, I accidentally wrote "crucifixion" rather than "crucifixion." Unconsciously, I had found an awareness of the painfulness of that death being the process of becoming mythologized, fictionalized, even imagined in the first place. Had I somehow by imagining this added to the torturousness of their experience?

In his appendix, "The Three Lessons of the Mirror," to his work, *The Mirror in the Text*, Lucien Dällenbach quotes J.L. Borges as pointing out "if the characters of a fiction can be readers or spectators, we its readers or spectators, can be fictitious" (172). Could the *mise en abyme* he is referencing become, then, the abyss of a swirling imagined pain that becomes real to the imagined and imagined to the real? Or do we both become something between real and imagined, with all of the possibilities for joy and pain inherent in both?

The dance "on either side of the mirror" is just that: a two-way relationship wherein both the players are affected, both move in relation to one another. What happens if we are being dreamt by that which we are dreaming, and similarly, we are reflections of that which reflects us? As Mieke Bal asks when reflecting upon artist Carrie Weems' piece "Mirror, Mirror," what happens if "the reflection judges [us] and [we] fail the test?" (211).

This brings any ideas about imagination and its logic into a starkly important realm, long past an amusing conceit and a small effort at revolt at sharply empirical (and imperial) manner of thinking. In order for it to be a true logic, imaginal logic must hold its own duality and take into consideration its potentially imperializing attitudes: if I hope to celebrate a logic that is creative, I must acknowledge its potentially destructive capabilities. In Gaston Bachelard's words, "the imagination is thus a psychological world beyond. It becomes a psychic forerunner which *projects its being*" (23). If this is true, the imagined ultimately becomes real, and "ideas have bodies" (Bal 213).

Sea-kissed and glinting
The day wanders off to play,
Unconcerned by my watching
Dull rocks become iridescent
In the retreating caress of the waves
As I hope I do
Melander, 2001

I do not know that there is an ultimate answer to the challenges of othering and penetration of the imagination. It is possible, arguably, for the reflection to do as the day does above, and simply “wander off to play/unconcerned by my watching.” I am quite sure that even if we could somehow stop imagining that the cure would be worse than the disease.

I think that perhaps there is a small answer in the manner in which we discourse upon imagining: our reflections must attempt to capture the essence, the poesis, of that which we are reflecting upon. Over the last year or so, my intuitive need to not dissect the poetics of imagination in prosaic ways has moved from an inclination to a burning sense of certainty. This has manifested itself for me as a deep reluctance to utilize the traditional tools of academic analysis when dissecting a myth, a poem, or a piece of art into a mundane series of “factoids” and factors.

As I suggested earlier, meanings shimmer to life when they are given time and space to breathe, without the strangling imposition of hard-edged reflections unsympathetic to the ethos of that which is reflected.

At the climactic end of *Commedia*, Dante describes his inability to encapsulate the infinity of divine love, exclaiming, “How incomplete is speech, how weak, when set against my thought!” (*Paradiso*. XXXIII. 121-122). He is, of course, correct. By its very nature, this infinity, whether one defines it as divine love or imagination, is far too enormous for mere words to capture. However, if it is possible to even try, the words of a poem or the stroke of a paintbrush begin to come closer than any other kind of reflection to rendering that moment

when our minds are “struck by light” (*Paradiso*. XXXIII. 140).

So perhaps my inability to form a prosaic definition of imaginal logic is not merely my failing, but instead reflects the very nature of imagination itself. As Luce Irigaray suggests, perhaps “it is still better to speak only in riddles, allusions, hints, parables” (143).

For it may well be that in that liminal space between the reflection and the reflected, the imagined and the imaginer, that any truth that the imagination holds can live.

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