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## Seeing and Imagining

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## Jen Taylor – Seeing and Imagining

Whether inspired is the correct term to use about my drawing, in reference to the eloquent words of Manly Hopkins, I am not so sure. Infected would perhaps be a more prescient description. My original intention was to emphasize the challenges an artist encounters when attempting to inject an artwork with freshness and spontaneity, capturing the moment, so to speak (thereby erasing years of ingrained images and collective experiences). The underlying theme was to also explore my relationship with nature, the landscape (the external, the visibly perceived) from which I determine my sense of belonging in the world (the internal, the invisible). Manly Hopkins' image illustrates the connection between the literal landscape of the exterior world, and the interior world, the inscape. What I had failed to realise at the time of processing his words was the way in which language also affects my vision as an artist. On reflection, while the main premise of my visual image was concerned more with the contrast between *seeing* and *imagining*, it has also touched upon the infectious quality of words, of language.

If we understand 'seeing' as 'being able to perceive', 'to look at', 'to become conscious of', then seeing is undoubtedly a learned skill. As a young, impressionable art student, one of the (few) crumbs of advice from the tutor's table was to 'Draw what you see, not what you think or imagine you see.' While this is most relevant and applicable when, for example, wrestling with the anatomical distortions of foreshortening, it is not a dictum that can be realistically applied to every aspect of creative processes. Bachelard wrote of the distinction between seeing and imagination; '...to perceive and to imagine are as antithetic as presence and absence.'

A young child does not draw what he/she visibly perceives owing to limited skills, insufficient language and knowledge/experience of the world. Consequently, the child compensates for this lack by drawing what he/she *imagines*. Is imagination therefore an ability more easily accessible to a child, an innate power that becomes diluted and lost somewhere along the road to maturity, through the development of skills and language, acquisition of knowledge and assimilation of lived experiences? Is it possible to bring or create an image (or idea) that has never been totally perceived before into the realms of consciousness, without an underlying existence of *sensory* experiences? Where then does imagination reside? Somewhere in the preverbal, object-relations stage of human development, or in the residue of dreams and the unconscious? According to Hillman, 'dreams call from the imagination'. This being the case, is a child therefore closer than an adult to the world of dreams, the unconscious? When an artist strives to recapture the playfulness and spontaneity so evident in child art, is the visual perception of the adult detrimental to those rudimentary powers of imagination?

Therefore 'seeing' equates with consciousness and 'imagining' with the unconscious. Does consciousness (our adulthood) come at a price, one that Jung compared with the burden of Prometheus (who stole fire from the gods), taking us further and further away from our inner child? Lacanian theory informs us that the self is a construct of language (post Oedipal-stage). What happens in the amorphous phase of growth before language takes over? But hold on...surely art, visual art, is also a language, another form of communication? Is that not what we attempt to rediscover, encourage in our work as therapists? An image, a picture is not necessarily an automatic

precursor to a verbal or written translation. Part of its phenomenology is inextricably linked to its ineffable quality; a quality that words can be stolen by words, (the Promethean metaphor?).

Returning briefly to Manly Hopkins' text, I should clarify what I meant about the infection of his words, in relation to seeing and imagining. Manly Hopkins did not imagine the scene of which he wrote, nor did he dream it. He *saw* it, framed in all its moonlit glory by the gallery window. His words came to me as a directive, (similar to using a specific theme or directive when working with clients) and one that I found impossible to ignore. They infected my vision - the half-hidden moon, the torn strips of clouds, the trees and bushes dusted with a silvery sheen. What I *imagined*, however, was standing at the window, opening the window wide. Most windows are designed to open out, but I have drawn the window opening inwards, towards the viewer. Does this convey some ambiguity about what exactly is the exterior in this picture, or was it merely a spontaneous way of inviting the water to flow through? Is it perhaps soulful, full of anima, embodying all that is feminine (in terms of symbolic content) - the moon, the hills and valley, the water? Is this why I opened the window to the interior, unconsciously connecting the external with the internal, the visible with the invisible? Moreover, what of years of embedded images from childhood, my country of birth, (where hills and mountains are common features of the landscape) - past and present experiences - (I walk along the river every day)? They were summoned, invoked by the poet's description, impermeable images that always exist, like layer upon layer of fine tissue paper, insidiously filtering their way through Manly Hopkins words. However, at its most fundamental, stripped of all psychoanalytical conjecture, my image is simply a composite of what Manly-Hopkins perceived and what I imagined.

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