CONVERSATIONS WITH THE ORIENTAL MAN:
AN APPROACH TO THE IMAGINATION
IN WRITING CLASS

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I met an oriental man in an authentic-looking dark costume, with a Fu Manchu mustache, dark orange skin, a black oriental skullcap, who I knew brought with him certain essences of oriental wisdom.

I wanted to ask him questions, to get answers, but I didn’t know what to ask. I asked him why oriental wisdom stressed passivity and passive reaction (I’m not sure what I meant). And he didn’t exactly answer.

Then somehow I found myself doing a task, as if he directed me to do it, as if he was my master guide, sort of like the oriental teacher from the old television show, Kung Fu.

The task was not very physical, I could do it sitting down somewhere (I was near a tree, in the sun); but it was a frustrating task and made me tense and somewhat hostile to my teacher. But then I realized I was approaching a sort of recognition about how trust and frustration and discouragement relate and about how you arrive at a moment of tension and hostility where you don’t know how to do something, or you don’t want to do it anymore. I realized that there is a certain kind of understanding to be learned from this type of experience of being suspicious but going on anyway.

I decided to continue trying to do the task, but I didn’t yet arrive at the purpose behind it, and I didn’t get back to the teacher to find out if I was doing it right or not.

But I sensed that for me there is a central link, not related to logic, between that experience of being at the edge of your patience, feeling frustrated and yet involved in the experience.

It is also important to me that I met such a distinctly and thoroughly traditional oriental, even an historic stereotype oriental. This tells me something about my respect for oriental wisdom and gives me some issues I might think more about in my life these days. (Oriental Man, Visit 1)
Nearly everyone agrees that it takes imagination for a person to produce the most lively and effective writing possible. English teachers can certainly be counted among those in academia who have long paid at least lip service to the value of the imagination. But it is only recently as more and more fields of study have focused on the imagination and its importance to us that we seem to have become actively concerned with "teaching the imagination." As a profession we are novices at organizing and describing the ingredients of a pedagogy of the imagination, although some English teachers have no doubt had great individual successes in working with the creative possibilities of the mind. In this essay I claim no such history of personal success, however. I simply wish to report on an experiment I have engaged in during the last year or so to attempt to teach my students to use their imaginations more effectively. The above "vision" of the oriental man was the mental experience I had the first time I tried to lead my students in probing their imagination in a writing class.

I had been interested in the imagination and its role in literature since my graduate student days where my studies emphasized nineteenth and twentieth century American literature, hence causing me to be concerned with the flow in those two centuries from Romanticism to Realism and Naturalism. In the simplest philosophical terms this was a movement from a time which placed high value on the imagination into a time which devalued the imagination and emphasized reason or logic. Eventually I wrote a dissertation utilizing the language studies of Owen Barfield and Ernst Cassirer as a pathway to further examine this movement in American thought.

Later, as a writing teacher, I retained this interest as I examined contrasting theories of discourse prominent in my field (the psychologically oriented approach of James Moffett and the purpose and audience oriented approach of James Kinneavy, for example). But curiously, to me at least, my ideas about how all of this related to the writing classroom began to coalesce as I read a January, 1977 article in McCall's. The article, by Kenneth L. Woodward, was a fairly sketchy treatment of the work of two psychologists who seemed primarily interested (as far as you could tell from the article) in hypnosis as a means for better examining past experience (not a revolutionary idea, I realize). The thing I became aware of as I read was that my own efforts at getting at the imagination in writing class lacked a bold, direct, and more systematic approach. It wasn't so much that a perfect system appeared, or needed to immediately appear; but I saw that I needed to begin more serious work on developing a system.
for approaching the imagination and activating it upon demand.

Up to this time I had done considerable work with "free writing" in my classes as well as working with imaginative writing techniques (like metaphor exercises, experiments in changing perspectives, and sensory recordings). But what the article helped to crystallize for me was the idea that writing class could easily be the place where more adventursome excursions into the imagination might take place. It struck me that, so long as I didn't waste too much time, the students would have everything to gain and nothing to lose in these excursions. Their imaginations were certainly one of the richest properties of their minds; and whatever I could do to give them better access to the imagination would be entirely, and perhaps importantly, to their advantage.

In the McCall's article a sixth grade teacher had read "tall tales" to her students and then had them fantasize, after which they wrote stories of their own. For my first classroom experiment I attempted to modify this exercise for college level students and also to try to make it a step-by-step approach to the imagination. I read my students a Ray Bradbury short story (a Martian Chronicle excerpt), "August 2002: Night Meeting." Then I asked them to close their eyes and to imagine that they were in a forest on a sunny day and that someone who could do things other people could not do and who knew things other people did not know would come by. I asked them to observe this person closely. After about five or eight minutes of this I asked them to open their eyes and write as much about their experience as possible, recording as much of the detail of it as possible. I had closed my eyes too and for the first time I met the oriental man (as recorded at the opening of this essay), to my complete surprise. So, I wrote busily for about fifteen minutes. Some of my students were still writing as I finished. Others had finished earlier.

The imagined experiences of my students were widely varied, but most of them were willing to say that the time while their eyes were closed was interesting. Many of them had, to their surprise also, met quite extraordinary figures in their forests within. Some had dealt in outer space beings, apparently under the direct influence of the Bradbury story. Others had met people from their pasts, or characters who resembled people they had known. One student met the smartest boy in his high school class. Another met a wizard-like figure with wonderful ways of showing off his powers. Others met contemplative but "deep" appearing characters like my oriental man. Even those who became preoccupied with the problem
of coming up with something, and by the apprehension that they wouldn't, were able to experience the tremendous energy of the mind spinning its wheels at a high speed.

There were two questions I had after this first experiment in search of the imagination. First, what had I done? And how could I do it better? Then, how could I best utilize this type of encounter with the imagination in more usual, expository writings? I decided to continue periodically to conduct this first experiment, as best I could in its original form, so as to better examine what it was. But I also decided to create variations on the experiment, pressing the search not only for the imagination but for greater direct "utility" in relation to the students' more usual writing tasks.

One of the values of this exercise, for me as a person, was the intuitive nature of the mental experience it brought about. I believe this intuitive potential in the imagination is just the complementary power our reason cries out for in the face of life's most complex difficulties and in the face of our deepest questions. In this intuitive flow often there are surprising associations which help us achieve a counterpointing of intellectual concerns which could only be arrived at through logic very laboriously, if at all. In short, this intuition provides a type of insight not readily available to our reasoning. Although I have never miraculously solved problems in these exercises, for myself or others, I have frequently been interested to see the unexpected flow of thoughts which occur, and the words and emotions that the meditative exercise turns on.

In my second meditation with my class I experienced something more like a problem-solving exchange with the wise man:

The oriental man in the black and orange robes was brought back, since I kept getting a blank when I bypassed him.

His flowing robes made me think he was going to do magic tricks, have white doves fly out of his sleeves and such. But this did not happen, and of course I realized right away that he was too important to come and do magic tricks.

Then he said, "No, the loose sleeves and designs of my robes are not for magic, they are expressions of appreciation for beauty." I understood that he meant that even though robes like his must be a lot of trouble to make and to wear, and I imagined to keep clean, even though they were all this trouble, he wore them as an expression, and
maybe a steady reminder, of the beauty of the world and of how much that very beauty at the same time depended on his appreciation and expression of it.

As usual I had many questions I wanted to ask him. One of them was about Hesse's concept of the bird struggling to get free of the egg as a central picture of a necessary life experience for people. I said I could easily believe that because several things had become a hard struggle, even a little discouraging, for me lately.

But the oriental man said, "Yes, that is part of the experiencing of life. The struggle is necessary. But it is only part of life. If you look to the simplicity of all things, you will find that there is simplicity in the parts of things as well as in the things themselves. And if you trust yourself, and follow yourself in relation to this simplicity of things, you will be right."

I wanted him to help me solve some specific problems I was having with the parts of something I was writing, but I wasn't sure if he could or would, and there somehow didn't seem to be time. (Oriental Man, Visit 2)

In addition to the fact that I felt freer to bring my concerns to this meditation and so made it more of a problem-solving venture, I was interested in the way the experience seemed to pivot on the word "magic." What I did, in fact, desire was as magical and easy a solution to my problems as was possible. Of course my real life was not about to be fixed "like magic," and so my inner wisdom and experience led me to as comforting a concept as possible, that all things in life turn out to be made up of simple components which usually can be handled successfully if approached with care and patience. Looking carefully at the beauty and simplicity of things is, at times, a nearly magical way to gain perspective on difficult situations.

By this time I had begun to understand to some extent the "system" I was using in these experiments. I knew that a part of the approach should be continuing to read to my students before asking them to close their eyes. And, I knew, from the article in McCall's, that giving quite specific instructions of some kind, to help them encounter something besides a void or a clutter of images, was essential. Keeping these in mind, and taking hope from the fact that my own "visions" seemed to be willing to be pressed further toward specific concerns, I decided to push the whole thing toward practicality in the next experiment.
I read to the students from James E. Miller's *Word, Self, Reality*, selecting what I felt were provocative quotations about language from various experts. I read five or six relatively short statements aloud that I felt were not so abstract as to be incomprehensible in one reading. Although I was not really concerned with how much of the material the students understood, I did want the reading to help set them at ease.

After reading to them I directed the students again to close their eyes. This time I told them to imagine that they were on our university library main steps on a warm day, thinking about a problem they were having with their writing. I then instructed, "Someone whose thinking and wisdom you greatly admire will pass by, stopping to talk to you. You may ask him or her about your writing and get some advice." After about five or ten minutes of this meditation I again asked them to open their eyes and write as much as they could remember of the experience they had just had.

One of the men, who worked at the Herbert Hoover Library in nearby West Branch, met Herbert Hoover in his meditation. Hoover proceeded to give him the most practical, almost impatiently efficient advice. First Hoover suggested that if the student had difficulty writing then "just don't bother with it; have someone else do it for you." When the student protested that he needed to be able to write for himself for some very good reasons, his work at the library for example, Hoover became somewhat more understanding, suggesting that he begin to take more time with his writing, doing each part carefully, and getting more help from his teachers. The advice went on, but the gist of it was that the student needed to take his writing more seriously, working on it as he did other problems in his life. Another student met his older sister, whom he greatly admired and who was a rhetoric instructor at another university. His sister informed him that he too would need to work harder on his writings, taking time to correct mechanical errors and to try to do his best before he would deserve a good grade; and she rather bluntly informed him that he wasn't taking sufficient time now, and that he should get down to business in the course. The typical advice students were receiving was not revelatory to them in the sense of coming as something they had never known before, but it was advice that in almost every case seemed appropriate and useful to the person receiving it. The advice also seemed especially highlighted to them, presented to them in a new way, through the experiment.

In my own meditation I sought advice on what I was trying to write:

I met Napoleon Hill, a man who writes about how to succeed and how
to make money and generally be happy in life, and someone who I believe knew a great deal about the imagination.

I tried to get him to advise me on an essay, but he said I'd solved most of my problems on that essay and that a book on the imagination was what was really on my mind and what he should advise me on.

I said I agreed and what could he tell me about the book. He said my ideas on it were good and that I should proceed, but also that I should remember that if the image is as important as I was saying in the book I should use image prominently as a way to communicate somehow. He said that I might consider the gatekeeper (who can be totally our servant, under our own control) as an image for passage to the imagination. And then I thought of his imagery of princes of the mind. But he somehow helped me remember that I had already thought of a concept of master servants of our minds which I have written down somewhere (and must look up) as an even better approach. Then I had to stop.

He was lean, older, with relatively short, combed gray hair, with bright but simple clothes. He was kindly and direct. He could see and get right to the point. (Advice, Visit 1)

Like my students I had not encountered a revelation in this contemplation, but also like them I had received a new and helpful perspective on my work and some fairly specific advice. I had even been helped to remember some relevant information I had been on the verge of neglecting to the point where it would drop from memory. My students' experiences even more than mine suggested, however, that these experiments in imagination could be pressed to a quite specific and practical level. This was, of course, one of the things I had hoped for; and it was an example of the idea Hill had helped me remember, and which I owed partly again to the article I'd read, about searching out certain individuals in our memory and using them as master servants, or master teachers.

I should say, however, that these experiments represent either an entirely different "prewriting" stage than the usual concept of planning out a paper or choosing a subject, or the experiments represent an entirely different approach to revision of essays than that of fixing technical weaknesses. In either case, considered as prewriting or revising, the experiments represent a perspective-establishing device which does more to provide a plan and a focus for further writing than it does to provide a topic or technique. I believe the key thing the experiments do is generate a
context in which the imagination can offer advice, freewheeling or directed. While these meditations should obviously not be seen in any way as diminishing the importance of rhetorical techniques or the importance of logic and analysis in writing, it is clear that there is assistance to be gotten from our minds in contemplation that cannot easily be obtained through logical channels. And, if the imagination is as important as literary critics and psychologists have said through the ages, and as neglected in modern education as recent researchers on the locality of various brain functions argue, this is a direction we should be actively searching in as teachers of writing.

The ingredients, or system, I used in these meditations with my students can be pretty well intuited from the brief "case studies" I have provided. In order to provide clear enough guidelines to allow others to refine my experiments let me briefly outline the steps I feel are involved in the exercises I conducted. There are four. First, as in meditation and hypnosis, I distracted the students' minds from their previous trains of thoughts, by reading to them, thus creating mental turbulence and what the hypnotist might call "receptivity." Then I turned their attention inward onto themselves and their own mental possibilities by asking them to close their eyes. These two steps generate the potential for imaginative experience. The third step consisted of offering a context, or setting, with specific images for their contemplation (a forest, the library steps); and the final step was to further specify the situation, and make it more concrete, by directing the students to meet someone (a person) rather than simply search for an idea. I enlarged this final phase in the "advice" experiment by also suggesting that the students bring a specific writing problem to the attention of their visitor. Believing as I do that image is the key to imagination, reliance on specific settings and upon encounters with specific persons seems a crucial part of what I have been doing.

I do not mean to suggest that these techniques are in themselves "new." Of course hypnotists and meditators have for centuries understood them. And of course some approaches to clinical psychology provide much more refined systems for directing a client's attention through the use of the unconscious memory. What I do mean to suggest is that there is a place and a need for these techniques in modern education, just as brain researchers (Robert Ornstein, for example) have been insisting, and that writing classes in particular can benefit from experimenting in search of the proper uses for these techniques. There will necessarily be a time when writing teachers do very rudimentarily for
students what they can later do in a more organized and thorough way. But the only way we as a profession can ever hope to successfully adapt techniques from other fields to ours is to experiment, cautiously yet probingly, at the classroom level.

As to the question of what are the dangers and limitations of this type of experience, it seems to me the actual dangers to students are none (except for the possibility of some wasted time while teachers learn to inspire the imagination effectively). The experience is clearly an invitation to a certain type of contemplation, and not a Svengali effort to "seize the minds of the victim." The students are not placed under a spell of the teacher—they are not hypnotized, for example. They are merely helped to relax and become meditative so that their imaginations can work for a time less obstructed by the problems of the day and the logical faculties of the mind. This imagination is, of course, a part of the self, not a sinister outside force. It is a main part of the human mind's potential. English teachers have, in theory, long recognized the importance of the imagination as a key to producing the best writing a person is capable of. Presumably the long neglect of the imagination in our classes is due to our ignorance of how to systematically gain access to it, rather than the result of a conviction that arousing the imagination is not worthwhile.

One of the clear limitations of this type of experiment is probably that the old adage about "leading a horse to water" would seem to apply even more to these activities than usual writing class methods. A teacher can offer the ingredients necessary for the experiment and can explain the potential value in it; but he or she cannot force the students to listen or follow through in their own minds, or even close their eyes for that matter. I would certainly not recommend coercing a student to participate, although I think a healthy classroom atmosphere and the intriguing nature of the experiments themselves have a good chance of soliciting most students' cooperation.

Searching in our profession for a tradition on which to develop experiments such as mine yields sparse results. The work of Rohman and Wlecke on prewriting from 1964 would certainly be one central early reference point. In this the authors argue that it is not enough to provide students with a knowledge of the standards for good writing; the students must also be provided the opportunity to experience the ways good writing can be brought about. For them this belief led to an emphasis on prewriting and in prewriting on the processes of meditation and analogy.²
There was also an outburst of experimentation with sensitivity exercises and free writing in the late sixties, followed by a fairly abrupt shift in the seventies to an emphasis on audience analysis and rhetorical techniques for achieving the public (or formal) purpose of a writing—I realize I am speaking broadly and simply here, but the purpose of this essay is not bibliographical. I believe I refer to traditions which are quite widely acknowledged, and I do not wish to compete with the fine "Bibliography of Research on Writing," produced by Charles Cooper\(^3\) or the bibliography on creativity provided by Ross Winterowd with his article on "Creativity and the Comp Class."\(^4\) In Cooper's bibliography we find reference, for example, to the extensive work of Morris Stein on *Stimulating Creativity*.

These studies are in sympathy with my experiment as I read them, but they are not focused on exactly the same imaginative processes. A growing crescendo of research is, no doubt, now moving in this intellectual direction, spurred on by Winterowd's essay and others like it as well as by the interest of scholars like William Irmscher who devotes a full chapter of his recent text, *Teaching Expository Writing*, to the exploration of intuition.

I am not prepared here to synthesize modern research on the imagination. But I am eager to report on my own experiment because it seems to me to be both successful and highly adaptable, and for these reasons may be able to contribute to expanding and systematizing our view of the writing process. At first such experiments may seem to have no clear place in the writing process as we usually think of it. But I do not believe we will be on any solid footing as writing teachers until our perspective has broadened to include such exercises in an integrated way as part of the normal writing process.

The mistake it would be easy to make with such experiments would be to demand too much of them. There must be realistic limits set on expectations in these kinds of activities. Specific insights may come from them; problems may be focused on and partially solved through them; and more helpful perspectives may be achieved on individual writings. But these experiments are supports for practice in the skillful use of rhetorical techniques. They assist in the successful use of practical techniques for good writing, like organization and successful narrowing of the main idea; they do not replace such techniques. And these experiments in no way eliminate the hard work necessary to improve writing ability.
One final weakness of these experiments, particularly the first more open-ended type, is a weakness shared also with more typical classroom free writing and experiments with metaphor and image. They tend so far to cause an experience more like jumping into the pool of the imagination and splashing around, rather than providing a clear map to the most interesting and useful point in the pool of memories and abilities. The second, problem-solving type of experiment, goes some distance toward achieving a more solid focus. I suspect that ultimately it will be beneficial to engage students in both highly directed meditations and in quite open-ended explorations, in a balanced way, to achieve different purposes.

So far the first open type of experiment has produced for my students experiences that seem more intriguing than enlightening. The images and tone of their meditations are captivating but not very specifically revealing. Here are a couple of brief examples:

I was walking through the woods and I came upon a little old man. He had on a garment as green as leaves and as brilliant as a million stars. He had a long white beard and a cone-shaped hat on his white haired head. His hat was made of the same material as his garment and he walked around in a light so bright that it is invisible in sunlight. He is quick, quiet, and unless you were as still as the dead, you would miss him. His wisdom was the only sign of his old age because his appearance was that of youth.

And another student wrote:

All of a sudden I am thrust into a deep forest. It is early morning with the mist and dew rising meeting the rays of the sun, as it glitters through the large oaks.

I glance around and out of the mist appears a man. He is wearing a brown robe that looks like something from the time of Martin Luther. As he walks nearer he appears about 7'2" at a not overweight 235 pounds. He has jet black hair and walks as though he is here often. He stops a foot from me. My eyes are fixed on him and a sense of something mindblowing begins to grow. Then I realize what makes this figure different from anyone I might meet on the street. His eyes are like staring into space. There is endlessness but not in the idea of being mindless.

It is a long time before I ask where he is from. He replies in a voice that is as mellow as I have ever heard. He says that I could not under-
stand. After a second I ask if he is from the future or the past. A look of tolerance crosses his face. "Not exactly," he states. Making me even more curious. Could this be God, I ask myself.

As I explained earlier, the students seemed to move dramatically toward the practical in the second experiment, where I directed them to focus on a problem and seek advice about how to solve it. However, I believe two positive things are true about the open-ended meditation also. First, I think there is considerable vitality and vividness in the writing of the two students quoted here in their reporting on their meditation; and any exercise which brings such writing out is probably beneficial for that reason alone. The student is at least establishing that he or she is capable of such precise expression. Second, I think that with practice these open meditations tend to become fuller and somewhat more directed (by the inner mind, I mean).

If my own experiences over the last year and a half are indicative (and I realize they may not be), the mind becomes more comfortable with probing the free-flowing meditation for meaning, during and after the meditative experience. I have almost gotten in the habit of pressuring the oriental man for advice on all manner and levels of concerns. Often he frustrates me in particular lines of inquiry, but usually I find that I have gotten some clear help from the meditation which focuses on him. The most important help comes in the form of a clearer recognition of what exactly my mind is struggling with at the time and a better perspective in which to continue the struggle. Recently, for example, I discovered through a meditation I did with my class that I was most in need of reassurance and some rebuilding of self-respect, in order to approach a difficult time in my life. Just as might be expected, once my inner mind was freed from distraction it came forth with the needed support:

The oriental man came again, quite quickly, in his silky black robes. This time it was easy to bring him. It felt refreshing to see him. He actually seemed quietly glad too.

I told him I was glad to see him. He smiled. I imagined we were under a large, tall, sturdy maple tree on a slight hill, and he saw how much I liked that. "Shall we meet here always," he said? I silently assented.

I said, "I'm so frustrated and discouraged right now."
He said he knew, but he added, "Don't be so hard on yourself, you can only do one thing at a time; you have especially learned that it is hard for you to consider several things at one moment. Just choose one thing each day, and proceed."

"You're being so nice to me today," I said, "sometimes you are so difficult."

"I can see that you need kindness," he said, "don't worry, you are a good person. You will find your way."

This made me feel a little better.

"Part of your problem is your worry," he went on.

He said I would probably need to work harder but that I should also schedule myself carefully and follow it.

And, some time later, when I was stronger emotionally, he gave me a tougher response:

I went to the tree to meet the oriental man. I couldn't decide whether it was an oak tree or a maple tree. He looked at me amusedly as if to say, "Well, whatever you want."

I tried to make it an oak tree, but it really seemed to be a maple. Anyway, I felt like I should get as much as I could from the oriental man while he was here. So I asked him what he had to tell me. He asked me what I wanted to know. My mind turned to writing as usual. I asked him if I had heard him clearly in his advice on this before. He said, "The person who hears does." So I realized I hadn't. I asked him what I should do, and he said, "A person also is what he does." I had the feeling he was telling me I must compel myself to do what I felt I wanted to do.

He seemed to sense my confusion at how to proceed. He said, "I realize you are in a period where it is difficult to write; you have other commitments. You are living in the period where it is necessary for you to pay the price. You will have to do two things at once. Perhaps it will be easier later."

Then I tried to fasten my eyes on him more carefully, on his black robes, and Fu Manchu mustache, and on his prevailing calm and
He noticed this and said, "Calm does not come from not doing anything. A person can be very busy with many small tasks and remain calm. The calm comes from having decided to do these things. The calm is the decision."

All evidence suggests that most of my students receive similar contacts with their own imaginations, to their excitement and mine. While it would be possible, as I've said, to make too much of such experiences, as a profession we have in the past been much nearer the danger of making too little of them. Now that we know we have one entire lobe of our brain devoted to imaginative, dream-like activity, and now that composition theorists are beginning to try to cope with that discovery, we have good reason to hope that such neglect can be avoided and that instead the effort will come forth to reconnect the imagination and writing in our teaching.

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NOTES


3^Charles R. Cooper, Bibliography of Research on Writing (Buffalo, New York, 1979).

4^W. Ross Winterowd, "Creativity and the Comp Class," Freshman English News (Fall, 1978), 1-16.