

THE CRAFTSMAN, THE TRICKSTER, AND THE POET

“RE-SOULING” THE RATIONAL MIND

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The human psyche seems to be the forgotten middle ground between brain and body, mind and matter, and cognition and emotion.¹ And yet, without the imaginative, the creative, and the heartfelt, there is no intelligence, experience, or meanings to speak of. The highest forms of human achievements can't be understood in terms of scientific conquests alone. No one says it better than Cassirer in *An Essay on Man* (1944), when he says that man is set above animals, not because he possesses higher sensibility, longer memory, or an ability for quicker association, but because of his power to create and manipulate symbols—to endow things with meaning and with life.

Clearly, the symbols that humans manipulate, or the “metaphors we live by” (Lakoff and Johnson 1981), come in varying shades of gray. They can be thoughts, words, images, or actions, such as enactments and performances. They can be used, alone or together, to invoke, evoke, mediate, delegate, signify, signal, subvert, or give orders. They can be emitted and received knowingly—for example, when I wink at a friend and she smiles back at me—or unknowingly, without my noticing, tacitly, on my behalf.

I suggest that art as a way of knowing is about “re-souling” the rational mind. This, in turn, occurs as a consequence of being mindfully engaged, playful in spirit, and disposed to use fiction—or the powers of myth—as windows into our inner and outer realities. Here, I offer a few thoughts on how people make sense of their experience, envision alternatives in their minds, and most importantly, how they bring forth what they envision in ways that can move and inspire others (those at the receiving end of a creator's offerings).

¹ The word “psyche” has a long history of use in psychology and philosophy, and has been one of the foundations for understanding human nature from a scientific point of view. The English word “soul” is sometimes used synonymously, especially in older texts. The psychological forces at play in human development may be hard to measure, but they cannot be reduced to behavioral parameters, biochemical analysis, or speculative metaphysics.

MINDFULNESS AND PLAYFULNESS: A BEGINNER'S MINDSET

*"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities,
in the expert's mind there are few."*

—Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*

Mindfulness, as defined by Ellen Langer, is about putting your mind into what you're doing at the moment you're doing it, and, in this sense, is akin to Csíkszentmihályi's concept of "flow." The relevance of mindfulness to the study of human creativity is that, beyond immersion and perseverance, it also requires a disposition to look at things afresh, as if for the first time, and a desire to move off the beaten path: a continuous and active quest to break loose from habitual ways of thinking! Mindlessness, in contrast, emerges as a result of having things all figured out. To Langer, experts are especially prone to becoming mindless whenever they put themselves on autopilot, rely on acquired skills, or apply standard routines—whenever they cease to look at what they know as potential obstacles in disguise.

Mindlessness Is When Knowing Gets in the Way

At the core of Langer's idea of mindlessness lies the paradoxical notion that the more we know the more likely we are to act mindlessly. Langer mentions three main sources of mindlessness: categorical thinking, acting or thinking from a single perspective, and habituation. Each comes with its own pros and cons.

Categorical thinking, or looking at things through pre-established categories, is essential for survival and for effectively operating in the world, yet it puts us at risk of ignoring anything that doesn't fit in. Thinking from a single perspective, or going down a set path, satisfies the "cognitive miser" in us, who has a tendency to save mental energy for later use. Mindlessness, in this case, is about following a set path without budging even if it takes much work for no perceived advantages along a path. Once actions become second nature, or habitual, we may gain in fluency, yet previously acquired habits get in the way as soon as conditions change.²

Mindfulness and Playfulness: Looking at Things Afresh

Mindfulness is a continual and active quest for novelty and, as Langer points out, novelty is not a matter of being showered with external stimuli. You could read the same book many times or see the same television program over and over and still bring to it something new every time. The trick is to teach people, adults in particular, that it is their investment—and not the stimuli—that can make things interesting.

² In one of her studies, Langer found that people were surprisingly more fluent and "lively" when discussing a novel issue after they were given time to think or, alternatively, when they spoke about familiar topics with no time to think about them. The worst-case scenario was when students rambled on about known topics without time limitations.

Ironically, young children don't have to be taught mindfulness. They are naturally that way, always in the moment, able to amuse themselves, and delighted when things are not as they appear. Children repeat what interests them a hundred times and discover something new each time. Think of a toddler learning to walk. She pulls herself up, wobbles along a few steps, and then plops down on her bottom. With a determined look on her face, she then gets up again, and down, and up, over and over. When did you last do something with such determination, so little immediate or external gratification, and so relentlessly? Unlike children, creative adults cultivate the art of mindful engagement by being deliberately playful, or adopting a beginner's mindset.

Beginner's Mindset: As If for the First Time

Beginner's mind is about adopting an attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of preconceptions when engaging in any activity—even at an advanced level—just as a beginner does. The term is mostly used in the study of Zen Buddhism and Japanese martial arts.

A beginner's mind rids itself of the "been there, done that" attitude. If we've got it all figured out chances are we won't pay attention. We'll get frustrated because we expect one thing and it doesn't happen exactly that way. Beginner's mind is about being there and looking out. And if you keep looking you are bound to see something new, which, in turn, is exciting, wonderful, and awesome. Adopting a beginner's mind is not about negating previous experience; it's about accommodating it. It's about coming at things afresh, like a stranger to a place. It's about wondering and wandering.

The main difference between mindfulness and playfulness is that the latter implies a non-literal attitude (one that fuses fiction and fact by suspending disbelief), thereby shielding the pursuit of "dangerous ideas" from potential harmful consequences.

THE WAYS OF THE CRAFTSMAN: CARING FOR THINGS WELL DONE

*"Craftsmanship is an enduring, basic human impulse,
the desire to do a job well for its own sake."*

—Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*

Through mindful immersion, the craftsman establishes an intimate connection among head, eyes, hands, and tools (or machines). And as he perfects his art, the materials at hand speak back to him through their resistances, ambiguities, and by the ways in which they change as circumstances change. An enlightened craftsman is someone who enjoys such a dialogue and, in doing so, develops an "intelligent hand" and a "playful mind." He falls in love with the materials and becomes so fluent in using his tools that he feels at one with them. According to Sennett, such appreciation and fluency are in no way contrary to play since it is in play that we find the origin of the dialogue a craftsman conducts with materials such as clay, wood, or glass.

Homo Faber, Homo Laborans, Homo Ludens

Sennett groups craftsmen into three types of doers: *Homo faber* (maker) is the creator and judge of material labor and practice. *Homo laborans* (worker) takes the task at hand as an end in itself. *Homo ludens* (player) is absorbed in exploring for the sheer pleasure of it. While all three involve an urge to perfect and the skills to deliver, the “techniques” of a craftsman are anything but a mindless application of written rules or procedures. They are about caring (mindful engagement).

“Every good craftsman conducts a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking; this dialogue evolves into sustaining habits, and these habits establish a rhythm between problem-solving and problem-finding. There is nothing inevitable about being skilled, just as there is nothing mindlessly mechanical about technique itself.” (Sennett 2008, p. 9). Architect Renzo Piano adds this about repetition and practice: “You think and you do at the same time. You draw and you make. Drawing is revisited. You do it, you redo it, and you redo it again. That’s where the pleasure lays.” (ibid., p. 40).

Craftmanship and Beginner’s Mind: the Stranger

The stranger, notes sociologist Georg Simmel, learns the art of adaptation more searchingly, if not more painfully, than people who feel entitled because they belong to a community of settlers, and thus know and often own their surroundings. In Simmel’s view, the foreigner also holds up a mirror to the society into which he or she enters, since the foreigner cannot take for granted ways of life that seem so natural to natives. Humans are skilled makers of a place for themselves. Yet only a sense of self-displacement and estrangement, characteristic of creative people and travelers, can drive the practices of change and open the way to cultural renewal.

To Sennett, the universality of early play experiences forms the basis for the potential of craftsmanship. In a beautiful phrase invoking the Jeffersonian ideal of democratic competence, Sennett suggests that “good citizenship is found in play, and is lost at work.”

TRICKSTERS, JESTERS, AND CLOWNS: A HYMN TO THE CREATURES OF MISCHIEF

“Every generation occupies itself with interpreting Trickster anew.”—Paul Rodin

“We interpret them always as transients.”—Frank Kermode

The disruptive side of human imagination is epitomized by the figure of the trickster. Trickster is an emblem of artistic and cultural renewal. He fascinates for how he transgresses boundaries and blurs distinctions. The jester, or joker, is a wise person who is employed to tell jokes and provide entertainment. Like a clown, he is a fool, yet his role is more than just to amuse. A clown may not be a troublemaker in the same way, but he, too, shines by turning things upside down. All three put much seriousness and

artistry into their feats. Without technique, a clown would be ridiculous, a trickster pitiful, and a jester fired!

Tricksters

Always out to satisfy their inordinate appetites, tricksters are *provocateurs par excellence*. They are also indispensable heroes and makers of culture. Always at the edge, in between, and opportunistic, the tricksters make it their job to cross the line and confuse distinctions. In doing so, they reveal unsettling truths under the cover of foolishness. The trickster is a wanderer. Like circus people, he belongs to the periphery, not to the center. The disruptive imagination of the trickster lies at the heart of the creative process because he questions the establishment and will never use his power for the sake of conformity. The trickster is at once a mindful provocateur and a playful creator.

Jesters

In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Feste, the jester, is described as "a man wise enough to play the fool." Jesters were usually hired by monarchs for their wit and perception. Their role was to entertain (playing music, juggling, telling riddles) and to criticize their masters, mistresses, and guests. Regarded and dressed as fools, they had a privileged status. Taking advantage of the license to mock, the jester dispensed frank observations and highlighted the follies of the people who ridiculed him. Only as the lowliest member of the court could a jester be the monarch's most useful adviser.

Clowns

A clown, or buffoon, is someone who provides amusement through grotesque appearance (stylistic makeup, outlandish costumes, red noses) and extravagant behavior (supposedly funny). Clowns come in many genres: from pierrot to harlequins to comedians such as Chaplin. And the types of clown acts vary greatly. Clowns can be feared by children, and even by adults, when they appear outside their "natural" circus environment. Supposedly funny, they are not always perceived as such. Their appearance can be awkward, and masks can be scary; you don't know what's behind it.

Tricksters, jesters, and clowns are all about exaggeration made into an art form (in this case, disruption, foolishness, and silliness). These artful exaggerations are a needed detour for the otherwise unspeakable to be given license to come out. Like theater, it is the very "unreality" of the performance that makes it truer. Jungian scholar Hillman puts it well when he states, "What we distrust in fantasizing and imagining is the revelation of the uncontrollable aspects of our psyche. The removal of 'fixation' is only possible through playful—and sometimes painful—displacement, characteristic of the trickster: now this and now that; now here and now there; peek-a-boo. Trickster pulls your leg, not as in deceiving but as in pretending, exaggerating, stirring." (Hillman 1975, p. 179)

**POETS AND MUSES: ON THE ART OF ENLIVENMENT
AND ON THE MYTHOLOGIZING OF “REALITY”**

“Every man is a poet when he is in love.”—Plato

“Don’t play what’s there, play what’s not there.”—Miles Davis

The poet is a master artisan at the service of the human psyche.³ More than the scientist, and maybe better than the jester or the craftsman, the poet knows how to bring his or her creations to life in ways that resonate with our inner being. When the poet uses words, the words sing and dance (they don’t just signify), and when he or she uses images, the images reverberate. In *The Mythologization of Reality*, Bruno Schultz writes of the poet, “In [his or her] hands the word, as it were, comes to its senses about its essential meanings, it flourishes and develops spontaneously in keeping with its own laws, and regains its integrity. For that reason, every kind of poetry is an act of mythologization and tends to create myths about the world. The mythologization of the world has not yet ended.” (Schultz 1993, pp. 49–50)

What makes the poets different from the rationalist or discursive thinker, scientist, or philosopher is that he or she lets his or her creations “speak” for themselves. And when I say “speak,” I again mean the silent murmur of the muses breathing through the work! The best example is music.⁴ But like music, any poetic offering breeds a life of its own. Archibald MacLeish concludes his paradoxical poem “Ars Poetica” with the lines: “A poem should not mean / but be!”

Art, like myth, is made to touch, move, and stir (enlighten and inspire) mostly as a result of original involuntary revelations that are brought into being (or made to be) through the maker’s own unselfconscious, mindful, playful dwelling in the depth of the human psyche. The maker, the medium, and the message are one.

The poet’s power comes from his or her reluctance to freeze, or cast in stone, the nuances of human experience into set categories or verbal representations that rid themselves of the imaginal for the sake of proof. The artist sticks to the image without any further commentary, explanation, or instructions. And that is precisely why he or she captures our imagination.

³ The term “psyche” was Latinized into *anima*, which became one of the basic terms used in medieval psychology. In psychoanalysis and other forms of depth psychology, the psyche refers to the forces in an individual that influence thought, behavior, and personality. The poet speaks directly to these forces.

⁴ You can’t write of the poet without invoking the Muses. For a long time, artists have said (and others have said *about* artists) that their inspiration, creativity, and talents are a gift from the Muse(s). In Greek mythology, the Muses who inspire artists (musicians, writers, and poets) are the nine daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus: Calliope (epic poetry); Clio (history); Erato (song, love); Euterpe (lyric poetry, music); Melpomene (tragedy); Polymnia (sacred poetry); Terpsichore (dance); Thalia (comedy); and Urania (astronomy).

The Imaginal: Sticking to the Image

Psyche is image, according to Jung, and we stick to the image because the psyche itself lives there. The image is not meant here as a picture in the head, or as a photographic snapshot of the world. Instead, it should be understood as imaging or envisioning. Psyche is ontologically “real” only to the extent that it is constantly finding possibilities and having insights. It uses fiction and fantasy as a lever to understanding.

Images are exactly what they appear to be: never standing still, indefinable except through and by their complications in each other. The sensual qualities of an image—form, color, and texture—are not copied from objects, and they never replace reality, as in visions or hallucinations. Paradoxically, images are real precisely because they do not correspond to anything in the so-called objective world of our everyday experience. The imaginal is quite real in its own way but never because it corresponds to something outer.

Jung said: “The West, having rejected fantasy as worthless subjective daydreaming, was forced to experience the return of the Olympians in the form of disease. . . . The westerner should learn to acknowledge these psychic forces anew, and not wait until his moods, nervous states, and delusions make it clear in the most painful way that he is not the only master in his house. . . . The truths of the imaginal are that they are guiding fictions whose function is to manifest the unreal, ineffable, multiple, and polymorphic character of our psyche.” (Jung 1944).

Homo Symbolicus

Homo symbolicus is the name that Cassirer gives to the human tendency to reenact, recast, and replay past and possible events as a means to understand where we stand and who we are. For Cassirer, like Goethe, there is creation in the very act of seeing; that is, all sensuous seeing is seeing with the eyes of the psyche.

Art, like myth, is not interested in the distinction between the real and the imagined. Instead, it emerges from/through the forming of an image, or insight. Cassirer calls “productive imagination” the unconscious “ideation” process that accompanies any act of perception. And the distinctive feature of artistic imagination, in his view, is that it further abolishes the opposition between content (the latent) and form (the manifest). Its expressions are self-revelatory.

To Cassirer, humankind has so enveloped itself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythic symbols, in religious rites, and in scientific explanations that we cannot see or know anything except by interposition of the artificial medium of the symbol.

**SCIENCE, PHILOSOPHY, ARTS, MYTHOLOGY:
SAME QUESTION, DIFFERENT MEANS**

“Why something appears as meaningful to us is impossible to define.”

—Bruno Schulz

Access to the symbolic function seems to be the common root of the discursive, representational, and rational (characteristic of scientific and philosophical approaches), and the performative, self-revelatory, and imaginal mindset (that characterizes artistic, mythical approaches). Both branches of human experience—science/philosophy and arts/mythology—are equally invested in a quest for truth, or at the least a desire to reach a deeper understanding. Both require hard work, creative thinking, and mindful engagement.

In their mature form, science/philosophy and arts/mythology each offers its own extraordinary insights into previously uncharted territory. Yet the views of each on what it means to know and how to construct, convey, and validate knowledge vary.

Reconciling the Poet and the Rationalist

I’m not sure if it’s a good idea to blend the poet with the scientist. It would be the equivalent of reinventing a Renaissance man whose motto could be the slogan launched by the 2007 Art Biennale in Venice: *“Pensa con I sensi, Senti con la mente”* (Think with your mind, mind your senses). Whether valuable or not, such hybridization would require a fine balance along the continuum between opposite poles, as shown below.

<i>making sense</i>	<i>making sure</i>
<i>made to move</i>	<i>meant to prove</i>
<i>perceives</i>	<i>conceives</i>
<i>illuminates</i>	<i>demonstrates</i>
<i>fanciful</i>	<i>factual</i>
<i>offers insights</i>	<i>give reasons, provide evidence</i>
<i>show me how you see it</i>	<i>tell me how it is</i>
<i>evokes</i>	<i>explains</i>
<i>enacts</i>	<i>describes</i>
<i>figurative</i>	<i>literal</i>
<i>allegoric</i>	<i>prosaic</i>
<i>delights, amuses</i>	<i>argues, convinces</i>

The main differences between the branches, as I see them, is the literal versus the non-literal use of symbols or signs, the importance attributed to proof versus insight in the quest for understanding, and the different exploratory (“what if-” versus “if then-” driven) as well as expository styles (show versus tell; evoke versus explain).

Symbol Usage: Indices, Signs, and Fusing Versus Separating

To name something is to give it existence and meaning. To the poet, we have seen, the life of a word resides in the fact that it tenses and strains to produce a thousand associations. What the poet warns us against is looking at words as signs (instead of symbols or indices): “As we manipulate everyday words, we [shouldn’t] forget that they are fragments of ancient stories, that we are building our houses with broken pieces of sculptures and ruined statues of gold as the Barbarians did.” (Schultz, p. 88). The scientist instead is more of a Saussurean. He or she wants words to be signs and cringes when their meanings are “sticky” (fused to their contexts) or “thick” (ambiguous or polysemic).

Indices, as defined by Piaget, are an integral part of a fleeting event or object. Something is left behind: a rabbit’s traces in the snow, a lover’s curl, a person’s “presence” through the ways he or she organizes his or her space (auto-topographies). In contrast, symbols, or “motivated” signifiers (ibid., p. 68), are analogs, metaphorical instantiations (a re-apparition or reappearance) of an event or object: for example, icons, proxies, and enactments, but also simulacra. Signs are conventional, detached from their substrate, and standing in for it. They are ersatz: labels, language, road signs (if not iconic), Morse code, or other forms of written instructions, for example.

For Cassirer, we have seen, art, like myth, is not representational or discursive in nature. It is performative and imaginal. Hillman sees the power of the psyche itself in its ability to turn any literal action or statement into a metaphorical enactment.

Gaston Bachelard, in *Poetics of Space*, renewed his warnings against the temptation to study images as things and to look at words as signs. In his view, symbols are “lived, experienced, re-imagined in an act of consciousness, which restores at once their timelessness and their newness.”

To fall into nominalism is a poet’s nightmare in more than one way. Nominalism eclipses the power of words (reducing them to their semantic and syntactic function), and claims that “the ineffable is meaningless.” It proceeds to a systematic sterilization of words by tearing them apart from the substrate in which they reside. Nominalists obsess about distinguishing and categorizing instead of fusing and blending. Along with my friends the poets, I wonder if an artist, scientist, or philosopher will ever be able to move or touch us, to hit a deep chord, if the expression of his or her own musings are not allowed to breathe and breed life.

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