The Neuroscience of Poetry

The Unconscious

And Just a Little Poetry & Music
Winter Poem
—Robert Bly
You may think
You know
This person

Then Again,
You Might
Not !!!

Connecticut Recording Session

harvey ellis
But I know I live half alive in the world, 
I know half my life belongs to the wild darkness 

—Galway Kinnell

I Don’t Write the Poem 
I Just Hold the Pen

We are such stuff 
As dreams are made on, and our little life 
Is rounded with a sleep 

— The Tempest, act 4, scene 1
“One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.”
Carl Jung
Some writers talk about channeling a voice or some such, but it seems clear to me that what they’re really channeling is an unconscious part of themselves. It’s some part of them that is desperate to talk but has been shut down, closed off, and this is the only way it can find its way out.

—Adam Nannini
Opening Up the Unconscious

The Tricks We Use:

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Opium

Laudanum

Sherlock Holmes

Brenda Hillman

Trance State

Second Sight

Day Dreaming

Automatic Writing

Prayer

Sex

Aubrey Hirsch

Hypnosis

Jack Kerouac

The Path to Non-Linear Thinking

You’re After the Same Thing
“Normally most writers don’t say, ‘I’m going into a mild hypnotic trance.’ Typically they don’t know how they do it,” Bell said. “Most people, when they have a good experience writing, they’re well placed in that state, which is also sometimes called a ‘flow state.’ If you don’t have trouble, you don’t have to think about it.”

Madison Smartt Bell in *The New Yorker*
What’s Actually Happening?

Kill the Editor

Break Through Writer’s Block

Shut down the DLPFC

Slide by Inhibitions, Self-Judgment

Open up the Default Network

Whatever distracts or puts to sleep the conscious mind...

This is the poet William Stafford

He would write a poem every day

Don’t you ever get writer’s block?

“No!”

“I just lower my standards”
More Than Just Getting Rid of Inhibitions

Accessing the Deep River of Emotions

Robert Bly

“Leaping Poetry”

Antonio Machado

Ansel Adams

Wallace Stevens
In ancient times the poet flew from one world to another “Riding on Dragons,” as the Chinese said. The Dragon means that a leap has taken place in the poem. . .

. . .a leap from the conscious to the unconscious and back again.

It is possible that rapid association is a form of content.

The farther a poem gets from its initial worldly circumstance without breaking the thread, the more “content” it has.
Wallace Stevens in “The Emperor of Ice Cream” starts with a worldly fact, the child is putting together a funeral for her doll. . .

. . . Then he makes a leap.

*Take from the dresser of deal,*  
*Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet*  
*On which she embroidered fantails once*  
*And spread it so as to cover her face.*  
*If her horny feet protrude, they come*  
*To show how cold she is, and dumb.*  
*Let the lamp affix its beam.*  
*The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.*

If he had described the play funeral directly, that is with dull association, the poem would have had “no content.”
The Spanish poets loved the paths of association.
They considered them roads.

Machado...

*It doesn’t matter now if the golden wine overflows from your crystal goblet, or if the sour wine dirties your glass.* . . .

*You know the secret corridors of the soul, the roads that dreams take, and the calm evening where they go to die.* . . .
Here’s a Neruda Poem...

Finale

Matilde, years or days sleeping, feverish, here or there, gazing off, twisting my spine, bleeding true blood, perhaps I awaken or am lost, sleeping: hospital beds, foreign windows, white uniforms of the silent walkers, the clumsiness of feet.

And then, these journeys and my sea of renewal: your head on the pillow, your hands floating in the light, in my light, over my earth.

It was beautiful to live when you lived!

The world is bluer and of the earth at night, when I sleep enormous, within your small hands.
—So the soul had known it all along, 
the soul knew when it was taken: 
first it filled with light 
and then it went 
sideways, through the boxes of radiance;

you wanted her to look your way 
but she couldn’t;

for the bride can’t just stop 
being the bride 
once the forward exit has begun, 
going backward would hurt too much.

So you had to 
What. Choose 
whether to call out as she passed by.

The choice was simply 
whether to live In memory and time 
or outside—
April

When we have gone the stone will stop singing

April  April
Sinks through the sands of names

Days to come
With no stars hidden in them

You that can wait being there

You that lose nothing
Know nothing
The Power of the Unconscious

“Hand Memory”

Huge
Fast
Powerful
And
Connected
MGM PRESENTS
FORBIDDEN PLANET
IN CINEMASCOPE AND COLOR
STARRING WALTER ANNE LESLIE PIDGEON FRANCIS NIELSEN
WARREN STEVENS AND INTRODUCING ROBBY, THE ROBOT
SCREEN PLAY BY CYRIL HUME DIRECTED BY FRED McLEOD WILCOX
PRODUCED BY NICHOLAS NAYFACK
AMAZING!!
So is Creativity dependant upon the Unconscious?

Some think so. . .

The conscious mind is so locked into the patterns of the past

Our training But Creativity means producing something new, revolutionary

The rules of behavior, of speech.

The conscious mind even shields the unconscious

We have to unroof the unconscious

Making dreams disappear Suppressing errant thought

How do we break the clasp of the conscious mind?
A Few Words About this Quirky Thing
Who is mr ellis?

A Break with “The Narrative”

Wild

Unexpected

Quirky

hypnogogic state

EXPERIMENTATION
How a Poem Might Begin for Watts and for ellis

We were sitting in overstuffed chairs
in a room overstuffed with people
trying to look casual and confident. . .

My bones arrange themselves around everything I think about. . .

This voice comes from a different place

Ah, But Where?
missing Bill

your arrival was speckled with departure
the way air
is folded into stone

now the light in the room is like coffee
and the places you have left in the wall
keep changing

October will come again
and go
before your dark eyes land on me

see how the full moon startles the darkness
on the floor by the window
it will pass over us whether we see it or not

you patience is enormous and has wings
this may come as a surprise to you
but I don’t think so

The Body of My Brother

First it belonged to my mother
or seemed to
stuffed into her
like a foot in a sock.
Then it took care of itself
filling out
into home runs, high jumps.
There were times
it must have been afraid
hiding in a bunker
in South Viet Nam
having happen to it whatever it was
that makes bodies years later
leap out of bed in the middle of the night
not awake
sweating and shouting. . .
Similarities and Differences

(As I see it)

(Grain of salt)

A sense of quiet affection

Less sorrow, more acceptance

It chooses to represent
Bill’s essence
in quirky terms

An overarching sense of serenity

There are 10 Strong Images in this poem

Knowledge is not linear but mysterious

The Poem seems to know something

Lunch

she served something hot
and rhetorical
said it would make
your cinnamon white

she set the table
with lilies
and sexual tension
the way her presence
came into her body

at the table they spoke as if
they’d already spoken
all they needed to

the sun was in the window

something
was just starting up
Would this strange, subterranean voice translate over to other people’s consciousness?

A deeper slice of the unconscious

A few got published

A small award

A couple of books

It translates!

I was surprised

I say these things to point out that our unconscious shares something with other people’s unconscious that we don’t talk about very much

So I gave it a name

So I gave it a name

a Father’s first

Harvey Watts

a Mother’s maiden

Lillian Ellis
ancestors

my ancestors surround me
like walls of a canyon
quiet
stone hard
their ideas drift over me
like breezes at sunset

we gather sticks
and make settlements
what we do is only partly
our own
and partly continuation
down through the chromosomes

my son my baby
sleeps behind me
stirring in the night
for the touch
that lets him continue

he is arranging
in his small frame the furniture
and windows of his home

it will be a lot like mine
it will be a lot like theirs
“I Am Not I”

I am not I.

I am this one
walking beside me whom I do not see,
whom at times I manage to visit,
and whom at other times I forget;
who remains calm and silent while I talk,
and forgives, gently, when I hate,
who walks where I am not,
who will remain standing when I die.
Unroof the Unconscious
Dawn Outside the City Walls

You can see the face of everything, and it is white—plaster, nightmare, adobe, anemia, cold—turned to the east. Oh closeness to life! Hardness of life! Like something in the body that is animal—root, slag-ends—with the soul still not set well there—and mineral and vegetable! Sun standing stiffly against man, against the sow, the cabbages, the mud wall! —False joy, because you are merely in time, as they say, and not in the soul!

—False joy, because you are merely in time, as they say, and not in the soul!

The entire sky taken up by moist and steaming heaps, a horizon of dung piles. Sour remains, here and there, of the night. Slices of the green moon, half-eaten, crystal bits from false stars, plaster, the paper ripped off, still faintly sky-blue. The birds not really awake yet, in the raw moon, streetlight nearly out. Mob of beings and things! —A true sadness, because you are really deep in the soul, as they say, not in time at all!
David St. John: “I believe that poems are not meant to be essays. So ... poems persuade invisibly. They enter through the mind and the experience of reading. But it’s really about the music of intelligence.

It’s really the pulse and the rhythms of language that are enacting whatever the poet’s concerns happen to be. For me, poems persuade through the texture and the rhythms and the movement of the speaker’s perceptions. But not by argument. Only a bad poem tries to convince somebody of something. Only a didactic poem tries to convince somebody that A or B is “right.”

What a good poem does, always, is to provide the reader with a particular experience. A poem itself is an experience.”
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Adam Nannini

When the unconscious speaks too much, it ends up being emotionally transparent.
The creative unconscious self, then, is the sum total of all of the knowledge and wisdom that has been accumulating in our psyches since the beginning of evolution. And one of its primary objectives is to guide us through, and help us realize, the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual stages of our development which were achieved at an earlier time during our evolutionary history.

—James Bonnet
actor, screenwriter

“Whatever it is, or whatever you call it, doesn’t matter. It is the creative unconscious source of all of the higher, universal intelligence, hidden wisdom and truth we possess. It plays a major role in storymaking and it plays a major role in our lives”
Married Blues
Kenneth Rexroth