
IMAGINATION
AND
CONCENTRATION

*Man feels himself younger and younger,
the more he enters into the world of
imagination. He knows now that it was
only the intellect which made him
stiff and aged in his soul expression.*

RUDOLF MEYER

THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION

At night when we are alone in our bedrooms, sharp images often emerge from the darkness. Before our mind's eye the events of the day mysteriously appear. The faces of people we have seen, their conversations and mannerisms, the streets of a city or the fields of the countryside suddenly reveal themselves. Mostly, we look passively at these familiar pictures, but among them appear strange visions, unknown to us. Scenes, moods, events, and people with which we have no connection intermingle with our everyday mental images and branch out in all directions. The new images seem to develop and transform themselves independent of our control or wishes. And

when this occurs, we are drawn into another realm.

We may discover ourselves pursuing some mysterious phantom, solving nonexistent problems, or traveling in a foreign country, speaking with strangers, seeing the fantastic arising from nowhere, often beckoning, sometimes repelling. We watch things happen; we “spy” on whole situations that grow from nothing. As the curious images become stronger and stronger, they lead us sometimes into laughter or tears, into joy or sorrow. The whole range of our feelings finally is aroused.

Glimpses of this unfamiliar terrain lead us to believe that our images have a certain existence of their own—that they come from another world. This is even apparent when we train ourselves to perform conscious work upon our creative imagination. Artists in every field affirm that such images surround them not only after the day is over, when solitude and night come, but also during the day, when the sun shines, in the noisy city or in a small room—everywhere. Artists live with their images. They and their images belong to each other, depend upon each other, and yet the images have an independent existence of their own.

The great German director Max Reinhardt confessed, “I am always surrounded by images.” Charles Dickens wrote in his journal, “I have been sitting here in my study all morning, waiting for *Oliver Twist* who has not yet arrived!” Goethe declared that inspiring images must appear before us as God’s children and call to us, “We are here!” Raphael saw an image moving within his room that later became the Sistine Madonna on his canvas. Michelangelo complained despairingly that images pursued him and forced him to sculpt in all sorts of materials, even solid rock.

How can we question the beliefs of these master artists and writers that their imaginative life came to them from outside themselves? And would they not scorn the narrow conception of creativity that relies solely upon personal memories and efforts? They would undoubtedly feel that today we deny

our communication with the objective world of imagination, in direct contrast to their free excursions into it. The creative impulse of the masters was an expansion toward the world beyond them, while ours is often a contraction within ourselves.

The old masters of European and Asian culture might even shout to us, "Look at your creations. They are not confined to reproductions of our petty, personal lives, desires, and limited surroundings. Unlike the artists of today, we forgot our individual selves in order to be conscious and active servants of otherworldly images. Truly, we did not want to be slaves to these unguided visions. But in our work, we incorporated them like an unexpected blessing. Why are you then creating so many specimens of ugliness, disease, and chaotic contortions? Is it not simply because you are too concerned with yourselves alone and not your art?"

The conviction that there is an objective world in which our images lead their independent life widens our horizon and strengthens our creative will. Developing and assuming new conceptions concerning the creative process in art is the way for the artist to grow and to understand his or her talent. One of these new conceptions is the objective existence of the world of the artist's creative images. What is the reward of artists brave enough to acknowledge the objectivity of the world of the imagination? They free themselves from the constant pressure of their too personal, too intellectual interference with the creative process, the greater part of which is intensely personal and takes place in the sphere that lies beyond the intellect.

TO WAIT ACTIVELY

Great artists of the past and the present, in acknowledging the innate laws governing the imagination, also accept the necessity of waiting patiently until the image has matured to its highest expressiveness. Leonardo da Vinci waited years

before he could envision the head of Christ in his "Last Supper," and Goethe tells us that he bore the idea for one of his works with him for forty years before it was ripe for expression. Such a protracted period of time is, of course, impractical for the artist of today, yet in principle, it is an admonition to modern actors who, in their haste, have lost touch with their imagination and consequently with the ripeness of its images.

CREATIVE "GAZE"

Let us not suppose that this necessity to wait, to pause inwardly before the image, is a passive state. On the contrary, the truly awakened imagination is in constant, fiery activity.

What did the great masters of the past do while observing the ripening of their images? They collaborated with them through their fiery "gaze," their creative, urging attention. They saw what they wanted to see, and in this lay the power of their "gaze," but they also enjoyed the independent activity of their images, which transformed themselves under their questioning look, acquiring new qualities, feelings, desires, manifesting novel situations, symbolizing new ideas, revealing fresh rhythms. Thus they worked consciously hand in hand with their images. (We shall discuss the proper way to question your images in Chapter 6.)

TO "SEE" THROUGH THE IMAGES

For artists with mature imaginations, images are living beings, as real to their minds' eyes as things around us are visible to our physical eyes. Through the appearance of these living beings, artists "see" an inner life. They experience with them their happiness and sorrows; they laugh and cry with them and they share the fire of their feelings.

Look, for instance, upon such creations as King Lear on the heath, or King Claudius in the chapel. Shakespeare,

watching these images, must have witnessed in them an intense emotional storm. Michelangelo, when creating his "Moses," must have been overwhelmed by the inner power of his image to force the medium of stone to such an effortless pitch. Not only did he "see" the muscles and sinews, the folds of cloth, the waves of hair and beard of his "Moses," but he "saw" before his mind's eye the inner might that molded all the muscles, folds, and waves in their rhythmical interplay. Why would Leonardo da Vinci have once exclaimed, "Where there is the most intense power of feeling, there is the greatest martyr," if he himself had not been burned by the fiery life of his images?

This inner life of the images, and not the personal and tiny experiential resources of the actor, should be elaborated on the stage and shown to the audience. This life is rich and revealing for the audience as well as for the actor himself. Ethel Boileau wrote, "You will see images as in a vision mirrored in your imagination. You will give them form, substance and reality, but you will never know quite whence they come. They are greater than yourself—and when you see them manifest a symbol, they will have a life of their own which is not your life—a mind which is not the reflection of your own. It is then that you will ask yourself, 'What is this that I have brought into being?' And the profounder their meaning and significance, the more you will question."

KNOWLEDGE THROUGH IMAGES

The acceptance of this independent world of imagination, the ability to penetrate through the outer appearance of the vision into its inner, fiery life, the habit of waiting actively until the image is right, brings the artist to the verge of discovering new and hitherto hidden things. Undoubtedly the image of "Moses" brought new creative insight to Michelangelo. " 'Parsifal' occupies me very much," wrote Richard Wagner, "namely, a peculiar creature, a fascinating world-

demonic woman, always livelier, appears before me.” This is the process of acquiring new knowledge through the imagination. Through painting “The Last Supper,” surely da Vinci increased his divine understanding and thus put forth his private philosophy that “good men” always seek knowledge.

This longing for knowledge makes the real artist brave. He never adheres to the first image that appears to him, because he knows that this is not necessarily the richest and more correct. He sacrifices one image for another more intense and expressive, and he does this repeatedly until new and unknown visions strike him with their revealing spell.

Poor indeed is the imagination that leaves the artist’s mind cold, and poor indeed is the influx of wisdom to such an artist, when one hears him say, “I have built my art upon my convictions.” Would it not be better for an artist to say that he has built his convictions upon his art? But this is only true of the artist who is really gifted. Haven’t we noticed that the less talented the person is, the earlier he forms his “convictions” and the longer he tenaciously clings to them?

DEVELOPING THE SENSE OF TRUTH

The more the artist develops his ability to imagine, the more he comes to the conclusion that there is something in this process that somehow resembles the process of logical thinking. He sees more and more that his images follow with a certain inner regularity, although they remain entirely free and flexible. They become, in Goethe’s words, “exact fantasy.”

It is of great importance for the actor to develop a kind of “instinct,” which will show him where to deviate from the sound “logic” of his images. Thinking and reasoning alone will not help him—the sense of truth is the principle that counts. This sense has been lost in our time, but it can be developed again. Perhaps it will take a long time for the actor to discover noticeable results in himself, but the way itself is

a simple and pleasant one. The creations of great masters of the past can again render us their kind service and help us achieve these results.

EXERCISE 1.

Look at any classical architectural forms of different styles. Reproductions will do for this purpose. Study them. Follow their lines, forms, dimensions; try to experience their weight, the interplay of the powers of gravity in them. Study the connections between separate parts of the whole architectural form. Try to guess their function, whether it be to support, to lift, to suspend, and so forth. What is the main character of the whole? Is it stressing upward, does it cover and protect, is it inclined to remain near the ground, does it want to vibrate, to fly away, to spread itself, to contract? You do not need to study any professional books on architecture for such an exercise—it is even better if you do it freely and intuitively. Thus you will find many ways to penetrate deeply into the architectural form and to experience it. But most of all, enjoy its beauty. Then, after having become a good friend of the whole thing, suddenly ask yourself, “How would it look if this pillar were twice as thin as it is, if the tower were three times lower, the arch became square, the roof flat, the window broad?” And so on. From such questioning you will receive a shock, sometimes even a humorous one!

You can do something similar with classical sculpture and painting by trying to change the forms and colors.

EXERCISE 2.

Then go to Shakespeare’s works, and after reading or studying one of his dramas, ask yourself some basic

questions concerning the play's plot. For instance, ask yourself how it would be if Othello, in the middle of the play, suddenly understood that Iago had deceived him? What if the performance that Hamlet arranges in the castle should make no impression on Claudius? What if Olivia, in *Twelfth Night*, were really deeply depressed by her brother's death? Ask yourself many such questions.

EXERCISE 3.

The best material for developing a good sense of artistic truth is offered in authentic folk or fairy tales. They depict destinies, suffering, heroism, downfalls, growth and development, mistakes, inner defeats, and final victories of individuals and mankind. They are true human psychology, true history, and they prophesy in tragic and humorous pictures. Their source was never a purely aesthetic or poetic one. Fairy tales have their concrete "logic" because they arise from the time when the wisdom of humanity was fixed in the images and symbols that we find in fairy tales. They are not arbitrary because they were seen by the ancients as the outer expression of inner truth and wisdom. Rudolf Meyer expressed this elegantly: "The fairy tale and its ancient motifs comes through the rise and fall of people, and through the rise and fall of different world-outlooks."*

Read or recreate a fairy tale, but do not ask questions as before. The images and events will of their own volition work in your creative subconscious, gradually implanting a sense of truth in you.

Now, if you feel yourself advanced enough in this

*Rudolf Meyer (b. 1896) was a popular German philosopher during the twenties and an art historian associated with German Romanticism and Indian art.

way, read the biographies of notable people. Follow their destinies by imagining their lives. Let their destinies live in you for days and even weeks. The wisdom of it will continuously increase and refine your sense of truth.

You mustn't say that you do not believe in an objective wisdom interfering with human fate. As a private person you may or may not believe it, but as an artist, as an actor, you have to accept this point of view. On the stage you have to deal with the destinies of your characters, and if you want to play a character in a fine, masterly way, you must conceive it as a panorama of destiny.

You would do well to continue such exercises until you discover that images which are accidentally and arbitrarily put together react upon you as tasteless and amateurish productions.

CONCENTRATION

How can the actor keep his grasp firmly on the turbulent world of fiery images? From where shall he take the strength to fix these movable, flexible images? The ability to concentrate his attention to the highest degree—that is his strength. Every one of us has the ability to concentrate. All of us use it constantly—we cannot even cross the street without it. For the creative process, however, it is not enough to use this everyday degree of concentration. Keep in mind that there is no limit to the extent to which this power can be developed.

EXERCISE 4.

Start by looking at an object. Describe it to yourself inwardly. Is it broad and low? Is it long and high? Is it of wood or metal? Is it fluid, static, or mobile? Concentrate your attention on it. Try to acquire con-

tinuity of attention. As you concentrate do not miss any qualities or details. Certain gaps or distractions will appear to undermine your concentration. Firmly avoid them and continue.

Then do the same with an audible object.

EXERCISE 5.

Then concentrate on any known thing (an object or a sound) that you remember but that is not perceptible at the moment of the exercise. Apply the same conditions as you did before.

Now imagine and concentrate on fantastic objects: flowers, beings, landscapes, abstract forms, and so on.

Imagine noises, for instance wind, storm, waves, crowded streets, factories, melodies, voices, spoken words and sentences, and concentrate on them.

Try to imagine fantastic sounds.

EXERCISE 6.

Concentrate again on the same objects, first visible and then imaginary. This time inwardly embrace the object. As fully as possible, grasp the object as though with “invisible hands.” Send out your whole inner being toward it. Experience your connection with the object in your arms, legs, torso. Let your whole being, as it were, participate in this embrace. This will lead you to a sense of merging with the object. At the same time, release any physical tension that may arise. Concentration is an inner event. Remain free and unstrained in your body, your eyes, your face, and even your brain.

EXERCISE 7.

Proceed with all the above-mentioned exercises in the following way. When you feel that the contact with

the object is firmly established, when it has been “grasped” and held by you in your “invisible hands,” begin to do things that have no relation to the object of your concentration. Start to move things in the room, to speak with somebody, to find a hidden thing, to open a certain page in a book, and so forth. While doing so try to maintain the inner bonds that connect you with the object of your concentration.

During such exercises you may have similar experiences to those you have had when waiting concentratedly for days for somebody to come or something to happen, while the ordinary trend of your life followed its own course without interruption.

The actor who can concentrate well makes a stronger impression upon the audience because all his acting becomes clearly shaped, sure, and explicit. Vagueness disappears in his behavior on the stage, and his presence on the boards grows more and more impressive.

I remember a gala performance-demonstration in Konstantin Stanislavsky’s own home, given before a selected audience in a festive atmosphere. Among the chairs was one in the middle, waiting for a distinguished guest whom Stanislavsky had chosen to honor specially. But the guest was delayed and the performance could not begin. Impatiently Stanislavsky looked at the curtain; his whole attention was focused on the preparations going on behind it, while toward the rest of his surroundings he was naturally distracted. Suddenly a happy smile flashed over the face of the white-haired master. With outstretched arms he rushed toward the crowded door and led the guest to the chair, forced him, in spite of his humble protests, to accept the place of honor, and gave the sign for the curtain to be raised. All eyes were turned toward the chair in which sat a little man—the chauffeur of the long-expected guest!

With his mind so concentrated on the performance, Stan-

islavsky had completely forgotten that the honored guest was not a man at all, it was a lady! Such a price was often paid by Stanislavsky for his extraordinary power of concentration. Therefore, don't do your exercises on concentration while walking along the street!

IMAGINATION AND CONCENTRATION

The more we are able to sustain a strong bond of concentration with visible and invisible objects to which we direct our attention, the closer we will approach an understanding of the nature of real imagination. The following exercises will combine practice in both concentration and imagination.

FLEXIBILITY OF IMAGES

The flexibility of our images is one of their most important qualities. These images must be able to influence and lead each other, to change themselves, merge with each other, to follow their own logic freely, inspiring, suggesting, and enriching us at the same time.

EXERCISE 8.

Imagine events of mobility and transformation: a castle transforming under a spell, a poor beggar woman turning into a witch, a princess becoming a spider, a young person slowly aging and vice versa, a seed growing into a tree, a winter landscape changing into a summer one, and so on. Do not skip any of the stages of transformation.

The next exercise will help you to develop the ability to wait actively, as we have described before.

EXERCISE 9.

Choose any episode in a fairy tale. Imagine it fully. Leave it until the following day, then return to the imaginary episode. After such a period of secret growth, the images will have moved on to new situations, fresh inner attitudes, bringing with them new contributions from their own world. Now look for more complicated, more detailed fulfillment. Before putting the images aside, set before them definite tasks, such as: show more characteristics; show more development in a good or evil way; become older; become younger; become more passionate or calm; reveal the costume, the inner attitude, the kind of movement. These questions are arbitrary. Then return to the images on the third day, the fourth, and so on, prompting them to fulfill more and more tasks.

The images of this exercise pass through two phases: the first, in which they are directly influenced by your creative "gaze," and the second, in which they develop independently with your assistance.

DISCARD FIRST IMAGES

It must be remembered that courage is needed to discard first images and to resist being too easily satisfied. What has already been found will never be lost, but will be transformed and purified in one's subconscious. Thus the standard of the actor's imagination will grow and with it a love for completion, in which actors of our time are so lacking. It will also become a great stimulus for the imagination to reveal to us new and unknown things.

EXERCISE 10.

Choose any character from a play or fairy tale. Elaborate it in your imagination as clearly as possible. Then discard it and start from the beginning, trying to make it more complete, expressive, and original.

You must be very familiar with the play or fairy tale from which you have taken your image, otherwise you will not have the guiding motive with which to improve it. The completion of the image must be measured from the point of view of the whole play or fairy tale to which it belongs. Having discarded your first image, do not force it to disappear completely—this is impossible and unnecessary. Such an effort might even interfere with your attempt to create a second, better, image. The first image will disappear slowly, and perhaps completely, as the second one grows. Usually the first image leaves with the second its best features. Go on discarding one image after another in this way, as long as you feel inner satisfaction from this exercise. Then take another image. Do this intensively but unhurriedly for many days.

After you have achieved a certain skill in discarding and improving images, try to create an original image, real or fantastic. Work with it in the same way you have with previous images. In this instance you will have a different criterion for the improvement of the image. Before, you had the play or fairy tale by which to judge whether the image was truly complete, while now you have to improve it according to your own conception of it. You may be unaware of the full details of your conceived idea, but you will feel that it is your artistic taste urging you to change the image in this or that direction.