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Article

Beyond the City Walls: How can creative writing enable us to access the autonomous realm of the *mundus imaginalis* for therapeutic purposes?

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Abstract

In this paper, I share the findings of a heuristically informed self-study exploring the potential of creative dialogues with characters from Homer's *Odyssey* to support the development of a healthy narrative identity in late adulthood. Feeling stuck in a persistent dysfunctional narrative, I was interested in trying to access the wisdom of the *mundus imaginalis*, described as a third realm between mind and matter with its own non-literal ontological reality, to find new possibilities. The study also drew on dialogical self theory (DST), which suggests that our narrative identity is constituted through ongoing 'conversations' between the multiple internal and external voices of a decentred self, rather than the unfolding of a single story. I devised methods (including collage, poetry, and creative dialogues) with the intention of enabling autonomous mythological characters to advise and guide me 'in their own voices.' The cumulative effect of these imaginal encounters was both profound and beneficial, helping me shift my narrative identity from that of a life mired in loss and grief to one characterised by gratitude and acceptance. I conclude that creative writing for therapeutic purposes practitioners could use similar methods to benefit others, with the caveat that they require considerable time and commitment.

Keywords: imaginal, Odyssey, creative dialogue, narrative identity, dialogical self theory

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Introduction

A year after writing my dissertation for Metanoia Institute's MSc in creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP), I find myself reflecting on what I Iearned and what might be of value to other practitioners and researchers. I believe that its main contribution arises from the distinction implied by the title of this paper between the *imagined* and the *imaginal*. At first sight, this might appear to be a mere semantic divergence, but the two words have profoundly different ontological consequences. The former limits imagination to the product of our own inventive minds whereas the latter expands the notion to allow the possibility of encountering autonomous figures and images 'beyond the city walls' of the individual psyche, with whom we might engage in creative dialogue. In this paper, I will clarify this distinction and draw on my research (Mead, 2021) to ask what are the implications for CWTP if we choose to take the existence of the *mundus imaginalis* (a third realm between mind and matter with its own non-literal ontological reality) seriously, and how can we use creative writing to access that realm?

I looked for answers to these questions by writing 'imaginal dialogues' with characters from Homer's *Odyssey*. I chose to work with this material because Homer's epic has inspired and supported me since I first read it 30 years ago. When I met my second wife, I felt that I had finally found my Ithaka, and when she died seven years ago, I wrote a poem in the style of Tennyson's *Ulysses*, likening myself to Odysseus grieving the loss of Penelope. I will say more about working with this particular text in due course, but I recognise that its appeal is not universal. I chose *The Odyssey* because of the strength of my connection with it. Other writer–researchers will naturally be drawn to work—perhaps in similar ways—with different material that has more weight and significance for them.

I recognise that as a relatively privileged, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, well-educated, middle-class man, I am not researching and writing from a normative position. As Burnham reminds us, each of us is the product of a complex intersectionality comprised (at the minimum) of gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, ethnicity, education, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation, and

spirituality (Burnham, Palma, & Whitehouse, 2008). Furthermore, I draw on *The Odyssey*—the story of a member of an archaic, patriarchal elite—for my source material. I have done so because of my personal relationship with the story and with what I hope is sufficient awareness of the 'Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS' to avoid egregious errors of cultural attribution or exclusion.

My research was motivated by the urgent need to address a real life issue. As a man in my early 70s, how could I resolve the existential challenge of late adulthood, characterised by Erikson (Erikson, 1997) as the opposing psychological pulls of despair and integrity? What would it mean to *grow* old, I asked myself, and how could I, as a writer interested in CWTP, use the process of creative writing to support the ongoing development of a healthy narrative identity?

Before I can detail my research process and findings in the second half of the paper, I need to establish the nature and importance of the *mundus imaginalis*, pick my way through competing schools of thought about narrative identity, and then say something about methodology and ethics to lay the ground for what follows. If you prefer to get straight into the practical domain, you could skip these sections and double back later.

Imagination and the Imaginal

Our understanding of what *imagination* means and the value placed on the kinds of knowing to which it gives rise have undergone profound changes since the ascendancy of the Neoplatonist world view of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) and his Florentine Academy for whom imagination was the primary sense of psychological perception (Corrias, 2012). René Descartes's (1569–1650) mind–body dualism that shaped the European Enlightenment allowed no place for imagination in mainstream philosophy other than as a product of 'unreal' human fancy. What we might call 'deep imaginative knowing' was for a long time consigned to esoteric disciplines such as alchemy and astrology, mystical theology, and to the sensibility of certain poets such as William Blake and the English Romantics (Lachman, 2017).

The nascent field of psychology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought with it a renewed interest in the role and functioning of the imagination. Freud, for whom dreams were the royal road to the unconscious, considered all such images to be projective, thus limiting the imaginary to a product of the individual psyche. His was essentially a

unitary view of the self, in which polyphony was a symptom to be 'cured' rather than a continuing source of insight and growth (Colman, 2006).

Freud's protégé Carl Gustav Jung eventually found his mentor's fixation on infantile sexuality as the root cause of most neuroses inadequate both as an explanatory theory of human development and as the basis for effective therapeutic practices. Jung's openness to the esoteric, in particular alchemy, Eastern religions, and the importance of what he called *the transcendent function* (Miller, 2004; Raff, 2019) led to the development of *active imagination* as a therapeutic method. Jung's idea that there are common archetypal figures that together constitute a form of collective unconscious begins to shift the notion of imagination from a process of invention to one of encounter, albeit with aspects of the human psyche (Nouriani, 2017).

James Hillman (Hillman, 1975, 1983a, 1983b, 1996) studied with Jung in the 1950s and later founded an approach he called *archetypal psychology*, which treats archetypal figures as powerful, autonomous energies, much as the ancient Greeks externalized human attributes and qualities in their gods. Hillman explicitly builds upon the idea of the 'imaginal' coined by Henry Corbin (Cheetham, 2015; Corbin, 1964, 1969). Drawing on a tradition of Sufi spirituality, Corbin uses the term to describe an ontological reality occupying a third realm between mind and matter. If *the imaginary* is a product of human intelligence, then the notion of *the imaginal* allows the possibility of the autonomous (non-literal) existence of archetypal figures.

For Corbin, the *mundus imaginalis* was an expansive spiritual realm, a place of light and ascension, accessible only through prayer and mystical religious practices. For the secular Hillman, whose predilection (like mine) was for darkness and chthonic descent 'this intermediate world is the world of soul' (Romanyshyn, 2013, p. 81), accessible through methods similar to Jungian active imagination. It is from Hillman that I take two important ideas. First,

> [t]he way we imagine our lives is the way we are going to go on living our lives. For the manner in which we tell ourselves about what is going on is the genre through which events become experiences (Hillman, 1983b, p. 23).

Second, and crucial to an understanding of how the process of writing can lead to imaginative insight, Hillman makes a distinction between pictorial images, which inevitably remain tied to their original visual manifestation, and 'word-images', which he describes as

> [the] immediate property of imagination... [T]he essence of word-images is that they are free from the perceptible world and free one from it. They take the mind home to its poetic base, to the imaginal (Hillman, 1983b, pp. 46–47).

Neither Jung nor Hillman were systematic thinkers, so one cannot pin down exact definitions of their understandings of imagination, but the trajectory of their thinking leads us to Watkins (Watkins, 1999, 2000) who was a student of Hillman's in the 1970s and has focused her life's work on how his radical archetypal perspective can be translated into therapeutic practice and cultural/ecological work. Her methods are relational and dialogic:

> Development does not coincide with a move from presence to absence, from projection to assimilation, integrating the voices and figures. Rather, development occurs in the dialogue between self and other, in the process of mutual articulation (Watkins, 2000, p. 105).

What intrigued me was the potential of the imaginal to bring fresh voices to the polyphonic self and thus trigger new insights and narrative possibilities, similar to the way in which Bakhtin asserts, in relation to Dostoevsky's fiction, that characters in a novel can sometimes assume autonomous personalities with views of their own quite distinct from those of the author (Holquist, 1981; Rankin, 2002).

Selfhood and Narrative Identity

The desire to *grow* old cannot be separated from an ontological understanding of selfhood that accounts for both continuity and change. The notion of *narrative identity*, which emerged in the 1980s as part of the wider narrative turn in social sciences (Mitchell, 1980), attempts to answer this conundrum by conceiving of identity in terms of a continually evolving 'self-story'. Paul Ricoeur was perhaps the first to name this narrative identity:

> narrative identity, constitutive of self-constancy, can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one lifetime (Ricoeur, 1985, p. 246).

It is important to recognise that there are some people whose lives are less narratively imagined or whose conception of self is more episodic than diachronic (Strawson, 2004). However, I agree with Crossley's argument that the fashion for postmodern/post-structuralist conceptions of self, taken to extremes, does not allow for the 'narratory principle' that human beings, in the normal course of their lives, 'think, perceive, imagine, interact and make moral choices according to narrative structures'

(Crossley, 2003, p. 291). Humans are in a real sense, 'the storytelling animal' (Gottschall, 2012; Harari, 2011).

Vassilieva reports that in the past 30 years, narrative psychology has emerged as a force to be reckoned with on a par with psychoanalytic, cognitive, and family approaches and that research and therapeutic practice in this fast-growing field can be more or less grouped into three schools of thought (Vassilieva, 2016). I will touch on these briefly in order to locate which approach sits most comfortably with the notion of the *mundus imaginalis* as a site of potential learning.

Narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990), originated in Australia and New Zealand in the 1980s. Strongly rooted in therapeutic practice, White and Epston theorise that their clients' dysfunctional and limiting narratives are socially constructed and represent dominant 'regimes of truth' shaped by the power of social relations that silence alternative, more generative narratives. Defining the self as socially constructed has enabled them to develop impressively effective problem-solving techniques, but theirs is not a developmental model. It also relies heavily on the external intervention of trained therapists. I value their work but needed to look elsewhere for my purposes.

If narrative therapy is at the postmodern/post-structuralist end of Hunt and Sampson's ontological spectrum, then McAdams' North American brand of narrative psychology is unashamedly modernist in outlook (McAdams, 1993, 2001, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; McAdams et al., 2006). He links the lifelong construction of our narrative identity with Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, which I found helpful. His emphasis on the malleability of our stories invites us to take responsibility for our continuing development throughout the life cycle. For McAdams, the goal of our narrative endeavours is to achieve a coherent story told by a unitary self, especially one that is 'redemptive' (McAdams, 2006a). It is a seductive prospect, but surely (like the hero's journey) too narrow and idealised to include the almost infinite range of human experience.

Hubert Hermans' dialogic self theory (DST) (Hermans, 1995; Hermans, Kempen, & von Loon, 1992; Hermans, Rijks, & Kempen,1993; Jones & Hermans, 2011) offers a more open and less prescriptive view of narrative identity, arguing that the self is comprised of many 'I's in constant dialogue with each other. He brings us back to Watkins, whose book *Invisible Guests* (Watkins, 2000) was one of the inspirations for me to hold imaginal dialogues with characters from *The Odyssey*:

> An important feature of Watkins' analysis of imaginal figures is that she does not treat these figures as simply 'aspects of the self' to be subordinated to the overarching organization of the 'I'. Watkins, rather, takes into account both the experience of 'being in dialogue with imaginal others who are felt as autonomous, and the experience of even the 'I' as being in flux between various characterisations' (Hermans et al., 1993, pp. 214–215).

If White and Epston are proposing a socially constructed self in constant flux and McAdams is arguing for the idea of self as coherent story, then one might say that Hermans is advocating the notion of a decentred, plural self engaged in an ongoing conversation and that Watkins extends the participants in that conversation to include 'imaginal others' residing outside the individual psyche. This is the theoretical and ontological conjunction of narrative identity and the *mundus imaginalis* that underpins the use of imaginal dialogues as the basis for my research.

Methodology and Ethics

I am by academic training and personal inclination, an endogenous researcher. Thus, rather than conduct research into other people's experiences, I sensed that it was vitally important for me to step into the work myself. As the 15th-century Indian mystic and poet Kabir said: 'If you have not lived through something, it is not true.' (Bly et al., 1992, p. 176).

I therefore needed to find a methodology that was intrinsically both experiential and reflexive. Etherington helpfully pointed to several possibilities when she said that for researchers engaging in self-study,

> reflexivity may become the primary methodological vehicle for their inquiry, as in research using auto-ethnography, autobiography, heuristic methodologies, narrative inquiry or 'social poetics' (Etherington, 2004, p. 31).

Having looked at various traditions of phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000; Spinelli, 1989) I realised that their focus was on describing the phenomenon itself rather than the observer's inner experience of engaging with it. Since the latter was precisely what I want to explore, I turned to a form of phenomenologically informed research called *heuristic inquiry* designed expressly for that purpose (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990; Moustakas, 1961, 1972):

> The heuristic inquiry paradigm is an adaptation of phenomenological inquiry, but explicitly acknowledges the involvement of the researcher, to the extent that the lived experience of the researcher becomes the main focus of the research… Indeed, what is explicitly the focus of the approach

> is the transformative effect of the inquiry on the researcher's own experience (Hiles, 2001, p. 3).

Helpfully, Moustakas proposed six practical phases of a full-fledged heuristic inquiry, which I loosely followed to guide my research (Moustakas, 1990):

- *initial engagement* with an experience of deep personal concern;
- *thorough immersion* in the experience being studied;
- *a period of incubation* for tacit and intuitive knowing to emerge;
- *unpredictable illumination* (one or more 'aha' moments);
- *conscious explication* of the experience in the light of the inquiry;
- *creative synthesis* to articulate and communicate the findings.

He was also aware how easily such processes can become reified into new orthodoxies, and he was at pains to point out that researchers need to create the specific forms that best suit their studies:

> Each heuristic study is a unique, creative challenge aimed at revealing the intimate nature of reality and thus requiring methods that fit the particular investigation (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 42).

Moustakas suggested that the findings of heuristic inquiries can be validated by sharing them with co-researchers and taking their responses into account. Sela-Smith argued that this shift from self-study to validation in Moustakas' model is inconsistent with the reflexive nature of the heuristic paradigm (Sela-Smith, 2002). I followed her lead in looking solely to the interior, subjective, feeling-self of the researcher as the primary source of data and settled on heuristically informed self-study as my methodology.

As responsible CWTP practitioners and researchers, we need to consider at all times the potential impact of our interventions, particularly the possibility of causing unintended harm, whether to ourselves or others. Working as we do at the boundaries of clinical therapeutic practice, we can look both to the BACP *Ethical Guidelines for Researching Counselling and Psychotherapy* (Bond, 2004) and to the *Lapidus Ethical Code* for guidance. However, it becomes more difficult to apply in practice the principles embodied in these codes (especially that of free and informed consent) when using post-conventional, qualitative research methods because of their emergent nature and of the complex nature of the relationships that can arise between participant–researchers and research subjects. Gullemin

and Gillam therefore propose that in such cases we should apply two sets of considerations:

> These are (a) *procedural ethics*, which usually involves seeking approval from a relevant ethics committee to undertake research involving humans; and (b) *ethics in practice* or the everyday ethical issues that arise in the doing of research (Gullemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 263).

The former provides a baseline for designing the project and the latter requires the researcher to review the ethics of their actions moment by moment. Autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis emphasises the interpersonal dimension of qualitative research and adds a third consideration:

> *Relational ethics* requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and initiate and maintain conversations. As part of relational ethics, we seek to deal with the reality and practice of changing relationships with our research participants over time (Ellis, 2007, p. 4).

Ellis's approach, although influential, is contested by some scholars, who argue that her open-ended, questioning approach allows too much room for self-justification and insist on rigorous compliance with predetermined procedural ethics (Tollich, 2010). Personally, I think it is possible to have the best of both worlds, planning for foreseeable ethical issues and being vigilant for those that emerge during the course of the research.

Even though I did not involve others directly in my research, I was aware that they could be affected by its publication. Writing about myself (my hopes, fears, concerns, dreams, fantasies) could affect people close to me, whether by commission or omission. I did not let this consideration place limits on my self-study, but I was very sensitive to what appeared in the final dissertation.

Finally, given I was engaged in self-study, another ethical concern was the duty of care I had toward my own wellbeing. Etherington (2004) places particular emphasis on this for all forms of reflexive research, whether or not it involves others:

> We need to promote our own well-being; to avoid doing harm to ourselves; to have respect for our own rights to be self-governing; to be treated fairly and impartially; and to trust our participants to take some responsibility for themselves (Etherington, 2004, p. 211).

Good time management, regular supervision, and access to therapeutic support all helped keep an eye on my wellbeing as I engaged in potentially

life-changing self-study, and I recommend these practices to other self-study researchers.

Working with The Odyssey

Homer's *Odyssey* is an archetypal journey of homecoming, a transformative voyage through life (Armstrong, 2007; Fischer, 2008), and a foundational text in the Western canon of storytelling (Manguel, 2007). It offers a mythic template for the unfolding narrative of the second half of a man's life (Christensen, 2018), but it is an unfinished story. Homer leaves Odysseus in the prime of life, reunited with his wife Penelope on Ithaka, reclaiming his royal throne; he does not tell us how his hero faced old age. There is no ready-made advice about growing old to be found in its pages. Poets such as Dante, Kazantzakis, and Tennyson all imagined that Odysseus would go off again in search of further adventures, unable to escape the narrative trope of the heroic quest. It took a female author, Helen Luke (Luke, 1987) to envisage the possibility that Odysseus might choose to remain on Ithaka and grow old in the bosom of his family.

Because the *Odyssey* is inconclusive, one cannot look to a hermeneutic examination of the text for guidance in growing old. But Odysseus does encounter some wise characters on his journey, and I wondered what they might have to say on the subject of ageing if I were able to ask them. I ruled out dialogues with the Olympian gods and goddesses because their archetypes are so well defined and unchanging that their points of view might be too predictable to give rise to fresh insights. Odysseus himself was an obvious candidate, but since I identified my predicament as one he had yet to face when *The Odyssey* ends, I thought it would be more interesting to dialogue with some of the human and semi-divine characters with whom he had interacted on his journey, who might offer interesting points of view.

I therefore selected six significant characters (three male, three female): Circe, Tiresias, Achilles, Calypso, Penelope, and Laertes. All but Tiresias had known Odysseus personally. Penelope was his faithful wife, Calypso the nymph with whom he lived for seven years on his journey home, and Circe the enchantress who directed him to the underworld and whose bed he shared for a year. Tiresias, the most famous seer of the ancient world, augured the manner of his death; Achilles, fought alongside him at Troy, choosing everlasting fame and glory rather than a long and prosperous life; and Laertes was Odysseus's father.

Dialogues with Imaginal Figures

Surprisingly, there is little to be found in the literature about writing as a form of active imagination. In Watkins' work and in Harrell's *Imaginal Figures in Everyday Life* (Harrell, 2018) writing is used to record imaginal dialogues arising in dreams and freely arising images in conversations with analysts and in synchronistic encounters. As a writer and CWTP practitioner, I wanted to go further and explore the possibility of writing as a medium for active imagination and a means to connect with the *mundus imaginalis*.

Although an exhaustive search of relevant databases, including the complete collections of *Poetry Therapy* and *Lapidus Journal*, did not reveal a single article on the subject of the therapeutic potential of working with the imaginal, there is nothing revolutionary about the idea of writing dialogues between parts of oneself or with other characters; I am sure that many CWTP practitioners have done it.

Although I claim some degree of novelty for the particulars of my methods, they sit alongside some more established ways of working. For example, Gillie Bolton offers journalling, memoir, fiction, poetry, and letter writing *inter alia* and concludes, in words that echo my own intent,

> There is no whole and integrated me, which is the ultimate aim, the vision, of this therapeutic work. The writing described here is a process of exploring; an expression of different aspects of myself and an encouragement of these disparate voices within me to communicate with each other and with other people (Bolton, 1999, p. 197).

All creative activity, including therapeutic writing, demands the exercise of our imagination, but for the most part it seems that within the field of CWTP, imagination is regarded in much the same way as it is by the author of *Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life*:

> The focus in my own work is on an imagination which does not leave the real world far behind, but rather is grounded in it, which extends from the 'real', the world as we know it, to the world of the possible (Andrews, 2016, p. 20).

There is no rubric for creating imaginal dialogues, but I had a sense that I should proceed as if I were approaching something sacred. As I noted in my research journal: '*starting feels like a big step... the creation of a temenos takes psychological energy and commitment.*' I had learned from secular ritualist William Ayot (Ayot, 2015) about the importance of preparing slowly and carefully for such encounters, so I designed a six-stage process, crafted intuitively and in conversation with my fellow CWTP

researchers, which I hoped would bring me closer to the autonomous life of these characters and enable them to speak to me in their own voices.

- *First,* I re-read relevant parts of *The Odyssey* (Fagles, 1996; Wilson, 2018) to bring to mind what Homer had to say about the selected characters.
- *Second*, I researched various mythological sources to develop a more rounded and extensive understanding of each one.
- *Third*, I wrote these reference notes up into comprehensive pen pictures.
- *Fourth*, informed and inspired by my research, I scoured the Internet for relevant images and made large (A2-sized) collages.
- *Fifth*, drawing on these images and my new-found knowledge, I wrote poems of invocation asking for their help.
- *Sixth*, following this preparatory work, I sat down to encounter the characters by writing imaginal dialogues.

Over the course of about six weeks, I performed the whole sequence of activities for each character in turn, working intensively for three or four days on each. Rather than summarise all six iterations, I will share a detailed description of the process for Circe, the first character I approached, beginning with an extract from the pen picture I wrote following some mythological research (Graves, 1996a, 1996b; Morford & Lenardon, 2007; Schwab, 1946).

Circe (meaning *hawk*) was the daughter of Helios (the sun) and Perse (daughter of Oceanus), and she lived on the Island of the Dawn. She was noted for her skills with herbs and potions and was sometimes described as a witch or enchantress. She had power over wild animals including lions and wolves. She made no attempt to make Odysseus stay once he told her it was time to go. In fact she helped him, first to find the entrance to Hades and then to get on his way home, avoiding enchantment by the Sirens and destruction by Scylla and Charybdis.

In my research journal, I wrote:

> *I like and respect this character, she puts me in mind of 'Polly' an older woman with whom I had a relationship when I was 20. She was my first lover and she put me back on the 'straight and narrow' when I went off the rails.*

The next day, I made this collage (Figure 1), dominated by the all-seeing eye.

Figure 1

All-seeing eye collage.

The day after that, before starting to write a dialogue with Circe, I spent a couple of hours crafting a poem of invocation. This was a deeply meditative process, done in silence, seeking the right words to set the tone for such a conversation. I found that addressing Circe by name in this way helped me to recognise and approach her as 'other' which I sensed would be vital to distinguish between an imagined character that I might simply invent and an autonomous, imaginal person that I might encounter through my writing (Corbin, 1964; Watkins, 2000).

> Circe, far-seeing daughter
> Of Sun and Sea, sing to me.
>
> Tamer of beasts and men,
> Mistress of plants and potions,
> Divine enchantress of the dawn
> I call on you and offer praise.

Teach me, mortal as I am,
How I can flourish till the end.
What must I sacrifice, to whom,
By what stars set my course?

Jules Cashford, writing on mythic imagination, reminds us that the ancient Greeks called upon the Muse for inspiration. Imagination and memory were sacred and existed not in the human mind, but with the gods and goddesses in the imaginal realm (Cashford, 2012). *The Odyssey* itself begins: 'Sing O Muse, of the man of twists and turns.' For Homer and his contemporaries, to entertain the Muse was a numinous experience, not to be taken lightly. I did my best to approach my impending dialogue with Circe in the same spirit, hoping that she would answer my call.

I read the invocation aloud when I sat down to write the dialogue, but it felt rather stagey and I realised that the actual invocation had been the act of creating the poem, when I had been acutely conscious of the 'person' I was writing about. I wondered how Circe might speak to me: Would I hear her voice somehow? Would her words appear on the page unbidden? Would she say anything I did not already know? Would she say anything at all? How I would I know what to write? Was I just kidding myself?

In a silent room, I opened the laptop, formatted the page, and waited for something to happen. After a few minutes in which nothing happened, I recalled a remark of Ernest Hemingway's about what to do when writing is not coming easily: 'All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know' (Hemingway, 1964, p. 16). I decided to adopt this as my method, visualised myself appearing before Circe, and wrote her quizzical acknowledgement of my presence: 'What are you doing here, did Hermes send you?'

The dialogue unfurled slowly, sentence by sentence, feeling my way into the 'truth' of each line, waiting until the words appeared. I had imagined that the process might be quick, words flowing easily, but the whole dialogue (about 1400 words) took several hours to write. The dialogue continued until it came to what felt like a natural end as I thanked Circe for her help and closed the laptop. As I was to discover over the next few weeks, each of the dialogues had its own unique tone. Circe's 'voice' was cool and dispassionate, self-aware and wise. She was sympathetic to the human condition and willing to answer my questions. I felt 'seen' by her and trusted the truth of what she told me. I also found that in

answering her questions I had tried to be open and honest. I think she would have been insulted by anything less!

Wondering how best to present my findings from the dialogues, I turned to Sandra Faulkner's work on reporting research through verse (Faulkner, 2007, 2016) and decided to create found poems from each dialogue, selecting words and passages from the original text because of their impact on me when I wrote them, using them to convey something of the essence of what they were teaching me. Here is the found poem based on my dialogue with Circe:

> People come and people go,
> they bloom and die like flowers.
> There is great beauty in such brief lives.
>
> There is much that you already know
> but don't know that you know,
> or prefer to pretend that you don't know.
>
> The only question worth asking is
> whether or not you are on your path right now?
>
> Human lives are measured in moments,
> each moment offers a choice in how to live.
>
> Anything that takes you
> away from yourself
> is a Siren Call.

When presented in this way, each stanza has something of the quality of a koan, to be pondered and meditated on. At a superficial level, their semantic meaning is obvious, but each is also a challenge to be met, a truth to be lived up to, a cause for reflection, a question to be lived into. Taken together, they embolden me to 'be my own man' and to take heart from the beauty inherent in the brevity of human existence. What matters, she seems to be saying, is not longevity per se but what you choose to do with the time you have left. Circe is challenging me to live in the present rather than look back with regret on what has passed or been lost.

The process through which I approached each character was designed to take me from using my rational mind *to learn* about them from *The Odyssey* and wider mythological sources to using my aesthetic judgement to create collages to *get acquainted* with them at a more subtle and personal level. This was a deliberate epistemological move from denotative

to connotative knowing and the first step in helping to 'personify' the characters. As I wrote each poem of invocation, calling on them for help, I had a clear sense of addressing something or someone other than myself and, as I described above in relation to Circe, a strong sense of encountering these figures rather than inventing them. To my mind they were imaginal as opposed to imaginary.

Were these dialogues real? Do these imaginal characters actually exist, or did I just make them up? Given the nature of the phenomenon, there is no way to prove it one way or the other. Whilst I could make an elaborate defence of their 'non-literal reality' (Corbin, 1964; Watkins, 2000) I prefer to say that it does not really matter. The slow, painstaking, and respectful process of approaching each character helped to separate them from the 'I' with which I am familiar, so they seemed to speak in their own voices, with an authority that I had otherwise been unable to access, about issues of great significance to me. I propose that what matters is that, whether or not *they* were real, my *experiences* of relating to them as if they existed were indubitably real.

Learning from the *Mundus Imaginalis*

The iterative process described above produced two main sources of data: the dialogues themselves (totalling some 7500 words) and the contemporaneous notes in my research journal, recording some of the insights, responses, and feelings that arose during the creative writing phase. To make sense of this data, I had to find an appropriate method to distil that amount of text in order to identify and communicate significant findings.

I quickly dismissed the idea of a comprehensive textual analysis of the dialogues using NVivo or similar software, because I was less interested in semantic analysis than in looking at the *effect* of the imaginal dialogic exchanges on my feelings and sense of self. I was also cognisant of Moustakas's observation that the analysis of heuristic findings requires something more than conventional qualitative methods:

> Once the researcher has mastered knowledge of the material that illuminates and explicates the question, [he or she] is challenged to put the components and core themes into a creative synthesis. This usually takes the form of a narrative depiction utilizing verbatim material and examples, but it may be expressed as a poem, story, drawing, painting, or by some other creative form (Moustakas, 1990, pp. 31–32).

As an interim step, I reviewed each dialogue in turn alongside the notes I had made in my research journal, whilst also being open to whatever feelings arose on re-reading the material. I used a highlighter to mark passages that gave rise to a felt sense (Gendlin, 2003) of significance, whether of affirmation, insight, or challenge. I then recorded each marked section in a spreadsheet that I set up to record the key moments of each exchange. Next, I drew on the contents of the spreadsheet to generate 'found poems' like the one responding to my dialogue with Circe above, again relying on my felt sense of significance at the time as well as an aesthetic regard for the unique ways in which the characters had expressed themselves. Each stanza (there were 27 in total) represented a separate finding. Some of them overlapped, but it would have been reductive to try to categorise them into common themes and outliers.

After dwelling with the found poems for several weeks while I wrote up my research, I decided to attempt a creative synthesis of the kind Moustakas recommends, and I again turned to poetry to express the essence of what I had learned. The words came easily through tears of relief and joy.

When I was young, as many do,
I listened to the Sirens' song,
and following another's dream,
denied the call of destiny.

The work I did was not my own;
my soul, unheard, went back to sleep,
and like a blindman in the dark
I grasped whatever came to hand.

But that's no way to make a life,
uncertain of your place on earth
and what is needed to become
the person you were meant to be.

I turned my back on those I loved
and those I didn't leave, left me
for others or the great beyond;
I thought myself defined by loss.

Old-age draws near implacably,
my time is short and I must choose
to count myself as what remains,
or end my days in gratitude.

A man's life has its seasons though,
and I've been blessed, as I now see,
for many do not live so long,
and few have been so loved as me.

Conclusions and Implications

In terms of theory, I have shown how two of the three schools of narrative identity—McAdams' life story approach (drawing on Erikson's life stages model) and Hermans' dialogic self theory (including Watkins' extension of DST to include imaginal figures) can be used in mutually supportive ways. I found that McAdams' methods of proactively engaging with one's life story were limited to forms of retrospective review or of internal psychological negotiation between archetypal imagos. Drawing on the ideas of Hermans and Watkins, of identity as decentred and non-unitary, allowed me to 'step outside myself' to encounter rather than to invent new insights and possibilities for ageing well.

In terms of CWTP practice, my research demonstrates the power of deep immersion in a slow and painstaking multimedia process of character research, pictorial collaging, poetic invocation, and creative dialogues to allow imaginal autonomous characters to 'speak' in their own voices. Creative writing it seems can be a *medium* for encountering the imaginal, but with some practical provisos:

- The characters in *The Odyssey* are powerful, archetypal figures with mythological lives extending beyond Homer's epic. One might say that as archetypes, they are already part of the Western psyche. The journey to Ithaka as an extended metaphor for coming home to oneself was already deeply embedded in my imagination. This helped me take the characters seriously as imaginal 'others' with something to say that would be worth hearing. Choosing to work with them worked well for me because of my particular connection with the story, but other people would probably have to look elsewhere for inspiration.
- It took a lot of time and effort (and several distinct stages) to enable the characters to escape from the textual confines of *The Odyssey* and 'meet me' in the *mundus imaginalis*. The mythological research was helpful to flesh them out beyond what Homer saw fit to tell us; finding images and making the collages brought them to life in my mind; and the poems of invocation further enabled me to perceive them as autonomous characters, without which I would have been talking to myself. It was,

and I think needed to be, a slow and measured process that had to be taken one step at a time.

- The creative writing phase of the research took a substantial amount of time and energy. It required commitment, self-discipline, and a belief in the efficacy of what I was doing, to complete. It was an extensive process that could not be dropped into a regular CWTP workshop. That said, it would be interesting to create a shortened form although I think it might be difficult to connect with characters in sufficient depth to make much difference. I could imagine supporting individual clients or a small ongoing group over several weeks, but I suspect that it is best suited for self-motivated, 'writerly' folk like me!

By conventional standards, the findings of one comprising six dialogues with characters from a single story, could not claim to be generalizable. But that is not the nature of heuristic research, which seeks depth rather than breadth and offers relatability as an alternative criterion of its utility; readers will judge for themselves what it offers by way of insight into the human condition and relevance to their own lives.

Further studies exploring the use of creative dialogues with imaginal (encountered) and imagined (invented) figures could help us draw on the distinctive powers that reside in the *mundus imaginalis* and their potential for contributing to therapeutic outcomes in CWTP. Rather than a CWTP workshop, I could imagine convening a facilitated co-operative inquiry group (Heron, 1996) interested in exploring these themes. I favour this approach because of the co-inquiring nature of the process, based on the prior interest and commitment of members to undertake a substantial amount of self-managed creative work.

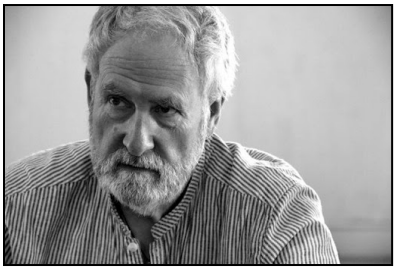
Final Thoughts

Throughout my life, from the age of four when my father died, I have construed my narrative identity in terms of what has been taken from me: my father, a great love in my 30s, my wife in my 60s. I saw my life as if it were a photographic negative, dominated by what was absent rather than emphasising what was or had been present. Given that one cannot change the histories that gave rise to our life stories, how then can we make a fundamental shift in our sense of self, our narrative identities?

McAdams points out that our personal myths are 'imaginative reconstructions of the past in light of an envisioned future' (McAdams, 1993, p. 53) and because they are subjective creations, there is the

possibility of recreating them, of coming to see and tell our stories differently. I believe that the cumulative effect of engaging with these six imaginal figures has enabled me to shift the narrative tone of my personal myth from grief for what I have lost to gratitude for what is and what has been. My orientation has become more forward looking and optimistic. I am revelling in my creative writing, enjoying the pleasures of solitude, and reconnecting with my much-loved family.

I am not merely ageing; I am *growing* old.



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