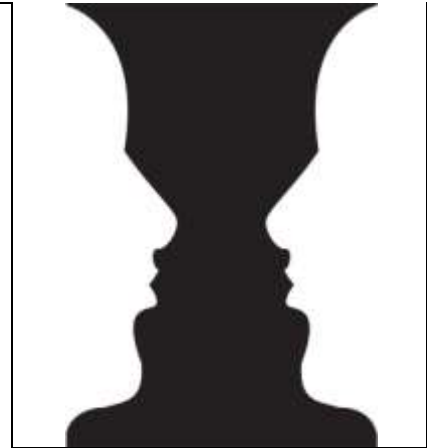

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Imagination, creation and literary origins: dreaming and waking

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Abstract

Quotation, allusion, mediumship and speaking with or through others' voices is an established and well-worked aspect of culture, indeed, it seems, across all cultures, an appropriate subject indeed for COMPASIO. So too has the inspiration artists have drawn for their creation from dreams and the voices of a world beyond themselves. This has been relatively well studied in such fields as visual art and music. Less attention, however, despite its clear centrality, has been given to literary creation. This paper, by a cultural anthropologist, uses a personal case study to illustrate how this can work through the interaction between dreams and narrative. The case here, though only singular in its detailed content and process has wider implications for the comparative anthropological and comparative study of culture, individuality, imagination and creativity.

Keywords

Dreams, narrative, creativity, literature, imagination, culture

We have heard of artists inspired in vision, their works ready carved and painted waiting for them to reveal to the world, of music composed in dream whether of a Mozart or Tartini's *Devil's Trills*. Much less is said of literary creation. How can this be? When all the evidence is that it is after all a far from uncommon common practice in literary work why are we so slow to recognise it? Even the smallest child would know better.

Quotation, imitation, tradition, allusion, model, reminiscence – these and similar notions run after all through the study of literature, of ritual and of culture. Others' words and voices come in speeches on official occasions, in rituals, religious texts, and genres conceptualised as 'high art'. The works of Milton or Wordsworth are crammed with allusions and parallels; Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the poems of Alexander Pope, the writings of Coleridge and countless other works in the literary canon borrow

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from earlier writers; and Renaissance literature fed among other things on the anthology of saws from earlier texts. Kuna ritual oratory featured quotes within quotes, Greek and Latin historians used their characters' speeches to forward and embellish their narratives, and quotation was a key dimension of the literary arts of the West African Yoruba. Alluding has been among the most frequently used literary devices, sermons and theological expositions brim with biblical quotation, and the works of certain modern writers are sometimes described as wholly made up of quotations. However it is defined, quotation in one or another of its many transformations weaves through the literary arts and rites of humankind, as creators and hearers repeat and play upon the words and voices of others.

We have had many echoes from these voices from beyond through the centuries and millennia.. Think of Coleridge, of Homer asking the Muse to speak his verse (more surely than just a conceit), of Zulu sonorous praise poems, epic poets foretold of their craft in dream, of Frost's automatic' poetics in the morning's dew after the struggles of a long night, with the poem waiting for the right moment to emerge fully clothed, shaping itself. How else do we think Petrarch's sonnet form came out to the world? by evolution? hard thought? trial-and-error? survival of the fittest? Or the cadences from one with little Latin and less Greek – whence Shakespeare's heaven-sent (surely) language? The Fijian danced-sung *meke*, chanted in induced sleep or trance from the spirit world at the ocean breakers' edge to be memorised by the waiting followers on the shore? Or Aeschylus great choruses, treasure of culture? Could they have been aught but gems dropped into his mind as the mediator from a world beyond?

Why have we so often ignored these hints? Are we so addicted to the concept of the solitary meditating genius that we screen out any other modes? Or so overcome by the institutionalised way of training that only the writings of the professionally trained are authorised as existent? Or the fought-for products of the supercilious London literary agencies?

Strangely, this has been brought home to me quite directly and personally in a sequence of experiences over recent months as I have been writing, reflecting on African narrative and poetry, on visual images (both my own and googled), and – most unexpected and strange of all – dreaming and waking. This article reflects on my experience and its outcomes. Counter-intuitively for many academics, dreams make an important contribution to our understanding of the nature and processes of human expressive creativity both now and through the ages – the future too perhaps.

So here is the example from my own experience. It is a true one, and not, to my surprise and perhaps yours, in any way a hoax, Perhaps I am deluded but if so it is a sustained delusion, a kind of myth, true, I believe, in its own terms and worth sharing with others. So listen, dear reader, to the case I have to present, of the stories – I had nearly said the poetry - I have heard and now, in part, endeavour to tell you.

They have come in the form of seeing, unplanned, a vision filled with images and, it turns out when transformed into words, that familiar narrative - experience of human living, the wonderful form in which we shape our lives and being - a form in which, perhaps not fortuitously, I already had, with quoting, an established interest (Finnegan

1998, 2011). Over the last few months, since a neurological illness in the summer, stories have been told to me, unexpected, unsought, and as what seemed at first an amazing gift in a series of dreams, later viewed, differently, as a series of unsought visions, revealed between sleeping and waking. They existed already – as do, miraculously, the events and practices of the field setting, waiting there for me, for us. They were there before I knew it, independent of my thoughts or actions, yet also enlarging as I struggled to note and record them and as my observations and travels grew, beautifully revealing themselves to my watching eyes. Those attuned to study of expressive culture will scarcely be surprised to hear that much also grows from the culture of present and past literary creation, its accustomed words and sights and sounds.

But I know that ultimately they do not come directly from any of those – unless perhaps from some unknown hand in some other century or galaxy past or to come. My trade is words and listening to words so I have worked, hard, at revising and crafting the tales and how they might sound in the reading. This was sometimes painful, though more in the later reading than the first writing; funny too, specially some of God's antics (I hope they don't offend) and parts of Sophy's - the third - story (to tell the truth I rather hope they do offend some university people – more likely they'll make them laugh). But all in all it has been a happy experience writing up - not the usual difficult readjustment from the field – even if painful as well as entertaining to read afterwards.

The stories scenes gradually uncurtain as I slowly see them and walk further to examine this unaccustomed land. things fall into place as I look at their intricacies.: Anne the defrauded mother – only after I had written the small scene in the second of the tales when Fionnuala brings her the child did I realise that (from the first tale) he was her own son; and that she was also St Anne who comes not in nativity scenes but with her own recent-born son in Virgin-and-Child pictures. Francis and his birds, and Athene's grey eyes (born fully formed from the head of Zeus, I remember) also came later. And Sophia by day in Sir Wulfram's cottage (her nights have not been shown to me): I needn't after all have been so exercised about whether palace sleeping-arrangements would allow Corin and Fionnuala's eventual union.

And the little cat – it was late on that I noticed him (except he was all the time a she) hiding behind the coal scuttle in God's study as he and Sophia finally talked wisdom together, aiming to overhear them so as to pass on it on, suitably edited, to her kittens. Unlike God she hadn't learnt Latin or had a private education (God said that didn't matter but she knew better: wisdom might not be everything – she knew that well from chasing the palace mice - but even in heaven it was something!). Near the start of Sophia's story the cat had all the time been chasing sunbeams in the corner, just I hadn't been looking that way. So too with the scene when he leapt to Sophy's so-unexpected rescue. My sympathy for *her* came late for though I knew that story had to end in her redemption, I wrote it unwillingly.

And the bluebells and primroses and rowan, and Fionnuala's harp – all late to be found unveiled. It was later still that I saw the connection, hazy as it was, with wilderness temptations and snakes and apples, and with the wise men with their different gifts and journeys (I had not before noticed their distinctiveness). Much else has gradually

emerged from the strange mist-shrouded land of my fieldwork between sleeping and waking.

Next, and while, I think, I was already into my period of illness when I found myself unable for a time to voice the words in my mind, I perceived the dreamlike experience, out of normal consciousness, of heaven as a setting not of passive acceptance, as I had thought, or of listening to already-perfected heavenly choirs, but of widening and deepening experience, both known and untried. That image does not figure directly in the stories, but forms their background. And the last dream tableau – the folding of Francis and Sophia in the safety of his wings followed by his betrayal and his gift: that makes up the central move in the second story, and (with some help from the angel and the little cat) gives structure to the narrative as a whole.

In the narrative as they developed, beyond my control, we see the angel developing from an anxious little figure into something more like the senior and experienced personalities he'd secretly hoped to emulate. He was one of those few who learned from taking part not just (as he theoretically should have) by standing back. Perhaps he had read Aeschylus – though I would doubt whether ancient Greek tragedy was on his syllabus. His experience recalls the strains of participant observation encountered by all field working anthropologists of detachment together with participation. Gradually, as in Greek drama, he learns from suffering, his own and others', he grows older in wisdom and experience, and when he gets home never forgets.

Some might say he's excessively tender to Sophia (if he'd taken the Virgins option in the heavenly Diploma programme he might have noticed her failings better). But with his foundation in Transferable Skills he's quite good on Soa the self-trumpeting slut, specially on the Witchiness bit which he focuses very hard on recording for St Peter and the archangelic archivists. He's less good on other dimensions so she gets away with a lot. In the end he makes not too bad an overall assessment, and at least her 'sins' were properly recognised ones, on St Peter's list.

He had more trouble with Sophy (originally Safia but she wasn't going to accept someone else's identity). There hadn't been a Feminist Module on offer or if there was he'd accidentally on purpose missed it, so was a bit lost. He wasn't so bad at spotting the bits about the bluebells or, more obvious, the music and rather warmed to her childhood aspirations. But he'd been brought up to respect Authority so was rather flummoxed. He couldn't find any proper Sins (he'd been scared to do the Advanced Criminology course).

It is illuminating how Sophy in the second story is so blind to the beauties of this world. Even when she tries to get them, as I wanted her to, whether for herself or for some utilitarian purpose, she can capture only a grey outline, hear the skeleton of the music, see the faint shape of the mountain. She has a few glimpses it is true, specially from having to join in the choral communing group singing of Newton's 'Amazing Grace' and in her loveless art-lacking childhood – a forlorn deprived figure that make me weep even now after having read (and of course written and revised) it so often. It is her very deprivation that can alert us to the wonders of human and natural creation. It was only her kindness to the little cat – who 'needed her', frustrated by her rigid parents' code – and her longing to learn the trumpet that brought about her eventual saving. The verbal

text was there before the music. Isn't music prior to words? I have long believed so and written extensively on that point (Finnegan 2003, 2010q2). But perhaps after all it *does* lie below verbal consciousness so the creative process had to dig deeper? Certainly music was key to the narrative as to my personal experience, perhaps coming later as lying, less retrievable, deep below the surface?.

But language was key too. It was, and is, a treasured store to be worked with, building on my own and others' arts, bringing to bear my own craft in the sight and sound of words, honed for - I do not know how to count the years, since my babyhood no doubt in the verbal traditions of Ulster where my parents grew and my father exercised his wit and mother told wild and improbable but oh so convincing tall stories about everything under the sun.

The dreams mostly come as static non-narrative tableaux. Transforming them into narrative was a work of art, drawing on the craft which I had spent my life polishing. The voice I came to develop, was at first uncertain and uneven, but began eventually to come through as clear and sustained.

The question of language brought up some interesting points. Unlike many anthropologists departing into the field I knew the language – or thought I did. The way it came out, however, was in very different style, vocabulary and grammar from my 'normal' (academic) writing. In the end, unintendedly and at first unnoticed, much turned out, like so many African and native American narratives mangled in their transcription (Hymes 1996), to be a species of poetry.

Given the traditions in which I grew up, and the Bible- and Bunyan-rich Quaker school I attended, the language, cadences and images could not avoid being biblical, though often in ways I was not aware of when I was writing them down – sometimes, as it felt, from dictation. I worked – hard – at trying to put the dreams into the narrative language in which I grew up, influenced I know by the many novels, both high- and low-brow that I read before sleeping (sleeping – yes, I begin to see the connection). They were deeply influenced too, I now see, by my experience of African narrative forms, especially the Sierra Leonean Limba and their wonderful story-teller Karanke Dema (Finnegan 1967, 1970, 2007, 2012): their verbal stylistics, lack for the most part of what we might term prepositions, conjunctions and adverbs (but with other, perhaps richer, resources in their place) musical cadences and interpolated songs, personalities (twins, including three twins – like the Sophias, figure often) and characterisation, dramatic moves, everyday style and setting, above all perhaps the ubiquity of repetitions – repetitions both within and between words.

This is not to say that I do not have to work at it. The central stories and characters never change – they are dictated to me, myself merely the medium – but the words and names sometimes do. I have to draw on all my long-learned arts of word craft and cadence-making – sound, in my experience, being at least as important as surface meaning.

How do I know these words come from beyond? 'Proof' is scarcely in question.. But I have been struck over and over again how once the words are written, the dream transformed to mortal story, a depth I had never envisaged shapes itself under my eyes –

not always but richly and consistently so. Take the following passage from 'Three Ways of Loving' (the second instalment) for which I am the current amanuensis.

It is a simple and dramatic episode, told in apparently straightforward language. It describes how the gay but (to Genna) terrifying Torquil tries to rape Genna, who is eventually saved not by either of the two twins who love her but by the faithful guide dog Meg.

Party at the Queen's palace, guests in boisterance, notables present. The Queen's hospitality never at fault, food wine dance. Guest list fulfilled.

Torquil evil heart a-planning.

Genna too with her Richard and Corin, Meg behind (not so welcome at the queen's festivities, but loved always by the king)

Talk to Torquil, courtesy.

'Have you read any good books recently?'

'Not my thing, surely you know that by now my Genna' (up down, opportunity?)

'But – Can we suggest some? I could lend ...'

OPPORTUNITY. Mistletoe. Below. Library.

'Yes yes yes. I have a gift for you too. A big wonderful unprecedented huge grandiose unprecedented long-desired ...'

Something odd there? But courtesy before all.

'A loan, very happy to help, let us explore together. Below. In the library'

Down stairs

Stretch high for a first book. Look up, haa! Tumble, tender catching.

Soft kiss. Loving cousin ...

?

The first gift.

Courtesy ... Laugh (try). Embarrassed -

'Oh, oh, unexpected. Mistletoe much to answer for!'

Now for the second, deeper (hah) message, signal, massage

'Your second gift now my love. (How convenient that mistletoe, look up)

How easy (women all want it I know). Now now no shrieks, what would the queen say party disrupted.

Hard kiss, no mistake

The second gift.

Scream, the queen ...

Unbuckling the belt, one of the many. Passing object. Not her, not her.

Not Genna.

The third gift was coming.

Scream. Voice not reaching her voice.

Richard help me help me

She could flee.

Hands on her breasts. Bodice. Skirt.

The third gift is coming ...
Cor help me help me
The third gift is coming.
The ant feet, the octopus fingers, spider legs.
No no, not my little spider cried God, the watcher, chorus, the common
man.
And now the snake coiling uncoiling slipping stepping
slowly slowly
Slowly down her body.
Across the stoop.
No stopping the lightning quivering lusting tongue
Round the last step's corner.
God held his breath
Cor, Rick (no voice)
Oh hope of last hope Meg in party's music
Too late, too late
Meg heard.
Paws on the stairs.
Snake in the anteroom. Help me help. At the door. The inner doors. All her
strength against them.
Opening
Opening ...
The third gift on its way.

It is Meg in the anteroom. Meg on the stoop. At the inner doors. All her
strength against them.

Opening, yielding,
The gift on its way.
At Tor's throat, ladder fallen, Jenn on the float. Sir Torquil tenderly
bending
'What happened my dear?'
Richard fast down the stairs, Iris close behind. Clasp Jenna in safe arms,
raising Tor, wrapping his cloak tight around him, hiding all.
'What happened?'
The Queen was there (the King had heard naught).
She did not allow a fracas to stir the smooth surface of her events.
'Get up and redo your make-up straight, my – my dear' Oh but first
(courtesy above all)
'Thank you my dear sir for looking after her – she's still very young you
know (better not elaborate on that ... hm ... Sir Torquil'll understand), the
more gratitude to your forbearance. We are in your debt' (gracious to the
pebs.) And did you get your gifts, Sir Torquil?'
'How gracious madam, how thoughtful.

Yes *indeed* I did. Gifts long desired. Two so far. Genn is keeping the third for my return, aren't you my darling? Looking to my third great unsurpassed magnificent – er - gift, specially for you ...'

A bit off key thought the queen, not used to elite company. But in one's position one has to unbend to the *nouveaux riches*, mingle. Duty first, the king's stamina not so good nowadays.

'She may not be up to finding it for you just now' (these badly brought up gals, no stamina) But do please come back for more when you're ready, Guinivere will be waiting, front always open for you, back if you prefer. I know she's agog to see your present

GINEVRA! isn't that right my dear?'

What could Genna do?

The third gift was coming.

Her madam selling her to to -, binding her ..

The third gift was coming.

Corin's eyes alone saw

And mine, don't forget mine whispered God

'Let me help, I will bring the book to your house honoured sir. Let me find it for you'

No look to Genna, he climbed the highest shelf for the Greek Testament, he knew it well

(*My soul doth magnify the Lord ...*)

'This one will do you good, ponder it well, er, enjoy it. With Genna's love, it's hers'

What could he but take it

Genns trembling in Richard's arms, Queen above exchanging cool looks with the king. Quite enough fuss about that irresponsible, *undutiful* Ginvera, I ask you. *His* niece.

On the face of it quite a dramatic episode, important too in the unfolding narrative. That was what I thought when I wrote.

But then, as the reader may already have seen, I gradually I began to see the depths in Sir Torquil's riddling words, speech not understood by poor Genna until it bursts on her, appalled, at the end. In the dreaming night their ambiguities started to uncoil themselves.

'Below' in every sexual sense you can think of – not the library or its books only for Genna - his snake awake, coiling inexorably down, snake of temptation (whose I wondered?), freezing its victim with its icy stare, raised to strike, closing on the apple of long-devised desire.

Unseen by the queen too. Her duty-filled graciousness makes everything worse. She could not have the smooth surface of her party ruffled (surface? below? water? rippling?– constant imagery of the narrative).

Heard only by Meg, Cor's seeing dog. Seen fully only by Cor's blind eyes which understood and quivered with Genna's every sense

Or so I thought ...

But I have seen, even as I write this, that though Richard was first to the rescue, it was Corin's sensitiveness to language, he the master poet, that let him grasp and unriddle the riddle. *He* heard and translated. It was he who undid the magic, the spelled words . for he spoke plainly, unpoetically, not of 'gift' –Christmas the time of the free exchanging of presents, of self, of mistletoed love – but of a book. And – again I have just seen – the gift he chooses is *the* book, the biblion, the Greek bible. How poor Tor must have puzzled over it – how delightful to the reader and to Cor, Genna all unknowing - as he turned those Greek letters upside down and around, above and below, endeavouring to open and penetrate its meaning, above, and again below.

Meantime I mistily knew already that that episode would be central to its characters and to the narrative's development. The key personalities are here in all their uniquenesses, key to the story's denouement as Genna makes her final impossible choice throwing her fateful weight along the earth's tilting fulcrum between the twins Richard and Corin (twins united in the womb and in love, one); and they between Genna and Iris of the dancing sparkling rainbow eyes (dazzling eyes that surprised me until I too looked into their depths).

As I say, I work by day at hewing words, drawing on all my skills. But once done, as it is now for the first instalment, I no longer recollect the details or the labour. The text is fixed. It is not only me of course. That great Limba story teller Karanke Dema in Sierra Leone once told of thinking out his longer stories in the fields during the day, then speaking in the evening inspired by *malimba ma* - tradition, dreams? – and the imagination of his heart, his mind, his poetic skill (*hutukuma*) as he told his tragic or comic tales.

It is much the same, I think, as I time after time struggle and hesitate between differing wordings and phraseologies. The words and names sift their shapes as I work them, as they have already done in the extract above. Sound is all, meaning already given. In the dream of last night, hard on a Christmas Day's festivities, the key images were of an anthropologist's choice on a thorny path and (hardly a coincidence) of food and cooking At the end

And she wrote wonderful books about her people, and he cooked the most fantastic wedding feast ever seen on earth, after she and her family – had cut up the vegetables for him. And they danced till dawn on the streets of Cairo, of free Cairo.

Well, something like that. But the details shift and slip. Too many 'and's'? and what about 'after she and her family – had cut up the vegetables for him'? I now see that's too fussy, though I wanted to put it in (he *did* need some help you know – this isn't just a fairy tale happy-ever-after-ending – I think) and how could she have done it on her own? maybe somewhere earlier? Or, hard choice, not there at all?). And the last sentence – closing cadence is all. Just 'the streets in free Cairo' would be more powerful. And I

think now they danced 'all night' (not till dawn): it means the same but the *sound* (not just the rhythm as I'd thought) somehow isn't - why? Other writers will no doubt be able to tell me.

And the images. Without my intending it, these have become a structural characteristic for each narrative. The first book - about the little angel and the three wisdoms - was shot through not just with the (stately traditional) music and words of hymns and carols but with images of living things; birds and animals, chiefly but not solely, for the divine union of God and Sophia, wild flowers for others; and then for Sophy vixen and, even more central, the tempting snake and its apples, temptation in every sense, not without rationale as even the little angel had to admit. Also with coiled beings, devils, demons, transforming to energising dragons (how could I have known the therapeutic worth of that progression?).

'Three ways of loving' began from Schubert's 'Trout' quintet, prime shared favourite of my husband and myself. I obeyed - 'and Mary meekly bowed her head', what choice had we? But I did not *at all* like it. I'm not keen on cold fish.

But then I realised it was the music, the piano's shimmering notes, the rich images of water - water the image of love, ice and desert of its opposite - and the rustling sound of water. All through we sense these images of love - the ones coldly incapable until redeemed by another's love, the ones swimming like dolphins in the ocean wave, carried by the river meeting the Donegal coast, travelling not through desert and rejected forgotten oasis springs and icebound peaks but over seven oceans and across seven rivers to find her love. The third and fourth, only dimly seen as yet. but I know they are waiting for us to see them, of abrupt sudden sounds - not sustained like the other - of percussion, the angel's madcap drummin' sister whose music and flashing lights are too hot even for purgatory. And the fourth (final?), the dragon's tale: smoke, and smells and the vigour that is needed for enlivening the world.

And the overriding theme of the whole? It never occurred to me to seek that. But one late night I opened, dreaming, an old blue file to see 'Self' written at the head of the column and a series of words below, taken away too quick for me to read or to turn the page, perhaps five or six, indented to the right (the short Cairo story?). I was puzzled rather than frustrated. In any case it seemed irrelevant.

But then I saw that there, waiting, was the extraordinary key to the whole. To our lives, there waiting. It was those fateful repeated choices between others, and no less between facets of one's self. What greater or more pain-full gift could God have given his children than their free will? The one gift he had no choice but to give. He wrote as it was written. How strange that God should lack what he had to give to those erring human beings of his creation!

The dreams and musings of a Shakespeare, Aeschylus or Newman must be of interest. How did they craft their work? Whence these miracle writings? That of someone like myself must perforce be of less interest.

And yet – and yet ...? In this age of women's achievements, of the voice of the common man, can my dreamed witnesses give a small clue to the wondrous working of human imagination?

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