Phanopoeia: In the Shadow of the Snow Queen
Wendy Donawa
University of Victoria

I must seem something of a wooly mammoth to my students when I point out that my childhood unfolded prior to widespread television; external stimuli to my imagination were limited in a way subsequent media generations find difficult to visualize. But I recall most vividly how compellingly and repeatedly I was drawn to one of the few books in our home—a 1908 publication of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales, lavishly illustrated by Edmund Dulac, sent by my father’s Scottish great-aunts when he was a young child.

How I pored over the intricate details of this book; how it enchanted me, provoked me, if you will—not because I needed help with the narrative—for after a first reading, I knew what happened—but for something I could not name, and still struggle to describe. I was possessed by the sense that there is a more-ness to the world: not only the mysterious possibility of beauty, or the unpredictable unfolding of events, but also an intractable and unfathomable sadness.
I felt, in a completely instinctive and inarticulate way, that if I gave myself over to these images, I might come to understand this more-ness. And I think so still; I agree with Dwayne Huebner (1999) that to be human is to transform experience into significant symbols, that our awareness of language makes our consciousness available to the world; I agree with Adrienne Rich (2002) that the multiplicity of the poetic image offers revelation, and is a way of learning and knowing (43). This more-ness is what I understand by phanopoeia, as I respond to Rebecca’s and Leah’s engagement with ways of evoking underlying memory and imagination, and of divining touchstones for poetic and curricular meaning.

I teach literature now, mainly to education students, and I often begin my children’s literature course with a reading of Hans Christian Andersen’s (1908) *Snow Queen*—a self-indulgent choice, as it’s a personal favourite. I like to share it for its wealth of imagery, its openness to interpretation, and here, for its applicability to our theme of provoking curriculum. The images and representations of mythic, archetypal experience seem to me to offer transcendent moments, opportunities to see how things might be other than they are; they offer ways to hold back the rising tide of educational means-and-ends values cloaked in scientific, developmental, and technological language.

But I am almost always disappointed, although not surprised, that, initially,
students do not take to *The Snow Queen* at all. *Too long, where’s it going, what’s the point?* they complain. *Why all the unconnected adventures? Too much description, too many obtuse encounters.* And indeed, the cadence is alien in a sound-byte, media-oriented era. So the challenge is to share with them the pleasures of listening for the delicious inventiveness, the dark ironies, the Lewis-Carroll-like nonsense, the pervasive existential melancholy unweaving the didactic Christian material. Such a reading offers an antidote to Adrienne Rich’s (2002: 149) observation that in an era dominated by marketing and capital, subtleties vanish, and complex relations are reduced to banal stereotypes. The devaluing of critical thought accompanies the devaluing of language, its flattening and impoverishment, and its collapse into the shallow and obvious. As Dwayne Huebner (1999) puts it, when text is replaced by textbook, our interpretive ability is diminished.

So the reward is our coming to hear that the dreamlike and startling qualities of the *Snow Queen* narrative are Andersen’s voice, to hear that it *is* a voice, and a way of being, worth listening to. To understand a reader’s capacity to listen to undercurrents, to subtext, to Rebecca’s *sideshadows*, is to invite tolerance for the uncertain, the ambiguous, the disturbing. To evoke and provoke.

Andersen summons our attention in his first sentence: “Now we are about to begin, and you must attend, and when we get to the end of the story you will know more”(1). The story is a classic circular journey, its central image the journey made by an immature protagonist forced to leave home, to encounter tests and obstacles, and finally to return home transformed by the crucible of experience.

And it strikes me that this is also a central energy of pedagogy, for however a trajectory of knowledge and experience may bring us to a new place, it also brings us home to our changed selves. So, how can the poetic and archetypal images, the *phanopoeia*, of the Snow Queen in/form our memory, perception and imagination? How can it offer touchstones in our pedagogical worlds?

The narrative, patterned with dark and light, begins with a cosmic encounter, angels and goblins. The goblins have invented a dark mirror that mocks and projects, which reflects only the world’s ugliness and deformity. The goblins fly the mirror too near heaven, and it shatters, its shards flying about the world to
lodge in human hearts and eyes. In terms of our own lived, embodied, politically structured lives, those shards reflect the fear and projection of Otherness; they foreclose empathy or understanding; they justify visions of racism, misogyny, hegemony and bigotry of all stripes.

Meanwhile, the child protagonists, Gerda and Kay, play innocently in their little rose-bowered garden, their Eden. But it is Kay in whom flying fragments of the shattered mirror lodge. Kay becomes a “bad” child, hardhearted, defiant, and disobedient. So far, a conventional Christian storyline. Or is it? Must innocence be ignorance? What are the consequences of knowledge? For it is the knowledge of previously unknown evil that provokes, then overshadows, Kay’s own childhood curriculum of devout and unquestioning innocence. Forbidden knowledge arouses Kay’s ambition and his intellectual hunger; it drives him out “into the wide world” (a continual refrain) where we must all eventually fare as we can.

And there is a certain grandeur to Kay’s misdeeds, for the clever boy is abducted by the Snow Queen and taken to the vast, mathematical perfection of her palace, its frozen centre “the Mirror of Reason...the best and only one in the world” (67). The Snow Queen’s beauty suggests the seductive appeal and pristine aesthetic of pure rationality. Her icy kisses ensure Kay’s allegiance, but they take his innocence; they sever him from his origins and his childhood loyalties; they leave him ungrounded, incapable of heartfelt engagement, his loving but limited childhood quite forgotten.

What does Kay’s dilemma convey of the appeal of pure reason, of unadulterated abstraction, of the seductive, authoritative way of knowing that has held the academy in its icy embrace for centuries? “Uncontaminated” by the feeling life, by subjectivity, the rational voice denies the subjectivity of which it is made; it denies the interests and the power that are at stake; it excludes all that is embodied, biological, and specific, all that is Other. It obscures its relation to any non-logical processes by which its knowledge is achieved, so that the domain of knowledge production, like the society in which it is embedded, is “befouled with inequalities of power” (Rich, 2002: 117). End justifies means, as we find in curriculum that has become, as Rebecca says “handmaiden to conservative and paranoid reforms.” In just such a way, a culture is created that maintains inequalities of power as effectively as any brute force might (Rich, 2002: 51).
So, what alternatives might be suggested by the child Gerda, whose quest it is to seek Kay? Gerda is the archetypal child-soul, utterly vulnerable in the wide world Kay longs for, her only strength her unknowing innocence. Gerda is a problematic image for feminists. Her innocence is conflated with her goodness, and suggests a life without evident power or control, the life of a “good” woman, unable to act in the public domain, guided only by innocence and intuition. Nonetheless, Gerda is the active agent and the rescuer in this tale, suggesting that intuition and the heart’s ties also imply ways of knowing, and offer another pathway to agency and wisdom. Perhaps she illustrates the “poaching” Rebecca describes; Gerda deconstructs the womanly virtues of goodness and uses them to disrupt the powers that thwart her quest.

Gerda’s search for Kay is a purely instinctual one, and follows an elaborate pattern of capture and escape, of darkness and light. Moreover, each stage takes her further from her flowering childhood garden into successive underworlds of the violent and murderous, the primitive and elemental. The lonely, befuddled old witch who first captures Gerda has a garden of magic speaking flowers who tell the child of the fleeting nature of joy, of thwarted love, of the melancholy, narcissism and despair of the real world. And they also reveal that the lost Kay is not, as feared, dead. This syncope unravels Gerda’s enchantment, and she escapes from her delusions and illusions to the “real” world of power and politics and possible community.

She eventually finds herself at an opulent and learned court, the princess of which is so accomplished that she “has read all the newspapers in the world and forgotten them again, so clever is she” (34). The ultimate in civility, the courtiers, although elaborately ritualistic, are kindly too, in their way, and they equip Gerda extravagantly for her onward journey. But there is something effete and bloodless about this court too, its inhabitants so elaborately learned, but shielded from the untidy vigour of daily life. So impotent are they that at night the
sleeping courtiers cannot even dream without assistance from the animal dream world. The court’s refinement is not really Leah’s logopoeia, a dance of the intellect; it doesn’t have the energy and sinew to be a poetics, a making, at all. It is not a house of being; it cannot be provoked.

And how might this courtly image speak to our curricular concerns? Any educational movement, to have vigor and longevity, must have intellectual and theoretical underpinnings, but what of ever-more-refined, subtle and self-referring conceptual ramifications that eventually seal themselves off from the active domains in which they should be embedded? “To be heard in the halls of high theory,” says Patti Lather (1996: 526), “one must speak the language of those who live there.” But to work with teachers in the difficult world of practice is to become aware of a current of impatience with academia’s insistence on strong theoretical curricular grounding. Let the wordspinners stay trapped in the palace of discourse with its elaborate protocols of tenure and promotion, say those in the field; let them stay trapped with the princess who has read all the newspapers in the world and forgotten them again.

The provisional nature of “civilization” and the insufficiency of pure theory is shown by the next episode in the tale, for deep in the forest, that unconscious domain where all that is dreaded and unknown lurks, Gerda’s golden coach is ambushed, her servants are
murdered, and Gerda is captured and taken to the Robber stronghold. If the court is an elegant dream, the robbers’ castle is the cannibalistic shadow stuff of nightmare. Against the orderly refinement and decorum of the court, Anderson sets actual, animating sources of power: violence, savagery, appetite and drive unfettered by law or scruple.

And if Gerda encounters the dark shadow of civilization, she also meets her own shadow in the little robber girl. Andersen takes pains to point out that the little robber girl is about Gerda’s age and size, but stronger, and darker. She is “all that gets suppressed in the process of becoming a decent civilized adult” (Le Guin, 1979: 60), everything Gerda is not, and that “good” children are not—headstrong, amoral, ingenious, unscrupulous. She does all the things good children might, in their darkest hearts, wish to do—she torments her animals, lies to her mother, helps herself to Gerda’s pretty possessions. But because the robber girl’s desires are authentic, and her will unconstrained, her passions have energy and agency, and it is she who equips Gerda and engineers her escape on her prescient speaking reindeer, almost an animal familiar. And frankly, the darkly passionate little robber girl, seething with qualities repressed, denied, or unacknowledged by good children, is a great deal more interesting than innocent, passive Gerda.
But how do we help our students recognize and incorporate their shadows, so that they can integrate authentic desire, the capacity to imagine alternatives, the relation of knowledge to self-knowledge, and a transcendent sense of the “more-ness” possible in their lives? And how consciously do we model this process ourselves? How effectively do we discern the light and dark energies of curriculum? The discourse of learning theory is an inadequate conceptual tool for thinking about education (Huebner, 1999, chapter 26), its language more concerned with control and behaviour than with the meaning of life.

Gerda escapes north with her faithful reindeer, again vulnerable and adrift in an increasingly wild environment as she draws nearer to the oblivious Kay. Once more she encounters shadows of civilization, but generative ones this time: instinctively wise primitives, women attuned to survival in a harsh environment. Here instinct is not blind, but practical, wise and generous, and Gerda is sent on the last stage of her journey.

Barefoot in the palace of the Snow Queen, Gerda at length finds Kay. Her hot tears of love melt the mirror fragments in his eye and heart; the innocent intuitive self and the intellectual rational self are reunited. Thus whole, they are able to retrace the whole reverse journey of Gerda’s quest to arrive transformed, mature and integrated, where they first began.

Resolution is effected through the interruptions, the syncopes that Rebecca and Leah evoke; the disruption of innocence by knowledge, of knowledge by excessive refinement, of refinement by primal savagery, and of all these, by a recognition of the shadow and the wisdom of the loving heart. For if the multiplicity of imagery offers a way of knowing, it offers a way of unknowing too. The subtlety, expressiveness and complexity that serve ideology also weave threads that can effect their own unraveling, subtexts that can resist, deconstruct, “write back” (Ashcroft, Griffith & Tiffin, 1989) its original intentions, text that can be “read against” itself (Schweikart, 1998: 197).

What, then, is foreclosed, in the life of the mind and spirit, in curriculum, when *phanopoeia* is dissolved by instrumental language, when discourse is robbed of image? What options, multiplicities, and potential disappear when the metaphors by which we live and make meaning are flattened into stereotype? When “language itself collapses into shallowness” (Rich, 2002: 149), we lose the facets and doubles and reflections and shadows of images that are our spiritual capital, and our pedagogical capital too. Those evocative images on the edge of meaning are not just for the isolated visionary, but for the collective, says Adrienne Rich (p. 117), who speaks searingly to the resulting overall impoverishment of human imagination and intelligence:

Waste. Waste. The watcher’s eye put out, hands of the builder severed, brain of the maker starved
those who could bind, join, reweave, cohere, replenish
now at risk in this segregate republic
locked away out of sight and hearing, out of mind, shunted aside
those needed to teach, advise, persuade, weigh arguments
those urgently needed for the work of perception
work of the poet, the astronomer, the historian, the architect of new streets
work of the speaker who also listens
meticulous delicate work of reaching the heart of the desperate woman, the
desperate man
--never to be finished, still unbegun work of repair--it cannot be done without
them
and where are they now? (Rich, 1991: 11)

That Unlikely Green

Seen from the coulee’s scoured edge
in the hot wind
that bristles its scruffy pelt,
marvel that anything fluid
could so burrow the valley,
could so insinuate that gleaming celadon curve.

Walk the river’s edge
where scrub and root entangle overhead
and wedge the astonished trees
inscribing winter’s roil and floodwrack.

Suspended
over the river’s fluent drift,
a flotilla of white pelicans
floats the air.

A heart, foolish hermeneut,
could open to their floppity grace;
could yearn after that unlikely green
threading archeologies of loss;
could imagine it to be more
than its meandering
tough
geographical
self.

—Donawa, 2002

Resources

Alberta Language Arts Curriculum Guides and Program of Studies, 2002.


Huebner, D., Hillis, V. (Ed.), & Pinar, W. [Introd.]. (1999). *The lure of the transcendent: The collected essays of Dwayne E. Huebner*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. [I have cited Dwayne Huebner from course readings and discussions offered during a doctoral seminar he taught at the University of Victoria, summer, 1998. The 1999 date refers to the subsequent publication of the course readings by Lawrence Erlbaum.]


*Quotations from Hildegard von Bingen appear on the CD *Vision*, produced
by Tony McAnany for Angel records. (1994)

About the Author:

Wendy Donawa, Ph. D., has spent most of her adult life in the Caribbean as pedagogue, artist/illustrator, poet, and museum curator. She is now an independent scholar, teaching for the College of the Rockies (Cranbrook), The University of Lethbridge, Alberta, and The University of Victoria, British Columbia.

E-mail: wdonawa@uvic.ca