The Creativity Seminar

*(This was published in the literary magazine of Garnett College, University of London, in 1975. I've revised it before posting it here. It's still frenetic and babbling, but you should see the original. As I recall, it achieved the desired effect, though. I wrote it out of exasperation at a real Creativity Seminar I was enrolled in. The class had been so abstruse! The lecturer pontificated and the rest of us pompously waffled back—until I brought in and shared this story. No one was offended by my parody of our conversations. Instead, my classmates began to bring in and put on display examples of their own creative output. The lecturer declared that this was precisely what he had hoped would happen. Why he didn't just say so in the first place I've no idea.)*

1. We Pursue the Butterfly

From time to time, overwhelmed with the conviction that I have something vital to say, yet ignorant of what, I feel the strain to grasp it and articulate it splitting me into two selves: my daemon, the captain of my eloquence, dislodged from his high seat, scuttling in circles; the pilotless rest of me, lock-limbed, prattling to no purpose. So it was this morning, at the creativity seminar—until Sita raised the stakes, and the metaphor spiralled out of hand.

At first, it felt like lucid dreaming, or a particularly dissociative drug trip. Inside my head my daemon careened, bumping into walls and tripping over tree roots; every shock of impact sent words cannoning from me, more and more of them even as I clenched my mouth shut and knit my fingers into a webbing. But the net was breached; the bright butterfly gambolled.

"There is no creation without destruction," I heard myself claim. "In the arts as in nature, they are the twin facets of change. To create *effectively* is to supplant what has *been*. And is what we create all rose petals and lush harmonies? No! Its thorns and discordances matter, or the oversweet outcome will ring false."

Voices shouted out in scorn and in agreement, to parse and to protest, but I rose over them.

"What's more, taste and modishness are *cyclical*: as the once admirable becomes outmoded, it must be displaced. Tear it down! Neither the old nor the new is *intrinsically* superior. All honest aesthetic preference is subjective! But the new *excites* us more. Until it too turns old and tired, and the *old* old, rising from the ashes, tears *it* down: an equal and opposite reaction."

There were more attempted interruptions; I remained unstoppable, or believed I did. Possibly everyone else was equally loud, and thought it was I who was failing to shout *them* down. Inside me my daemon was hellbent on gluing himself up in a flood paste of sticky concepts—twisting into mucilaginous knots to declaim it. Or possibly I was a mere mouthpiece; a puppet gyrating on Sita's strings. She gesticulated; I leaned where she pointed.

"Is a Beethoven symphony more creative because it is more complex or because it is not *too* complex? Is what counts its freshness, or that its freshness is not too *radical*? Do we admire more its richness or its economy of means? Or perhaps its *balance* of freshness and familiarity? By the way, what's the big deal with originality? Isn't the imitative at times *more* beautiful?"

Creation? Destruction? As my daemon rampaged off topic, he began to claw for whatever was in range—with bared teeth and filed fingernails—for the sake of any argument at all; the coherence of that argument be damned! The words glugged out of me in clots, in spurts, like blood.

"Is there any arrangement at *all* of the universe that can remain *in perpetuity*­—in perpetuity…"

Until I sputtered. I became stoppable. What burst from the room's other heads swept me before it. The voices, joining forces, had become an avalanche. Oh, I was soon enough roaring no less loudly again myself, but I was now at one with it. The swell of us swallowed the floor and brimmed up over the chairs, the seats, the back rests, up to the level of our chins and our mouths, clogging the tumult at its origins, at the rim of the lips, backwashing.

The lecturer (did he know that he too was Sita's toy?) lifted the baton of his right hand; he waved it, conducting us ashore; the noise receded. He breathed forth a question, which bubblegummed into a balloon; into a globe etched with tiny rainbows. We listened; we watched; it popped.

I won't say it calmed us. But the discussion continued in a less cluttered fashion.

We interrupted still, but we listened a little; we took turns. All except Sita, that is. Not yet.

"Look, if creation's so great…"

"But it is great…"

"…why don't we spend our whole time creating instead of all the other stuff the human race gets up to? Just imagine everyone's precious creations clamouring for attention as we sink beneath the weight of them…"

"Because creation isn't just *any* kind of change, it involves making an *order* out of chaos, what we gravitate to is

order…"

"Exactly, not just the artist but the consumer of the art…"

"And yet look how the cycles of physical creation, and invention, and consumption, and the appetite for the new are destroying the world's resources…"

"Well, fundamentally, matter can neither be created nor destroyed…"

"And in the same way, spirit can't be either, spirit might seem to be born and to die, but in its essence that's just cyclical *being*; spirit *is*, and *is*…"

"But chaos is what precedes order. We seek order because we're actually besieged by chaos…"

"…or is, was, *will* be, and is…"

"Chaos is as subjective a notion as order, or as creative excellence. Everything contains a natural order, if we can direct our gaze the right way, if we can learn to appreciate it for what it is. What *true* chaos *results* from is our perversion of the natural, is from our longing for *more* than the natural…"

"And basically that's vanity. We create because in our pride we wish to prove we exist; to prove we matter; to prove we matter *more* than…"

"Spirit and matter aren't equivalent! Spirit is temporary. We're a chemical reaction that will stop when our container ceases to function…"

"It's the same thing with contraception—"

"Ha! Even if that's true of the individual spirit, even if *personal* death is real, it might not be true, and I maintain probably is *not* true, of the *great* spirit, of the oversoul—"

"If life is so damn sacred, then yes, contraception is a sin, but so is abstinence, if what our bodies are made to do is copulate as much as possible so that we can keep creating more and more of us. More and more life…"

"Which, exactly like matter, can neither be created nor destroyed!"

"Is *thought* spirit? Isn't thought, rather, more like a kind of bacteria that lives off the physical world…"

"What? Not everything that lives *thinks*!"

"And like most of that sort of organism, thought flourishes best where there's crap, shit, dung, and a whole lot of manure around to fertilise it…"

Oh, how the butterfly nets swooped and whooshed, clashed and clanged; how the butterflies danced out from under them. It wouldn't be fair to say I didn't listen; I did. But most of what struck me was not what was said (frequently aimed at other butterflies than mine) but what was touched off, as an idea sideswiped the greater currents and my daemon rode them elsewhere, into his own froth of fleck and babble. Were some of the voices I have quoted here, see above, my own? Possibly! Who could say? They teemed. In fact, they were not just my team but the other team, bouncing their unruly football between them like a bunch of six year olds.

The truth of it too was in there somewhere, but who knew where? Or what it was, exactly? My daemon had rocked loose from me, glimpsing and losing sight of revelation and wonder, like a dog chasing its tail—snatching at its tail's shadow—left grasping for its smell.

What clicked him back into place inside me was the voice of our young mystic: "Enough." It had been so easy to forget Sita was among us! And then, whenever she wished us to remember, there she would be: a buddha at our still centre, smiling and serene. Now, finally, she did wish; she gestured, and we fell into an obedient quietness. "Sit," Sita said. The lecturer sank into his chair, and gazed into her eyes, with a kind of patient, good dog fascination.

She rolled out her long tongue. On it, for all to see, sat her lovely daemon, an exact and tiny doppelganger. The daemon duplicated and reduplicated, a dozen doppelgangers: who strolled about the room; who perched in a waft of perfume on our shoulders, ready to breathe whatever she might choose to tell us directly in our ears.

"The imagination," she announced, "can conceive of anything. The creative challenge is to fetch that anything out into the shared world, while managing the effects upon the shared world of its arrival; what it redirects; what it may displace. A common 'safe' method is to restrict oneself to the creative arts: to the little containments of our what ifs. Merely a tale, only an image, no more than a game, all just a tingly scary dream. Others—our inventors, the physical makers among us— may risk more reality, but there are trials, small steps, monitored stages. Because we all know to fear the mad scientists! The wilder, more anarchic, more *actual* the creative action, the more it tips towards destruction."

Did we accept this as truth, as argument? It didn't matter. In truth, she had not yet begun. This, and we knew it, was her concession to the small step, the soft preparation. She was gauging our readiness. *Now* were we ready? Not quite. A little more explanation, perhaps, a rational branch or two to grab onto when the flood began, as it would, soon. There was about to be—we could read it in Sita's voice, her body language, her very gentleness—a demonstration.

"There is a technique I learned during my time of apprenticeship, in Yarlung, at the abbey. One must be trained first, of course, as for *all* of the more advanced techniques, in the enlargement of the mind and the pacification of the physical world. Mastery is achieved when the enlarged mind not only *contains* that physical world but holds it in balance, preserving the local safety and the larger harmony. Easy enough! At the next level, one brings other consciousnesses into one's field of influence. Rather more difficult! I admit it, I've been operating lately at this level— subtly, as a test, only. Confess it: you failed, did you not, even to notice? My intent was not to exercise control over you, but to offer you a sip of soup, a slice of beef, a wedge of cake: a smorgasbord taste, in fact, of your own—*our* own—vast individual yet communal otherness.

"Once these first two skills are acquired, the seeker will begin to perceive the exact door of the self behind which the imagination pullulates. With the seeker's whole being, he, or of course she, enters there. Let me amend that. Let me say: *I* perceive that door. In a moment, I *will* enter. Not fully, however: just to stand at the threshold and offer you a view of what lies beyond.

"As I, in Yarlung, was shown this spectacle, by the greatest of its great practitioners. The seeker enters; he lets his awareness of the physical world revive, there behind this door, directing it inward; with a twist of the self, the imagination is unconfined, and becomes his form, as time, logic, cause and effect, the physical laws of science, are shut inside him: he is inside out.

"This may sound dramatic, and it is! Yet done properly, there will be no *actual* change but the change of places and perspectives. Within this inverted space, one can create and destroy without creation and destruction, cognisant of how such processes are illusory, how the physical world, should one wish it, is illusory. These chairs? An illusion. That table, this room, these bodies of ours? All illusion. One is without laws, except as one wishes."

"As one does wish! Even at the highest levels, it is wise to have laws and to respect them! And there are additional safeguards. Done properly, the entire experience of this created reality remains separate. It is, after all, fundamentally other dimensional. So that barring accident, or inadequate mastery and control, the smaller, shared world will continue quite untouched.

"It is beautiful to watch, especially when the seekers are multiple, and they allow their worlds to interact. The technique may be practised by one person alone or a number together; I have participated, without strain or trouble, in several such group enterprises.

"It can be dangerous for one person alone to invite in too many non-initiates, but I believe my skill is sufficient to crack open that door just a smidge, so that you may peek!"

She smiled. "If you wish to leave, and not risk this experience, I will of course release you."

None of us moved. I suspect that we all thought about it. But it was clear that she didn't wish us to. And who among us would willingly disappoint Sita?

2. The Butterfly Turns

It happened quite suddenly. She reeled in her red tongue. The daemons flowered into light. She ran a hand through her long black hair; rose-gold bangles clinked around her slim dark wrist.

Then the end of the world began.

She was a clear waterfall, without human form. Deep within the high crash of water her head had dissolved into, set back on a rocky ledge, there sat a bright transparent cube, that housed a squeaking system of pumps and pulleys, among which lights flashed in steady rotation, now illuminating, now casting into shadow a solemn clock face, whose metronome clucks the water riffed on and pulsed to. The waterfall flowed in and out of being, rhythmically, arrhythmically, contrapuntally, periodically overwhelming everything else, though not for long; never entirely *gone* for too long either; yet at times quite distant, a spray of fronds, three-quarter face to me, then sideways. At times, bit by bit, its perimeter expanded, until what we had been looking across at was right before and behind us; above us; disgorging us, encompassing us. And now trees tumbled into the room; the walls grumbled with the thwack of them, each shock and aftershock strewing a quick scent of bark. The leaves, and the sprigs of twig, even the branches, lacked edge and definition, fuzzing one into another. The wind turned in them like long, slender fingers—no, turned *into* fingers—that plucked like a harp the hair of a young man, whose face, then her face sprouted among the gnarls, woven together into birds' nests. Birds wheeled and whistled, swooped, clawed, and ruffled—one moment precise as parakeets in a Brixton pet shop; the next moment coming to perch on a finger and dissolve in a shimmer of rainbows. Faces (from her past, from her present, from her imagination?) lay ranged on the air like photographs on a table: dry and inert; then, in abrupt choral bursts, wholly alive, with sobs and with song, with laughter, with snarled anger. Dizzying views opened out about me, of streets, towns, deserts, real and mythical, lifting high to the black of space. Stars swirled past like leaves in a high wind. They settled and *became* leaves, laid out in state in an autumn park; then rose again up to the branches, in whistling flocks, turning autumn back to summer. In the grass, multiplying as if mirrored, half-clad bodies twisted in attitudes of love. Darkness fell and darkness lifted; light faded and light broke, into shards of sound and smell; I was barefoot, knee-high in swaying grass. The moon, very quietly, was singing.

Her voice—it was *her* voice now, no longer singing—came softly out of the moon's loudspeaker. There was, I thought, a little tremble to it. Perhaps, though, of delight, not fear. "Stay calm," she said, "while I go to ask advice. I may have opened the doors a little too wide." And she vanished, leaving on her chair the transparent cube, the pumps and pulleys, the metronomic clock. One by one, we chose phrases to cluck to its rhythm. "Stay calm, she'll be back, stay calm." "Windsong, waterfall, leaf-fall, nightfall, moonrise, sunrise, birdsong." "Stay calm, stay calm, no worries, stay calm." "The end of the world has begun, begun, the end of the world has begun." "Separate reality! No worries! Stay calm!"

I made it home somehow. I crossed the lintel, swung the front door behind me, and collapsed with my back barricading it shut—my senses half-drowned in a cask of alcohol; my body as unsteady as if the sloshed barrel of me was washed up on some beach, being toyed with by the tug of the surf. A touch as physical as a lover's hand was pulling me inside myself, and I was resisting, terrified of what might happen to my unique identity.

Two quotations warred within me. Dr Johnson:

"––Are not all things possible to the mind?

––We may take fancy for our companion, but we must let reason be our guide.

All power of fancy over reason is a degree of insanity."

And Wallace Stevens:

"The magnificent cause of being,

The imagination, the one reality

In the imagined world."

I had left the college grounds this morning scored by an invisible gash. Had my classmates, similarly stricken, managed to seal theirs? Through mine, certainties poured like sawdust from a rag doll. My heart beat loudly, erratically, uncertain of its own existence—beat desperately— uncertain that anything as physical as a heart could long maintain the illusion of its existence.

All that had been real was now the unreal.

I recall very little else about today. The outside world may already have faded away for all the information about it that got through to me, whoever that me might be: this rag doll me that had somehow made it to this place of refuge. This door. This weight of self sprawled back against it, anchoring me. How I've been struggling to feel that weight, that pressure, its pain even, amid the voices and the visions; the unravelling.

The unravelling of *what?* I wonder. Of me only? Or will the world, bit by bit, unravel? Or a continent only, or a country, or just this town? I fear I won't remain whole enough to know.

For I have now broached a bottle of chilled white wine; and to end my limping resistance, I am drinking it in a hot bath by candlelight.

But although sleep lullabyes my body, my head is too hopped up to allow me to succumb. Patches of semi-intelligence startle and blaze, wash over me and are gone, like sunlight on the water. Under the surface, old wishes and new intentions surge and glitter.

But there, they are gone again. In any case, they were no more than glimpses; they were salmon-flickers battling the current; the river is great, and swift, and dark, and it is taking them.

I let it. I float. I let the bathwater lift me and lap at me, until from a transparent cube perched on the tub rim, an clock alarm trills that it is time. I am to be the actor and the action. I am to rise from the marble temple pool; I do so. The invisibles drain down and drip paint-splotches, except not of paint, but of light, and shadow. The shapes kneel to me. They uncurl and rise. They animate and inhabit. For I am Krishna, waking from the dream in which he dreams the world alive. I lift my limbs like hills, like sleek brown hills up out of the marshes. I mass and hover above the marshes, with waterfowl scuddering from my eyes.