

# The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke



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By

Harry Eiss

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke,  
by Harry Eiss

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Dedicated to Ryan, Suzanne, Trevor, and Evan

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It is to their madness that we owe the many benefits that the Pythia of Delphi, and priestesses of Dodona were able to bestow upon Greece, both privately and in public life, for when they were in their right minds their achievements amounted to little or nothing.

—Socrates (1)

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# MOVEMENT I

## Track 1

Seeking harmony in the wildly careening arpeggios of broken calliopes, finding truth in the image of a girl with kaleidoscope eyes, studying Werner Heisenberg's theory of uncertainty, and trying to grasp the implications of Henri Poincare's chaos theory--I compose and revise and piece together motifs on my Architecture Pro sound mixer in search of the mythical lost chord.

## Track 2

Richard Dadd is a trickster, a pre-post-modern enigma wrapped in a Shakespearean *Midsummer Night's Dream*, an Elizabethan Puck living in a smothering Victorian insane asylum, foreshadowing and, in brilliant, Mad Hatter conundrums, entering the fragmented shards of today's nightmarish oxymorons long before the artists currently trying to give them the joker's ephemeral maps of discourse.

I think of Bob Dylan's *Ballad of a Thin Man*, that cryptic refusal to reduce the warped mirrors of reality to prosaic lies, or, perhaps *All Along the Watchtower* or *Mr. Tambourine Man*. Even more than Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which curiously enough comes off as overly esoteric, too studied, too conscious, Dadd's entire existence foreshadows the forbidden entrance into the *numinous*, the realization of the inexplicable labyrinths of contemporary existence, that wonderfully rich Marcel Duchamp landscape of puns and satiric paradigms, that surrealistic parallax of the brilliant gamester Salvador Dali, that smirking irony of the works of Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, and Robert Indiana, that fragmented, meta-fictional struggle of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*.

John Lennon certainly sensed it and couldn't help but push into meta-real worlds in his own lyrics. Think of *Strawberry Fields Forever*, *I Am the Walrus*, and the more self-conscious *Revolution Number 9*. In *Yer Blues*, he even refers to Dylan's main character, Mr. Jones from *Ballad of a Thin Man*. If Lennon's song is taken seriously, literally, then it is a dark crying out by a suicidal man, "Lord, I'm lonely, wanna die"; or, if taken as a

metaphor for a lover's lost feelings about his unfulfilled love, it falls into the romantic rant of a typical blues or teenage rock-and-roll song. However, even on this level, it has an irony about it, a sense of laughing at itself and at Dylan's Mr. Jones, who knows something is going on but just not what it is, and then, by extension, all of us who have awakened to the fact that the studied Western world doesn't make sense, all of us who struggle to find meaning in the nonsense images, characters, and happenings in the song, and perhaps, coming to a conclusion that the nonsense *is* the sense.

When Andy Warhol made the intentionally overly obvious punning cover for the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* album, depicting a man's crotch (presumably Mick Jagger's—though not literally) covered by jeans with a real zipper to be unzipped to reveal the sticky underpants from a man's cum, the connection with musical creativity and sexual creativity was humorously conjoined, but the real irony wasn't so much that sexual *double entendre*, as it was a self-mocking, a laughing at the creator, a fun conceptual undermining of the search for meaning through art, a presenting of the artist as trickster, very much in line with Carl Jung's trickster as the impulse to anarchy, a light-hearted metaphysical joke similar to Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed*—a literal quilt and pillow (rumored to have been from the actual bed he shared with Jasper Johns; which only makes the mixing of realities even thicker, because whether or not the rumor is true, it becomes real, perhaps even more real simply because it fits so nicely into human maps of meaning), that is then transformed with splashes of paint, hung on a wall, and *designated* a work of art, in the tradition of Duchamp's "ready-mades" and the whole irreverent Dada movement.

As W. B. Yeats so famously wrote:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
 When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
 Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
 Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
 The darkness drops again; but now I know  
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (2)

This is the coming of the *fool*, a prophetic vision of the end of the centuries of the European construct of civilization, of both practical and spiritual truth, a foreboding announcement of the “rough beast” overturning the carefully constructed, self-conscious world of T. S. Eliot’s *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, where the narrator, who is etherized, knows that everything he does and says will be misunderstood, and only finds reassurance in the quote from Dante’s *Inferno* (XXVII, 61-66):

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
 A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
 Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.  
 Ma perciocchè giammai di questo fondo  
 Non tornò vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
 Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.* (3)

[If I but thought that my response were made  
 to one perhaps returning to the world,  
 this tongue of flame would cease to flicker.  
 But since, up from these depths, no one has yet  
 returned alive, if what I hear is true,  
 I answer without fear of being shamed.]

Indeed Richard Dadd might be the perfect real life guide to replace Dante’s Virgil (who is way too grounded in the conceits of Classical and Medieval allegory) to reveal to us the real world inferno that begins “*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate*” (Abandon all hope ye who enter here).

But no. That’s too easy, and ultimately pointless. Richard Dadd is more than that, or I would have no interest in him. Can we find meaning and value in such dark mirrors, such amusement-park-funhouse conundrums? Is it possible to follow Alice through her looking glass and somehow give the inversions a logic or, more accurately, a human existence beyond logic, and, even more still, beyond illogic? Can the humorous absurdity of Lewis Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty serve as a literary form of L.S.D. and

help lead us to a higher understanding of realities transcending the boundaries of Europe's paradigm of civilization? Is there some higher truth bound up in Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception*, or is it simply yet another clay pigeon meant to serve the needs of humans desperate for reassurance, humans needing the illusions because they cannot ignore the threats of a mindless cosmos? Can some higher truth be found in the insane accusations of Heath Leger's role as the Joker in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*? Does insanity triumph sanity? If so, where do we go from here?

### Track 3

Pia Hoffman sat across from me for our group lunch. "I checked online. All the publications are impressive."

"Yes," I replied, "Joseph Campbell is a star in the world of mythology."

"No, I meant *your* publications."

"What? Oh. Well . . . thanks."

My teaching experience at Pacifica Graduate Institute was not working out nearly as well as I had hoped. For several years, my students and the presenters I accepted into my area for the Popular Culture Association conferences had told me I should contact the institute because it was, apparently, teaching the same materials I taught.

I was intrigued, but only made a few modest attempts to find out more. At first, I noticed it was not accredited, or, at least it was unclear if it was, but then I found out it had, indeed, achieved this status, and I made contact. After a few phone and email exchanges with Cindy Carter, their Dean of Academic Affairs, I decided to submit my materials to be put on file as a potential guest professor. I wasn't completely sure just what this position entailed, but it sounded exciting, perhaps even a doorway into a career change.

Then Cindy contacted me with an offer to teach two courses in my field. The first would be titled *Symbolism in the Visual Arts*. The proffered pay was much less than I anticipated, but I wasn't pursuing this for the money, and I decided to plunge in and see where it took me.

They mailed me several impressive promotional publications filled with beautiful color photos of the thirteen acre campus in the foothills of Santa Barbara overlooking the Pacific Ocean and the Santa Barbara Channel Islands. The landscaping was designed to blend the buildings and "people paths" with existing orchards, now converted to fresh fruit, herbs, and

vegetable plants, all centered on strong environmental concerns. It looked idyllic.

The intellectual stress was what it called "Depth Psychology," a psychology based on the theories of Freud, and especially of C. G. Jung, as put forth by Joseph Campbell, Marion Woodman, and James Hillman. This was certainly important in my own theories, especially Freud, Jung and Campbell. My own views, though by then already moving to new arenas, were certainly influenced by theirs. I was not so interested in Marriion Woodman and James Hillman, and prone to ignore their importance to the institute at the time. Nevertheless, the M.A.s and Ph.Ds. being offered in Depth Psychology and Mythological Studies were as close to my own interests as any I could find in academia.

The courses were set up so that a large portion of them were taken online. They either began or ended with a campus retreat where the students were at the institution site for a busy week crammed with meetings of the courses they were enrolled in, each course set up to either begin or end with these campus meetings, most likely, at least partially, to fulfill the state requirements for campus contact hours. This first course for me to teach began with the online exchanges. Since I had done a good deal of online teaching, I was comfortable with this. However, I had always considered the online assignments to be important, formal components, and I had always conscientiously responded to the students' submissions. I was later to find out that it didn't really work that way at Pacifica, and that my responses were actually seen as a negative thing for me to do. I never completely figured out why, but the assignments apparently were simply meant to be forums for the students to exchange thoughts without impute from the professors.

I was excited to make my trip to Carpentaria, California to complete my course and see what the pictures and descriptions in the Pacifica publications suggested was a very impressive campus. The flight involved some connecting flights, and was, at best, boring. I was told no one would be at the airport to meet me, but that I should hire a shuttle to the Carpentaria Best Western Inn, where I would be housed.

By the time I arrived at the motel, I was tired, and feeling disorientated, as I was arriving with little guidance about how everything worked. I asked the motel clerk, but got no information from her. In truth, the motel was not nearly as impressive as I had expected, and I was already beginning to have some negative thoughts about this adventure.

The next morning, I had to get up early and wait outside the motel front door for a bus shuttle to arrive and take me to the campus to begin my teaching. I felt like a stranger in a strange land, lost, with no-one to even

ask how things worked, and yet knowing I had to begin my teaching in about an hour. The morning ride was through a number of different neighborhoods along the coast, most seeming to be poor neighborhoods, not my image of the enticing California coast, though the mountains on one side of me and the intermittent views of the ocean still held out the promise of a fantasy location.

Then we arrived at Pacifica. I exited the bus. There was no-one to greet me, no-one to even tell me how to find my classroom. The land and buildings, while they were overlooking the Pacific, and while they were no doubt expensive, desired land, were not even close to the clean, impressive campus I was expecting to find. I walked down a sidewalk to the few buildings that had to be the ones I would be teaching in, walked into one that consisted of a large room, a curious shrine to the four main theorists of the institute with a make-shift path laid out on the floor, as if some teacher had done some kind of classroom activity involving walking through a labyrinth. This building with its large room that gave me a feeling of being in a church without the pews apparently was not where I would be teaching, so I exited it and entered one across the sidewalk from it. Though I had entered from the back, this one seemed to be the main building with the campus main entrance on the opposite side. However, I was too disoriented to really comprehend the layout. It had what might be considered to be a lobby with a front office for a receptionist to sit in, but this was also empty at the moment. I walked through some doors on one side of the main room and then retreated and went through the doors on the other side, and in both cases entered large, attractive rooms with full wall windows overlooking the distant ocean below. This was encouraging. While these rooms didn't seem to be classrooms, they certainly could be used as such, and the atmosphere would be excellent. Then I heard some noise in the central room--a woman had arrived. I immediately approached her and told her who I was and why I was there. She was not mean, but was not very concerned about me either. I was given a packet of promotional materials, a course list, and directions to find my room.

This reality wasn't matching my understanding of my position. I wasn't expecting to be treated as if I were some celebrity, but I did expect someone to at least have the courtesy to get me oriented and make sure everything was in place for me. I was feeling disoriented and discouraged. Perhaps, fortunately, because it took my mind off my disappointment, I had to teach in about a half-an-hour, and I was always one who focused on satisfying my commitments. Since the building was not very large, I was able to locate my room, and I was immediately astonished at the poor quality of it. It was old, small, unkempt and dirty--the exact opposite of the

overly modern, expensive, "intelligent" room I had expected. It had but a row of small windows along the back of it, and they did not face the ocean. Never mind the latest classroom technology, my promised outdated equipment for showing slides and videos was not there. It took a trip back to the woman at the front desk and a call from her to the man in charge of this to initiate a resolution.

By now, my students were beginning to arrive, and I was scrambling mentally to figure out a whole new classroom presentation. About five minutes before class was to begin the equipment man arrived, and he was a friendly man, a nice guy; but he had not been informed that he was supposed to have any equipment ready for me. As he immediately went about solving the problem, I visited with my students, something I would have done anyway, so the delay in formally beginning the class, while it was a psychological stress, was not a literal problem, and I was even able to make it serve a purpose. It took less than a half-an-hour for the proper equipment to get in place, and I began: "Psychology, whether Freudian, Jungian, or from others, offers us a theoretical basis for how humans think symbolically. It is how our brains are structured. We cannot help but do it. My own studies in modern humanities and art have, perhaps surprisingly, led me to see how these theories match up with the findings of hard science, of neurology. It is amazing how all of these seemingly desperate disciplines coalesce. . . ."

As it turned out, Pia was a wealthy woman, a niece of Abstract Expressionist Alfonso A. Ossorio, and she was looking for someone to write a book on him. "I can connect you up with Harry Cooper, Curator of Modern Art at the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, which holds several of Ossario's works," she said. "And I can introduce you to the people in charge of the collection of his works in the Hamptons."

I was intrigued and suggested we exchange emails when I got back home and could pursue it more.

My immediate experience at Pacifica that weekend would continue in a disjointed attempt by me to get my students to better grasp the relations of artistic expression with psychological, neurological, archetypal, and mythological constructs for how humans try to understand life and give it maps of meaning. Directly after lunch, I was told that Pacifica super-star Marrion Woodman was on campus and would be giving a workshop (no one had bothered to inform me ahead of time). Several of my students simply assumed my class would be cancelled so we could all attend her featured event. Perhaps they were correct in this, as they obviously knew a good deal about her, and I did not. At any rate, I felt powerless in doing anything but just that. Also, though I found many of the other faculty did

not do so, I decided to join in on the event, to turn a negative disruption of my own planned teaching into a positive experience, a chance to learn about someone I apparently should know better, and simply to demonstrate I was a “good sport.” It began with a brief question-and-answer session, where it became obvious to me that Marrion was a strong feminist, intent on redefining classic psychology in feminist terms. This could be useful, a chance to see psychology from a different perspective. I tried to follow her shifting designations and even asked her a friendly question to help me and my students clarify her revised use of terminology I had been employing in more standard usage for years. Then she had us break into groups of three for a curious psychological form of dance, and as it turned out, Pia was one of my group. Marrion Woodman put on some music by Chopin, told us to take-on the three standard Freudian psychic roles—id, ego, and super-ego, and move (dance) to the music, a completely free-form letting-go of conscious thought to express the best we could of our unconscious reactions. After a while, we were told to switch roles and continue. This, then, was an attempt to connect a form of physical movement and interaction to Freudian concepts reinterpreted to fit a feminist view of psychology, something of a version of yoga put into the language of psychology.

After this session, we returned to my classroom, where I converted my planned presentation to incorporate the experience. The teaching equipment was not state of the art, was in fact a jerry-rigged mess, but it served the purpose, and I showed my students how Marrion’s views did not deny the underlying artistic expressions, but instead thickened them, added to their texture.

While much of my planned presentation had to be gutted, I decided to begin with Pavel Tchelitchew’s *Hide-and-Seek (Catches Catches)*, a wonderful expression of the both terrifying and yet enticing psychological world humans are born into.

I pulled down the damaged shades to make the room as dark as possible, and brought up the slide. The students, while restless, settled in to look at it and listen.

I began:

“A painting of a tree, the heads of children, small hands, a partially developed foot, the back of a defenseless child, naked and lost in a dark cave, the delicate lines of the nervous system, the fragile blood vessels of the brain, half formed embryos—a depiction of life both contained in and yet beyond the rules of physical existence, two worlds coming together, one the dripping, flowing colors of biology, the fine capillaries and delicate blood vessels of medical anatomy, the other the mythic world of



the psyche, the world of imagination and the dream. Here we see the physical world of the brain merging with the surreal world of the mind, a twilight world where we sense the primitive archetypal emergence of the human mind from the dark recesses of the swamp, the frightening, terrifying forest where life escapes the restrictions of mere physical existence, encountering realities beyond space and time, to struggle with the macabre yet sublime monsters beyond meaning and value, a world of ethos and salvation born out of the nightmarish darkness of eternity. And we feel the innocence and imminent danger of the small, naked child, sense the lonely, lost fear of the entire human journey about to begin."

Home from Pacifica, I thought about Pia's comments and brought up an earlier online submission from her that delved into her uncle and tried to fit his art into the theories I had presented:

In the dense neurological history outlined in chapter 3, "*From Shadow to Substance*" (Eiss, *Metaesthetics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), and I could not help but think, in my personal experience with individuals who suffer from some neurological anomaly, the need for expression, the human need to communicate is so intense, that no amount of damage seems to suppress it. It morphs into something new, but it cannot be denied. Damage to one center, particularly the left, seems to release a creative urge and flow of symbolic representation welling up from deep within the psyche. Even very structured works, such as that of J. H. Pullen, are released from otherwise "uneven" psychological realities. The passage on *Johnny Got His Gun* by Dalton Trumbo (p.83) is chilling: "let me out, let me out, let me out. Put me on display. Let me have some purpose, some value. Give my life meaning." With no known means of communicating, and with the assumption of the outside world that he is incapable, no more than a vegetable, he (the main character) is imprisoned within his own cranium! That which is his being cannot make contact, and we know his isolation and feel his hell.

The chapter discusses at length the differing attributes of right and left hemispheres, respectively connotative and denotative, and highlights what happens to expression with damage. It is the right half of the brain that generates nuance in understanding. Expression is still possible, symbolic thought still present, meaning still generated when the left hemisphere is damaged. It is less clear how damage to the right exclusively affects artistic expression, or if any is even possible with damage to the right hemisphere.

This initial portion was obviously her way of bringing what she really wanted to discuss into the assigned readings for the course:

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art devoted an entire exhibition to "Outsider Art" in 1992. One of the artists featured was my uncle, Alfonso Ossorio. In the 1950's, he worked closely with Jean Dubuffet as well as Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock, Motherwell, Klee and others, cultivating a style Dubuffet called "l'art Brut," "Savage art." Their inspiration came from the art of the insane, who they admired for their spontaneity.

"We admired these wonders of the artists' minds that come from the depth outside all thoughtful thinking." (p. 11, *Parallel Visions*, LA County Museum, 1992) Dubuffet "assigned to outsider works, which he labeled art brut (raw art) all the characteristics that one should expect of 'high,' 'serious' art: burning mental tension, uncurbed invention, and ecstasy of intoxication, complete liberty." (p.11)

It is interesting to consider that "healthy" individual artists felt inspired by individuals who had little or no choice in what or how they communicated to the outside world. In having neurological limitations their means of expression was greatly affected. It was as if the brakes were released. I quote a passage on Salvador Dali from the book produced from the show, *Parallel Visions*: "In formulating his paranoiac-critical method, Dali hoped he could arrive at a spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based upon the interpretative-critical association of delirious phenomena." (p.17) He encouraged dissociative thought. He and others glorified as if it was religious ecstasy the ravings of the disturbed!

Saints and Madmen have always shared the highway, but I think again to my sister in the subways of Washington D.C., seeing people with forked tongues and animal heads, imagining the shadows of her radiator to be evil spirits moving towards her, threatening her, sounds in her breakfast muffins. ...Crows following her. She does not recount these memories and experiences as spiritual insights, nor do others whom I have spoken with who suffer from mental illness, but as living hell from which she could not escape. "Let me out, let me out, let me out."

Tapping the unrefined, uncivilized, unrestrained creative impulse of those whose lives have been altered by brain damage may show the power of the subconscious, and the force of the urge to communicate, even if in a distorted way. In other times and cultures we might have interpreted these communicative impulses as messages from beyond, and would have answered with the shaman or religious personage. The context of this interpretation is missing in our culture, and so how do we look at the art of the "insane," what is it that they are channeling for our culture?

The two halves of the brain evolved to complement and supplement each other. Although it has been shown that they can work independently of each other, and can even assume some functioning from the other half if needed, working with both halves, a full deck as it were, could produce a more coherent and deliberate work, rather than compulsive visionary work. I would argue that without a context for interpreting these spontaneous visions from the subconscious, they are no more than ejections onto the physical plane of random energy. We have cut ourselves off from the

conduit and so seek as Campbell suggested a new type of shaman for the 21st century.

If artists are the new shamans, it is tempting to enshrine the insane as more "in touch" with the true ethereal spirit, but is that not just another construct of Maya, the veil of our own wishful thinking for meaning when we can find none? Perhaps the neurologically damaged are showing another way that the spirit is released, albeit involuntarily, from the restraint of the left brain and the prefrontal cortex. Do we assume it is more real, or only different? Can one fake ecstatic vision? Dali would suggest yes. But then, is it any more than advertising, a con, a cheap trick? (April 1, 2007)

As I reread this paper, I thought it would be worthwhile to pursue this accidental door to an important, under-exposed artist who was an integral figure in this intertwining exploration of an important strand of modern art and insanity designated *Art Brut* or *Outsider Art*.

## Track 4

Fifteen years prior to meeting Pia, I was fortunate to meet Vera B. Williams, a well-known and highly respected political activist, educator, and picture book illustrator who had graduated from the notable Black Mountain College, founded in 1933 by John Andrew Rice, Theodore Dreier, and other former faculty members of Rollins College in Black Mountain, North Carolina--an experimental college employing John Dewey's principles of education and focusing on the study of art.

In other words, Black Mountain College was a consciously directed liberal arts school that grew out of a progressive education movement. In its day, it was a unique educational experiment for the artists and writers who conducted it, and as such it became an important incubator for the American avant garde, both a precursor of and prototype for many of the alternative colleges since: Naropa University, the University of California, Santa Cruz, Marlboro College, Evergreen State College, Bennington College, Hampshire College, Shimer College, Prescott College, Goddard College, World College West (1973-1992), New College of Florida, and Warren Wilson College.

Though the school was in a relatively isolated rural location, had a small budget, and closed in 1957 after only 24 years, its faculty and alumni reads like a "who's-who" of highly respected American artists, composers, architects, poets, designers, and choreographers who would prove to have an important influence on the postwar American art scene.

The faculty included such notables as Josef and Anni Albers, Eric Bentley, Ilya Bolotowsky, Josef Breitenbach, John Cage, Harry Callahan, Mary Callery, Robert Creeley, Merce Cunningham, Max Dehn, Willem de Kooning, Robert Duncan, Buckminster Fuller, Walter Gropius, Lou Harrison, Alfred Kazin, Franz Kline, Jacob Lawrence, Richard Lippold, Charles Olson, M. C. Richards, Albert William Levi, Xanti Schawinsky, Ben Shahn, Arthur Siegel, Aaron Siskind, Theodoros Stamos, Robert C Turner, Jack Tworckov, Robert Motherwell, Peter Voulkos, Emerson Woelffer, and William R. Wunsch.

Some of the guest lecturers were Albert Einstein, Clement Greenberg, Bernard Rudofsky, Richard Lippold and William Carlos Williams

Alumi include Ruth Asawa, Harrison Begay, Lyle Bongé, Nicholas Cernovich, John Chamberlain, Robert Creeley, Fielding Dawson, Elaine de Kooning, Ed Dorn, Jorge Fick, Joseph Fiore, James Leo Herlihy, Ray Johnson, Karen Karnes, Basil King, Gwendolyn Knight, Hazel Larson, Ingeborg Lauterstein, Jane Mayhall, Peter Nemenyi, Robert De Niro, Sr., Kenneth Noland, H. Peter Oberlander, Joel Oppenheimer, Pat Passlof, Arthur Penn, Charles Perrow, Robert Rauschenberg, Dorothea Rockburne, Michael Rumaker, Oli Sihvonen, Kenneth Snelson, Claude Stoller, Cy Twombly, John Urbain, Elaine Schmitt Urbain, Stan VanDerBeek, David Jacques Way, Susan Weil, John Wieners, Jonathan Williams, Vera B. Williams, and Judd Woldin.

Various avant-garde poets (subsequently known as the Black Mountain poets) were drawn to the school through the years, most notably Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Jonathan Williams, Ed Dorn, and Robert Creeley, who was hired to teach and to edit the *Black Mountain Review* in 1955, and who, when he left two years later for San Francisco, became the link between the Black Mountain poets and the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance. Also, through Allen Ginsberg, a link with the Beat generation writers of Greenwich Village was initiated. (4)

I was worried. Vera was late. Her flight had been delayed, and she might not make it for her presentation. I had an audience already gathering, and even though I was capable of ad-libbing, I didn't want to have to cover for a no-show from my key speaker.

Cell phone communication was not yet the norm and neither of us had one. But I was getting updates on the flight arrival, and it seemed likely she would make it just on time, if there were no more delays.

While I had communicated briefly with her by phone and through emails arranging her appearance, I had yet to meet Vera in person. But I knew her respected, award-winning work in children's picture books, which was why I had invited her to speak, and I had read about her degree

from the famous Black Mountain College, and her many political and social protest activities—all interests I was excited to discuss with her.

At the time, she was best known for her trilogy about a young Hispanic girl named Rosa. It begins with *A Chair for My Mother*, a story dealing with a young girl (Rosa), her mother (a waitress), and her grandmother, who live together and save their money to purchase a comfortable chair for the overworked mother. The book was placed on the *School Library Journal* Best Children's Book List, received Caldecott Honor, Boston Globe-Horn Book, and Children's Book Bulletin awards. The second book, *Something Special for Me*, again has the three women saving money, but this time it is to buy Rosa a birthday present. She decides to buy an accordion so that her present will bring joy to the entire family, not just herself. It also placed on the Best Children Book List. The final book, *Music, Music for Everyone*, has Rosa and her friends raising money for her grandmother's medical care by playing in a band, and it received the Jane Addams Children's Book Award Honor, the Parents' Choice in Literature Notable Book, and a spot on the Child Study Association of America's Children's Books of the Year list.

Greenwillow Books, her publisher, also sent me a brief biography and list of all of her publications to that date. She was born in Hollywood, California, January 28, 1927, but grew up in New York City in the 1930s and 1940s, acting, dancing, and painting at the Bronx House, a local community center, even getting one of her paintings included in a WPA exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art when she was only nine, resulting in the chance to talk with Eleanor Roosevelt. She was very close to her sister, but her father was absent through most of her childhood, and she believes he was probably in prison, something suggested in a book of poems, she published, *Amber was Brave, Essie was Smart*, about two sisters whose father is in jail. She graduated from New York City's High School of Music and Art. Then she went on to earn a BFA in Graphic Arts in 1949 from the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where she studied art with Florence Cane, and later to study at the Boston Museum School.

She co-founded the Gate hill Cooperative Community in North Carolina and lived with other graduates of the Black Mountain College; she served as a teacher from 1953-70 and also co-founded the Collaberg School, an alternative school for children in Stony Point, New York where she taught from 1960-69.

She married Paul Williams, and they had three children, Sarah, Jennifer, and Merce, before their divorce in 1970. After her divorce she

immigrated to Canada and worked at the Everdale School in Ontario as a teacher and cook from 1970-73.

From 1980-1982, she taught at Goddard college in Plainfield, Vermont, and from 1984-1987, she was a member of the executive committee of the War Resisters League, and organization that emphasizes nonviolence. Williams summarized her life in the following way:

At various times I have helped start a cooperative housing community, an alternative school, a peace center, and a bakery where young people could work. I have worked to end nuclear power and weapons, and for women's rights. I have demonstrated and been jailed. I have produced posters, leaflets, magazine covers, drawings, paintings, short stories, and poems, as well as books.

When asked about her arrests, she replied:

I don't make a point of ending up in jail, but if you try to put your hopes and beliefs for a better life into effect, arrest is sometimes a hazard. I am asked if I think any of this helps or works. I say, in the short run, we can't know, but many things we take for granted have been gained by the similar actions of people like myself: the end of child labor, more rights for black people, the vote for women, the end of the Vietnam War are a few. As a person who works for children, who raised three children...I have been able to say I did something to try to save our planet from destruction. It is my faith that we will.

Just ten minutes before the scheduled presentation, an older woman, dressed in heavy, winter coat, and flowing woolen scarf pushed open the door to the Conference Center and walked purposefully in. I knew immediately it was Vera. She had arrived.

"Hi, I'm Harry. You made it!" I said in a friendly manner.

"Yes, just made it. My flight kept getting delayed and I worried, but here I am."

"Are you ready to go? Can I help you with anything?"

"I'm all set. Just point me to the stage."

And amazingly, she was able to shed her winter garments, open her large cotton bag, produce the books she wanted to discuss, and immediately connect with the audience.

Yes, she had that rare quality of making strangers feel comfortable with her, of making people feel they had known her all their lives. That's how I felt. I liked her the moment I saw her walk through the door.

Fortunately, we had several chances to visit one-on-one during her three-day stay, and we found immediate connections in our artistic and

political interests. One afternoon, I gave her a ride so she could visit a friend living near the University of Michigan campus, and the talk turned to John Cage. I had attended a concert (more of a workshop) he held at the University of Minnesota when I was an undergraduate there, and had later presented papers on his writings, theories, and subsequent music.

Vera had interacted with him on a daily basis and knew him well. "However, I'm not sure I agree with him," she said, and I felt a door had opened.

"I have similar qualms," I replied. "The problem is that the arts are meant to communicate beyond explanation, to *express*, not to *explain*. They are *perceptual*, not *conceptual*, and what has happened throughout the twentieth century is that artists have turned art into theory, have denied art its realm. John Cage's work is clever, and at times fun, but it's not sensually enjoyable or emotional. It's theory, not music."

"Well . . . yes," Vera responded, not as eagerly as was my outburst, but offering agreement nonetheless.

As the conversation continued, I tried to clarify my beliefs, "Rauschenberg's *American Bird*, with its helicopter in a Vietnam skirmish, an eagle, and a hand with raised middle finger—all the mixed forms of language, of communication resulting in a punning on the meanings, a series of oxymorons."

But Vera was more interested in the politics of it, "Yes, the war was wrong, and that's the kind of political statement artists needed to make," Vera chimed in.

"And the *erased* DeKooning, a statement about the difference between art and artifact; and the time Rauschenberg sent his *thoughts* about his work instead of the work itself to a showing to emphasize that art takes place in the mind."

"Turn here; this is the street."

"It's an exploration of how meaning takes place, of what art is," I continued.

Vera nodded. I wanted her to join in, to give me more of her views, but she was more interested in directing me to her friend's house.

I wanted to get into a more esoteric discussion with this important artist from the Black Mountain College, to take it all the way back to the *Frenchenfans terribles* beginning with Charles Pierre Baudelaire, whose 1857 collection of poems, *Flowers of Evil*, offered a nightmarish landscape of "lovers of Dementia," of "woman, a vile slave, proud in her stupidity, / Self-worshipped, without the least disgust," of Man, greedy, lustful, ruthless in cupidity, / Slave to a slave, and sewer to woman's lust," of "Sanctity who treasures, / . . . a fragile drone, / in horsehair, nails, and

whips, his highest pleasures,” and of “Prating Humanity” crying forth “O God, my Lord and likeness, be thou cursed!” (5)

I wanted to follow it through Arthur Rimbaud, who stated in a letter on May 15, 1871, “that one must be a seer, make oneself a seer”:

The poet makes himself a seer by a long, prodigious, and rational disordering of all the senses. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he consumes all the poisons in him, and keeps only their quintessence. This is an unspeakable torture during which he needs all his faith and superhuman strength, and during which he becomes the great patient, the great criminal, the great accursed – and the great learned one! – among men. – For he arrives at the unknown! Because he has cultivated his own soul – which was rich to begin with – more than any other man! He reaches the unknown; and even if, crazed, he ends up by losing the understanding of his visions, at least he has seen them! Let him die charging through those unutterable, unnamable things: other horrible workers will come; they will begin from the horizons where he has succumbed!” (6)

I wanted especially to ask her what she knew about Alfred Jarry, how she interpreted his *punning* “pataphysical” mixing of literal, figurative, and theatrical truths, a source of Duchamp’s imaginary science, his ironies and puns in such works as *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, and a term applied to works by both her friend John Cage and Andy Warhol.(7)

I wanted to get into a lengthy discussion about the whole history of modern art, wanted to connect Pablo Picasso to Jarry’s views. Picasso certainly admired Jarry (to the extent of obtaining Jarry’s famous pistol), and the following statement by Picasso about his famous painting, the painting that, perhaps more than any other single work of art, brought in modern art, certainly suggests a less than romantic view of art, certainly suggests a Jarry-like ridicule of the overly serious respect for art:

“*Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*”—how that title can excite me! It was [Andre] Salmon who invented it. As you know very well, in the beginning it was called *The Brothel of Avignon*. Do you know why? “Avignon” has always been a familiar word to me, one woven into my life. I used to live a few steps away from the Calle d’Avignon [Barcelona], where I used to buy my paper and water colors. Then too, as you know, Max [Jacob’s] grandmother was originally from Avignon. We used to make a lot of jokes about that painting. One of the women was Max’s grandmother, Fernande was another one, Marie Laurencin another—all in a brothel in Avignon.(8)



Yes, a painting about a brothel, the least respected place filled with the least respected people of all. And then those who want to impress, who want to seem to be highly educated and erudite, will praise it and fawn over it and expostulate about its brilliance—what a wonderful joke!

Yet, it is not at all so simple, so straight-forward. It is, in fact, much the opposite of a seemingly adolescent reduction of life to stupid, crude sexual humor.

Jarry was *proclaiming* anarchy. In fact, he made sure the one performance of *Ubu Roi* would result in rioting—that was the desired effect. He even hired a “*counter-claque*” (a group of attendees instructed to cause a conflict should the play turn out not to achieve its desired *succes de scandale*). “The performance must not be allowed to reach its conclusion,” he insisted. “The theatre must explode!” And *on cue*, catcalls and fistfights erupted as the central character Pere Ubu (acted by Firmin Gemier) appeared costumed in a mustachioed mask and false belly with a toilet brush scepter to demonstrate his cowardice and rapacity.

We know W. B. Yeats was affected. He was in the audience and subsequently wrote in his *Autobiography* that he realized it represented the end of an era (that late nineteenth-century Romanticism that included such writers as Mallarmé, Verlaine and himself), and the birth of “the savage God” he would write about in his 1919 poem, *The Second Coming*, the birth of that rough beast that slouches toward Bethlehem to be born.

We know Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard, and Toulouse-Lautrec were influenced, as they were involved with the painting of the backdrop for the play. We know Jarry's views affected and foreshadowed the views of Tristan Tzara, André Breton, Italo Calvino, Gilles Deleuze, Eugène Ionesco, Guy Debord, Georges Perec, and Jean Daudrillard. Oscar Wilde found him “extraordinary,” “very corrupt,” “most attractive,” and “looking like a very nice renter” (London slang for a male prostitute)—though, as is common with Wilde, his comments must be taken on multiple levels, more so on figurative levels than literal, and certainly Wilde is enjoying the *gay* implications here.

Vera Williams and I would never have this desired discussion, but we would continue to keep in touch. One Christmas, she sent me a copy of *Long Walks and Intimate Talks*, a book of poems by Grace Pauley she had illustrated with a wonderful inscription about the battle people such as us have to fight against the negative actions of the establishment. Unfortunately, I loaned this book to a friend, and it was destroyed when he basement plumbing sprung a leak. However, another year she sent me a copy of a rough draft of Petey with her usual political and social concerns:

Dear Harry,

I was glad to hear from you and I'm sending Petey from my book *Scooter* to work some magic with his sky blue hat for a better political and social outcome for 1996. It has truly been discouraging and it is hard not to get hopeless. But it's been as bad other times in our country & I like to believe it will change again.

Best wishes,

Vera

Somehow, in my unorganized moving since then, I managed to preserve this, and in many ways it best represents her, a juxtaposition of all of her interests--education, illustration, political and social justice.



## Track 5

I dug up the final paper Pia had given me for the Pacifica course, one she titled *Ossorio and the visual integration of dynamic tensions*:

Alfonso Angel Ossorio is an artist of rare intelligence and profound symbolic insight. His work exemplifies the idea of artist as Shaman (J. Campbell), being the gatekeeper between the realm of the conscious and the unconscious (S. Freud) and the conduit of the archetypal collective unconscious (C. Jung). His work, which spans his entire life, was most highly concentrated from 1940 through 1980 and displays the collaboration, both deliberate and accidental, of these two ways of knowing: reason and the unconscious. Of his own work he said, "There's always the aesthetic element that's playing very strongly with the intellectual concepts...both sides of the mind are working at the same time,

in other words, the left and the right.” (Ossorio, 1980, p. 27) He was very aware of the work of Freud and Jung, as well as other psychiatric writings, and felt both theorists’ insights were essential and important.

In reference to symbolic expression, “the same thing can have many different meanings depending how it is placed, a stick of wood or a rock, and that’s true not only of art, but of everything. It isn’t a question of figure and ground or a variety of abstractions or realizations; what controls the composition is always the idea. And the idea is the result of the most complex human processes that we know. The mysteries of human thought are part of the mysteries of science and vice versa. Does the human being control or is he controlled? ...although there was always a fairly conscious knowledge of what I wanted to do, how it was to be done; what it would look like, that I did not know.” (Ossorio, p. 46)

Allowing for the spontaneous and unexpected to merge was for Ossorio an integral part of the organic process of artistic expression. It is interesting to note how often in his interview he looks at his own work with fresh eyes and remarks on things he had not noticed before, images of layers of meaning that seem to have crept into the work of their own accord.

Ossorio was the product of Spanish, Philippine and Chinese ancestry. He was born and raised for his first eight years in colonial, Pre-World War II Manila, Philippines. From the age of eight he was sent to British boarding school, highly regimented, replete with snubbing and racial discrimination. He travelled extensively in Europe, summered in Spain and France, and was exposed to a wide variety of cultural influences. His life reflects a yearning for integration, bringing together forces seemingly at odds with each other, whether religious, cultural, sexual, or between conscious and unconscious impulses. The dichotomies are essentially one in his view, Yin and Yang, raw and cooked, motion and inaction. Life feeds off death.

Later, I would study his life and find that the religious and sexual dichotomy was especially important for him because he was both a strong Catholic and a homosexual, and thus caught in the middle of a huge personal struggle.

I continued reading her paper:

“How does that relate to painting?

Or of self-destruction, self-preservation...It is a principle of life; it runs through plants and ideas and people and is shown in the work.” (Ossorio, 1980, p. 24).

Stylistically, he integrated the influence of many cultures. Although classically trained in the fine arts at Harvard, one sees in his work, particularly his work after 1948, a wild sort of chaos, reminiscent of a noisy oriental street market: loud colors, distorted forms, blaring images,

beggars and thieves. It was at this time that he met and was influenced by such artists as Tapie, Dubuffet, and surrealists Dali and Tchelitchew. His art is not in any way timid, but reveals humanity and life in its most unforgiving, roiling and raw form.

Ossorio was intellectually voracious, devouring books and ideas. He was important in the Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist movements both in Europe and the United States. He was a close friend of Jean Dubuffet, who wrote a book on his work, "*Peintures Initiatique d'Alfonso Ossorio*," (Dubuffet, 1951) and of such artistic luminaries as de Kooning, Still, Pollack, Krasner, Jared French, D. H. and Frieda Lawrence, and Ananda Coomaraswamy. He was a polymath, fluent in eight languages with a photographic memory, whose interests spanned the whole breadth of human endeavor. There was not a subject on which he was not well versed. But his particular interest lay in the symbolic representation of the sacred and divine: the themes of unity and integration in creation. He reveled in the tension of opposites, perhaps directly reflecting the tension of opposites he himself felt culturally, as well as physically. Although a gifted and very attractive man, he was aware from early on that he was "other," an outsider.

Ossorio attended Harvard University and graduated in 1938. His dissertation was on the "Spiritual Influences on the Visual Image of Christ." I quote from his thesis.

"We are today laboring under the benefits of an unparalleled Catholicism of taste in our appreciation of the visual arts: with an ease that bears all the earmarks of superficiality, we turn from the fetishes of Oceania to the elegant complexities of the Rococo. That we are able to do this is, I think, due in a large degree to our preoccupation with purely formal relationships, to our concentration upon style to the exclusion of content...It would be futile and wrong to deny the importance of purely formal relations in a work of art: to do so would be to repudiate the essential element in any man-made object- the imposition of form upon matter. But behind an artist's predilections, behind his preference to express himself in a particular manner, lies not only his personal genius, but the thought-scheme, the sense of values, that permeates his age." (Friedman, 1973, p. 18) This theme of integrating and even accentuating the interplay of intellect and formal artistic appreciation with the rawness of inspiration is the hallmark of Ossorio's work.

Although Ossorio embraced the movement of l'art Brut, the intuitive art of the mentally impaired, the art of the untrained, and the art of indigenous people, he also had an astute appreciation for and understanding of formal Western artistic expression. He was a superb

draftsman (see his pen and ink drawing of Frieda Lawrence) and gifted in various media including sculpture and botany.

As his interests in the unification of opposing forces grew, his expression in art took on more dramatic forms. He began to incorporate industrial waste, found objects, discarded detritus, and gave these objects new life in what he called "congregations." All of his paintings, assemblages, sculptures, and even botanical fantasies, were predicated on the union of opposites, or if not strictly opposing, unlikely pairings, and the inherent impulse of life to assert itself. This philosophical underpinning goes back to his Catholic upbringing and scriptural grounding, "Ego dominus et non est alter. Faciens lucem et creans tenebras:faciens pacem et creans malum: Ego dominus faciens omnia haec." (I am the Lord, there is no other, making light and creating darkness, making peace and creating evil. I am the Lord doing all these things.) (Ossorio, 1980, p. 16) This is not to say that he was a religious painter, but rather that the spiritual underpinnings common to humanity, what Jung may have referred to as archetypal forces, were a central theme.

As an artist and man Ossorio reached deeply within himself to express the truths he felt could only be born of the subconscious and yet develop a visual language through intellect with which to express it. As he stated when still a very young man, an artist expresses not simply his own genius, but draws on the heritage of his time and culture. Ossorio's time was one of rapid change and unparalleled human destruction. This flux is reflected in the work.

I believe that he dipped into the well of the collective unconscious for expression in his art, but being of such diverse backgrounds and rich personal experiences, his well was particularly deep. His work shows the integration of intuition and intellect: the mingling of the sublime with the nightmarish. Although very disciplined, he was able to "let go" into the flow of the unconscious when working, and was thus able to allow the percolating of ideas to be transformed within and to then manifest on matter.

I have attached three very different pieces from his vast works to illustrate how diverse yet consistent his style was. These three pieces are representational of a body of work that spans half a century. What I believe they illustrate is how one artist incorporates the particular proclivities and talents of the two hemispheres of the brain, two ways of knowing, into his work. (For extensive discussion of the two hemispheres, refer to Harry Eiss, *Metaesthetics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)

The first image is an exquisitely rendered pen and ink drawing of *Frieda Lawrence* done in Taos New Mexico in 1941. One can see the

classical training in his draftsmanship, something echoing perhaps Albrecht Durer. The second piece is more visceral, entitled *Klan Picnic* (1949), one of the painful paintings I shied away from as a child. The third is one of his congregations, a grotesque and yet whimsical portrait entitled *Exposed Head #2* (1966).

Each of these very different works illustrates the integration of left and right hemispheres at play. The execution of the works shows a precision and organization, a conscious and deliberate logical process leading to product. Each of them is superficially exactly what it is called, yet each also speaks to more than is apparent on the surface. We feel a response to what is seen that is beyond the deliberate image.

At this point in her paper, Pia included illustrations of the three works she briefly discusses. The first, the pen and ink windswept drawing of Frieda Lawrence, while it does demonstrate his drawing abilities, and is indeed an attempt to mimic the work of Albrecht Durer, is obviously an earlier work, an artist who still has not found his niche. Pia writes briefly:

This is a straight forward portrait of *Frieda Lawrence*, yet it evokes a timelessness and state of mind familiar to all. There is a calm dreaminess about the portrait, and one can almost feel the breeze passing over her face as she looks out on the New Mexico landscape.

The second, *Klan Picnic*, represents his mature work, what Roberta Smith writes, consists of “clogged, theatrical wall reliefs” that “even by today’s standards . . . are exuberant models of excess and bad taste, whose crowded surfaces include glass eyes, bones, fake jewels, shells, deer antlers and much else,” works “equally pertinent to the sagas of Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and assemblage,” forming “an important, nearly all-purpose footnote to the history of postwar art.”(9)

Pia writes about it:

*Klan Picnic* on the other hand is a visual nightmare of a collective cultural wrong and represents, beyond the obvious reference, to the feasting on victims. Ossorio asks, “Is it biologically and spiritually necessary to survive on victims?” (Ossorio, 1980, p. 15). The central figure (in Klan hood) has eyes closed, as if to show disinterest in the suffering around him. His hands are clasped, monstrous nails resting. All about him are mutilations and fingers pointing accusingly, daggers, open wounds, lidless eyes. This picture is visceral, crowded, raw, seething. The scale of figures shifts. There is an uncomfortable gloating quality in the feasting upon the victim at the base of the picture. It is akin to maggots feasting on a red open wound. This is an evocation of the collective archetypal Shadow.