

## **ELUSIVE POWERS**

by Lowry Pei

“A thought comes when ‘it’ will, not when ‘I’ will...the subject ‘I’ does not condition the predicate ‘think.’”

– Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

Much has been written, and probably always will be, about writing as if it were something under the writer’s guidance. My purpose here, by contrast, is to walk reflectively around the outskirts of the creative faculty, knowing that it is outside myself, other than myself, and its working is impossible to describe. I’ve been writing fiction and non-fiction, some of it published, for thirty years, and teaching writing for longer than that – being in the neighborhood while the creative power, on its own schedule, got some work done for me and others. It seems to me that after this long I can begin trying to say what it’s like to work in some sort of collaboration with that which I do not control.

For me, the experience of writing a first draft involves a lot of waiting, for a voice in the head that comes, as Nietzsche says, when *it* will, not when *I* will, from an unidentified source. While I wait, my job is to try to keep my attention focused on the subject at hand – not to think up sentences, not to string words together like the plastic beads that plug into each other to form a child’s necklace. Doing that would be pointless, distracting; what I have to do is wait and try to keep my attention on the problem, the scene, the train of thought. Eventually the voice says something relevant – maybe only a phrase. Perhaps I begin writing at once, or perhaps I wait for a sentence to form itself. Perhaps I repeat those first words with my conscious mind, listening to how they sound, wondering if they could sound better, if they make

sense. Perhaps I try to deduce logically where the sentence is going; already, even before the sentence is formed, I'm doing something like revising. The sentence does not get finished, usually, by such deduction, but that deductive activity seems to help trigger the voice that is the source, and what the voice eventually says is usually different from what I had managed to deduce, and truer. Sometimes the voice gets freed up and carries me along for several sentences or even, when I'm lucky, a whole paragraph at a time; often it doesn't and I spend a great deal of my writing time waiting, re-reading, tinkering, correcting, doing anything I can to keep my mind somewhere in the vicinity of my subject, until the voice says the next thing that I will write down.

The voice that writes is often faint, and goes by almost before it's noticed. I find that I have to be very good at eliminating distractions, including those that come from within, and fast in recording what the voice says. It sometimes seems barely to surface into consciousness, as if a banner fluttered for a moment above the surface of a choppy lake, just long enough for me to glimpse an inscription on it, then disappeared beneath the waves. In a few seconds it will be forgotten; even the fact that something surfaced will be forgotten; it will be as if nothing ever happened, unless in those few seconds I write down what I glimpsed there. The voice that speaks what's worth writing down is sometimes one among a crowd of voices, and far from the loudest. It speaks in the interstices left by the other voices chancing to shut up; although it may be that chance has nothing to do with this, it seems that way subjectively. There is no accompanying announcement that this is the thing I'm supposed to pay attention to; in fact, other voices, talking about something like what to cook for dinner, are generally announcing themselves as if over a public-address system, in a tone which suggests that their agenda must be considered at once. Part of learning to write, for me, has been learning where the attention needs to go, and how to help it stay on the alert for the small voice that matters, but that does not preface what it says with "I am the voice that matters."

Of course there are those moments when the voice that does the writing is absolutely self-assured, when it takes full possession of the mind to the exclusion of all else. Those moments are transcendent or ecstatic, and the hope of repeating them is probably what makes me want to write. But they're rare, and I can't depend on such moments – the moments when the voice is so strong that instead of listening for it I become it – to get my writing done; so I have had to learn to give my attention deliberately the rest of the time, in a very specific way.

For me writing has a great deal to do with meditation – letting go of distracting thoughts without allowing the letting go to become an effort that in itself constitutes a distraction. A practice of ceasing to try and starting to allow. There is impatience to be transcended, and also fear – the fear of sitting quietly without distractions. What if I should find nothing within myself? What if I should find something?

The search as I experience it is definitely for something that is already there inside. What I need to know, I believe, is always in front of my nose, like the purloined letter, and almost perfectly hidden there – but the key word is “almost”; the obvious, long contemplated, yields the most sought-after revelations. The object of the game is not to search for some esoteric part of myself, a sort of Northwest Passage of the soul; the object is to stay home and sink down into the reality of home – the soul’s home – to sink down into the exact reality of the self, the reality that I most deeply long to explore or become. What I’ve learned through writing and teaching seems to be that the mistake is not to go deep enough. At a superficial level we can talk and be sure of what everyone means (though not much can be said); at a middle level, each soul is separate from each other and we despair of communication; at a deep level, where art lives, by diving into the center of the self we reach others where they want to be reached. Our most private, most personal intuitions and longings, the ones we fear are incommunicable and the ones we are generally trained to hide, seem strangely enough to be the very basis of communication.

But wait: didn’t I contradict myself by suggesting that the voice came from outside of me and then saying that I have to sink deeply into myself? Maybe not, if I go on to say that the inmost self is collective, or that sinking in is a way of opening to the transcendent...however these two aspects of the experience are to be reconciled, they are both the case. Within versus without is a false distinction.

When I revise in the sense of rewriting sentences – when I stand off as the reader and look at the work from an artificial distance – I operate on the words more consciously, and more controllingly, than not. As I read I monitor how I am making the sentences mean something, and what I am making them mean – what I would make them mean if I had to start from the words on the page rather than from the impulse that drives me to write. If I catch the reader-part of me making the words mean something that the writer-part doesn’t want to mean, I try to change the words on the page so that they will operate upon that reader-part of my mind in the way that the writer-part

intends. All of this sounds something like playing all four hands in a game of bridge – complex, but calculable in an analytical way. Nevertheless, there are many points in a revision where weighing word choices isn't enough – where new sentences must come into being – and there the unconscious, or uncontrolled, faculty comes into play again.

But that's only the linguistic level of revision; that level assumes that I know what I want to mean, which is far from always being the case. This discussion is also misleading if it leaves out the fact that any new sentence I write down may very well change what I mean; the meaning I am intending is not a fixed quantity – language changes it. Writing is not a one-way action of intention upon language; simultaneously, language acts upon intention. For this reason, revision can go on forever – language altering intention, altered intention changing language, and so on, chasing a meaning that is always disappearing around the corner. Usually the only way to end this chase is to search back instead of searching ahead, to return to my first impulse, the first intimation that drove the piece of writing into existence, and to think my first thought again – not think *about* it, but actually think it. Inwardly live it again. Start over again the creation of the world which is this piece of writing. Then words may come as if for the first time.

Any piece of writing worth prolonged work is alive; it is trying to be something. Even if I don't know what that something is, I can feel the piece trying to emerge from itself. To finish a piece I must at some time jump to – I was going to say an understanding, but I really mean an inhabitation of what the piece is trying to be, and work from that; that jump is an instinctive leap in the dark. Even if it is, as I have suggested, a jump back to what I always knew about the piece, my own knowledge comes as a kind of surprise, and the creative power cannot be pushed to make the leap; it will do so in its own good time.

Because I must somehow inhabit the world of the piece of writing before that world even exists, before I know what words I will use to speak it, thus live in it and know it before it has attributes to be inhabited and known – because this logically impossible feat is absolutely essential to writing as I experience it, I can never sum writing up as a superior form of craft-work, cabinetmaking to the nth degree. No matter how much technique I have, or may come to have – and I feel the need for a great deal of it – all exercise of craft is secondary to an action that I always perform without knowing how.

There are plenty of things about writing fiction that I can do on purpose, such as avoiding weak repetitions or unintentional rhymes,

but the important things have to initiate themselves; in fact, to the extent that I am bringing scenes, characters, or events into existence by an act of will, they come out lame and untrue. Telling the creative faculty what to create does not work. And if it's true that I don't tell myself what to create, still less can it be true that I knowingly create what conventional wisdom tells me to. Society may condition my unconscious, or it may not, but that's a different issue. Even if it turns out that I create to order, I am not aware, and must not be aware, of following orders while the creative process is unfolding. It's not so much a case of trying to be original as that at least the sensation of originality is necessary in order for anything to be created. For me, the elusiveness of the creative process lies partly in this: the imagination, when doing its essential work, notices the *other* – that which it is not directed to notice. Exactly there, in that realm of the other, the not-commanded noticing, lies a margin of play, a “vacant paradise” in the words of a poem by James Wright.

This margin of play seems to be threatened with diminution as our species more and more thoroughly dominates and domesticates the planet and our own selves, takes control of the physical and spiritual environment we live in. As we try to create the conditions in which our humanity can flourish – to free ourselves from never-ending obsession with survival – we also threaten that humanity by making more and more of the world into a commanded reality, an already-defined reality in which each element, drained of mystery, more and more becomes what it is said to be and no more. A world in which Coke is the real thing. But we are constantly rescued by the elusive nature of thinking and creativity, by the way this faculty always manages to make its escape; it refuses to be defined, it remains outside the controlled world, and because it does that, it persists in finding the otherness which is concealed right out in the open all around us. Somehow, imagination lives in an original world (a world of origin, of coming-into-being) in which the self meets a reality that is what it unspeakably is, too powerful to be summed up in any formula of words no matter how complex. This encounter in an original world can take many forms: physical adventure, spiritual discipline, the making of art works, romantic love, scientific investigation...I won't pretend to complete the list. But wherever a particular temperament finds it, it is always a risky encounter that is its own reward, a lonely encounter in one sense because one enters it as oneself with nothing to fall back on, and the reverse of lonely because in it – finally! – one meets a presence which asks for, and accepts, everything one can give.

There is a traditional story of a man who loses a quarter one evening in his back yard: later his wife finds him looking for it under the streetlamp in front of their house. “Why are you looking for it out there?” she asks him.

“Because the light is better here,” he replies.

Perhaps language is the streetlamp; perhaps consciousness itself. In any case, the quarter remains in the back yard, undisturbed by any investigations out front – an inexhaustible source of wealth.

Originally published in *Many Mountains Moving*, vol. III, no. 1 (1996)