TEACHERS

WRITERS

November–December 1992

Bi-Monthly • Vol. 24, No. 2

Educating the Imagination

Editor's Note

This issue of *Teachers & Writers* is devoted to one of the special events that marked the 25th anniversary of Teachers & Writers Collaborative this past spring: a May 12 panel discussion entitled "Educating the Imagination." Moderated by Wesley Brown, four distinguished panelists—Lewis Hyde, Julie Patton, Robert Coles, and Maria Irene Fornes—tackled this elusive subject. For this event, which was funded by the National Council for the Humanities and the New York Council for the Humanities, T&W's new Center for Imaginative Writing was packed with teachers, writers, members, board members, founders, and friends old and new. For those of you who could not be there that afternoon, here is an edited transcript.

Lewis Hyde: I'm going to tell a bit of an ancient Hindu story and comment on it. The question that lies behind this short narrative has to do with the ethical function of imagination—whether or not the imagination is moral, amoral, or immoral. I'm not going to answer this question, but to try to complicate it.

In ancient times the world was dominated by an evil tyrant, Kamsa, so much so that the Earth herself went to heaven pleading for intercession from the gods. The gods agreed to help and they created Krishna to try to clear things up. He was taken from his birth mother and given to a foster mother so as to protect him from evil forces. He was raised by this foster mother, Yasoda, who is a cowherd woman, as they call her. So he's raised in this barnyard setting, and there are many amusing stories about discovering the god in the barnyard.

But the one that interests me has to do with Krishna as a thief. It's morning and Krishna's asleep and Yasoda keeps trying to get him to wake up: she's got all this breakfast ready and he won't wake up. Finally she gives up and goes away. Immediately he wakes up and, in the little plays that they put on in India, you see him sneaking around the stage looking for the butter. He is the butter thief. He finally finds the big urn in which his mother keeps the butter—it's the Hindu equivalent of cookies—and he breaks it open and eats the butter. Yasoda then comes home and discovers him—he's the dark god—with the white butter smeared on his black face. She confronts him and asks, "Krishna, did you steal the butter?" and he says, "I didn't steal the butter, ma." That's the canonical reply. And then he has a whole series of charming replies for wriggling out of the impending doom, and the pertinent one here is: "How could I steal the butter? Doesn't everything in the house belong to us?" His mother typically smiles at that point and lets him off.

There are similar stories all over the world—in Greece, there's the story of Hermes's birth. On the day of his birth he steals Apollo's cattle, and then he's confronted by the gods about this and he tells these fabulous lies to try to escape. In the Raven cycle in the Pacific Northwest, it's the child thief who steals daylight. And so forth and so on. I would argue that these

IN THIS ISSUE

1 **Educating the Imagination** with Lewis Hyde, Julie Patton, Robert Coles, Maria Irene Fornes, and Wesley Brown

12 **Book Review** by Chris Edgar

stories are partly about the imagination and that the telling of these stories is one way in which the imagination is educated. I want to try to make three or four quick points about what I see in these tales.

The first thing is that these are stories about children, and so, in a way, they are stories about the first theft, and also, then, about the first lie, and they are creation stories about the creation of theft and the creation of lying. Because these characters are creative themselves, the stories seem to imply that both thieving and lying are part of creativity at one level. In terms of personal psychology—if you want to have a lively dinner table conversation, ask people to tell the story of their first theft, or think back on your own, and also then the first lies that had to follow, and also then how the elders handled this event.

Which brings me to the second point about these stories: the shamelessness of the lying. In the Homeric hymn to Hermes, when Hermes has stolen the cattle and comes home to his mother, and they have a boy-mom argument at dawn at the door, she tries to shame him. She says, "You who wear the cloak of shamelessness." Hermes can't be shamed, nor can Krishna, and so in a way these stories are fantasies about that first instance of thieving and lying, but relieved of all the possible shame or guilt that might come with them. John Stratton Hawley, who's written a wonderful book about Krishna the butter thief, actually went to India and asked mothers how they felt about their children lying and thieving, and it turned out that the mothers would be upset if their children up to a certain age didn't have a little bit of Krishna in them, didn't have a little bit of devilishness, that in fact the child who never lied or thieved would be the child who was somehow in trouble and in need of help. Up to a certain age, of course—there is a kind of cutoff point.

The third point comes from Umberto Eco, who is not just a novelist, but also has written books on semiotics. In his *Theory of Semiotics* he talks about what makes something a sign, and says that a sign is everything that can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. Then he says, "Thus, semiotics is, in principle, the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth, it cannot in fact be used to tell at all." I find this a fascinating idea. In these trickster stories the theft is a sort of a substitution of objects or a moving of objects from one context to another, and lying is the verbal equivalent. In fact the first lie is a moment in which a child is discovering the plasticity and the figurative nature of language—until you can tell a lie, you're in this delusion that language has a sort of one-to-one relationship to its objects. Thus lying is the beginning of fiction, it's the beginning of fabulation. With it then too come the philosophical questions about what is true and what isn't. Thus begins the battle between imagination and the kind of fundamentalism that insists that all the stories are literally true, a battle that continues in this nation.

At any rate, the final point I'd like to make here is that Krishna's lie is one that tells a greater truth. When Krishna says, "I didn't steal the butter," that's a lie. However, he then widens the context. When he says, "Doesn't everything in the house belong to us?" it changes the situation of the question, and at that point, if you take his reformulation as apt, he changes what seems to be a lie into something that is in fact a truth. Such lies call into question the standards of truth of the community. Remember that Krishna has come to earth because an evil tyrant is ruling. Perhaps the local ethical standards are not in tune with the sacred. There comes a time when you have a president whose policies are out of line with people's true needs and then you suddenly get darker people stealing and the question of whether this is true theft or not. That's part of what's in this Krishna story: tricksters (or characters) who lie and cheat in order to try to change the terms of local morality. In this line there is a long tradition of artists who have spoken of their work in exactly this way. You may know Picasso's remark: "We all know that art is not truth; art is a lie that makes us realize the truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand." Or Oscar Wilde's: "The telling of beautiful untruths is the proper aim of art." This is from his wonderful essay, "The Decay of Lying." And the final one I'll offer is from Czeslaw Milosz, who writes of "the right of the poet to invent—that is, to lie." Milosz also warns against what he calls "an attachment to ethics at the expense of the sacred," that is to say, an attachment to a sort of local moral structure that has in some way begun to exclude what we think of as the sacred, which is how I'm reading these stories about prophetic tricksters.

In terms of educating the imagination, or situations in which these things actually arise, my feeling would be that some sort of delicacy and restraint is in order so as not to shame the young, or even to shame professional artists, when they imagine worlds different than our own. Such education is difficult, especially in a country whose first president could not tell a lie.

About the Panelists

LEWIS HYDE is the author of *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, which examines the place of creativity in a market-oriented economy. Mr. Hyde has received numerous awards, including the MacArthur Fellowship in 1991. JULIE PATTON is a poet and visual artist who has worked with Teachers & Writers since 1984. She has taught primarily in public schools in New York City, in Harlem and the South Bronx. ROBERT COLES, professor of psychiatry and medical humanities at Harvard University, has written over fifty books and worked extensively with children, exploring their moral, political, and spiritual lives. MARIA IRENE FORNES is a playwright. *Fefu and Her Friends* and *The Conduct of Life* are among her plays that have received seven Obie awards. In the 1970s Ms. Fornes worked in a Teachers & Writers project at P.S. 75 in New York, creating film scripts with children. Moderator WESLEY BROWN worked as a T&W writer before becoming a member of the T&W board. Mr. Brown is a novelist (*Tragic Magic* and *Dark Town Strutters*) and playwright (*Love during Wartime* and *Boogie-woogie and Booker T.*).

Panelists (left to right) Lewis Hyde, Robert Coles, Maria Irene Fornes, Julie Patton, and moderator Wesley Brown

Julie Patton: In thinking about the topic of educating the imagination, at first I thought, "Oh, you know, that's simple." I thought about all of the different things that I've done with kids over the years regarding imaginative play, and then I realized that *imagination* is a word that I've always taken for granted, and I began to ask myself, "What exactly is the imagination?" I finally settled on imagination as a process of transformation and the multiplication of meanings. But first of all I want to say that for me, as an artist and visual writer, the imagination is not detached from my artistic practice: imagination exists in the doing. Defining what this activity consists of and how it is applied means confronting a web of issues, topics, concerns, and considerations that I will touch on today.

The word *imagination* is one we usually associate with artists and children, with their minds and their relationship to reality. The closest word to imagination for me is *dreaming*. Both are parts of the process of transformation and involve the multiplication of meanings. In our society we tend to marginalize the imagination as an inverse function (or flip side) of reality precisely because of its transformative power—that is, its power to produce alternative versions of reality. Having said that, I am faced with the demands of my own imagination, begging a question usually reserved for lovers; that is, "Why do you need me?" My response is, "Because our vision of the world is not enough. Faced with the many problems that reality can produce, I see two ways to respond to them; one is to repress them, the other is to find new ways to resolve them, using the imagination."

Another thing that occurred to me is that *imagination* is a loaded word that suggests other, equally significant words, including the word *image*. We need to make a distinction between the two. *Image* comes from the Latin verb *imaginor,* to picture. In the West, we tend to compartmentalize our senses. We are constantly intensifying the domination of seeing and the seeable, and we primarily relate images to what can be seen. That's because a description of forms is easier than a description of movement or process. Eye thinking is polarized thinking. We have an abundance of words that illustrate this fact; we see, scrutinize, look, contemplate, reflect, see through, observe, eye something, inspect, discriminate, examine, discern, note, mark, regard—all of which get us into right-and-wrong responses. So when the teacher comes into the room with her marking pencil, what is she crossing out or erasing? The forms that tumble into a jumble as the child struggles with mastering script, or the ideas themselves as represented by the images?

This is problematic for two reasons: one is that, as Gaston Bachelard says, while the imagination lays down images, it exists beyond them. The imagination is more than images, and more than the production of images. I care about the whole journey. The poem is a description of the stay. I try to remember that something is going on in the mind or spirit of a child whether it's manifested on paper or not. I can be content with interpreting the energy that happens around the making of a poem. I can see scribble as impulse, long stretches of silence as meaningful, the movement of a hand as dance, script as drawing, the rolling of an eye, the bounce and the bop as expression. Sometimes this is all that may happen for weeks, and then slowly the hand moves, grabs the pencil, and then begins to make the gestures that will give body to formerly immobile characters.

But it's a mistake to think of images as being only positive. In fact, as Bachelard says, "Stable and completed images clip the wings of the imagination" instead of encouraging us to dream and to reflect. Such images compel us to consume them and to be dominated by them. My biggest struggle in the classroom involves trying to pry the imagination from confining images. Such images include Ninja turtles, Freddy Krueger, the educational system, and even styles imagined by young people on the streets of Harlem and repackaged and sold back to them as something new, fresh, and necessary enough to kill for. Meanwhile, the young people themselves will be reprocessed as images, frightening ones, such as "gorillas in the mist" heading for Simi Valley, or "children at risk." The message to such young people is not to trust themselves, the power and validity of their own imaginations, and so fire speaks for those who cannot speak or those whom we do not hear.

Increasingly, my role in the classroom reminds me of a tale from Amos Tutuola's "Feather Woman of the Jungle," in which he talks about two kids journeying into a forest, where they encounter the ostrich woman. She tells them not to look into a certain pit, because if they uncover it, they will see two ostrich eggs that will turn them into images. There are lots of people who had wandered into the forest and become images. Every night she comes to the images and beats them. That's what I do in the classroom. I try to drive the images out of my students, so that the children can return to their own vital visions.

Bachelard describes imagination not as "the faculty of forming images of reality, but rather the faculty of forming images that go beyond reality, that sing reality." As someone else said, "To read a poem is to hear it with our eyes, to hear it is to see it with our ears." The richest events occur in us long before we perceive them. When we open our eyes to the visible we have long committed ourselves to the invisible. I muse over

this idea, perhaps thinking that the imagination begins in the dark sea of the womb, as we bend our ear towards our mother's heartbeat, where sound filters in as the only available light source. In the dark, the attentive ear tries to see. Creation myths describe the creation of the world as beginning with a sound. And often this sound accompanies the idea of an intermingling of light and sound. Turning off the lights and closing the blinds encourages us to look inward, to let go of the world, to nurture imagination as insight. Poets don't see the muse, they hear her. Rilke talks of hearing the wind and being inspired to create his *Duino Elegies*. The fact is, we perceive through the fabric of our entire being, feeling our way through the world, which reverberates in us. So, much of my work involves saying, "Away with boundaries, let distance appear and the depths speak," and the depths *do* speak. The walls we define as real are precisely the same ones that the imagination can and should tear down. Imagination is a yes to all the resounding no's and cannot's fencing children in. It is flight, not escape. And transcending the immediate world, we enter the space of elsewhere. Dimming the classroom lights and lowering my voice, I transport students with the rudder and oar of my tongue, with the song of poets resonating from all over the world. Sometimes one word can send children dreaming: *void, vast, night, space, river*, even *gravity*. These words are elastic enough to create impressions of immensity that reflect the children's own imaginative capacities.

I see this work as empowering, bound up with survival. Bell Hooks, in her book *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, describes her grandmother's ability to make a space livable, and in a lot of ways this is what I'm talking about—how to transform the classroom to allow space for imagination: "Baba was certain that the way we live was shaped by objects, the way we looked at them, the way they were placed around us. She was certain that we were shaped by space. Her house is a place where I am learning to look at things, where I am learning to belong in space. In rooms full of objects, crowded with things, I am learning how to recognize myself. 'Look,' she tells me, 'what the light does to color.' Do you believe that space can give life or take it away, or that space has power?" Baba taught her how to look at the world and to see beauty, but *seeing* in this instance is meant metaphorically as insight or awareness or understanding. The question is: what is the role of language in this context, and how can paper, or a slightly altered classroom, mirror this expansion of space that will hopefully enable children to relax into their own rhythms, set their own paces, and, with a stroke of the pen, name themselves masters of the world?

This year I struggled to resolve the nagging question of what is the real value of writing for children. How natural is it? How does working with language in non-oral ways orient them to the world? What impact will it have on their eyes? And is this really what they would choose to do with their hands and bodies were they not in school? I interviewed a lot of students about their attitude toward writing outside of school. I wanted to know what spaces they take to, what compels them to write on their own time, what gets them in the mood, what tools they use, what kind of light or what time of day or night they prefer. The answers were interesting and startling, but one of the things I noticed was how and where movement ushered in—or followed—a gathering-in of body and mind and the act of writing. Some students said, "Writing is playing, constructing, working, hammering. Writing is where a pen and a pencil can move to letters. Dancing is similar to writing because you have to think before doing the next step. When I see action, it encourages me to write. I feel another world in myself. It is like people working with my brain. It feels like wheels circulating in my head. I like to write in the living room with soft, slow music, drinking lemonade, writing with a black pen." Another student said, "I feel like a cartoon and nothing can stop me but cartoon acid." For these students, words come out of movement. In a similar sense, Foucault says, "To read and to journey are one and the same thing." Reading, I noted, was one of the most common activities that stimulated children to pick up the pencil and write. Reading appears to be an immobile activity, but actually it has a tempo of reflective thought, in which words recover their movement, running, skipping, jumping, falling. This mobility and its counterpoint require space. Sixth grader Ron Taylor's comment that "you need writing to go through the world" mirrors the aboriginal concept of language as migration, in which the melodic contour of song describes the nature of the land over which it passes. For an aboriginal these song lines are as legible in the dirt as a poem is on paper. The hands are ex-feet, remembering and relishing and requiring movement. The earth has become paper, paper the earth we dig, scratch, and etch our lives into. The pencil is a digging stick, nicking the skin of a former tree whose memory of horizons come back to spin blue lines that extend as far as the imagination will go.

•

Robert Coles: In recent years I've been teaching a fourth grade class in what is called, I guess, a difficult neighborhood, and a lot of the children are unruly, provocative, or angry, and don't pay attention. I got into this because one of my students, an art history major, was interested in what their reactions would be to some of his slides. He showed them Picasso's *Les Saltimbanques* and they wondered what was the matter with these people: they seemed very unhappy, and some of them seemed malnourished. And as he collected some of these responses, I went with him to the classrooms and ended up teaching English in a fourth grade class at the Martin Luther King School in Cambridge.

The children told me that they were not interested in writing and they weren't interested in reading. Trained in psychoanalysis to ask questions like "What's your favorite subject?" or "What do you like to do here?" in order to elicit responses, I got responses like "Recess is my favorite subject and eating is a close second or sometimes first, and the best subject of all is when the day is over." They asked me what I was doing there and why I wanted to do this, and I told them that I wanted to be there and to find out more about them, but that didn't register too well. Then I told them a truth of sorts—which at the time I thought was a lie—namely that I wanted to get away from where I was, that I was sick of where I was, and I was glad to be there instead. Some of them bought this, others wanted to know where I was before I came there. And then I started hearing stories of their experiences in the same city [Cambridge, Mass.] that I've taught in for a long time. What it

means to go through that well-known place that calls itself and is called a Yard. What those buildings mean. Who those people are who have been seen by these children in that area and going in and out of some of those buildings.

I told them that I wasn't going to try and teach them how to write—I didn't know how anyone ever did that anyway—but I was going to continue the tradition of showing them some pictures, and I started in with a collection of slides of the work of Edward Hopper. I use those slides in a freshman seminar, which I've called American Light, in which we read Raymond Carver's short stories and poems, and then we look at Hopper's pictures. My students are eighteen-year-old men and women, ten to twelve of them, who want to do this for a term. With the fourth graders, though, I certainly wasn't going to start in with Carver's stories. Instead I brought in those slides, and started out with the best known of them, namely *Nighthawks*. As soon as I showed *Nighthawks*, the class quieted down. It was the quietest class I'd had with them. I'd been struggling for several weeks with their noisiness: kids getting up and walking around, ignoring the schedule I was trying to keep, and ignoring me while I tried to read to them. Now they quieted down, and they asked me where this picture took place. I said, "Where do you think?" And then a girl told me that her mother worked the night shift in Dunkin Donuts. And she started telling the class about the people who come into Dunkin Donuts in the middle of the night, the good people and the bad people. And this picture got us going on nightlife in restaurants and elsewhere, and I noticed that the children waited out their turn, and were even raising their hands for me to recognize them, something that had not been taking place before, although I had tried to tell them, "Please, there has to be *some* routine and order and structure in this class." Now they politely raised their hands, and one after the other they told stories about eating at night, and restaurants, and places that are open at night, and streets where you can go and always get something at night, and places where you can't, and on and on.

Then I showed them some other slides of Hopper, some of his restaurant automat scenes, some of his street scenes, some of his office scenes, some of his home scenes, some of his sailing scenes, and his on-the-road scenes. He was one of the first people in America to go on the road, so to speak. He and his wife got into a car in the twenties and drove across the country, and out of this came some of his Mobil gas pictures and roadside stand pictures, visual evocations that he'd connected to that trip out west. And these children were enormously interested—and continue to be interested—in the relationships between the men and the women in the homes and offices. Unerringly they pick up that strange mixture of intimacy and huge distance that Hopper was such a genius at rendering. In abstract terms, what I began to hear from them was a rather lively narrative response to visual images. I brought in other slides, from Picasso, from Renoir, from Pissarro, and some fell over like duds, and got nothing going, but others did get a lot going.

A favorite one of mine, which goes back to my mother's taking me to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, is the Renoir *Le Bal à Bougival*, which hung for many years in one place in the museum and now has been moved. I told the children that I remembered my mother's bringing me to look at that picture and telling me about it, and they were interested in that, they were interested in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. I found out that none of them had been there. They wanted to know where it was, and so of course I had the idea that we could all go there. And I took them there, and the guards followed us around, which immediately turned these children on enormously. They wanted to know who the guards were. When I said, "I don't know, but we could go and ask them," one kid went up and said, "Who are you?" to the guard, and the guard said, "I work here," and fortunately he was a nice man, although a worried man, and a nice conversation got going, and the children began to connect with him in such a way that I noticed they were behaving a little better, almost in order to please him. That lasted while we were in his turf, but when we went into some other turf, there was trouble: the guard screamed at a couple of the kids and told them to get their hands off the wall, or off the frame, to which one kid said, "What's it to you?" and we were off and running. Pretty soon I saw we had to get out of there. But we'd had a good time, we'd had a good time in the van, and we'd had a good time with one of the guards.

I was fascinated by the way the kids looked at this part of Boston—the buildings and the people—and I felt myself learning something about a viewpoint, a viewpoint that has its own kind of muckraking populism to it, a lack of interest in the stuffy and the pompous. The students don't use words like *stuffy* and *pompous*, but perhaps I shouldn't use some of the words that I've heard from them about some of these institutions. But the more I heard, the more I thought I would tell them that hearing them was to a certain extent a little music to my ears. It got me away from the university and the psychoanalytic institute. It's nice to get away from all that talk and it's also nice to get a viewpoint that reminds one of one's own imprisonment in a world of pretentious language, self-importance, and constraint—constraint through phrases like "character disorder" and "acting out." As I tried to make connections with these children, I kept hearing the voices that I'd been trained to hear—and those voices are hard to get out of one's head—like "acting out," a lot of which goes on in that fourth grade classroom. My wife and I once spent a whole weekend at the Waldorf Astoria where the American Psychoanalytic Association had a two-day symposium on acting out. When we left, my wife said to me, "I have a question for you." I said, "What is the question?" She said, "I want to know the difference between acting out and living."

The children were acting out and they were also—I began to realize after weeks and weeks—willing to settle down, scratch their heads, and notice some of the sadness and loneliness in those Hopper pictures, but also notice the light, the shadows, and the mixture of the sinister and the apparently intimate, and even connect it to their own lives and to the world that they inhabited. I don't want to forgo mentioning that this worked with some and didn't with others, and some were vastly bored. I love the way they kept on pushing at me in what I initially felt to be a rude and insolent way as to my own reasons for doing all this, and in fact when I told my wife about this she said, "You're calling them rude and insolent for doing to you what you do all the time with patients."

So it has been an interesting experience that I can't let go of, and it's a pleasure to have children look at these pictures without using words like *chiaroscuro* and all that other stuff. I wanted to take them to the Fogg Museum, but then I thought I would be undone by the wish I would have that they would go on a wholesale rampage, and I thought I had better just—how do they say in the English school of psychoanalysis?—keep on splitting.

•

Maria Irene Fornes: I'm writing a play in which one of the characters talks about the violence and despair in the world today. Speaking right after the L.A. riots have taken place, she says that the problem is that people look too much to themselves and are less able to look outside themselves—that they are self-centered and selfish and that they don't think of others. She says, "By 'to think of others' I don't mean to be kind to others, but to be curious. To observe other people and be interested in what other people do. What other people are like. Whether with kindness or unkindness." She says that when we look too much into ourselves we lose our balance, but that when we look outside ourselves we feel in a state of bliss. I think my character is very smart, and I think that when she says that looking outside ourselves is creative, she is right. She says it is like when you are learning to ride a bicycle: if you look right down in front of you, you lose your balance and you fall, but that to look out in front and to have a perspective is what brings you to balance. Looking out in front of you is not only that you are conscious of and generous to the world, but also is actually for your own good and your own sense of center.

I have been aware of this fact, and of how important it is for the creative process of the writer, ever since I started teaching playwriting a long time ago. Actually I don't really teach playwriting. My responsibility as a teacher is not to teach people how to compose, not to teach people to create a structure, not to teach people how to decide on an interesting subject and then bring it out and implement it, nor to think of a pertinent idea that would be relevant to everyone today and would perhaps even contribute to the improvement of the world, but rather to show them that they must go inside themselves. Now, this sounds contradictory, because my character is saying not to go inside yourself. But you have to go inside yourself in order to be able to look out—that is the creative process. You have to become centered so that you can look outside yourself, but since you have to look outside yourself in your imagination rather than in reality, therefore you have to first be able to center yourself inwardly to then be able to look out and to imagine. In a sense you have to disappear, otherwise you'll have a very hard time. You have to stop thinking about questions such as what should I write, how should I write, what should be the first word that I write, because it often happens that you start writing and you look at the first sentence and then say, "This could not possibly be the first sentence of a great work of art." You throw it out and you start again, and of course this same thought comes back. Sometimes I hear people quote the first sentence of a novel as if that line was so good that it was a reason for the greatness of the rest of the work, when in fact it is the other way around.

I would like to talk now about the importance of creativity for the ordinary person, not for the artist but for the ordinary person. It seems that when a new concept evolves, it circulates at lightning speed. Often it's just a phrase, naming a particular kind of problem. Then people start bouncing it around and accusing other people of having that problem. There are so many such phrases that it's hard to think of one, but let's take for example the word *dysfunctional*. This word is used these days like a weapon, so that you're afraid to say anything, because somebody's going to say, "Well, you grew up in a dysfunctional family." You talk about a friend who has a problem and people say, "Well, that's a dysfunctional person."

I remember that when I first came to live in New York, in 1945, Freud and psychoanalytic terms were becoming fashionable. These things really are like fashions. Finally these terms went out of fashion, but new ones came into fashion. Such systems—and they *are* systems—accumulate. It's not as though one system replaces the other and there's always a sort of natural human being and then there is this little space reserved for those systems. Those systems stay, they are like dormant germs that live there and they keep adding up and they keep occupying the human space inside us. And I don't know where we are now, how far down we have gotten, but I do feel there are times when I meet people who are almost completely made up of layers of different systems and there's maybe just a little bit of the human being left around the ankles. Every time I go to California I hear a new phrase. I say, "What does that mean?" I remember one word, and it's not the most recent, that took me awhile to understand was "You have an *attitude*." And you even have to say *AT*-TI-TUDE, because it has a little more punch to it. And I remember that I said, "Uh, yes, I . . ." and then I realized that it was an accusation! They didn't seem to realize that you could have a *friendly* attitude, or all sorts of attitudes. Not all these concepts and phrases get East, but about half of them do become part of our language.

What does this have to do with the importance of creativity in the ordinary person? I feel that creativity is probably about the only thing—creativity, and maybe love—that really can break through those systems. Because being in love is such a powerful thing that it destroys all these structures. But I wonder whether in the end we will perish, because real emotions and real connections are going to become so feeble that in the end we'll die, we'll just die. Maybe we'll become like space people or automatons. Maybe we will survive, but not our humanity, as science fiction sort of creatures. I do think it's possible, because I think we are already at least halfway there.

•

Wesley Brown: Thank you all very much. I'm going to pose four questions related to things that have intrigued me about what each of the panelists has spoken about. Any of you can respond to the questions in any order that you choose. I guess, in Lewis Hyde's sense, you could steal the question that belongs to someone else and then trade lies about whose response it is.

I was struck by what Lewis Hyde was saying about thieving and lying as a function of imagination and one of the questions that came to mind was: Are there any other examples of enlightened forms of thievery that you might feel are crucial

to the education or to the educating of the imaginations of children? Julie Patton was speaking about imagination as a process of transformation, and how images are often regarded as an expression of imagination, when in fact they often stunt the possibilities for children to create their own visions. And I was interested in what responses she might have, as a teacher and a poet, to the power that images have to take the lives of children away from themselves. When Robert Coles was talking about *Nighthawks* and how the Hopper images were a catalyst for what he called the "lively narrative responses" from children that he was working with—I was wondering if he might be able to speak more about what might be some of the qualities of these lively responses and how they might have been useful to him in his work with children over the years. And finally, I was very taken with Irene Fornes's speaking about how our lives are so categorized. And I was reading an interview with you, Irene, in which you spoke about the ways in which you attempt to deal with the difficulties that some beginning playwrights have in trying, as you say, to take an inward journey, one that is not freighted with the categories of living that we all have to contend with. Those are the four questions.

Maria Irene Fornes: You could ask one at a time.

Wesley Brown: Well, the reason for just asking them all at once is so that they could be switched and transformed, so there could be thievery and lying.

Maria Irene Fornes: Well, I was last, so I'll go first. I think that people in their own work, including myself, are either extremely stupid or stubborn. For example, there is a person who wants to go out, and all they have to do is open the door. What they do is to stand in front of the wall and press against it and say, "I want to get out." They are right there like that, and they will not think for a moment, "Let me see whether this is the best spot, the best point of exit or entry," just like the most stupid animal. If you see an animal that's trying to do something and they do it that way you say, "This is"—hens are supposed to be very stupid—you say, "This animal is more stupid than a hen, this is the most stupid animal." I find that all I have to do when I am teaching is distract people enough, like give them something fast so they don't have time to turn it into what's familiar to them. So they are not quite sure why I'm asking them to do what I'm asking them to do. So they go to their most talented place rather than the habitual one. There's a kind of obstinacy in the way people think. They "know" how it should be done: it *must* be done like that. So it never occurs to them to just move, remove themselves, just do something different. I suffer from the same problem. And since I don't have a teacher, I don't have someone who pushes me . . .

Robert Coles: You have an attitude.

Maria Irene Fornes: There are times when I have been stuck with that obstinacy, which is something that can give you many sleepless nights and anxiety. I mean it's serious, it's not like, "Oooh, well, I haven't been able to write for two weeks." Sometimes it's a desperate situation and I don't realize that what I have to do is to do one of my own exercises. Instead I keep doing what my students do, which is to push at the same place.

Lewis Hyde: One thing to say about this thieving and lying mythology is that in fact it's about marginalized or powerless characters. These are stories about children, whose only access to power is through cunning. The issues about shame are in the same realm. I'm interested in the problem of creating a space in which you do not feel ashamed of yourself or ashamed of what comes up in your own imagination, and I think that when that happens you no longer have to lie or steal. There's a kind of open playfulness involved. I was moved by Bob Coles's story of working with these kids, because part of the story is about finally coming to a space in which the children feel free to be themselves—particularly the story about the child whose mother works nights in the Dunkin Donuts. You know, children feel ashamed of their own lives and therefore are unable to relax and play the way you would if you knew that the people around you trusted you and cared for you. And when that happens, you're freed also of this lying and stealing business. The thing I keep coming back to in terms of educating the imagination is that everybody is born with an imagination, and that it's only a matter of trying not to damage it and of trying to provide situations in which it can grow. And that begins with just being attentive to the child who's in front of you, which takes time and energy and silence and money.

Julie Patton: I agree with Mr. Hyde and with Irene Fornes. The categorization that you talk about is what I meant in reference to children appropriating images. Well, it's actually not that they appropriate concepts, it's just that the concepts are dumped on them. I try to keep the children moving past them, but more and more I see that it's a very difficult job. For example, in the last three years images of violence seem to dominate a lot of the discussions I've had with children. It's not that images are wrong in themselves—of course as a poet I use them—it's just the images that they get from TV and from the media, images of themselves, and I see that process as repressive. It's as if the children who are most susceptible to this are the children who lack a belief or conviction in themselves, so I try to engage with them in such a way that they begin to celebrate who they are, and often it comes out of the writing, the writing itself is a process for producing a type of magic that will help them find interest in their own minds. But more and more I do see it as a very difficult battle, this year in particular, because of all the violence in the media. I remember asking a group of sixth graders about people knocking you over your head for a coat. I had been talking about which clothes were no-no's for me when I was a child—windowpane stockings or platform shoes or Afro wigs—and we were discussing their struggle with trying to be cute or beautiful or attractive and how the parent may say yes or no, and that led to a discussion that was very strange because it made me realize how much fear these children live with: though they may want certain types of clothing, be it a leather coat or a certain brand of tennis shoes, those pieces of clothing are dangerous because you can be killed for wearing them. And

that was odd, because we got into a discussion about the right and wrong of that, and a lot of them felt that it was valid for someone to strike someone or do whatever they felt necessary to survive. That's what it amounted to. And then we talked about images from religion. I asked how many of them go to church on Sunday. About half of the class did, and then in the course of this discussion I realized that they didn't see the contradictions between the forms of behavior that they were told to practice in church and the violence they found acceptable. Right and wrong and all these edges are very blurred.

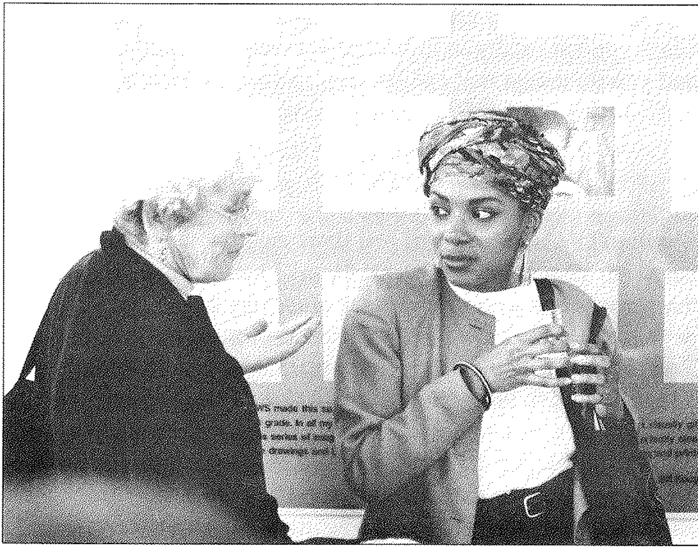
Robert Coles: That brings up a serious educational issue: the role in the culture of the forms of constraint that are exerted upon children. In many classrooms, the flag is gone, the Bible is certainly gone, and texts are deconstructed, but the school psychologists live on forever, and I suspect that no Supreme Court is going to get rid of them for us. The role, however, of self-consciousness, not to mention a kind of moralistic self-consciousness in the name of science directed at people by those who have the power to do so, is a major question and needs plenty of discussion still. You would have thought this would have gone away by now. These fads do come and go but they keep regenerating new and essentially the same—to use the word—"attitude."

As far as working with children—I've been working with children through their drawings and paintings all my working life. It started out when I was in pediatrics at the Children's Hospital. We had a polio epidemic and a lot of the kids were very upset by what had suddenly happened to them, and as I would sit and talk with them, sometimes there was nothing more to say, and I remembered what I used to see William Carlos Williams do when he'd go on house calls. He carried in his black bag some little Hershey Kisses—which live on forever—and he carried some crayons and some paper, and sometimes he'd get the parents out of the way, he'd sit on the floor, and he and the children would draw pictures together. I will never forget some of the drawings those kids did when they got out of the iron lungs, the ones who had bulbar polio, like getting out of prison. When I started working with children under the rubric of child psychiatry, I used to ask them to draw and paint, sometimes just to settle them down. They didn't want to talk very much, and some of them were very rambunctious, and they'd start tearing up my office with all my toys and stuff, and I'd either want to take them for a walk, to get them out of my office, or I'd try to sit down with them, and we'd both draw. Sometimes they drew a hell of a lot better than I did, and they would see that, and that was a first step. Some of them thought that I secretly could draw better, that I was drawing down, so to speak. But I can tell you from the bottom of my heart that I really think that drawing and painting is a much-neglected instrument of communication between all of us, and especially between teachers and children in our schools, and it could be the subject of a long discussion about what it is, especially in American education, that has pushed so-called "art education" out of the schools, or derogated it as a transient kind of behavior permissible at a certain age but something one must outgrow in the name of more serious matters, like—"God forbids," Flannery O'Connor would say—spelling. I've collected thousands of drawings and paintings and sometimes tried to make sense of them. I'll never forget a scene in a *favela* [Brazilian shantytown], I was with two of my sons and a translator, and I was stumbling around with my effort to begin something and one of my sons nudged me and said, "Daddy, why don't we just sit down with some of those crayons and paper and ask the translator to tell them what we should all draw?" And then he decided not to be at the mercy of the translator, and he pointed up, and there was that statue of Jesus that dominates Rio, and he didn't say a word, he pointed and he made do with the paper and the crayons, and pretty soon we were all sitting out there in this field doing these Jesus drawings. And then we got some stories about what Jesus thinks of Copacabana and Ipanema versus the *favelas*, and I wish that some of our well-known American ministers and cardinals and others who go in and out of the White House could have heard some of those comments. Some nuns ran a kitchen at the base of that *favela*. In the *favelas* in Rio, the real estate values go up as the land goes down, in contrast to the way most of us are taught to think. In Rio, you go up high in the hills and real estate means nothing there, and there are these beautiful what we would call "views."

One of the "girls" who drew some pictures for me was thirteen years old. She drew a picture of Jesus as a whore, a slut on the Copacabana streets. And later the nun told me a story about her, how she'd go and do tricks for fat cats. But she told me something else, that she came back and she split the cruzeiros: half of what she made went to the nuns for the soup kitchen—even with the serious character disorder that this girl had, and even with her acting out. And I thought to myself, it would be interesting to see how many Harvard professors and training analysts at the Psychoanalytic Institute tithed themselves fifty percent for the soup kitchens in Boston. So what one is left with always, as you who write stories and struggle with human complexity know, what one is left with is all the ironies and the contradictions and the inconsistencies and the paradoxes that ought to haunt us and ought not to drive us, as you well said, ought not to drive us to these dreary simplifications directed sometimes in such a mean-spirited way at others and therefore as a means of elevating ourselves as so smart, so wholly smart.

Wesley Brown: Let's open the discussion to the audience. Are there any questions on anything? Yes, Tillie?

Tillie Olsen: My question for the panel is about the working of the imagination. In Robert Coles's haunting instance of the Brazilian girl who split half and half, was she not exercising what might be called Blake's "divine imagination?" She was *being* those others, as well as herself. Of course her grounding was her own experience of gnawing poverty and homelessness. But—in the same vein—I'd like to say something contrary to Lewis Hyde's statement that the first evidence of the imagination in little children is their lies. Even with babies in arms (except for the damaged ones) there's the first rudimentary expression of the innate human capacity for what later—unless impeded—develops into what we call empathy, identification. Cry, and there are tears on that baby's cheeks; laugh—and how



Tillie Olsen (left) and Julie Patton

can they know what the laughing's about?—and they're crowing with laughter too. Later, the second, the third year they're into pretend, dress-up, acting out situations and relationships around them—and more. The walk, the gestures, the tone of voice, yes the very characterizing phrase that person whom they're pretending to be would use in that situation. It's not blind imitation—it's observation, trying to understand, embellishing—the unfolding human child way of *imagining* being another, in other situations. So we need to remember that the imagination is not only make-believe, fantasy, but is "divine" capacity—more necessary than ever today—to understand, feel what others are feeling, even thinking, to *be* those others. My question for the panel is: what more can or has been done to shelter, educate, or bring back this aspect of the imagination?

Wesley Brown: Would anyone on the panel like to respond to that?

Maria Irene Fornes: Well, I don't know whether this answers your question, but in talking about the importance of drawing, part of my method of teaching has to do with drawing. I usually teach playwrights, who are not children, but in a sense what I have to do is bring them to the state of being childlike in order to get them to stop conceptualizing, and one very specific way and very effective way that people can stop conceptualizing is through visualizing. I have them visualize different things, whatever—it's not something specific. I give them a general subject and their visualization is very personal. Then, before the writing starts, I have them draw what they have visualized, and I make sure that they don't think that this has to be an artistic drawing. I tell them it is just a way of writing something down to anchor themselves. The drawings are important no matter how they look, what is important is that their imagination does not exclude what is material, that the imagination is not conceptual and verbal. One of the main problems in writing is that the writing very soon becomes repetitive and exhausted. If the imagination doesn't conceive matter (the life, the physical life of the persons that they're writing about, or the place, the physical life of the place, the air, the tone of the light), if all of that is not in the imagination the writing is disembodied and quickly asphyxiates itself. The drawing helps with that in a very easy manner.

Man in audience: Mr. Hyde made some rather interesting allusions to fundamentalism as a battle we are fighting in this country. I just wondered what was behind that.

Lewis Hyde: Well, I'm thinking of the people who want to take everything literally, as opposed to those who understand that there are several layers of meaning in any utterance. Take the fight over Serrano's *Piss-Christ*, just as a small example. I once worked in a hospital, and one of the remarkable things about working in a hospital is that you work close to people's bodies, you work with blood and piss, and there's a kind of an enlivening contact with what is usually hidden. When I saw Serrano's photos I thought that in a funny way what he's trying to do is to ponder the mystery of the body in Christianity, where Christ's body—you know, his actual body—is nailed up on the cross, and he actually bleeds. Some people take this image and turn it into a shibboleth that doesn't have any liveliness in it anymore. Part of what I thought Serrano was trying to do was to rethink the image of Christ and to say, "Okay, this is about a body suffering." Of course I'm doing a kind of a complicated personal take on this image, as opposed to the way it's attacked by fundamentalists in this country, who think it's simply an insult to a tradition. To my mind, what's actually going on is that there are people in this country who are not interested in the imagination, because the imagination does put you in contact with other people, because the imagination is how we create the future, and if we're going to get out of our political logjams or any other kind of logjams we have to have a free imagination. But that kind of fight between the literal reading of a sacred text versus an imaginative reading is an old one. Blake says that the suppression of mental war leads to corporeal war. If you don't allow there to be imaginative fights and intellectual fights, then you're going to have to have physical fights, and if you don't have a debate over what it means to go into the Persian Gulf, then you're going to have to *go* into the Persian Gulf. Or if you don't have an actual political process that can deal with the inner cities, then you're going to have to have riots. I see this as all connected, and that's what I was thinking of when I mentioned fundamentalism.

Julie Patton: I would like to respond to Tillie Olsen's question. What Tillie mentioned about kids imitating or wanting to be other people made something else click in my mind. Children do a lot of mimicking and what I think they mimic is what they guess is what the teacher wants to hear. I don't see them as lacking imagination, I think that there's still a lot of make-believe and play, but I think that their response to me in the school and what they think they're giving me is what they think I want to hear. That goes back to this whole idea of society's treating the imagination as the opposite of reality. When a child really tries to go off on his or her own imagination, a lot of educators respond by saying "But that's not *true*."

They immediately want to bring them back to "reality," but what I try to do is to keep them moving, to make the world bigger and bigger and bigger. That may mean going for a walk in their minds down 125th Street and gathering in all the different languages, customs, and rhythms, or looking at the lines radiating in a broken glass and seeing beauty in that. It may mean going within and going to outer space—all of those things.

I brought up the ear because I know that in my own writing I tend to hear things first—that's generally my stimulus. And I was struck by something I was reading recently that said that we can see only three dimensions, but we don't know how many we can hear. Anyway, having kids close their eyes and go within is a way of helping them get in touch with their feelings and be honest with themselves and push aside the frozen images that they're given all the time.

Woman in audience: For fifteen years I wrote for various educational publishing houses. I wrote for English students who were second-language learners and who were in crisis situations in the South Bronx, in places with Hispanic students all over the country, and year after year my editors would come to me and say, "We're tired of your endings. Your endings always end with hope, with an open door, and we want you to change them." I didn't change my endings, because if I did, those children would never have a feeling of themselves—and I'm talking about adult children, adult children who needed to perceive, who needed to identify, like one girl in Pelham who worked in a grocery store yet wanted to be a tennis player like Althea Gibson. These people *had* to have something to hold on to, *had* to know that the door was open, or that it would open. I think we do not have enough talented role models for children in crisis in this country, and we will not have that unless the voices are heard.

Julie Patton: That reminds me of something else. This voyage of the imagination that I try to induce in the classroom has an end, and this is something that's important to the work that I do, and that is this idea of creating a memory and thinking about how a memory is bound up with the imagination and vice versa. And I see all of this gathering primarily because when I work in the classroom I bring in my own childhood. I remember what it was like encountering museums and feeling that you couldn't enter certain worlds, that there were all these no's, and children not claiming space. I talk about imagination as a *doing* because it's something that I feel kids have to realize—it's not that they're naturally going to be aware of it. It's my hope that when they are adults they'll look back, and see what Gaston Bachelard calls "the motionless childhood," this center that stays still within us, that we can begin to make use of as adults.

Man in audience: I was struck by Ms. Fornes's and Mr. Coles's comments on concepts and labels. At the end of her presentation, Ms. Fornes spoke about love as a way of cutting through all of this to some personal authenticity. Is there some pure love that you're speculating about?

Maria Irene Fornes: No, I was thinking more of mad love, when you're madly in love. When you are just sweetly in love you may very, very easily fall into all kinds of concepts, but when you are madly in love then you become totally irrational, and you do things that can be very embarrassing and very awful—*that* is what I'm talking about.

Wesley Brown: One final question.

Stephen O'Connor: I was just thinking how the remarks I've heard here have brought up problems I have as a writer and teacher working with kids who are often very fearful, very desperate. It seems there are two aspects of using the imagination. You talked a lot about the relationship between imagination and truth, but in art the imagination does another thing, which seems to be the same thing but isn't really, which is to create beauty. And I find that my desperate, frightened students are not very interested in the beauty aspect. They really are interested in using imagination, using stories as a way of investigating the world, as a way of lying to discover the truth, using imagination to get in somebody else's mind. But I have to wonder: What about beauty? What about that good feeling we have when we read stories—I just reread *Dubliners*, and I found myself feeling really good. They're very depressing stories, but I was feeling good because they were so beautifully written, so beautifully constructed. And what about the role of aesthetics and the imagination creating aesthetics in education?

Lewis Hyde: You might look at that essay of Oscar Wilde's that I mentioned, "The Decay of Lying." When he talks about lying he says, "The function of art is to tell *beautiful* untruths." The second thing that comes to mind is that one sort of works in stages. It's often the case that the first stuttering version of one's story is not beautiful, and that you sit with it and work with it, trying to perfect it on its own terms. I think that it's a question of where you are in this process. For many people, often all you're involved with in the time you're in the school is trying to get something started, and beauty is a later concern.

Robert Coles: And there are the moments of beauty, even in the midst of the chaos. Since Tillie Olsen is here I'll say that one of the things I've done is to read "I Stand Here Ironing" to the children, just as I get my college students to read all four of the stories in *Tell Me A Riddle*, and it is astonishing how the children respond not only to the substance, but also to what she's done, to the mystery of these stories. And remember, just talking about the visual, that our dreams are visual, and can serve as reminders of our aesthetic capacity in the middle of the night to make pictures and to respond to them.

Man in audience: I need to know if I understand your question. Were you talking about beginning a process whose only goal is beauty?

Stephen O'Connor: No, I guess what I meant was a question of emphasis. For instance, take something like Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*. I mean, where's the "truth" in *Tender Buttons*? There's humor and beauty in *Tender Buttons* and in other works that seem to be less referential to the world and more just about themselves. My students have trouble with that. So what it does with me is it makes me think, How much do I

value beauty? How much do I value aesthetics? How serious and important a goal is it? It's not only a philosophical question, but it relates to teaching too.

Maria Irene Fornes: I feel that beauty, whether it is for the observer or for the creator, is a question of true contact with the thing we're talking about, whether it is the beauty of a shirt, a fabric, a pair of sneakers, a dog or a cat, anything that you truly open yourself to and become familiar with. If you see, say, this glass only once, you don't know whether it is a beautiful glass or not. But if you become interested in it and you begin to observe, you will, as a natural function of the human being, end up being able to tell which is the beautiful one and which is the poor one. But the moment you start thinking, "Oh, this is *supposed* to be the good one, and this is *supposed* to be the bad one," you are not progressing at all. I would say don't mention the word *beauty*. The children will learn what is beautiful if you teach them how to come close to it.

Photo: Joshua McHugh

T&W's Center for Imaginative Writing

The Center for Imaginative Writing, where the "Educating the Imagination" panel took place, is a new resource library and meeting place for educators, writers, and students. Located at 5 Union Square West in New York City, the Center is open 9–5 Monday–Friday. Special events at the Center include writing workshops for teachers and students; talks by writers and educators on literary, artistic, and educational issues; and other formal and informal lectures, readings, and seminars. The Center is made possible by funding from private foundations, most notably The Bingham Trust and the Booth Ferris Foundation. Use of the Center's resources and many events are free and open to the public.