



*Figure 1 The Etruscan Hermes. Terracotta statue head. Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia, Rome. C. 500 BC.*

## **The Myth of the Messenger**

**Jules Cashford**

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The German novelist Thomas Mann, in his address on the occasion of Freud's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, spoke of myth as offering a "smiling knowledge of eternity" – such, perhaps, as is evoked by this Etruscan Hermes of 500 BC (1936, p. 89)

It is impossible to define Imagination since the only definition we can make is that we are far from it when we talk *about* it. It is perhaps a power so ultimate that only its own numinous images can call it forth, as though we have, as it were, to ask the Imagination to imagine itself. We might say that whenever there is numinosity – a coming alive of divine presence – literally, the "nod" or "beckoning" of a god – whenever an image becomes *translucent* to a reality beyond itself, we are in the presence of Imagination. The images that come towards us – as divinities, daimons, soul-birds, angels, geniuses, muses – are all figures who bring messages from afar or beyond, from the heights or the depths – the realms where consciousness may not go, yet on which it rests and through which it grows. "Wisdom first speaks in images," W. B. Yeats, says (1961, p. 95).

The role of "the messenger" is to go between, and so to connect, two terms – gods or persons or worlds or states of being. The need for a messenger implies that the message cannot be carried directly, because the two terms belong to different orders of reality. These different orders have been variously named: divine and human, heaven and earth, the night world and the day world, dreaming and waking life, the world of faery and the world of men, the sacred and the profane, eternity and time – or, more simply, the unconscious and the conscious.

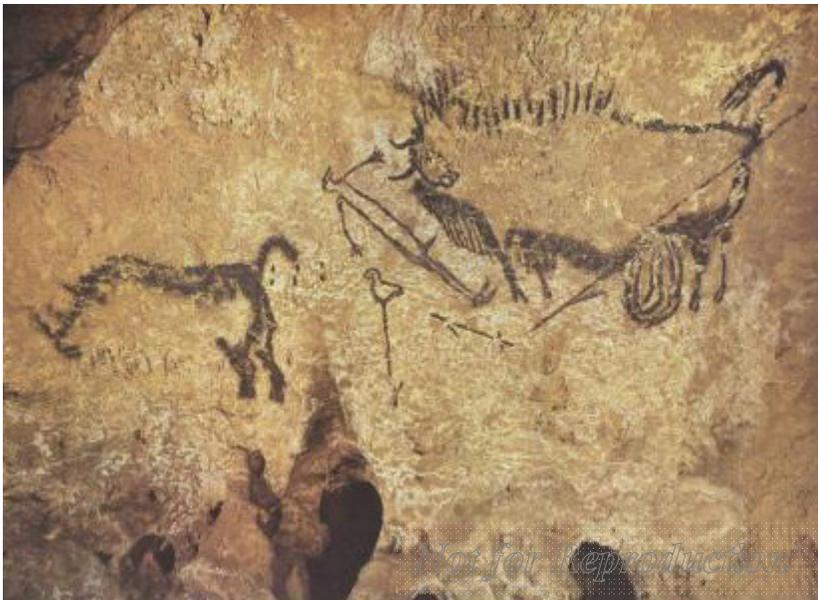
The messenger has something of both realms, and so can move between one world and another as the intermediary who explores their permeability to each other and seeks out a common purpose. So the myth of the messenger is primarily a myth of relationship, where two dimensions of being are brought into relation with each other and are united in a new whole. The caduceus which so many of these figures carry with them – two snakes uniting around a central staff – expresses the essence of this myth as a new synthesis of hitherto antithetical modes of being.

Mythic images of messengers appear throughout history in most, if not all, cultures, and they all bear a family resemblance to each other, suggesting an archetypal image belonging to the structure of the psyche, one which the psyche needs for its wholeness. So the outer myths mirror and explore the inner psychic drama, telling stories of imagination in all its unmanageable diversity. As with other mythic images, there is both a universal theme and an ethnic, local inflection. The original experience common to all of them would seem to be the magic of the bird.

The bird who flies out of the vast unfathomable distance was thought, in earlier times, to “bring” the weather and, before that, to “make” the weather, as well as the spring, babies and anything new. The Great Cranes trumpeting across the sky let the rains fall so that planting could begin; swallows brought the spring back with them; and the black and white stork carried the babies from the black and white Moon.

In ancient Greece, priests watched the birds in the heavens to understand life on earth. *Ornis*, Greek for “bird,” also meant “omen,” which became *avis* in

Latin, from which we get “auspice,” literally, *avis specere*, “to look at birds,” and “augury,” the art of divining. The priest would cut out, *temnein*, a circle on the ground, which was then designated as a sacred space – a *temenos* – with its own ritual laws of interpretation, so that as each particular bird flew over this space its meaning was revealed. “Temple” and “contemplate” also derive from this word. It might seem to us to be one of the earliest divinations of the unconscious, which, suggestively, has to begin with a conscious consecration to the divine realm, so that we can hear the daimonic messengers speaking to us. In the Olympian age, gods and goddesses manifest as birds when the archaic stratum of thought breaks through: Zeus speaks through the eagle and the woodpecker, as well as the rustling of oaks and thunder; Athene of the gleaming eyes has her owl, Apollo the swan, raven and crow, and Aphrodite the swan, goose and dove.



**Fig. 2 The Bird-man shaman of Lascaux, Dordogne, France. C. 1500 BC.**

The Palaeolithic Bird-Man Shaman at Lascaux, 15,000 BC, is the earliest we know of this tradition. He seems, from the direction of the imagery, to be flying, either in his

musings mind or in his waking dream, towards the dying bison to learn the wisdom of the animals. (Baring and Cashford, 1993, pp. 35-37).

This ancient tradition has given us the winged being of many names who summons earth-bound creatures beyond the confines of the physical world and the literal minded to fly beyond themselves, into the unknown. Flight is the predominant metaphor of Imagination, with the related images of movement, speed, lightness, and still further related images of wind, breath, breath of life, soul, spirit, inspiration – all themselves etymologically related in Greek, Latin and Indo-European. Sanskrit texts say “Intelligence is the swiftest of birds” (*Rig Veda*, VI, 9, 5); and “He who understands has wings” (*Pancavimca Brahmana*, VI, 1, 13). Similarly, Shakespeare: “Knowledge: the wing wherewith we fly to heaven” (2 *Henry VI*, IV, vii, 73). Mircea Eliade, in his book on *Shamanism*, remarks that “all shamans fly” (1989, p. 477).

We can follow this tradition through the bird goddesses of the Neolithic, to ibis-headed Thoth and the “soul-birds” of Egypt; through Hermes with his winged sandals, who flies like the wind or a breath in autumn, to the winged Muses, to Plato’s “winged and feathered” soul. Plato’s soul grows even more feathers from the “unaccustomed warmth” at the sight of beauty; for indeed, he adds, “in former times the soul was feathered all over” (*Phaedrus*, 251). Hermes became Mercury in Roman thought, less of a presence and more of a trader, but still wearing his winged sandals, while in Christianity winged Angels became the messengers of God. The Holy Spirit – *Hagion Pneuma* – which originally meant wind *and* spirit – was imaged as a dove.

In the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci’s John the Baptist points upwards to heaven with the same gesture as Hermes, a gesture found also in the Mercury of Botticelli’s “Spring”. The winged Mercurius with his caduceus reappears in

Alchemy, as does the dove. Hermes Trismegistus, like Archangel Michael, Hermes and Thoth before him, holds the scales on which the balance of the soul may be weighed. Shakespeare has Prospero with his wand, and Ariel, invisible spirit of air, who can “ride on the curled clouds” (*The Tempest*, I, ii, 192-3), and also Puck, Robin Goodfellow, who can “put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II, I, 175-6). Later, there is Blake’s

daimonic muse, and of course Jung’s Philemon.

All these figures have stories and roles characteristic of the values of the people who imagined them. In Egypt, Thoth with his ibis head was the god of Wisdom, god of the Moon and the Mysteries, closely allied to Maat, his spouse, goddess of Truth and the Right Ordering of the Universe (Cashford, 2003, pp. 334-5).

Here, Thoth, holding his caduceus of snakes, offers the Breath of Life to the

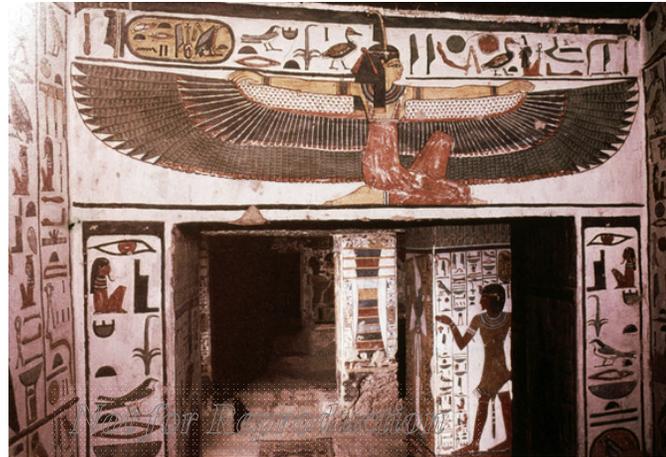


**Figure 3** *Thoth offering the Breath of Life to Seti I with his caduceus of snakes. Temple of Seti I, Abydos. c. 1300 BC.*

Pharaoh Seti I at Abydos.

Maat, who wears the ostrich feather on her head, was present with Atum the Creator in the Beginning, and was the image of harmony in the universe. Every day the Pharaoh enacted a ritual called “Presenting Maat,” when a tiny figure of the goddess was offered to herself to set the Pharaoh in harmony with cosmic law on behalf of his people.

Thoth and Maat were the Daimons of moral consciousness, both in life and in death. Thoth weighs the individual's heart in the scales against the essence of Maat, the feather of Truth. Is the heart as light as a feather, equal to the Truth? This was also a tableau



**Figure 4** *The Goddess Maat at the entrance to the tomb of Nofretari. Valley of the Kings, Thebes. c. 1370 BC.*

of life: the inner act of weighing up an action is shown to be an act of Imagination, imagining its relation to the values deep within. A dry soul is best, Heraclitus says. Contrast the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic poet Coleridge's albatross,



**Figure 5** *The weighing of the heart of Ani. Papyrus of the Royal Scribe, Ani. The British Museum. c. 1250 BC.*

whose cruel and pointless death hangs heavy on the mariner's soul and becalms his ship; as does the weight of Coleridge's own depression in his *Dejection Ode* – in both cases lifted by the return of Imagination in the images of wind and storm. Or William Blake, the first of the English Romantic poets:

*“He who binds to himself a joy  
Doth the winged life destroy.  
He who kisses the joy as it flies  
Lives in eternity's sunrise”*  
(1961, p.99)

Thoth was also patron of scribes, poets and artists, who understood their inspiration to have been sent by the god. Here he takes his other form of baboon – Daimon and Muse as one.

The scribe, Nebmeroutef, sitting cross-legged, holds his scroll over his knees, while on a dais above him, apparently unnoticed – for the scribe has eyes only for his manuscript – Thoth stares intently down upon him. The inscription round the dais reads:



**Figure 6** *Thoth in the form of a baboon and Nebmeroutef the scribe. Schiste statuette. The Louvre. 1391-1353 BC.*

“Thoth brings Maat into being every day” Imagination brings Truth into being continually. It could be Keats speaking.

A poem addressed to Thoth in his ibis form says:

*The finger of the scribe is the beak of the ibis,  
Beware of brushing it aside”*

*(Lichtheim, 1976. p. 156)*



**Figure 7 Dialogue with the Ba-soul.  
Tomb of Inherkau. Deir El Medina,  
Luxor. 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty. c. 1190-1085 BC.**

A person in dialogue with his Ba-Soul is imagining the voice of his own depths, as in the 2000 BC poem of a Man talking with his Soul on whether he should choose to live or die. Imagination is called the organ of the Soul, and the terms are often used interchangeably. The

Imagination, Coleridge writes, “brings the whole soul of man into activity.” “It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create...it struggles to idealize and to unify.” It is a “synthetic and magical power,” which is “essentially vital” and “reveals itself in the balance of reconciliation of discordant qualities.” Finally, he concludes, Imagination is “the soul that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole” (1975, pp.167-74).

Once a person has united with their own personal Ba-Soul they meet their Ka-Soul, the cosmic soul, figured as the Bennu bird or the blue Phoenix. The Ka,

as Jung said, was later transferred to the Holy Ghost as the Dove (CW 11, par. 177). In this there was, perhaps, both gain and loss, since, in Egypt, the toast over a mug of beer would be “To Your Ka”!

The Greeks saw Thoth as the Egyptian Hermes – Herodotus and Plutarch called

Thoth “Hermes” when they wrote of him – and Hermes as

the Guide of Souls has deep affinities with Thoth. Hermes was also the god who

brings luck, messenger of the gods, friend to mortals, always in motion like wings on the wind.

Originally, Hermes was an *agathos daimon*, a good spirit, who lived beside springs. Wayfarers would lay a stone – a *herm* – on the earth for other travellers, who thought themselves lucky to find it and would lay one of their own. So perhaps



**Figure 8 Meeting with the Ka-soul. Tomb of Inherkhau. Deir El Medina, Luxor. 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty. c. 1190-1085 BC.**



**Figure 9 Hermes the Journeyer. Red-figure vase. The British Museum. 495-490 BC.**

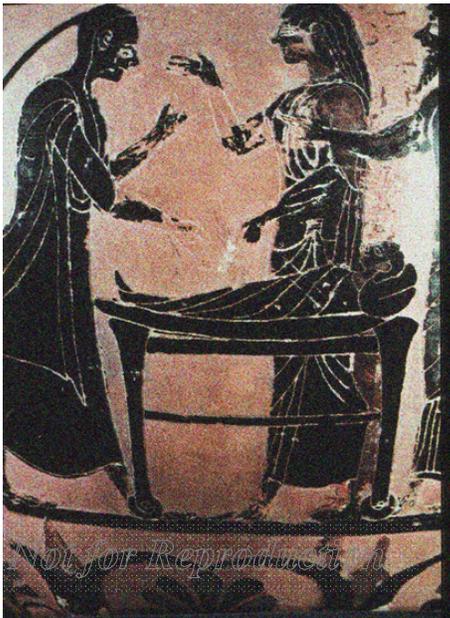
standing gratefully at a herm and picturing the next spring far away – leaping in the mind towards it – allowed a *hermaion* – a “windfall,” a “godsend” – to shine forth in the form of the god of Imagination himself?

Plotinus said that, “according to the mystical wisdom of the ancient sages, the phallic symbols on terminal statues of Hermes suggest that all generation derives from the mind” (Wind, 1967, p. 27).



**Figure 10** *Herm.* Red-figure vase. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 465 BC.

In keeping with the Greeks’ less reverent attitude to their gods, Hermes becomes an ambiguous figure, starting life, in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, 700 BC, as a baby trickster who steals his brother Apollo’s cattle to barter himself a seat with the gods on Olympus, to make himself a god. Which is to say, that the



**Figure 11** *Hermes in his cradle with his mother.* Red figure Kylix. Museo Gregoriano Vaticano, Rome. 490 BC.

range and power of the Imagination have been extended into consciousness. We do not now only have to talk of Inspiration – the “breathing in” of a god, or the god breathing in the mortal – but of images that consciousness can itself justly relate to if it honours the *temenos*, the rituals and laws of Imagination. Beginning in a playful spontaneity, which yet has perspective,

Hermes can see the need to steal and trick his way into the established order embodied in Apollo's reasoned certainties. For how else to break through?

This is Hermes in his cradle with his mother and Apollo, pretending to be the baby that he is, and lying to Apollo while winking at him.

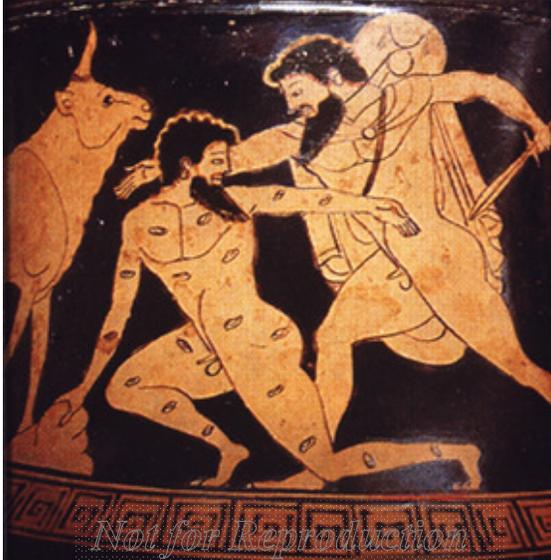
Once Hermes has drawn Apollo into his cave by stealing his cattle, he then barter his own unique gifts – the invention of the lyre and the sweet and lovely playing of it – to beguile the heart of Apollo and so dislodge the superiority of the rational mind. Because of their relationship Hermes is given the magic wand, the caduceus, by Apollo. Zeus – as the ratification from the depths of the psyche – gives him the freedom to move between life and death, between conscious and unconscious, guiding the soul. Consequently, all the stories of Hermes disclose the gifts and the laws of Imagination.

Hermes' first act is to *see through* the tortoise to the lyre it could become (Kerenyi, 1976, p. 26). He looks at the tortoise and it shines back at him – “that gleaming shell you wrap yourself up in” (2003, p. 56). This is what Blake calls “Double Vision, where you look “not with but through the eye:”

*“With my inward eye ‘tis an old man grey,*

*With my outward, a thistle across my way” (1961, p.860).*

This is the double vision – the way of seeing and feeling as one – that allows us to live the symbolic life, to attend to synchronicities, to bring dreams into waking life on their own terms. “May God up Keep / From Single Vision and Newton's sleep” (1961, p. 862).



**Figure 12** *Hermes slaying Argos.*  
**Red-figure vase. Kunst Historisches**  
**Museum, Vienna. c. 500 BC.**

Hermes is called the Slayer of Argos, even while still a mischievous baby, suggesting that this quality is primary:

Argos *Panoptes*, the All Seeing, is the giant with a hundred eyes, two of which always remain open – a wonderfully parodic image of the over-conscious mind, which refuses to “suspend disbelief for the moment,” as

Coleridge has it (1975, p. 169), determined to stay always in control. Hermes charms him to sleep with his pipe and then slays him, closing all the eyes at once, and so releasing the imprisoned Moon Cow Io, whose descendants eventually free Prometheus who stolen fire for mortals. Hermes, by contrast, was given a cap of invisibility by Hades, so that no one can see him unless he lets them. If you look for him wilfully you will not find him; if you try to tie him down, as Apollo does, the ropes will root in the earth and tangle you up. Any “irritable reaching after fact and reason,” as Keats defines his “negative capability” (1952, p. 71), and he will vanish. He kills the literal mind as a condition for his being there at all.

Here we see Hermes, Paris and the three goddesses, an image usually called the Judgement of Paris. But this is not, as Jane Harrison declares (1980, pp. 292-5), a picture of a vulgar beauty contest, but a man trying to escape his destiny, and being compelled to make



**Figure 13** *Hermes and Paris with Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. Black-figure vase. The Louvre. 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.*

his choice by Hermes in his daimonic role. The root of *Daimon*, from the Indo-European, is to “deal out.” Paris may look as if he thinks his destiny is being dealt out to him, but for Heraclitus, daimon and destiny are the same – what we deal out to ourselves by our habitual bearing towards life, our character: *Ethos anthropo daimon* (2001, p. 82). Hermes is then the “compelling image”, as Rilke puts it (1987, p. 141), which turns Paris, against his will, to face himself. Yeats explores this:

“I think it was Heraclitus who said: the Daimon is our destiny. When I think of life as a struggle with the Daimon who would ever set us to the hardest work among those not impossible, I understand why there is a deep enmity between a man and his destiny, and why a man loves nothing but his destiny” (1959, p. 336).

Messengers often come when one has lost connection with the sacred depths of their own nature, to awaken the person to remember who he is. Hermes was a follower of Mnemosyne, the Great Memory, mother of the Muses, who holds the pattern and passion of the soul's destiny. The Greek word for happiness – *eudaimoneia* – means literally “to be well with your daimon.” So the “call” is typically the first stage of the Hero Myth, a beckoning to transform: “Every angel is terrible,” Rilke says, “And yet, alas, / I invoke you, almost deadly birds of the soul” (1987, p. 157). The angel says: “You must change your life” (1980, p. 61).

Here, Hermes is weighing the souls of two men fighting, as though to decide their fate in the battle, which ultimately comes, turning the meaning inward, from the characters of the combatants themselves – their relation to their own daimon.

Compare this to St. Michael weighing the Soul in the porch of Bourges Cathedral, with the devil waiting with his pitchfork on the right. Good and evil, heaven and hell, have replaced the more complex



**Figure 14** *Hermes weighing souls. Black-figure vase. The British Museum, 490-480 BC.*

understanding of character in the earlier myths. Though Christian Angels took their name from the Greek *angelos*, “messenger,” the orthodox view, with its



**Figure 15** *St. Michael weighing souls. West front central porch, Bourges Cathedral, France. 1250 AD.*

emphasis on sin and guilt, would find the autonomous life of the Imagination dangerous – as indeed it was and is, to that and any orthodoxy. Here, the imagery of Hermes and St. Michael is similar, but has the ecclesiastical interpretation subtly replaced imagination with spirit?

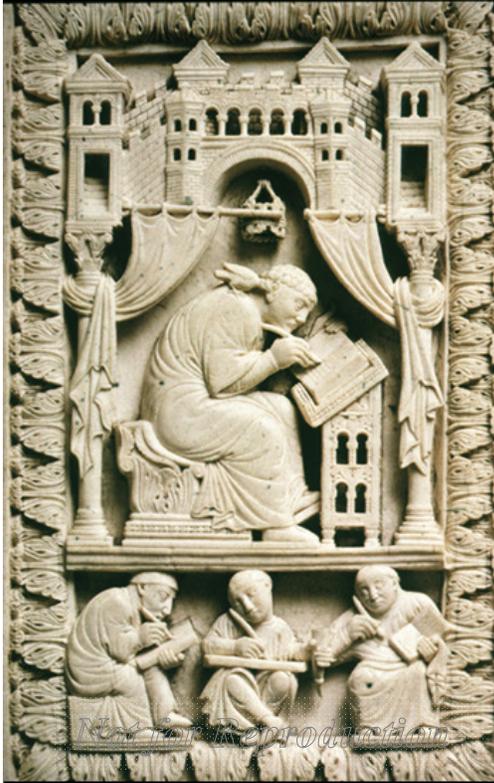
Art, however, as Yeats says, being that “forgiveness of sins commanded by Christ” (1961, p.112), has a way of breaking through.

The winged angel, in this 16<sup>th</sup> century painting by Bartel Bruyn the Elder, carries a caduceus for his wand, as Joseph Campbell points out (1974, p. 246), while Aphrodite’s dove of



**Figure 16** *The Annunciation. Bartel Bruyn the Elder. Landesmuseum, Düsseldorf, Germany. 1493-1555.*

relationship takes resplendent form as the overshadowing Dove of the Holy Spirit.



**Figure 17** *St. Gregory inspired by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. Ivory bas-relief. Kunst Historisches Museum, Vienna. 960 AD.*

In the Gospels, the dove appeared only when Jesus was baptized, but was found later at the ear of St. Gregory when he was translating the Bible into Latin.

“Always I hearken,” says Rilke (1941, p.13).

The Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary may be read as an image of the divine visitation of Imagination to a soul prepared to receive it, closed to all that is not God – “virgin”, in the original way of understanding this idea. In this sense, the different postures of the Virgin in all the Annunciation pictures dramatize how we meet the other world. Leonardo’s Mary

is arresting because she is able to look steadfastly into the angel’s face.

Finally, Blake, who draws the portrait of his Teacher and Muse as a self-



**Figure 18** *The Annunciation. Leonardo da Vinci. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, 1470.*

portrait, understanding him to come from within:

*“Man is born like a Garden ready Planted and Sown.”*

*(2001, p. 176).*

Blake wrote that “Imagination is God in man”, “Genius is the Holy Ghost in man,” and said simply: “Jesus the Imagination.” Further, Imagination or the “Poetic Genius” was the “true Man”: “Likewise...the forms of all things are derived from their Genius, which by the Ancients was called an Angel & Spirit & Daimon.” And “all are alike in the Poetic Genius” (1961, p. 148). Consequently, only with Imagination can anything, inner or outer, be seen in its true nature:



**Figure 19** *The man who taught Blake painting in his dreams. Coloured engraving. The Tate Gallery, London. 1819.*

*“To a Man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself. As a man is, so he sees” (1961, p. 835).*

To end with Yeats: “And surely, at whatever risk, we must cry out that Imagination is always seeking to remake the world according to the impulses and

the patterns in that Great Mind, and that Great Memory?” (1961, p. 52). And that Great Memory is the “Memory of Nature herself” (1961, p.28).

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