

## Imagination on the Couch: An Interview with Francis Levy

Written by Steven Heller

Published on September 15, 2009.

Filed in Voice: Journal of Design

The nexus of imagination and psychology can be found on East 82nd Street in New York City. That's where the Philoctetes Center for the Multidisciplinary Study of Imagination—which takes its name from a hero in Greek mythology, the son of King Poeas of Meliboea in Thessaly—shares space with the New York Psychoanalytic Society. It's also where, at least twice a week, leading thinkers, doers, artists, designers, philosophers, scientists and anyone else with a keen sense of the psychological and physical worlds we live in join together in conversation about how and why the imagination works. Francis Levy, co-director and co-founder, has devised a program that weds art, literature and graphic design in weekly roundtable discussions with notables in dozens of contrasting and interrelated fields, including politics, economics and philosophy. The center is, therefore, not the usual designer hangout, but over the past year it has been host to discussions on collecting graphic artifacts, political persuasion and propaganda, and type and typography (including a showing of Gary Hustwit's *Helvetica*). I recently spent time with Levy, the author of the novel *Erotomania: A Romance (Two Dollar Radio)* and the blog *The Screaming Pope*, to discuss how and why the center addresses imagination as a life force.

**Heller: The name of your center sounds like, well, I don't want to be explicit.**

**What is Philoctetes?**

**Levy:** The center was named after a Greek warrior who had been bitten by a serpent and exiled to the island of Lemnos due to the noxious smell of his wound. However, as fate might have it, Philoctetes possessed the sword of Herakles, which was the key to victory in the Trojan War. In spite of the fame it might have won him, Philoctetes at first was obstinate and vengeful when Greeks came back to him for help. He exulted in silent scorn, but the *deus ex machina* intervened. I first learned about Philoctetes from the Sophocles play, but Edmund Wilson expropriated the myth for his famed book of essays entitled *The Wound and the Bow*, which dealt with writers like Dickens and Hemingway. In these studies trauma is equated with insight. This is the romantic or proto-modernist idea of the artist as sufferer. Thomas Mann, naturally, was one of the chief propagandists for this view, and it is something that we expropriated for the center, to the chagrin of some, in that we were interested in the notion of suffering which is transformed into art as opposed to sociopathy. Some people have terrible things happen to them and become criminals, others become great artists; still others navigate a territory in between, becoming merely miserable outcasts who sometimes discharge their rage in creative acts.

**Heller: Imagination and psychology, wouldn't you say there's a redundancy there?**

**Levy:** Not really. Imagination is the raw material, the lode out of which creative work devolves. It is the core of the reactor as it were. Psychology is a way of understanding some of the processes at work. There is a famous book by an analyst named Ernst Kris called *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*. This is a part of psychoanalysis called applied analysis that endeavors to analyze creative process. At the center we tend to avoid this kind of psychologizing in that it can become one-dimensional. It is one of the reasons why there were artists and writers who objected to the Philoctetes nomenclature when we first came up with the idea. They didn't want their suffering and/or their creative process understood. Artists copyright their inner lives. Why would they be interested in giving away the secret of the huge fund of irrationality that is presented to the world in the guise of structure and beauty?

**Heller: Is a dirty mind the sign of a good imagination?**

**Levy:** I have a very dirty mind, as you know. I think about sex all the time and I wrote about it in my novel *Erotomania: A Romance*, but I wouldn't necessarily equate it with imagination. In analysis there is a distinction between primary process or unconscious thinking and conscious or ratiocinative thinking. In the unconscious anything goes. There is no force of civilization or logic to rein anything in. I believe that in the unconscious we all have Tourette's to the extent that impulses beget word associations, but this is true of everyone. I guess Freud would say we all have dirty minds. What differentiates the artist is what he does with his dirty mind. There are plenty of psychotics who live in this dangerous world of unconscious associations. I would say that one thing that differentiates the artist from the psychotic, if we were to assume that the artist has uncommon access to the unconscious portal, is the fact that he can navigate his way in and of the world of the irrational, descending into Hades as it were, but coming out whole enough to function and create.

**Heller: Have you found that there are any common threads that have emerged regarding your primary themes? Is there a formula for imagination, or is that just a silly contradiction in terms?**

**Levy:** There is no formula; there are no common threads. I don't entirely believe what I just said, but I feel like saying it. Anyway I'm a major league anti-reductionist and I'm not talking about the making of sauces.

**Heller: You have covered propaganda, typography, collecting, and much more at Philoctetes. Are there topics that you will not touch?**

**Levy:** Literally none. We showed Pasolini's *Salò* with its famous coprophilia scenes during our "Sextet" series last fall. We started with an audience of about 25 and ended with 7.

**Heller: What do you hope will be the long-term result of Philoctetes?**

**Levy:** My hope for Philoctetes is a wholesale change in the nature of human nature. Think of all the great utopias—Erewhon, Summerhill—and then imagine Philoctetes. People will create as freely as they make love and the lovemaking will be effortless and freed from any dysfunctionality. Artists will be freed of ego, marriages from conflict. There also will be no writer’s block or artist’s block. There was a famous book by Marion Milner called *On Not Being Able to Paint*. It equated creative block with therapeutic resistance. No such book would need to be written in the world we have envisioned for our lucky Philoctetes.

**Heller: You have some very rich programming, and unique confluences of speakers. What defines a Philoctetes topic?**

**Levy:** Ed Nersessian, who is a psychoanalyst, was the co-founder of the center and he and I involve ourselves in constant discussions. We throw topics around all the time. Sometimes if the topic is something like cell biology, the approach will involve a lot of vetting in a linear scientific manner, which you can tell is not my forte. Ed takes over on many of those, but we also have numerous discussions between ourselves and our staff members and out of these discussions come themes as varied as “The Impulse to Abstraction,” “The Evolution of the Gods,” “Traffic Congestion Chaos Theory and Imagination,” “Divided Society: Divided Self,” about the inner psyche, history and civil war. This last was one of my favorites and it started with a chain of free associations. I started to talk about the civil war and then I thought about the civil war that is going on in all of us and the way that historical conflicts live from generation to generation in individuals—phylogeny recapitulating ontogeny, as it were.

**Heller: What would you say was the most surprising of all your events, insofar as you were not prepared for the insight or oversight from your guests?**

**Levy:** “The Evolution of the Gods,” by far. People were lining up like at a supermarket to engage the panelists on the subject of God. It was like Wal-mart meeting Robert Coles’ *Spiritual Life of Children*. Another amazing event was “The Critic as Thinker.” We had Eric Bentley, Stanley Kauffmann and Robert Brustein. I was worried that no one would show up, that no one remembered these great theater critics. The place was a mob house. We have an upstairs room, which holds about 70, and a downstairs auditorium holding 130 in which the events are video-streamed onto a screen (they are also broadcast on the internet). Every seat was taken in both spaces. Ergo, there is an audience for profundity despite everything we hear to the contrary.

**Heller: Another surprise must have been this economic downturn. I understand that Philoctetes lost a large portion of its operational funding. How have you continued?**

**Levy:** We have received over \$100,000 in contributions from people sending in checks. We also recently got two important grants: \$20,000 from Templeton for our math series that was devised by Barry Mazur from Harvard, and \$50,000 from Bloomberg. This last was particularly satisfying, but we are teetering on the brink of oblivion.

We need support from major donors to stay alive. We hope to make it to December, but after that, unless we can find some major donors and we get more foundation support, we are out of business. We have a very unusual enterprise, but the thing that's at the core of its uniqueness—the multidisciplinary approach—is the thing that makes it hard to fund. Funders want to know, is it neurology? Neuroscience? Art? Psychoanalysis? And it is all of these things. Also we were very influenced by C. P. Snow's two-cultures essay, in which Snow inveighs against the separation between science and culture. The problem is, funders seem to like this separation.

**Heller: Can you say Philoctetes three times fast, with food in your mouth?**

**Levy:** Yes, but I always talk with food in my mouth. I am well practiced in these matters.

---

**About the Author.** Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) and most recently *Design Disasters: Great Designers, Fabulous Failure, and Lessons Learned* (Allworth Press). He is also the co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.), *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press) and more. [www.hellerbooks.com](http://www.hellerbooks.com)