Psychoanalysts and poets live in a world of symbolism, imagery, and heightened language, moving fluidly between conscious and unconscious process, among shifting and conflicting emotional states, seeking meaning. In March 2009, I was invited to lead an on-line forum on poetry for a psychoanalytic organization. I began the discussion inviting participation thusly: “Poetry is the consummate language of the human psyche, the fusion of symbolic communication, music, and meaning. Poetry is the verbal interface between primary process and secondary process, guided by creative artistry. Freud said that poets are the best psychologists, meaning not that among psychoanalysts the poets are the best, not at all, but that the dramatic poets such as Goethe and Schiller best penetrated the depths of the human psyche.”

Participants in the on-line forum were invited to submit poems of no more than 40 lines, either original work of their own or work by other poets. For the three weeks of the forum, I would choose poems for discussion from those submitted. I emphasized that the discussion would focus on the reader’s response to the poem. “What does the poem evoke in you? What thoughts and feelings and memories are stimulated by the poem?” I further stipulated that we were not to discuss the poet’s psyche. We were not to analyze the poet. We were to learn from our own response, to enjoy our own process of discovery.

Literary discussions of poetry focus on imagery, music, and meaning of a poem. Participants in the on-line forum were encouraged if they so chose to address prosody: tropes and the musical impact of rhythm, rhyme, and repetition. I acknowledged the importance of the awareness of literary elements. Even more so, I envisioned personal response, individual resonance with meanings of the poem. In essence, I was asking, “Does this poem convey something of unconscious fantasy, unconscious process, affect, memory? Does it create a sense of oneness or of anomic? What do you resonate with? What engages you?” My aim was to encourage a free associative process that would allow us to share our expanding understandings of the deepest meanings of human experience as they are expressed in poetry and shared by all.

The basic guidelines for discussion are a paradigm for exploring transference and countertransference responses in the analytic situation. To explore one’s own responses to symbolic creative process is akin to exploring one’s own countertransference. Psychoanalysts who read and listen to poetry are training themselves to resonate further with dreams, free association, fantasies, primary process, and transference wishes. And of course, much more.

Prominent members of the community submitted their own poems, which had literary merit and deep meaning. Participants identified and resonated with themes of leaving, silence, loss, and non-existence. Water imagery evoked a sense of nature and
impermanence, and led to many associations, some serious, some humorous. One poem describes a world overwhelmed by flooding, an engulfing and predatory ocean. Since all psychoanalysts have undergone personal analysis, we can assume that the analysts responding to this poem had access to their own memories of feeling overwhelmed, flooded, engulfed, at risk of annihilation, either in their personal lives, their clinical work, or both. Certainly these analysts would be able to recognize and resonate with similar feelings experienced by their analysands. We frequently are witness to clinical manifestations of fear of symbiotic engulfment, of annihilation of self and individuality. To resonate with such imagery in a poem means we can resonate with clinical manifestations of such fears. Poets can be aware of such feelings, which to some extent are universal, and poets find a way to symbolize and sublimate such feelings without being truly overwhelmed or engulfed. Poets provide a pathway to explore these feelings without having been swept away and drowned!

One participant responded to an image in a poem that evoked a predatory ocean, “[the] ‘monotonously sleeping sea quiet to the eyes’ terrifies me. It only seems quiet to the eyes for there are monsters below.” After another participant referenced Homer’s “wine-dark sea,” a third participant responded, “And hit a Homer and slid across home Plato.” Free associative processes heightened, and as they did, community built. The ability to share both cultural frames of reference and humor, particularly the provocative humor of punning, created a freer and freer environment. We were sharing a language of poetry, a language of free association, in a way very different from most psychoanalytic forums. We were deeply immersed in transitional space. We were playing. I offer you now fragments of our process. Please join us, first in contemplation, and later in interchange. (Interchange: All articles published in Other/Wise may be responded to by readers.)

on reading ammons

by Gerald Gargiulo

it’s not the leaving
that it’s about.
about leaving
there is no
about.

it’s about the silence,
like a monotonously sleeping sea
quiet to the eyes
can we leave that way?

that way, non-existence has
no argument with us.
we trouble it not
disturbing with our memories
what cannot be disturbed

no wonder we come again
again to learn
it’s not about the leaving
but leaving not troubled

not troubling the quiet
emptiness
which yearns to remember
us
with no trouble at all.

In sending the poem to the group listserv, I made the following remarks: “This poem is a meditation on leaving, and silence, and non-existence, and emptiness, and memory. These are ultimately profoundly human themes, themes we all have wrestled with, encountered in our own lives, and certainly in our work with analysands. Your thoughts, your feelings, are welcome, and will be seriously entertained by all of us.

“In stanza four, the poet says, ‘it’s not about the leaving/but leaving not troubled.’ What sort of leaving can lead to a leaving not troubled? What prevents us from attaining leaving not troubled?

“What impact does the spareness of the poem, the simplicity, have on you? Does the spareness and simplicity evoke silence, or leaving, or emptiness, or something else?”

My questions are the questions a literature professor, or a high school teacher, might ask! They were intended to spark dialogue, and were my defenses against my fears that people might be too shy to respond without encouragement. I did not trust the “free association” potential.

In identifying the themes, I stated the obvious, culling the words directly from the poem. Because the themes touch our deepest fears, I thought it wise to articulate them loud and clear, to ease the defenses and resistances to approaching the subject matter. It would be quintessentially natural to defend against the feelings evoked by the poem, particularly in a public discussion among analysts. But it would be quintessentially natural to feel relief in being able to do so!

The first response, by Lou Hagood, was intense. “Perhaps existence & memory are manifestations in the waking world like subatomic particles, emerging, briefly, from the sleeping quantum sea of dream. Quiet to the eyes, but alive with infinite energy.” He brought us straight to psychoanalytic concerns, the stuff that dreams are made of, to dream, and he did it with poetic language of his own. Lou Hagood has a particular interest in dreams, has attended and led many dream workshops, and maintains a blog, at
http://PlayingWithDreams.blogspot.com/. Our encounter with symbolic process led us to a transitional play space, where we could be allusive, rather than academic, free, not constricted by professional jargon. I did not have to play the role of literature professor.

The second response was equally intense, and personal. “I keep reading this poem, trying to feel my way toward words articulating my experience of it.

“I’m troubled when I sense the silence left behind by vanished loved ones, and by my inevitable leaving. The poem suggests to me that there may be an infinite sphere of mind in which remembrance of me and my others can be untroubled. Don’t I want to take, and leave behind, this trouble?”

The analyst responding did what an analyst should do – she identified the issue being alluded to. She brought to the open the fear of death and abandonment, and of being forgotten. She named the vanished loved ones, those who disappear when they die.

Paul Cooper responded to this post, saying, “Your experience parallels my own, except you have articulated yours when you say ‘trying to feel my way toward words articulating my experience of it.’ I had this odd blank feeling of not being able to resonate and therefore not being able to use words. So perhaps that was the experience, right within and in front of me and completely missing it. Perhaps, as with certain patients, the state of ‘not-knowing’ is the actual ‘knowing’. Yes, ‘The quiet emptiness...’”

This response is resonant with the first analyst’s depth of response, conveys how Paul processes his own feelings as human being and as analyst, and provides a model for clinical and personal dialogue. He is attuned to poetic, symbolic process, as analyst, poet, and person.

Alexander Stein, who is an expert on psychoanalysis and music, and who has written and published extensively in this area, responded thusly: “There is a lexical-affective symmetry. ...[T]his is one of the defining features of what poetry can achieve. I also admire how Jerry has layered and compounded meanings and allusions in key words, akin to imagistic or auditory condensation in dream work. The fulcrum is... Ammons, a word laden with assonant and ideational overtones – Amen, endings, Jerry’s spirituality, the distinguished and beautiful poet A.R. Ammons.... As I hear it, Jerry offers a haunting paean to loss, a meditation on presence, absence, and remembrance tied to the life cycle.” Stein’s ability to tie the meaning to the music of the poem, his freedom in associating the name Ammons to the word Amen, his psychoanalytic and musical and poetic ear integrating possibilities for his colleagues, indeed is impressive. That he did so freely and smoothly is a tribute to the poetry, of course, but also to the openness and responsiveness of his colleagues.

Michael Eigen responded with a poem from his soul,

What a haunting transmission, deep, enigmatic, true.
A deep sea within, totally silent, at peace....the deeper one goes, the greater the peace....

and on the surface, ripples, waves, turbulence.

So deep, the Sabbath point of soul.
So deep, the ever moving ripples.

Poetry offered then was matched by more poetry offered. Paul Cooper pointed out in one of his comments that “poetic response is central to certain aspects of Japanese poetry.” Further, he said, “A good poem...can evoke infinities of response, which says more about the reader than the poem.” Analysts listen to the poetry of free association, to the deepest conscious and unconscious wishes, conflicts, fears, yearnings of the analysand, and in the many analysts are evoked infinities of response. In clinical work we discover that our own infinities of response may tell us more about ourselves than our analysand, as Paul said of poetry. Yet knowledge of our own response allows us to offer so much more to our analysands.

Henry Grinberg’s poem on the watery burial of the city of Torcello also evokes the same pervasive anxiety of loss. The tides and turbulence of feeling that Jerry Gargiulo’s poetry created continued to swirl as we considered Henry’s poem. Henry’s poem addresses the rage of abandonment, offering us the image of a forgotten drowned god who continues to smile beneath the roiling waters as the safe and dry sky gods look down.

WATER BURIAL AT TORCELLO

by Henry Grinberg

As Venice sinks,
Some miles across the water,
Trembling beige and brown in torpid mist,
Here too waters slide upward,
Washing inset tombs of ancient saints
Set in the cathedral floor.
From above, others gaze:
Cool, grave, lovely and passionate gods,
In the apsidical mosaics of Torcello.

The charmed city across the lagoon
Smiles in easy indulgence,
Seducing its familiars with colors and wine.
But here, wetted in cold silence,
Water pulls and stretches the faces of deities—
Cool, angry, lovely, gold and ivory undimmed,
Passionate in silent rage—
Pulled and stretched, by water unshaped.
I too lie beneath the waters,
My face gathering and relaxing
In the quiet restless wash.
The glower above matches my lifeless stare beneath,
Sheltered from the tumbling heat outside,
Piercing grief and bereavement,
Though unforgiving.

Like Venice,
Torcello, biothanatic, settles into the water.
But its descent, believed accomplished, alarms not at all.
Alarms not at all.
Only I, flagstone-rinsed by implacable inches,
Stare upward, matching blind hatred, god to god,
With watered, shining eyes of stone.

Torcello once was a haven for people fleeing Venice during barbarian invasions. It is now a saline marsh, with a population of about 20. Analysts share an appreciation and dread of silence. We appreciate reverie, we dread unmoving resistance. If something is forever dead and buried beneath unforgiving waters, can we dredge it up and bring it to light? Silence is both a spiritual state of grace and a sinking into non-existence. Perhaps the contemplation of grief, bereavement, and silenced rage caused a momentary lull in the forum dialogue. Comments were sparse and focused on the concrete realities of the poem, the back story rather than the imagery or what was being invoked. The poem itself is complex, deep, beautiful, resonant. Perhaps I erred in offering two melancholy poems back to back. Too much to bear…. And then....

A particularly stirring part of the discussion came when I announced that the upcoming poem for discussion, “Hebrew Mamita,” by Vanessa Hidary, could be seen on YouTube. The YouTube video is poetry in performance, a lively “rant” on the theme of a bar pick-up. Vanessa Hidary describes a man coarsely coming on to her with an anti-Semitic attitude. She explores the experience in a contemporary poetic style, part of the “Poetry Slam” culture. She uses her whole body, the musicality of her voice underscoring the musicality of the poem itself.

I offered literary background to contextualize the discussion while leaving room for individual associations. I pointed out that worldwide, poetry always has been a performance art, long before written language and “literary” tradition, and that much of prosody evolved as an aid to memorization. I cited Celtic bardic tradition, court minstrelsy throughout Europe and the Middle East, African griot tradition, and Greek epic recital. Blind Homer had a prodigious memory (if Homer indeed were blind). I then referred to the tradition of the “rant,” found in the Celtic bardic tradition, Calypso, talking blues, and rap.
“Hebrew Mamita” evoked deep memories among a number of Jewish women analysts, particularly those who grew up as minorities. The discussion then involved the experience of non-Jewish analysts as well. We explored the concept of the Other. One Jewish woman, who grew up in a Baptist Bible Belt town, stated, “I am noticing a wish to ask the non-Jews reading [these posts] if my own remarks have made them uncomfortable, or to wonder if a profession like psychoanalysis with so many Jews has marginalized non-Jews as the Other, the way Jews were marginalized in their own cultures of origin.

“What intrigues me about the power of ‘Hebrew Mamita’ is that the poem has sensitized me to how sensitive I am to other people’s reactions. Am I apologizing in some way for being ‘too Jewish’ or for presuming that psychoanalysts are ‘too Jewish’?”

Another Jewish woman analyst responded, “I loved it, in my flesh. I know the barstool moment. I loved Vanessa’s beautiful flesh, her articulation, her polite in-your-face gruffness, her body. I loved her rhythm.”

She then went on to wonder how the people attending the poetry slam at which “Hebrew Mamita” was performed would experience a white Jewish woman using a hip-hop inflected poetry style. Would the mainly African-American crowd feel co-opted? Or would they identify with her? She also considered how the poem would work if the writer/performer were a Jewish man. From there she speculated on whether the poet consciously uses her “flesh and winsome talents” as “weapons in her act.”

I chose “Hebrew Mamita” because of personal experience. I commented on this in initiating the discussion, as follows: “During the late 1950’s, I used to participate in poetry readings at the Gaslight Café on MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village. I was a teenager from the ‘outer boroughs,’ seeking ‘culture’, ‘art’, adventure and romance. Most of the poets who read were not teenagers. They were adults. Among those adults was a poet named Ted Joans, who mocked the outer borough Jewish adolescent girls who frequented the Village. One of his poems referred to these girls as ‘Bronx bagel babies’. And yes, I found the poem degrading, anti-Semitic, insulting, and hurtful. ‘Hebrew Mamita’ voices something I could not articulate myself as a teenager among adults. I was more concerned with avoiding the predators among the adults, those trying to manipulate and seduce the girls seeking romance and adventure. Whatever we were seeking, it was not to be found among the predators filling the cafés, sitting on the stoops near the store fronts, or at the fountain at Washington Square.”

A response soon followed. “Vanessa Hidary’s voice strongly echoes my own struggle between feeling deeply part of a group, contrasted with the painful and confusing shame, fear and anger that that group could be hated, denigrated, and cast out. This certainly was a force that I had to reckon with analytically on many levels.”

The poetry brought the individual experience out of privacy and into shared play space, in a form that analysts together could recognize, resonate with, inform their own lives with, and bring to their own clinical practice. From my own self-revelation in choosing
the poem and discussing my reasons to do so, to the responses from others, we found ourselves touching on many issues from a personal perspective. Sexual vulnerability, Otherness, humiliation, rage, were all identified and willingly explored. What I find remarkable is the freedom we had to delve publicly into issues such as these, issues which are seldom explored in psychoanalytic presentations and gatherings. In the spirit of the forum, I offer a poem of my own, a rant:

FIRST RANT

When I call the names of invisible things upon you,
when you hear your own voice
calling your own name
in your left ear,
when the names of invisible things become nothing,
yet your skin feels the whisper of names present,
like a halo,
when I do these word-deeds with my tongue and voice,
do not then believe that I have exacted vengeance.

Nine nights dreaming you will see me dancing,
and it won’t be me! It will be
a fox, perhaps, or a bird, something creaturely,
naked as a tree, and I won’t be there!
But I’ll be somewhere, dancing,
and you will be encircled.

You are grown earthy; marsh-grass sprouts in damp places,
moss dapples your back.
Your tongue lies mute as a stone in your mouth,
and in your throat nickel begins to boil.

You are free: run to the river,
roll in the mud, sink in the waters;
you shall still be burning.
And do not think that I have sought my vengeance
in these tame events.

For those who attended the presentation of this article at the 2009 IFPE conference, and for those now reading, I will say what I said on the poetry forum, “Rant is an honorable form.” Is that statement defensive? I find myself speculating, is offering this poem for contemplation actually sublimation through art and creativity, or is it aesthetically-informed acting out? Either way, it sure feels good. I reveal an aspect of myself through rant that I don’t particularly choose as public persona, someone angry, vengeful, aggressive – and of course, beneath the blatant aggression, someone hurt and sad.
Obviously I am letting this aspect of myself be seen because I trust that it is integrated into a self that enjoys psychoanalytic interchange and intellectual and emotional dialogue.

Rant inspires to action. While rap and hip-hop inflected poetry in performance is “embodied”, as are sung lyrics, political poetry reminds us that “the times, they are a-changing’, that poetry creates change. What do the following lines evoke in you? “The answer, my friends, is blowing in the wind.” “I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night, alive as you and me.” “Where working men go out on strike, it’s there you’ll find Joe Hill.” “This land is my land, this land is your land.” “Allons enfants de la patrie, le jour de gloire est arrivé.” “Buffalo soldiers, stolen from Africa.”

How have the following poets changed or challenged your world view, your perception of reality, your filters?


In discussing poetry, a dialogue among analysts emerged that was open, free, playful, serious, self-revealing, and vibrant. We shared a language of the soul.

NOTE: I would like to express my gratitude to the poets who permitted their work to be presented in this paper. All rights to the poems are retained by the poets, and the poems may not be reproduced in whole or in part without consent from their authors.

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