Fiction as a Transformational Container: A Graphic Detective Story

Virginia Rachmani

FIPE Conference 2014

“Necessary Fictions”
In a jocular 1921 paper, a psychoanalyst lists the typos his secretary makes while transcribing his book. She changes his description of a case from “a defective story” to “a detective story” (House, p. 407). He attributes the error to her “subconscious flirting with detective-story plots.” Apparently, the genre was as much on the mind of the early twentieth century public as crime series are in books and television today.

This paper depicts how my ongoing psychoanalytic treatment with Mrs A is currently enhanced by her writing and illustrating “graphic” detective stories. Through this medium, she attempts to contain her sizeable and destructive aggression, while in her public and private relationships she remains encumbered by lifelong hostilities.

It is no coincidence that crime fiction and psychoanalysis emerged and developed in the same historical period--the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Wide-ranging political, economic and social changes had affected a wide swath of the population across educational and class lines (Rycroft, 1957, p. 444). The increasingly easy access to information enabled both detective stories and medical achievements like psychoanalysis to reach their respective audiences. In each, the efficacy of the “scientific method” captured imaginations, whether it happened in the style of Sherlock Holmes or of Sigmund Freud.

Freud himself confided his predilection for detective stories to his daughter Anna (Eickhoff, 2007, p. 263), and his contemporaries frequently asserted that he presented cases as if they were detective accounts and his patients’ symptoms were clues (Long, 2001, p. 183; Mitchell, 1992, p. 444). Recently, Ferro (in Boffito, 2010, p. 124) suggested that supervision cases be discussed in the detective story format, particularly when examining an impasse.
Through detective stories, a replay of guilt and innocence is staged, wrote the poet W. H. Auden (1948); they are “ready-made fantasies in which the compulsive question 'whodunit?' is always answered by a self-exonerating ‘not I!’” (Rycroft, 1956, p. 230). Every tale provides an opportunity to identify with the detective, some degree of permissible gratification of aggression and the libidinization of aroused anxiety. The perpetrator and the detective cannot be the same person; in the psychotherapy analogue, the experience of the patient and clinician is more complex: each person can be felt to be one, or the other, or both in the transference or in countertransference reactions.

The dynamic between the “oedipal” protagonist and “oedipal” criminal can steer the detective story (Hess, 1999; Bauer, Baiter, Hunt, 1978) because it stimulates a resurgence of the primal scene (Freud in Bonaparte, 1935; Sachs, 1935; Pederson-Krag, 1949; Rycroft, 1957; Bernabe, 1957). Readers play the detective who is clever and enthralled with a mystery that represents early unmanageable excitation, guilt, confusion and frustration. By the safe repetition of relieving oedipal guilt, this drama is actively relived instead of being passively endured (Pederson-Krag, 1957). Its addictive quality may account for some of its continuous popularity.

Picturing mythic characters, like detectives—or psychoanalysts, if The New Yorker cartoons are to be believed—is the realm of the graphic novel, the fastest growing literary genre and a polyglot of pop culture, memoirs and social histories. Psychoanalyst Bruce Reis (2007) recently collaborated with an illustrator to create a graphic journal case study. Are You My Mother, Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir, was The New York Times pick for best fiction in 2012; it parallels her psychotherapies, liberally citing Winnicott and Alice Miller.

Most writer/illustrators consciously or unconsciously draw on split-off parts of themselves as alter egos and gain some degree of substitute satisfaction by doing so. The
detective story is specifically composed of expectable, formulaic characters that offer made-to-order opportunities for the writer to project his or her narcissistic phantasies into the work.

An alter ego can be defined as “a secondary or alternative personality” or “an intimate or trusted friend” (online www.oed.com). The term, however, is now so ubiquitous that it loses these meanings: there are Alter Ego hair products, an Alter Ego restaurant (in Spain no less) and even a band, the Alter Ego. Everyone has one, at least in avatar form. In literary criticism, the author and the alter ego are spoken of as psychologically identical (Wheeler, on-line web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms.html). For example, an English literature professor might say that Robert Louis Stevenson’s Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886) presents Hyde, and perhaps Jekyll, as the author’s alter egos; psychotherapists would discuss them in relation to dissociative identity disorders.

The Case of Mrs A:

Mrs A’s and my sessions take place in an active, dialogic milieu, during which I closely monitor our transferential/countertransferential experience and remain alert to our mutual enactments. Therapeutic action largely emanates from a careful and continuous balancing of empathy and anxiety (Bromberg, 1983), and I try to be mindful of Mrs A’s developmental status as well as her developmental thrust.

Mrs A is a middle-aged copyeditor who requests twice-weekly psychoanalysis, due to her deteriorating relationship with her husband and colleagues. She is an only child, whose father died when she was four and whose mother was flagrantly narcissistic and intrusive, insisting that her daughter forego an “impractical” career in the arts and marry young. Her mother repeatedly told Mrs A that her father had wanted a son, with the implication that his daughter was somehow insufficient. Mrs A buried her anger with her mother in a silent retreat and
repressed her then indefinable feelings surrounding her father’s untimely dying, its resulting oedipal insult and her feelings of gender inferiority. She remembers confusion from that time, not grief. Five years ago, after her mother had died, her rage emerged full blown, and she began to draw the adventures of Sirena, her self-proclaimed alter ego.

Mrs A lives emotionally inside her avocation as a graphic novelist, displacing her seething vindictiveness onto insidious crimes that she bases on current events. Her earliest doorknob remark to me was, “If you really would like to understand me, I will email my latest book to you. This is confidential isn’t it?” And so, with necessary disguise, I present Mrs A and Sirena, who are necessary fictional characters, recognizable to our therapeutic twosome alone.

With the support of her trust fund, Sirena lives and works alone investigating corporate institutions by hacking their computer files, actively snooping on possible culprits and then alerting the public to any danger. Dressed in Prada and perched on stiletto heels, Sirena is always illustrated in black and white; she is angular and scary-sexy, dangerous to the touch. Although she carries a gleaming dagger, it is only an accessory, Mrs A asserts. Her stealth lies in her facility as a researcher and whistleblower; the mysteries she unearths are not overt murders, but diabolical schemes that threaten our collective wellbeing. The first work Mrs A shares with me depicts Sirena tracking down a birth control device marketed as ‘a woman’s ticket to freedom’—when it can potentially sterilize its users.

In this way, Sirena deftly incorporates much of Mrs A’s narcissism and sizeable aggression; in her everyday life, Mrs A hides in the shadows as a quiet, if disgruntled, presence at home and work, plodding through her days with efficiency, awaiting a return to her drawing board. She seldom speaks about her unhappiness with her husband and almost never about her career, even though these were her initial reasons to begin therapy. When asked if she ever had an interest in having children, she grimaces and shakes her head. Mrs A only wants to talk about Sirena.

As she relates Sirena’s adventures with me, Mrs A needs to know that I fully appreciate her drawings and text. Her husband, she claims, has limited interest in what he calls her “hobby,” much like her mother’s labeling her childhood writing as her “scribbles.” When I do
not fully appreciate the obscurities of these tales, or respond with the desired enthusiasm to Sirena’s exploits, Mrs A tries to mask her narcissistic injury with silence or a snide remark. I feel shut down, a two-dimensional backstop for her preoccupations and rants about business and politics that seem inconsistent with her high intelligence and sometimes border on being delusional. At the same time, I respect her determination to stick out the therapeutic process, although she appears bored by my questions about her feelings. I learn to gently nudge Mrs A, as I work to arouse a greater curiosity about herself and a loosening of her inflexibilities.

Two years into the treatment, Mrs A surprises me by devising a partner for Sirena, a brawny, streetwise, former undercover cop named Mike. Mrs A says he is her fictional “playmate,” and that he can serve as Sirena’s own alter ego. Sirena patiently tutors the less-educated Mike in everything from the mathematics of hedge fund fraud to the ills of social media. I mention to Mrs A that her hard-edged drawings of Sirena are growing decidedly curvier, and, ever the fashionista, she has tucked her dagger into a softly-quilted Chanel handbag. When I wonder to Mrs A if Mike might represent me in some way, someone who takes her seriously and provides safety, camaraderie and acceptance, she cuts me off curtly, “I already thought of that,” she claims, but with a sly smile.

Discussion:

Early psychoanalytic thinking would deem Mrs A unanalyzable. Her narcissistic preoccupations are initially disguised beneath her neurotic exterior, but quickly unearthed in psychoanalytic practice. The primitive, semi-psychotic portion of her personality (Bion, 1957) is hidden beneath the defensive masks of wife and businesswoman and partly contained within her alter ego enmeshment with Sirena.

Famous writers, analyzable or not, have long been fodder for psychoanalytic exploration—most notably Freud’s 1928 treatise on Dostoevsky (who, himself, wrote a book called The Double). It is impossible to ignore a storyteller’s personal imprint on his main characters,
whether or not she/he consciously depicts her/his idiosyncratic needs, desires and beliefs (Bellak, 1945, p 406-7).

Grotstein (1992, pp. 182-5) discusses how in addition to his knowledge of fin de siècle medicine Freud was also influenced by nineteenth century romantic literature, which included the eerie shadow of uncanny objects like the alter ego, often referred to as the ‘second self.’ Because his non-scientific discovery of the unconscious, what we now understand as right brain processing, was integral to his psychoanalytic theory, Freud needed to construct a rationale that made the unconscious scientific, and he brilliantly “flipped” the parallel communication between the right and left brains to a horizontal schema, so that the unconscious--with its uncanny segments of experience--fell beneath the ego’s control.

This paper leaves off examination of Mrs A’s neurological underpinnings, her childhood relational traumas and her attachment problems, and concentrates on her current psychic difficulties and achievements with an admixture of theoretical organizing concepts--specifically Winnicott’s transitional phenomena, Kohut’s selfobject transferences and Bion’s “waking dream.”

In Winnicott’s (1971) review of transitional phenomena, he discusses how culture forms as an intermediate area, a realm where one can play with his or her illusions of omnipotence. He famously says that an adult’s illusions, unlike a baby’s, is a mark of art-- until the artist insists upon others’ agreement with these illusions, at which time they become “the hallmark of madness” (p. 90). Science fiction and comic books rely on the reader’s implicit agreement to suspend reality, i.e., Superman flies, and Batman lives in a cave, but Mrs A’s stories are deadly serious. She dogmatically demands that I, as her first--and sometimes only--reader, accept her reasoning.
When I think about Sirena along the arc of Mrs A’s transitional object universe, I admire her creative efforts to protect her brittle self in a world that feels to her like the seamless continuation of her unempathic childhood. And, as with any transitional construction, Sirena can be modified or destroyed by Mrs A alone. If I raise an eyebrow, as Mrs A shares Sirena’s exploits with me, I am interfering with Mrs A’s absolute control: she reacts as if I am giving her teddy bear a black eye! For the first two years of work, no matter how carefully I question Mrs A about these hostile reactions, her emotional thermostat freezes me out. Yet, slowly, on Mrs A’s clock and not mine, her rejection of her parental bad objects and an acceptance of my good object intentions appear to shore up her weakened ego, and she shows an increased tolerance for perceived criticism or rejection.

Mrs A’s detective fiction continues to reveal the arc between her primitive anxieties about her physical vulnerability and her more differentiated and better integrated fears of death—as with the example of her plot by the birth control device manufacturer. She frequently illustrates Sirena inside the artist’s graphic cell in wordless danger until each a peril passes, at which time text alone explains how the crime was solved and the perpetrators exposed. Bach (1983, p.22) states that for narcissistic individuals, language “regulates well-being or self esteem rather than [being used] for purposes of communication or understanding an object.” Mrs A writes to calm her anxiety and enliven her feelings of deadness much more than she craves my endorsement.

Kohut stresses that narcissistic people often search for some defensive merger with, or reinforcement from, an object representing their grandiose self. An alter ego is made-to-order. Mrs A tells me that she invented her alter ego strategy in early childhood, playing first at being a feral cat that could jump out of the way of her mother whenever she came too close, and she
remembers purposely embarrassing the woman by meowing in public. In this way, Mrs A kept her mother at bay and emboldened her toddler self, while being creative, playful and developmentally phase-appropriate in Kohutian thinking. The strategy was somewhat adaptive in the bewildering wake of Mrs A’s father’s death, but it was limited by her mother’s inability to allow her little girl enough room to express her grandiosity. It set up a life-long constructing and re-constructing of her alter egos to combat shame and provide vitality; these operations can be thought of as secret mergers with ideallizeable selfobjects of her own design, sometimes drawn and other times portrayed in stories. These selfobjects fight her battles for revenge and justice that we find fully-articulated in Sirena, Mrs A’s first complete fusion of innermost desires in both pictures and words.

Kohut’s “alter ego” transference, sometimes also known as “twinship,” is his third form of a narcissistic activation of a not yet evolved, grandiose self, in which the patient assumes that her therapist is similar to her, at least psychologically (1971, p. 115). Early in treatment, I do not fulfill this requirement; Sirena is Mrs A’s idealized image; I can only serve as a dependable mirror or Kohut’s iconic description, “the gleam in the mother’s eye,” a mirroring selfobject.

Brothers (1993), however, proposes an alternative function to Kohut’s alter ego selfobject transference that seems more attuned to Mrs A’s alter ego needs; this alter ego owns “disavowed or hidden aspects of the self” (p. 192) that she cannot currently afford to expose to others and, in part, to herself; she would feel unacceptable or shameful if she is outed as having superheroine physicality, sexual desire, or overt hostility. Only recently did Mrs A intimate--through her snarky comments to me--that she “envies” what she perceives as my freedom and the ability to do anything I want, whenever I want.’
Across cultures and disciplines, the yearning to be like another and to have another like one’s self is elementary; Bion believed (Klein, 1957, p.302) that the “twin” is a ubiquitous phantasy object. He, himself, claimed that his protagonist in A Memoir of the Future, his late-life science fiction work, was his alter ego (Lindell, 2001, p. 77). And Kohut’s best known paper, “The Two Analyses of Mr. Z,” features a markedly narcissistic patient who struggles with his sexual and religious identities, in great part due to a great lack of parental empathy (Kohut, 1972, p. 392): Mr. Z is, according to Strozier (2001) and others, Kohut’s own alter ego.

As well as alter egos, an adult’s transitional universe can include muses, phantasy objects and the adult equivalents of imaginary companions called “doubles” (Bach, 1985). Doubles are found in both psychoanalytic case studies and in literary criticism. In psychoanalysis, the double is similar to Brothers’ alter ego. As early as 1914, Rank stated that the double compensates for a defect or failing in an individual that is shameful if exposed. Sirena acts as a double that not only digests Mrs A’s rage, but uses it heroically for the common good. Mrs A begins to treat me like this kind of double or alter ego toward the end of year two of our work—someone she believes has a satisfying life in a world to which she feels excluded but desires. She recalls being shunned in high school by the popular kids, saying, “My nose had grown huge, but my chest was still flat.” She confides how she had wished that she had been asked to sit with the cheerleaders at lunch—at least in order to then refuse their offer—which is much the way she feels with her office staff today. I ask her, “Would Sirena belong at this lunchroom table?” “Probably not, but you would,” she teases. Two selfobjects are better than one.

Bion’s concept of the ‘waking dream’ and its current extensions by Ogden (2005) and others in the world of neo-Bionian theorizing, feels most salient to me in my clinical work with Mrs A. It can be said that her incapacity to fully dream prevents her from “dream[ing her]
emotional experience…unable to change, or to grow.” Mrs A cannot conceptualize the fragments of her unconscious thought and to use them symbolically (p. 2). Her creative work acts as a container for her considerable rage but it also boxes her inside a repetition of the detective story dichotomy: an all-good detective versus an all-bad perpetrator.

Ferro (2009, p. 210) states that the analyst’s most important activity is transforming the way in which the ‘dream’ of the dynamic field is formed. In the beginning, Mrs A’s and my sessions consist of loops of our mutual projective identifications and introjections, feeling to me like a relational ping pong game that slowly brings some degree of new thinking to consciousness, as we learn to trust our “dream for two.”

We are gradually becoming collegial detectives, and our hard-earned relationship allows for the increased flow that Ferro (2009) describes as pre-experienced, unmetabolized “narrative derivatives.” These are a combination of Bion’s unknown beta elements and unassembled alpha elements, or pieces of unsymbolized thought. Together they seem to me like what Brown (2011) terms “interrupted cries”; they are disorderly, not yet fully comprehensible pieces of a therapeutic detective puzzle--but they are beginning to be metabolized in our therapy.

During these past three years of work, the strength and vigor Sirena holds for Mrs A is also beginning to be incorporated into her day-to-day life; her drawings of her alter ego soften, and Sirena appears less visually threatening. To me, her dagger remains fetishized as a phallic object designating safety and success, but Sirena has hidden it in her bag since her male confederate Mike was introduced.

As a second alter ego, Mike contains the physical representations of Mrs A’s destructive aggression. Additionally, I see Mike as a co-constructed ‘third,’ a manifestation of our analytic
field. He is the muscle that can do Sirena’s dirty work and neutralize Mrs A’s feelings of inadequacy.

Mike, Sirena and I each contribute to, and overlap in, the holding function for Mrs A’s detective story container. A fictional story can contain, but only so much. Containment needs to be porous so that the intersubjective medium can penetrate it to promote human growth. This is the containment that can fully ‘dream’ a psychoanalytic mystery.
References


Ginny Rachmani may be contacted at ginny.rachmani@gmail.com