

STORY TELLING, SYMBOL, METAPHOR AND THE GROUP-AS-A-WHOLE Peter Zelaskowski (1991)

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PREAMBLE

In the spirit of the 'here and now', the present, the web, the matrix, the stage, the platform, the place, the 'moving moment', the space in which psychotherapy performs its tricks, I feel it important to state, by way of enabling me to start and to move on, that I hate the thought, and have hated it for some time, of writing this essay. I am at a moment I've been resisting, putting off and unable to confront. I feel on trial. It feels as though my mother has told me to tidy my room. To, as it were, get my 'things' in order, or else! I feel resentment. She never asks my older brothers with whom I share a room and whose shit I have to suffer. Why do I always feel compelled to satisfy her, to be her 'good little boy'? Still, I suppose it's time I sorted out my 'things' and reluctantly did what I know I must. I always feel more relaxed once I've done it. You see, it has its rewards. That's my problem!

RATIONALE

Poets and psychotherapists are blood brothers (Rothenberg)

It appears to me that each moment is pregnant with meaning and possibility. To explore the meanings of each moment, and thus the concomitant possibilities, one normally feels compelled to either plunge headlong into the past to examine how it may be impinging on the present, or, to examine the moment itself in terms of the observable phenomena that present themselves. Then, in each case, one applies some form of either inductive or deductive reasoning, et voila, 'truth', 'fact' or mere 'insight' burst forth. As a budding psychotherapist, with a trained social scientists mind and being as I am well-versed in defensively intellectual forms of resistance, I have always tended to consciously or almost instinctively apply this type of method. It permeates my thinking, my work, my self-analyses, and generally speaking has served me well, and continues to do so. However, this is not the whole story. It is, I feel, insufficient for both psychotherapy and myself. The bare bones lacking flesh and soul.

And those breeding trees
with eccentric outlines
will be no more like our theories
than a hippopotamus
is like a parallelogram.
(From Adrian Mitchell's poem Revolution, 1982)

Psychotherapy is, I believe, a creative process for both therapist and patient, calling into being all aspects of experience, aesthetic, religious and scientific. It is essentially story-telling, an assertion which Freud appeared to be reluctantly suggesting at the outset of his discussion of the case of Fraulein von R., his first full-length analysis of a hysteria (1892-1894), he wrote:

.....it still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short-stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science. I must console myself with the reflection that the nature of the subject is evidently responsible for this, rather than any preference of my own.

Freud's conversion from neuro-pathologist to psychotherapist was precipitated, it appears, by what science couldn't give meaning to. For example, how can the past be the present and truth be fiction? Problems, which in my pre-psychotherapy days I ruminated about in a poem I wrote called New and Now:

The past
 Holds the key to nothing
 And is nothing but
 Today's new art work
 The was
 As it is
 Now

Scientific thinking generates paradox and then stumbles. Story-telling, poetry and all other art-forms, enjoy and respect paradox as being part of the fabric of human experience. The past, in a sense has no place in psychotherapy, because it exists as nothing more than a metaphor for that which is hidden from the present, that is, that which is latent or unconscious. Similarly, the present is a metaphor for that which is manifest or conscious. Through the device of metaphor both past and present unite in the here and now, 'the ever evolving instant'.

My focus in this essay is creativity in psychotherapy. In writing it I hope to carry forward the process in me of unearthing exploring and, to a certain extent, structuring thoughts, ideas and an attitude that have been with me for some time. My procrastinations over the writing of this essay, I feel, stem not only from my fear of maternal disapproval but also from my fear of what the here and now of writing this essay contains for me, in terms of fantasies I have about my own creativity and more specifically fantasies I have about myself, at this juncture of my life, as a trainee Group Analyst.

What brings me to this moment, itself pregnant with meaning and possibility, is a question demanding a much broader canvas. What I will

say, however, is that this is in part an attempt to add flesh to a deeply held conviction that I have held for some time which is that psychotherapy is essentially creative and, more specifically, poetic. Also, that poetic thinking and a poetic attitude are dynamic psychotherapeutic components. This conviction was excitingly affirmed by Murray Cox and Alice Theilgaard's book, *Mutative Metaphors in Psychotherapy, 'The Aeolian Mode'*, which I will be referring to and quoting throughout. In addition this essay will begin to explore creativity in the group and attempt to apply some poetic thinking to the group, after all, what brings me to this moment owes much to the group. But first a few words about language.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT LANGUAGE

Language, in the form of the spoken or written word, is the most commonly accepted currency of human interaction. It is the purveyor of meaning, enabling communication, the exchange of meaning. Words carry meaning and the enabling factor, insofar as communication becomes possible, is that certain meanings institutionalize themselves, through common usage and subsequently through appearing in a dictionary, as the most commonly accepted meanings for any given word. Each person's stock of words expands as life progresses, as does their capacity to use them. At the same time words appreciate in meaning as new shades of meaning attach themselves. Language is dynamic. Words and meanings come and go. Some people have more than others and use their wealth to generate more wealth. However, this is not the whole story.

Psychotherapists are rediscovering that psychotherapy is not primarily a precise technology of accurately used words, as tools of effective interpretations. The depths of the mind are reached and touched by simpler words that speak in images and metaphors, speak in a universal, timeless language, pre-dating contemporary ideas. A language that touches the heart, the ancient seat of the emotions, that speaks to the soul..... (Malcolm Pines in Cox and Theilgaard)

The 'problem' with language is that words not only purvey commonly agreed meanings but also catalyze new or previously hidden meanings, meanings which can be more or less commonly agreed or which are deeply personal to an individual and are not shared by others. This is a 'problem' because in everyday discourse it causes confusion to arise and 'crossed lines' to occur, added to which the space does not often exist within which this confusion can be explored. However, this need not be a 'problem' for psychotherapy. Fundamental to psychotherapy is the task that both therapist and patient/s face of digging deep, bringing to the surface, unearthing and laying bare what's hidden or unconscious, and a space exists for this to happen. When words, either individually or conspiratorially, catalyze new or hidden meanings they are acting on people in a creative process which is 'calling something into existence

which was not there before'. Words are essentially symbols, totems with visible and invisible faces, which represent, in a literal sense the visible, known or 'designated' meaning and in a metaphorical sense an invisible, unknown or 'marginal' meaning, 'called into existence', or 'carried across the threshold', through the process of metaphor.

I will return later to metaphor, but for the time being a brief outline of how I will be applying these ideas to the context of analytic group psychotherapy. Firstly, through an exploration of the group as metaphor. Secondly, through a discussion of the roles language, symbol, metaphor and poetic thinking play within group dynamics, in particular their therapeutic potential. But first, story-telling.

PSYCHOTHERAPY AND STORY TELLING

Story telling involves telling and listening. Our first experiences of story-telling were as the listener, either on our parent's lap or being "put to bed" or "on the carpet" in the classroom. A good story would both entertain and help us give meaning to our lives. As Bruno Bettelheim (1976) explains in *The Uses of Enchantment*:

For a story to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and hold his attention. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him.

A task of childhood is to learn how to create, tell and listen to stories. Patients present themselves to the psychotherapist or the group with a story to tell, their story. Initially, because it is repressed, patients will be unaware of much of their story and equally, because of fear and resistance, patients will be disabled from telling much of their story. The task for the patient is to tell as much of their story as they can, such that, according to Murray Cox and Alice Theilgaard:

When a patient is fully able to be his own narrator it is evidence that he is at greater ease with himself.

Until a point when:

The desperate act of coming in here to face unbearable things has gone. The last vestige of wanting to hide from the truth has been stripped.

Within the therapeutic relationship, during the process of telling, 'the aim of every moment of every session', according to Malan (1979) 'is to put the

patient in touch with as much of his true feelings as he can bear'. The skill of the therapist is in being attuned, cognitively and affectively, to the patient's story such that when the 'moment' arrives, when a 'point of urgency' is reached and the patient is standing at the gates of heaven or hell, on the 'threshold of the horrible', then the therapist intervenes in such a way (which I will return to when exploring metaphor) as to enable the patient to cross the threshold, further into the realm of 'his true feelings', further into the realm of his/her story.

When people enter psychotherapy they carry in with them, to a greater or lesser extent, dependent on how primitive is their psychopathology, a fantasy that the therapist already knows their story and is about to tell it to the them. In a sense they give to, or project into, the therapist their story, in the hope that the therapist will tell it back and in so doing 'stimulate his imagination.....develop his intellect.....clarify his emotions'. With the gradual erosion of this fantasy, throughout the course of treatment, the patient reappropriates his/her story as belonging in the here and now to him/herself.

but you are the music
while the music lasts
(T.S. Eliot)

Story telling is a useful metaphor for psychotherapy, not only because of its adult/child connotation but also because it suggests that creativity and imagination are essential to the psychotherapeutic process. And finally if 'story telling' can do for the patient what Bettelheim suggests a story should do for a child, then the story is worth the telling.

THE GROUP-AS-A-WHOLE STORY

Our work then becomes a creative activity, more artistic than that of a mere producer on the stage or film, or that of a sculptor or painter. Not so much, perhaps, as that of the playwright or composer, but life as it displays itself and unfolds under our eyes is more dramatic and poetical than any play ever written. (S.H.Foulkes, 1984)

When the group tells its story it is a 'game of consequences'. Fragments of each individual's story, surfacing either verbally or non-verbally, by way of members free-associating in the here and now, uniting within the bounded therapeutic space of the group to form the group-as-a-whole story. On a literal level the story may make poor reading, appearing bitty, fragmented and repetitious, lacking purpose, coherence and the basic elements of a good story, namely plot and characterization. Its authors may appear silent, nervous, rambling, overly polite, loud, dominating, chatty, sleepy, chaotic, etc.. On this manifest level what may be most apparent,

particularly at the outset, is each individual story, in the guise of individual themes waxing and waning and so reflecting intrapersonal dynamics. However, the narration, through free-floating discussion or free group association, soon takes on what Agazarian and Peters (1989) refer to as a foreign feel as interpersonal and group dynamics become reflected in group behaviour and discussion.

Perhaps the paramount conscious anxieties of the new group member are, and this was certainly my experience, a fear of exposure and an apparent lack of time and space for the telling of his/her story. The latter, in my case, was experienced with a certain amount of defensive relief in the face of the former. However, in time these anxieties are allayed, to a greater or lesser extent, as the new individual member's story becomes increasingly a part of and more and more bound up within other individual member's stories, through the individual projecting onto and seeing him/herself mirrored within the group. Ultimately the individual and the group are experienced as being organically a part of each other such that when the individual speaks it is also the group speaking and such that each individual member's story is organically a part of the group-as-a-whole story it is the group that tells the story. Peter Fuller in his essay *Abstraction and The Potential Space* (*Art and Psychoanalysis*, p179) writing about his experience of a painting by American abstract-expressionist Robert Natkin, describes a relationship between himself and the painting which resonates powerfully, I believe, with the experience of becoming a member of a psychotherapy group:

It is almost as if at this level of your interaction with the work the skin had reformed but this time around you so that you, originally an exterior observer, feel yourself to be literally and precariously suspended within a wholly illusory space which, like the unconscious itself, contains its own time. Thus when you engage with it receptively this Natkin painting offers the illusion that it is almost a 'subjective object' or a picture of which you are more than a viewer, and almost a literal subject.

For the individual the group begins to be experienced as a 'subjective object', wherein individual stories interweave such that one feels oneself to be 'almost a literal subject' in other's stories. The subject, the individual, through empathy, identification, mirroring and projection perceives itself in the object, the group, so that each individual member's story can be seen as the metaphor through which the group-as-a-whole story is told, such that each fragment of an individual's story contains the more latent group communication, of which the group will be more or less unaware. In effect subject and object merge and the degree to which the individual merges with the group and becomes attached is dependent on the individual's level of development. What I am describing here is the process, first conceptualized by Melanie Klein, of projective identification, described variously as a mechanism meant to relieve a person of undesirable parts

(Mark Roitman, 1989) and ‘a type of projection wherein the person projecting feels at one with the object of the projection’ (Schafer), whereby the subject projects its parts on to the object in such a way that the impression is created, of the object possessing these attributes projected on it. Through projective identification each individual member in the group will try to exert pressure on the group in order to build on it his or her own story, in particular his or her own family constellation.

Within all of this it is the group conductor's role, initially at least, to begin to narrate the group-as-a-whole story by identifying emergent characters, plots and sub-plots. However, using Marxian terminology, at a certain phase in the its development the group will change from being a group ‘in-itself’ to being a group ‘for-itself’, at which point the group will begin to become aware of itself, to take responsibility for itself - therapy by the group of the group - and tell its own story.

The group as it were avails itself now of one speaker, now of another but it is always the transpersonal network of communication which is sensitized and gives utterance or responds. In this way we can postulate the existence of a group mind in the same way as we postulate the existence of an individual mind. (S. H. Foulkes, 1984)

The group tells its own story, which is not only more than the sum of its parts but as Agazarian and Peters (1989) have said is different from the sum of its parts. It develops a mind of its own, the matrix or, according to Louis Zinkin (1989) a group-self, both the subject and object of what is narrated in the group. The game of consequences which is the calling into being of the group-as-a-whole story is the calling into being of a phenomenon above and beyond or latent to the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics of the collection of individuals assembled in a circle, each telling their own story.

There are two aspects of this that I am going to explore. Firstly, the creative process through which the group ‘in-itself’ becomes the group ‘for-itself’ and becomes mindful of the group-as-a-whole story. Secondly, the nature of the beast, of what is encountered and experienced when the group tells its story.

SYMBOLS, METAPHORS AND GROUPS

A symbol has as part of its purpose, therefore, to take the individual from the narrower concerns to the wider values of the group, the nation and even perhaps the human race. (Symington, 1986)

I discussed earlier the spoken word as the common currency of human communication, as the means by which meaning is purveyed and its sharing made possible. A group is a space within which meaning is sought,

explored and ultimately shared. The unity of a group, initially a more or less disparate collection of individuals, is dependent upon and achieved in part through this sharing. Language is a collection of symbols, a stock of which each individual carries into the group. Symbols carry meaning and affect, in a subjective sense wherein all experience is considered unique and in an objective sense wherein any given symbol has a restricted set of meanings that holds across cultures. Neville Symington in his book *The Analytic Experience* outlines the six differentiating factors of Ernest Jones' theory of symbolism:

- A phenomenon of primary significance is represented by a lesser essential idea;
- The symbol represents the primary element through having some perceptual element in common with it. This perceptual element has gone underground and is not consciously understood, though it is often recognized unconsciously;
- A symbol is sensorial and concrete but may represent a relatively abstract idea. It has its roots in childhood when matters are concretely represented.
- Symbols are primitive modes of thought and represent a reversion to an earlier stage of mental development;
- Usually the symbol is a manifest expression of a hidden idea;
- Symbols are produced spontaneously and are productions of the unconscious.

Groups abound with symbols in the more manifest form of the lesser essential idea yet to be recognized for their primary significance'. For example an individual's primary attachment to mother, being of primary significance may be represented at the symbolic level by that persons attachment to the group. Indeed the group has immense symbolic potential as a lesser essential idea.

Central to Jones' theory is that the universality of symbols is due to the psychological processes involved in the cognitive-perceptual construction of the world which is basic to symbolism. Contrary to Jung who saw archetypal symbols as being inherited and thus universal, Jones explanation rests upon the commonality of early cognitive-perceptual experience when children construct their world of meaning. Language as the purveyor of meaning is thus restricted in its symbolic potential, an enabling factor insofar as a unifying group-as-a-whole story is concerned. Furthermore Jones' ultimate conclusion is that all symbols represent ideas of the self and immediate blood relatives, or the phenomena of birth, love and death. This takes us to the very heart of the group-as-a-whole story groups struggle to tell.

Metaphor is, at its simplest, a way of proceeding from the known to the unknown. (Nisbet in Cox and Theilgaard)

But the image has touched the depths before it stirs the surface.
(Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* in Cox and Theilgaard)

How does the group get to its story? To the phenomena of primary significance - manifest in symptoms, defences, personality disorders - the lesser essential phenomena. My focus here is the essentially verbal. The processes operative within language that are intrinsic to the therapeutic process, which when used creatively, give psychotherapy its poetic edge. Metaphor, a linguistic symbol, when applied at the appropriate moment within psychotherapy can, according to Murray Cox and Alice Theilgaard, be 'mutative' in its effect. This therapeutic potential of the metaphor, which Cox and Theilgaard elucidate and give structure to in their method, *The Aeolian Mode*, rests upon three dynamic components:

- **Poesis:** a process in which something is called into existence which was not there before;
- **Aesthetic Imperatives:** the therapist's experience of a sense of fit and coherence, linked to an imperative urge to respond to a patient in a particular way;
- **Points of urgency:** a moment of incipient dynamic instability, in which endopsychic patterning is such that the patient is optimally receptive to the therapist's initiative. In analytic work the point of urgency indicates that a mutative interpretation is called for.

Poesis, the process of poetic thought and language, enables patients to tell their stories, as it facilitates a link between the universal world of meaning and the particular world of meaning belonging to the patient. It introduces an 'otherness of language', bridging 'the gap between that which is inexpressible and feelings which make their presence known through massive non-verbal evidence', enabling the 'poet and the reader to gain a purchase on awareness which is too elusive or overwhelming for other language to contain'.

Essentially the patient in a group is a poet who tells the group-as-a-whole story in a symbolic and metaphoric disguise using a language of lesser essential meaning pregnant with primary significance. It is the therapist's role to apply poesis and nurture a poetic and aesthetic culture, which enables things to come into being, across the 'threshold of the horrible'. The therapist needs to listen to the group, to take stock of its moods and metaphors, to facilitate exploration, not by going straight to the heart of a metaphor, because this may be damaging and premature in that an appropriate period of gestation is required for all births to be successful. If an intervention is judged correctly and the group is taken deeper through

the use of metaphor then the metaphor will be mutative. If not then defences will be stirred up.

The therapeutic potential of the metaphor rests in its nature. In Greek it means to carry across. It is a transfer of meaning, generally speaking from the margin to the centre, which extends the use of a word beyond its designated or standard definition. More importantly for psychotherapy it introduces meaning outside of its here and now connotation. Similarly transference, Latin for to carry across, is the transferring of affect from the margin of experience to its centre, the here and now. Psychotherapy is essentially the re-appropriation of the marginal such that what is known and experienced as the centre, as the self, is much less narrow. The metaphor extends us into cognitive and affective realms of ourselves hitherto marginalized by our earlier primary and socializing experiences.

As a metaphor the group offers immense therapeutic potential. It can signify society, the nation, a culture, a club, a vessel, a ship, school, church, a dinner party, work, my family, myself, mother, father, womb, etc.. The group can be experienced and perceived as any of the above. The group as school may be more readily received into the group's consciousness. For example, during the first session of my training group a member commented, 'this reminds me of my first day at school', an observation which precipitated nervous chuckles of recognition. However for the group to be conscious of itself as mother may take a good deal longer. At this point it feels apposite to sound a note of caution, as expressed by Cox and Theilgaard:

At the therapist's disposal is an entire cosmos of metaphors and images that are potentially mutative. He must not thrust his own preformed imagery upon a patient who is cautiously seeking to express the inexpressible.

THE GROUP-AS-A-WHOLE STORY AS A METAPHOR FOR...

There are such moments - as Baudelaire points out – 'of existence when time and space take on extra depth, and the feeling of existence is immensely amplified'. (Cox and Theilgaard)

There are many group phenomena not yet accounted for in theory where one sees an intensity of affect which should not be called transference because it relates to a true, not a distorted perception and which has a numinous quality. One perceives at times a deepening of feeling involving the whole group, a sense of heightened meaning which cannot be easily defined but which can best be described as belonging to a greater whole, a sense that life in the group has acquired

a new significance, somehow enlarging the individuals within it.
(Louis Zinkin, 1989)

Throughout the course of my group psychotherapy there have been moments where I have encountered terrible inconsolable feelings arising out of what is usually a transient sense of my own total isolation. At this point the very notion of the group-as-a-whole appears emotionally and conceptually redundant. There are also moments, however, when the group 'acquires a moving sense of unity' when 'it experiences in itself an indescribable sense of wholeness', as if my 'skin had reformed' but this time around the group. Something more than or even different from the sum of its parts is called into being which was not there before. Then the group-as-a-whole forms, takes on a kind of self, thinks, speaks and acts, at least that is how it feels.

The very notion of a group mind or self raises the possibility of there being a dimension to the experience of participating in groups which is essentially transcendent, akin to a religious or spiritual experience, wherein the group-as-a-whole can be seen as a metaphor for divinity. Louis Zinkin, in a paper entitled *A Gnostic View of the Therapy Group*, suggests that

it is the individuation of the group, rather than of the individual, which enables the individual to experience a sense of belonging to a greater whole.

Development occurs through the process of the group generating and resolving conflict. This unity of its opposites takes the group into higher levels of development. Various philosophers of history have used a similar dialectical approach. Hegel talked of history as the process of human development towards a spiritual unity with the 'Absolute'. Marx's dialectical materialism saw a classless conflict free communist society at the end of history. Zinkin outlines Jung's gnosticism in which the supreme deity, the hidden god, of which we are all fragments, is the 'pleroma'. The individual human mind is a sub-system of the collective human mind, which Jung called 'creatura', itself a sub-system of the pleroma in which 'there are no distinctions' towards which humanity is evolving. Each individual for Jung is but a fragment of the pleroma and gnosis, a kind of self-knowing, is the awareness that, irrespective of our differences, we are all united through having within us this same originally undivided being. Using this type of formulation, for an individual individuation entails gnosis, an awareness that beneath the conflicts in ourselves there exists a fundamental unity in which there is no longer the need to split off or disown aspects of ourselves. We become undivided beings. Similarly for a group, in which individuation entails development towards the fundamental unity of the gnostic's pleroma, of which the group is but a fragment, a unity embodied by, or at the very least suggested by, the notion of the group-as-a-whole.

If we are to talk of a group mind or self, through which a collection of individuals is actually able to think, speak and act as an undivided being, which corresponds to the reality of our experiences in groups as both patient and therapist, and is not simply an illusory conceptual chimera, then what we are talking of is the group-as-a-whole as a metaphor or symbol, a lesser essential idea, for an aspect of experience of more primary significance which transcends individuality and may be something close to what poets, priests and mystics refer to as God.

A FEW REFLECTIONS

I arrive at this moment with much relief. I have sweated far too much blood over this. I feel that I have said more or less what I wanted to say, although at the moment I'm too immersed in it, too close up to it, to be able to assess its coherence. I have a sense that it may be lacking unity, being possibly too diverse and without a central theme which would bind it together. However I do feel fond of it and have certainly got a good deal out of doing it, having read some fascinating literature en route. This paper can now take on its new job as a symbol of my

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