

## Psychoanalysis and Poetry ... Poets and Poems

I'm going to introduce the topic for today on "Psychoanalysis and Poetry ... Poets and Poems" by telling you, first of all, what I'm not going to do, that is speculate on the relation between psychoanalysis and poetry; as much as this can be a prolific and reciprocal enriching encounter, it runs the risk of becoming an interesting but purely intellectual exercise if it is not associated with the experience of the poet writing a poem! Or of the analytic couple at work!

Let me start with a confession; whether this can reflect an approximation of the truth comes without doubt; nevertheless, I must say that when it came to writing a paper to present tonight, I found myself struggling more than other times; and it took me a while to realise that and therefore to start questioning why? What was this about? In the psychoanalytic spirit of both letting things unfold while trying to make sense of them, I will share with you some reflections, and this becomes the way for me to start with. I think that this somewhat struggle, I was talking about, is not only related to some kind of uncertainty, that I believe one faces when writing something new, mixed probably with a sort of anxiety related to how the audience will react and experience it. I think that the very theme we are approaching tonight is particularly challenging, as it entails talking about poetry and psychoanalysis together, without confining that into some pre-defined idea about what poetry is about, according to psychoanalysis, or vice versa, what poetry can say about psychoanalytic thinking.

In an attempt to have an open dialogue, I can tell you that one of the conscious reasons for which I decided to approach the theme of psychoanalysis and poetry ... and poets and poems, in one of our NZIPP events, is primarily related to my passion and interest in poetry and in writing poetry, that is the creative process of producing something new, that acquires a life of its own. Like any form of art, and yet a specific kind of artistic creation. As psychoanalysis is, some might say; but let's leave this on hold for now, and I will make some reference to it, later on.

So, with these preconditions in mind, I will try to introduce my own ideas and 'free' associations, I should say, in the form of questions, to hopefully facilitate a space whereby other meanings can be explored and reflected upon all together and with the participation of our guest, Courtney Sina Meredith, who will be also sharing with us her poems.

Going back to the question about why we talk about poetry in a psychoanalytic forum and what psychoanalysis has to do with poetry, the first answer that comes to my mind is that it is for the same reason that we organise events where we watch movies together and reflect and share our experiences using a psychoanalytic lens.

But in thinking about another answer to this question, I'd like to share a story with you: recently, while watching the movie 'Gloria Bell', directed by Chilean director Sebastian Lelio in 2018, I found myself captured by the scene where the man Gloria is dating starts reading her a poem, which I only learnt the title of the poem later on while searching it on internet, this being: 'PARA UNA JOVEN AMIGA QUE INTENTÓ QUITARSE LA VIDA', written by Claudio Bertoni (Santiago del Chile, 1946), a contemporary Chilean poet.

You can read the poem below and also watch the video clip from the original Movie 'Gloria' (2013) by the same director, with Chilean actors, in the original Spanish language: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKLofioLiLO>

Me gustaría ser un nido si fueras un pajarito  
me gustaría ser una bufanda si fueras un  
cuello y tuvieras frío  
si fueras música yo sería un oído  
si fueras agua yo sería un vaso  
si fueras luz yo sería un ojo  
si fueras pie yo sería un calcetín  
si fueras el mar yo sería una playa  
y si fueras todavía el mar yo sería un pez  
y nadaría por ti  
y si fueras el mar yo sería sal  
y si yo fuera sal  
tú serías una lechuga  
una palta o al menos un huevo frito  
y si tú fueras un huevo frito  
yo sería un pedazo de pan  
y si yo fuera un pedazo de pan  
tú serías mantequilla o mermelada  
y si tú fueras mermelada  
yo sería el durazno de la mermelada  
y si yo fuera un durazno  
tú serías un árbol  
y si tú fueras un árbol  
yo sería tu savia y correría  
por tus brazos como sangre  
y si yo fuera sangre  
viviría en tu corazón.

Translated in english 'For a young friend who tried to take her own life':

I'd like to be a nest if you were a little bird.  
I'd like to be a scarf if you were a neck and  
were cold.  
If you were music, I'd be an ear.  
If you were water, I'd be a glass.  
If you were light, I'd be an eye.  
If you were a foot, I'd be a sock.  
If you were the sea, I'd be a beach.  
And if you were still the sea, I'd be a fish, and  
I'd swim in you.  
And if you were the sea, I'd be salt.  
And if I were salt, you'd be lettuce, an  
avocado or at least a fried egg.  
And if you were a fried egg, I'd be a piece of  
bread.  
And if I were a piece of bread, you'd be butter  
or jam.  
If you were jam, I'd be the peach in the jam.  
If I were a peach, you'd be a tree.  
And if you were a tree, I'd be your sap...  
And I'd course through your arms like blood.  
And if I were blood, I'd live in your heart.

Why this poem and this scene from the movie have remained stuck in my mind for so long, to the point that I feel like sharing it with you, is difficult to say. This content appears quite clear, not like some poems that evoke multiple meanings, leaving the reader the space to wander unnoticed; there is a sense of musicality, perhaps not that remarkable, and repetition, which feels reassuring; but I think that another reason why it has been on my mind, and in that of many others, as you can read on different blogs and conversations on the web, is related to the experience of watching it in a movie, whereby the poem becomes a moment of a powerful interchange between two people, two great actors in the movie, who appear so real and natural in their suffered longing for love and connection, within a new-born relationship.

So, this inter-relation between psychoanalysis, as well as other forms of creative/artistic production of humans, has a much deeper meaning, that might have something to do with the inner experience that puts one in contact with someone else, or with something else, lost or unknown, in other words unconscious. Or at least this is where my reflections start. The mind develops from the absence of the object, in psychoanalytic terms the other, under some favourable circumstances such as an attuned mind capable of keeping the other in mind, and starts with the 'hallucination' of the external object in order to manage its absence by reproducing it internally.

The initial questions about the inter-relation between psychoanalysis and poetry will then turn into how one starts writing? For whom one writes? As well as why one starts an analysis? And, on the other hand, why one becomes a psychoanalyst or psychotherapist? Maybe I'm raising too many questions than those we will be able to address, but this is where my mind is going in approaching this topic.

Thinking about what the poet is trying to convey and where poetry comes from, I asked myself whether there is an intentionality of writing poems. More often, poets report feeling a sense of urge of writing, as if there was a sort of force pushing them to create something in the form of a poem. And I can relate to that as I have experienced it myself, at times. As well as having words coming out of nowhere, triggered by an image, a memory, or most likely by a dream. So, it is an unknown place in some ways, the one where words come from, foreign to the poet writing the poem, while at the same time quite familiar, as it is experienced as coming from an internal world. But, actually, there might be other ways to experience that, I imagine, such as feeling words are coming from somewhere else; however, in my mind the poet remains the 'organiser' of these words in a form that becomes suitable to others. This made me think of something raw that can be transformed into 'food for thought', using Bion terms, thanks to what he described as the *α-function* that is making *β-elements*, identified as

unprocessed sensory data, undigested, raw facts, experienced early on by the developing mind, into *α-elements*, that are literally available for thought (1962). In this model, the child and the mother/caregiver form a 'thinking couple' which is the prototype of the thinking process that continues developing throughout life, and reproduced in the analytic couple, whereby with thinking we are talking about a process that deals with affects for which another mind is required. The other mind in the field of poetry can be represented by an internal voice/object as well as by the reader, real or imaginary.

Another way to approach this is to think as both, psychoanalysis and poetry, having a common language as a tool/medium of expression, but a specific kind of language that is evocative, intense, condensed, and goes beyond its meaning and symbolic register (the verbalised), that sits between what can be said and what cannot, that remains unspeakable; like dreams, or the unconscious, that is to say "all roads lead to Rome!". Perhaps, the concept of a pre-conscious system better suits this process: it is described as a psychical act "capable of becoming conscious" once it has overcome the so-called censorship, in psychoanalytic terms.

An extract from 'Dreams' by Courtney Sina Meredith:

*" (...) Dream journal ...  
... because it is going to unlock your unconscious and help with everything sitting there at the back of  
your chest, just waiting to pour out  
(...)  
that's the beauty of it  
there are a lot of things we don't know, and we don't have to  
that's partly why we dream, to explore  
(...)  
it's the same thing with your dreams  
if you make a commitment to write them down  
you will find that easier over time  
to access your raw power  
and you won't be just the rooms and the roof  
you will know the foundations  
you will know what you are really made of".*

The process then becomes about how to access the unconscious through language, as one would do in analysis. A poem is written by poets, in their own internal dialogue; then it can be read by another in their own intimacy; and when the intimate dialogue between the poet and the poem is publicly shared with an audience (like in performance poetry) another dimension is introduced, that has to do with the vitality of the experience or what psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden (1999) called "the music of what happens". This is related with the way one listens to a poem as well as to a patient in analysis,

that is not only about what lies 'behind' or 'beneath' but also 'what's going on', including the transference and counter-transference experiences in the psychotherapeutic/analytic setting. At this regard, Bollas (2011) said: "...when it comes to character reception, the analyst's sensibility is akin to the frame of mind one is in when listening to poetry" (p. 244).

Bion, in his writing, gradually moved away from his preoccupation with science as explanatory, towards a descriptive, evocative, and *aesthetic* conception of psychoanalytic thought; in *Transformations* (1965), he wrote that when he thought he grasped his patient's meaning it was often 'by virtue of an *aesthetic* rather than a scientific experience' (p. 52).

A specific question I can answer now is: why am I inviting Courtney Sina Meredith for the first encounter between psychoanalysis and poetry? First of all, because I found her poems particularly evocative; and with this I mean not only for their content but also for their musicality and intensity, in other words for what they allow to experience. Another reason about 'why Courtney' is this: I got to know Courtney's work thanks to a connection with my home country, Italy; a family friend, a school teacher, was a colleague of an English teacher who participated to the translation of Courtney's poems in Italian. A few years ago, I found myself attending a performance where Courtney was performing her poems along with other poets, in a collective happening that was very much inspiring for me, for the bravery of the participants in speaking their own truth, with such pride, intensity and joy, I must say. And here I am now, inviting Courtney to be part of one of our NZIPP public events, with the same and renewed enthusiasm.

When it comes to describing what psychoanalysis has to say about poetry, we can't but go back to Freud, who explicitly mentioned poetry in his work "Psychopathic characters on the stage", written presumably around 1905-6 and published in English in 1942, where he made reference to the concept of pleasure/enjoyment: "Several other forms of creative writing, however, are equally subject to the same precondition for enjoyment. Lyric poetry serves the purpose more than anything else, of giving vent of intense feelings of many sorts (...). Epic poetry aims chiefly at making it possible to feel the enjoyment of a great heroic character in his hour of triumph. But drama seeks to explore emotional possibilities more deeply and to give an enjoyable shape even to forebodings of misfortune (...)" (p. 306).

In *the Interpretation of dreams* (1900), Freud compared dreams to poetry: "There lies in dreams a marvellous poetry, an apt allegory, an incomparable humour, a rare irony"; and dreams are "the source of new inspiration for poets and musical composers" (p. 62); and he was also aware of how

much they can reveal: "... if I was to report my own dreams, it inevitably followed that I should have to reveal to the public gaze more of the intimacies of my mental life than I liked, or than is normally necessary for any writer who is a man of science and not a poet" (p. xxii-xxiv), and that's exactly what he did!

When Freud is talking about dreams being "the royal road to the unconscious" he refers to both of them having a language that can be expressed when the mind is free to equally wander, under a so-called relaxation of the watch upon the gates of the censorship that demarks the conscious system. And what are dreams in psychoanalysis if not a production of the mind that psychoanalysis has learnt to interpret within its own setting? And what else are poems if not a language that can be accessed or that can open up different routes on the horizons?

"But just as all neurotic symptoms", according to Freud (1900), "and, for that matter, dreams, are capable of being 'over-interpreted' and indeed need to be, if they are to be fully understood, so all genuinely creative writings are the product of more than a single motive and more than a single impulse in the poet's mind, and are open to more than a single interpretation" (p. 266). So, Freud had already introduced the idea of a possible link between the two, psychoanalysis and poetry, a link that can be found in the nature of language and particularly in its potentials to evoke affects of lived experience. But what is this language about?

In 1901, in the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud talked again about poetry when he brings examples of forgetting parts of a poem to confirm his theory that "the forgotten or disagreed matter is brought by some associative path into connection with an unconscious thought-content - a thought-content which is the source of the effect manifested in the form of forgetting" (p. 20-21). So, even when we are familiar with a poem, we are more likely to forget parts of it that might be associated with an unconscious psychic material and its related quantum of affect.

A difference between dreams and poetry is that a poem still remains an active production of a subject confronted with his/her own mind; the question of where the urge to write comes from remains valid, and yet the issue is also that this is so powerful that it requires a lot of work to be completed. This is the power of the mind and of creativity: the possibility to make use of a space that is open and *unsaturated*, a term first used by Bion (1970) and re-elaborated by Antonino Ferro (2009), a very prolific Italian psychoanalyst, in relation to the function of an interpretation that can remain open to possibilities, that contemplates different psychic dimensions, always constructing and re-constructing a psychic reality, freeing up new meanings that can be integrated within the mind.

Winnicott deepens the understanding of the cradle of creativity with the concept of the “potential space”: a space that lies between fantasy and reality, whereby transitional phenomena can occur and take place: “The intermediate area to which I am referring is the area that is allowed to the infant between primary creativity and objective perception based on reality testing. The transitional phenomena represent the early stages of the use of illusion, without which there is no meaning for the human being in the idea of a relationship with an object that is perceived by others as external to that being” (Winnicott, 1953, p.94), in other words that is “... created by the infant and at the same time provided from the environment” (p.95), and yet a question about its origin “*is not to be formulated*” (p.94), Winnicott used to say. Winnicott himself related these phenomena to creativity and artistic production: “The transitional objects and transitional phenomena belong to the realm of illusion which is at the basis of initiation of experience. This early stage in development is made possible by the mother's special capacity for making adaptation to the needs of her infant, thus allowing the infant the illusion that what the infant creates really exists. This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work” (p.96).

Finally, I'd like to comment on the role of the poet as well as on that of the analyst/psychoanalytic psychotherapist; the questions of who the poet is and who the analyst is comes to the foreground. What do poets and poems bring into the world? And what is the process that analysis/psychotherapy facilitates?

Adam Phillips, psychoanalytic psychotherapist in London, was asked in an interview to elaborate on his concept that psychoanalysis is a “kind of practical poetry”, as he calls it on the preface of his book “On Flirtation” (1994); and this is what he replied: “On the one hand, psychoanalysis is practical in the sense that there is an attempt to (solve a problem, or to cure somebody, or at least to) address their (of the patients) suffering. But the other thing that psychoanalysis does is that the project is to enable somebody to speak. It's the attempt to create the conditions in which somebody can speak themselves as fully as possible” (Davis, 2013, p. 144).

In other words, psychoanalysis facilitates the process of speaking one's own truth and to make a life of one's own, to cite Marion Milner's book (initially published under the name Joanna Field in 1934). And we can say that both, psychoanalysis and poetry, occupied a space that lies ‘in between’, like the

transitional phenomena (previously described), whereby this process can happen while, at the same time, be discovered.

One way to see this is to think about the emergence and/or construction of the self that is an 'authentic self', some would say; but what does it mean? There is the risk to identify 'goals' in psychoanalysis that are made up in agreement to the specific psychoanalytic theory that one is following and supporting.

For Bollas, interpretation, as important as it is, takes a back seat to the radical core requirement of the psychoanalytic situation: a mutual attention to and allowance of the influence of the unconscious in the treatment encounter. For that purpose, psychoanalysis has only ever had one requirement, Bollas says, related to its method, that is based on the fundamental rule of the *free association* on the patient's side, and the related position of the analyst determined by an *evenly suspended attention*; this is at the heart of the therapeutic experience for both patient and analyst.

Bollas sees this discovery of Freud's as a monumental shift in the culture in understanding the depths of human relationships and communication; he describes *The Goals of Psychoanalysis* (1999) as the experience of this reality within the context of the "Freudian pair", the experience of a radically new dimension of human experience; one that transforms one's experience of being a self and opens the way to the realization of continuously new possibilities in our relationships. The focus then becomes the experience being a continuous, transformative one, as the model of the mother-baby dyad suggests with the mother-object being that of a transformational object for the baby-subject, registered as an 'Unthought known', according to Bollas (1987), that is to say something that has been experienced but cannot yet be symbolized. In my view, that could be where poems draw from.

In this sense, we can say that psychoanalysis can become a journey within oneself, whereby an inner not necessarily critical dialogue can develop, or a way to affirm oneself, for the purpose of dreaming one's own experience, thereby dreaming oneself more fully into existence (Ogden, 2004), similarly to what poetry might like to achieve, in a sense.

At the same time, this can be seen as another way to identify one specific aspect of such a complex experience, as the analytic/therapeutic one is; there might be many other ways and possibilities to interpret this experience for each one of us, and possibly as writing, reading, and listening to poets, poems and poetry (as a whole) might be.



The pleasure/enjoyment, going back to Freud, in terms of satisfaction, joy, genuine excitement, can then be a measure of the experience itself, at some point, with its finitude, as all the possibilities are limited, including in poetry.

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