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Different uses of Fantasy in working with Images

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(for John Henzell)

What is now proved was once only imagined (William Blake)

Background:

'Fantasy' refers to the formation of imaginary images: this -may be a spontaneous almost automatic, process, or it may be one that is the result of more careful and conscious invitation. It is tempting to think of fantasy as a widespread, if not universal, activity, like dreaming; but in both cases there are obvious and dramatic differences in individual experience. There is not much experimental evidence about the extent to which people may be differently 'wired up' in terms of their ability to acknowledge a fantasy life, let alone to make some use of it. However, it is fairly evident that deprivation and trauma in childhood can interfere with or paralyse these capacities.

In the domain of culture, since the Renaissance 'fantasy' has been closely associated with the capacity to create and with individual artistic inspiration ('invention' and the like): significantly, it has also often been used as an alibi for darker, more collective imagery (eg Goya's so-called 'Caprichios' [conceits]). More recently, it has come to refer to a wide and proliferating set of genres in comics, novels and films, where alternative worlds are allowed an extraordinary degree of licence. However, this profusion stands in marked contrast to the subordinate status of fantasy in much of psych oth e rapeutic literature. In classical psychoanalysis it is seen as being strongly coloured by unconscious wishes and hence as being both unreal and escapist. Its mode of operation is supposed to be largely governed by Primary Process thinking, so that it is slippery, opportunistic and essentially selfish in its content. Furthermore, because of its constitutional link with images (the Greek *'phantasein'* means 'to make visible'), it comes in for the same generic suspicion of the image that colours any perspective, whether in psychotherapy or in the history of art, that is slanted in favour of language.

On the other hand, Jung's concept of 'non-directed thought' as a valid complement to rational, logical thought, is much more image-friendly. In fact he went so far as to assert 'Psyche is image', by which I take him to mean that image is, in a fundamental sense, the closest we can get to psyche's inherent 'language'. Fantasy thinking. is thus a key means of access to , material of psychic importance and value. More important, Jung pioneered the systematic use of imagination (fantasy) in response to fantasy material: this was the basis for his well-known technique of 'Active Imagination'. One of the key features of this is that fantasy is both actively engaged in, and at the same time conscientiously harnessed to, the fantasy material (fragment of dream or fantasy) on which it is intended to work.

Post-Jungian perspectives- in particular that of James Hillman- take this notion of fantasy, and the images that derive from it, even further:

> *Fantasy-images are both the raw materials and the finished products of psyche, and they are the privileged mode of access to knowledge of soul. Nothing is more primary. Every notion in our minds, each perception of the world and sensation in ourselves must go through apsychic organisation in order to 'happen-at all. Every single feeling or observation occurs as a psychic event by first forming a fantasy-image.(Hillman 1975, xi)*

From this point of view, fantasy is inescapable, but it is also crucial 1, in that it is a source of information, a way of finding out about ourselves, others and the world.

This imaginal background is the essential ground on which Art Therapy must take its stand, if it is to be a therapy of the imagination, rather than just a mode of psychotherapy that happens to revolve around art materials and artmaking. It is surely no accident that many of the same criticisms that are made of fantasy- that it is subjective and arbitrary, escapist or useless- are also made about aesthetic responses to works of art; as we shall see, the two are closely intertwined and equally central to Art therapy's practice. Fantasy is not just a way of generating material images ('draw how you are feeling' and the like), it is also the preferred way of working with the result: the same creativity that presided over a picture's making is brought to bear, not just on the finished product, but also on the process that led up

to it, and indeed any given moment in a therapy session. For example, when we first see a patient, whatever the circumstantial details of their case notes or the clinical diagnosis suggested, they spontaneously evoke (or maybe provoke) an image in us, and this image can not only be a vital part of our acquaintance with them, but also enable us to bring them to life for others (eg in a case presentation).

Of course, it is the actual material image on which fantasy is most obviously expected to work in Art Therapy: images need images to handle them, to warm them, to breathe life into them. But for all sorts of reasons, there are limits to how much of this can be done within any particular session: for example, the patient may not be in a position to tolerate this use of fantasy, or the therapist may feel too pressurised by other kinds of material (emotional outbursts, recent life-events, recovered memories etc) to do this themselves. Even if the fantasy work that could have been done with an image within a session has, for some reason, been curtailed, or has never even begun, there are still places where this work can be carried out- in supervision, or in writing a Case Study, for example. Indeed, because of the independent life that images live within and between us, there is a real sense in which fantasy work on an image never really comes to a stop.

I want now to outline some of the ways in which fantasy can be 'applied' to pictures; and it is interesting that much of what I have to say applies as much to works in the world of art as it does to those within the confines of 'therapy'. Again, Hillman has suggested that therapy, in the sense of 'soul work', isn't something that just happens in clinical settings, but extends to cultural and life situations. In this respect his ideas converge with Christopher Bollas's concept of 'transformational objects': works of art, for example, that engender profound psychic changes, or act as signals for them, and that in a real sense 'stay with' a person for the rest of their life.

1/ Descriptive

It's almost impossible to describe a pictorial image in strictly literal terms. Maybe we can pinpoint its local colours, specify the medium used, and so forth; but as soon as we try to deal with its 'feel' (or what I call its 'aesthetic' properties), we have little choice but to use a metaphorical or a figurative language. Even the adjectives we use to describe colours (intense, subdued, glowing, etc) or lines (wavering, forceful, jagged etc) have a latent figurative momentum. But when we come to giving some account of the way in which they interact, of what might be called its compositional dynamics, we are almost compelled to animate or dramatise them ('The wriggling black line seems to be trying to escape from the blue square'). These aesthetic events happen at a local level, in specific passages of a painting; and they also happen at a more global level, in terms of its overall structure. In both cases we may find ourselves asking the childish question 'What is that doing there?', not in the the sense 'what does that mean?' but in the sense of 'what energy is at work, how is it working?'.

Finding the most telling, the most vivid ways of evoking these very specific qualities of a picture is an essential part of what James Hillman calls getting to grips with the specificity of an image. However, while the description of a dream image may entail specifying just what something looks like and how we imagine it behaving, in other words visualising it, something like the converse is happening when we try to put the particularity of some bit of painting into words. Even a painting's visual features, however, are not as 'given' as they might appear. As Merleau-Ponty reminds us, they only come into being as a result of our 'seeing' them; and each different description of them can change this to a considerable extent. Hence, as Goethe pointed out, every description is already an interpretation, even if this is still implicit and not yet fully articulated. But 'interpretation' can mean several different things here: I shall return to this issue later.

2/. Elaborative

Pictorial images which are more or less figurative can often invite fantasy or narrative simply as extensions of the scene depicted ('Is the canoe going to go over the waterfall?'). In other cases, the scene may appear more static, less negotiable (the house, the tree, the pond are 'there'); yet we can still wonder, as children often do, 'what are they doing there?'

Even nonfigurative images can evoke these responses: in fact, we are perhaps more acutely aware of 'reading things' into them because the painting itself is so suggestively open-ended.

'Physiognomic perception' is a classic phenomenon of this kind: our innate tendency to 'see' faces or facial expressions in, for example, clouds, bark patterns, rock formations and the like. This is, of course, the basis for Projective tests, such as the Rorschach. However, there is-an important difference here: we are using 'figurative' readings as a way of getting a handle on the specific qualities of a painting, rather than using the painting as stimulus for figurative, and therefore psychological, readings. But it is already clear that we cannot maintain a watertight boundary between the descriptive and the elaborative, and the question then arises whether this is a handicap or an advantage. I shall return to this later.

A more diffuse form of fantasy elaboration involves an associative network or envelope that surrounds an image, or parts of it (This reminds. me of...'). Some of these associations are obviously personal to the spectator; others may be more collective; belonging to a genre or an era, or even having an archetypal dimension to them. Even stylistic terms, such as 'gothic' or 'baroque', can have a collective psychological aura that goes way beyond their strictly art-historical denotation. (incidentally, I would argue that the same cultural creepage applies to the term 'psychotic' when applied to art-works.)

An additional mode of association is in relation to other images made by the same artist ('There's that lifebelt shape again.'). Our recognition of something like a family of shapes or typical colour combinations in an artist's work is a gradual acquaintance with what I call their 'idiom': it is this, for example, that sometimes leads us to say "That doesn't look like one of your pictures'. I believe that in an Art Therapy context this familiarity with a patient's idiom is valuable in itself, even when we do not yet know quite what this idiom may mean.

3/. Interpretative

The relation between the particular 'aesthetic' features of a picture and the clusters of metaphor and metaphor-induced fantasy that gather round them is crucial. Specific material features (colour, line, handling) act as grounding for the fantasy that connects to them. If fantasy takes off and becomes something like psychoanalytic 'free association', it has somewhere along the line cut loose from this anchoring in the actual material structure of the image, and while it may still have some therapeutic use, it is no longer something peculiar to Art Therapy. Conversely, metaphors or fantasies may serve to develop, and to articulate, our sensitivity to the specific features of the image, and out of them more 'narrative' accounts may emerge.

Neither of these two paths, which are often so inextricably intertwined that it is impossible to separate them, amounts to what is conventionally thought of as an interpretation, for several reasons. First of all, there is something provisional, a quality of 'as if', about these metaphors: we float them, try them out; we do not insist on them. Second, it is possible for several competing, even contradictory, takes on a picture to co-exist and to indicate, in their paradoxical combination, a larger sense that cannot quite be articulated. Often, in a group, this 'kicking up the dust' around a picture helps to open it up, to knead its ingredients so that they 'rise'.

All that matters is that any individual version should be capable of being seen to have a sufficient degree of 'fit' with the principal formal features of the picture, or of any passage within it. How can we be sure of this fit? This is a crucial question for research into pictorial significance. It cannot, I believe, be answered by the use of predetermined grades or formats which claim to provide a categorical ranking of pictorial effects (such as are often found in 'scientific' studies of aesthetic preferences). There is an analogy here with what makes a therapeutic interpretation apt or useful: sometimes there is a 'click' effect, where a connection is made that suddenly gives explicit insight, either to therapist or patient; at other times there is just a scatter of potential sense, but nothing that is in any obvious way conclusive.

Both art-history and psychotherapy are well used to one kind of fit, where something of the person's biography is known beforehand, and a fit can be made or found, between some pattern in it and some pattern in an art-work or a fit can be found, between some pattern in an art-work or a series of art-works. (For example: Magritte’s paintings of lover’s faces shrouded in sheets have been connected to his mother being fished out of water with

her nightdress over her head). Or else we may look to the artist's state of mind to support the fit between our reading and their (more or less) expressed intent. It could be argued, however, that in the context of 'art the potential meaning of a work always exceeds whatever its maker intended. In an Art Therapy context this is given an almost obligatory twist by the assumption that these other meanings will be contrary and 'unconscious' ones.

Other types of fit may operate in generic terms: ethnic, sexual or even 'pathological' styles of configuration. In a therapeutic setting the influence of this pathological context (suicide attempts, sexual abuse etc) can sometimes be almost overwhelming. Here, too, we have to be careful because imagery that appears to carry an obvious pathological stamp may not necessarily be the signal of some inherent illness: Hillman has introduced the term 'pathologising' to refer to the psyche's autonomous ability to (re)present itself to us in sick, wounded or morbid terms, without on that account being reducible to the symptom of some personal disorder. So 'fit' here would be stylistic or even rhetorical rather than diagnostic.

With the exception of the last-mentioned, these are forms of fit that depend on factors extraneous to the actual picture: but in practice we often have to look at what sorts of things a picture might be saying, regardless of its context. In group work, and in supervision it is sometimes an interesting, if challenging, exercise to look at a picture without any of its usual background. We can then discover that an image leads a life of its own, which is to some extent independent of the person who made it. Indeed this is surely one of the motive forces behind both art and therapy: if we were not sometimes surprised by what we had painted, dreamt or remembered, if these imaginative events did not tell us more than we thought we already knew, their interest would be limited.

So encouraging a cluster of fantasies 'about' an image can often be a way of enhancing its independence from our wishes, needs or theories. However, the question remains of how we are to distinguish or choose between any of these takes on any given image. As I have already suggested, it may not always be necessary to make such choices: the multiplication of 'views', and the consequent imaginative loosening-up of the picture in question, may be an end in itself. Apart from that, it could be argued that 'kicking up the dust' is a heuristic device, a way of generating meanings, and that some kind of sieveing or digestive process will eventually take place.

Some research implications:

Research in this area (as in the field of therapeutic interpretation) has to be based on a phenomenological or intersubjective perspective, in which 'facts' are not purely objective and quantifiable, but are instead the result of interpersonal dialogue and group or individual reflection (which incidentally includes reading a text). The positive use of fantasy and of fantasy-laden (ie figurative) language is crucial to such work, and there is a variety of situations, besides actual clinical ones, in which we can acquire practice in it: eg training groups, supervision sessions and case presentations. In supervision, for example, the fact that there is a distance between the person who witnessed the making of the image and what its creator had to say about it and the rest of us looking at it from the outside forces us to place greater reliance on what light our own fantasies might shed on its feel or possible meaning.

There are also extra-clinical situations, such as image-making workshops, where this practice can be elaborated. A particularly interesting exercise is to take an image from the world of art- preferably one that is figuratively suggestive and not well-known- and use this as an experimental A subject' for group fantasy work of the kind I have been describing. The fact that the work has not been made by anyone in the group seems to offer a kind of freedom or permission which is difficult, if not impossible, to create in more conventional 'art therapy' groups. In a sense, the work is being 'seen' f rom a transpersonal perspective: neither art-history, nor the artist's life-story, nor any intentions he or she may have recorded can be used any longer as pointers or clues to the work's meaning. The fact that the same image can be used with a succession of different groups offers a basis for comparison.

But what sort of research could be carried out in any of these settings, where fantasy is being used as a way of working on images, and how might it be conducted? It must be obvious from what I have already said that there is only a limited use in trying to list or evaluate the results of this kind of work in terms of a strictly 'scientific' methodology: such

an approach would presumably have to involve the cumbersome administration of carefully designed questionnaires, and the data- or rather, the phenomena- that we are most interested in largely evaporate under such scrutiny. But, as in clinical psychotherapy work, this does not mean that they therefore have no real existence: what is significant are the individual and group-interactive accounts of what has gone on.

This material makes most sense when taken on its own terms, as clusters or fields of imagery, rather than being translated into the language of another discipline (one or another type of psychology, for example). Again, the kind of hermeneutic open-endedness on which this depends presents problems for conventional models of research. We are not encouraging readings that could be taken as conclusive: on the contrary, one of the aims is to create as wide a scatter of response as possible, providing always that there is still some visible connection to the original image. One of the interesting things to emerge, for example, is the way in which the whole image, or passages within it, come to be 'seen' differently as a direct result of what other people have shared about their- very different - responses to the main image.

Research on the use of fantasy as a way of working on images will therefore have to develop its own methodologies

Conclusion.

Advocating this use of fantasy as a powerful tool for working with images in Art Therapy involves, I would argue, more than the promotion of a useful, but optional, technique: it reminds us of the fundamental importance to our work of imagination, which is intimately bound up with the kind of fantasy I have been talking about There are several ways in which this works itself out in practice: one is to do with nourishing ourselves as art therapists by keeping our fantasy alive and exercising its imaginative muscles; another is the way in which fantasy can work into or knead imagery in our actual practice, so that it is warmed, and begins to ferment and rise; a third might be the necessity fantasy imposes on us to find an appropriate image-friendly language in which to report and reflect on our work. Finally, this use of fantasy might help to restore or to re-aff irm art therapy's connection to the soul and to soul-making.

If we allow fantasy to be marginalised and disqualified, in the way that it so often is in therapies under the influence of psychoanalysis, then it seems to me that we have sold our imaginative birthright for a mess of psych oth e rapeutic pottage, and thereby to have subordinated our artistic and creative strengths to an authority that has scant respect for them. It is precisely because Art therapy is a therapy of and through the imagination that James Hillman has recently called it 'the primary mode of therapy'. As Cathy Moon has recently reminded us, the artist perspective, in all its richness and skill, is not peripheral but central to our work (Moon 2002).

There are many ways in which we can keep our fantasy in practice, of which making our own art is only the most obvious, and perhaps the most literal, one. I find it encouraging that similar viewpoints are emerging even in that most conservative field, art-history. Writers like James Elkins and John Armstrong have recently sponsored the use of reverie and fantasy as indispensable elements of creative response to art-works, rather than treating them as subjective debris to be got rid of. Familiarity with works of literature and poetry that protect and value fantasy is another obvious source of imaginative nourishment. I hope that I don't have to do more here than remind Art Therapists of their vocation and inheritance.

But much more important is the practice of imagination at the heart of our work. This entails putting our trust in fantasy and taking risks, as I believe early psychoanalysis did in its pioneer work with unconscious processes. There is an internal and an external aspect to this: internally we may use fantasy as a way of processing clinical material; externally we have to decide how much, if any of this should be shared with the patient. Of course this should not be done carelessly: every therapist knows the danger of overwhelming someone, whether with considered interpretation or with the promptings of intuition. But if we edit fantasy too much, or even try to censor it, we are surely clipping our own wings, and our work will suffer as a result.

This is thrown into relief by the way in which we talk, and certainly the way in which we write, about our work. How much Art Therapy literature is deadened by the lack of imagination in its language! Something is missing, often the subject, I believe, of some 'professional' inhibition, or even repression, and its absence makes itself all the more vividly felt on that account. Instead of trying to keep fantasy out of the picture, why not let it in and make the most of it? Figurative, metaphoric language, where images carry weight and which is faithful to the imaginative material that is the stuff of Art therapy, needs constant cultivation and fertilisation in order to act as the living ground images can grow in. And these images are not exclusively pictorial: they crop up all the way through therapy sessions and are also the ways in which we think about what might be going on. Why can't they be more up front in the way we write?

Finally we have to consider what 'therapy' might be in aid of. Here the envelope of fantasy that surrounds images points to a dimension that extends beyond the immediate concerns of the therapeutic relationship. As Jung said, and as Hillman reminds us, the domain of psyche is not confined to personal or individualised 'inner worlds': it is out there, all around us. As Hillman puts it

> *Through art therapy soul retums to dance and painting, to poems and sculpture. Each gesture the patient makes attempts to place into defined form [and if undefined if necessary] the emotional influxes that assail a human life. Each gesture is made for the sake of the gesture and not for anything external to the gesture itself... (T)his gesture, encouraged by art therapists in studios, practices and clinics in city after city, town after town, may be more than a therapy of the patient. It may also be a therapy of the arts themselves, restoring to them the archetypal gestures of the soul (Hillman 1992 xvi)*

Whether or not you choose to call this 'soul', doesn't really matter: it's the atmosphere we as Art Therapists need to live in, and fantasy is an essential condition of that life.

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