

## "What You See is Nothing Compared to the Root": Images of the Psyche in Contemporary Poetry

"The poets and philosophers before me," said Freud, "discovered the unconscious.... What I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious could be studied." He and his analytical brethren drew their descriptions of how the psyche works from two sources: their own case studies, and from poetry and literature. In those narratives and poems, they sought to identify the myths, patterns, compulsions and desires which structure human nature and narrate the human condition. Thus Hamlet, and Oedipus; thus *Richard the Second* and the inferiority complex.

What Freud perhaps did not guess was that psychoanalysis itself would, in the twentieth century, stamp *its* narratives into contemporary literature; that poets and fiction writers would adopt, imitate and reproduce the insights of psychoanalysts in the making of their fictions. Given the tools and the vocabulary of psychology, they would read experience differently. Twentieth century writers would construe their stories in the idiom of psychoanalysis, as much as the other way around.

Psychoanalysis transformed American literature. From Tennessee Williams to Ernest Hemingway, from William Faulkner to Ann Sexton, psychoanalysis informed how we saw things, what we thought about, and how we sounded when we talked. Its narratives and its jargon provided a vernacular and an image of process that pervaded novels and poetry for sixty or seventy years.

Here, for example, are two passages from well-known poets that would never have been written without psychological ideas and jargon in the community water supply:

1.

Whoever despises the clitoris despises the penis [SEP]  
 Whoever despises the penis despises the cunt [SEP]  
 Whoever despises the cunt despises the life of the child. [SEP]  
 [SEP]Resurrection music, silence, and surf. [SEP]

Muriel Rukeyser, from "The Speed of Darkness"

2.

The Greeks are sitting on the beach  
 wondering what to do when the war ends...

Thinking things over in the hot sun, pleased  
 by a new strength in their forearms, which seem  
 more golden than they did at home, some  
 begin to miss their families a little,  
 to miss their wives, to want to see  
 if the war has aged them. And a few grow  
 slightly uneasy: what if war  
 is just a male version of dressing up,  
 a game devised to avoid

profound spiritual questions?

Louise Gluck, from "Parable of the Hostages"

Rukeyser's poem is about the spiraling, tangled costs of sexual repression. Gluck's witty poem analyzes the connection between male vanity and war, exposing the private motives underneath public ones. The very fluency of formulation in Gluck's poem testifies to the permeation of psychoanalytic understanding in our culture. The insights of both poems are fruits of the Freudian legacy.

Contemporary thinkers have tried to persuade us to suspect all ideologies, to see them as a kind of weakness which human beings are prey to, as intellectual viruses that fog the mind, or as purveyors of insidious "master narratives" which maintain social inequities. This position may seem true enough, if one thinks only of the Spanish Inquisition, or Nazism, or the Cold War--but that's not the whole story. Systems of belief -- psychoanalysis being one among the others-- don't just influence culture; they lend it shape and empower it; they extend our reach and strengthen our grasp.

In forties and fifties America, it was psychoanalytic vocabulary-- *neurosis, Oedipus complex, boundary issues, penis envy, sibling rivalry, inferiority complex, narcissistic*-- that became our common intellectual currency. Since then, the cartoon image of one person reclining on a couch beside a other person seated with a notebook in his lap is the instantly-recognizable icon for therapy. Since then, the therapeutic occasion has been a commonly accepted context for hilarious comedy and serious drama.

Psychoanalysis gave people of all kinds, including artists, a framework that in its own way was both comprehensive and useful. Its description of experience included both the known and the unknowable, the civilized and the savage, the personal past and the challenging present. Psychoanalysis provided an account of human nature and of civilization, an account required by the modern individual to situate herself in a story. A human being, we were given to understand, was itself a sort of community of contradictory instincts, memories, and ideas; the psyche became a place both more inscrutable and more approachable, a place itself mysterious and worthy of exploration. And, of course, the therapeutic process has been depicted, embodied and enacted in a great variety of ways in our poems.

## 1. WORKING IT OUT

If one wants to see the impact of psychology upon our poetry, examples abound. The poem "The Anxiety," by the poet Michael Dennis Browne provides a textbook representation, in poetic form, of the therapeutic process:

I don't expect the anxiety to go away  
but I want the anxiety to know  
its place in the scheme of things  
of which I seem to consist  
I want the anxiety to be  
not an attention getter or star,  
but faceless, like a butler bearing trays

whose old hand has turned down my bed  
who knows when to take his leave  
the one I could even grow to pity  
this trembling retainer I keep on  
as my father before me

out of some kind of long-standing loyalty  
to the anxiety family  
whose fortunes have been bound up  
with ours for so long.

"The Anxiety" offers a lucid, almost letter-perfect version of the therapeutic process. It showcases a speaker confronting and patiently working through a psychological affliction towards a better accommodation. It turns out, Browne's speaker understands, that invisible parts of the self are available for conversation. This is what Freud called "the talking cure" in action.

Browne's poem could not have been written without the theories of Freud, and the existence of the psychoanalytic framework and vocabulary. The analytic term "*anxiety*" itself was needed to provide the speaker with a personified other, a necessary degree of separation from his own subjective condition. Because the speaker is conceptually comfortable with the idea that the psyche is compartmentalized and split, those parts can enter into negotiation with each other.

The speaker of Browne's poem also seems like a person who has already done a certain amount of therapeutic work. After all, he is engaged in a process of dialogue with a part of his internal constituency: anxiety. From a psychoanalytic perspective, moreover, the requests of this spokesperson for the ego are quite reasonable: he has a desire for a more comfortable life, one in which a better balance is achieved between function and dysfunction. He wants, not to dominate or banish anxiety, but for anxiety "to know its place in the scheme of things." Such a proportionate sense of the relative nature of happiness is one benchmark of Freud's so called "well-adjusted" human being.

And indeed, at the end of the poem, the speaker's psyche *is* convincingly reorganized; his parts seem reconciled with each other.

How is this breakthrough in "The Anxiety" achieved? In part, as mentioned, it is facilitated through the enterprise of dialectical conversation. The other, poetically-interesting ingredient is the visible activity of associative imagination in the poem. It is when the poem's speaker personifies his anxiety as a kind of *servant* or *comforter*- only then can he find an attitude of compassion towards this former adversary. By the end of the poem, the speaker has accepted the anxiety as a kind of companion, with whom he *must*, with whom he has *always* cohabited.

Such a poem is a not just a product of psychological culture, it provides a model of the mysterious psyche in action. In the complex textures of the poem, we see upwelling energies and strata, the collaborating energies of conscious and unconscious resources. If the conscious self brings the resources of rationality, choice, discernment and will, then the unconscious brings to the table imagination and play, song and theatre. The amount of quick cognitive play and double entendre in Browne's poem is evidence of the presence of the whole psyche.

On a sheerly linguistic level, this process becomes visible in "The Anxiety" in a kind of quickening or turbulence that begins around line 8. Once the personification of the butler has been introduced, the second half of the poem is riddled with puns, double entendre, and ambiguities: a "retainer," for example, is something that holds one back, as well as a servant; that the figure is "long-standing" suggests the way in which a butler is stereotypically seen as perpetually standing at attention; that the "fortunes" (meaning both money and fate) of the two characters in the poem are "tied-up" suggests that they have held each other in a state of

**captivity. These sonic and punning elements are evidence of the simmering, ingenious participation of the deep imagination in the making of the poem.**

## **2. ENTANGLEMENT**

**"The Anxiety" is a monologue with a therapeutic happy ending; one in which the parts of the psyche, formerly at odds, learn to cooperate, converse, and live harmoniously together .**

**But the layers of the self are not usually so easily dis-entangled. Poems often testify to and embody entanglement as well. And there is something both revelatory and cathartic about seeing even the most insoluble or toxic conundrums of selfhood vividly represented and brought to crisis. It can be consoling, and clarifying to see such images of the entangled self. In contrast to Michael Dennis Browne's patient, reasonable poem, Robert Creeley's poem "Mother's Voice" enacts a less detached psychological state of enmeshment in a more dire and physical way.**

**In these few years  
since her death I hear  
mother's voice say  
under my own, I won't**

**want any more of that.  
My cheekbones resonate  
with her emphasis. Nothing  
of not wanting only**

**but the distance there from  
common fact of others  
frightens me. I look out  
at all this demanding world**

**and try to put it quietly back,  
from me, say, thank you,  
I've already had some  
though I haven't**

**and would like to  
but I've said no, she has,  
it's not my voice anymore.  
It's higher as hers was**

**and accommodates too simply  
its frustrations when  
I at least think I want more  
and must have it.**

**Creeley's poem starts out in a narrative and level-headed mode, but in line seven the voice begins to grow strange, incoherent, and abstract. The distortion of syntax and grammar of the poem actively mirrors the internal confusion of the speaker's self. The sentences themselves embody the deformity and adhesions of the speaker to the mother, like an egg stuck to the wall**

of the ovary. This internal theatre of conflicting voices is recognizable, to some degree, to even the most normal among us-- but Creeley's representation of this dreadful confusion is brilliant. The poem displays a predicament of hell, an underworld of incomplete separation which itself radically estranges the speaker from the "common fact of others."

Like the earlier poem by Michael Dennis Browne, Creeley's poem is highly informed by the psychoanalytic blueprint of self-development. Despite the poem's bleak scenario, we can see the speaker's self working to gain a critical distance on the limits of this self-denying legacy: "it accommodates too simply/ its frustrations," the speaker reasons, in his conscious rebellion against the frozen past. The struggle of language itself manifests a heroic effort towards autonomy. Even inside the prison, there is the glimmer of hope for change.

### 3. ARCHETYPE

Like Creeley's poem, Louise Gluck's poem "Mock Orange" is about being *stuck*, jammed deep inside in the human predicament. Like a cramped muscle, the psyche in "Mock Orange" clenches its own trauma in a fist. "Mock Orange" is gripping in its raw intensity and force.

Yet there is an important categorical difference between the two performances. Creeley's poem--in its opening at least-- is clearly channeled through the paradigm of psychological method--it is, we could say, underwritten by the insights of therapy. ("In these few years since her death,/ I hear mother's voice under my own...") By contrast, in reading or listening to Gluck's "Mock Orange," we are transported into the realm of myth and archetype.

It is not the moon, I tell you.  
It is these flowers  
lighting the yard.

I hate them.  
I hate them as I hate sex,  
the man's mouth  
sealing my mouth, the man's  
paralyzing body--

and the cry that always escapes,  
the low, humiliating  
premise of union--

In my mind tonight  
I hear the question and pursuing answer  
fused in one sound  
that mounts and mounts and then  
is split into the old selves,  
the tired antagonisms. Do you see?  
We were made fools of.  
And the scent of mock orange  
drifts through the window.

How can I rest?  
How can I be content  
while there is still

**that odor in the world?**

This distinction between the personal and the archetypal voice is a significant one, poetically and psychically. The poetics of personal psychology are *local* and autobiographical; such a poem seeks insight and resolution in the voice of a struggling and good-willed individual. The poetic voice often emanates an urgent intimacy. The improvement of the speaker's circumstances is a real possibility.

The high-pitched monologue of the archetype is another story; such a monologue embodies an eternal conundrum, a universally-recurring, permanent locus of human consciousness-- the proud, unforgiving Creon, the abandoned and fatalistic Dido, the eternally grieving mother pieta. When we read "Mock Orange," we are listening to an old story, told by one of those selves from the deep interior of the collective consciousness. The lyric, ferocious complaint is a perpetual configuration of consciousness and of human affairs; it will always be so, and the particular players are merely the temporary, temporal mouthpieces for the gods, demons, and goddesses present.

"Mock Orange" is the complaint of one who has fallen from erotic grace, exiled from the realms of true pleasure and union. At the core of the poem is a wound, a complaint, and a renunciation. Though Gluck assigns the speech to no particular mythic character (as she often does elsewhere in her poetry), it is easy to imagine the speaker as one of the angry virgin goddesses who pledges never to be captured and deflowered; or perhaps one of the many mythological figures--usually female-- who has been loved and then abandoned by a god.

Though the poem's acidic complaint about sex is unforgettable-- "*I hate them./I hate them as I hate sex./the man's mouth/sealing my mouth ...*"--what the speaker truly hates is not sex, but the promise, the premise, of an achievable *oneness*, a longing which is always disappointed. Here is the tragic truth of the archetype: the selves that attempt union always fall back into their condition of separateness. The failure of union is inevitable and irresolvable. Gluck's poem is the expressed outrage of that condition of existential partialness.

In that sense, the plot of "Mock Orange" is practically the opposite of the Michael Browne poem, which illustrates a successful, if modest, psychological union and integration. A New Age therapist, encountering Gluck's speaker as a client, would wrinkle his brow sympathetically and say, "But don't you see? You must find the eternal lover inside *yourself*."

But Gluck's poem embodies a cosmic dilemma, and will not soften its existential extremity. Because the poem is archetypal in orientation, we can glimpse the specter of other myths floating around the perimeter of this one-- the exile from Eden into shame and incompleteness; Eurydice in the underworld after slipping from the grasp of Orpheus; Psyche sent away by Cupid. No flower will ever be aromatic again; no food will ever again taste good.

But remember, poems are made great by their imaginative resources, not their conceptual strengths. One brilliant aspect of Gluck's poetic craft is its figurative genius-- the way in which the speaker turns abstractions into metaphors that configure the theme of mating and romance. In stanza four, for example, she says "in my mind I hear the question and pursuing answer," providing an analogy for both carnal and intellectual desire. Then, when the answer "catches" the question (an interesting reversal), they "fuse" into "one sound," that first "mounts and mounts"--again the sexual analogy-, then "splits" "into the old selves, the tired antagonisms." It is not just the futility of passion that is being lamented by the speaker; it is the uselessness of intellect as well. We will never be a finished thought, we will never be more than a temporary answer, nor will we ever be more than momentarily whole.

In "Mock Orange," the hatred of isolate discreteness is projected onto sex--the world of men and women and copulation-- and that hatred of sex is transferred or projected into the smell of nighttime flowers. The speaker is a barren ghost wandering restlessly in a sensuous world, a mythological figure tormented by some memory of union which eludes her. Her response is to accuse the world of a cosmic breach of faith. And, fair enough. This too is a true image of the process of the psyche, which keeps transforming, struggling for an achievement it only falls away from.

#### ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF PSYCHE

The poems by Browne, Creeley and Gluck all provide images of a particular sort-- each describes a condition of confinement. Specifically, we might even say, the poems express the feeling of being trapped in *bodies*. Each of these poems depicts the speaker's self in a state of confinement, then intensifies the crisis to a point at which a breakthrough can occur. *How can I be content?* asks Gluck's speaker, caught in herself forever like a maiden trapped in stone. "*But I've said no, she has, / it's not my voice anymore,*" says Creeley's afflicted speaker. Alienated, separate, and needy--the image is an old one. The underlying request, *Help me*--is the very foundation of therapy.

Just as we say that metaphorical systems empower, they can also ensnare. Ask any Catholic. A vocabulary for experience can itself become a kind of prison. It is plentifully evident that the concepts of psychoanalysis have ensnared numerous seekers over the years-- those whose analysis never ends, those who become addicted to their trauma, those for whom an esoteric vocabulary has become a substitute for life. How can we find an image then, or a system, that can reverse, unlock, transform, or liberate us from a model of the world, or of the psyche, that we have unconsciously inherited?

The answer might reside in working with the images with which we describe our world. Psyche IS image, says Jung. Images are pre-rational, and carry information from the other worlds into this one-- ergo mythology and folklore. Images, and the psychic possibilities they represent, can teach us in ways that bypass and circumvent the analytical mind. Imagination can discover the unimaginable.

The Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer, a child psychologist by profession, often displays in his poems an awareness which incorporates the parameters of psychology, yet also enlarges it. Tranströmer writes poems that frame consciousness in a less bounded way than the sheerly psychological. His imagistic vocabulary even illuminates the assumptions and limitations of the older system.

One striking aspect of Tranströmer's "analytics" is that they do not depict the world as exclusively human-centered. In Tranströmer's poems the human is coexistent with, but not essentially separate from, or superior to, the natural world. The consequences of such expansiveness are evident in his poem "A Few Moments:"

The dwarf pine on marsh grounds holds its head up; a dark rag.  
But what you see is nothing compared to the roots,  
the widening, secretly groping, deathless or half-  
deathless root system.

I you she he also put roots out.

**Outside our common will.  
Outside the city.**

**Rain drifts from the summer sky that's pale as milk.  
It is as if my five senses were hooked up to some other creature  
that moves with the same stubborn flow  
as the runners in white circling the track as the night comes  
misting in.**

**In Trstromer's poem, Nature itself models the expansive connectedness of things better than human institutional wisdom. The root system of the self, to use the poem's analogy, is larger than the spread-out branches of the tree visible above ground. The boundaries of this world are not the penitentiary walls of an isolated human individual; they are permeable, contiguous, and in communication with their surroundings, like the dwarf pine. Here, awareness flows out of the individual speaker into the surrounding world; here, physical energy is spiritual energy, and it is in circulation: "I you she he also put out roots." In Freudian analysis, the unconscious contains disturbing and repressed elements. In Trstromer's more Jungian-influenced vision, the unconscious is simply the water in which we all swim, the air we breathe, the earth upon whose surface we walk. "Outside the city" there is more of us, and we are alive. Such an image surprisingly heartens us.**

**The intentional plainness of the Trstromer poem, and the opaque, somewhat surreal image at its conclusion, have their own meanings. Trstromer is affirmative, but he knows the human psyche contains some bleak realities, Trstromer acknowledges, as well as graceful, natural ones. The notion of being in control, of achieving some permanent state of harmony or safety is a pipe dream. We must not pretend to be more evolved than we are. To have a split consciousness, and a split being, to be "hooked up to a creature," is the human condition, and to deny that is folly. As the half-formed images in the last lines of "A Few Moments" suggest, we are incomplete and "secretly groping." But we are also larger than we might think.**

**The most important intellectual value provided by 20th century psychoanalysis might be its forceful assertion of the essential unknowability of the self and of the world. To remind us of our actual ignorance is in many ways a central proposition of any useful modern system -- in this sense, psychoanalysis was a viable surrogate for the map provided by religion, which posits an unknowable and inaccessible divine intelligence. The limits of consciousness and the dangers of hubris are still our guide. Not only that, the human concession to the actuality of unconsciousness lends an all important openness to our description of reality. It requires humility regarding human self mastery. If psychoanalysis wanes as a contemporary paradigm, what version of unknowing will the next paradigm offer as a replacement.? Or will the hubris of our technology seduce us into believing that our ignorance can be outrun? The understanding of our essential ignorance makes civilization and perspective possible. It safeguards us from our own grandiosity and impetuous rashness. It is also the perpetual precondition for creativity itself.**

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**As a late twentieth century European who had witnessed the failure and dissolution of multiple ideological systems, Trstromer often reiterates this point about incompleteness. In another poem, "Romanesque Arches," the Swedish poet exclaims: "Don't be ashamed to be a human being, be proud!/. . . You'll never be complete, and that's as it should be." Perhaps this is one of the great reminders that therapeutic thought has had to offer us; the self is a work in**



progress, in the midst of perpetually transforming circumstances. Representations of the "unfinishedness" of phenomena, feeling and thought is a challenge that seems worthy for twenty-first century art. The system that pretends to be comprehensive is a dangerous thing.

Nonetheless, ideologies and their correlative images empower us, they structure the world of perception, they provide us with the compass points and traction that enable us to negotiate life for our own ends and the good of others. The stories and models we are bequeathed by our culture, by our parents and teachers, have everything to do with how our lives will go, how they are enclosed, confined, or extended into adventure. They determine whether we will love ourselves and our lives, or fear and endlessly defend them. A metaphor of roots and branches, like the one Tranströmer's poem offers, may be more useful than that of a heavenly shepherd watching his flocks.

It takes great art to open and not to quickly confine the case of the human condition. The poetic use of psychology is most enriching and authentic when it is used to explore, but not resolve, the mysteries of soul and world. Again, we can turn to a Tranströmer poem, "Streets of Shanghai," which exhibits the benefits of the psychological legacy, but goes beyond them as well. "Streets" is a poem in three sections, whose dialectic is complex and composite, but here are the closing images, once more focused on the pedestrian traffic on the street:

Behind each one walking here hovers a cross that wants to catch up to us,  
     pass us, join us.  
 Something that wants to sneak up on us from behind and cover our eyes  
     and whisper, "Guess who?"

We look almost happy out in the sun, while we bleed to death from wounds  
     we know nothing about.

Tranströmer's intuitive poem mingles together images that seem variously drawn from the realms of psychology, religion, myth, and philosophy. In doing so, the poem emphasizes one premise held in common by all of these systems: that we live only on the top layer of our lives. The narratives we tell ourselves and show to the world are not the entirety of the picture. Rather, we cohabit and collaborate with other dimensions, spiritual and psychic, which thrive behind the stage, outside the frame. Our respectful attention to those forces has the potential to enlarge and lend our lives meaning. To be unfinished, to concede that our consciousness is partial, and a work-in-progress, can be construed as a cause for anxiety or for positive excitement. It can provoke a sense of shame, or of adventure. Somewhere between science and theology, perhaps through the creative act called art, there is room for an experiment in which we are already involved: the task of making of what could be called a human being.

END