

EPILOGUE: Creativity and Polysemy— On the Limits of Pathography, Psychobiography and Art Criticism

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Empathy, a concept so central in our everyday psychotherapeutic practice, was extensively used in the field of Aesthetics in the 19th century as an attempt to define the emotional experience of contemplating a work of art. The extrapolation of “Einfuehlung” from Aesthetics to Psychoanalysis (Pigman, 1995; Vischer, 1873) opened the doors to an interdisciplinary exchange that has undoubtedly enriched both fields. Just as art historians and critics have offered stimulating insights that either propelled or facilitated the creative process of artists, psychoanalysts have helped millions of persons experience personal and creative freedom. Over 100 years of cross-fertilization between Psychoanalysis and the Arts has also resulted in wild reductionism (Spitz, 1993), categorical dismissiveness, overidealization, and projective identification. We would like to introduce or borrow the concept of polysemy from Linguistics in an attempt to curtail reductionism and emphasize how much we can learn from the arts, just as artists have appreciated Freud’s royal road to the unconscious.

Polysemy can be defined as the intrinsic plurality of meaning that words or communications have which are independent of conventionally accepted definitions. Metaphors exemplify polysemy, taking multiplicity of meaning to the extreme of infinite possibilities. Polysemy, in psychoanalysis, would stand against radical determinism. Our daily communications are not as clear as we often assume they are, and we must explore layers of meaningfulness in order to adequately comprehend what is being communicated. Cruse (2000), in describing the linguistic conundrums of polysemy, refers to the importance of the contextual sensitivity of meaningfulness. To the artist, polysemy resonates true and speaks for the transcendental and autonomous nature of the product of his or her creative effort. As psychanalysts we must accept that meaningfulness is fluid and infinite. We must also recognize that works of art do acquire autonomous meaningfulness separate from the life and experience of the artist.

In studying art appreciation we learn to see a work of art from many perspectives. Artists reflect aspects of the socio-economic-cultural world they live in, creating artistic representations of new trends, ideas or representations of a critique of their time like the evil of industrialization or, of late, the evil

of art becoming a money-driven commodity. Artists also are in dialogue with antecedent styles, with the immediate past as well as revisiting styles of past centuries. Classic, neoclassic, and romantic traditions recur again and again in modified forms. The artistic creation may or may not reflect artists' emotions or struggles.

While metaphor is second nature to artists, the appreciation of metaphor in early psychoanalysis was more circumscribed and biased by a deterministic approach. Our relationship to metaphor has, however, changed over the years. Aspects of the history of this change are of interest. Darwin and the advance of science impassioned Freud's time with the spirit of exploration to find universal principles to explain the world and man. The belief in the power of reason flourished hoping to effect and explain unreason. Beginning with the turn of the past century and accelerated by WWI this faith gradually dissolved, a happening most evident in the arts, as in music, literature, and painting. Suzanne Langer (1941) challenged our customary view of how man's mind functions in her slim but widely acclaimed book *Philosophy in a New Key*. She there declared her "heresy," that she believed that there is a primary basic need in man of symbolization, a fundamental process of the mind, which goes on all the time. Sometimes we are aware of it, sometimes we merely find its results and realize that certain experiences passed through our brain and have been digested there by a process of symbolic transformation. "Human life," she writes, "is an intricate fabric of reason and rite, of knowledge and religion, of prose and poetry, fact and desire" (p. 49). She elaborated on our two basic forms of expression, our discursive language, which has to string words in a row, like beads on a rosary. Complex inter-related meanings or ideas can only be represented sequentially as pieces of clothing that are actually worn one over the other, that have to be strung side by side on a clothesline. Non-representational forms can express complexity simultaneously. Psychoanalytic theories use discursive forms of logic and reason. In practice, however, we are confronted by the patient's complex life, by, as Langer wrote, the intricate fabric of prose and poetry, which evolves from the interplay of biological, socio-cultural, and idiosyncratic forces. Theories and practice are partners. They need each other yet have to retain their independence. Our perception of the "intricacies" is guided and enhanced by theoretical perspectives, but the "intricacies" have to declare themselves. We can clarify and explore, thus helping the process of emerging.

Our relationship with the arts, literature, and music, has undergone changes over time. Early analysts had the enthusiastic conviction that they were able to throw light on the arts. The arts, in contrast, delighted by the notions of subterranean forces, used these to forge new creative paths. Klee (1968) wrote: "today we reveal the reality that is beyond the visible things thus expressing the belief that the visible world is merely an isolated case in

relation to the universe, and that there are many more latent realities” (p. 182). The arts, at home with symbolic expressions, fully grasped the interactive multi-dimensionality of our way of being. We are now beginning to appreciate how much we can learn from the arts. Psychoanalysis and the arts are equal but different partners that can enrich each other by mutual appreciation.

References

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