

Looking with the mind: psychoanalysis and literature¹

Helen's famous definition in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that "Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind" is one which has been adapted as an appropriate motto for their task by both poets and psychoanalysts. In William Blake's view, the poet's goal was to "cleanse the doors of perception", until it became clear how "Mental Things are alone Real", for "where is the Existence out of Mind or Thought?" (*Vision of the Last Judgement*), while Milton expressed it as a quest for "things invisible to mortal sight" (*Paradise Lost*, III). Freud (1914) stressed how he disciplined himself to follow Charcot's advice to "look at the same things again and again until they themselves begin to speak"; and, more recently, the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion put the same problem thus:

The truth - what does it look like? Who wants to be confronted with a *trompe l'oeil* representation of Paradise? Such confections are pardonable to an agent selling us an earthly home, but not for our eternal home - our Self. (Bion 1980, p. 127)

The "mental things" which psychoanalysts, like poets, have always set themselves to observe, are the directions and tensions of mental states, waiting for the human eye to adapt to them until a pattern begins to emerge. This adaptation has always been considered to involve a type of blindness to everyday vision; or at least to be so disorienting, on first contact, that it throws other values and ways of seeing into confusion and is experienced as a blindness which can only reorganise itself into a pattern under some power outside the control of the self such as (in traditional poetic terminology) the Muse; or (in the terms of Kleinian psychoanalytic theory) the Object, or Combined Object.

In what follows I want to take some examples from Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, and Keats to suggest that their idea of the mind (taken as a composite model) and especially the idea of inspiration is not unlike the model of the mind used in present day psychoanalysis. What I have to say will be based on the language of what deplorable (though doubtless inevitable) jargon calls "the post Kleinian school", though in principle I hope it applies to the general spirit of the age rather than to the restrictions of dogma. And since much psychoanalytic literary criticism arouses justifiable outrage in anyone seriously working in either field, who conclude that their ideas are merely pillaged or perverted, I should perhaps (as a literary critic) state that my psychoanalytic education has been lifelong and includes the experience of psychoanalysis

1 First published in *Encounter* 24 (4), May 1990, pp. 33-38.

as well as academic study, and that I am indebted in particular to the teaching of Donald Meltzer and Martha Harris.

What does it mean, “to look with the mind”? Indeed, what sort of entity is the mind? How was it envisaged by poets in pre psychoanalytic days? How is it now envisaged, as a working model, in modern psychoanalytic practice?

Shakespeare’s Antonio, in *The Tempest*, says that the idea of “conscience” is meaningless to him, since unlike a chilblain he cannot feel it: “I feel not/This deity in my bosom”. The mind, like the conscience, has to be seen feelingly or it is assumed not to exist. It is often assumed today, especially by post structuralists, that the mind does not exist as a creative agency; that there is instead a *tabula rasa* which reflects in miniature the linguistic and social assumptions current in the individual’s environment.

I WAS RECENTLY accused by a publisher’s reader of ignoring the academic premise that “writing is an institutionally contingent activity”, and of “drawing both literary texts and psychoanalysis back into the self enclosed, transcendent and apolitical world of ‘the Mind. This complaint seems to me typical of a widespread, prevailing anxiety about confronting what cannot immediately be explained away or what we cannot “do anything about”. Nothing is more conservative and timid than the fear of appearing “outmoded” (to quote the same critic). Everyone is subject to the political, social and linguistic pressures which cushion or stifle creativity, but it is absurd to elevate their influence into the principle which governs symbolic explorations, such as those in art and psychoanalysis.

- 34 -

Since Wilfred Bion’s classic work *Experiences in Groups* (1961), psychoanalysis has come to categorise this type of social cushioning as the “basic assumption” mentality, distinguishing it from properly “mental” activity, which is founded first and foremost on the individual’s attempt to come to terms with the “truth” of his emotional experiences. These emotional states, once contained through symbol formation, become the basis for creative thinking; and the way is paved for it by “the work group” - a technical term which can refer to a network of points of view or “vertices” within the individual mind. “The work group” exists simultaneously with but in opposition to, the “basic assumption” groupings; but even so, it is not the work group alone but the mind’s internal “object” that is responsible for the existence of the thought which the mind then strives to think through - i.e. to contain symbolically. As a concept linking Kleinian theory with the religious tradition, the internal Object is the mind’s personal god.

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY of thinking, which is Bion’s distinctive contribution to Kleinian theory, holds that “the thought” exists, in a way analogous to Platonic innate ideas, and that it exerts emotional pressure on the mind, which then attempts to contain the thought by mobilising its apparatus for thinking. Alternatively, it may attempt to deny the thought by anti symbolic means.

This view is a development from (and in a way, a reversal of) the Freudian theory of the unconscious or primary process as chaotic systems requiring organisation by the conscious mind. It makes use of Freud's other definition of consciousness as an organ of attention for perceiving psychic qualities; this organ of attention can then be focused on the unconscious struggle and help to translate or capture it in other symbolic terms, such as words.

The ability or failure to mobilise the apparatus for thinking depends on the individual's internal relationship between infant and mother an ever present feature of the inner world which has its complex roots in the chronology of early life but is nevertheless not the same thing as that historical actuality. The ability of the mind to feed from its internal Object is called "introjection" by Melanie Klein, "learning from experience" or the pursuit of "wisdom" by Bion. To the poets it is known as "inspiration".

Both psychoanalysts and poets emphasise the antithesis between this type of learning, which is the realisation of what Blake calls the "eternal Imagination", the "Divine Humanity", and spurious or imitative types under the direction of the "selfhood" the domineering, publicity oriented conscious self which can copy surface qualities but not make spiritual identifications. Keats's famous doctrine of Negative Capability warns us that it is impossible to "come at a truth" through always trying at it, and that it is necessary to eschew "irritable reaching after fact and reason" and learn to tolerate the sense of blindness and darkness that comes with looking with the mind; for "that which is creative must create itself".

Literature pioneered, through symbolic forms, the kind of continuing self analysis in which knowledge itself is therapeutic, and which is the goal of any individual psychoanalysis (rather than any mythical state of cure or completion). This is what Milton meant when he stated his aspiration in terms of becoming "a true Poem" (in *An Apology for Smectymnuus*). He did not mean that he hoped one day to be perfect. The literary foundations of the modern psychoanalytic idea of the mind's capacity for development may be glimpsed in a passage such as Theseus's description in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* of how the imagination operates:

And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (V.i.15-18)

Like many of poetry's more dazzling revelations, this analysis is often read as ironic, at least for the speaker, since he sets out to prove imagination's story "more strange than true". But Theseus, like the archetypal poet, can use words as a vehicle for expanding his understanding beyond his original preconceptions. Words do not confine but liberate his consciousness - such is the poetic or symbolic use of words as a means of expression, in contrast to the everyday use of language for communication. In this

passage, imagination is the ultimate “stranger” who often appears in literature as the bringer of some new idea, heralding a change of mental state with implications of catastrophe (here confined to the idea of “a bear” later in the speech). As Theseus speaks, he imagines how imagination, like a womb where dreams are engendered, “bodies forth” those things which are otherwise invisible to mortal sight, from the realm of Platonic ideas. There emerges the “airy nothing” which, far from being derogatory, denotes a mental space waiting to be filled with meaning.

This is a prerequisite for symbol formation, a space in which “the thought” can be contained beautifully described in terms of Kleinian theory by means of the concepts of projection and introjection, founded on the infant’s means of identification with his mother as the storehouse for infinite mind nourishing wisdom. Those unknown, otherwise unknowable “things” a cloud of unknowing are then caught in mid air by “the poet’s pen” (a process which Keats called “catching Beauty on the wing”), and given sensuous form - a local habitation and a name. In Donald Meltzer’s terms (1983), the mind becomes “a theatre for the generating of meaning”; in Bion’s words, “Disguised as fiction, the truth occasionally slips through.”

The new awareness that discoveries made in the psychoanalytic consulting room can be aesthetic lies behind the increasing interest of many analysts and therapists (not all of the same school) in the extent to which psychoanalysis itself is an artistic activity, an art science in which intuition and expression can be of greater importance than explanation. For example, Robert Hobson (in *Forms of Feeling*, 1985) describes the aim or hope of a psychotherapist “to share with his patient in the creation of a language spoken with a ‘true voice of feeling’. . . . The important currency of this language is the living symbol which has a presentational form”. The modern conception of formulating an interpretation is one of achieving a description, not of explaining a hypothesis. The hope is to achieve, like Theseus, an increased dimension of meaning.

- 35 -

THE COMPLEX PHENOMENON known to poets as “inspiration” is the most fundamental of the metaphysical building blocks later to be incorporated in the psychoanalytic model of the mind. I do not mean that it is an overtly acknowledged element in psychoanalytic theory: for many years “inspiration” has been a debased term, drained of significance, and people have found other ways of describing it. Also, the cultural impact of literature on psychoanalysis has been deep and subterranean.

Inspiration refers to the manner in which spiritual or mental vision becomes part of what Blake calls the “inward form” of the personality the form which is seen with the mind not the eyes. It represents the moment of developmental change (“catastrophic change” in Bion’s alarming terminology) during which a new idea is absorbed into the mind’s structure, resulting in an increase in wisdom. This is a true metamorphosis, not merely a process of arrest and then return to the repetitive, circular flux of existence - a far more popular metaphor in contemporary literary criticism.

Blake (in his *Milton*) describes the “inward form” of mental reality as a house for the passions, enabling inspiration to operate: and psychoanalysts call “omnipotence”:

Some sons of Los surround the Passions with porches of iron and silver
Creating form and beauty around the dark regions of sorrow,
Giving to airy nothing a name and a habitation
Delightful: with bounds to the Infinite putting off the Indefinite
Into most holy forms of Thought (such is the power of Inspiration),
They labour incessant, with many tears and afflictions
Creating the beautiful House for the piteous sufferer. (Blake, *Milton: a Poem*, pl. 28).

From one point, building the House takes 6,000 years (Blake's idea of the span of creation); but from another, it takes only one moment, or one "pulsation of the artery":

Every Time Less than a pulsation of the artery
Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years,
For in this Period the Poet's work is Done, and all the Great
Events of Time start forth & are conceiv'd in such a Period,
Within a Moment, a Pulsation of the artery.

This moment is the one which "Satan cannot find": the one in which the daughters of the dream world Beulah feed the suffering sleeper "with maternal care"; it is identical with Milton's image of visitation by the Muse, in *Paradise Lost*, between the movements of sleep:

...my celestial patroness, who deigns
Her nightly visitation unimplored,
And dictates to me slumbering, or inspires
Easy my unpremeditated verse.

The poet always feels that the true poetic work is done not by, but for him, by those "fairy hands" (in Blake's phrase), the internal gods or the Muse. The poet provides the craftsmanlike setting for "airy nothing", but the Muse fills it with "holy forms of Thought" with the inspired knowledge which enables the poet to feel not merely that he is creating, but that in a most fundamental sense he or his mind is *being created*.

This is what "looking with the mind" involves; it is not an activity which can be pursued with objective detachment. Understanding the poetic concept of inspiration therefore dissolves the paradox which is traditionally found puzzling: how it is that the poet can say more than he knows. For by the time he has finished writing the poem, he knows more than he knew though it remains encapsulated within those symbolic terms. If we as readers wish to translate that knowledge into our own symbolic terms, we also have to look with our minds.

MEANWHILE, POETS are always conscious of the inadequacy of words to capture the ineffable: Milton was careful to say "The meaning, not the name I call." More than this, they are continually haunted by the idea of the "satanic" parts of their personalities trying to destroy the true vision of the Muse and to substitute an imitative vision

under the domination of the selfhood. Milton continues (in the invocation to Book VII): “For thou art heavenly, she an empty dream.” The “empty dream” is the source of what Blake calls “error” and psychoanalysts call “omnipotence” – the delusion that the poet is master of the knowledge he presents, that he knows all there is to be known.

- 36-

Shakespeare investigates the limits of omnipotence in *King Lear* and *The Tempest*. In the latter, Prospero fully experiences the emotional storm of “catastrophic change” only when Ariel (who provides the expressive meaning of all Prospero’s manipulations) achieves his freedom. The dissolution of his selfhood is heralded in the magnificent “cloud-capp’d tow’rs” speech, which echoes imagery in *Antony and Cleopatra* about how “the rack dislimns” at an equivalent point of change when Antony begins to face disgrace and death (in this play, a metaphor for genuinely falling in love). Milton’s Samson, likewise degraded in terms of worldly heroics and “eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves”, analyses his own temptation to act the “petty god”, which had devalued his original experience of inspiration (“intimate impulse”). In doing so, he gradually renews lost contact with the heavenly Muse who is present implicitly (but unvisualised) in the poem’s opening words:

A little onward lend thy guiding hand
To these dark steps, a little further on...

Shakespeare’s Leontes, in *The Winter’s Tale*, similarly pays for his “tyranny” by undergoing a period of hibernation in which his internal “recreation” is carried out on his behalf by the wife and daughter whom he believes to be dead, in a re-enactment of the Persephone myth - a myth which Milton and Keats both took to be expressive of the poetic process. He is guided by the artist as craftsman, represented by Paulina, to the statuesque image of Hermione (Mnemosyne, the Muse), who only comes to life when the “faith” of her family is “awoken”. She returns to Leontes when he learns properly to love that is, to see with the mind not only the eyes.

THESE EXAMPLES MAY SERVE to sketch the poet’s struggle between true and false art: between inspiration by the Muse and the limitations of selfhood. The theme has many variations and developments. They include investigations into delusion, perversity and lies, such as Keats’s *Lamia*, or the study of perverted femininity in *Macbeth*, in which the pervading phantasy of a dead child sweeps the heroine and hero onward in the name of ambition. Psychoanalysis, likewise, has always been concerned with delusory links which impede development with “hallucination”, “bizarre objects” (Bion) or “symbolic equations” (Hanna Segal) which are the opposite of symbol formation.

The form of the activity is always the struggle to look with the mind, not the eyes: to accept the blindness which may then be illuminated by the Muse, rather than to impose “premeditated” or preconceived solutions for fear of the emotional and

aesthetic conflicts involved in the kind of writing in which the creative creates itself. The poem is the poet's child only in the sense of being the vehicle for his own mind's capacity for development. He is an explorer within the poem, directed by his relationship with the Muse, yet all the time unsure (as Keats put it) "whether the dream now purposed to rehearse/ Be poet's or fanatic's" whether the guide is heavenly or an empty dream. The poet recognises his vulnerability to the forces of cynicism and philistinism in this "blind" state, yet is upheld by faith in the possibility of a "brave new world" founded on an innocence beyond experience, an innate preconception of radiance or joy. As Milton put it in the "Nativity Ode": "Time will run back and fetch the age of gold".

THE PIONEERS OF PSYCHOANALYSIS were steeped in literature, and it has always fed the psychoanalytic imagination, as well as providing terminology for its technical concepts. On a deep level, indeed, the impact of great literature on psychoanalytic practice has been immense. Its significance lies not only in externals such as the richness of dream imagery, or the ambiguities of language. Primarily, it lies at the dynamic, structural level of deep metaphor, through which the shadowy conflicts of the mind as a world of its own are implicitly figured.

Poets and artists have always explored the world of psychic reality in fictional and metaphorical terms, for the very reason that the current discursive terms and theories of their society are too limited to carry the weight of meaning which their creativity demands. Psychoanalysts and analysands likewise are aware of the constant battle not to let the analysis slip into a complacent "basic assumption" situation or to misuse theory to maintain the status quo, but to focus with a "work group" mentality on the emotional facts they are trying to observe until "the things themselves begin to speak".

It is through this "work" activity, responding to the pressure of emotional reality, that the psychoanalytic model of the mind has developed over the years. This is not merely a political question of one school of doctrines superseding another. It represents the absorption of new discoveries; and the evolution of the psychoanalytic spirit in the Kleinian tradition, from Freud through Melanie Klein to Wilfred Bion, has been systematically traced by Donald Meltzer in *The Kleinian Development* (1978).

Early Freudian theory (which is most frequently used in academic interpretations of literature) was based on a neurophysiological model of the mind, which thought a hydrostatic circulation of psychic energies needed balancing and harmonising; the accumulation of past "reminiscences" of vestigial emotions acted as a kind of irritant, which had to be soothed and appeased in the process of adaptation to external reality and conscious reason. When used as an explanatory system, Freudian theory (removed from its live context of the "transference" relationship which Freud discovered) is inherently reductive: it results in mechanical or behaviourist interpretations of literature.

The 19th century evolutionary view of the connection between emotion, reason and language, based on the assumed identification of mind and brain, seemed necessary at the time to give scientific status to the new discipline of psychoanalysis, but as a working model it has long been superseded both in psychoanalytic thought and in philosophical investigations into the relation between emotion and symbolic expression (as summarised, for example, in the work of Susanne Langer). Science and medicine were the original models for the psychoanalytic discipline, but have since been modified by the recognition of kinship with art and literature, which have always provided inspiration. This change in clinical orientation over the years since psychoanalysis began, may have been spurred by the introduction of “lay” or non medically qualified practitioners into psychoanalytic training a generation ago.

- 37 -

That reflected the intuition of many psychoanalysts that the humanities should be able to provide a basis for the study of the mind which was quite as relevant as medicine. During this period “the mind” was gradually coming to be officially and theoretically regarded as a different entity from “the brain” a distinction which had probably always been maintained in practice. As was inevitable in a developing discipline, the theoretical framework lagged behind the clinical experience in the consulting room, which continually hinted at a mental life more complex than any existing theory seemed to encompass.

Thus the existence of the “countertransference” (the analyst’s reaction to the patient’s emotional transference) had been known in practice for some time before it came to be honoured in the 1950s as a useful and illuminating tool rather than a hindrance to objective observation. Similarly, a new importance was attached to the need for self observation, bringing psychoanalysis into line with other artistic activities. The fact that Melanie Klein worked with actual children rather than with childhood reminiscences” meanwhile revolutionised the psychoanalytic model of the mind, owing to the literalness with which children spoke of their mother’s “insides”, which clearly symbolised their quest for knowledge in general.

FROM THAT POINT ONWARDS, psychoanalysis, like dramatic poetry, has been concerned with the ways in which inhabitants of an inner world divide and link its spaces. Mental events came to be seen not as vestigial eruptions from the past, but as present conflicts of identification with internal objects (or between internal and external objects). The Kleinian concept of “the Combined Object” or “internal parents”, though derived from Freud’s later structural theory of the Superego, is not a wrathful Old Testament conscience, but presides over the child’s development primarily through modulating pain the pain of the child’s incapacity. Freud’s idea of life and death instincts is replaced by that of grateful and envious parts of the personality. Further developments of the Kleinian model show how the Object’s function in modulating pain is also one of thinking that is, of transforming unpalatable emotions into symbols, so that they become a true part of the child’s storehouse of knowledge, his own inward

form rather than filling him with “nameless dread”.

Such symbols, of course, are not necessarily verbal: they can include the whole repertoire of looks, gestures, etc., through which intimacy is conveyed. Donald Meltzer stresses the aesthetic quality of the entire developmental struggle, including the recoil from the confrontation with beauty (initially embodied in the mother), which is felt by the infant knowledge seeker (as in Plato’s Cave or Dante’s *Paradiso*) to be dazzling, hence possibly deceptive with regard to the goodness of its internal contents. As in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, it is uncertain whether the Muse is feeding the poet or starving him. Milton’s Raphael said, “Knowledge is food”; and if Bion is right in speculating about the possible origins of mental life in prenatal existence, the child may be born with a “preconception” (equivalent to a Platonic innate idea) of the mind feeding experience or “conception” which might confront him. All these conflicts belong to the realm of truly “mental” experience or intimate knowledge, as opposed to the socially oriented veneer of the “basic assumption”.

IT IS CLEAR that there is a close congruence between the modern psychoanalytic model of the mind and that which has been expressed metaphorically by poets. The poet who is an infant voyager in the world of his own poem relinquishes his selfhood’s omnipotent control over ideas those “holy forms of thought” and allows his “house for the pas-sions” to become a local habitation shaped by the imagina-tion. In this he feels guided by the instructions of the Muse or mind feeding deity. Although assailed by doubts as to its authenticity, and fighting off temptation by “satanic” as-pects of the personality, he is nevertheless encouraged by the conviction that as Keats (or, rather, his Urn) phrased it: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.”

The Poet’s ability to bring preconception to full realisation as conception in symbolic form, depends upon his trusting this deity despite his personal sense of blindness. But “thought” in the common sense of adherence to established doctrine or to political and institutional regulations is merely one of the satanic temptations or basic assumptions, though it characteristically appears in the guise of reason or common sense - which is why Blake relegated Reason to the realms of Ulro (error). It involves a misconception, a “*trompe l’oeil* representation of Paradise”.

‘Mental Things are alone Real’, and sub mental assump-tions are unreal in the sense that they deny the emotional reality which is the mind’s food, replacing it with either travesty or perversity. Coleridge always distinguished be-tween the mechanical accumulation of knowledge, and the vital absorption of principles by means of the “shaping spirit of imagination”, or the “irradiating” reason. Items of know-ledge stock the mind like a “lumber garret”: while “Principles ... become the mind itself and are living and constituent parts of it” (letter to J. Gillman, 22 October 1826).

- 38 -

Bion, in *Attention and Interpretation* (1970), described the goal of psychoanalysis as “an activity that is both the res-toration of god (the Mother) and the evolution of god (the formless, infinite, ineffable, non existent)”. By “non existent” he means

something similar to Blake's "non sensuous" responsive to mental rather than physical vision. Recent developments or modifications of Kleinian theory suggest the possibility of not merely restoring but enriching the internal deity, making infinite the mind's potential for development. In the same way, the poets' ideal has always been to introject or be inspired by the Muse - not only to reach a finite goal, but to follow reparative and creative processes. "That which is creative must create itself."

References

- Bion, W. R. (1961) *Experiences in Groups*. London: Tavistock.
Bion, W. R. (1980). *Bion in New York and Sao Paulo*. Perthshire: Clunie Press.
Blake, W. *Poetry and Prose*.
Coleridge, S. T. *Letters*.
Freud, S. (1914). On the history of the psychoanalytic movement. *SE* 14, 1-66.
Hobson, R. (1985). *Forms of Feeling*. London: Routledge.
Keats, J. *Poems*.
Langer, S. (1953). *Feeling and Form*.
Meltzer, D. (1978). *The Kleinian Development*. Perthshire: Clunie Press.
Meltzer, D. (1983). *Dream Life*. Perthshire: Clunie Press.
Milton, J. *Poems*.
Shakespeare, W. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Related writings by the author

The Chamber of Maiden Thought (with Margot Waddell). London: Routledge, 1991.