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A state of complete simplicity in poetry and psychoanalysis

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Following the works of D. W. Winnicott and M. Balint on regression in psychoanalysis, this paper offers a discussion of states of harmony between self and other as these are expressed in poems by Whitman and Dante. An attempt is being made to demonstrate the emotional nuances expressed by poets in order to enhance psychoanalytic understanding.

Key words: D. W. Winnicott, M. Balint, psychoanalysis, poetry.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I would like to trace the notion of a state of 'complete simplicity,' characterized by a sense of harmony between self and other, as it appears in the writings of various psychoanalytic thinker, and later to demonstrate its existence as it unfolds in poetry. Speaking generally, there is a tendency in psychoanalytic writings toward focusing on the negative, pathological facet of human relations. As a result the idea of clam, harmonious relationship between self and other is not offered for discussion all too often. Terman notes, for example, that "love" is not even listed in the American Psychoanalytic Association's Glossary of Psychoanalytic Terms (1991). Indeed, Eagle makes the point that whatever is internalized by the ego as an "object" is already something foreign to the self (Eagle, 1984). Thus our theory of "object-relations" implies an inherent sense of estrangement between self and other and ends up with an elaborated investigation of the results of such an estrangement.

Ever since Kuhn's notion of 'paradigm,' we become aware of a theory's tendency to organize new material in light of old concepts. It seems that the psychoanalytic study of poetry has often taken a route, which aims at uncovering pre-established psychoanalytic concepts in poetry. There is, however, also the option of approaching poetry with a mind free of given psychological understandings, with the attempt to better understand the mechanisms operating within a poem and, ultimately, with the hope that such a study of poetry would enrich psychoanalytic theory. I believe that poetry points strongly to the possibility of a state of harmony between self and other, and even more so, that it provides us with a direct expression of such a state. That being said, one

is still able to find in psychoanalytic writings references to a state of harmony between self and other. I would like to turn to an overview of the various references made to such a state.

AN OVERVIEW OF PSYCHOANALYTIC REFERENCES

Beginning with Freud, the notion of "oceanic feeling" offers a discussion of a state of harmony between the self and its environment. Freud, according to Eigen, "depicts early states in which 'primary ego-feeling' (all is ego) goes along with 'primary identification' (all is object)" (Eigen, 1998, p.27). In such a state "boundaries are open, so that I am part of you and you are part of me are indistinguishable (I am you -- You are me)" (Eigen, 1998, p.27). This state of undifferentiation between self and other is described by Freud as follows:

"Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive- indeed, all embracing- feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it. If we may assume there are many people in whose mental life this primary ego-feeling has persisted to a greater or less degree, it would exist in them side by side with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego-feeling of maturity, like a kind of counterpart to it. In that case, the ideational contents appropriate to it would be precisely those of limitlessness and of a bond with the universe the ideas with which my friend elucidated the 'oceanic feeling'" (Freud, 1930. p.68).

Viewing this statement through poetical lenses, one could point out that the term 'oceanic feeling' is metaphorical by nature, evoking the deep reverberations of an image of a sea with all of its connotations of longing, liquidity, and flexibility which is beyond friction and tension.

The state of openness between self and its environment, that is, "of limitlessness and of a bond with the universe," is, usually, linked to the early relationship to the mother and her care. The harmonious relationship between mother and infant is considered the forerunner of the adults "oceanic feeling." Kohut, for example, says that: "the original psychological universe, that is the primordial experience of the mother is 'remembered' by many people in the form of the occasionally vague reverberations which are known by the term 'oceanic feeling'" (Kohut, 1966. p.119). It is thus reminiscences of one's early union with the environment (symbolized by mother) which constitutes the foundation of the adult's experience of openness to and harmony with others.

The wish to achieve a state of harmony between self and its object was noted in an early paper by Nacht and Viderman (1960) Coining the term "pre-object universe," they observe, in some patients, the need to return to a state before separation, a "union sought by the patient [...] in which no tension can exist." (Nacht and Viderman, 1960: p. 386). These patients "seek that state of total union in which both desires and needs disappear" (Nacht and Viderman, 1960: p.385). "The patient," Nacht and Viderman tell us, "reverts to the period in which the possibility of life and survival depended on a perfect union with an environment *"not yet recognized as something different from himself"* (Nacht and Viderman, 1960: p.386). We come upon a very early stage of development where there is no clear differentiation between mother and infant. This sense of oneness with mother is the prototype of "pre-object universe." In adult life this pre-object universe continues to play a role, as great feelings of longing are aimed at re-establishing a state of lost harmony. In some cases, either through art, mysticism, or regression in analysis, Nacht and Viderman tell us, some people are capable of attaining such a state of calmness and harmony.

Balint made the state of harmony between self and other the explicit focal point of his discussion. He speaks about "harmonious coexistence," a state which he is able to observe in some very regressed patients and which, theoretically, he ascribes to the very early relationship between baby and mother in what he calls "primary object love." Balint offers the German word *arglos* to describe this state in which "the individual feels that nothing harmful in the environment is directed towards him and, at the same time, nothing harmful in him is directed towards the environment." (Balint, 1968: p. 135). Balint says:

The best illustration for this state is the relationship we

have towards the air surrounding us. It is difficult to say whether the air in our lungs or in our guts is us, or not us; and it does not even matter. We inhale the air, take out of it what we need, and after putting into it what we do not want to have, we exhale it, and we do not care at all whether the air likes it or not. It has to be there for us in adequate quantity and quality; and as long as it is there, the relationship between us and it cannot be observed, or only with very great difficulty; if, however, anything interferes with our supply of air, impressive and noisy symptoms develop in the same way as with the dissatisfied infant, or with the unsatisfied patient" (Balint, 1968: p.136).

Balint is interested in the manifestations of such a harmonious relationship within the psychoanalytic setting as part of what he calls "benign regression." Balint is, of course, highly influenced by the ideas of Winnicott. A state of harmony between self and other is implicit in Winnicott's developmental theory. Indeed, the capacity to develop a self-other distinction depends, according to Winnicott, on an earlier stage when coexistence overshadows separation. Winnicott tells us that "there is no such thing as baby," thus pointing to the fact that we cannot think of a baby without its maternal care. At the very early states of development, harmony between baby and mother means that there is no true contradiction between the babies' needs and the needs of the mother. What is good for the baby is good for the mother. What is good for the mother will serve the baby. "Good" and "bad" hence evaporate. Coexistence between mother and baby prevails. Slowly, the process of differentiation occurs, but an early experience of harmony and coexistence between baby and mother is the precursor of healthy development. In a private communication to Marion Milner, Winnicott sums up his position:

For an infant, at the start, there is no good or bad, only a not yet de-fused object. One could think of separation as the cause of the first idea of union; before this there's union but no idea of union, and here the terms good and bad have no function. For union of this kind, so important for the foundation of the mental health of the individual, the mother's active adaptation is an absolute necessity, an active adaptation to the infant's needs which can only come about through the mother's devotion to the infant. Less than good-enough adaptation on the part of a mother to her infant's needs at this very early stages lead (it seems to me) to the premature ego-development..." (Milner, 1955. p.38).

So far, we have been able to establish the existence of a state of harmony between self and other either in the form of a deep regression within the analytical setting or as a speculation about the early stages of development. We need not, however, dwell all too much on the

developmental theory which Winnicott, Balint, and Nacht and Viderman imply. What is important for the purpose of our discussion is that all writers point to an experience of harmony between self and other which some regressed patients come upon. Andre Green (Green, 1993) reminds us that regression in analysis is always metaphorical and that, in the final analysis, it belongs to the experience of adult life. The state of harmony observed by the writers mentioned above suggests, therefore, the possibility of a state of harmony between self and other in adult life. It is, nevertheless, still an experience that belongs to the patient-therapist dyad, and we might want to ask whether such an experience can occur outside of the very special context of the analytical frame.

More toward health is Winnicott's discussion of "ego-relatedness" as opposed to the notion of "id-relationship" (Winnicott, 1954). In moments of "ego-relatedness," he tells us, all contradictions abate; tension is reduced, and one reaches a pure sense of being. Winnicott points out that there is no instinctual tension present in those moments, the clinical manifestation of which is a shared silence. The relations to the environment in such moments are no longer backed up by drive, but by a quality which he suggests calling "ego-relatedness." Winnicott sees the forerunner of a state of coexistence between self and other in the capacity to be alone and points out that in healthy adult life such moments of harmony might occur after intercourse or while engaging art. His discussion revolves around the failure to establish the capacity to be alone, but he also tells us that where this capacity is established, a state of harmony between self and other is also a given.

The explicit association of Winnicott's ideas to aesthetic was offered by Bollas (Bollas, 1987; 1993). Using the logic of object-relation theory, Bollas offers the idea of 'transformational object' which is the reminiscences of the early maternal emphatic handling of the baby. These experiences occur before language and separation is a feature of the baby's life. They are, thus, internalized in the form of a process of transformation, the prototype of which is the transformation of hunger into saturation and emptiness into fullness (Bollas, 1993. p.42). Bollas tries to link these early experiences of the mother-infant dyad to the aesthetic experience. His description of the aesthetic moment is very much like what I have in mind when I suggest a state of harmony between self and other as a feature of poetry. The aesthetic moment is, according to Bollas,

"a spell that holds self and other in symmetry and solitude, time crystallizes into space, providing a rendezvous of self and other that actualizes deep rapport between subject and object. The aesthetic moment constitutes this deep rapport between self and object and provides the person with a generative illusion of fitting with the object, evoking existential memory"

(Bollas, 1993. p. 40)

On the transition from early experiences of holding to aesthetics, Bollas says:

"When the transformational object passes from the mother to the mother's tongue (the word), the first human aesthetic, self to mother, passes toward the second aesthetic: the finding of the word to speak the self" (Bollas, 1993. p. 43).

The 'finding of the word to speak the self' is, in a sense, the main preoccupation of poetry. It is Ogden's notion of voice (Ogden, 1999). With Bollas we have completed the cycle and were able to tie the ends. What has been, traditionally, observed in psychoanalytic theory as moments of coexistence between self and other, theoretically linked to early stages of mother-infant relations, is now emerging as a state of mind represented in poetry and art in general. It is time to see what shape and form this state of harmony takes in poetry. I would like to turn to the poetry of Dante and Whitman and see what representations are offered to such a state.

STATES OF COMPLETE SIMPLICITY IN DANTE AND WALT WHITMAN

Dante says that *"passing beyond the human cannot be worded"* (Dante, 1995, p.381), yet he goes on to tell us quite a bit about his journey into paradise. In a similar way, talking about the state of 'complete simplicity' is not an easy task, given the fact that this place, by definition, implies silence. I must now speak of something which demands not to be spoken of but rather to be experienced. Keeping this point in mind, we might be able to progress.

I believe Dante's transcendence into paradise is one of the greatest literary descriptions of the unique form of harmonious coexistence which I have in mind. A few lines from Dante will convey best the nature of this state of harmony or of 'complete simplicity.' Dante, entering paradise, says:

"It seemed to me that we were covered by a brilliant, solid, dense and stainless cloud, much like a diamond that the sun has struck. Into itself, the everlasting pearl received us, just as water will accept a ray of light and yet remain intact" (Dante, 1995. p. 385)

This description does not deny boundaries, for the 'cloud' is said to be 'solid' and 'dense.' Yet in a miraculous way, this 'solid cloud' accepts Dante and Beatrice into itself. Both Dante's physical being and the one of the 'cloud' are not disturbed by this unification. We are given the beautiful metaphor that this form of coexistence is much like water which accepts light and

remains 'intact.' We come upon a state of coexistence in which two solid beings can merge and yet remain intact. The 'pearl' is said to be 'everlasting,' thus pointing to the sense of timelessness that is so typical of those moments of deep poetic contemplation. In addition, Dante's image offers a toning down of perceptual tension by organizing all perception around the white/brilliant pole. We have a 'brilliant' cloud which is colored like a diamond stuck by sun, all of which combine harmoniously with the image of a ray of light that travels across clean waters. In addition, Dante's image makes use of the basic materials which allow for a harmonious coexistence: light and water. One can move in air without feeling that the motion disturbs the air; one can be in waters, and yet it is hard to say that the waters are changed by this presence, a point made also by Balint in his discussion of harmonious states (Balint, 1968). Each of the elements in the image serves to convey a state of coexistence between two 'solid' substances which can merge and yet remain 'intact.'

A great deal of Dante's imagistic language in 'Paradise' seems to carry with it the ambiance of this tranquilized, simplified, state of being. He says, for example:

Just as, returning through transparent, clean glass, or through waters calm and crystalline (so shallow that they scarcely can reflect), the mirrored image of our faces meets our pupils with no greater force that that a pearl has when displaced on a white forehead... (Dante, 1995. p. 389).

Again, we have the image of 'transparent, clean glass,' and 'calm, crystalline water,' all of which allow some form of transformation as the mirrored image travels through to meet (and merge?) with the pupils. All tension is reduced. All contradictions and friction abated. What remains is a form of calm and transparent coexistence with 'no greater force,' like a light, white pearl placed on a forehead. It is interesting to note that Dante says of the 'forehead' that it is 'white,' whereas the whiteness, no doubt, belongs to the image of the pearl. In this way Dante is able to dislocate physical qualities from one object to the other without disturbing the wholeness of his image. This dislocation serves to convey a state of being in which two solid objects can merge with each other and share, so to speak, their physical qualities, and yet remain 'intact.'

In yet another place Dante gives the following image:

As in a fish-pool that is calm and clear, the fish draw close to anything that near from outside, if it seems to be their fare, such were the far more than a thousand splendors, I saw approaching us... (Dante, 1995. p.401).

Once again, we have the image of a fish-pool as a well contained place which is 'calm' and 'clear.' The motion in

the image is one of attraction between similarities or things that 'seem to be their fare.' The naiveté of the movement of the fish toward whatever comes close to the glass gives rise to a sense of total acceptance. In this instance no suspicion or judgment takes place. Yet the image maintains a good sense of boundary throughout, for things are said to 'near from outside,' thus pointing to the awareness of the inside-outside distinction. The fish-pool maintains clear boundaries, within which the naive and innocent motion towards the other takes place.

In modern poetry, Walt Whitman, identified by Harold Bloom as "the center of American canon" (Bloom, 1994), gave a most accurate description and awareness of a harmonious state of being where all contradictions abate. Whitman establishes the direction: "What is known I strip away,/ I launch all men and women forward with me into the Unknown" (Whitman, 1948. p.105). After he goes through his search and his torment, Whitman finds, at the end of his magnificent 'Song of Myself,' a state of being which could be read as a form of existence in 'complete simplicity.' Whitman illustrates this state directly in the concluding lines from his poem:

*I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift in the lacy jags.*

*I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.*

*You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
but I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.*

*Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.* (Whitman, 1948. p. 114).

In these lines we find Whitman 'effuse' his flesh, transcending into a realm of existence which is more like that of the air or the earth than an existence within the subject-object dichotomy. He 'departs' like 'air,' like earth or like water. Here again, Whitman becomes the three elements of fire, air and water which are the only elements to allow this form of harmonious coexistence. His existence is everywhere and yet nowhere, defying the physical laws of the material world; he hovers over, very much like the graceful figure of Dante's Beatrice or, for that matter, a 'good enough mother,' so to speak. His existence is transformed into one of 'love,' 'good health,' a patient 'waiting for you.' He is establishing a relationship to his environment which allows for a reciprocal exchange from 'I' to 'you:' what the other will take hardly affects or deprives Whitman. In these lines, Whitman transcends the realm of subject-object into a place

where all contradictions cease and one finds total harmony and calmness.

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