

Bushwhacking Through Narcissism: The Making of a Jungian Analyst

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Eleven

Emotion and the Self Field

Jung often speaks in his *Collected Works* of "getting our moods to speak to us" through dreams, active imagination, and artwork. He implies by this that the fundamental mode of unconscious life is affective or emotional. Emotions themselves, however, are difficult to grasp in a conscious and differentiated manner. They affect our conscious ideas and intentions in a dark and subterranean manner, boosting the value of one all out of proportion and obscuring others. They are the source of potent misunderstandings and, when unexamined, keep us in the dark about our motives and intentions. Individuals with sufficient ego strength to tolerate the fragmenting power of depression and wild impulses long enough to allow an image to emerge from their chaotic psychological state, acquire a valuable tool for specifying and focusing on the forces that are confusing them. Those not possessing sufficient conscious stability to understand themselves this way may provide their *analyst* with a conceptual handle through the spontaneous images that emerge in their dreams, conversation, artwork, and the like.

The central discovery, therefore, that lies behind Jung's therapeutic method is the value of imagery to specify and differentiate the chaos of emotion. He writes almost exclusively of images because they are definite and clear and admit of demonstrable articulation through comparison with the mythological heritage of humanity. Images are "scientific": emotions are confusing; and Jung needed to be understood as a "scientist"[1] if his theories were to be accepted. His notion of "getting our moods to speak to us" shows that he knew he was working primarily with emotional realities and that differentiating the blurry realm of affect was essential to the work of becoming conscious.

As analysts, we may consider ourselves fortunate when our analysand has the capacity to think symbolically and can appreciate that the imagery of the unconscious is providing relevant and highly specific information about confusing emotional states. Many of our patients, however, are incapable of this. Borderline and narcissistic individuals are generally too overwhelmed by their emotions to tolerate a nuanced discussion of their archetypal imagery. They generally defend themselves by literalizing the images and cannot endure the anxiety aroused by "amplification" through personal associations or mythological parallels. Like my analysand Kim, they sometimes tell us their dreams only on condition we will not "interpret" them. Or they may ask for an interpretation only on the impossible condition that

it still their anxiety by providing a simple directive: "You can banish the woman tormenting you with erotic desire by placing small containers of salt in the four corners of your bedroom." [2]

Powerful emotions in the consulting room do not confine themselves to the *intra*psychic realm of the analysand. They inevitably disturb the analyst's equilibrium as well. This has led me to speak of an interpersonal *field* of emotion that analyst and patient inhabit like the poles of a magnetic field. Kim and I were possessed by an erotic archetype of which Tristan and Isolde may be taken as representatives. Just as the legendary lovers achieved resolution of their holy/unholy obsession in a "love-death," so Kim and I found ourselves longing for unconscious union. Her relentless seductions were aimed at a genital congress that would have dissolved my analytic consciousness in a final manner. Similarly I have to confess to a romantic fantasy that if her indiscriminate sexual liaisons had led to infection with HIV, I could think of nothing better than to die of AIDS with her. [3] In less dramatic instances, the analyst may feel only a vague dis-ease or sense of danger, as I did with Mara and Dave. Or perhaps there may be a clear image that emerges as a commentary on the nature of the emotional field, like the small monster I saw crawling out from under Suzannah's couch.

Archetypal images are powerfully expressed abstractions of emotional states that threaten to overwhelm us. One who is overwhelmed by the emotions of a Tristan, for example, is prepared to undermine the monarchy for which he had repeatedly risked his life. He is ready to cuckold the king he loves more than his own kingdom [4]; and he justifies this in the name of a higher principle: his love for Isolde, which comprehends God and all of nature. God provides him miraculous escapes from the small-minded defenders of the king's honor; and representatives of the church afford him sanctuary. He is overwhelmed by the harmony of the self field, in which he and Isolde are luminous poles. Temporal power and the security of the persona field are incidental to a vision of eternal union, for which bodily death and extinction of ego are the window and the door. Like Christ, Tristan "emptied himself" of his king-hood to serve as a knight in the worldly land he loved. And like Christ, he submits "unto death" to the Unity that stands outside of all space and time. [5] He is a man possessed of a dangerous truth, and there is no arguing with him.

To be able to name the perilous emotion that overwhelms us as "Tristan" and then to discuss its implications, is more than half the battle. For the archetypal name is an abstraction, an handle by which to grasp the affect that is dissolving our ego. For when we are in the grip of a raw emotion, we are not "ourselves." We act blindly as the instinct-archetype drives us. We are lost in the surf and undertow of our mood. To be able to speak of it symbolically, to call it "Tristan" and our beloved "Isolde," to identify the king we are betraying: all of this requires a discerning ego and a coherent sense of self. Contemplating the symbols of our obsession requires distance. Seeing and naming our emotional states is a high order of conscious activity. In such a situation we are no longer helplessly awash in the rough seas of affect. We have withdrawn them into ourselves and called them "mine."

When our analysands have reached this stage, we know exactly what to do. Most of our work, however, involves getting *to* this point. The majority of our analysands have lost their souls, having been dissolved in a turbulent self field. To find and restore those souls, we have to wade into the emotional tumult and risk our own dissolution. The work of analysis is

a struggle with emotional states that are bigger than we are. Our training analyses are designed to teach us the realities of dissolution and coagulation in our coherent sense of self. But because our analysts may be expected to have a firm sense of self and we are not likely to be selected for training unless we have one, too, we may not encounter the disabling perils of fragmentation until we find ourselves sharing a disturbed self field with a difficult patient. What our training analysis leaves unfinished will be addressed by our patients.

In my experience there are only two rules to follow when we find ourselves in a turbulent self field with an analysand: as much as possible to assume a secure and accepting stance, and to gradually name and differentiate the emotions that disturb the field.

A secure and accepting environment is almost a contradiction in terms when one's self seems to be breaking up. For to *accept* the emotional field we jointly inhabit means to embrace its turbulence, the fact that it is already overwhelming our analysand and threatens to dissolve our own sense of having a coherent self. There is nothing "secure" about it apart from what we can bring to it by our willingness to share in it. In the face of our own growing fragmentation, only our confidence as analysts that solidity and coherence will return will have a calming effect upon our frightened analysand. But even if we are successful in holding the tension between dissolution and coherence, we will probably not see much improvement for months. Our theories and "helpful" interpretations will be perceived as a denial of the overwhelming emotion, a failure to understand the analysand's dire circumstances. For intellectualizing distances us from the chaos that is our patient's whole world. It shifts the burden of madness onto the analysand while falsely propping up our own shaky sense of security.

What makes the overwhelming emotional turbulence of the self field so frightening is its undifferentiated quality, the fact that a great variety of feelings, needs, and impulses strive together chaotically. Desires to be contained and deeply touched are exacerbated by impulses for sexual union and yearnings to be held and rocked by a mother, for example, while panic at the prospect of losing one's individuality in a boundary-less fusion with the analyst arouse frantic aggressive impulses to drive away and even destroy an analyst perceived as able to gratify those needs.

As long as they feel overwhelmed by this confusing mixture of affects, our analysands are prone to "split" what they feel into a mass of "good" emotions projected onto a divinely benevolent and powerful healer and a corresponding mass of "bad" emotions directed toward a demonically malicious destroyer. In such a situation, no "secure and accepting stance" by the analyst can ever be adequate all by itself to induce a calm sense that the self field is benign. The analyst will be drawn into an illusory, blissful intimacy one moment and then cast a whole universe away the next. In our "acceptance," we cannot fight these enantiomorphic [6] changes directly; but by our tolerance and a quiet understanding that someday an implicit order may be found, we can set the stage for a gradual sorting out of the chaos.

Nothing is more effective for sorting out the confusion than an accurate and empathic articulation of what the analysand is experiencing in the moment. For example, "You are terrified that your anger will hurt me and destroy our relationship." Or, "You are afraid you love me too desperately." Or, "You want me to hold you, but are afraid that if I do, I'll take

advantage of you." To provide such clarifications, we have to be attentive to what the turbulent self field is doing to *us*. We have to appreciate that the most powerful emotions are *shared*. We are not without a guide in our work. The Third member of our partnership, the emotional field itself, will show us the way if we can remain secure enough in ourselves while accepting the fragmenting feelings that make us almost as much a victim as our patient. There is little "deduction" in this work, but an attentive moving with the flow of powerful affect.

We may have an opportunity in the first session to name a component of the emotional chaos, but more likely it will be weeks or even months before the tumult has settled down enough for the analyst to be able to say very much. In this we may have to imitate Winnicott (1971: p. 57), who reports having written down his interpretations in order to gratify his own need to act analytically while sparing his analysand the threat of intrusiveness. But even when an accurate empathic statement of the analysand's feelings hits home and we can see and feel the relief our words have occasioned, it is wise not to expect the amelioration to last. Individuals with a fragmented sense of self have a hard time remembering these moments; for new waves of tumult batter them constantly, obliterating their brief instants of peace with new chaos.

In such cases we will probably have to name the same affect time and time again over a period of months before our analysand will begin to recognize it without assistance. We may have to work for years at sorting out emotional confusion before we can begin to speak with one another in any way resembling a conversation. Even then we will not be able to speak symbolically, as we might expect a Jungian analysis to proceed. Dreams may continue to be too difficult for the analysand's most rudimentary appreciation.

This does not mean, however, that all figurative speech must be avoided. I have found that, in a moment of relative calm, I may be able to tell stories the way I might talk to a child in order to convey simple notions. Saint-Exupry's story of *The Little Prince* has been very useful. For example, the Little Prince encounters a fox who wants to be tamed and asks the Little Prince to sit in the same place every day at the same hour so that she can creep as close as she dares -- some days closer, some days farther away.

This has been an anxiety-relieving image for a borderline patient who wants to establish a relationship with me but is tormented by ambivalence and fears that she may be injuring me by her overwhelming reticence. The vignette reminds her that I will be sitting in my chair for her every day (four days a week) at the same hour, and that she is permitted to be as close to or as far from me as she needs. The story delighted and relieved her, although she could not remember it from one day to the next. Some days I had to tell her the whole vignette all over again, and some days it was enough just to mention "the little fox." It was at least two years before she could remember it on her own.

By the time she could remember the little fox, she began to name some of her own emotions and even draw some very useful conclusions. As with most patients lacking in a coherent sense of self, she found her emotional overload most painful when she was in my consulting room. This is hardly a surprising fact as the *sharing* of the self field becomes most acute when the patient is in the presence of her divine/demonic analyst. A dependable intimacy has been missing in the lives of these people, apparently from birth; and they long for it almost

more than life itself. But intimacy brings with it the threat of dissolution in the self field. The resulting combination of longing and terror obliterates the simplest of memories. They often complain that they knew what they wanted to say before they left home to travel to my office, but that once they enter the door their mind becomes a blank. Ideas and images vanish before overwhelming conflicting emotions.

Pierre Janet, who seems to have worked almost exclusively with borderline patients,[7] often gave them writing assignments to raise the level of their functioning. I, too, have found this very useful. What they cannot remember at the session, they may very well remember when they return home. I encourage them to write down the things they would like to say to me in case they should again forget. My "little fox" patient writes me a letter every day, and they are remarkable documents. What she writes at home is often months ahead of what she can articulate orally in the session. She names her emotions accurately and even comes up with startling metaphors and analogies. Although she rarely remembers these insights an hour or a day later, it seems her letters are scouting out the territory she needs to map in her meetings with me. Occasionally I read her passages from these letters days or weeks later when she seems on the verge of rediscovering what she has already described. Sometimes she listens without comprehension, but other times she has a shock of recognition that ties things together at least momentarily.

Analytic work of this type moves with glacial slowness. I think of the Grimm fairy tale of "The Six Swans," in which the heroine has to maintain silence for six years while she is sewing together tiny "star flowers"[8] to make shirts for her bewitched brothers. To work directly with the emotions of the self field may seem a no less hopeless task. It amounts to nothing less than weaving together a sense of self from fluid and ever-changing affects. By comparison the work of symbol interpretation begins with a sewing machine and ready-made fabric. But in the end it is the same work, only the material and the methods are different.

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1. Jung's neurotic emotionality, indeed narcissism, in response to a well-meaning challenge to the "scientific" validity of his methods may be appreciated from his letter to Arnold Knzli (4 February 1943), a doctoral candidate in philosophy at the University of Zurich and later a professor of philosophy at the University of Basel. (Adler, 1973: pp. 328f).
 2. An actual instance from my practice. Often narcissistically disturbed individuals are drawn to "psychic healers" who will provide solutions that enable them to escape the anxiety of introspection. Such magical remedies can be a useful adjunct to analysis if they reduce the anxiety enough to enable the patient to endure the analytical process -- somewhat as anti-psychotic medication can sometimes help. More frequently they provide a refuge from analysis.
 3. Bosnak (1989) reports a similar fantasy in his work with a gay man dying of AIDS.
 4. Tristan has left Lyonesse, the kingdom he inherited at the death of his father, to fight for the Cornwall of his uncle, King Mark.
 5. Phil 2:6-8: "Who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross."

6. Jung liked to use Heraclitus' word *enantiodromia*, to describe the way extreme psychic states regularly transform themselves into their opposites. It is a regular symptom of what Klein calls "splitting."
7. Although he did not use the term *borderline*, a careful reading of descriptions of his "psychasthenic" patients will show that he would have understood our modern patients very well (cf. Janet 1903, 1919, 1926).
8. For example, the tiny, purple, star-shaped blossoms of the deadly nightshade that grows rampantly in my garden.