



FANTASY AND THE AESTHETIC: HAVE THEY BECOME THE UNINVITED GUESTS AT ART THERAPY'S FEAST?

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In reading much of the recent literature on art therapy— in Britain, at least— I am struck by two significant absences. One is the paucity of attention given to the actual material characteristics of an image to what I shall be calling its aesthetic qualities and the other is the little use made of fantasy, whether by patient or by therapist, in making sense of an image. By aesthetic I do not mean either its accomplishment in technical terms (its skill representation, for example) or its beauty in purely formal terms (its balance or harmony, for example) nor some hybrid of the two (such as the avoidance of muddy color or distorted shape); I mean the full range of qualities in its *facture* or handling, whether they be subtle or obvious, rich or poor, and the psychological effects that are their inseparable accompaniment. By fantasy I mean the ability to relate, consciously and verbally (rather than unconsciously), to a picture or part of a picture with an intuitive or irrational image. This image may or may not be involved in a narrative, but it belongs to a loosely figurative idiom, about which I shall say more later.

Sadly, most writing about the actual pictures in art therapy, as opposed to analytical descriptions of the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship (where images are often treated as mere by-products), is dry and flat. It is almost as if there were some fundamental discrepancy between the technical terms of art therapy and the more imagistic or metaphoric language that would be appropriate to the pictures that are, after all, its *sine qua non* . I cannot help thinking that this is in

part a reflection of the marginal and subordinate status assigned in practice both to the aesthetic aspects of a picture and to the use of fantasy as a way of exploring its potential significance.

Although there are, of course, local exceptions to this rule, the only writers I have come across in the field who provide any substantial examples of a different perspective are Rita Simon (1992), who set out a theoretical basis for understanding the unconscious significance of pictorial form, and Shaun McNiff (1992), who exemplified the value of aesthetic qualities and fantasy imagery in exploring a picture. Even founding figures in the background to art therapy, such as Freud or Jung, showed a blindness to aesthetics and a bias against fantasy that has, I believe, had the effect of disqualifying these features and making them suspect. It is more recent figures, such as James Hillman, to whom we must turn for glimpses of a different way of working with fantasy and the aesthetic.

To understand how things have reached this pass, we need to know something of the history behind the “inferiority complex” afflicting fantasy and the aesthetic, and to realize that the secondary position they currently occupy, where they serve best as the raw material for analysis to work on, is not an inevitable consequence of their nature, but the result of long-standing prejudice and ingrained misunderstanding.

Fantasy has a long and distinguished history going back to ancient Greek theories of perception, but in 18th century Romantic England it acquired its modern connotations of extravagance and unreality largely as

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a result of Coleridge's distinction between creative imagination and mere fancy. The former played a fundamental role in our perception of the world, whereas the latter is a purely repetitive recombination of previously experienced elements (Abrams, 1953, pp. 168–169). These prejudices are reinforced in a psychotherapeutic context where fantasy is seen either as a product of unconscious wish-fulfillment or, on a more conscious level, as escapist indulgence. Whereas imagination, although it is often seen under a similar cloud, is at least credited with finding an outlet into the real world, as Freud conceded, via the creation of works of art, fantasy is often treated as being more narcissistic, more deeply embedded in subjective interiority.

Like the dream, to which it is closely related in both its unconscious function and in its modes of (mis) representation, fantasy is an object of psychoanalytic suspicion, not to be taken at face value, but to be *taken down* and used as evidence against the protestations of an innocent consciousness. Even Jung made the distinction between passive fantasy, which is governed by unconscious influences, and a superior active fantasy (which later form the basis for the advanced technique of Active Imagination). The latter involves a *direction* of fantasizing, in several senses; in a theatrical sense, ego-consciousness functions as a responsible overseer, keeping the action within a certain focus, and this focus, in the case of Jung's own practice with patient pictures, often has an agenda (in the first of the famous set of pictures, 1959, part 1, it is to picture being stuck).

Wherever art therapy has imported the psychoanalytic suspicion and interrogation of fantasy— if not the pictorial image itself— it is treated as something to be *seen through*, rather than to be looked at or listened to in its own terms. I shall argue, later on, that this amounts to be an abuse of fantasy and a neglect of its intrinsic value that is particularly shameful for a profession that is supposed to honor the imagination.

Aesthetic is a more recent term; it first appeared in the mid-18th century in a philosophical context, where it is a key example of subjective knowledge (Bowie, 1990). However, the grounds on which the objects of aesthetic experience— beauty and the sublime— were to be authenticated proved increasingly difficult to justify; taste, and the value-judgments connected with it, came increasingly to be associated with an unjustifiable realm of personal and arbitrary preference. Under the influence of fin-de-siecle dec-

adence, aesthetic experience came to be seen as aloof, sophisticated or effete; it acquired an aura of extreme self-indulgence, even of perversity (summed up in the figure of Huysmann's *Des Esseintes*). This association with superficiality and hedonism is reflected in the classic psychoanalytic approach to aesthetics.

For Freud (1908/1973) the aesthetic qualities of a work of art were simply a superficial distraction (a bribe) from its deeper, unconscious meaning. Aesthetic qualities— the enjoyment of line and color for their own sake— were too closely associated with the Pleasure-Principle (Freud, 1914/1972) and were therefore tarred with the same brush as fantasy. It was, I believe, the same distorted image of aesthetic that Jung was reacting against when he warned against treating the pictures made in therapy as art. To read his descriptions of what he called "the aesthetic attitude" (Jung, 1976, pp. 365–367) is to be presented with a parody— a ruthless narcissism, concerned only with formal qualities, to the exclusion of any psychological or ethical factors.

Yet it is also Jung who asked that pictures made following the route of "creative formulation" should allow fantasy the maximum freedom of expression and should "be done as well as possible" (1960, p. 83). Furthermore, he claimed that

Image and meaning are identical: and as the former takes shape, so the latter becomes clear. Actually the pattern needs no interpretation: it betrays its own meaning.

This would seem to imply that the actual process of materializing an image, which surely involves an interplay between the makers and the materials they are working with, contributes to its psychological meaning.

I would call this process aesthetic because it hinges on a complex feedback between the form of an image (even if abstract) and the way in which it is realized (thin or thick lines, chalky or greasy color, etc). The aesthetics of making are reflected (but not, of course, reproduced) in our reception, our reactions to, a picture. One of the conditions for aesthetic awareness is a sense of the picture *as a picture*, rather than as the reproduction of a mental image. This is the case even where the result is impoverished or "anaesthetic," because aesthetic response covers the entire range of qualities from the banal to the extraordinary. It should already be clear that such reactions cannot be merely subjective, because they have a material basis in the

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