Creativity: From the Painting Studio to the Consulting Room.

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People often ask me how much of my psychoanalytic life and my work with patients informs my work as a painter. I tell them that it is rather the other way around, that is, my painting helps me in my work with patients. This is what I am mostly aware of but in all fairness, I believe the self-knowledge acquired through my personal analysis and the work with patients itself must have an effect on my work as a painter as well. There seems to be a dialectic relationship between the work of an artist and the psychological vigilance required in working with unconscious and projective processes during an analysis. I will limit my comments here to the effect that my painting has in my consulting room.

From the very beginning over 30 years ago I have worked mainly with abstraction, even though there was a period when I ventured to work in watercolors using a live model - 1978 and again in 2002 - and there was another period when I worked on collage/paintings that were only partially accidental (1984). In my work with abstraction I typically start by creating an accidental happening on the paper or on the canvas and then follow the dictates of that accident. It is here that work with the painting resembles the work with a patient in that we need to follow the patient. The main thing perhaps is that in both cases I have to tolerate a state of not knowing that can be for most people quite unpleasant. I remember in my early days trying to learn to paint in my teacher's studio, that students at different levels of competence would often say with a mixture of irritation and acceptance that they didn't know what they were doing. It was the humility and acceptance of their ignorance that convinced me that that was a good environment for me to counteract the demands of my life as a graduate student at UCLA. Keats called this not knowing "negative capability", the capacity to stay in contact with the work without reaching for a resolution. In the work with patients this translates to a tolerance of this not knowing state without reaching for theory or for other material in the patient that could explain what is going on in the present. In other words, this negative capability results in an ability to abstain from trying to reach

conclusions that lead to an interpretation and a special kind of patience to wait for clarification from the material emerging in the session.

From Keats "negative capability" we can go to another poet, Raine Maria Rilke, who wrote about the workings of memory in the emergence of a poem.

> You must have memories...And yet it is not enough to have memories. You must be able to forget them when they are many, and you must have the immense patience to wait until they return. For the memories themselves are not important. Only when they have changed into our very blood, into glance and gesture, and they are nameless, no longer to be distinguished from ourselves – only then can it happen that in some very rare hour the first word of a poem arises.
>
> Rilke 1910, p. 20

Rilke's thoughts about memory and necessity of waiting for the first word of a poem applies as well to the patient's waiting for an association or the analyst's waiting for an appropriate interpretation. Waiting for the next step of a painting in progress has helped me to wait for the right time before formulating and interpretation.

Another aspect of the analytic work that resembles creative work is that the artist often gets confused with the work. These states of confusion with the work can be followed by a certain detachment from it where the artist does the necessary editing or corrections. The states of fusion and confusion with the work alternate with a separation from it that leads to a certain objectivity to do to the work what it requires. This corresponds to Melanie Klein's paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. In a paper entitled "The Evolution of a Painting" (1981) I attempted to document the work on a single painting by taking photographs of the work in progress – a large painting on canvas – by recording my conscious thoughts about it after each 'session' with it and by writing up my dreams during that time that had to do with the painting. I only put these elements together when the painting was finished and concluded in amazement that the combined effort with this one painting represented a few years of analysis.

Because I would need to show you slides of the different phases of the painting, I have chosen instead Rilke's poems and his letters about them to illustrate the confusion and separation from the work. The poems succeed in showing the fluctuations from Ps to D I will be talking about and in understanding how work in the studio can affect the work in the consulting room. Some 20 years later I wrote and presented a paper entitled "Destruction

and Reparation in the Creative Process: a Retrospective" (1999) where I looked at the changes in my painting over time and tried to connect these changes to my understanding of factors in my life that may have prompted them. Again, I could not use this material here because we would need the illustration with slides (the presentation included 112 slides). Luckily poets offer us their poems and their commentary and are thus more appropriate to what I am attempting to do here.

In *Belief and Imagination* (1998) psychoanalyst Ronald Britton examines from a psychoanalytic perspective the creativity of poets such as Wordsworth, Rilke, Blake and Milton. He argues that Wordsword, for example, illustrates in his poetry some aspects of Klein's depressive position and mourning (Klein 1946) whereas Rilke's poems illustrate Klein's paranoid-schizoid position or Herbert Rosenfeld's clinical descriptions of psychotic states of mind (Rosenfeld, 1965). Here is a well known poem by Wodsworth written in 1804 that illustrates the depressive position.

> Though nothing can bring back the hour
> Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
> We will grieve not, rather find
> Strength in what remains behind

Rilke's Duino Elegies, written during the course of ten years, were spontaneous effusions written after intense periods of what he referred to as 'working through'. They were written as a quest, but it was a quest with a difference, and in this respect it was very much like an analysis (Britton, 1998). Rilke seems to have shared with Freud the belief that what he discovered about himself was of great significance; that in fundamentals all men are the same, transcending culture or period and that internal reality was as significant as external reality.

In the second Elegy – he wrote ten – Rilke claims that love as incompatible with maintaining an identity because, according to him, when we love we disappear into the elusive object, which is itself insubstantial. Here he shows how in the paranoid-schizoid position there is no real separation with the object; if he loves it he projects parts of himself into the object thus losing his identity. That the object is 'insubstantial' may refer his perception of a depressed mother who was not there for him. The bitterest of the Elegies written in 1915 is the fourth one known as the 'Marionette Elegy' which emerged in a period of despair. In one of his letters – and he wrote many - he says, "For I no longer doubt that I am sick, and

my sickness has gained a lot of ground and is also lodged in that which heretofore I called my work so for the present there is no refuge there" (Rilke 1969: 114). Rilke considered analysis – his wife was in analysis – but felt that his Elegies would be his form of self-analysis. In a letter to Lou Andreas Salomé he wrote: "I know now that analysis would have sense for me only if I were really serious about...not writing anymore" (Rilke 1969: 45).

As compared with Wadsworth who, according to Britton is a poet of the depressive position, Rilke's poems exemplify the paranoid-schizoid position. Britton is not describing the poet as in the mode of the paranoid-schizoid position since in order to be able to write as Rilke did he had to be functioning in the mode of the depressive position. He goes further to suggest that the act of writing was the means of moving himself from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position.

Rilke's first account of the beginning of a pilgrimage to find himself is in his novel The Notebooks of Malter Laurids Brigge (Rilke 1910). In a poem entitled Turning Point he acknowledges that he must learn to love those internal objects established by the possessive yet unloving use of his eyes. There were memories of childhood that had not been experienced but only 'waited through', and which now had to be retrieved and 'lived through'. What he called his 'heart work' was painful and bitter, involving the discovery of considerable hate and grievance in his search for viable love (Britton, p 157). This explains why he feared the attacks against him by others.

In a letter to his friend and patron Princess Marie Bonaparte in 1913 he wrote: "I am no lover at all, it only takes hold of me from the outside, perhaps because I do not love my mother"(Rilke 1969: 116). In a letter to Salomé a year later he accuses himself of destructiveness, for which in the past he has always blamed others, and he makes clear that he can no longer entertain a sense of persecution. Here he is clearly moving towards the depressive position with less projection of his own aggression and thus less persecution. This is also clear in another letter to Lou Andreas Salomé where upon completion of The Book of Hours, his auto-biography, .he questions her about her reactions to it :"Dear Lou, you can distinguish and indicate whether and how much he resembles me. Whether and how much he ...goes under in it in a sense to spare me the going under". This is an illustration of how in the depressive position he even achieves a separation from the him he is writing about. The character is going under, not the poet.

Talking about the Sonnets to Orpheus, written immediately after the Elegies he says,

"They are, of the same birth as the Elegies and sprang up in connection with a girl who had died young. This moved them closer to the realm we share with the dead and those to come: "We of the here and now...are incessantly flowing over and over to those who preceded us, to our origins and to those who seemingly come after us". In this he shows that the true here and now does extend to the past and the future across generations. He resolved that he must look within, even if it means he finds emptiness or deadliness, because to identify emptiness and non-existence and to find a home for them is a way of transforming and including them. In his own retrospective account of the Elegies he says:

> Two inmost experiences were decisive for their production: the resolve that grew up more and more in my spirit to hold life open toward death, and, on the other side the spiritual need to situate the transformations of love in this wider whole differently than was possible in the narrower orbit of life (Rilke 1969: 330).

Rilke reiterates that it is our function to transform the visible external world into the invisible internal world but he does so now optimistically since he sees this as creative and reparative. He adds that 'everything apparently needs us in this fleeting world (Rilke1987: 199) and Britton adds: in order to register it, to experience it, to name it. Here is how Rilke says it:

> Perhaps we are here in order to say: house, bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window – at most column, tower...but to say them you must understand, to say them more intensely than the Things themselves ever dreamed of existing.
>
> (Rilke, 1987: 199-200)

According to Britton, Rilke is saying that we should give life to things by naming them so that they have a life beyond their own material transient existence. He makes it clear that experiences and feelings are among the things that need a name. Rilke seems to have lacked someone to do for him precisely what he concludes he needs to do for the world: to name things, to register what exists, to transform experience from visible to invisible form, to mourn what has gone and to distinguish what is living from what is dead. Britton suggests that this is what Rilke's mother had been unable to do for him "perhaps in particular to bury her dead little girl and bring to life her little boy" (Britton, p.162)

There is another area of experience to which he gives great value and that is grief. He has reached an ability to value his grief because in it he values what is lost and what he has never had.

> How we squander our hours of pain.
> How we gaze beyond them into the bitter duration
> To see if they have an end. Though they are really
> our winter-enduring foliage, our dark evergreen,
> one season in our inner year – not only a season
> in time – but a place and settlement, foundation and soil and home.
>
> Rilke, 1987: 205

This is to be the conclusion and resolution of the tenth elegy, and his own version of the depressive position. As I have said, he has come to value grief because in it he values what is lost and he has never had. Having completed the Elegies Rilke could at last bury the sister who died before he was born and with whom he had always been confused. The phantasised identity with the dead baby sister had provided him with a location for a part of himself that wanted death, that wanted to live in the perpetual womb of the unborn. In a celebratory letter to Lou Andreas Salomé he described 'laying aside' his pen after completing the tenth elegy: 'Now I know myself again. It really had been like a mutilation of my heart that the Elegies were not here' (Rilke 1969: 2920).

Hanna Segal suggests that, 'for the artist the work of art is his most complete and satisfactory way of allaying the guilt and despair arising out of the depressive position and or restoring his destroyed objects' (Segal 1952: 198). She also says that , 'in a great work of art the denial of the death instinct is less than in any other human activity ' (ibid: 204). Rilke talks about "...the resolve that grew up more and more in my spirit to hold life open toward death' (Rilke, 1969: 330). Freud had said of mourning, "When it has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free' (Freud 1916a: 307). This appears to have been the case for Rilke. After he completed the Elegies he had an enormous surge of poetic energy. In addition to the sonnets and a number of other poems in German, he wrote some 400 poems in French in the 4 years that remained before his death, of leukaemia in 1926. As a postcript of his self-analysis he writes:

> Whoever does not, sometime or other, give his full consent...to the dreadfulness of life, can never take possession of the unutterable abundance and power of our

existence: can only walk on its edge, and one day, when the judgment is given, will have been neither alive or dead.

Rilke, 1987: 317

I have gone into Rilke's poems in some detail to covey the travels from the paranoid schizoid position and the confusion with the object to the depressive position where there is true separation from it. I have felt that a poet like Rilke is a more complete example of this shift from confusion to clarity. It is certainly the same as it happens with painting only that it is more difficult to follow its evolution.

I have found it especially interesting to observe the alternation of confusion and clarity of vision in work with a therapy group (Safán-Gerard, 1991). Patients can get into arguments and become quite hostile toward other members and at some point one of them makes a comment that seems to move the whole group to the depressive position. This position is marked by a real appreciation of each other, by guilt for the attacks on other members and by reparation for the damage done. The group members can remain in this position for a while until one member's comment may take the whole group back to a hostile exchange. Rather than trying to help the group move towards the empathy and understanding that results from seeing others as separate from themselves, my intervention to the group consists on helping them see how it is that they move from one position to another. I will remind them of the comment that seemed to move the whole group to empathy and understanding or to hostility toward each other. They themselves extrapolate this understanding to what they do individually and outside the group.

How is this group experience related to what we do in the consulting room with individual patients? I believe that if the analyst is aware that changes from fusion and separation will happen of their own accord and with their own rhythm he or she will be able to wait for these changes and will not get discouraged when things seem to revert back to a more hostile and unreceptive place. Note how the notion of waiting reminds us of Rilke's need to wait for the first word of a poem. I have learned about these unpredictable fluctuations from my work in my studio where a paintings seems to go well and badly outside of my control.

We can now go back to explore how the work in the studio affects the work in the consulting room. We have so far examined the confusion and separation with the work and linked the fluctuations between Ps and D. Another element comes to the surface at this time; a certain ruthlessness facing the work where the artist engages in actions that put the work

in jeopardy. Sometimes I find myself destroying the existing work which has become stale or contrived to make room for something different and new. This is sometimes frightening as I may have spent quite a bit of time developing the work up to this point. But the ruthless action seems absolutely necessary to move the work to a different level. This ruthlessness shows the artist's capacity to face death insofar as the work is always in danger of being destroyed. As we saw with Rilke, the artist has to develop a capacity to mourn the work that is being destroyed again and again and where reparation becomes a necessity. This translates into the consulting room in a new capacity to help our patients mourn their loses and to tolerate the paint of mourning with them. In the work with a patient this ruthlessness may manifest in interrupting the patient's discourse at the risk of appearing rude, or dropping a line of inquiry to make room for something new the patient is bringing up or in response to the patient non-verbal communication. I believe that I can exercise this freedom because of the freedom with which I can destroy a painting in progress. So patience at times, ruthlessness at other times are capacities that come to my analytic work directly from my work as a painter.

The difficulty with becoming ruthless is ultimately a fear of death. Rilke sees the fear of death as a projection and he seems to anticipate Klein's theory that the fear of external annihilation arises from the projection of the death instinct.. According to Rilke by acknowledging the presence of nullity in life we transform and integrate it, thus finding a place for winter among the seasons of life. In the consulting room this is reflected in the analyst's capacity to tolerate long periods of silence in the patient, of nothing going on and the fear that analysis is being nullified.

Still, another aspect where the work as a painter has helped me in my work with patients is the capacity to use mistakes and not discard them or correct them prematurely. This translates in the analyst's capacity to use what appears irrelevant and out of sync with what the patient is saying. This also applies to the patient. Ever since Winnicott (1969) wrote about the use of the object there has been an interest in the fate of an interpretation. Does the patient take it, does he seem indifferent to it, does he reject it? How much of the analyst's work is *used* by the patient? The possibility for creativity during a session arises when both therapist and patient can use what is available to them without too much editing in the listening. And, as I have said earlier, this can be coupled by the courage to disturb things; by the analyst interrupting the patient with a different idea or the patient interrupting the analyst with a new association that contradicts the analyst's interpretation. This ruthlessness runs counter to empathy, a *sin e qua non* of analytic work, but is a necessary

ingredient of work with a patient that comes directly from the ruthlessness of the artist at work.

I have focused this communication on how my stance or behavior as a painter affect my therapeutic work as an analyst but this applies as well to the work of psychoanalytically informed psychotherapy or other forms of therapy. This includes tolerating not knowing, my willingness to alternate confusing myself with the patient and detaching myself from him or her, my willingness to move away from an empathic stance to engage in a necessary ruthlessness during a session to break away from stale moments during the analytic work and, finally, my use of accidental utterances or non verbal communications by the patient or by myself in formulating interpretations. I have used Rilke's poems, his thoughts about them expressed in his letters and Britton's commentary on both as a way to anchor my ideas about the way the work in my studio affects my work in my consulting room.

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