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## PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ARTISTIC PROCESS

**Valerie Sinason**

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**Abstract:** This is the transcript of a talk given by Valerie Sinason at the conference ‘Making Space’ at University College, London, in 2012. The talk responds to a presentation by Grayson Perry and also refers to other conference speakers: Sharon Kivland, Kenneth Wright and Lesley Caldwell (whose papers also appear in this issue). Further details of the conference can be found in the editorial.

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Well, what is the proper approach for psychoanalysis to someone as wonderful as Grayson? Hopefully it is profound gratitude and not envy, to bring Melanie Klein in at the start. But the laughter that we have enjoyed Freud could tell us a lot about in terms of truth breaking through and anger and all the painful subjects raised that were transformed by Grayson’s humour into something that allowed us the freedom to laugh. But, actually, analysing humour does nothing to take away from, or really add to, the pleasure of that feeling of hearing him touch so many sacred subjects with such a light and honourable touch. Similarly, whilst we can come up with all kinds of theories of aesthetics, of looking, of seeing, the actual power is what we have just seen in those images, and the wonderful images from Sharon this morning, and the ones we will see later.

So can I start by saying that, as a poet and analyst, I am split ... that starting analysis I was terrified that it would destroy creativity, but then of course found that it aided it. And, as Grayson pointed out from what I had sent to him, I see the link between all forms of therapy and art as truth - seeking, that we’re trying to understand something in different ways that involves a transformation. And one of the things that we appreciate about Grayson, and indeed in the way that Sharon moved from the personal to the iconic to the structural, was seeing a transparency and truthfulness, going from humour, way of being dressed, way of speaking, craft, and what finally emerged. So that in admiring Grayson, whom I have had the privilege of being involved

in a public conversation with on two previous occasions, I am enjoying (1) Grayson Perry the person who is transparent in a way that really hides years and years of self-analysis and his own therapy and his own understanding in his art, the way he carries his iconic position lightly so that we are allowed to project onto him. But also he will then be amused and reflect back his truthfulness so we can't keep him as a celebrity in a fake way, we are forced to engage with something truthful: (2) Grayson Perry's work which can only come from Grayson Perry and all the personal experiences he has had. But also finally (3) the work which then loses Grayson because it's out there in the public eye for us all to enjoy, be moved by, affected by, even if we knew nothing about the person from whom it came. And somehow it's all those areas we are looking at when we put psychoanalysis and art together.

In terms of those questions of core identity and the fact there is something that is truly each of us, whatever the number of years that pass, that something doesn't have to be singular, it can be somethings. We are all a ragbag collection of multiple states: of images, smells, ideas, fantasies from every year we have ever existed in; as well as, as Sharon commented, ancestrally, what was inscribed before we were born. And in fact Grayson's work in the British Museum bringing his internal ancestry from hundreds of years ago, revering it all in the present.

So if we are to go back to how Kenneth started the day, we are what we see looking at us, the first impact of the gaze we look into which forms our sense of ourselves. I'd like to begin with an image of the beginning of a therapeutic meeting because in a way the work that Lesley and Ken and I do is more seen in its consulting room art than applying itself to great art on the outside. So just to give you a moment of a profoundly multiply disabled woman abandoned at birth, blind in one eye from eye poking, collapsed bowel from anal poking following God knows how many years of abuse, dumped on a doorstep at one year old and paralysed from the waist down, coming for a therapy assessment because her staff can't bear the fact that although she can't speak she screams and screams, and every night they put her to bed in clean sheets that are covered with shit and blood in the morning. I am deliberately bringing this image because in a way all art is a transformation of earliest effluents, orifices, we go back to the beginning of everything. And the lift doors opened and out came what felt like a monster, in that she was wanting to reflect the monstrous image of herself that she'd imbibed from all her care homes and abusers and everything. In that whilst her fingers covered her face so I could only see one good eye, her breasts were exposed, she had a little tunic on that only half covered her vagina, smell of

urine and faeces, thin legs because she wouldn't do her physiotherapy, and behind her a care assistant holding her tights in a non-verbal example to say 'I did bring her out dressed, she's chosen to do this.'

And here I am supposed to be good at assessment with people with severe learning difficulties feeling 'Oh my God, she's seen my look of shock at looking at her. Help, how do I cover this up? What do I do? How on earth am I going to have any interaction with her?' Shame, all those feelings that are there, as well, at the root of a piece of art there in a therapy session or assessment. And then slowly my sanity can return and I can say 'Maybe you know I got a surprise looking at you, and that's why you're coming with your eyes covered, to have a look at what the expression will be.' And suddenly, she gives a big grin, tidies up her tee shirt so her breasts are covered, and wheels herself into the therapy room with me. Now just a moment of a transformation, but the poet or artist in the therapy room might experience years of sessions of a painful plateau waiting for that moment that doesn't happen, but that moment when it does happen can transform everything.

And what we're witnessing in the beauty of the art we've just seen is the transformation, whether it is a horrendous family, trauma, class, race, whatever the stigma, painful sexual experiences; when the transformation happens everything is in sunlight and gifted with something profoundly beautiful. But psychoanalysis has left a rather painful mixture for looking at these transformations, partly I think because of envy. And ironically some of it seems to come from Freud's envy of himself, his somehow not daring to enjoy properly the beauty of his writing (for which he won a Goethe award) and therefore attacking the creativity in himself. Hence his often writing about how the artist can descend far deeper than the analyst, can bring up things that the analyst could never find, but would need the analyst to interpret what had happened. And again, as Sharon brought in, the link with daydreaming, somehow the denigration of children's play and what's happening in creativity. D. M. Thomas, in his wonderful novel *The White Hotel*, has his fictional Freud quote Shakespeare from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 'The lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact'. The linking of creativity with madness is a terrible burden that in a way anybody caring about any creativity has to struggle with. When I used to be on the council of the Poetry Society we would be going on all the time of 'thinking of all the poor drunks that weren't Dylan Thomas'. Somehow this need to put the

two things together is also a denigration of the path the artist makes in transforming personal pain into something that has meaning for everybody.

Now again we heard this morning that one of the key analytic mixed contributions to understanding art is that the artist, by seducing us with the beauty of what they have produced, allows us to be narcissistic and bring in our own egocentric bits in a way that would arouse disgust if they were put in any other way. I think that is also true, and I want to give you one little image: when I first applied to do the adult analytic training, I failed my first interview and it took me two years to apply again, it was such a narcissistic knock. This was just a little part of a poem on failing the interview, but what I want you think about, with double ears, is not a poem which is attempting to hide my shame, humiliation (it's public, you've applied for something, people will know you didn't get in, etc etc). It is the attempt to put it into words that will allow you to not think 'there she goes moaning again about all her failures' but that this is a shared universal experience. So an extract from '*Sister Pumpkinhead fails the interview*':

"We are sorry to have to tell you",  
intones the letter.

"Not for you! Not for you!"  
screeches the parrot  
in the golden brain-cell

It is midnight and pumpkin time

And down fall the words  
Down the shining palace of brain  
Down the libraries of bone

Down fall the words  
Through the graduation ceremonies  
Of blood cells

The words  
Still in their state robes  
Their ballgowns and tiaras  
Their We are Pleaseds  
Clenched in their jewelled evening bags

The words in their best school uniform  
Scrubbed and plaited  
With their daffodil growing certificates  
and monitor's badge

How to pick up pick up

The words in the corner of the playground  
With no-one to play with  
The words not picked for  
The netball team, the hockey team,  
The words not invited to the party  
Given the bit-part in the end-of-term play.

So you can see the way that for any bit of work we do there is ourself in it, but it is not going to work on any level of art if our own personal pain is shrieking louder than the transformation. So in running poetry classes there is the bit where you are trying to help people who write 'agony', 'pain' 'scream', thinking that that word says it whereas the word, even though it is so deeply felt, it has not transformed the personal hurt.

So the poet Al Alvarez points to the way that psychoanalysis initially tried to colonise poetry to prove a theory, but as Adam Philips commented 'a psychologist, alas, is rarely a genuine poet'. Indeed Al Alvarez made a good case for saying that when it comes to critical theory analysts are again more like critics, literary critics, than being the real thing in themselves. And in taking the analyst out of the consulting room we're being put into that secondary task.

Unsurprisingly, it was Carl Jung who wrote about creativity in a far more positive way. In the British Analytic Society you look at Winnicott, you look at Freud, obviously, and Klein. You don't look at Jung, but as a poet I'm going to finish by just saying how Jung divided art up into two categories: psychological art and visionary art. It's the same issue really - it becomes visionary art when it has transcended the personal wound.

To complete, in the coffee break I was talking to Grayson about the fact that I came in a taxi and there was a whole queue of people outside the door and the taxi driver said 'There's never queues for lectures here, what's going on?' and I said 'Oh well, it's a day with artists talking about their work'. And he said 'Grayson Perry! I went to his exhibition at the British Museum'. I thought that was quite amazing and I said to Grayson 'There's a real difficulty in thinking analytically about your work at the British Museum which I was so profoundly moved by. For example, you have said that you revered your father for the use of his tools and that you knew that your father had really left home when he came back and took his tools away. It feels partly insulting for me to say in an applied way "By having the unknown craftsman of hundreds of years revered at the British Museum you have done something wonderful at keeping your father alive." But so what at one level.' For we are all moved when we go to the British Museum because these unknown people have been touched by modern greatness, by the use of an art name done honourably for the sake of all art. So can I conclude by going back to gratitude to say thank you to the artists here and especially to you, Grayson, for what you have done for the whole culture. Thank you.