Dancing with the Unconscious
The Art of Psychoanalysis and the Psychoanalysis of Art

Danielle Knafo
Dancing with the Unconscious

_Psychoanalysis in a New Key Book Series_  
*Volume 14*
When music is played in a new key, the melody does not change, but the notes that make up the composition do change in the context of continuity, continuity that perseveres through change. “Psychoanalysis in a New Key” publishes books that share the aims psychoanalysts have always had, but that approach them differently. The books in the series are not expected to advance any particular theoretical agenda, although to this date most have been written by analysts from the Interpersonal and Relational orientations.

The most important contribution of a psychoanalytic book is the communication of something that nudges the reader's grasp of clinical theory and practice in an unexpected direction. “Psychoanalysis in a New Key” creates a deliberate focus on innovative and unsettling clinical thinking. Because that kind of thinking is encouraged by exploration of the sometimes surprising contributions to psychoanalysis of ideas and findings from other fields, “Psychoanalysis in a New Key” particularly encourages interdisciplinary studies. Books in the series have married psychoanalysis with dissociation, trauma theory, sociology, and criminology. The series is open to the consideration of studies examining the relationship between psychoanalysis and any other field—for instance, biology, literary and art criticism, philosophy, systems theory, anthropology, and political theory.

But innovation also takes place within the boundaries of psychoanalysis, and “Psychoanalysis in a New Key” therefore also presents work that reformulates thought and practice without leaving the precincts of the field. Books in the series focus, for example, on the significance of personal values in psychoanalytic practice, on the complex interrelationship between the analyst's clinical work and personal life, on the consequences for the clinical situation when patient and analyst are from different cultures, and on the need for psychoanalysts to accept the degree to which they knowingly satisfy their own wishes during treatment hours, often to
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Dancing with the Unconscious

The Art of Psychoanalysis and the Psychoanalysis of Art

Danielle Knafo
In loving memory of my father, Maurice Knafo, who loved to dance
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Dance is the hidden language of the soul.

—Martha Graham

The unconscious is the true psychical reality; in its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as incompletely presented by the data of consciousness as is the external world by the communications of our sense organs.

—Sigmund Freud

I have lived and worked at the junction of psychoanalysis and art for many years. The origin of my interest in these two disciplines, and especially in their connection, is rooted in my early childhood. I was a child when my family emigrated from French Morocco to Pennsylvania Dutch country in the United States, two worlds farther apart in culture than in miles. Whisked away from the bright, fiery colors of Morocco, baked by the sun and caressed by the sea, I was deposited in Pennsylvania, a land of cold, empty streets and hills coated with endless snow. In the country of my birth, people with olive-colored skin sang Andalusian melodies in passionate voices, the marketplace boomed with the raucous pyrotechnics of gritty commerce, and ghosts walked among the night trees. In my new home, pale Amish women quietly sold their produce, their hair pulled back so tightly that their faces seemed stretched upward, while their stone-faced men stood, inscrutable, behind unruly beards. Having gone from couscous and b'stilla to funnel cakes and shoo-fly pie, I had no choice but to creatively bridge those two worlds.

Watching my parents reinvent themselves also taught me about trauma and creativity, resilience and sublimation. My father had been at the top of the class ladder in the small coastal town of Safi, where he was both a mathematics teacher and the
owner of a local department store. In the United States, he was humbled in his new position as clerk in a supermarket, but he slowly managed to create a new and prosperous life for himself and his family. My mother, a homemaker who learned English by watching *I Love Lucy* episodes on television, was more isolated. Having had a number of servants in Morocco, she now did everything herself. I learned from her how to use creativity and resourcefulness to survive in a strange land. She sewed haute couture clothing for me and my sister as well as our dolls. She cooked gourmet food and served up 10-course feasts on a daily basis. She helped us put on plays and created all the costumes for them. She was a gifted storyteller, a true Scheherazade who brought the dazzling tapestry of her Moroccan childhood to life in the stories she told us.

I learned from my parents’ adaptation to trauma and my own bridging of worlds how creativity infuses everyday life. When I became a professional psychologist in Israel I learned how much creativity and resilience survivors of trauma must have in order to continue living a life that has betrayed them. Helping Holocaust survivors, combat veterans, and victims of terrorism create new lives after undergoing the worst human experiences reminded me of what Elie Wiesel once said: “When He created man, God gave him a secret and that secret was not how to begin but how to begin again” (1976, p. 32). No doubt beginning again is a creative act, and it is no coincidence that so many immigrants and exiles—persons who have suffered great loss and survived trauma—are often among the most creative. Art often becomes the new home for those displaced from the mainstream. Living outside the box becomes thinking outside the box. Theodor Adorno wrote that “For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live” (1974, p. 87), and Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott expressed the same notion in “The Schooner Fight,” where he wrote, “I have no nation now but the imagination” (2007, p. 129).

Working with severely disturbed individuals, often diagnosed as psychotic, has taught me that there is no manual for entering the human mind and that one has to be creative to reach those deemed unreachable. While many of my colleagues found psychosis frightening or labeled it untreatable by psychoanalytic methods, I have always felt excited and privileged to encounter and treat a human being suffering extreme disturbance, because the psychosis itself is a creative response to some unbearable situation and holds the key to its own creative resolution. I additionally perceived similarities between psychotic experiences and the products of creative artists. Both involve fluid, even regressed, self states and access to unconscious processes; both create new worlds to deal with pain; both are attempts at healing what's broken; both offer alternative ways of viewing and experiencing reality.

The life of an immigrant, the work with trauma, and the treatment of psychosis all demanded of me a creative response. Just as I lived the double life so common to immigrants and traveled between cultures, I learned to move easily between the worlds of art and psychoanalysis. In addition, since my early childhood, I danced, played music, drew, and wrote. I have always loved the arts and felt that both art and psychology deal with the human condition and require many of the same skills. As a result, bringing worlds together and having them dialogue with and learn from each other have characterized my life's work, and that work is reflected in this volume, which contains many examples of creative transcendence precipitated by various
forms of exile and loss.

Why the Dance?

Psychoanalysis has traditionally been thought to exist somewhere between the disciplines of science and art. John Bowlby (1979) distinguished the “art of psychoanalytic therapy” from the “science of psychoanalytic psychology.” He explained that while the clinician deals with complexity, the scientist seeks to simplify, and while the clinician employs theory as a guide, the scientist challenges theory. Loewald (1974) similarly divided psychoanalytic technique into the art of applying psychoanalytic knowledge and methods to particular cases and the science of psychoanalytic observations and theory.

More recently, articles in Psychological Science in the Public Interest (Baker, McFall, & Shoham, 2008), Newsweek (Begley, 2009), and Nature (Abbott, 2009) harshly criticize psychotherapy—and especially psycho-analysis—for not being scientific enough. In contrast, Shedler (2010) has presented abundant empirical evidence to support the effectiveness of psychodynamic therapy. The debate rages on, although categorizing psychoanalysis as a science remains an elusive goal. Irwin Hoffman (2009) argues against the current ascendance of empiricism, saying that questions addressed in psychoanalysis, such as “What is a good way to be in this moment?” “Which human motives are most important?” and “What constitutes the good life?” “cannot and should not be adjudicated by … ‘science’” (p. 1049).

Although theorists of psychoanalysis are often influenced by empirical study, and many aspire to scientific validation, the practice of psychoanalysis possesses commonalities with many art forms. Analysis and dynamic therapy have been compared to the interpretation of literary texts, coauthorship, the construction of narratives (Lacan, 1959; Loewald, 1974; Schafer, 1992; Spence, 1982), and storytelling (Ferro, 1999/2006). Dreams, a frequent subject of analysis, are visual and depict scenes, like paintings or “moving pictures.” They speak in code and demand access to unconscious revelation. The analyst “sculpts” the patient's material. The patient and analyst enact and reenact [psycho]dramas and, in many respects, they are both creative and performing artists, each fluidly (one hopes) moving from one role to the next (Loewald, 1974). Like artists, both therapist and patient enjoy sessions of white-hot creativity thrumming with possibility, as well as endure slow and seemingly unproductive fallow periods, where, nonetheless, some important change may be taking place within the unconscious. Many decisions made during therapeutic engagement rest upon intuition, hints, clues, associations, pregnant silences, and missteps. How much like the artist is the therapist who often may be at nearly a complete loss about how to proceed when, in the gloomy darkness of uncertainty, a door suddenly opens and fills the room with dazzling light.

Wilfred Bion, in his 1978 Paris seminar, stated, “One cannot afford to cast aside imaginative conjectures on the ground that they are not scientific enough.” He compared the psychoanalyst to the artist and invited him to consider which type of atelier he works in: “What sort of artist are you? Are you a potter? A painter? A musician? A writer?” His interviewer opined that some Analysts might not see
themselves as artists, to which Bion replied, “Then they are in the wrong job” (1978). If Bion were to ask me that question, I would answer that my consulting room is a dance studio and my patients and I are partners in dance. The metaphor of dance appeals to me as a provocative representation of the dynamic aspect of the psychoanalytic process and relationship—the movement from past to present, the movement of defense and catharsis, the movement of containment and release, the movement between conscious and unconscious and, most of all, the movement created by analyst and analysand. Like the dance, psychoanalysis is an art in which we use ourselves as the medium; the dance and the dancer are one fabric. Steps are required, but they cannot be performed rigidly, without grace or fluidity; every passage must involve creativity. Theory guides me but cannot restrict my engagement with my partner; theory cannot be adhered to so closely that it binds the interaction, nor can it be loosened to the point that the embrace is broken. I must remain ever sensitive to the rhythms, alterations, and intensities of the dance in which I sometimes lead and sometimes am led. It is a dance of high purpose whose proper execution, though informed by theory, is nothing if not art. 

Dance was present at the beginning of psychoanalysis when Breuer and Freud filled Studies on Hysteria (1893–1895/1955) with stories of women's bodies that were stuck. Some of them literally could not move. Freud danced with his patients as he addressed the performative elaboration of their symptoms. He passed from hypnosis to the pressure technique to free association to dream analysis, as he tried to move his patients out of emotional and “physical” paralyses. (See Plate 1.)

What Freud grasped early on is that dance is about the mind and body working together and that dance and health are about movement. Mitchell (1988), too, referred to a patient's dance as either restrictive or expansive:

I do not propose going to the dance and complaining about the music, but enjoying the dance as offered, together with questioning the singularity of style. How did it come about that the analysand learned no other steps? Why does the analysand believe that this is the only desirable dance there is? Most analysands need to feel that their own dance style is appreciated in order to be open to expanding their repertoire. (p. 212)

Movement contains a symbolic function; it gives evidence of the dissemination of unconscious processes and mental health. It has its own pulse, heartbeat, and breathing cycle—the enfolding of experience and the unfolding of knowledge and action that heals. Pathology is about being stuck, repeating the same patterns of behavior again and again, even when such repetition deepens restriction and despair. Any movement can be viewed as dance, and any dance—physical or emotional—has its own vocabulary. Think of the sexuality and aggression expressed in the tango, the relaxed, rhythmic movement of a waltz, or the lively, flowing feel of a samba. Psychologically speaking, we dance through life and change partners throughout. There are developmental dances, beginning with that of the mother and child, whose choreography is so beautifully demonstrated in the microanalysis of Beatrice Beebe's films. There is the dance of children playing together. There is ebb and flow of
friendships and the excitement in the dance that is part of courtship and lovemaking. Finally, there is the dance of old age, as one begins to dance with loss and death.

And then there is the dance of psychoanalysis, offering freedom for personal expression and intuitive, spontaneous invention. Of course the dance of psychoanalysis is more than a dance, certainly even more than an art. Hoffman (2009) writes that “the reality of the ambiguity of human experience requires a creative dimension in the process of ‘making something’ of that experience” (p. 1048). Bollas (2009) likens the analytic session to “an act of creation” (p. 12), and Ringstrom (2011) speaks of the “ensemble work” and “spontaneous gesture” involved in playful analytic improvisations, which he likens to jazz (p. 469). That one human being works with another for the purpose of personal transformation is both a therapeutic and artistic endeavor. But the artistic component of psychoanalytic treatment (that is, the creative engagement with the analysand) might be the most significant in effecting positive change. If this is so, why has so little been written about the artistic elements of the therapeutic process itself? Perhaps it is because creating art is messy, full of false starts, interruptions, repeat attempts, punctuations of despair, flashes of inspiration, and long-awaited breakthroughs. The artistic process does not lend itself to linear descriptions. The inspired artist relies on the covert and spontaneous activity of the unconscious, never quite sure of, exactly, what she is doing or what she will do next. This is no less true of analysis. Even if the whole process were filmed, every word recorded, and every event analyzed from multiple perspectives, still something vital would remain hidden. The resonant, pregnant silences, the complex and subtle layers of cognitive, affective, and expressive patterns of embodiment, and the hidden radiances of the underground all remain elusively beyond capture through formula and theory.

To be sure, the deep work of psychoanalysis is not readily recognized in every session. This is because psychoanalysis is messy and because, like artistic production, it has periods of incubation. Just as an artist does not write or paint every day, so too, psychoanalytic work is not always visibly productive or creative. There are long days, weeks, months, and even years that prepare the way for breakthroughs, those dazzling moments when the rhythm of change beats the air. This period of incubation is a necessary prelude to the illumination that accompanies creative and emotional transformation and synthesis (Arieti, 1976). Stillness is also a part of the dance and beautiful in its own way.

Why the Unconscious?

The unconscious stands as the central pillar in psychoanalytic thought. Although Freud did not discover the unconscious, as many believe, he did bring our attention to its primacy in human life. LaPlanche and Pontalis (1973) claim that “if Freud's discovery had to be summed up in a single word, that word would without doubt have to be ‘unconscious’” (p. 474). Freud emphasized that unconscious processes played a much larger role in human experience than conscious processes, comparing them to the greater portion of an iceberg submerged and hidden from view.

Freud's unconscious was influenced by his observations with hypnosis (Breuer &