

## WHAT IS THE BRIDGE FOUNDATION?

12 Sydenham Road, Cotham, Bristol , BS6 5SH

0117 942 4510

Reg.Charity 288932

The Bridge Foundation was set up in Bristol in 1984 by Sally Box, with the encouragement and help of colleagues locally, and from the Tavistock Clinic in London. The major aim of the Foundation is to promote the application of psychoanalytic principles. Apart from the Child and Family Psychotherapy Service, The Bridge Foundation runs a short term counselling service for adults, and arranges clinical conferences and those for group relations - as well as some ongoing seminars. There are also events which are focused on the arts, or can provide a platform for a dialogue between psychotherapy and the arts.

## THE IMAGINATION: WHAT IS IT?

Some views from Contemporary Psychoanalysis and the Romantic Poets  
Bridge Foundation Day Conference, Bristol , 17 May 1997

Reviewed by Paul Cheshire

This was the latest in a series of events which have been organised by *The Bridge Foundation for Psychotherapy and the Arts* to explore the contribution psychoanalytic thought can make to the appreciation of the arts and *vice versa*. The interdisciplinary format brings its own problems: there is inevitable confusion, if not rivalry, between the two camps of psychotherapy and literature over whose insights or language are more valid and where the boundaries of their respective expertise lie. Inhibitions can creep in - the literary critic hesitates to make psychological evaluations aware that his audience consists mostly of psychotherapists, and the psychotherapist likewise reins in his literary opinions in the presence of the specialist scholar.

The other tension suffered by the literary camp is an unease about the deadening effects of systematised psychological classification. Thus Wordsworth in setting out on the "hard task to analyse a soul" is full of caution:

But who shall parcel out  
His intellect by geometric rules,  
Split like a province into round and square?  
Who knows the individual hour in which  
His habits were first sown even as a seed?

.....

In weakness we create distinctions, then  
Believe our puny boundaries are things

Which we perceive, and not which we have made.

But this unease is surely derived from the tension between the two drives of artistic creation and analytic dissection that Coleridge struggled with internally: as early as 1796 he could write "I *think* too much for a *Poet*". Psychotherapy is not analytical in the dead sense of the word - its work lies rather in uncovering such conflicts and making them creative, and the field in which it works is that of the living human imagination. The enquiry into the nature of Imagination, as Coleridge and Wordsworth used the term, was thus a useful conference topic both to explore these issues and to examine their pioneering psychological explorations.

Papers were given in the morning by Ronald Britton, a psychoanalyst: Some Thoughts on the Concept of "Unconscious Phantasy" and "The Imagination", and Robert Woof, the Wordsworth scholar: The Workings of "The Imagination" in Coleridge, Wordsworth and other Romantic Poets. After lunch they became a panel joined by Pamela Woof, editor of the Grasmere Journals, and, to make up the symmetry of literary and psychoanalytic figures John Steiner, psychoanalyst and author of *Psychic Retreats*. Ignes Sodre, psychoanalyst and co-author with A S Byatt of *Imagining Characters*, chaired the event.

Ronald Britton started with Coleridge's definitions of primary and secondary Imagination before going on to concentrate on the Two Book 1799 *Prelude* looking at the parallels between Wordsworth's search for the source of creativity within that poem and Freud's explorations 100 years later. He was light of touch, preserving the integrity of what he termed Coleridge and Wordsworth's proto-psychoanalytic insights. His detailed commentary on the 44 lines in Book 2 of the *Prelude* on infant mother relations starting "Blessed the infant babe..." showed how well the notion of infant as "creator and receiver both" is mirrored in the Kleinian theory of infantile symbol formation. In this theory the emphasis is on the creator aspect: the infant builds up its inner world by what is termed *unconscious phantasy* and the capacity of the infant to form symbols is vital both as the foundation of all creativity and the means of providing the world with emotional meaning and significance. This also made an illuminating angle on Coleridge's definition of primary imagination as "the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." The lack of this capacity, as Britton pointed out, is well captured in Coleridge's *Dejection: An Ode*:

I may not hope from outward forms to win  
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

The paradox of how *Dejection* expresses the experience of loss of the creative faculty of Imagination while using that faculty to create a masterpiece was raised later in the day, when looking at the psychotherapeutic uses of literary creativity, and out of this emerged a possible view of psychotherapy as a restoration of the faculty of Imagination.

Robert Woof started his talk with an extract from Coleridge's 1800 letter to Josiah Wedgwood:

She interested me a good deal; she appears to me to have been injured by going out of the common way without any of that Imagination, which if it be a Jack o'Lanthorn to lead us out of that way is however at the same time a Torch to light us whither we are going. A whole Essay might be written on the danger of thinking without images.

This last sentence was lingered over the way a vicar will start his sermon by repeating his keynote biblical text: "a whole Essay might be written on the danger of *thinking* without images". Images, then. There was some slight lack of fluency in Woof's speech, as though a host of words and ideas were simultaneously vying for air time. Imagine a speedboat buffeting the resistance of the waves, and in the exhilaration of the plumes of spray you have something of the excitement of his delivery. When talking about the poetry he paid particular emphasis to the importance of metre, and his accompanying physical gestures (he spoke standing) used this rhythmic element to the full, driving the words onwards. I watched the delight on the faces on his listeners as he went on to read Coleridge's account of his runaway night spent outdoors in Ottery St Mary. Most were presumably familiar with it, but all were caught in the glee of the spirited delivery.

The sequence of autobiographical letters was represented by Woof as Coleridge's equivalent of *The Prelude*, a preparatory self-exploration as foundation for the greater work that was to follow: namely, the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Woof then took us through the genesis and themes of *Ancient Mariner* in detail, saying many interesting things about the traces of pantheism to be found in the poem, and sprinkling these with a seasoning of wild asides. A wonderful instance of this was his statement that "every poet is a pantheist". This does not survive being written down, but in the context and spirit of his talk, it matched his tale of Coleridge kissing his copy of Spinoza and exclaiming, "If only it were true!" Woof warned against extracting information or mere discourse from poetry, mentioning Wordsworth's use of Platonic pre-natal existence for its value as a poetic image rather than as a creed, and some of Woof's own statements were best viewed in a similar spirit.

This worked because of the scope of Woof's knowledge of the factual source material and the depth of his sympathy with its spirit. From this secure foundation he was able to improvise like a jazz musician, and leave the impression that he could blow different but equally convincing notes the next day. As indeed he did when explaining in the morning that *Christabel* was not completed because Coleridge's intended plot development was too difficult both artistically and psychologically, while in the afternoon on the panel he insisted that the non-completion was due to technical difficulties over the metre.

One suspects this was to tease the psychotherapists. It was an away match for him and he played Woof v The Shrinks to perfection: the significance of his bantering Woody Allen psychoanalysis joke, was only fully apparent when he

revealed at the start of the afternoon session that Ronald Britton had been at school with him - this was jesting between friends. However, there was a serious point to this joking - it enabled a lively discussion of the different uses made of poetry and the "danger of thinking without images". Woof could safely dismiss the "infant babe" passage as discourse and hence inferior poetry, and press for the poetic superiority of Wordsworth's "spots of time"; no one wanted to disagree with his literary judgements apart from Pamela Woof (his wife!) who stood her ground. This gave rise to a good no holds barred afternoon with true Wordsworthian "unreserved intercourse" banishing timidity and polite deference.

A final image to convey the success of this coming together might be Ronald Britton's story of a poet who was in analysis with him. This poet was telling Britton that he had a blocked lavatory waste pipe in his house giving rise to leaks, but due to a neurotic fear of plumbers as a source of contamination, he felt unable to call one in to get this problem fixed. Britton interpreted this analytically explaining to his patient that he was referring symbolically to the process of his own analysis: i.e., the plumber was the analyst. The poet's response was to say that this interpretation made the situation much worse:- "now I have to deal with the two of you instead of just one!". The moral of this story lay in the uses of the imagination, on poetry writing as a process of bringing alive the symbolic significance of things. The analyst's task here was to guide the poet into symbolic relationship with his own experience, or in other words, to widen his capacity to be a poet.