

# Meeting of the American Journal of Psychoanalysis

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## A Conversation about Psychoanalysis, Literature and Anthropology between Anthony Molino, and Benjamin Kilborne, Date: May 18, 2007

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This evening's presentation was sponsored by *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* (AJP) to raise the funds necessary to convert print versions of the AJP issues into electronic versions on the Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP) library. Joining the ranks of psychoanalytic journals on the PEP will insure the ready availability of the pioneering work done by our founders to students, researchers and clinicians all over the world. It will also preserve the Journal's viability as a forum for dissemination of the courageous, often groundbreaking work being done by the truly original thinkers of our generation. The international appeal of the Journal and Horney's appreciation for culture and anthropology were echoed in Dr. Anthony Molino's talk about the emergence of a transnational phenomenon in fiction whereby the psychoanalytic inquiry is being used for its expository value in the reassessment of pivotal moments in the timelines of various cultures. Anthony Molino, Ph.D. is a practicing psychoanalyst, anthropologist, literary translator and author of several books who is presently based in Italy. After the initial presentation, Dr. Molino was joined by Dr. Benjamin Kilborne to further the discussion. Benjamin Kilborne, Ph.D., Associate Editor of the AJP, is in private practice in West Stockbridge, MA, has published extensively in the fields of history, anthropology, literature and psychoanalysis. For the past 20 years one of his major concerns has been the integration of literature and psychoanalysis.

Molino's paper, "Contaminating Genres: Reflections on Ethnography, Literature and Psychoanalysis," was inspired by anthropologist Michael Fischer's essay "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory." In his essay Fischer describes methods similar to dreamwork and transference analysis being employed in ethnic autobiographies as a means of explaining the relationship between identity and ethnicity. Works such as Michael Arlen's *Passage to Ararat* and Charles Mingus' *Beneath the Underdog* exhibit what Fischer calls "transference-like techniques of repetition, indirection and reworking" that are also ethnographic textural strategies. Cross-referencing examples (Obeyesekere's *Medusa's Hair* and Vincent Crapanzano's *Tuhami*) lead Fischer to an appreciation of a basic anthropological rationale: "seeing others against a background of ourselves, and ourselves against a background of others." He concludes that reading these ethnographies requires a "juxtaposition of cultural traditions that works on both the conscious and unconscious level."

Consideration of the unconscious found Molino remembering anthropology's historical reliance on a "depth" metaphor. But an insistence that the unconscious lies mysteriously beneath the surface of observable cultural data has often allowed for its dismissal along with all other subjectivities. Molino sees some hope in a recent enrichment of the depth/surface conceptualization with a visualization of an inner/outer boundary. The coexistence of a vertical and a horizontal metaphor would seem to suggest a newfound willingness on the part of anthropologists to consider a discourse in subjectivity. Since the body's semipermeable membrane still prohibits a "scientific" demonstration of the unconscious, its role as a potentially helpful tool in anthropological research, however, continues to be undervalued.

Molino considers the exclusion of psychoanalysis to be a regrettable compartmentalization that casts a blind eye toward recent developments in world literature. A new genre in fiction has emerged "in which psychoanalysis is used increasingly not merely as a vehicle of personal introspection, but ethnographically as well: that is to say, as a penetrating instrument of social, cultural and historical analysis and criticism." Molino reviewed five modern novels, all written within the last 20 years, to make his point.

In *The Sickness Called Man* by Ferdinando Camon, the impact of significant political and social events (World War II, Italy's civil war, the post-war economic boom, the transformation and demise of a peasant culture, the tumult of the 1960s and 1970s, women's liberation and its unsettling effect on Italian men and the crises in the Catholic Church) on the broader culture "are all evoked in the symptoms, stories and memories brought by the protagonist to the timelessness of the analyst's couch." This is "psychoanalysis as cultural testimony and indictment." Miguel Delibes uses a psychoanalytic interview in *The Wars of Our Ancestors* as a means of exploring brutal war stories, an erotic initiation, ancestral values, and customs of Spanish village life and a rural social realm of routine daily violence. He goes on to embrace subjectivity when his protagonist's resistance to this amoral surround invites the fictional psychiatrist to consider abandoning his own values by urging his patient to tell a pardon-securing lie. Molino points out that "while Camon's novel uses psychoanalysis primarily to engage history and to map out the interface of culture and psyche, Delibes focuses on the session as a space of an authentically human encounter between two subjects to highlight the transformative contaminating potential of a relational psychoanalysis."

In *He Who Searches* Luisa Valenzuela's protagonist is a psychoanalyst who traverses the Mobius strip of a "fragmented, transnational, postmodern" landscape in order to eventually return home to Buenos Aires and finally recognize it for what it is. Molino comments that "again, psychoanalysis is deployed both as a process of self-discovery and recognition (through the bifocal lens that the other provides), and as a praxis, deeply rooted in the culture capable of revealing the crimes, the secrets and the denied perversions of history."

Ntozake Shange's *Liliane: Resurrection of the Daughter* incorporates an array of psychoanalytic session notes within the structure of her novel in order to help best tell a black artist's coming-of-age story while revealing the horrors of growing up black and female in the U.S. during the 1950s and 1960s. Shange felt that Liliane's tale "could never be told omnisciently, from on-high..., but needed to come from the many horizontal quarters of life ...—her childhood companions, her lovers and her unconscious in the care of her analyst..." Molino adds that:

"Shange, perhaps unknowingly, squarely situates herself with Liliane in an interdisciplinary tradition quite familiar to the postmodern ethnographer. In foregoing any omniscient (i.e., functionalist realist) stance *vis-à-vis* his/her object of study, today's fieldworker too has become enmeshed in the intersubjective, horizontal quarters of the field: in permeable, self/other quarters ridden with disruptions, peopled by multiple voices that no singular narrative can ever hope to capture.

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For his final example Molino chose psychoanalyst, and now novelist, Christopher Bollas' *I Have Heard the Mermaids Singing* in which the protagonist, a psychoanalyst, "is beleaguered by the more confounding and sometimes monstrous aspects of this historical moment of ours." He considers it to be "a timely study of our post-9/11, post-postmodern world: a world whose shaken foundations betray not only a loss of meaning, but the more diffuse and ominous sense of moral, spiritual, political and ethical bankruptcy that threatens, in Bollas' view, to turn Western civilization into a nouvelle wasteland."

These five novels, "resort to psychoanalysis in a way that anthropology has yet to manage, or even envision when they contemplate 'the erasures of history, the slippages of human agency, the convulsions of time and the convolutions of memory and a self in traction between fluidity and fragmentation.'" He considers them all to be "literary experiments involving psychoanalysis" that are "inspired by distinctly anthropological concerns," Molino concluded. He sees the utility of psychoanalysis to extend beyond that of "a fieldwork tool, or for its insights into symbolization processes and social theory, but as a versatile yet virtually untapped representational strategy." Molino feels strongly that a meaningful dialogue with psychoanalysis could provide the tools needed to develop an ethnography, that in Michael Fischer's words: "fulfills the anthropological promise of a fully bifocal cultural criticism."

Kilborne entered the conversation by raising his concerns about the narrative. Whether in ethnographic field notes or psychoanalytic process recordings he believes that "all we can get is a fraction of what is there." He cited an exercise conducted by Margaret Mead in which students were asked to take notes on the interactions they could

observe taking place between subject mothers and their children. No one got it wrong, but film of the event later revealed that each student had captured a certain aspect of what had taken place while missing many others. Our narratives are always fragmented, incomplete. Kilborne suggested that we can learn much about the nature of narrative from fiction, including what we might leave out and why. Personal feelings, attitudes concerning political correctness and other aspects of the countertransference enter into what gets recorded no matter how faithful one might aspire to be to both patient and process. Kilborne reminded us that even Malinowski omitted vital observations from his field notes. This was discovered when letters written home to his mother eventually became available for scrutiny.

Kilborne went on to point out that culture provides the context in which the future objects of anthropological study ferment. You have to look no further than to the path that culminated in E.B. Tylor's now classic 1871 definition of "culture," and his influence on the emerging field of anthropology. Tylor, the scion of a wealthy Quaker family, went south to Mexico for health reasons where he met up with Henry Christy, a fellow Quaker who just happened to be an ethnologist and an archaeologist. Kilborne characterized Christy's archaeologically informed anthropological influence on Tylor to be "the baggage of cultural history." Tylor went on to help shape a rigid, scientific, material evidence anthropology that would much later choose to reject Carlos Castañeda's innovative fictional ethnography. Castañeda had entered into a new realm, one in which the narrative could live and breathe and inspire, but anthropology was too mired in conformity to follow.

Molino noted that ethnographers must conform to genre in order to get published, but he also declared that shame is being split off here, and denied access to the process. This is also true in case presentations at psychoanalytic training institutes. Those coming up through the ranks learn how to structure their work in order to look smart and gain acceptance, but traumatic pain can abolish the narrative in analytic practice. While everyone is wasting time trying to look good, patients have become increasingly either unable, or unwilling to tell their stories. There is denial of the generation that preceded, and the death that will come. "Trauma is time frozen," and patients are staying put—a reflection of a cultural pressure to deny both the past and the future.

Molino went on to say that with or without anthropological recognition there is obviously an unconscious cultural context. The unconscious is still, of course, an enigmatic reality that can even surprise the psychoanalyst when its effects reveal their source. He described a personal incident that began with his spying a title in a bookshop window as he passed by one morning. Some seven hours later he was surprised to find himself humming an old song with that very same title. He experienced a bit of an epiphany in realizing that the politics of book publishing and music making had conspired to place these works into an ethnographic context that allowed for his “generative unconscious” to make a connection.

Kilborne feels that the problem with the unconscious in anthropology has to do with conflicting superego ideals. Certain cultural values can crystallize into defense mechanisms that can interfere with superego conflicts. He pointed out that many patients are ashamed of their conflicting loyalties to opposing superego ideals. The superego is not simply a judge, it is more of a jumble—“I wish I could be this, I wish I could be that.” This leads to confusion and an inability to meet standards.

As an example he compared the original 17th century French version of *Little Red Riding Hood* to the Disney version. The moral of the story in the former is that only a fool wouldn't know that wolves in the woods are dangerous. This suggests an enormous difference between the two cultures concerning attitudes about pain and fear, and the world as a dangerous place. Kilborne wondered aloud about the culturally charged influences that interfere with superego conflicts. What is the value of experiencing pain and/or fear that cannot be wished away? What does it mean to recognize the world as a dangerous place? He feels that there is a pernicious cultural pressure to create a shared narrative, and that an analogous process can be found operating in psychoanalysis if we are not careful. It is very important to allow a patient to create his or her own narrative as the process progresses along.

At this point in the conversation, Molino reached for a book lying on the table before him. He turned to p. 117 in Kilborne's *Disappearing Persons: Shame and Appearance*, and read this quote from Salman Rushdie:

“Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts...

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Kilborne feels that the cultural pressure to eliminate pain, as if it had no age-old function, is interfering with our patient's abilities to tell their own stories. How much of the story can emerge if the focus is primarily on the elimination of pain, and the treatment is only permitted one session per week. Trauma truly is time frozen, and the story can languish untold for decades.

Molino likened the dilemma to Greek tragedy. He remarked that many of our patients fail to realize that the plot is not the point; it is the feelings and the use of suffering that are important. In order for trauma to be transformed it must be part of the narrative, and patients must have faith in their ability to tell the story. Kilborne added that there must be someone to whom the story can be told, and patients must have confidence in their ability to use expression in the service of connection. Molino remembered that he had a mentor who used to insist that trauma was not being addressed in anthropology. He feels that there is so much shame associated with being traumatized that we will all, more often than not, automatically deny any sense of injury.

Kilborne concluded that he was better able to address shame in his work by seeing how it was dealt with in fiction. He mentioned Pirandello, Sophocles, George Eliot and especially Charles Dickens' sensitivity to the shame experienced by children. He feels that fiction's use of emotion gives it an extraordinary reach into the horrifyingly injured, the lack of faith in human bonds and the superego strictures that condemn helplessness and ruin. He cautioned against rigid interpretations, and spoke to the richness and depth in mythology. He urged us all to stop, read and think.