Psychoanalysis, Illusion, and Our Humanistic Tradition

(Horney, Jan 08)

My imagination makes me human and makes me a fool; it gives me all the world and exiles me from it.

URSULA K. LE GUIN, *Harper's* magazine, Aug. 1990

They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night.

EDGAR ALLAN POE, "Eleonora"

It is striking that although there has been much discussion about free association as essential to the psychoanalytic method, few writers have explicitly linked free association with the imagination, and fewer still have provided specific clinical examples of such a connection. In this paper I will discuss the subject of illusion and imagination by connecting both with free association.

Let me begin with a brief vignette. A schizoid patient in analysis was speaking at great length about his own writing projects, referencing Derida, deconstructionism, a variety of authors, quotes fro T.S. Eliot and others. I mentioned Rilke and his Letters to a Young Poet. The patient mused, “what happened to the letters of Kappus, the young poet?” I replied that Kappus might

have been a figment of Rilke's imagination so that he would write the book. This idea had never occurred to this highly intellectual patient, who thereafter referred to "Kappus moments" to designate similar inhibitions in understanding and imagining.

We have all had similar experiences with patients whose ability to imagine freely is impaired, and who are, as it were, mired in the concreteness of their own thinking, fenced in emotionally by their assumptions about what is real. I have spoken here at the Horney of deceit, spies and lying, and the difficulties entailed in judging deceit in the analytic situation. This time I will be focusing not on narcissistic assumptions about what is real as a source of toxic shame, deceit and self-deceit, but rather on the essential importance of imagination for human dignity and humanizing shame.

Let us now turn to the subject of illusion in our humanistic tradition as a resource for understanding the crimps in imagination of our patients and ourselves as analysts. More particularly, let us consider the subject of perspective in the visual arts as an expression of our fascination with constructed illusions that can then be relied upon to convey visual "truths."

The Greeks said that to marvel is the beginning of knowledge, and that where we cease to marvel we close off what we might otherwise know. The subjects of perspective and of illusion are therefore clearly subjects to be marveled at, since they raise endless questions about the nature of perception, imagination and the human mind. For one thing, perspective makes a flat surface <u>seem</u> three-dimensional. And then we take the illusion to be a representation of what we see in reality. As Liotard notes, "Painting is the most astounding sorceress. She can persuade us through the most evident falsehoods that she is pure Truth." (p. 33) How can such a thing come about?

Consider our assumption that we can see ourselves face to face in a mirror. What is it that we are seeing, and conversely, what is it that we are not seeing? The most obvious explanation is that we have the illusion that the face looking back at us when we shave or comb our hair is the same size as the actual face we use to do the looking. However, the image is necessarily half the size of our head. Since the mirror will always appear to be halfway between me and my reflection, the size on its surface will be one half of the size it appears to me to be. What I am not seeing, therefore, is the <u>actual</u> size of the image, and what I <u>am</u> seeing is my <u>imagined</u> correspondence. I cannot believe that the face I see is not the same in size as the one I show.

In both instances, of perspective and of looking at one's face in the mirror, illusion and imagination play major roles. Not only have psychologists of perception emphasized how strong a role expectation plays in what we see, but they are newly interested in the functions of cross-sensory perception in seeing in general. According to ideas of cross-sensory perception, we hear what we see, we see what we hear (what we do when we read), we taste what we feel, smell what we hear, feel what we see and so forth. In fact, learning how to read constitutes the most radical transposition of senses that we are called upon to make: from what we hear to what we see. Many are the reading difficulties that bear directly upon the organization (and disorganization) of the senses.

The 17th century French painter Nicholas Poussin compared the feelings of form and color in painting to the modes of Greek music. The Doric mode was severe and uncompromising, the Phrygian passionate and so appropriate for battles, and so forth. And in a similar vein, John Constable writes: "The sound of water escaping from mill-damns, etc, willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brickwork, I love such things. I shall never cease to paint such p[laces…painting is with me but another word for feeling, and I associate my 'careless boyhood'

with all that lies on the banks of the Stour; those scenes made me a painter." (quoted on p. 383)

So the business of seeing is simultaneously the business of sensing with all our senses, as the business of exercising what we will call free association as analysts requires imagination, our sixth sense. And, like all the other senses, its use entails all the others. We cannot simply assume that it is ever possible to shut one sense so as to test another the way the opthamologist does when he examines our eyes; one eye gets closed off so that the other eye can be tested. Indeed, we have not two but five senses, and some would say six. A well known 11th century Arab specializing in perception Alhazen (d.A.D. 1038) wrote: "Nothing visible is understood by the sense of sight alone, save light and colors." (quoted p. 15). And Bernard Berensen observed: "The painter can accomplish his task only by giving tactile values to retinal impressions." Gombrich notes that in Egyptian art "things are rendered as they appear to the sense of touch, the more 'objective' sense which reports on the permanent shape of things irrespective of the shifting viewpoint." (18) So even the sense associated with reliability can change over time or according to the cultural context. Here we refer to "an eyewitness account" which presumably makes the account believable. Eyewitness news is

presented as the most "real" conceivable. In Russia, by contrast, one says, "He lies like an eyewitness."

And then, to further complicate things, one must add the imagination to any perception at all, and to the workings of all together. Quintilian noted that there is no craftsman who "has not made a vessel of a shape he has never seen." (p. 25) Now this comment can be further elaborated to include both imagining the shapes one has seen, and seeing invisible shapes. [1] It is a psychological truism that perception involves expectations. Following the work on perception in psychology, the art historian Eric Gombrich underscores how essential expectation is in perception. "All culture and all communication," he writes, " depend on the interplay between expectation and observation, the waves of fulfillment, disappointment, right guesses, and wrong moves that make up our daily life." (60) Our expectations act like filters, influencing what we perceive as well as what we imagine we perceive, and how both activities involve cross-sensory dimensions. Emile Zola called a work of art "a corner of nature seen through a temperament." (quoted p. 66)

---

[1] The psychologist Hering speaks of "memory color." (226)

A splendid example of such expectations is the story of a painting by George Innes of the Lackawanna Valley, commissioned in 1855 by the president of a railroad as an advertisement. He wanted a painting of his roundhouse. In actuality, there was only one track running into the roundhouse in the valley. However, the president wanted five painted in. Refusing to paint what was not there, Innes objected. The president remained steadfast in his requirement. There seemed to be no way out of the dilemma.

Then Innes hit upon a solution which he relied upon in the painting he eventually sold to the president of the railroad. In the distance one sees the roundhouse roughly in the center of the painting. You see the train and on its track, and there, where the four other tracks should have been, is a billow of smoke. Inness ingeniously "hid the patch with the non-existent tracks behind puffs of smoke." (67) The president, presumably expecting to see his five tracks, was not disappointed. He knew they were there. And Inness had managed to paint according to what he saw.

Let me give you another example of expectations and perception illustrated by a difficulty with captions. In the Nuremberg Chronicle there are woodcuts by Durer's teacher Wolemutt. We see the first image of a city, stylized with trees,

church towers in the distance, city walls in the foreground, and pointed rooftops all crowded together. It is called Ferrara. Then we see a city that looks very much like the first. It is called Milano. And then we see another city identical to the preceeding two called Mantua. Naturally, inasmuch as we assume we know what a caption is and should do, we assume that it should inform us of the particularity of what is represented, making Milano easily distinguishable from Mantua. Not so with the Chronicle. Why?

Gombrich suggests that the answer lies in the function of the caption and in its relation to the image. The function of the captions was, he thinks, "to bring home to the reader that these names <u>stood</u> for cities." (p. 69) Whether or not the actual images corresponded to the real cities was a matter of indifference since what mattered most was depicting the essence of what a city was, of which Milano, Mantua and Ferrara were manifestations.

Another illustration of the same principle can be seen in the drawings of the Gothic master builder Villard de Honnencourt who has furnished us with a volume of elegant plans and sketches comprising a trove of information about the building of Gothic cathedrals. In the drawing in question there is a caption that reads "Et sacies bien qu'il fu contrefais al vif." Roughly translated this means

that one should take note that the drawing has been made from life. We would therefore expect a naturalistic image. What we get, however, is strikingly heraldic. There is a lion facing us stiffly. We see only his forefeet. The body is anatomically obscure, and the hind feet are altogether missing, as is the torso. His eyes look as though they had been made up by a theatrical make-up artist: perfectly almond shape, with exquisite eyebrows. The bridge of the nose looks aquiline, but ends in something vaguely bulbous. The mouth smiles, showing a perfectly regular set of teeth that look like the product of an orthodontist. As for the main, it is divided into hair on top and beard, all stylishly coiffed and looking as though they had just received the attentions of an upscale beauty parlor: each curl perfect. As for the feet, they are turned outward, making it seem impossible that any creature might stand on them. The lion of de Honnencourt, we can imagine, was so depicted to convey the essence of lioness, the Platonic reality.

"An existing representation will always exert its spell over the artist even when he strives to record the truth," writes Gombrich. "Thus it was remarked by ancient critics that several famous artists of antiquity had made a strange mistake in the portrayal of horses: they had represented them with eyelashes on the lower lid, a feature that belongs to the human eye but not to that of the horse." (p. 82) Whether we think of Van Eyke, Hans Memling, Roger Van der Weyden and

the early Flemish painters or the subsequent 17th century Dutch genre paintings, the appearance of bustle and variety is just that: an appearance. They are in fact composed of a limited number of types and gestures, a bit like the stock and trade of Restoration comedies.

Rather than bemoan a state of affairs in which the "real" world seems not to be as objectively rendered as we might assume, there is another approach that in fact celebrates the human imagination. Nature cannot exist outside our perceptions and experiences of it, which necessarily provide us with the framework in terms of which we then perceive. It is a truism that those without language can learn a foreign language most easily, which is why young children learn languages with so little effort. They do not have as much of their own language in the way. Similarly, there is no idea of the natural world that does not go through our experiences of what is natural. These ideas were not unfamiliar to those designing landscape gardens in the 17th and 18th centuries, where nature needed to be shown up, loped and bound here, adorned with ruins there, let free to run like the streams, associated in significant places with contemplation, in others with stronger emotions, etc. In fact, many have pointed out that there is an implicit vocabulary of the emotions associated directly with the iconography of the English landscape garden. Nature cannot be separated from those feelings

and sensations through which we know it. And whatever we know cannot but be filtered through our ideas about what we want to communicate about what we have experienced. At both ends, Nature in the buff is unthinkable and unknowable.

For example, take Leonardo's reputation as above all inventor, one who pioneered the modern airplane with his experiments. This presents Leonardo as a scientist who wishes to invent a flying machine along scientific principles. If we look at Leonardo's notes, however, we find that there is not only no mention of a flying machine, but that Leonardo was attempting to make a bird that would fly. He was in no way thinking of man's flight. Nor was he an inventor in the mode of Thomas Edison. Shortly after the entries in his notebooks on wanting to make a bird that flies, Leonardo writes of his quarrel with a German mirror maker and of his project of affixing wings and a beard to a tame lizard in order to frighten his visitors. Leonardo’s is the world of dream and fancy; it is as a maker of dreams, not as a scientist who studies the realities of what can be construed as nature, that we know him today. As many authors have pointed out, human culture (however construed) is a product of the human imagination, although the history of Anthropology suggests that there has been confusion from the birth of the concept in the writings of E.B. Tylor in 1871.

This suggests that what we can perceive with our sensations and feelings is of a conceptual nature, regardless of the seeming realism of the image. Vraisemblance (true seemingness) thus calls attention to its artifice, and the art of seeming to be true (however truth is conceived) is what we are dealing with, whether the truth of the Gothic lion, the representation of a horse with eyelashes or the truth of the captions on medieval cities. Works of art grow through a process of schema and correction. They are not faithful records of a visual experience, but rather faithful "constructions of a relational model."(90)

All this points to an obvious conclusion: that the natural world of landscapes is one necessarily filtered through our experience of what we perceive, and thus necessarily calls into play our emotions. Not only our emotions at the time of experiencing the landscape, but our memories and histories of these feelings, and our judgments of these feelings. In considering such a perspective on landscape we are aided by the 18th century theories of landscape gardens in which certain emotions were triggered by certain shapes, the purpose of the landscape garden being the furtherance of emotions deemed desirable and/or educational. Ruins were prized because they evoked the perspective of time and change together with feelings of humility; serpentine paths produced feelings of pleasant

divergences and a respite from single-mindedness; running water evoked a sense of peace and tranquility; the whole might be constructed to induce feelings of contemplation.

Also, places evoke associations of other places. When Kathleen and I were driving to Boston we passed Belchertown, and I said that the next town would be Burpee. The ways these associations work depend upon emotional connections and making sense of sounds, and not upon the population or physical dimensions of the township of Bechertown, or the existence of a place called Burpee.

Or consider what we see when we look at clouds. The shapes call up in us all kinds of associations: some of us can see faces, beasts, mountains, and landscapes. When Kathleen and I flew into Milano we did so early in the morning at dawn. First we saw the clouds rising up in fantastical shapes. Then we barely imagined that these clouds rising out of the mists were real. Suddenly, out of the clouds and mists and ever so faintly visible appeared the shapes of mountain peaks. We were imagining the peaks as we struggled to see them, because we could barley make them out. Little by little, the peaks defined themselves through the fog as we descended. This combination of what we

imagined and what we perceived was, we felt, amazingly exhilarating, and we could not stop talking about the power of the experience.

Because the world of human beings is at once a world of things and of imaginings, we can have faith in the transformative power of our imaginations. Moreover, such faith takes root in the fact that the distinction between reality and fancy is itself unreal. There is no way that we can parse reality without bringing into play the distinction between reality and fantasy, which itself eludes exclusive physicalist, sensate definition. As Freud observed, the unconscious too is part of reality. The dignitary who is called upon to lay the foundation stone of a public building will give the stone three taps with a silver hammer. The hammer is real, but is the blow? (99) Which calls to mind Freud's comment about Dora's dream of a fire from which she awoke terrified. The dream, he pointed out, was imaginary. However, the fear was real. But, we could add, the very distinction between what is real and what is imaginary in a dream is itself inevitably influenced by our feelings. Freud's point was not to tell us how to distinguish between reality and fantasy; it was rather to call attention to how integral are our emotions for any distinction between the two, and how impossible is the task of parsing the two without considering feelings.

What, then, are we to make of all the discussions of lifelikeness or vraisemblance? If we assume that there is a model in nature altogether independent of our feelings in imitation of which we then render, for example, a mountain, we are likely to get lost in discussions of the functions of illusion. Such discussions are unlikely to take into account how terrifying images experienced to be "too real" can be. For example, in Poland there is a Jewish tradition that will allow statues only if they are incomplete; a finger, a nose or something else must be missing. And the Eastern Church allows icons but not sculpture. The test for the Eastern church was whether you could take the image by the nose. If you could, it was too real, and had to be excluded. In Egyptian art, the familiar stylized figures seen from the side may have had similar functions through what they concealed, through what was not there, since foreign prisoners, dead enemies on the battlefield and slave girls were sometimes rendered en face. (112) We are again reminded of the Innes painting, and of his rendering of what was not there.

It would seem then, that the gist of this presentation deals with the representation of what is not there, which would seem to be a very odd twist on the subject of perspective and illusion. And yet the functions of perspective tend towards the ordering of illusion rather than in the copying of something posited

as reality or the natural world. Yet illusion does not come out of nowhere however much it designates what is not there, any more than a dream arises out of the void. Because it is something rather than nothing, art is necessarily preoccupied with what is not there. Which is perhaps why some have observed that the study of perception is essentially psychological, an affair of the imagination, a matter first and foremost for the psyche. Freud would never have maintained that the object of psychoanalysis is psychic reality had he not recognized that it deals with illusion.

This is a point driven home also by the nature of perspective, of which it has been noted that it rests on an obvious limitation of human experience: we cannot look round a corner. Therefore, when we cannot get up and walk round them, we see objects only from one side and have to guess, or imagine, what lies behind. Paradoxically, then, a three-dimensional model can exist in its own right, whereas a perspective picture cannot. Therefore, all of the ambiguity and uncertainty of what we cannot see is hidden beneath the illusion of perspective. While perspective appears to make up for our human limitations in seeing, what it does is to hide the unseen behind the veil of illusion.

And then there is the vanishing point. It is literally the vanishing point that organizes the illusion of perspective. Once again, it is what is not there, what has disappeared, that dominates the illusion. Pliny cites a remark of the Hellenistic painter Parrhasios, who said that the outline "must go round and so end, that it promises something else to lie behind and thereby shows even what it obscures." (cited on p. 138) Parrhasios was admired because he promised what he could not show and revealed what was not there.

Shakespeare wrote:

Sometimes we see a cloud that's dragonish;

A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,

A tower'd citadel, a pendant rock,

A forked mountain, or blue promintory

With trees upon't, that nod unto the world,

And mock our eyes with air… (Antony and Cleopatra)

And then again when he describes a painting of the fall of Troy in The Rape of Lucrece:

For much imaginary work was there;

Conceit deceitful, so compact, so kind,

That for Achlles' image stood his spear,

Grip'd in an armed hand; himself behind,

Was left unseen, save to the eye of mind;

A hand, a foot, a face, a leg, a head.

Stood for the whole to be imagined.

Despite artistic conventions of time and place, the principle that the technique aspired to depends directly on the powers of the imagination. The eleventh century Chinese artist Sung Ti criticized the work of the younger artist Ch'en Ung-chi in the following manner: "The technique in this is very good but there is a want of natural effect. You should choose an old tumbledown wall and throw over it a piece of white silk. Then, morning and evening you should gaze at it until, at length, you can see the ruins through the silk, its prominences, its levels, its zig-zags, and its cleavages, storing them up in your mind and fixing them with your eyes, Make the prominences your mountains, the lower part your water, the hollows your ravines, the cracks your streams, the light parts your nearest points, the darker parts your more distant points. Get all these thoroughly into you, and soon you will see men, birds, plants, and trees, flying

and moving among them. You may then ply your brush according to your fancy, and the result will be of heaven, not men. Ch'en's eyes were opened and from that time his style improved." (188)

And illusion attests to that capacity for transformation and change in which, as Pico della Mirandola knew, lies the dignity of humankind. Leonardo was, like other artists, interested in what cannot be seen and must therefore be imagined in the process of seeing it: he was fascinated with running water, the wind in the trees, the clouds as they move and change in the sky. Leonardo speaks of the need to "quicken the spirit of invention." Invention in this context is rather different from what the inventor does with mechanical devices in his basement. It designates an ability to invent what is not there. "You should," Leonardo writes, "look at certain walls stained with damp, or at stones of uneven colour. If you have to invent some backgrounds you will be able to see in these the likeness of divine landscapes, adorned with mountains, ruins, rocks, woods, great plains, hills and valleys in great variety; and then again you will see there battles and strange figures in violent action, expressions of faces and clothes and an infinity of things which you will be able to reduce to their complete and proper forms. In such walls the same thing happens to us as in the sound of bells, in whose stroke you may find every named word which you can imagine." (188)

And, most pertinent for our purposes tonight, Leonardo wrote of the power of confused shapes such as clouds or water, to stir the mind to new and fresh inventions, to stoke the fires of the imagination. So it was that he advocated the deliberately blurred image, the sfumato, which allows images to in the words of Vasari, "hover between the seen and the unseen."

Consider, for example, Leonardo's portait of the Mona Lisa. While her expression has been deemed a "smile" by generations, the expression is not a clear smile at all. If in fact a smile is there, it is the promise of a smile, a hint of what is absent from the visible rendering that fascinates us, suspending us once again between the seen and the unseen. That is necessarily an imagined place that quickens our sense of sight, indeed all of our senses, and reminds me of the example of flying into Milano and imagining the mountains that we could barely see; we found our sight quickened because we could not quite see them, anticipating what might be there and feeling possibility in the place between the seen and the unseen.

And it was Leonardo who noted that "perspective is nothing else than seeing a place behind a pane of glass, quite transparent, on the surface of which the objects behind the glass are to be drawn." Here the blank canvas is the glass; the visible objects are but shadows, insubstantial things to which the artist can give life only by organizing what is not there to be seen and making the unseen visible. In Chinese painting giving expression to the invisible is explicitly a

primary goal of painting. "There are things which ten hundred brushstrokes cannot depict but which can be captured by a few simple strokes if they are right. That is truly giving expression to the invisible" (quoted on p. 208)

The profession of psychoanalyst or psychotherapist also needs to hover between the seen and the unseen, in that realm of things half forgotten and half invented, in order to help our patients and, in the practice of our profession, ourselves acquire more faith in the transformative powers of the imagination. Things are themselves, of course. But they are also other things. And which they are depends upon the feelings through which we experience them, and the ways in which the difference is both imagined and felt.

A psychological version of Sfumato, the power of confused shapes, the blurring of contours and the questioning of categories is essential to our work. Creative confusion that enlivens curiosity, the senses, and the imagination, is indeed a technique which seems suited to these nether regions between the known and the unknown, the visible and the invisible, the remembered and the forgotten, the imagined and the all too real. When we can, as analysts or as patients, put beards on lizards, we are doing something of essential importance. To be able to catch thoughts and feelings in motion, to be able to imagine what is blurred and to use what is blurred to imagine, to liven curiosity in the confusion entailed in

trying to grasp the ungraspable, can allow for a vividness of experience that, for me, is a primary goal of both analysis and this little presentation.