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Continuities of Psychotherapy: Theorizing Critical Presentism

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Biography

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Abstract

Without relinquishing the critical insights of new historicism, this paper considers how plays, poetic epics, and prose fiction of healing can inspire new understandings of states of mind and psychotherapy. Although historic literature may remind us of our own present-day experiences, it is argued that history cannot be used to justify contemporary conceptualization. The narrative theory of Paul Ricoeur is used to formulate a historical presentism that reads literature metaphorically, allowing for considerations of symbolic similarity without losing the important differences of meaning over time. Stories of healing are taken up to illustrate how they can inform present psychological understanding, without ignoring important socio-historical differences of meaning.

Keywords: Narrative, Hermeneutics, Psychotherapy, Fiction, Ricoeur

Continuities of Psychotherapy: Theorizing Critical Presentism

Plays, poetic epics, and prose fiction from the past about the care and healing of the psyche/soul/mind are not usually used as resources for understanding in Psychology. When literature from the past is made use of to understand the present, it tends to be read with a naïve presentist view. That is to say, the past is understood by making reference to contemporary knowledge without differences of culture being considered problematic for such interpretations. Strictly speaking, considering there was no ‘Psychology’ in the ancient world, historic representations of the psyche/soul/mind are never truly Psychological. Perhaps, then, we should always avoid transposing states of mind unique to a particular historical period. Yet, studying ancient stories and narrative structures can deepen our understanding of psychology. The difficulty, then, is how to allow this deepening without appropriating the world of the other so completely that we erase important differences. How can we respect the distinctiveness of a historical period and also use the past to understand the present? White’s (1987) explanation of Ricoeur’s recommendation for the historian highlights the historian’s dilemma:

It is wrong, from Ricoeur’s point of view, for historians to limit themselves to trying to see things from the position of past agents alone, to trying to think themselves back into the mind or consciousness of past actors in the historical drama. They are fully justified in availing themselves of the advantages of hindsight. (p. 174)

This paper focuses on how we might understand psychotherapy by reading fictional drama from the past without losing a critical perspective on important differences of meaning across time and place. The significance we ascribe to plays, poetic epics and prose fiction from the past, depicting what we might consider to be psychological healing, inevitably is influenced by current problems and conceptions of psychotherapy. If we are going to use literature from the past to illuminate new meaning in present day practices and states of mind, then we cannot lose sight of how our understanding is always generated from within our contemporary worldview.

When reading historic texts and ideas to gain insight into present-day ideas, continuities of meaning have been assumed to hold across time. Evans, McGrath, and Milns (2003), for example, review Greek and Roman literature to assess the presence of DSM criteria for schizophrenia in the ancient world. They claim that diagnostic evidence for schizophrenia is absent whereas for other psychiatric disorders the specified diagnostic criteria are present. Their research into ancient literature could foster innovative reflections on present-day conceptions of psychopathology. However, showing that a state of mind or a form of psychopathology was present in a past epoch is to project a modern view into a historical time. In an earlier report, Milns (1986) discusses ancient Greek and Roman attitudes towards 'mental illness' based in a reading of historic plays, dramas and comedies. Using the past to validate present beliefs is generally discredited by historians (Fischer, 1970). Introducing present-day ideas into historic texts distorts the unique meanings of the time in which the literature was produced. Although imagining similarities can inspire new ways of thinking, this should not be mistaken as evidence for a contemporary phenomenon being historically present.

According to the insights of 20th century new historicism, we cannot assume there is continuity in meaning across time and place.

New Historicism

New historicism is the position that theory, history, or literary work must be considered as representative of the specific historical time and circumstance that generated it¹. Teo (2005) explains, ‘Instead of continuity in history, Foucault emphasized (as Kuhn did) discontinuity, and instead of a clear linear, progressive stream of ideas he identified a multiplicity of developmental lines that may or may not cross and interact’ (p. 8). So, to understand historic practices of care, healing and treatment *on their own terms* and not as nascent forms of contemporary ideas, they must be understood as belonging to unique economic, socio-cultural, political, and theological milieus. A culture invokes a world of meaning and a practice cannot be understood out of the context of that world. As such, something of the meaning of historical times is always lost on our contemporary minds. At the same time, we can imagine what another world could have been like. Sustaining this play of similarity and difference is central to new historicism.

Psychology’s new historians also challenge the claim that ideas and practices have continuous meanings through time, emphasizing instead how the meaning of a psychological phenomenon depends on its circumstances (Harris, 1997; Hill & Kral, 2003). Social and political forces unique to a specific context are always at work to construct the significance of things. There may be a resemblance of practices through time because psychological, social, cultural, and political pressures may repeatedly

delimit certain meanings as healing and not others. However, this does not mean there is an essential, eternal significance nor does it mean that practices were handed down from one person to the next in a continuous succession to the present. So, for example, ancient practices of psychological healing did not result in modern psychological services for schizophrenia. The meaning of healing transforms as we experience healing and as we imagine how other scenarios could be healing. New historians debate how similar or different meanings are through time. Most recently, new historians of psychology recognize that historical discontinuity can be overstated (Danziger, 2003; Stam, 2003). Teo (2005) writes how ‘traditional historiography has wrongly emphasized continuity’ and he suggests that there may be more continuity than the new historians originally perceived (pp. 19-20).

As long as the symbolic illumination of psychotherapy’s meaning is not mistaken for claims to factual historical understanding, resemblances can illuminate and inspire understanding (see for example Smythe, 2005). Further to this point, Moghaddam (2004) writes, ‘Perhaps it is not “data” as such that psychologists will find most valuable in literature, but new and deeper theoretical insights about human thought and action’ (p. 508). Metaphorical understanding depends on this distinction between the first or ordinary meaning, termed the literal, and the elaboration of this literal meaning, which can then be termed metaphorical. Ricoeur (1978) explains, ‘In the same way as the metaphorical sense not only abolishes but preserves the literal sense, the metaphorical reference maintains the ordinary vision with the new one it suggests’ (p. 154). The relationship between the reference and the interpretive elaboration, between the literal and the metaphorical is not necessarily hierarchical. Although the literal may be

considered 'first' this is merely heuristic and in certain instances metaphoric understanding may be 'first' and then be concretized into a literal meaning. One is not necessarily the foundation for the other. The point is that there is a movement between the metaphorical and the literal that requires a distinction.

Metaphor is not possible without the literal but the literal becomes absorbed by the metaphor. For this reason we must make a special effort to recall the distinction between the two. A presentist dialogue with a text can occur only while upholding a critical historical awareness that keeps open the space between metaphorical sameness and ordinary difference. Then, a dialogue between past and present can elaborate understandings, respect the difference of other times, and avoid atemporal universal claims to knowledge. Otherwise, we may become so concerned about what is history and what is fiction that we lose the opportunity to imagine there may be metaphorical significance to the stories told. Arguably, meanings of psychotherapy can take into account the specificity of a text's history and culture without becoming so narrow as to prevent the generation of symbolic continuities of meaning across time and place.

The possibility that we may gain symbolic illumination and innovative understanding of psychotherapy by reading literature from the past, motivates the current effort to understand possible continuities of meaning across time, place, and culture. With critical presentism, we can rethink the present and disrupt what is taken for granted, not by examining the conditions that produced certain experiences, but by metaphorical refigurations of the present in light of past representations. A critical presentist view understands interpretations of the past as metaphors for the present.

Along with the insights of the new historical consciousness as outlined above, this paper adopts the literary theory of Paul Ricoeur (1984) to consider a metaphorical way of studying ancient descriptions of certain subject matters of psychotherapy, navigating between universal claims of similarity and those that hold to absolute difference across time. Presentism is the projecting of ideas of the present into the past and, as explained above, it is considered an unacceptable fallacy of historiography (Danziger, 1997; Fischer, 1970; Harris, 1997). However, by reading the past symbolically, ideas of psychological healing may be read metaphorically in ancient texts to enrich and inform contemporary understandings of psychotherapy.

Psychological Healing Illuminated in Stories from the Past

Considering the subject of psychological healing and psychotherapy, Stanley Jackson (1999) positions the emergence of the term *psychotherapy* in the Liébeault-Bernheim school of suggestive therapeutics at the end of the 1880s in Nancy, France. He proposes that *psychological healing* can be understood as a more general term of treatment that uses, directs, examines, and interprets mental influences in order to heal. Unlike psychotherapy, stories of exorcism, confession, confiding, consoling, and solace are stories of psychological healing that have been around for millennia, throughout diverse cultures.

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1979) has at times argued for the basic identity of certain ancient concepts of medicine and modern concepts of dynamic psychology. However, historic representations of psychological healing need not describe present ideas and

practices of psychotherapy to provide insight. For example, psychological healing by way of soul retrieval, extraction of foreign objects, expulsion of evil spirits, confession, and counter-magic are narrative structures of magical, religious, and pre-modern empirical-rational procedures are not identical with, yet can have sensible bearing on, modern practices of psychotherapy. For example, Jackson (2003) finds in fifth and fourth century Hippocratic writings the principle of ‘*Contraria contraries curantur*,’ sometimes translated as, ‘opposites are cures for opposites’ (p. 202). Cure by contraries was a common theme of many healing stories and a prominent theory of healing throughout classical antiquity. The principle of contraries gives rise to new ways of thinking about the present day cognitive therapy practice of countering dysfunctional thoughts and cognitive distortions by generating contrary rebuttals.

Configuring Narrative Plots: Demonic, Tragic, and Transgressive

Examining the configuration of healing plots, Alon and Omer (2004) develop an uncritical presentist position and argue that fictional stories of the past have influenced clinical theory and practice so that they can be used in a historical literal sense to describe the practices and theories of psychotherapy that have developed. They identify and compare two healing plots – the demonic and the tragic. After describing their configuration of these plots, I will then describe another narrative structure of psychological healing – the transgressive – depicted in the work of Euripides’ *Bacchae* (Kirk, 1970; Sutherland, 1968). My intention is to demonstrate how historic narratives

may inspire new understanding without becoming appropriated as evidence for present-day conceptualizations.

Demonic

Ancient stories of demons and possession may remind one of the suffering communicated in psychotherapy (Alon & Omer, 2004). Something demonic seems to be experienced in times of personal and social upheaval. Alon and Omer identify the following four major features of the demonic plot: the helpless host; the hidden puppet master; the basically healthy but paralyzed 'I'; and the saving procedure. Also in their analysis, they identify the following six assumptions: all suffering comes from evil; the origin of evil is hidden; the other pretends to be one of us; hidden evil can only be detected by specialists; acknowledgement and confession are the precondition of cure; and real cure consists of eradicating underlying evil (pp. 30-33).

They go on to argue that the demonic narrative parallels the narrative structure of popular psychology as well as of mainstream professional literature. The demonic narrative structure can be taken symbolically as a story of psychotherapy, but it seems important that this parallel be taken as strictly metaphorical without slipping into taking it as a literal resemblance. Consider cognitive psychotherapy, where beliefs are held to lie at the root of mental suffering and dysfunctional beliefs are identified and banished. Or consider psychoanalytic psychotherapy, where consciousness is under the control of a hidden nefarious unconscious that needs to be brought to light by way of special techniques into a holding environment to eradicate duplicity. Although there is a

resemblance, a mimetic parallel, the demonic narrative is not a nascent form of cognitive-behavioral therapy or psychoanalysis.

Tragic

Unlike the demonic narrative, the tragic narrative does not take suffering as indicative of the presence of evil but explains suffering and sickness as an inevitable part of life that must be accepted and even embraced. Thus, there is a cathartic value to tragedy because it purifies through identification. Attempts at totally eradicating evil often lead to more suffering. Instead of banishment, compassion becomes the saving procedure (Alon & Omer, 2004). Analyzed by Alon and Omer, the tragic narrative assumes the following: suffering is an essential part of life; bad actions can result from positive human qualities because human failings are rigidified extensions of human strengths; one person is not so different from another. (pp. 38-40).

The tragic narrative may remind one of client-centered humanistic psychotherapy, where a therapist accepts others' suffering with total confidence in their goodness and ability or it may remind one of psychoanalysis, where the tragic is inescapable in human nature. However, if the tragic narrative influenced the emergence of humanistic psychology or psychoanalysis is a question for historical, not metaphorical, understanding. Instead, we can take the comparison symbolically and see the tragic in the humanistic therapy relationship or in the psychoanalytic relationship. Then, our understanding is expanded and there is a poetic stability of meaning across time without having to claim literal progressive continuity.

The historical continuity of poetic narratives with contemporary representations of psychotherapy seems most accurate and most fruitful as an interpreted continuity that takes up prefigured images of healing metaphorically to illuminate and refigure present understandings. Alon and Omer's analysis is useful and positive because it identifies narrative structures of psychological healing which may stimulate our imagination of what psychotherapy could be. Consider, for example how psychotherapy metaphorically involves tragic acceptance or banishment of evil. Although there may be a similarity, we need not claim that the similarity between dramatic tragedy and psychotherapy theories and practices supports an atemporal truth. Tragedy belongs to a world different than psychotherapy. For one to inform the meaning of the other each must be respected as belonging to its own world – only then can we grasp new meaning across a world of difference. This is the hermeneutic circle of interpretation and understanding, the circle of suspicion and faith (Ricoeur, 1970). The stories we live by become the stories that we hear and the stories we hear enrich the stories we live by.

Transgressive: Euripides' Bacchae

I would now like to turn to the story of *The Bacchae* and the narrative plot of transgression and psychological healing depicted there. In this story, Pentheus violates a taboo, which brings a mad and murderous reverie upon his aunts and his mother, Agave. Agave and her sisters are worshipers of Dionysus, but Pentheus outright mocks and deplores their worship of the god of wine. His grandfather, Cadmus, pretends devotion to

serve his own interests in dance and drink. Dionysus seeks his justice by playing on Pentheus' desire to spy on the dance and celebrations of the Bacchae. He leads Pentheus to the mountainside wilderness but the spying is quickly detected and, at Agave's lead, Pentheus is captured and ripped apart, his flesh scattered over the hill. Agave returns to Thebes carrying her son's head as a trophy, like the head of a lion after a successful hunt.

French ethno-psychiatrist Georges Devereux (1970) reads what follows as a 'psychotherapy scene.' Cadmus, Agave's father, diverts his daughter's attention from her fantasy to their reality. First, he heightens her senses so that she becomes located in physical reality, supporting a sense of her continuity in time. He also helps her recall the past, to remember where she belongs in society, recreating social bonds. After reclaiming her place in time, but also knowing her place with the other in the fabric of social being, she has then to acknowledge what she has done, to recognize the head in her arms as the head of her dead son. At this point, she tries to get her father to recount what has happened but he refuses and waits for her to voice her own recollections. After recalling the 'what' and the 'how' of her son's death, she is left with having to understand why. Cadmus proceeds by highlighting how the whole city had been mad and undone by Dionysus, that she was not alone; what happened, happened to her, but not only to her. Agave focuses her attention on the influence of Dionysus. Once she recognizes the evidence before her – her son's dismembered body, and the extent of her madness – she is shocked. The impact turns her further toward sober reason and away from fantasy and frenzy to consider her son's fate, her own actions, and how all survivors will be affected. Agave is now sane and suffering from the event. Her social, sane self is connected with being flawed and vulnerable. No longer divinely inspired, she sees her human madness,

degraded and limited. Therapy is complete when this link is made; the past becomes part of the present. Self-connected, Agave must now learn to live with what has happened.

Devereux (1970) argues for the clinical plausibility of this interaction between Agave and Cadmus, claiming this is the first documented account of recall and insight psychotherapy. Although in ancient Greek literature *sophrosyne*² was highly regarded to ensure health and sound reasoning, recall and insight oriented psychological healing was not construed as such until the early 20th century (Ellenberger, 1970, p. 343). In this sense, *The Bacchae* is unique in depicting a scene that can be read as a form of recall and insight psychotherapy.

Devereux (1970), however, finds the analogy so strong that he writes of ‘[t]he timeless appeal of this scene, which, because of its universally human validity, could with only minor and purely external modifications, unfold itself also in the consulting room of any modern psychiatrist.’ (p. 35) For example, he points to how, ‘[it] is the patient – and not the therapist – who must utter things; for it is not the therapist’s understanding of the patient, but the patient’s understanding of himself that effects the cure.’ (p. 43) As I have already stated, assuming this kind of identity of practices is unsatisfactory for many historians when it implies an essential reality that sustains a continuous meaning across time. There are many different stories of taboo, breach of taboo, of soul loss, resistance, and recovery that, without claiming transhistorical timeless significance, can offer rich sources of reflection on psychological healing. *The Bacchae* is a story that can be ‘translated’ into a contemporary lifeworld to enrich our understanding of psychotherapy without assuming that the interpretation is universally significant. To paraphrase Jean Laplanche (2003), the passage from a story to its understanding is a translation between

sign systems (p. 28). One can imagine becoming intoxicated, like Agave, losing control, acting out a violent passion, being unable to attend to the consequence of one's action, and then being gently lead to recognize oneself through these events. Here we are interpreting a message which 'binds and gives form' but does not make claims about a timeless reality.

A Narrative Analysis of Transgression and Healing

There are many stories of soul loss through sleep, fainting, or intoxication which make one vulnerable to accident, dangers, transgressions and taboos, where a healer functions as a mediator between the other irrational world where the soul is lost and this world of the living (Ellenberger, 1970, p. 6). Configured in the story of *The Bacchae* (where there is a frenzied loss of control) we can see a narrative structure that traces a path through: transgression; resistance to remembering; recall; shock; insight; and adjustment. The narrative restricts madness to a place in the time of one's life, preventing it from spilling into all of one's being. Transgression is explained as psychological frailty, where frenzied irrationality leads to impulsive and sometimes unacceptable actions, dissociation, and resistance to remembering. Healing begins with the work of recall, leading to a sobering shock, and insight into what all happened. Although temporarily frenzied, the sane social self prevails.

Several important moral precepts seem to be depicted in *The Bacchae*. As a story of transgression and healing, we can see how one's actions are subject to conditions, making one limited and fragile. Losing oneself in frenzy and wild excitement can put one at risk

for transgressive actions. Delusion, forgetting, and continued dissociation of self are ways of resisting remembering shameful and unacceptable events. When suffering unacceptable guilt, others may have a larger, more comprehensive, coherent sense of what one is experiencing and the meaning of one's fantasies – an understanding better than one personally has of oneself. Personal sanity seems to depend upon a continuous sense of self in time sustained by a set of relationships. And, finally, recollection of oneself and one's place does not repair the damage of transgression nor permanently eradicate neurotic resistance but restores one's personal sanity along with the ability to live in relation with others, to accept one's life, and face one's tasks.

The point here is not to try to exhaust the meaning of *The Bacchae* but to become more aware of prefigurations that get considered as psychological healing. Not just any story counts as a healing story; certain possibilities are allowed but not others. Some narrative structures catch the imagination and are interpreted as something that could happen and be considered as healing. There is discontinuity, yet, a semblance generated by interpretation that refigures our understanding of psychological ideas and assumptions of healing, allowing us to more clearly recognize what we believe and what else might be possible of psychotherapy.

A Critical Presentist Interpretation

Having argued that in the works of Evans, McGrath, and Milns (2003), Alon and Omer (2004), and Devereux (1970), historic literature is uncritically linked with the present,

what follows is a critical presentist interpretation of *The Bacchae* for the purpose of further understanding mental disorder and contemporary psychotherapy.

The Bacchae is a play that continues to be valued. After two and a half millennia, it continues to be read and performed³, seeming to illuminate something timeless. Yet, if there is a discontinuity of meaning from past to present and continuity of meaning is not the result of interpretations being handed down in unbroken progression to the present, then it seems that interpretation must reference something relatively stable in time.

Along with dialogical forces delimiting interpretation, there seem to be what we could call *diasomatic* dimensions of understanding. In part, we understand plays, poetic epics and prose fiction by feeling our way into the story. In this sense, interpretation involves the body. Understanding through time could, in part, depend on familiarity with being a human body along with familiarity with there always being inescapable social exigencies, and pre-existing cultural conventions into which we arrive. Arguably, the body is the first object of subjectivity, so we come to know another through this body. Furthermore, meaningful interpretation of *The Bacchae* seems to involve *sensing* the play. The text comes alive through the felt experience of meaning. The body as a reference for meaning across time does not fix meaning but may shape and delimit interpretations. The relatively stable presence of being embodied, the inescapable presence of interpersonal relations, along with inevitable social historical constructions with which we must contend may explain why some patterns repeat and become mythical instead of being unique ephemeral transitions in historical time.

One ground for claiming that what is understood today is continuous in some way with what was understood in ancient Greece, may rest on the certainty that the human

body, social interdependency, and cultural constructions are present now as they were in Ancient Greece. Not the same body or relations or systems but bodies, relations and systems nonetheless. The dynamic of ‘madness and recovery’ is prefigured linguistically in our cultural inheritance and non-linguistically in our embodiment. In this way, a 21st century Psychological refiguring of *The Bacchae* into what could be called ‘madness and recovery’ participates in a shared human experience and counts as a *true* configuration insofar as it is familiar, we recognize it, and can relate.

The feeling of being frenzied with inspiration, followed by desire and the press for impulsive, potentially detrimental action followed by the return to sober reason through coming to ones senses is probably not unfamiliar. It would seem that all human beings corporeally, linguistically and culturally experience some version of this pattern. A skeleton across time and place can be constructed recognizable, with specific interpretations being terribly ephemeral.

Reading *The Bacchae* symbolically can distend the present into the past and suggest a future. It is as if there is a recurring pattern of death and rebirth, chaos and order, insanity and sanity occurring in rhythmic variation. The political, historical significance becomes buried but more of the poetics is restored. On this reading, madness need not be repressed because it is part of a cycle that will circulate back to sanity and a new order. Psychological healing seems linked with psychological disorder in a rhythmic progression. Accepting madness, then, is the way it becomes banished and its banishment is the way that madness is invoked. Risk for greater harm seems to be the result of disrespecting the divine Dionysian presence of erotic and aggressive energies in life. Disavowing madness is an injustice that seems to polarize reason and unreason,

stagnating the rational and the irrational into extremes so they cannot circulate, resulting in disaster and exile.

Although the story of *The Bacchae* may remind us of the history of psychiatry and psychotherapy, this is not evidence for the truth of the categories in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* nor does the story figure into a historical development of these categories nor would I claim that the scene between Agave and Cadmus is what happens in the office of a contemporary psychotherapist. The play is valuable because it speaks to the importance of honoring the energies of Dionysus and reading the play symbolically seems relevant for the practice of psychological care. Kirk (1970) writes of ‘the inescapable power of the gods and the inviolability of established law’ (p. 94). Resisting Dionysus is futile and dangerous. The story of *The Bacchae* demands of its audience respect for frenzied inspiration, the power of exhilaration, and excitement beyond the bounds of rationality. Madness is threatening because it heralds a new order but to refuse space for the chaos of untamed emotion is problematic because such unreason is inevitably a part of human experience. Pentheus is boastful and tyrannical. He refuses to communicate and understand the unreasonable antics of the Bacchae and his attempts to dominate unreason with unified order end in disaster. While the madness of the Bacchae is disruptive, its divisiveness is also inspirational and fertile, resulting in a new political order. Inevitably, ecstasy transitions back to uninspired sobriety. This transition is facilitated by Cadmus, helping Agave come to her present senses and recognize how she has returned.

This psychological, psychoanalytic and Ricoeurian inspired interpretation likely would not make sense to the ancient Athenians. The interpretation may resonate with

some and carry forward as a reference for another to interpret in the future. This reading of the play may affect our understanding of contemporary references, such as insanity and psychotherapy. Psychiatry, clinical psychology, classification of mental disorders, and psychotherapy seem like contemporary social systems constructed to respond to such human patterns as depicted in *The Bacchae*.

Seeing how human excitement and irrationality, the movement from spontaneous exhilaration to careful sobriety, and the awe and respect madness demands from society, recurs across time and culture, the meaning of *The Bacchae* becomes mythical.

Metaphorical literature such as poems, prose fiction, epics, and dramatic plays appeal to cyclical, repetitive forms of time; unlike literal resemblances such as facts, theories and histories that assume linear progressive time. Freeman (1998) writes about the difference between historical time and mythical time and the limits of historical rational representation to satisfy our mythopoetic desires. He cites Eliade's book *The Myth of the Eternal Return* and explains how entrance to mythical time begins with imagining the first time something occurred. From there a world of multiplicity can emerge without losing the connection to a transcendent, primordial significance. Historical time, on this account, is empty of meaning because of its one-off quality, whereas mythical time repeats, albeit in multiple forms, in an archetypal gesture.

Although there may not be transhistorical narrative structures, it seems there are narrative structures that can invoke a transhistorical experience. Reading the interpersonal, social body as a shared reference, a degree of common ground can be imagined across cultures and time. A simple bodily experience becomes a centre for interlaying complex meanings and interpersonal and social encounters, forming a

reference to anchor meaning across time and cultures. Seeing as we are interdependent beings who experience recurring excitement, desire, frustration, and impulsive action, it seems that our excitability and our socialness are commonalities with multiple expressions depending on cultural traditions. Psychologically speaking, the biological features of dependency translate into the particular socialness of our being, generating psychological dynamics that bring forth unique social systems. Róheim (1941) cautions that, ‘interpretations of cultural elements through individual analysis is probably correct, but should be combined with the analysis of anthropological data’ (p. 163). Hence, to make this realist claim about excitability and socialness as stable across time, we must consider the political social climate of Athens at the time of Euripides so as not to over interpret the psychological significance. Likewise, we should keep in mind the social political climate of our times to appreciate the psychological reading of *The Bacchae* provided here. Our social institutions condition our being just as our institutions arise from our human nature. Somatic, interpersonal, existential, and social references will define any understanding of the movement from madness to recovery.

Historical Reference for The Bacchae

Readings of *The Bacchae* have offered insights into existential theory (Sale, 1977), psychoanalytic theory (Arvanitakis, 1998; Hubback, 1990; Parsons, 1990) and politics (Medelsohn, 2002). There are many ways of reading a single story for different purposes. For our purposes of understanding the interplay of historical reference and creative

interpretation in order to understand psychological healing and states of mind, consider the following historical situation at the time in which Euripides wrote *The Bacchae*.

In the midst of the Peloponnesian war, in his political plays, Euripides considers what it means to be Athenian and seems to be searching for an identity between unity and diversity, but failed negotiations result in nightmare scenarios. Medelsohn (2002) focuses on readings of *The Bacchae* that generate tragic consideration of the *polis*. Pentheus is a political leader trying to maintain State unity by suppressing the female characters that are tragic symbols of the forces of wilderness and diversity (p. 28). The uncivilized female must be contained because she ‘threatens to undo the city from within’ (p. 29). Tensions within the *polis*, rather than the *psyche*, are the object of interpretation. Medelsohn explains how the female was seen in Greek culture as ‘a potentially anarchic element within the rigidly organized, carefully hierarchized, and finally, masculine world of the *polis*, whose male citizens, like the state itself, were meant to be paragons of self-control’ (p. 29). He cites this as the reason why women are frequently characters in Greek drama even though they have been evidenced as invisible in Greek society. In this case, Euripides’ tragedies are a vehicle for political theorizing. Medelsohn admits that such readings, ‘animate the text’ but there is ‘no full recovery of the past that would be untainted by the critic’s own investments’ (p. 27). The specificity of Greek culture can be taken into account without narrowing the historical focus to the point of preventing interpretive understanding of contemporary life.

Risks

Poetic epics, prose fiction, and epic dramas can inspire new ways of thinking about somatic experience, interpersonal relations and social institutions. A narrative structure can enrich and expand our present understanding of a phenomenon but it runs the risk of restricting the complexity of the lived present to the singularity of one interpretation. When the distinction between the meaning of the historical reference and interpretation collapses, we run the risk of becoming oblivious to the possibility of other interpretations, reifying an idea as if it were timeless. Concepts exist in time. Ideas are recounted and interpreted within lived embodied realities. ‘Madness’, ‘recovery’, ‘excitable’ and ‘social’ make sense because they belong to someone’s world and say something about where one stands with respect to another world. With the focus on interpreting narrative structure, there is the risk that the story will be stripped of the social milieu in which the characters are placed so that the vibrant interplay of the social and the personal is collapsed and is taken for a fixed underlying meaning, slipping into atemporal claims, forgetting that any personal interpretation is also a social account. Furthermore, when narrative structure is misused as a procrustean bed, it can distort personal accounts to fit a generalized explanatory structure. Over-extending the relevance of a narrative structure, in this way, does not enrich and extend the meaning of psychotherapy. Instead, understanding becomes diminished and sacrificed to the building of ideological paradigms of knowledge.

A story must be told again and again for it to be meaningful in the present (Järvinen, 2004). However, when an interpretation is not couched within a sense of history, it does not illuminate a present configuration, nor inspire refigurations that move

one into an open future of possibility. Ahistorically stabilizing the renditions of understanding reduces the living moment to a determined present and a predetermined future where ossified explanations preclude spontaneously living in an unfolding world of meaning. Taking structure factually, without a sense of narration and therefore time, forgetting to consider the social, political, and moral worlds that the interpretation is reflecting, can unleash a search for evidence to prove the correctness of identified structures and assumptions at the expense of dialogical exploration of meaning. Using the past as evidence for timeless meanings can preclude understanding across differences, making it difficult to suspend disbelief and open one's world to that of another.

These are some dangers of working with narrative structures but they are risks we take when we stabilize a referent to elaborate an interpretation. Presentism allows us to understand one thing as another and increases the capacity to experience greater meaning. As long as the presentist elaboration is discernible from its reference and both are recognized as messages, then whatever interpretation is elaborated can be respected as an understanding of a referent where the referent itself was an interpretation. Essentialist, universal interpretations can be oppressive and exclusionary when the stability of the reference is reified as if it was timeless, but any understanding is brought to life through a particular reading. We can interpret a message however we want, to serve our own ends, as long as we respect the possibility of an original significance, thereby recognizing the limited metaphorical meaning of our interpretations.

Conclusion

Interpretations of the past in terms of the present are vulnerable to being taken up as evidence for decontextualized universal abstractions, assuming such universals are essentially the same across cultures and historical epochs. Taking a critical presentist view of the narrative continuity of meaning, one can imagine sharing the world of another without assuming an identity of meaning across worlds. Cultures are not hermetically sealed. It is possible to communicate and share meaning but this is not to say there are universals taking on different forms in different relationships, cultures, or historic epochs. Instead, telling and hearing the story of another world becomes relevant to one's actual world through interpretation. Structures change; for example, madness, care of the psyche, healing the soul, and treating mental disorders have distinctly different meanings. We imagine a similarity of meaning because one can *interpret* the story of one time and place as resembling another. One then understands one's life together with the story of another.

In connecting a historic narrative with the present, configurations of psychotherapy become refigured. Reading stories, both historical and contemporary, does not complete an interpretation but enriches the capacity to live in a meaningful world. By telling and hearing what prefigures one's imagination, the present may become more meaningful and open to possibilities for action. Retelling stories from the perspective of the present feeds the imagination and increases the capacity to experience the metaphorical continuity of our practices with ancient forms of healing.

End Notes

¹ Apparently, 'New Historicism' did not begin as a doctrinal position but as the agenda of an interdisciplinary group who institutionalized their vision by founding the journal *Representations* in 1983 (Kelley, 2001).

² *Sophrosyne* is sometimes translated as a combination of self-knowledge and moderation. Later, it was taken up by the Christian tradition and the meanings of self-restraint and moderation were emphasised to the near exclusion of self-knowledge.

³ In 1980, *The Bacchae* was performed on Broadway 61 times (Internet Broadway Database, <http://www.ibdb.com/production.asp?ID=3967>. Retrieved March 6, 2006.

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