

Poetry and Making Meaning of Unsymbolised Experience.

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*'I shelter in the arms of Poetry
Against the howling storms'*

[Sifting seeds; verse 1. C.Bailey 2021]

In this paper I reflect on some ideas that I have had about the usefulness of poems or fragments of poems that arise by chance in my mind while listening to a patient, and how they can assist in making meaning of unsymbolised experience. The ideas expressed in this paper also build on those that I discussed in a previous paper titled 'Poetry as a Reverie in the Analytic Landscape' (Bailey 2020; APAS online journal Psychoanalysis Down under issue 17) and a poetry workshop that I facilitated at the APAS conference in 2021.

In this paper I use the terms mother and analyst synonymously as well as the terms infant and patient, because in many respects the analyst/patient relationship, can be experienced as similar to the mother/infant relationship.

*'I find comfort on a tranquil day
Between your words
And the blossomed boughs.'*

[Sifting Seeds; verse 2. C.Bailey 2021]

Poetry can be experienced as a way of being with ourselves, being with our patients in the here and now; listening to ourselves as we listen to our patients struggle with painful memories, grief and trauma.

I don't claim to be a scholar in the art of writing poetry nor a philosopher or linguist. I won't be attempting to define what poetry is; but I believe that I can use my own experience to try to convey to you something about the curiosity that I have for poetry, and how useful it can be as a way of trying to understand and relate to the mind of another as well as to my own.

Self-expression can take many forms such as art, poetry, singing, music and dance. It is both inter-related and relating. Poetry as a form of self-expression or story-telling can be spoken, listened to, written down, set to music, even danced to and inspire a painting. Poems inter-relate and are relating.

Poems set to music can range from nursery rhymes to hymns or psalms, love songs to laments, battle cries to slave songs. The structure of poems varies widely ranging from sonnets to lyrics, ballads to Odes, narratives to haiku, epic poems and more. Poems are an ancient means of connecting with our emotional selves and to others, and our more 'primitive' states. Poems can express these states in ways that defy anything more cognitive and logical. For me poetry is a symbolic form of condensed language that carries within it a multitude of embodied emotions, meanings and ideas, that can only ever approximate what is deeply felt or sensed. A poem is a thing in itself, and is dispatched as it were, from the emotional heart to the outside world.

Let's take a brief look at history, and how humans for thousands of years have endeavoured to making meaning of emotional experiences. First Nations people in Australia have a rich oral tradition reaching back over 60,000 years. Their ancient history with its deep sense of belonging to country is suffused with visual art, songs, dance and stories about creation and dreamtime that go to the heart of cultural identity.

Before our ancestors discovered the ability to write, whether in cuneiform, hieroglyphics or the alphabet, poems and stories were memorised and handed down orally

often in the form of ballads for thousands of years. Stories were carved into bark, stone, etched onto clay and slate tablets, papyrus scrolls, parchment or animal skins. This was a slow and laborious process and few copies of original works have survived. With the invention of the printing press multiple copies of books could be printed, and in the last 30 years we have come to rely on the internet to store and disseminate our memories, ideas and thoughts.

With the exception of early Stone Age cave paintings, one of the oldest known surviving pieces of literature, is in the form of an epic poem. The Epic of Gilgamesh was written in cuneiform on several clay tablets over 4000 years ago. This poem has undergone many different translations and iterations over millennia. Some tablets were lost but as recently as 2021 one tablet was found and returned to the collection. Traces of the original stories such as those about creation and the great flood are found in religious books today. Other Epic poems such as the Homeric poems of the Iliad and the Odyssey, contain the dreams and mythologies of ancient civilisations not unlike ours today. Some ancient scripts were considered sacred and seemed to possess more power if spoken aloud, sung or chanted. As we can see poetry in its many forms and as a symbolic object, has an important place in most cultures and traditions all over the world, both ancient and modern. Our stories, songs and poems are timeless methods of self-expression and go to the core of our humanity.

Coming up to the present, we continue to live in a pre-symbolic and symbolic world in its many forms ie literature, music, painting, sculpture and dance etc. As stated we set poetry to music and there is something about the rhythm, beat and melody of classical lyric poetry for example, that can inspire us at a deeply visceral level. The lyre is an ancient musical instrument that was often used to accompany songs, hence the name lyric poetry.

Poet Charles Simic said that ‘The reason people make lyric poems and blues songs is because our life is short and fleeting. The blues bears witness to the strangeness of each individual’s fate. It begins wordlessly in a moan, a stamp of the foot, a sigh, a hum, and then seeks words for something or other that has no name in any language and for which all poetry and music is an approximation.’

During life we experience a yearning to share our thoughts and emotions with at least one other person who can listen to us without censorship or judgement. There is a timeless, ancient embodied sense of rhythm and melody in poems and in songs that links us to our earliest childhood memories, experiences and relationships. Did poetry begin as a lullaby as we were rocked gently in our mothers’ arms, in the cradle of dreams?

*‘Thoughts spring up
Like distant prayers
When I seek you after your going.’*

[Sifting seeds; verse 3 2021 C.Bailey]

Edward Hirsch in his book titled *‘How to Read a Poem; And fall in Love with Poetry,’* states, ‘Reading poetry is a way of connecting through the medium of language more deeply with yourself even as you connect more deeply with others.’ Hirsch, whose book I found both enjoyable and informative for an amateur poet like myself, also says that ‘Poetry needs a reader to possess it or be possessed by it.’ I agree and would like to add that poetry not only requires a reader but a listener, because a child, an illiterate person or a crowd at a concert can all become possessed by poetry whether it is spoken or sung. Everyone has a story that can only come alive in both the telling and receiving. The desire to communicate is irresistible and deeply embedded within our minds and bodies. This is true from the moment we utter our first cry at birth to our last sigh before death. Indeed it may be a question of life or death that someone is listening to us, is able to take in what we are trying to say, and that what we say matters.

How does this all fit with psychoanalysis? Psychoanalysis encourages us to get in touch with our deepest feelings, emotions, sensations and memories through the process of free associations and dream work, bringing them out of the shadows as it were, into consciousness. In this way the unconscious becomes conscious, can be thought about and re-experienced; and through the process of symbolisation linked to words. The way forward is then open to the possibility of change and transformation, and for relationships to feel enriched.

On the subject of shadows, Plato told us the story about a group of people imprisoned in a cave. The prisoners are chained facing the cave wall, and behind them is a fire that casts shadows of the objects in the cave, on the wall. It is these shadows that the prisoners have come to believe as real rather than the objects themselves. Only one prisoner manages to escape from the cave and is then able to realize that the shadows are illusory. In other words, what Plato seems to be saying is that, until we have the courage to turn and face the objects that cast shadows, we will forever remain imprisoned. It is the task of the psychoanalyst, to turn his patient from the shadows to face the truth.

*'No more to reach you
Or what's familiar
Has passed grasping, touching.'*

[Sifting seeds; verse 4 C.Bailey 2021]

Dream work, reverie, working with imagination, metaphor and symbolic meaning, working in the Transference/Counter Transference, projection, introjection and interpretation, are the art and craft of psychoanalysis, the tools of the trade and every bit as important as the science and theory. Poems have a place in the analyst's tool box because they arise in reverie, dreams and imagination and have a way of making the non-symbolic, symbolic; distilling feelings, affects, sensations, images into meaning, into thoughts and into words.

In order to think about reverie, dream work, poetry and imagination in more detail, let's turn for a moment to what Jeffrey Eaton describes as the 'Emotional Field,' what Thomas Ogden calls the 'Analytic Third' and Antonino Ferro 'The Field.' Here a short poem that may help us to think about the field.

*'By the help of the dim moonlight
Go along the dark and quiet path in the field.'*

[Author unknown - Japanese in origin]

Here is an invitation to go on a journey akin perhaps to the beginning of an analysis. The poet is not asking us to take any path, but a specific path, a quiet and dark path in the field; and not any field, but *'the'* field. The moonlight also conveys a sense of shadows and objects that are as yet, only dimly perceived. The poet has not provided us with answers as to what we may find in the field, but nevertheless invites us to enter a landscape that is unexplored and seemingly unknown. Bion encourages the analyst to enter these uncharted territories with the patient, by adopting an internal state 'beyond memory and desire.'

The use of reverie as a form of communication informs the analyst about what is happening in the Transference/ Counter transference. Psychoanalyst Jeffrey Eaton describes reverie as that which, 'belongs not just to the mother/analyst but to the analytic couple.' He talks of two minds finding each other thereby creating a 3rd space that he calls the 'emotional field,' the space that Thomas Ogden calls the 'Analytic Third.' Beyond rational thought, judgement, memory and desire there is an emotional field where we can meet.

Psychoanalyst Howard Levine [2016] states that a Post Bionian concept of 'The Field' is the name we give to the emotional dimension created by the 'unconscious affective interaction and inter-affectivity of the patient in the analytic context.' Levine describes how psychic reality is a type of transitional space [Winnicott], that has a different reality to 'external social reality.'

In other words in psychic reality, time is non linear as in a dream. Reverie, like dreaming also has a psychic reality, a quality where time is non linear, where past and present appear to intermingle. Reverie arises in the emotional field, unbidden from the unconscious where feelings, sensations, and imagery distil into meaning, thoughts and words. A few words arising in the reverie or dream of the analyst can be encapsulated within a poem. A poem arising as if by chance in the emotional field from a timeless psychic reality could be the psychoanalytic object or form that is linking, making meaning of something in the here and now, and therefore requires investigation.

*'I find a lonely comfort
In the poesy
That comes in a long line from you.'*

[Sifting Seeds verse 5. 2021 C.Bailey]

Because poetry relates and is relating, it can be thought of as evoking a unique unconscious affective interaction and inter-affectivity between the patient and analyst, poet and listener, the emotional couple. The relationship is contained within the emotional field, the analytic third, a space where stories can be rediscovered, re-experienced, transformed and re-told. A poem can be an *affective* form or analytic object that appears out of my unconscious at the contact boundary [Bion]. It assists me to listen to my patient's unconscious narrative or transference in the emotional field.

The following short poem arose in my mind as a reverie while I was sitting with a patient many years ago. I have presented this poem in a previous paper, and use it here again to illustrate the powerful emotions that a short poem can evoke.

*'The hidden soul lies in its shell
A pearl
Longing to be found.'* [C.Bailey 2017]



This short poem was a signpost that pointed me towards a deep sense of loss in the patient. Feeling lost and longing to be found was as yet an un-symbolised emotional experience in the field. My emotional experience of the patient was one of intense sadness and loneliness followed by the visual image of a single pearl, lying in its shell. The shell was open and the pearl vulnerable and exposed. I was subsequently able to understand the unconscious symbolic meaning in the transference/counter transference, and find words for the patient's experience. The past experience still existed powerfully in the patient's mind and had emotional significance in the here and now. It was able to be understood by the analyst and shared with the patient in the emotional field. The reverie of the analyst in this instance was firstly a non-verbal feeling/affect or visceral sensation followed by the emotional experience and then the visual imagery that transformed into thoughts, symbols and words that linked together past and present into a short poem. Words make meaning of un-symbolised internal emotional experiences and feelings.

Externally there may 'appear' to be very little happening, where any kind of interpretation could shatter a delicate shell. But the poem that emerges from the analyst's reverie, is in itself an unconscious affective communication by the patient in the emotional field, a psychoanalytic object *and* evidence of something happening in psychic reality.

The maternal capacity or alpha function [Bion] of the analyst to think about the patient's experience, process it and communicate it back to the patient in a way that conveys a caring attitude, is what Bion calls 'reverie.' The mother's/analyst's ability to 'contain' or process the infant's/patient's raw emotions, makes meaning of what is communicated and turns it into digestible food for thought. Over time the patient much like the infant is able to internalise the mother's/analyst's capacity to think with him about his psychic structures, objects and embodied experiences. This is the basis of the formation of the patient's/infant's good internal objects and becomes the foundation of the ego's capacity to think about emotional experiences, opening the way to transformation. To 'meet' the patient, the analyst has to use similar tools used by the poet, ie metaphor and symbols in an effort to link experiences, to seek something hidden, and like the poet find meaning.

When the mind of a patient 'appears' to be a barren or post- apocalyptic place, it is hard for the analyst to find life let alone meaning or an awareness of a self. The analyst may experience a nowhere timeless zone inhabited by a survivor who has adapted to life without hope or sense of a future. There may be a feeling of a void or psychic deadness in the patient, a mindlessness where contact with life or vitality is a frightening experience and what Bion called a 'nameless dread,' a recurring nightmare described by Winnicott as 'fear of breakdown,' or falling forever into unthinkable anxiety. It is the business of the psychoanalyst to explore those psychic realities with the patient. This is where poetry as a reverie or as a symbolic way of thinking about, and making meaning of the patient's internal experience, can be used by the analyst as a way of keeping something alive.

Here is a poem by Emily Bronte that touches on some of the ideas we have been reflecting on.

Poem by Emily Bronte 'Spellbound' written in 1837

*The night is darkening around me,
The wild winds coldly blow,
But a tyrant spell has bound me
And I cannot, cannot go.*

*The giant trees are bending
Their bare boughs weighed with snow,
And the storm is fast descending
And yet I cannot go.*

*Clouds beyond clouds above me,
Wastes upon wastes below;
But nothing drear can move me;
I will not, cannot go.*

This poem was written by a young Emily Bronte [Author of *Wuthering Heights*] and conjures up a storm where something frightening is taking place. Perhaps there is also something fearful happening in Emily's mind. I'm left wondering what was *really* frightening her when she wrote this poem? The fear expressed in the poem is timeless and still palpable at a visceral level several hundred years later. Her poem is an example of the potent power of the written word and how it can possess us in a timeless way.

There is a very alive experience of dread in Emily's words as well as evidence of her defiant and resolute spirit; and as frightened as she is, she will not give in. The title itself [Spellbound] seems to add to the awe of the tempest over which Emily has no control and she is held frozen as if captured under a spell in a moment in time. Could it be that she is paralysed with fear and cannot move herself out of harm's way?

Emily's poem could be an expression of what may be happening in my patient's mind as it, or a similar poem surfaces as a reverie in my own mind. Is my patient trapped spellbound in psychic reality, a timeless zone, by a 'nameless dread' [Winnicott] and unable to move out of the shadows of a storm. Am I sensing speechless terror in the patient's transference? The patient may have brought a traumatic memory embodied in a nightmare or had an emotional outburst towards me. This information holds clues, not only about the patient's past but also points to 'something' happening in the here and now in the patient's transference in the field. The nightmare or emotional tirade has appeared in the emotional field in the form of a storm, and symbolic meaning has to be found. A psychoanalytic object embodied in a poem.

In a previous paper titled '*Poetry as a Reverie in the Analytic Landscape*' (Bailey 2020) I quoted psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden who stated that the dream state is similar to 'the darkness of sleep' [Ogden 2001] and it appears at a 'contact boundary' [Bion] between preconscious and conscious states. It is at that place where, as Ogden describes it, 'dreaming, and reverie....are born.' Ogden [2001] also states that 'reverie can take any form including poetry.' He describes a process whereby the analyst takes a step back from the familiar place of logical thought and external reality, and experiences his waking dreams. It is in this timeless place where self-consciousness is generated uniquely through symbolisation. What Ogden is saying is that, the experience of what it means to be truly human lies largely outside our conscious awareness. This is the place where the psychoanalyst does his work.

Facilitation and containment by the mother/analyst of the infant/patient's primitive mental states is essential, firstly for the formation of a secure safe relationship in order for analysis to take place, and secondly to facilitate the infant/patient being born into his own mind. The analyst's reverie or waking dream is similar to that of the mother for her baby as she tries to decipher her child's cries and sighs.

*In a sense these types of pre or proto-conversations embody the true meaning or essence of thought, and it takes time for the mother/analyst to develop a particular type of attunement or language, in order to understand what the infant/patient is trying to say and to help him find the words. We all begin life in a pre-infantile, pre-linguistic, pre-symbolic place in utero. We have a natural emotional predisposition to form relationships and develop symbolic language in order to communicate. It follows that embodied memories or experiences from pre-infantile and infantile life can be contained within reverie and dreams.

Jeffrey Eaton states that 'These early experiences are pre-symbolic,' that is they are preverbal and lie outside conscious experience. The analyst and patient co-construct or dream these pre-symbolic experiences into consciousness together, within the emotional field.

*In much the same way the mother and her infant find a way to relate and communicate pre-linguistically and pre-symbolically, initially through the physical holding and loving care of the infant by the mother, and eventually symbolically through words.

Similarly the analyst and patient find a way to begin to relate to each other in a wordless unsymbolised state, within the containment of an emotional field or a unique relationship. Eventually words make meaning of these unsymbolised experiences.

*'The milky air is pillowly sweet
With your quiet murmurings
In my sleepy ears.'* [CBailey 2017]

In the mother and infant relationship there is a continual oscillation between un-integration and integration [Winnicott] during the developmental process of the infant's mind. So too is there a similar developmental process evolving in the patient's mind during psychoanalysis. By revisiting memories/unsymbolised experiences in the course of an analysis there is a slow movement forward and backward between construction, destruction and repair, an oscillation between un-integration, disintegration and integration [Winnicott], a movement towards and away from the shadows.

The process of psychoanalysis can be likened to the rhythmic movement of the tide, that leaves change on the sea shore each time it recedes and returns.

There is something similar to be found in the rhythm of lyric poetry, in the melody of ballads and songs, in the movement of the dance, and in the sigh and hum of an ordinary mother who gently rocks and sings a lullaby to her infant.

These rhythmic forms of expression are innate to humans and have been present throughout our history. Each communication brings about change to both within the relationship.

Here is a poem by Emily Dickinson.

Poem by Emily Dickinson.

*Adrift! A little boat adrift
And night is coming down!
Will no one guide a little boat?
Unto the nearest town?*

*So sailors say, on yesterday
Just as the dusk was brown
One little boat gave up its strife,
And gurgled down and down.*

*But angels say, on yesterday,
Just as the dawn was red,
One little boat o'erspent with gales
Retrimmed its masts, redecked its sails
Exultant, onward sped!*

When I read this poem I imagine a vulnerable child adrift and in danger of drowning and I'm aware of my own sense of helplessness. It appears to me that hope is lost and that a drowning will occur before the safety of a harbour can be reached.

Perhaps the boat/child is indeed lost below the waves in utter darkness. But with the dawn of a new day, it appears that not only does the boat survive but it recovers and speeds on exultantly against the odds. There is a religious theme about death followed by new life, a resurrection as told by angels. An ending and a new beginning. I'm reminded of moments when patients are engulfed by despair and seem to lose all hope. As the observer I experience a sense of utter

helplessness. But just as it appears that life is no longer possible and the patient won't survive, there is an ability to find or choose 'something' deep below the destructive waves that paradoxically, breathes new life and fresh hope. Could it be that Emily in her darkest moment could find a truth? We may never know, although we do know that Emily suffered from immense pain in her life and poetry was a lifeline.

*'There is a harbour
To be found between the sheaths of words
Where I sit with you
Sifting seeds.*

[Sifting Seeds; Verse 6. 2021 C.Bailey]

In the darkest moment a patient may 'find' a truth, a deep insight. The truth frees him from the pull of death thus enabling him to make choices, and to move away from the psychic reality of drowning, where timelessness relentlessly returns him to an un-past past [Levine]. Perhaps in that moment there is an experience by the patient of not being alone, of being held and received into a safe harbour in the analyst's mind?

*A small boat appears in the mind's eye
The bow cleaves clear water
Eye to the future.
The wake flows behind
Eye to the past.*

[Dream Boat, C.Bailey 2021]

Over time, due to the alpha function [Bion] of the analyst, a series of reveries may appear from the unconscious. These reveries may contain word objects such as poems that can be interpreted and act like yarn that weaves together all the un-integrated and scattered pieces in the patient's mind. The integrated internal object feels whole and alive in the here and now, and cannot be described so succinctly in any other way.

Jeffrey Eaton says that reverie and the alpha function of the analyst's mind, create possibilities and choices and an emotional transformation in the patient's mind, where imagination, creativity, playfulness and mindfulness can coexist alongside painful memories and grief, and free up the possibility of deeper emotional relationships in the here and now and into the future.

Ultimately there is an inherent sadness in the realisation that our deepest desires to communicate are predestined to be thwarted to some degree, because language being the blunt instrument that it is, can only ever be an approximation of our deepest yearnings. In the same way a painting or a dance capture only a fragment of what we truly desire to express.

Even so, words are a pathway for grief to find expression and consolation because somewhere in our minds there exists is a unique complex personal narrative, physical, sensual and emotional, that goes on a long journey from the unconscious to the preconscious into consciousness; from the unknown to known, from memories, dreams and imagination, from that which is un-thought into thoughts; from pre-symbolic into symbolic, from preverbal into verbal, and finally distils into words that embody in a condensed form an approximation of what is deeply felt. It is these faint cries from the shadows and the oceanic depth of the unconscious that the analyst tries to hear, decipher and find words for expression.

Finally I have included a few lines from a poem written by **Derek Walcott** titled '**Love after Love**'. [Sonnet XLIII] but I recommend that you read the poem in its entirety.

This poem is a message of love about the poet to himself. There is a sense of light hearted delight and joy in re-discovering and welcoming himself back into his home after many years. Like many journeys through life, the poet's journey has been epic. But in the process of enduring many hardships, storms and immense suffering, he has found what is most deeply human about himself in all his complexity.

'...you will greet yourself arriving at your own door.....and each will smile at the others welcome.....'

The stranger who is being welcomed, is not a stranger after all, but himself. He also acknowledges that for years he has loved other forms of himself such an inauthentic self.

'.....Give back your heart to itself..'

The poem feels transformative, where the poet has found an opportunity to turn away from the illusory shadows on the cave wall that have imprisoned him, to face himself unadorned, unashamed and authentic. He is surprised and delighted that the 'somebody' he has found at the end of such an epic journey is in fact himself; the *he of himself* who has been quietly waiting for *him* to return to the beginning.....that is to return home.



Fragile Parts

*My most fragile parts
Were delicately held
When I placed them in your hands.
Scars became distant storms
Dreams a cosy comfort.'* [C.Bailey 2021]

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Additional Notes.

*Eleana Mylora and Sophie de Mijolla gave two wonderful papers at the 2021 IPA conference where they discussed the idea of the 'mother tongue' as the primary secret object, the psychic expression between the mother to her infant and this language is unique to each couple. This is not the same notion as the first linguistic language spoken eg English, rather it is the psychic and/or 'corporeal language' of the couple. They also discussed the idea of 'family noise' that is an extension of the earliest infantile psychic experiences. What remains in the adult psyche are the 'magic words' and remembrances that are not understood but linked to the myths, the music/rhythm or melody.

This points to how the infant is a deeply social creature, and in an early primitive way tries to organise the world so that it has meaning. The 'infant/carer language' becomes visible when the linguistic language breaks down and there is a regression to obsessions/repetitions and compulsions in an effort to fill in the gaps between words, images and meaning. The 'corporeal language' or 'mother tongue' and 'family noise' reside in our bodies and in our dreams.

Sadly despite searching the web, I haven't found the titles of their papers (only my brief notes here) but I wish to acknowledge that the presentations given by Eleana Mylora and Sophie de Mijolla were inspirational to my thinking when writing this paper. I hope they don't mind my incomplete acknowledgement of them and their work here.

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