



Myself: How to be as if—A Review
Rosemary Faire

*POIESIS: A Journal of the
Arts and Communication*
Vol. 6, 2004
©2004 EGS Press
Printed in Canada.
All rights reserved
ISSN 1492-4986/2004

Intimacy and Alienation: Memory, Trauma and Personal Being, by
Russell Meares, Routledge, London/Taylor & Francis Inc.,
Philadelphia, 2000, or in paperback: Brunner-Routledge, NY, 2001.

*Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.*

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

Two Spheres of Existence

Meares describes the self as a “special form of conversation” about inner experience based on non-linear, associative, narrative thinking, using the poetic language often found in symbolic play. This self is distinct from the other sphere of existence (the identity), which is directed outwards and uses linear, propositional thinking and the language of adaptation. Different forms of memory serve these two orientations: specific episodic and autobiographical memory, the basis of stories and group bonding, is the stuff of self and intimacy, whereas semantic memory has survival value for the identity, being the source of fact recall and generalizations—including those about “me.”

The Protoconversation and the Development of Doubling

The caregiver’s (and therapist’s) vital task is to engage the child (or adult) in a “protoconversation,” described by Meares as a “dance,” pleasurable to both partners. This provides the child with reflections of itself (“resonating representations”) based on feeling, which show the child who “me” is. (Music-centred expressive arts therapist Margareta Wärja [1999] has eloquently described the way in which music can serve a mothering function in therapy by communicating such pre-symbolic “vitality affects.”)

A “doubleness” of consciousness grows out of the internalisation of this reflection, so that both facts and stories can coexist in consciousness. In the presence of trauma, or failure of the caregiver

What does it mean when we say, “I was not myself”? Most of us can look back on moments in our everyday lives with embarrassment or wonder, expressed commonly as “I don’t know what got into me,” or “I lost it.”

Russell Meares’ latest book explores the nature of this “myself,” its relationship to “I” and “me,” its fragility in the face of trauma, and the possibilities for its restoration. Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Sydney and Director of Psychiatry at Westmead Hospital in Sydney, Meares has worked extensively with clients suffering borderline personality disorder.

The book is both highly readable and academically intense, bringing together the work of William James on the “stream of consciousness,” Hughlings Jackson’s concept of “self,” Pierre Janet’s model of “dissociation/integration,” James Mark Baldwin’s studies of human development, and current theories of memory. Given this enormous scope, I have chosen in this brief review to focus specifically on the aspects of Meares’ book which speak to me and stretch my own imagination as an expressive arts therapist centered in music and somatic-movement therapy.

to adequately *re-present* the child to itself, such doubling can become disrupted: the story of the self is lost and only limited chronicles of facts remain.

Traumatic Memory Systems

Also called “disruptive systems,” these produce a contraction in the field of consciousness triggered by “priming” circumstances that resemble the original trauma. The earlier and the more severe the trauma, the more the autobiographical and episodic memory systems will have been disrupted. This could leave only factual recall, or wordless images, or—even less accessible to consciousness—imageless, bodily affects and impulses.

The weakness of the traditional, transference-based, interpretive approach to therapy, Meares points out, is that by staying at the level of objectivity and working to develop insights, only the semantic (facts) system is addressed and the client stays in the “trauma zone.”

The therapist's first task is to develop a relationship with the patient in which it is possible for a mental activity, which is non-linear and feeling based, to emerge. (p.130)

This brings to mind the “alternative experience of worlding,” which Knill (2000) proposes to be at the heart of the therapeutic process.

Feeling-Tone and Value in Therapy

Meares describes history’s neglect of the concept of *value* in philosophy and psychology, and argues for the reinstatement of *feeling-tone* as central in constructing reality. He suggests that the felt value of an experience arises out of “those special forms of continuity between inner and outer existence” (p. 67), such as those that often occur in the reflective protoconversation.

The therapist listens for subtle shifts in his client’s emotional tone, tone of voice, and bodily movements as “markers of unknown areas of psychic life which have not been linked up in conversation with the world of another... a new and more comprehensive story must be told” (p. 83).

The therapist also practises a form of “doubling” in striving to monitor his experience at the same time as being “taken into the patient’s

personal system” (p. 109). His willingness to engage in interpersonal resonance rather than remaining at the level of information transfer (foreignness) allows a patterning to emerge “as though all the harmonic variations of the same melody [...] light up” (Edgar Levenson quoted by Meares, p. 127); this gives rise to a level of complexity in the stream of consciousness which Meares likens to Mandelbrot’s geometry.

Meares uses the memorable image of “flights and perchings” to describe the process of intimate conversation: the perchings allow each participant time to engage the sensorial imagination.

Expressive Forms

Although (curiously) not mentioning the arts therapies as such, Meares advocates a use of language that comes from the poetic consciousness:

What is required is a form of language resembling the artistic process as Susanne Langer defined it, which strives towards the finding of 'expressive forms to present ideas of feeling.' (p. 145)

He does cite a case example (p. 90) of a young woman patient whom his father, Ainslie Meares, worked with over seven years. This woman produced a remarkable series of about 200 paintings which told the story of her trauma and her recovery. The paintings reveal a form of pathological identification, which Meares calls *malignant internalisation*. “The frightening, hated image of the traumatising other now seen in monstrous form, is fused with the helpless victim, whose bodily-self is misshapen and fragmented” (p. 92). The young woman’s gradual recovery was associated with the emergence of a dominant theme in her paintings: a three-winged bird. Eventually, the bird flew, free of its phallic third wing.

Implicit Metaphor

*And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;*
—Gerard Manley Hopkins

At the core of self may be a highly valued experience, kept secret, which is “the potentially germinal centre out of which grows a creative

life" (p. 74). By being sensitive to what is most personal in a client's remarks, one may invite a conversation in which the client discovers an implicit metaphor, a "means of visualising the inner world" (p. 124), a visualisation which is fundamental to integration.

Flight of Fancy: Embodied Metaphor?

In his paper "The Other Inside: Memory as Metaphor in Psychoanalysis," Paul Antze (2001) argues that the price of the current trend in neuropsychanalysis to over-enthusiastically embrace procedural memory as the key to trauma therapy is likely to be the neglect of metaphor. Meares' book counters this trend by describing a complex interplay between memory systems, and by placing visualization and artful relating at the center of the process of recovering the story and valuing the self. How, then, is visualization so powerful? Does visualization (including all the senses) provide the voice with a melody through which the song of the self can be sung? Is it the bridge across the divide between soma and story?

If our earliest somatic way-of-being-and-responding-in-the-world (based on perceptual and procedural memory) is the substrate of later metaphoric constructions of "how it is" and "how to relate," drawn from the family of origin, cultural and imaginal realms, and mythology, could a transformative metaphor exert its power through moving and touching us on a somatic level (Gendlin's "body shifts" come to mind [Gendlin, 1980])?

The "as-if" imaginative play of a baby animal-child seems to be necessary for the laying down of new procedural patterns; this has been harnessed by somatic educators in the very effective use of ideokinetic imagery (Sweigard, 1974) to facilitate subtle neuro-muscular shifts in patterns of somatic tension. For example, an effective somatic metaphor which Linden has used in his work with clients who have a history of abuse (Linden, 1989) asks the client to imagine embodying power, then compassion, then both: how could one embody power and compassion at the same time?

The space of "asking-and-not-knowing" inherent in the creative act, *poiesis* and artistic dialogue may be the place where somatic

metaphors can be restructured. Without this, the choices of the "how-to"/procedural system are limited to what is already known. Could, therefore, the power of visualization be, as in ideokinetic imagery, to create an "as-if" space in the "how-to" system, a space that can begin to bring forth the metaphors of a new story of self?

From my vantage point (perching after this flight of fancy), I am visualizing a dance which celebrates both the somatic animals that we have always been, and the magic creations of *poiesis* that can inhabit us and melt our crystals into liquid, enabling us to be *as if*.

References

- Antze, P. (2001). "The Other Inside: Memory as Metaphor in Psychoanalysis." *POIESIS: A Journal of the Arts and Communication, Volume III*, p.100.
- Gendlin, E.T. (1980). *Focusing*. Toronto: Bantam.
- Knill, P. J. (2000). "The Essence in a Therapeutic Process: An Alternative Experience of Worlding?" *POIESIS: A Journal of the Arts and Communication, Volume II*, p. 6.
- Linden, P. (1989). "Being in Movement: Intention as a Somatic Meditation" *Somatics: Magazine-Journal of the Bodily Arts and Sciences*. VII(1). 54-59.
- Sweigard, L. (1974). *Human Movement Potential: Its Ideokinetic Facilitation*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Wärja, M. (1999). "Music as Mother: The Mothering Function of Music Through Expressive and Receptive Avenues." In S. K. Levine & E. Levine (Eds.) *Foundations of Expressive Arts Therapy: Theoretical and Clinical Perspectives* (pp. 171-193). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.