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The Moon Is a Silver Coin
Let Poetry Stimulate the Transrational Potential in Children and Adults!

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Abstract

This is a theoretical paper aiming at enriching biblio/poetry therapy with a new framework. It consists in a vindication of a "transrational" world view, defined as "perceptions developed and combined in ways that are rejected by an empirical-rational world view". Such perceptions are frequently dismissed as "magical", "animistic", or "superstitious"; frequently denigrated in children; and submerged in adults. Yet they harbor a great potential, worth cultivating purposefully, for personal growth; for a sense of coherence counteracting malaise and promoting resilience; as well as enhanced self-esteem in children.

Children suffer from being constantly reproved for their deficiencies in the adult world, including their supposedly wrongheaded transrational mode of perception. Instead of confining that mode to the preserve of children's literature, it should be displayed to children in prestigious adult poetry where it occurs in abundance, sometimes with explicit links to childhood. This can engender in children a fellow feeling with adult role models, thereby boosting their self-esteem shaken by the adult world's fault-finding.

As for adults, they have learnt since their early school years to suppress and belittle the transrational – including their own nocturnal dreams – in favor of empirical rationality. This may cause mental malaise and/or stunt personal growth. However, such conditions can be counteracted in poetry therapy by systematic and attentive exposure to freely metaphorical and associative poetry.

Having established these basic goals, the paper calls for more research into the specific features and potentials of the transrational world view in adults and in young people of different ages.

Keywords: poetry therapy; transrational world view; anxiety; subjugation of children; metaphors; children's literature

Introduction

A main aim of poetry therapy is to foster mental resilience and alleviate negative feelings such as malaise, anxiety, and depression. Such feelings may, on the one hand, be triggered by specific individual causes – traumatization, physical illness, bereavement, divorce, economic hardship. On the other hand, as Viktor Frankl (2008 [1946]), Irvin Yalom (1980), and Emmy van Deurzen (2012) have made clear, they may also arise from the more general existential predicament of failing to find meaning and purpose in life. This paper focuses on a societal area between these two extremes: a predicament that is collective but due, not to human existence and mortality in general, but to a feature peculiar to Western societies in late modernity.

This is a world view that is secular and empirical-rational, i.e., based on observations made through the senses, sometimes reinforced by man-made instruments, and on rational conclusions drawn from these observations. This is useful in everyday life and it has yielded remarkable scientific,

technological and medical achievements in the last couple of centuries. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the empirical-rational world view is a universal given; in fact it constitutes only one possible paradigm for a collective perception of life. Both historically and in other present-day cultures there are many alternatives which in the dominant Western context of today are described and frequently denigrated as "magical", "animistic", "superstitious", or just "wrongheaded". These alternatives occur in our nocturnal dreams – usually dismissed as "just a dream" – and are embraced by children. Theirs is a "transrational world view", which I define as "perceptions developed and combined in ways that are rejected by an empirical-rational world view".

Some classics of education such as Friedrich Froebel's *The Education of Man* (Froebel, 1891 [1826]) and Maria Montessori's *The Discovery of the Child* (Montessori, 1967 [1950]) are keen to vindicate mental traits peculiar to children. Their influence has been salutary but insufficient to counteract adult condescension towards the transrational world view of children. If, for instance, a child says a creaking door is speaking angrily, he or she may either be corrected or smiled at for fertile powers of nonsensical invention – based on the presumed privilege of the empirical-rational paradigm to define what is genuinely real and true.

Growing up, children are programmed to embrace that paradigm and give up their transrational perceptions, or at least fashion them as hypotheses that can be tested against that which counts as real in the adult world. This spells pragmatic efficiency but also impoverishment since a wide spectrum of spontaneous human experiences and perspectives on the world is devalued and suppressed.

This, I maintain, is one neglected aspect of the cultural malaise described by Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud, 2002 [1930]). More specifically, it can be seen as one instance of the anxiety caused by not achieving the "sense of coherence" which Aaron Antonovsky, in *Health, Stress, and Coping* (1979), rightly identifies as a basis of mental wellbeing.

A major function of all art, I argue, is to open up the spectrum of available human world views stunted by a one-sided application of the empirical-rational stance. In this, poetry plays an important part and one that can be developed systematically by poetry therapy. This can enrich our adult lives and counteract the mental imbalance, malaise, and anxiety that may result from society's systematic suppression of the transrational side of our personalities. In children it can, in addition, strengthen their sense of self-esteem undermined by recurrent denigration, explicit or implicit, of their transrational perceptions as well as their behavior in general.

In what follows I exemplify forms of transrational perception characteristic of poetry, also citing the fellow feeling with children and their world view expressed by some writers. As a further indication of this connection, I bring out some neglected parallels between poetry and children's literature.

Poetry as a Resource for Cultivating a Transrational World View

The First European Biblio/Poetry Therapy Conference, *Encounters, Paths and Challenges in Troubled Times*, was held in Budapest in October 2024 under the epigraph: " … we do not feel at home / in our interpretations of the world". It is taken from the "The First Elegy" in Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* where, after an introductory expression of despair and vulnerability, the speaker goes on to reflect:

> Alas, whom then
> can we turn to? Not to angels, not to people,
> and the animals full of insight cannot but notice
> that we are not quite reliably at home
> in the interpreted world.
> (Rilke, 1987 [1923], 685; *all translations in this paper are mine*)

Our "interpreted world", i.e., the interpretation imposed on the world by adult human beings, is thus presented as stultifying and conducive to a feeling of homelessness in the world. The idea is later developed, particularly in the "The Eighth Elegy", where we are told that animals see an open world whereas the fashioning of our eyes prevents us from seeing what really *is* on the outside. A child, on the other hand, according to this elegy, can lose itself in calm contemplation of "the pure, the unsupervised" but is "shaken" out of it by an adult – "for even the young child / we turn around, forcing it to see formation ['Gestaltung'] / backwards, not the openness which / is so deep in the countenance of an animal" (Rilke, 1987 [1923], 714).

Like Rilke, I see the world view typical of adults as limiting and as conducive to the malaise which he describes as homelessness. I also agree that children are free from this until, at a certain point in their upbringing, they are forced to toe the empirical-rational line. Rilke, however, moves on a very high existential level of abstraction where the condition he describes is due to our awareness of death and our immersion in contrastive thinking which he describes as "never nowhere without not" ("niemals Nirgends ohne Nicht") (Rilke, 1987 [1923], 714): rather than conceiving of phenomena in their pure form here and now, we always perceive them as what they are *not*, as a contrast to something-else located in a different place and/or a remembered past or a projected future.

Like our awareness of death, this, for Rilke, seems to be inevitable, a sort of Kantian existential category of the adult human experience. My focus, as I have indicated, is on a somewhat lower level of abstraction, the empirical-rational paradigm of a historically given Western society. Thus I can also specify more than Rilke does what is lost in our perception, in our "interpreted world". For Rilke this remains ineffable beyond the point that it is pure and open whereas I describe it as transrational connections, i.e., observations made of, and links established between, phenomena which in the light of the rational paradigm are invalid as an account of reality.

What, then, can art do to alleviate the rigors of the empirical-rational paradigm? The answer is twofold. Firstly, art offers alternative ways of structuring external reality. They can take the form of expressionist projections such as the cry of despair which refashions the whole landscape in the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*. Alternatively, they can consist in generically specific transrational possibilities such as warp speed in science fiction and potent magic in fantasy.

Secondly, and more importantly, art invites us to explore the human inner world, untrammeled possibilities of experiencing reality and our own personalities beyond the pale of strict rationality. This is literature's forte: the use of linguistic signals to activate our imagination concerning both external phenomena and above all our own inner world (see further Pettersson, 2015).

However, literature in the form of narrative fiction is not very useful for this purpose. Even when it takes transrational liberties such as warp speed and magic, its dominant focus on a coherent story links it to chronology and causality – which in turn are linked to the empirical-rational paradigm.

Poetry, by contrast, resists this pressure. Of course it can tell stories, as it does in the ballad genre, but its core area is that which in some languages is indeed given appellations such as "the center of poetry" ("Zentrallyrik"): the development of a lyrical speaker's thoughts and emotions liberated from the normative narrative logic of chronology, causality and rationality. Thus poetry can typically move freely between the external and the internal world, between observation and reflection, between reason and free-wheeling imagination.

In poetry therapy it is, then, all very well to cull a transferrable substance from poems: feelings, thoughts, attitudes that can interact with the mindsets of the participants. My suggestion in this paper is that in addition to that, poetry therapy should be more alive to the formal aspect of poetry which provides beneficial breathing space for the transrational side of our personalities suppressed by society in an unhealthy way. It can heal the split between the social norm of rationality and our transrational inclinations – submerged but not entirely quenched by that norm, as witness their resurgence in both thought and behavior in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005).

Take imagery, for one thing. Similes and metaphors can of course occur in many kinds of texts but are particularly frequent and well-developed in poetry. One example is a "Moon Poem" by the Swedish poet Harry Martinson: "In quivering night clouds a path is cut / by the white doubloon of the moon" (Martinson, 1997 [1934], 154). Here the perceptual analogy works well: yes, the full moon at night resembles a shining silver coin, and through its movement it seems to be slowly cutting its way through the clouds. In the reader this image induces a nod of recognition, it gives us a little kick. This is not due to any insight into the workings of reality; clearly, this is not what the night sky is "really" like. Instead the metaphor unveils new possibilities of combination in the human mind and in our cultural consciousness. It allows us to make a discovery inside ourselves: our ability to see something in this way, to take something from the external world and make it our own, to enjoy the human freedom of viewing the world in this way – transrationally.

Poetry can do this despite being potentially handicapped by its medium of language. In the form of everyday prose, written or spoken, language is society's main instrument for upholding and cultivating the empirical-rational world view. Poetry's answer to this is to develop special signaling techniques such as lines that stop before the margin of the page, division into stanzas and/or a markedly poetic level of style. What is more, poetry goes beyond other kinds of texts in employing what Roman Jakobson (1960) called "the poetic function": that which projects the similarity principle of the paradigmatic axis onto the syntagmatic axis. In other words, poetry systematically cultivates analogies and contrasts, be they phonetic such as rhythm, alliteration and rhyme, or syntactic. The latter includes anaphoric repetition at the beginning of phrases and chiastic patterns such as complement-subject/subject-complement in "Spring was the bride, the bridegroom autumn".

By means such as these, poetry defines its own space separate from various kinds of prose. It signals its freedom to cross the boundaries of prose and, concomitantly, those of our rationally governed world view: to intertwine empirical observation of the world with free associations forged by the human mind.

An interesting consequence and indication of this is the following. In narrative prose we are careful to define the rules governing its world view: we speak of "realism" when the rational paradigm is fully observed; "magical realism" when there are some departures such as bicentennial longevity; and of "fairy tale", "fantasy" or "science fiction" when the departures are more pervasive. In poetry there are, historically speaking, generic labels such as "idyll" or "pastoral". However, during the last century the categorization of poetry tends to be one of form and style – we refer to "traditional", "modernist", "postmodernist", or "colloquial" poetry – rather than one which would position it in

relation to the rational paradigm. In other words: we do not speak of "realism" or "fantasy" in poetry – apparently because poems typically move constantly between realism and a more freely associative, dreamlike attitude which allows the vast potential of the human mind to come into its own.

Another area where we tend not to distinguish between realism and fantasy is children's books because, analogously, we accept their fusion of the two. It is only later, in books for young people above the age of eight or ten that we start to apply the distinction – for round that time socialization into the rational paradigm has set in and the child's holistic experience has started to move towards the adult dichotomy of rational and "irrational".

This illuminating analogy between poetry and children's books emerges with particular clarity when the associative imagination in a poem triggers little stories. Here is how the Swedish writer Tomas Tranströmer's poem "Epilogue" renders the sounds of a storm:

> A tone of bagpipes breaks loose!
> A tone of bagpipes marching forwards,
> liberatingly. A procession. A forest on the march!
> (Tranströmer, 1984 [1954], 26)

The metaphor, then, is this: the whistling sound of the storm constitutes bagpipes, but then that metaphor, "liberating" in itself, is taken further in the form of a procession of bagpipe players – whose tall figures in their turn become a second metaphor as a marching forest.

Here is what happens in "Elegy", another Tranströmer poem:

> One summer's morning the farmer's harrow is caught
> in dead bones and shreds of clothing. – He
> was left here, back then, when the peat bog was drained
> and now he stands up and walks off in the light.
> (Tranströmer, 1984 [1954], 23)

Thus when the remnants of a corpse are thrown up by the tilling of the soil, the speaker of the poem projects from his inner world into the external world an imaginative little story where the corpse is transformed into a live body strolling off in the sunlight.

The sliding associative movement which in these two cases produces the embryo of a story often engenders a fully-fledged story in children's literature. What happens is that the vehicle of the metaphor – which really exists only in the mind by which it is fashioned – is moved into the external world; once there, it starts to lead a life of its own, as do Tranströmer's bagpipes. And so, in a recent Swedish children's book, when the grandmother of a little girl says that "[g]randchildren are the dessert of life" (Karinsdotter et al., 2023, 128), a longer narrative is triggered when the girl becomes seriously concerned that her grandmother is literally going to eat her!

If poetry and children's literature share this projection of metaphors into the external world, it is because they also share a transrational perception pitted against the rationalism of adult society. A beautiful description of poetry in these terms was once penned by the Swedish writer Stig Dagerman: "As a child you are always a poet. Then you are weaned, in most cases. Thus the art of being a poet is not letting life or people or money wean you of that" (2014 [Dagerman, 1948], 291).

In keeping with this, children's literature finds its point of departure in the child's spontaneous experience of the world as a fusion of what adults call "reality" and what they call "a fantasy world". Poetry in turn – to develop Dagerman's observation – may be seen as an attempt to recover this holistic experience of childhood and keep alive the transrational world view. A poet is a child who has survived: a person who, having gone through the process of socialization, functions as a normal adult in everyday life, all the while retaining the child's experience of life. By extension, the texts produced by the poet may help others cultivate or resurrect that experience, thereby broadening their mental spectrum that has been narrowed down by the rational imperative.

From the point of view of children, this means that they can easily relate to, and find sustenance in poetry written by adults primarily for adults. For once, they may feel, the adult world validates their perception of the world rather than dismissing it as a silly fantasy.

This is illustrated in the poetry of the Norwegian writer Jon Fosse. His poems constantly move back and forth between things that are visible in the everyday world and mystical, "religious" phenomena which are invisible but equally real; in my terms he interlaces the empirical-rational and the transrational. What is more, Fosse frequently ascribes this dual perception to a child, for instance in his poem "Child song":

> A child stands watching with his heart
> and he sees that the stone is good.
> A child stands watching with his heart
> and he knows what you never understood.
> (Fosse, 2021 [2009], 291)

This kind of reflective child, mostly described as a little boy, is a recurring figure in Fosse's poems. On one occasion he sings like this:

> these
> innermost days, these
> long years, these distant
> sounds
> while the dog walks and walks
>
> the dog has my thoughts
> while God has my soul
>
> my heart is with the dog
> where an angel bade me kneel
> (Fosse, 2021 [1990], 56)

Endowed with this deep vision, a child may also be lost and in need of help:

> who is it now who needs help
> not the dog, not the angel
> but perhaps the little boy
> the one with the large hands
> the one with the clear thoughts

the one with a grief
like the sound of bells
and water
over the old landscape

He looks towards the house and the lake
and he thinks twice before he smiles
He is now the one who needs help
The one with the stupid words
that never express
what he thinks and feels
He is now the one who needs help
(Fosse, 2021 [1992], 139)

What we are reminded of here is this. In addition to many other psychosocial conditions, it is not easy being a child in terms of philosophy of life: to live for years and years in a cultural no man's land between the child's freely transrational experience of life, suffused with imagination, and the stricter rational adult world view which frequently dismisses that experience as wrongheaded nonsense. In that predicament a child can really need the help of adults with a more flexible attitude to life, open to transrational perception.

For older children and teenagers who have largely been socialized into embracing the rational world view as a norm, as well as for adults, this is a question of a reasonable balance, as a variety of Antonovsky's "sense of coherence" (1979). What we need to achieve is a chance of functioning rationally in society while avoiding the Freudian "discontents" (Freud, 2002 [1930]) partly resulting from the empirical-rational ban on transrational perception and personality traits.

As an example of a balance between the child's and the adult's point of view, I take the liberty of quoting one of my own poems (as yet unpublished). Having written it a few years ago, I now realize that its poetical practice adumbrates and exemplifies some of the ideas which I have developed discursively in this paper.

The speaker of the poem is a small boy, aged round five:

Going alone for the first time
to the milk store is stepping into an abyss.
Will the hanging bridge of the street support me?
Does it know that I am here right now?
I stretch my toes as I do into cold water
and carefully allow my foot to land. Step
by step the street is black, but no abyss.

Sometimes I look up. Someone places a house
next to a colorful house as I creep onwards.
Like the street, someone knows that I am walking here.
My sign is perhaps the glistening grey milk can.
Swinging it with my arm I make it to the store.

The milk store is shining white, its walls and floor
made of frozen milk. They could melt and come
crashing down like a waterfall so that we are all
struck down and drift off on the waves.
I stand quite still by the jingling door.

"Well hello there! Come in. You're from the Petterssons?"
She stretches her arm towards me. A few brown tiles
form a bridge over all the whiteness.
I step on them to give her the can.

A see-through machine sucks up milk.
Then a pillar is pressed into the can,
white and frizzling like waves on sand.
"Were you given money?" No.
"We'll put it on your account. To the end of the month."

I walk back lopsided. The handle of the can
cuts into my right hand. The houses are
also lopsided and placed in the wrong order.
But I trust the street and make it all the way home.
The can drools froth, but only a little at the lid.

Afterwards I feel a coin in my left hand,
pressed hard. It has kept me safe on my journey.
A lucky coin! I hide it under my mattress.
But then I sneak it back into Mummy's tin box
'cause stolen things bring bad luck.

Here we witness the child's transrational perceptions in action: objects like the street which we consider inanimate are endowed with powers of observation; the metaphorical perception of a white wall as congealed milk is projected into the external world as a risk of melting and flooding; a coin or a stolen object is seen as a source of influence over one's life; and the placing of houses along the street is attributed to the ongoing activity of some kind of large-scale intelligence.

The grown-ups' rational terms for this would be "animistic", "magical", "superstitious", and/or "religious". On this occasion, however, the voice of the grown-up poet merges with the experience of the child. It offers an attempt to reconnect with the perceptions of childhood as well as an employment of poetic resources, designed to invite readers to open up to these perceptions. In printed form a division into stanzas immediately denotes visually a realm of poetry beyond the rational imperative. The reader's entrance into this realm of reflection is then facilitated by rhythm and by the repetition of lines of more or less equal length, both engendering a mildly trance-like contemplative mood. Furthermore, the child's perception is merged with literary conventions, particularly that of the metaphor. The black asphalt street seen as an abyss between high buildings and the white wall viewed as a congealed waterfall of milk are at the same time spontaneously

childlike and proficiently literary. Thus in appreciating the aesthetic quality of the metaphors, teenage and adult readers familiar with literary conventions are concomitantly pulled into a child's frame of mind; this also allows them to access submerged transrational elements in their own personalities. As for younger children reading this, I would hope they relish a sense of recognition and perhaps reassurance in noting that an adult writing like this can side with them in their experience of the world, rather than dismissing it as misguided and silly.

Conclusions

So, in the light of all this, what do I recommend for poetry therapy? Firstly, to be aware of the suppression of transrational personality traits as one possible source of maladjustment, malaise and anxiety. This will no doubt take different forms for therapy participants of different ages, a rough estimate being as follows. In the youngest children the rational imperative induces confusion and insecurity when for instance someone living in their house is dismissed as an imaginary, nonexistent friend that must not be taken into account or even mentioned. A little further on in age is what I have called the no man's land of children who are old enough to start comprehending the rational world view but still young enough to embrace the transrational as well. At both stages the children's experience of the adult world's constant censure and correction of their perceptions no doubt undermines self-confidence and may induce dejection or anxiety. This may be a serious, partly or largely unacknowledged mental problem. Further on, when the rational stance has increasingly supplanted the transrational one, there may be a sense of loss counteracted at times by bouts of regressive, surprisingly childish behavior. Alternatively, in a more benign manner, older children and teenagers, as well as adults, may play with very young children, using their transrational games and attitudes as an alibi for reconnecting with suppressed aspects of their own personalities.

Secondly, in poetry therapy we should be more aware of the transrational aspect of poetry and more prepared to pay attention to it over and above the identifiable psychosocial substance of a given poem. Therapy participants may also be encouraged to devise adventurous metaphors of their own, separately or as one element in their composition of poems.

Thirdly, we need to develop the best possible use of these tools of transrationally focused reading and writing to foster balanced personalities: people who thrive in the rational everyday world but are also able to cultivate their transrational potential.

And fourthly, we need more research into the phenomenon which I have addressed. In children, how does transrationality function more specifically in various age groups? How does the adult world's suppression and correction of it interact with its concomitant constant correction of a large variety of attitudes and behavior in both children and teenagers?

So here, for the theory and practice of poetry therapy in the future, there looms a large field of endeavor and discovery.

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