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Poetry and Psyche
From Poetic Inspiration to Poetry Therapy

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Abstract

The day when poets, philosophers, psychologists, scientists, doctors and artists will find common ground and a shared language is getting closer and closer. Today, we simply recognise that poets felt poetry flowing from a realm beyond the reach of reason – the primal union of being and nature. We know that philosophers emerged from this ancient split, questioning the archaic feeling-and-understanding of poetry. Finally, we know that, since that fateful moment when Freud solved a clinical problem with the verses of a classic poem, psychologists have been trying to understand men's life experience. What we still don't know is the enigma of poetry between therapy and madness, andwhere poetic inspiration comes from. We also need to understand how psychology can recognise it. The answer lies in poetry as another science of the Self and care of the Other.

Keywords: poetry therapy; psychology; anthropology; myth; Plato; Freud; Pennebaker

Introduction

In this paper, whenever I refer to poetry, I will be talking about poetic language and forms of writing associated with poetry, rather than poetry itself, including songs, diaries and letters.

I am a psychotherapist and writer with fifteen years' experience in poetry therapy. However, regarding the theme of this conference, my story begins as a patient.

I was sixteen years old when my obsession of becoming a professional basketball player was abruptly interrupted. I felt like a stranger in my own town and my heart was broken. I found no support except in art, especially poetry. A consolation that became, through a daily practice, my rebirth. Poetry saved my life, and I have never been without it since. I have written about it and I have read about it. I joined a secret poets' group and stuck it on the walls of cities at night, including Budapest. I have even found it when I was not looking for it. At some point, I began to ask myself, as both a poet and a budding psychologist, what exactly about poetry had saved my life and continued to nourish my soul.

I chose a topic for my thesis and, to my great surprise, found that as soon as I started working on it, there was no book on the subject and no study to act as a foundation for every researcher setting out to explore the boundaries of their own field. While such texts existed for other disciplines, both psychological and otherwise, none existed for the therapeutic use of poetry.

How could psychology have ignored this?

It seemed absurd to me and with mytwenty-three-year-old recklessness, I decided that I would put it right.

I wrote the book I wanted to read. It took me ten years of intense and desperate independent research, during which I read and translated literally everything I could find in libraries around the world, dividing my time between living in a small house in the Tuscan mountains and travelling through Asia.

Although my research is claimed to have been conducted outside the departments that culpably severed the permanent bond between poetry and psychology, from the first day it has been structured to engage in dialogue just with these very same departments. The aim is to re-tie Ariadne's Thread and liberate poetry from the labyrinth of rationalism that has been imposed on it by every era.

The Relationship Between Poetry and Psychology

The fascinating journey poetry and psychology have made together over the centuries. If their relationships date back to the origins of our civilization, today their tools can be validated through the scientific method, the prodigy of poetry therapy is precisely its being very ancient and avant-garde at the same time.

I will tell you in brief about my work, focusing in particular on some passages that, less known to scholars and ordinary people, are those that have most fascinated me. The title of my book is *Poetry and Psyche. From Poetic Inspiration to Poetry Therapy*, it was published a year ago and is currently only available in Italy.

As I scrolled through the index of the book, I found myself asking what poetry is and what the link is between poetry and madness, and therefore between poetry and therapy, because as Hölderlin wrote "where danger grows, that which saves also grows" (1977, 35). Then I wrote a universal history of the relationship between poetry and psychology, beginning in the Stone Age and ending in the present day. This history covers the development of praiseworthy associations, such as those that are promoting this conference.

An entire section is dedicated to poetry psychology, comparing what each psychotherapeutic approach with its most famous interpreters has assumed about the therapeutic use of poetic writing. Then I dedicated myself to an exposition of the most diverse methodologies present in literature.

Finally, I investigated the future prospects of our discipline, with respect to its complex relationships with the scientific world and the new points of view offered by neuroscience.

Psychology is a science that has been a subject of poetic expression since the dawn of time, yet this rich heritage has been largely neglected by psychologists. Until recently, when this research began in 2011, existing contributions on the topic were isolated or partial, lacking a universal and comprehensive framework. The present study, however, aims to synthesize a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between psychology and poetry.

In addition, other critical aspects were identified. Firstly, the history of this discipline has been considered only superficially. Even today, the National Association for Poetry Therapy (2024) states on its official website that "the relationship between poetry and medicine remained obscure for many centuries."

From this perspective, it is a reasonable inference that poetry, with its much older history, is merely one of the many forms that language has taken. And, by extension, of psychology. This directly contradicts the findings of this research, which are supported by numerous prominent poets and philosophers who argue that poetry precedes science, the birth of consciousness, and, according to some mythologies, our very existence. For instance, in the Hindu myth, the Sanskrit "om – aum" represents the voice of the universe before the Big Bang, the foundational disjunction from the Whole.

From Primordial Language to Abstract Thought

Originally, poetry existed everywhere. In the prehistoric night of pure orality, speech imposed itself on the unexpressed. This form of language-music had no utilitarian purpose; it was pure expression. There was a time when every word was poetry, an era preceding writing and the abstract mind. During that period, men spoke in poetry and, as myths suggest, trees, shadows, and stars responded. Often, deities manifested through them, visible and participating in the events of the Earth. The "strange ideas" of these poet-men, "incomprehensible to later ages, were the beginnings of the intellect and grew over time to become a lingua franca extended throughout the world." This "mother tongue of the whole world" was, according to Giambattista Vico, a "poetic wisdom without contrast," the "first wisdom of the world" (2006, 77).

Located between the origin of the species and approximately 4000 BCE, the use of poetry as a universal language was modulated on the primary movements of the body, such as the heartbeat, the rate of breathing, the sound of footsteps, etc (Bertoni, 2006). For tens of thousands of years, humans produced this primordial form of poetry as a language of pure expression through voices. Other voices were heard and were commands – not like commands, but genuine commands that guided their actions. These were not necessarily voices of other human beings, but also voices they heard in their heads and which, as the archaeology of primitive cults suggests, they believed to be of divine

origin. The voice was heard and believed to be true; in essence, our condition resembled that of individuals whom we today diagnose with schizophrenia (Jaynes, 1976).

We coexisted with forces that are obscure to us today; all we knew how to do, besides trying to survive, was this prototypical poetry, this song of immediacy that must have been a means of survival itself. The world was filled with rituals that have reached us, propitiated by that voice which was the voice of the world itself, speaking within each of us.

The poet is a child.

Perhaps because in its initial, poetic phase, the human species behaved like children who, in the first years of their lives, learn to recognize the world inside and around them through the oral device. And just as children love repetition, so poetry has used rhythm since primitive man translated his instincts into a discourse based on an acoustic order that later favored memorization and reuse, establishing the fundamental characteristics for the evolution of the species.

This is how humans transitioned from hunter-gatherers to farmers, establishing cyclical behavioral models and referencing natural elements. Through meter, poetry facilitated the sharing of content about the fate of community members, whether gathered around a fire covered in animal skins, or wrapped in cool linen inside a Babylonian temple, or inspiring political actions in Greek agorae.

These religious or civil rituals are still celebrated today, propitiated by the songs of shamans, healers, and other precursors of contemporary therapists. The Hippocratic Oath that doctors have continuously sworn since the sixth century BCE serves as a historical example; consequently, the notion that poetry and medicine are separate fields is historically inaccurate.

The Rise of Consciousness and the Condemnation of Poetry

We can now approach the experience of this ancestor. We must no longer imagine him as a kind of humanized ape, but as incredibly similar to what we are today. He has now separated himself from nature. He does not consider himself an inhabitant of the earth like the oxen he begins to graze, nor like the stars he uses to understand when to sow the land, impregnate his wife, or cut his hair. He covers an area extending from the western tributaries of the Euphrates to the Pillars of Hercules and gathers in progressively larger communities. Empires risk collapse if they do not invent a faster and more stable way to organize the communication of legal and civil codes to increasingly distant provinces. That technology is writing. The Code of Hammurabi presents laws, not poems. It is the prototype of the internet but would also influence Shakespeare's sonnets.

Writing progressively inhibited the verbo-motor practice integral to poetic composition, dissolving the primordial union of word with action and creating the resources for a leap to an abstract intelligence distinct from the natural world. Today we call it consciousness, and we sometimes forget that it was not born with us. It is precisely consciousness that transforms those voices into

ideas. It is not by chance that psychiatric patients in the popular Italian language are referred to as "unconscious." Ideas are the vehicle of that voice.

The rise of this new faculty, as is well known, was vertiginous: the classical poet is already very distant from the sources of language. From this moment on, the poet's word became "the word in a state of crisis," according to Ungaretti (1974, 81), a word to express man in crisis facing the possibility of either being or no longer being, of becoming that abstract consciousness and no longer being nature.

See the image below (*Figure 1*). It shows the relief on the front side of the Tukulti-Ninurta I Altar from 1200 BCE, found in Babylon. The Assyrian king kneels at the feet of an absent god. The throne is empty.

Figure 1. Relief on the front side of the Tukulti-Ninurta I stone altar from 1200 BC, showing King Tukulti first standing and then kneeling before the empty throne of his god, pointing emphatically. Alabaster stone Bas-Relief, related to the mythological story named 'Epic of Tukulti-Ninurta I' at Vorderasiatisches Museum Berlin, Germany, catalogued as record number VA 08146.

According to Julian Jaynes (1976, 124), this is the first iconographic representation of the principle of divination of an absent god and the contemporary collapse of the "bicameral mind," the brain formation that preceded the birth of consciousness and in which the gods spoke to men through what we now call auditory hallucinations: "most men had to hear, during the day, poetry (a kind of poem), composed and recited within their own minds."

This provides one of the greatest available clues regarding the enigma of poetic inspiration today. Since then, the gods have stopped speaking to us. The birth of consciousness made us solitary

among beings. Nature became an entity external to us, to be regulated according to our purposes. In other words, we stopped listening to the voices of poets and began to think with the consciousness of philosophers.

Moving to Athens, approximately a thousand years later, a group of wise men, including Socrates, met at Cephalus's house to establish the foundations for a republic based on principles of justice. These dialogues were written by Plato, who stated that there was no longer a place for poets in such a nation because they obey different laws and are dangerous due to their divine inspiration. The philosopher admired poets and was one himself, but he felt he had to wean humanity from the intoxicating influence they had wielded until then. The Muse had to stop inspiring irrational feelings and learn to think about what is right. Plato reluctantly issued what is now called the "condemnation of poetry," which persists to this day (Bremond, 1925).

The relegated position of poetry in our society and the associated stigma of being a poet were first outlined in that book. However, those same pages marked the recognition of poetry as the science of the other men, the path less traveled by humanity (Steiner, 2011).

In contrast, Aristotle was in a sense the first to advocate for poetry's therapeutic utility through the concept of catharsis, thereby reducing the poet from a channel through which gods and nature speak to a technician of language. While he saved poetry from condemnation, he did so by reducing it to an instrument of logic (Calvo, 2004).

Even today, poetry can be viewed in one way or another. Poets themsel-ves are divided into factions, ignoring their common origin and the ancient, dissolved union.

Maria Zambrano (1939), a key philosopher for this research, argues that at that moment, feeling and understanding were separated, a separation that endures to the present day.

As a psychologist, it is argued that the integration of feeling and understanding is a suitable metaphor for expressing the state of well-being of both the individual and a community.

The Poetic Origins of Psychology

Poetry has been regarded as a medicine in every culture and era, and poets have been likened to spontaneous healers, nostalgic for that lost primitive language, which expresses the undimmed light of being through the senses.

Poets evoke our past. Those who listen to them feel, for a few moments, that everything is reunited again and the wound of separation from the gods and nature within each of us is healed. The earliest evidence of this use dates back to Ancient Egypt, where pharaohs' doctors not only had possessed individuals read songs but also made them eat the papyrus on which they were transcribed. In classical Greece, at Epidaurus, medical treatments included the reading of songs. Centuries later, during the Roman Empire, a predecessor named Soranus prescribed drama reading to manic

patients and comedy reading to depressed ones. Two millennia later, the rationale of his treatments would be termed the “isoprinciple.” (Rojcewicz, 1999)

The principle today is the same as it was then.

A review of the consulted literature reveals diverse experiences on this subject. An extensive presentation can be found in the forthcoming book. The examples presented here demonstrate that contemporary methods are not an invention.

Our methods as poet therapists, bibliotherapists, and so on are nothing more than these healing fossils.

A further consideration, though outside the main scope of this study, relates to the geographical context.

All of this occurs in the West, whereas in the East, the story is completely different, as evidenced by this example: until the arrival of the white man a couple of centuries ago, the Japanese did not even have a word for “nature” because they felt it to be indivisible from themselves, much like our ancestors before the birth of consciousness.

The central theme of poets also underwent a slow evolution. This historical progression is rapid compared to the vast epochs previously discussed. Seven hundred years ago is but a snap of the fingers in the evolution of the species, within the not-so-long history of humanity on Earth.

The most recent revolution in the relationship between poetry and psychology occurred very recently. Petrarch was the first to compose a poem intended, from the beginning, for the blank page. His "Canzoniere" is the first literary work designed to be read, not listened to. If for all this time the Other to whom the poet addressed was the Mother Goddess and her divine emanations, then with the advent of agriculture, the deities changed in number and sex, becoming the God of monotheism.

Sought by the poet in the high heavens for millennia, He was only translated into earthly love a few centuries ago with Dante's search for Beatrice, not Jesus, at the top of Paradise. With the Neoplatonists, poetic inspiration became associated with the melancholy that comes from Saturn. In the Romantic poets, there was a return to deified nature, and from there, in Western literature, the poet gradually assumed the freedom to draw inspiration from whomever he wished, culminating in the Dadaists and their theatrical return to pure orality, a drastic desire to strip away from poetry what is not poetry.

It is a fire that has not yet gone out, contributing to today's shift in poetry toward songwriters, rappers, and so on. Today, without much effort, one can continuously listen to odes to anything; even consumer objects serve as inspiration, as exemplified by Frank Ocean's “Nikes”—not the Greek goddess, but sneakers.

From Ancient Healing to Modern Therapy

A historical anecdote highlights the intersection of these fields: a Viennese doctor named Sigmund Freud, faced with a clinical case he could not resolve with the traditional medical tools of the time, discovered the cure in a classical poem written 2,500 years earlier. That poem is titled "Oedipus Rex."

When Freud wrote, "not I, but the poet has discovered the unconscious" (De Marchi, Lo Iacono & Parsi, 2006, 12), he was not simply making a statement but was referencing the fact that the birth of psychology was made possible by the intuitions of poets. Freud is arguably the greatest poet of the twentieth century, having coined the most enduring metaphor of our time.

The unconscious has no counterpart in the physical world; if asked to describe it, individuals offer different conceptualizations – some place it in the head, others in the belly – yet there is a universal consensus on its existence.

We are confronted with the birth of psychology as we practice it today. Not medicine, as might be assumed, but poetry is its mother. All psychology rests on a metaphor, a living, inexhaustible metaphor. The etymology of the term comes from Greek and stands for discourse on the soul, a discourse that poets have been conducting since the dawn of time, long before psychologists.

For this reason, Freud, Jung, Hillman, Adler, Lacan, Klein, Winnicott, Bion, Rogers, Maslow, Fromm, Perls, Assagioli, cognitivists, cognitive-behavioralists—all the greatest psychologists and the main psychological currents of the twentieth century—have addressed the great theme of the poem. In my book, I have sought to condense into just one hundred pages the contributions that each author and approach offers on the link between poetry and psychology.

Yet, with the advent of certain reductionist currents, psychologists have forgotten the essence of their discipline in favor of science at its peak of expression, a dangerous shortcut toward the recognition of medicine. The problem with that science, influenced by positivism, is that it denied everything it could not measure. And how can poetry be measured if a paraphrase is enough to completely lose its meaning?

Our predecessors, however, managed to achieve this.

The great American tradition for the therapeutic use of poetry begins, as is known, with Dr. Rush, the father of American psychiatry who, three hundred years ago at the Pennsylvania Hospital, had his patients undergo treatments that integrated poetic expression with the methods of that time (Jamison, 1993).

However, it is thanks to the work of a contemporary psychologist, James W. Pennebaker, that the therapeutic use of writing became a science, verifiable on par with surgery. Approximately forty years ago, he divided an audience similar to this one into two groups. He instructed one half to keep a diary for six months, documenting their daily experiences while a series of measurements were

taken on their mood and immune system. The other half served as a control group, without writing anything. The results were sensational.

In particular, the colleague successfully demonstrated the beneficial effect of autobiographical writing on the immune system - a turning point that still constitutes the best academic validation for our, in the view of some skeptical colleagues, audacious research and practices in caring for others (Pennebaker et al., 1988).

Conclusion: Re-stitching Ariadne's Thread

As the recent Nobel Prize winner for Physics, Giorgio Parisi, wrote, “another history, another society would have produced another science, also capable of explaining the phenomena considered essential by that other society” (2011, 148). Poetry and myth are the precise science of that other society.

There is a sense that the era when poets, philosophers, psychologists, scientists, doctors, and artists will find common ground and speak a common language has arrived. We are attempting to bring poetry closer to science, intuition to analysis, and inspiration to therapy. We are striving to unite feeling and understanding.

Today, we know that poets felt poetry flow from a space forbidden to reason, the original place of the union between being and nature. We know that philosophers were born from this ancient split and, starting from it, questioned themselves about the archaic feeling-and-understanding of poetry. Finally, we know that psychologists have been trying to understand human life experience since that decisive moment when Freud solved a clinical problem with the verses of a classical poem.

What we still do not know are the enigmas surrounding poetry's connection to therapy and madness, the origins of poetic inspiration, and how psychology can recognise it.

The answer lies in poetry as another science of the Self and a form of care for the Other.

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