

THE WALLPAPER PEOPLE: PSYCHIC FANTASY AS GUARDIAN OF TRAUMA OR AGENT OF TRANSFORMATION

By Leah Lucas

Compassion and power, within us all reside the tension of these two opposing forces. Compassion is connection, empathy, merger, oneness with the other. It can also be a trap, a burden. Power is the innate drive to break free and individuate. Be one's own person. It implies a movement from merger with mother to a ruthless negation in order to live a free life. The tension of these opposites is a primary force. The bodily instincts provide the raw power for fuelling the conscious ego that has to interact with the real world. Man's developing ego emerges out of infantile experiences. The mother's body is the ground we all spring from. The very nature of human existence contains a superego conscience to fulfill one's unique destiny, the innate potential. Yet the instinctual body compels equal fulfillment of the powerful innate yearnings, desires, longings of the primal infant self.

Fantasy rooted in childhood ground may be a life reflective of one's unfolding talents. Like a seed germinating and growing to manifest its own unique architecture, we are thrown into the world with a genetic, psychic, emotional blueprint. The entire structure is inherent in the nascent form.

Norman O. Brown in his book LIFE AGAINST DEATH, The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History writes "according to Freud's later theory, the peculiar structure of the human ego results from its incapacity to accept reality, specifically the supreme reality of death and separation. The real achievement of the Ego and the Id is the pioneering effort to make an instinctual analysis of the ego, to see what the ego does with Eros and Death. And in that analysis the point of departure for the human ego is death not accepted, or separation (from the environment, the mother) not accepted. The human ego is not strong enough to accept the reality of death. The primal act of the human ego is a negative one – not to accept reality, specifically the separation of the child's body from the mother's body. This negative posture blossoms into negation of the self (repression) and negation of the environment (aggression)." 1.

Brown goes on to describe the aim of psychoanalysis which is "still unfulfilled and still only half-conscious – is to return our souls to our bodies, return ourselves to ourselves, and thus overcome the human state of self-alienation. Hence, since sublimation is the essential activity of soul divorced from body, psychoanalysis must return our sublimation to our bodies; and conversely sublimation cannot be understood unless we understand the nature of the soul – the nature of the ego. Sublimation is the "ego-

syntonic” way of disposing of libido. The desexualization of libidinal drives is the consequence of passing through the crucible of the ego.” 2.

The ego of man is conscious of both his internal world and external reality. This awareness makes us not strong enough to die as well as not strong enough to live. Consciousness of life and death has to be diluted to a bearable balance. Desexualization accomplishes this dilution of life.

In Freud’s INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS he writes how “human consciousness is inseparable from an active attempt to alter reality, so as to “regain the lost object”. The reality which the ego constructs and perceives is culture and has the essential quality of being a “substitute gratification”, a pale imitation of past pleasure substituting for present pleasure, and thus essentially desexualized.”3.

“The more specific and concrete mechanism whereby the body-ego becomes a soul is fantasy. Fantasy can be defined as a hallucination which cathects the memory of gratification; it is the same structure as the dream, and has the same relation to the id and to instinctual reality as the dream. Fantasy and dreaming do not present, much less satisfy the instinctual demands of the id, which is of the body and seeks bodily erotic union with the world; they are essentially, like neurosis, “substitute gratification”. 4.

This is where fantasy transcends into creativity emerging as a bridge between body and soul. An inspired union of self with world allows for an internal settling, an answer to the body’s insatiable yearnings, the possibility of satisfaction. Fantasy has a bold power inherent within its stream because its underpinnings are steeped within non-verbal, primary process experience. Fantasy originated out of the human beings childhood solution to bodily and emotional frustrations. The fantasy then got retranslated into secondary process functioning that made its aim actual change with the real outer world. Its primary initiative is to shape external reality to bring fulfillment of the now unconscious deep wishes and desires.

When my mother was little girl growing up in Bucharest, Roumania her parents were very poor. They had so little money that her bed was a dresser drawer on the dirt floor. Every night before going to sleep my mother would look at the faded wallpaper and drift into reverie. She would bring alive the “wallpaper people”, imagining scenarios and conversations in this secret wallpaper world.

A child myself, I remembered my mother telling me about her “wallpaper people”. Her eyes would light up as she described the joy and freedom as she slipped into the wallpaper world. There was something

infectious and enlightening in the breadth of her imagination, which made a strong impression upon me. I felt an aching sort of sorrow for my mother's disappearance into her imaginary world.

Fantasy saved my mother from the harsh reality of poverty, quarrelling parents and the violent rise of fascism in Roumania. It was the Second World War that separated my mother from her family. At age twenty she was the lone survivor while everyone else was lost to the sea in the sinking of The Struma, the ship carrying desperate Jewish refugees in one final bid for freedom.

Fantasy again suspended my traumatized mother in a world of hope and possibility. The rest of her adult psychic life was engaged in an attempt at restoration. Yearning for her lost family she imagined she would travel to Israel and discover her brother Martin. He did not drown on that torpedoed ship. Miraculously he had survived and she could unite with him in the Holy Land. The inescapable wish to return to her beloved mother took a solid hold on her mind and intensified with the sudden death of her husband from a massive heart attack.

A few weeks before my mother died, she awoke from a coma that she had fallen into for five full days. I was in the hospital room with her when her eyes first opened. The nurse came in and asked her if she knew who I was. With a radiant smile and tears glistening through innocent eyes, "oh yes" she exclaimed, "this is Leah, this is my mother!"

In that heartbreaking, poignant moment I realized how deeply the fantasy had overtaken my dying mother. She truly believed and had re-created the mother she longed for in the being of her daughter named Leah – my grandmother's name. Passion, longing, unspeakable trauma converged to create the desired resolution. When my mother died, she may have entered a realm where her parents were alive, death was the fantasy.

Buddhist philosophy teaches the nature of mind to be clear luminosity, boundless freedom and openness. There is no solid self; all existence is transitory and impermanent. It is our emotional attachments that at the point of death imprison us. Desire beckons one back to seeking the body, fearing our freedom in the disembodied state.

Out of necessity, my mother lived her life locked in fantasy. Her internal world required and constructed a secret container to bring cohesion for losses impossible to bear. The unconscious, in its endless creativity found a way to sustain a fragile ego, keep it going with capacity to operate in an external world.

I intuitively knew from an early age that I was part of my mother's fantasy. I was a child that made her proud, validated her existence, and mirrored back a positive reflection of herself. The fatal flaw in her mothering capacity was that I knew she was unable to truly see me as separate and different from herself. Any difference was too threatening and had to be denied.

As I grew into a teenager I began to turn against my mother. I hated her violent, hysterical outbursts and her vicious attacks on me. In my compassion I would tell myself she couldn't help it, she was frustrated, unhappy and in terrible pain. She really did love me deep down. I wanted to carry her burden, be the good daughter to make her feel better about herself so she could love me the way I needed her to love me.

Yet I resented her withdrawal, her inability to guide me into womanhood. I knew her weakness and raged against it. I wanted her to be a strong, confident mother who could by example lead me into the confusing, frightening world of adulthood. The power drive in me to individuate and fulfill my own blueprint was ruthless in rejecting her. My contempt and rage forced me to obliterate her, she was not a woman I could honour or respect. She weighed me down, a burden impossible to carry. I had to free myself from her in order to not go mad or disappear into her fantasy. When I finally did break free, my mother broke down. She entered into an autistic state that lasted seven years. Disappearing into her home, dropping all outside contact, frozen in time, she was completely unable to function. In her own wisdom she refused hospitalization or medication. Something deep within my mother recognized the time had come to face all the repressed loss and pain hiding behind the fantasy. There was no strength left to pretend death was not real. While my life went on growing and building, my mother sat with herself, thawing her frozen heart, which required seven long years of undistracted attention. Then one day the exile was over. Life stirred inside her, a broken psyche was miraculously healed and she entered back into the stream. My mother lived in relative contentment for twelve more years after her recovery from the breakdown.

I now feel a powerful urge to honour my mother. My hate and rage has been replaced by sorrow and understanding. Not all of her fantasies were impossible. She had the vision and strength to bring our family from England to Canada. Her passion managed to create a better life for us all, thus translating that fantasy into reality. I now admire the courage and will required tolerating her fear of the unknown in order to initiate such a frightening change. I used to have contempt for her lack of ambition as she toiled in a government job enduring the daily grind of uninspired bureaucracy. But from my more mature lens I realize that my mother was barely hanging on by her fingernails. She brought up two daughters with no

mother to guide her. There was no father, siblings, aunts or uncles. She was alone with only her husband in this huge undertaking attempting to give to us from a motherless ground. I now see her steady devotion to the family as silently heroic. She stayed the course; the government job provided a security and stability unknown in wartime years.

It becomes clear to me how hatred and rejection of the disappointing, limited mother creates a block in the internal feminine. Not having live contact with the maternal self leads to inner destruction and a block to one's deep creative core. Creativity is unable to thrive in an atmosphere of anxiety, anger and fear.

*Hans Loewald in his paper *On Internalization* writes how "internalization as a completed process implies an emancipation from the object. The individual is enriched by the relationship he has with the beloved object, not burdened by identifications and fantasy relations with the object."5. My mother was always a burden to me. Not strong enough in her own right, she needed me to fulfill her fantasy life. I could not internalize her because I was too busy trying to flee. I rejected her, I ran away, fleeing from myself and the feelings she evoked that I could not face. I separated before I was able to internalize and identify with her. This left me forever anxious. I had no safe psychic ground in which to feel secure. I substituted work and money for mother. The aim of attempting to gain emotional security from external things is fruitless. It is a search destined for failure because no material thing can fulfill spiritual and emotional hunger.*

Here is where mother truly is the ground of being. Therefore, a hatred of the mother, a trauma or rejection, leaves one broken inside, forever cast out of the internal home. Where there is no connection to mother, the primal ground, there is no connection to self. The primal infantile roots of passion and creativity are severed. They must be allowed to re-grow, to re-connect and link up with the original deity; otherwise all is lost, wandering aimlessly in the no man's land of psychic disconnection. In the words of Anatole France, "As long as man is suckled at a woman's breast he will be consecrated in the temple and initiated into some mystery of the divine. He will have his dream."6.

The powerful wish to change reality is the ego's only rational response to the painful contradictions between deep-seated emotional needs and the external situation man finds himself living in. This creates a conflict and intolerable tension between the conscious ego and the instinctual energies of the body. It is the development and maintenance of a sound superego that activates the psychic mechanism capable of mediating the forces of ego and id in order to bring the human personality into a more evolved relationship with the external world. The superego speaks to us as a voice of conscience concerning the non-fulfillment of the internal image of ourselves, of the internal ideal we have not reached, of the future in us that we have failed.

Hans Loewald writes how “fantasy is unreal only insofar as its communication with present actuality is unreal, or severed, or meaningless. In the analytic process the infantile fantasies and memories are linked up with present actuality resuming the growth process. There is a depth of experience when present actuality linked with infantile fantasy allow for live communication with the infantile roots of experience. The disruption of that communication is the most important aspect of the problem of defense, or repression and of isolation. For the adult there is a far greater separation between the two worlds of fantasy and reality than for the two-year-old child. In the healthier adult, communication and interplay between the world of fantasy and the world of objectivity, between imagination and rationality, remain alive, one gains meaning from the other.”7.

Locked within this psychic tension of opposites lies a sense of guilt for one’s entrapment, an inability to make real desired goals and ambitions. The urge is to reach towards a future while the fear indicates messages of defeat and impossibility. Loewald goes on to describe the superego as “the voice of conscience that tells us what we should do, speaking from a future that we ask ourselves to reach or tell ourselves we are failing to reach. A future whose images become imbued with all that is still alive from the hopes, expectations, demands, promises, ideals, guilt and despair of past ages, ancestors, parents, teachers, prophets, priests, gods and heroes. Maturation and development, which are movements into a future, are promoted and channeled, or hindered and inhibited by the hopes and expectations, fears, doubts, and demands given by parents and other authorities. The superego is the intrapsychic representation of the future.”8.

Fantasy serves a dual aspect within the human psyche. On the one side it operates as an opaque shield for the ego. It takes the individual away from facing harsh experiences that would be overwhelming. It is a protection; a cloak of distance from what is otherwise too disturbing to meet. Yet fantasy also holds transformative power. Its symbol and imagery point to a future where fulfillment is a true possibility. There may be a very long road from one’s present state to manifesting the vision. But hope spurs one on to make such an arduous journey.

Fantasy serving as defense becomes an entrapment. It keeps the individual imprisoned and blind, unable to be in the service of actively creating a new reality. Defensive fantasy separates and divides conscious ego from its own unconscious depths. There is no longer a living chord of communication between the two realms. This results in a depressed, paralyzed state. There is an incapacity to act outwardly, a despair resulting from impotence. Much concentrated work and suffering is entailed in the process of uniting the

unconscious fantasies into an ego capable of shaping and developing life in tune with reality. It is a bitter pill to swallow, accepting what is rather than what we wish it to be.

We all rebel at the present actuality when it is so far from the way we want things to be. We are horrified when it is evil, cruel, harsh or rejecting. We are determined to control outer events because nobody wants to feel helpless, small and insignificant. The deeper damage lies in the unconsciousness of our control. Lacking awareness of the way one manipulates an uncooperative environment deepens the divide between conscious and unconscious communication. Banished from awareness, the intuitions and promptings from a distressed self have no other recourse but to seek a hearing through symptoms, anxiety, addiction or heartache.

Here is where fantasy rises up in the form of a symbol, image or dream calling for examination. It is only in encounter with irrational forces illustrated through fantasy that a union of opposites may evolve. This mysterious union was termed by Carl Jung as the Transcendent Function. Within the heated, conflicted wrestling with internal forces, eventually a new element is created from an unknowable irrational source. Suddenly the personality breaks free of some impossible bind and grows beyond the problem to life in a larger sphere. This spiraling evolution continues throughout man's lifetime in ever widening circles of complexity. Apparitions of the transcendent function at work are witnessed in the productions of painters, writers, dancers and poets. All artistic endeavor born out of the artist's soulful struggle with self speaks in spirit to the witness, reminding us of what is possible in earthly existence.

I would like to conclude with some verses written by Walt Whitman in Leaves of Grass. Whitman was an American artist who struggled all his life to fulfill his vision of himself as a poet capable of expressing his personal apprehension of the divinity of life through the written word.

*Dazzling and tremendous, how quick the sunrise would kill me,
If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me.
We also ascend, dazzling and tremendous as the sun
We found our own O my soul
In the calm and cool of the daybreak
Divine and I inside and out, and I make holy,
Whatever I touch or am touch'd from.9.*

Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass.

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NOTES

- 1. Brown, Norman O. Life Against Death, pg. 158*
- 2. Brown, Norman. O. Life Against Death pg.158*
- 3. Brown, Norman O. Life Against Death pg. 163*
- 4. Brown, Norman O. Life Against Death pg. 163*
- 5. Loewald Hans. W. The Essential Loewald pg. 362*
- 6. Brown, Norman O. Life Against Death pg. 164*
- 7. Loewald, Hans. W. The Essential Loewald pg. 269*
- 8. Loewald, Hans. W. The Essential Loewald pg. 273*
- 9. Whitman, Walt Leaves Of Grass pg. 69*

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