

Psychoanalysis as Poetry

Jerome I. Sashin Memorial Lecture

Presenter: Jeanine M. Vivona, Ph.D.

Discussant: Frances Lang, LICSW

Moderator: Ana-Maria Rizzuto, M.D.

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The Jerome I. Sashin Memorial Lecture was given this year by Jeanine M. Vivona Ph.D. who spoke about “Psychoanalysis as Poetry.” Dr. Ana-Maria Rizzuto introduced the presenter and reminded us about Dr. Sashin’s work; he was “investigating the connections between affect, language and object relations.” His research was cut short by his untimely death but a number of thinkers in the field including Dr. Bonnie Litowitz, Dr. Rizzuto, and Dr. Vivona have reflected on and written about the nature of language as a tool for studying the human psyche. Dr. Rizzuto commented that Freud explored the “inexhaustible complexity and subtlety of spoken words” but “paid limited attention to language as a cultural medium.” She posited that “reality cannot be reality” unless it is “shared with others in spoken encounters” and that speaking is an “orchestral arrangement in which multiple instruments play simultaneously.” She then turned to Dr. Vivona to present her ideas about the medium, the spoken word, through which we do our work.

Dr. Vivona began by quoting Freud’s ironic statement about the puzzling power of the talking cure. He described words as “nothing other than watered-down magic.” She noted that we do not have “cogent explanations for the therapeutic action of verbal processes.” She announced that she would focus on the “evocative and active potentials of words” as revealed in psychoanalysis and poetry and on “the origins of those potentials in the interpersonal processes of language development.” She then asked the audience to read Billy Collins’ poem “Fishing on the Susquehanna in July” silently for the next five minutes. The audience became a living laboratory for Dr. Vivona as she accompanied us in analyzing the experiential impact of the poet’s words. She demonstrated the multilayered reality present in the poem in which the author denies having fished on the Susquehanna River at the same time that he describes it as if he were there. Readers quickly discover that he is composing the poem in a specific room and that he is remembering the scene as rendered in a painting he saw in a particular museum. She points to the rhythm of the swaying boat in the cadence of the poem and to the sounds and the images as seen by the fisherman, imagined by the poet, and subsequently experienced by the readers of the poem. She noted the verbal form, the gerund that Billy Collins uses to capture an incomplete action in process. We are “rowing”, “sliding”, and “raising” the oars. The semantic content of the chosen words are only one of the many aspects of language that draw us into the experience of fishing, of composing a poem, of moving through the museum and thus, of accompanying the poet as he is imagining, recalling, and doing. Dr. Vivona began her talk with this demonstration

of the way in which words allow us to share an imagined reality. She then turned to discuss the sources of power in language.

Ferdinand de Saussure, a 19th century Swiss philosopher and linguist, proposed that words are a type of sign whose sounds which he called “signifiers” refer to a concept or category. Words both differentiate and amalgamate the things they signify. According to Dr. Vivona, Saussure “asserted that the relationship between the word’s sound and the concept it signifies is typically arbitrary.” She illustrated the idea by referring to a famous quote from Romeo and Juliet, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose/ By any other name would smell as sweet.” In contrast to de Saussure, however, she suggested that the process of learning words from others means that they are not inherently abstract or arbitrary, “we cannot call a rose by any other name than the name we learn through living.” She pointed out that because words differentiate and amalgamate in the process of categorizing, they have a powerful impact on one’s sense of reality. Language shapes what we notice. Juliet fell in love with Romeo whose other name was Montague, signifying a special Romeo. Language is inevitably informed by the circumstances and people from whom we learn it.

In the next part of her presentation, Dr. Vivona elaborated on the implications of the interpersonal and developmental circumstances in which words are learned. She began with the observation that each word in our individual lexicon refers to something highly personal. For Dr. Vivona the word “river” brings to mind the Hudson River which was a “central feature of the landscape” of her childhood. In a specific clinical example Dr. Vivona demonstrated how the choice of an unusual word used by a patient in the midst of a narrative can alert the clinician to highly personal meanings hidden behind that word. Dr. Vivona suggested that “sometimes therapeutic action arises from helping patients understand what they are saying.” The words chosen contain a “precise meaning;” unlike a poet, however, patients may not be aware of the way in which they have composed their speech. In this way “spontaneous speech is unwitting poetry,” bringing a personal thought or feeling vividly to life.

Another implication of words being learned in interactions with others is that the initial experience of learning words is embodied. Dr. Vivona referred to Hans Loewald’s theory about the nature of language acquisition; it “binds abstract thought with the bodily concreteness and power of life.” She described the physical nature of the process. “The sounds of mother’s speech are part of the infant’s experience of interacting with the mother and over time those sounds become differentiated from other sensations of the lived world as a special kind of sound; these special sounds grow into words.” Eventually children learn to use words in a more abstract way. The mature individual uses “language in a flexible way ... with the right mix of rationality and expressiveness.” She noted that individuals vary in their preference for particular sensory modalities. She pointed out that Billy Collins’ poem is full of words that evoke the sights and sounds of fishing and that he used only one abstract metaphor. Dr. Vivona called this use of words that contain the original sensory as well as conceptual meaning the “hallmark of psychological maturity as well as poetic talent.”

A third implication of the interpersonal and developmental process of language acquisition is that words carry “the emotional aspects of the lived experiences within which the word is learned and used.” Dr. Vivona cited research carried out by Ma et al (2011) that describe the difference between the prosody in infant-directed speech and adult-directed speech. The melodic quality in infant-directed speech pairs semantic content with tone, rhythm, and other qualities of sound. Studies show that children do not understand the neutral sounds of adult-directed speech until the age of three. The way in which words are learned is a developmental achievement in which these non-verbal prompts “in the lived relational context in which they were spoken” facilitate language acquisition. Dr. Vivona noted that in working with people whose development has been interrupted or accompanied by trauma the meaning and form of language is also disrupted. The adult language of the therapist may not be intelligible or even tolerable to the patient. The therapist’s awareness of unusual responses to verbal interventions and to the presence of non-verbal language may help the therapist to understand and respond to unusual forms of communication that capture and express the emotional experience in which language was learned.

Dr. Vivona enumerated the communicative potentials of words she had described so far as the “personal, embodied, and emotional foundations that are mobilized in speech as in poetry.” She went on to explicate one more potential source of meaning and power available to us through language. The verbal form of communication includes information about and/or memories of the intention of the speaker and their power to affect us. Words can be used to trick or manipulate; words can be used as weapons. On the other hand words can be used in a way that facilitates and nurtures individual development. She offered a particularly salient example to the audience. When we make an interpretation the patient learns about the analyst’s mind and experiences the impact of the analyst’s mind at work through the spoken word. Dr. Vivona compared this to the original experience of language acquisition, “Through interactions with speakers, the infant learns the possibilities of verbal communication, in particular the potential to know and affect the mind of the other through words.”

In the last part of her presentation Dr. Vivona declared that “psychoanalytic talking is not discourse, not merely dissemination of content; it is action effected through words....” She shared a final clinical vignette with us to illustrate the way in which our patients learn about our minds. One of her patients was being quite self critical in a particular session when he realized that she did not share his opinion. Suddenly he shifted his perspective and made a statement that was much more neutral. Dr. Vivona was initially uncomfortable. Something was odd about his comment. She was used to hearing his self criticism. She reflected on “the tone, cadence, and intention of my own words coming back to me through him...an interpretation I might have made....” The patient had internalized the intention, the tone, and finally a different perspective. Her language had become his language resulting in therapeutic action. Dr. Vivona’s ended her talk on this note, demonstrating that words are as “magical” in therapy as they are in poetry. She finished her presentation appropriately with a simile. She stated with conviction that we as

analysts use “the fullest potentials of words to evoke, convey, enact, connect, reveal, and transform... This is why we, like the poet, need the quiet room.”

Frances Lang responded to Jeanine Vivona’s paper with what she called a series of “associations” focused on “resonance in language.” She referred to Dr. Vivona’s proposition that “for an interpretation to do its work, the meanings active in the shared relational moment must be articulated by the speaker in language whose precise content, tone and form creates resonance in the listener....” She chose to illustrate this aspect of linguistic synchrony between speaker and listener in an array of examples from clinical moments with patients, to confrontations between lovers in a short story, and finally to a lesson given by a legal scholar about how to argue effectively on behalf of a murderer.

Ms. Lang began with a clinical example in which, as in the clinical material shared by Jeanine Vivona, the patient’s choice of a particular word to describe aspects of himself was striking. When they began to explore his associations to the word, the discussion led to a series of thoughts and fantasies. The ideas contained in these associations were incompatible and even contradictory. In this case the word crossed over from conscious identification to unconscious self-identifications that were highly conflictual. Ms. Lang hoped that she and her patient could continue to explore the meanings of the word he had chosen. In clinical work words can lead us to as yet unarticulated conflicts and confusion.

In the material that followed, we left the consulting room and entered the bedroom of Alexandra, a woman in Grace Paley’s novel, Enormous Changes At the Last Moment. She leapt out of bed stark naked in the midst of an argument with her lover. He complained “I was just starting to fuck you...” She took issue with his language, “And another thing. Don’t use that word. I hate it. When you’re with a woman you have to use the language that is right for her.” By contrast one of Ms. Lang’s patients wants her lover to use the “f” word when he talks about sex; anything else seems feminine. The language this person prefers to use for sex is also strongly connected to gender (but in an opposite manner). In addition she wishes to be different from her powerful mother; she wants to be contained and managed by someone who is “masculine” in her lexicon. In these contrasting examples, Ms. Lang demonstrated that in the sphere of sex, the words used between intimate partners indicate the nature of relationships and gender roles and the pleasure or unpleasure associated with those wishes and memories. Once again the audience learned that among their other meanings, words connect us with the people from whom we learn them.

Finally Frances Lang turned our attention to the power of words illustrated in a scholarly article written by an eminent death penalty attorney, Anthony Amsterdam. She described his advice to defense attorneys in a case in which the killer was plainly identified. The jury was asked to decide between second degree murder and manslaughter. Mr. Amsterdam and a co-author urged the attorneys to make the jury the subject of the closing argument to draw attention away from the unappealing killer by putting references to him into a dependent clause. The story became one of the jury rising heroically above the fray to do their duty, “The jurors faithful to their oath, acquitted the defendant although he sorely tempted them to do otherwise by killing the victim in a dastardly fashion....” The jury is the protagonist, the acquittal is the action, the killer is subordinate. Ms. Lang points out that the “narrative, dialogic structure and linguistic microstructure” become imbued with a perspective that may save this man’s life.

At the end of her discussion, Frances Lang returned to Billy Collins’ poem. She offered her own reaction to the last line of the poem in which the poet steps in front of a painting of a hare that is “jumping right out of the frame.” For her, the poet’s tone shifts markedly from the safe “zone of pretend” to an urgent place, more like “real life.” The dual reality contained in the part of the poem in which the poet denies ever having fished while he vividly describes the experience collapses into a singular reality when the hare becomes real for poet and listener. Ms. Lang suggests that an analogous process takes place in psychoanalysis. We speculate endlessly about whether the relationship experienced in the transference is real or “pretend.” She quotes Freud in “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through” describing transference as an “artificial illness...which... is a piece of real experience, but one which has been made possible by especially favourable conditions, and it is of a provisional nature.” This is the kind of duality that we play with in analysis. Ms. Lang seemed to imply that the special nature of this dual relationship in an interaction involving intensely shared experience is related to therapeutic action. The concept of merging experientially seems linked to the concept of “resonance” she referred to in her opening remarks. Perhaps when shared meaning connects us to our patients through the medium of words in the context of this powerful provisional relationship, the “action” becomes therapeutic. Ms. Lang turned at the end of her talk to Hans Loewald who quotes the poet Paul Valery, “the word enjoins upon us to come into being much more than it stimulates us to understand.” She ended with Loewald’s own reflection, “Dare I say that at propitious moments this (*coming into being*) may happen in a psychoanalytic hour?”

The audience’s response to Jeanine Vivona’s presentation and Frances Lang’s “associations” was free-flowing and wide ranging. It began with a comment about the destructive force of the

Susquehanna River coupled with a question about how we listen to aggression and it ended with a comment about the development of both the analyst's and patient's language in the course of a treatment, comparing it to the process of children learning to use meaningful words with each other over the course of time. In between these two comments clinicians from the community as well as from afar touched on the impact of speaking in first (native) and second languages, the separation of word and context in texting, the use of poetry and metaphors with our patients, Theodor Reik's concept of "listening with the third ear" as it relates to poetry, listening to our patients with our entire body, and the use of music and film as another communicative medium. One of the attendees brought to our attention Haydee Faimberg's concept of "listening to listening" as another thinker who wrote about the importance of hearing how our patients understand our words in order to delve into the unconscious. Bion's "unsaturated interpretation" was compared to Jeanine Vivona's reference to the affectively neutral or "desalinated" speech she described in a clinical vignette. Dr. Rizzuto ended our meeting by reminding us of the elusiveness of words and on the task of helping the patient articulate his/her own version of what is said and meant. The audience was both inspired and eager to resonate with the speakers on the topic of "Psychoanalysis as Poetry."