

Finding Nectar: Poetry as Backstory — Commentary on “A View of Jungian Analysis in Aotearoa New Zealand” by Chris Milton

Barbara Rockel

PSYCHOTHERAPIST, TAURANGA

The sole purpose of human existence
is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being.
(Jung, 1989)

Abstract

This commentary was developed around two interconnected meditations sparked by Chris Milton's paper: firstly on the idea of poetry as complementary to the healing alchemy of analysis and secondly on how the encounter with a new landscape and culture in Aotearoa New Zealand forms the ground of transpersonal life for Pākehā, especially those of settler descent. The language of poetry, with its capacity to connect us with the mythopoeic world, is offered as a way of contextualising the arrival of Jungian analysis in this land and imaginal ground.

Waitara

I whanake ake tēnei kōrero mai i ngā taumauri hononga takirua i pupū ake i te pepa a Chris Milton: tuatahi mai i te whakaaro me haere takitahi te ruri me whakamātau tūmahu o te tātarihanga, tuarua te huanga ake o te taiao hou me te ahurea hou i Aotearoa Niu Tīreni hai hanga papa whakawhiti ki te taha wairua mō te Pākehā, torotika nei ki ngā hekenga tauīwi. Ko te reo ruri me ōna pānga ki te hono i a tātau ki te ao atua, kua homai hai horopakinga i te taenga mai o te tātarihanga Hungiana ki tēnei whenua me te papa pohewa.

Key words: Jungian analysis; Aotearoa; poetry; landscape; dislocation; loss; belonging

Chris Milton's paper, "A View of Jungian Analysis in New Zealand," sent me inward and outward into enriching digressions. As I waited for language that could adequately articulate this experience, I was reminded of a line from Virginia Woolf's *Letters*: "A sight, an emotion,

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creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it.” (1977, p. 247) This quote — an image of the transcendent function at work, if you like — felt like a reassuring nod to my own process, slow at times, encouraging me to trust my capacity to recapture the wave, and, echoing Milton’s quote from Jung, “to become conscious of the contents that press upward from the unconscious” (as cited in Milton, this issue) while I found ways to enter into a conversation with the material offered in the paper.

Milton’s paper provides a clear and engaging elucidation of the international context for Jungian thinking and practice and some history of analytical psychology in Aotearoa New Zealand. He also gives his own working definition of analysis and its main aim — to foster the process of “individuation ... whereby one becomes the authentic and autonomous author of one’s own existence” (p. 130), along with an articulation of the phenomenology of individuation.

This commentary is not intended as a comprehensive overview of the paper, but as a meditation on aspects of its content which caught my imagination. The first is Milton’s account of the arrival in 1939 of Grete Christeller, (possibly) the first Jungian analyst in Aotearoa New Zealand, and of her work with poet and novelist Janet Frame. Wrongly diagnosed and committed to a psychiatric institution, Frame was sent for analysis to Christeller, who recommended ECT to “unite the divide” in Frame’s brain (King, 2000, p. 95), causing great harm to Frame, but who was also greatly healing in introducing Frame to the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke.

Prompted to re-read Rilke, I was again struck by the value, beauty and healing potential of poetic language, with its capacity to connect us to the mythopoeic world, and to guard against the extinction of vital words that foster our inner life. Milton’s description of an offering of poetry as part of an analytic process — an affirmation of a symbolic attitude open to numinous experience — set in motion a series of reflections for me. In my own work — as thinker, reader, writer, dreamer, wonderer, analyst and, analyst / therapist — I have experienced how literature can provide a way, as an individual, to inhabit the tense middle ground where “the ego is challenged by the unconscious ... [which produces a tension that leads to a] symbol, which we may define as the “best possible description or formulation of a relatively unknown fact” (Jung, as cited in Milton, this issue).

In the context of the history and “task” of analysis in Aotearoa New Zealand, could literature, I wondered, provide a way to encounter the painful “unknowns” of our *collective* experience? I began a search of literature from Aotearoa New Zealand, finding writers who, as “outsiders and social activists” (Stafford & Williams, 2012, p. 383) could provide commentary on the conditions, the ground, from which our individuation as a nation proceeds, in the hope of gaining insight into what might best foster appropriate training and development of analysts in Aotearoa.

As I read, what leapt out of the writing was that the “ground” of individuation in this country is, literally, in the landscape, in the encounter between settlers and their unknown other. What follows is my reading of the work of writers (mostly poets) about the period of Aotearoa New Zealand’s history which encompasses the arrival of Pākehā settlers. I want to think, via literature, about the impact of settlers’ arrival, their conflicted relationship with the land and tangata whenua, and about the internal and external forces at work, set in motion by unresolved experiences of loss, which continue to impinge on land and people, leaving much to be worked through by later generations. I want to think, too, about the

paradoxical nature of this legacy, which is full of grief but also contains its own possibilities of transformation, as potently expressed by James K. Baxter in the poem “Wild Bees”:

But loss is a precious stone to me, a nectar
Distilled in time, preaching the truth of winter
To the fallen heart that does not cease to fall
(1949/1981, p. 82)

Louis Johnson described colonisers, settlers, pioneers — my ancestors — as:

uneasy residents in search of a landfall of hope
spat from another climate of failure
to feed on roots or look for them. To make
clearings in the undergrowth
(2002, p. 343)

Inability to securely inhabit the land was underscored by unresolved grief for an idealised homeland:

I’m leaving ... and it cuts as keen as a knife;
The place that’s broken my heart — the place where I’ve lived my life
(Baughan, 1902/1907, p. 3)

Settlers experienced the land of Aotearoa New Zealand as adversary and destroyer — a place where Pākehā felt abandoned by God:

When God made this place
He made mountains and fissures
Hostile, vicious, and turned
Away his face
(1949/1981, p.86)

The language they used to describe their approach to the land was full of descriptions of possession and control, of subduing and exploiting, with an obsessive focus on the physical landscape and climate as troubling obstacles to the task of belonging.

In 1949, James Baxter described the settler response to the land like this:

For us the land is matrix and destroyer,
Resentful, darkly known
By sunset omens, low words heard in branches,
Or where the red deer lift their innocent heads
snuffing the wind for danger,
And from our footfall’s menace bound in terror
(1981, p. 86)

Three years later, Bill Pearson offered this analysis of anguished Pākehā subjectivity:

caught between the mountains and the sea,
never far from the silence of the bush and the stars,
we are in the bland, frightening witness of the infinite,
and we haven't created a social convention strong enough to reassure us
(1952, p. 226)

Many settlers were unconscious of what in themselves they must relinquish, adapt or change, and the attempt to relocate themselves brought them face to face with the experience of *not* belonging, as signaled by Charles Brasch's achingly bleak images of alienation, displacement, discomfort and rejection:

Always, in these islands, meeting and parting
Shake us, making tremulous the salt-rimmed air,
Divided, many-tongued, the sea is waiting, ...
Everywhere in light and calm the murmuring
Shadow of departure; distance looks our way;
And no one knows where he will lie down at night
(2010, p. 240)

Settlers individually and collectively lost themselves when, in their effort to hold to the promise of a better place, they lost connection with the spaciousness of uncertainty, in which hope resides. Holding the tension of the unknown and the unknowable "potential space" was unbearable for many. "[T]he interplay of old and new... an intermediate, symbolising space ... that never previously existed... in which paradoxes could be accepted but not [necessarily] resolved" (Bernstein, p. 351-52) was inaccessible to many, who were unable to use what was alien and newly found. As Irvin Yalom puts it: "The search for meaning, much like the search for pleasure, must be conducted obliquely" (1990, p. 12) in *terra incognita*, with its potential to thrill or terrify.

Entwined with and through this experience was a collision with Māori culture. Māori, having already had some hundreds of years in-country and an awareness, enforced by island living, of the need to look after finite resources, had created a different relationship with the land, where landscape, sun, sea and sky are experienced as living forces. Tribal history is written in the hills and valleys, rivers and streams, cliffs and shores, and the earth — Papatūānuku — holds the dead. It is a sensual connection, as described by Hone Tuwhare:

We are stroking,
caressing the spine of the land
with our sore but ever-loving feet:
hell, she loves it!
Squirring, the land wriggles in delight.
We love her
(2002, p. 242)

This relational rather than mechanistic approach to land, while having much in common with the close-to-tribal transpersonal worlds of settlers from, for example, rural Ireland and Scotland, was far distant from the mindset of Empire and of those drawing up the blueprints for colonial life. For such as these:

Simply by sailing in a new direction
You could enlarge the world ...
We thought we knew all about, being much apter
To profit, sure of our ground
(Curnow, 2012, p. 312)

Persuaded by this fantasy, settlers, many of them freshly traumatised by famine, war, and/or imperial projects in their home countries, literally bought into the dream of a new life where streets were paved with gold, and land-holdings were there for the taking. Many Māori were soon dispossessed and the cycle of trauma continued.

This then is the landscape, (back)ground and context for a Jungian presence in Aotearoa New Zealand — and for a response to Chris Milton's question: "What has been the history of analytical psychology in New Zealand, how prevalent is it, has it taken a New Zealand form?" (In this issue, p. 130.) Milton goes on to say:

[M]y thinking has been strongly influenced by and forged within the challenge of cultures that meet in New Zealand. Dominantly scribed within the cultural tropes of "biculturalism" and the "Treaty of Waitangi" there is a very practical attempt to clear a space where one meets the "other" and the "Other", i.e. the literal other but also otherness, the Self, which provides a deep and mysterious source. (In this issue, p. 135.)

Our collective task as analysts and trainers of analysts is to find ways to (fore)ground questions which might facilitate this "meeting": What in our history makes it difficult to access our "source" and our sources of healing? Who becomes known? Who remains unknown? Who belongs and how?

The image of a furnace, or crucible rather, was in my mind as I read. The settlers' encounter with a new land was the start of a profound and mysterious process of transformation — an alchemical process set in motion by their quest, so often thwarted, for the "precious stone" of literal gold or of a sense of cohesion and belonging. In the fire of analytic work, we continue their quest, transforming experiences of loss, dislocation and exile to discover the gold of a Self, so that with Denis Glover, we can say to our settler-ancestors:

*R.I.P. where no gold lies
But in your own questing soul
Rich in faith and wild surmise.
You should have been told
Only in you was the gold
(1987, p. 122)*

If we can relinquish our defences and face those early griefs through what Milton calls the “workmanlike” process of psychoanalysis, “a process which is profoundly relational, phenomenological and also ultimately transpersonal” (this issue, p. 135), perhaps we can come full circle and “know [our] “place” in the world” (p.135) as the process of individuation deepens, personally and collectively. Coming home in this way we can know, with Rainer Maria Rilke, that nothing and everything has changed:

Losing too is still ours; and even forgetting
 still has a shape in the kingdom of transformation.
 When something's let go of, it circles;
 and though we are rarely
 the center of the circle,
 it draws around us its unbroken, marvelous curve.
 (1995, p. 165)

In any case, we have no option but to transform, squeezed as we are by fears and fretful sleep, frightened by silences and our sense of the infinite, while literature diagnoses our malaise and hints at a way through: *All too-familiar gnomes / Bumping in our dreams / Remind us that we had / A key and lost it / A way of being wrong / Yet able to belong / A sense that any box / Was made to open* (Baxter, 1981, p. 184).

The establishment of Jungian analysis in Aotearoa New Zealand occurred in the context of a “challenge of cultures” as Chris Milton puts it (p. 135), and, in addition to acknowledging our (collectively) unresolved griefs and adaptive failures, the cultural task, then as now, is to become conscious of our responses to the “other,” if we are to find a doorway to “the ‘Other,’... the Self, ... [that] deep and mysterious source” (Milton, p. 135).

Training for this work, analysts carry out the work of individuation *and* pay its price — the “ransom” as Jung puts it (CW Vol 18, quoted in Milton, p. 132) for our refusal to remain unconscious — in the form of “a creative contribution to culture” (Milton, p. 132). The wave in the mind presses up and we look into it, lifting, finding ways to communicate what we see and feel there, giving names to the unique shapes of our “forgetting” in *this* place, Aotearoa New Zealand, all contained within the “marvelous curve” of individuation. So, as a community we become “the authentic and autonomous author[s] of [our] own existence” (Milton, p. 129), and as James Baxter intimates, our loss may indeed become “a precious stone ... a nectar.”

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Barbara Rockel is a psychotherapist, mother of three, third generation Pākehā of Irish, Scottish and German descent. Her first career was as a registered nurse; in the 1990s she trained to become a psychotherapist. She has lived and worked all her adult life in Tauranga. Contact details: barrock@xtra.co.nz .