

Between You and Me

Reaching for Understanding in Anthropology and Analysis

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Nearly 40 years ago I trained in a department then called Social Relations, which combined psychology, sociology and anthropology. I still feel blessed to have been able to study across disciplinary boundaries, and to have had years to read among their common philosophical sources – Marx, Weber, Durkheim, William James. Even while still an undergraduate I was able to begin fieldwork in a Mayan village, the start of eight years there, all up so far. So, when in graduate school, I also had time to study the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz and the psychological phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I finally found thoughts that resonated with my personal experience of encountering radically different others - in their terms, in their world which for them was the taken for granted arena of human existence.

The phenomenological attitude also gave me a way of thinking about the intense, detailed, wholly experiential practice of fieldwork. Fieldwork research, itself definitely an initiation, confronts our own sense of secure belonging in a knowable and meaningful life world. And most ethnographic accounts up to those times were written in language that bleached personal experience from the text. This discursive form reaches for the voice of objectivity, in line with the heroic attitude requisite in the English language sciences of discovery, whether in laboratory or in jungle.

And it was/is also in line with the universalising discourse of the non-personal knower: there is no experiencing 'me', no 'I' except the conventionally depersonalised, (and, I might say, superior) objective knower. Subjective personal experience has no voice here.

So what a relief it was to find a philosophical attitude to knowing that grounded itself in experience, and investigated its conditions! - that took advantage of Kant's realization that however wondrous human conscious is, (and it is) it is nonetheless housed in bodies and sense organs and an embodied mind that gives it access to the world. No body: no mind. No embodied mind: no knowing. How humiliating is that to the project of limitless rationality hoping to become God?

If we begin with a sense that our knowing is grounded in experience, the experience of a particular subjective awareness, shaped by language, filtered by cultural selection of what matters, situated in a complex vantage point, always engaged in inter-subjective moments which flow into our Jamesian stream of inner consciousness then we can relax into the fact that human experience is the centre of all our knowing, though not by any means the sum of it.

We are continually subjects of our experience, imbedded in our lifeworld, and, like most human beings, we take the meanings in that lifeworld as given, as self-evident, and, often even universal. The practice of anthropology takes careful note of this at a collective level, and to do this, though not many anthropologists would express it this way, we must deliberately suspend our belief in the world as we naively take it to be. *Fundamentally, if we apprehend the world through the lens of what we already know, we cannot see what is there in its own terms.* To suspend this normalizing belief in the world as we already expect it to be is called the 'phenomenological epoche', and it is quite different from cultural relativism. The phenomenological attitude regards the elemental apprehension of what it means to exist in a pre-existent world as the basic project of human consciousness. Anthropology helps us realize just how radically the many human

lifeworlds can differ, even while many essentials of humanness do not.

Analysis, when it is well done, carries out this same project in a similar way, attending in detail to what is, moment by moment, through conversation at all levels - suspending belief in the world by forbearing to already know what the analysand means, or takes us to mean or to be. Using the experiencing self of the analyst to perceive afresh, and thus possibly learn something about this complete and radically different lifeworld sitting in the chair opposite.

The subjective, the experiential, in academic discourse is often suspect because it lies in the realm of the small, the daily, the personal, the 'just me', while our intellectual attention is directed toward the conceptual, which we imagine is the collective. Anthropology, as well as analysis, knows that people do not actually live in the conceptual, but in the daily, the totally contingent. But we think, we assess and we evaluate ourselves against the conceptual. This is in every human being an ongoing preoccupation.

The conceptual forms the realm of rules, of what can be said; the subjective often sits quietly, unsaid, often unsayable. But as we know in analysis, the subjective, as it slowly moves toward formulation, through dream, through association, gradually becomes articulable in some way.

So subjectivity raises, inevitably its companion 'objectivity', a hierarchical pair, as Levi-Strauss would tell us. Subject and object, companion standpoints of consciousness, are not, in intellectual discourse, on level ground: objectivity belongs to a knowing mind with claims to authority which subjectivity cannot match: the subjective is the personal, the private, the unauthorised, the subversive.

So I speak today as just myself, someone with continuing deep interest in our topic but

with no special rigour or expertise. What I can offer are just some of the thoughts and experiences that have stuck to this question in the meanderings of my life.

Let's start with some words from a legendary meanderer, the Haiku master Basho who wrote the wonderful book *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* about the journey he undertook when he felt he was soon to die.

Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or, to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object, and do not learn.¹

-Matsuo Basho

Basho directly speaks here not only to the gardener or botanist, but to the modern student of psychology, social work and, indeed, anthropology. Go to the other. Leave your preoccupation with yourself. Do not impose your subjectivity on the object...thus you may learn. Of course, in Basho's meditative tradition these significant injunctions can only be understood as coming after an earlier, more primary injunction, akin to Socrates': know thyself. Without a rigorous self-knowledge how can we possibly know what to leave behind as our preoccupation with ourselves? How do we discover the obstacles in ourselves to the possibility of learning about what is other, or not-self. How do we 'Go to the pine, or to the bamboo'? How do we encounter the other?

This is all the more poignant when the other is another self, like, and unlike, me. I might add to Basho's suggestions: leave, but do not forget, your subjective preoccupation. Both social research and analysis require a double consciousness – our own meaning, the other's meaning, held together. In both anthropology and analysis our self, our subjectivity is our instrument. The task, then, of knowing in order to understand something in both domains is triple. The three elements could perhaps be posed this way:

1. to be aware of our experiencing self; 2. to bracket this experience – hold it for the moment to one side, as it were; and, 3. to open the experiencing self to the other in order to receive what emanations – thoughts, feelings, unconscious happenings, bodily signals – come to the self.

Of course, there is a 4th element, the digesting, differentiating, re-combining, thinking and feeling that may, ultimately make useful sense of the encounter of self with other.

Dogen Kigen, another wonderful old phenomenologist, and bringer of Zen to Japan in the 13th century, puts it this way:

To study the way is to study the self;

To study the self is to forget the self;

To forget the self is to become altogether intimate with the ten thousand things.²

What I've just laid out for some kinds of anthropology and for analysis is quite different from the radical objectivism necessary to certain forms of science. That objectivism requires, prescribes, a radical separation of the knower from the known, of mind from its object.

One of our great sociological thinkers of the 19th century, Max Weber, presaged the epistemological complexities of this issue when he contrasted the sciences of matter with the human sciences. The great positivist virtue of material science, he pointed out, lay in the investigator's capacity to suspend identification with the object of study – to know, as it were, nothing of the object while observing it. This is, indeed, the heart of objectivity: withdrawing all human desire for the world to be as one imagines or wishes it to be. Thus, we observe, record data, and make inferences from data hopefully uncontaminated by desire. All scientists know how difficult and dodgy this is to maintain: but procedures of replicability and peer review have been put in place to help to hold desire in check and

to back up experiment and observation with the intending rigour of other minds.

Max Weber chose to propose an exception to this canon of scientific objectivism. He asked: Why, when the object of our study is a human being like ourselves, would we forego the insight which our common nature affords us? Thus he proposed a social science that might make use of the investigator's special likeness to, and therefore potential psychological access to, something of the mind of the object of investigation. This thought profoundly implied, therefore, that the **object** of investigation was/is also a **subject** – a subject of his/her own consciousness.

The potential pitfalls in this as a research paradigm are immediately obvious - identification, assumptions unnoticed, logical fallacies. And, at the same time, the possibilities are also clear – the entry into meaning-making as primary human activity; awareness of contingent factors which impinge in similar ways upon human subjects, shared language, even via translation.

Empirical psychology has chosen the positivist route, taking the 'subject' of experiment or investigation as an 'object' – a 'not-me'. Analysis has chosen Weber's route, which he termed "verstehen sociologie": understanding; making use in certain ways of the fact of our likeness, which is denied the investigator of the molecular structure of say, copper alloys.

Verstehen sociologie, since Weber's time mid 19th century has been a fertile source of theory. Weber's own analysis of bureaucracy remains unsurpassed; current papers on governmental and managerial dynamics in modern schools of business may ignore their ancient forbear, but cannot gainsay him: his thought is the ground they stand upon. This is because, as Weber demonstrated, we know something of what it is to be human, and to draw on this, especially in light of a rigorous self knowledge, can hold great value in our effort to make sense of other humans, and human practices and institutions of society.

However, as both Marx and Emile Durkheim, Weber's contemporaries and the other two luminaries of 19th century thought, were also making clear, positioning within any given human meaning system strongly shapes what it is easy to think, and what will be given to us to feel - by class, by culture, by language and by the way human groupings make specific meanings of things, despite our common human potential for both thought and feeling. So our 19th century thinkers about the nature of society delineated for us both the potential for empathy and common understanding, as well as the limits to these, routinely imposed by the way our position, our experiences, our vistas and blinkers shape our view of the world and of ourselves.

These socio-philosophical matters weighed upon me as a young woman, one foot in the upper class, one in bohemia, living with an itinerant mother on the smell of an oily rag and bravado, in love with life and scared to death. It was, perhaps, living between worlds, my fate to take up anthropology, to try myself in other peoples' worlds, frightened, self-conscious, struggling for a semblance of competence when often my rudimentary language of Tzotzil, or Guugu Yimidhirr made me fit company only for four year old children.

It was fascinating, and desperate. I disclose these uncomfortable personal matters in order to delineate the grounds for the kind of anthropology I undertook, something I can see was the same ground that carried me forward into the analytic profession. Objectively, or intellectually, I can make a case for the continuity and common wellspring of these two undertakings: anthropology and analysis. And I'm bolstered in this by my colleagues here today with similar overlaps. Still, I take it as my task today to say something philosophically coherent about these things. If they make some sense in a life – my life – this could be entirely idiosyncratic. But more likely, the sense they have and do make in my life could suggest something about a sense they make together, a sense that links the clinical to the anthropological, even though these practices are held institutionally in quite

differing discourses, and are accountable in quite different ways.

This has been a rather long preamble, trying to say something about the philosophical orientation that informed, my research and my way of understanding clinical work, just to give us all a common referential ground.

Now I want to describe or convey something from my life in anthropology that carries for me the clarity and conundrum about subjectivity (and objectivity) and might mark the place where I have found myself in the academic context over the last decades. After that I'd like to say something about a clinical encounter that resonates with my thoughts about subjectivity, in clinical, anthropological and philosophical inquiry, even while they occur in quite a different registers.

First, a vignette from my many years in Nabenchauk, a village in the municipality of Zinacantan, in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. I first went there age 19, in the early years of a 25 year ethnographic undertaking called the Harvard Chiapas project. From the recently prior presence of linguists and archaeologists the role of inquirer was sort of known; a masculine role. Before me two women had taken up this role with some success, but also at personal cost, as they were honorary males, but not women, and it gave them no comfortable place in the Zinacantec world – no hostility, simply no recognition.

I chose another way, for lack of courage, I think, and for lack of loyalty to objectivist science. I chose to apprentice myself as a Zinacantec woman: drawer of water, hewer of wood, baker of tortillas, grinder of corn dough, spinner of wool, tender of sheep, weaver of clothes, bags and bedding, washer of clothes, bags and bedding, raiser of chooks and turkeys, and over the years carrier of my babies in snug slings on my back. I worked hard to shorten my steps to be more sure-footed on the steep pathways, and learned how to make my long folded skirt snap deliciously as young women could do; to sit with my legs tucked and my feet cradling my bum; to stand in a single graceful rising from this

posture. I learned to express shock at local transgressions, how to exclaim in feminine tones, how to keep quiet, when to cover my head, or my mouth.

All these tasks, skills, ordinary movements and activities have a style and a manner of accomplishment that carries grace. I took months to learn to carry my water jar on a tumpline without sloshing telltale splotches down the back of my skirt, even though I made 8 trips every day. How to bake an acceptable – even excellent- tortilla and with grace (not burning my fingers, draping the thin crumbly dough with an easeful sweep over the fire, turning them so that in the end they puffed satisfyingly and didn't have to be put aside for the dogs) became my particular obsession. When, after maybe five years my compadre Petul asked me to help make tortillas for his senior ritual obligations at the fiesta of San Sebastian I was in bliss, and puffed with pride throughout the five days. I could happily have it as my epitaph.

Why does this matter? Because sensuous meaningful experience is an embodied life, and the embodiment carries an infinitude of meanings that constitute personhood, and intersubjective encounters of social recognition.

My first really useful skill, of spinning wool, I learned from Me7 Mal, then in her 80s and nearly blind. She and I sat together over a thousand hours in our courtyard, spinning wool, telling stories, snoozing, remembering. Slowly I learned to spin it strong and fine enough to be warp thread, and though I had earlier woven a few small hapless cotton bags, dying and weaving my wool into a proper belt was another stage in becoming a Zinacantec woman.

Her belt is the piece of a Zinacantec woman's clothing that is most emblematic of femininity. She wears it throughout her life cinched very tightly around her middle. The belt holds her skirt smoothed closely across her body, delineating her hips. Because of the way her tubular skirt folds over the top of it, the belt itself is virtually invisible when she

is wearing it. Its breadth supports her back and stomach when she carries heavy loads. She hangs it over the rafters to support her weight when she kneels in the labour of childbirth. She loosens her belt at night for sleep, but only unties it fully when she changes her skirt. Women in Zinacantan are almost never fully unclothed.

As soon as an infant girl is born she is wrapped in a skirt-like cloth for a nappy, which is cinched in place with a miniature belt identical to her mother's and sisters. She will wear a woollen belt tight around her waist for the rest of her life. I struggled to cinch my belt as tightly as both custom and utility required. More than once one or another of my babies, stretching their legs in their sling on my back, pushed the back of my skirt out from under my belt, occasioning extraordinary measures from my family to cluster around me, hiding my chagrin, until I got home!

But I spun the wool of my belt in our family courtyard; my sisters helped me dye the green from local plants, and accompanied me to town to buy the imported chemical red dye from Guatemala. They helped me judge the length, helped me warp up the pattern, and soothed my frustrations when my inept sawing motion on my backstrap loom made the fibres pill up and clog the weaving.

So when I remember, or look at my first belt it is replete with the sense experiences of all that is part of it, and all that surrounds it: the smell of wood smoke from the household fires, the ruckus of turkeys and baaing lambs, voices carrying up the mountain slope from neighbours' courtyards, truck horns and scratchy cantina music. The feel of dawn frost under my bare foot.

Without the frost under my foot, the grassy patches between forest and cornfield would not be good pasturage for sheep. Without the baaing of the lambs, the wool in the belt would be gone. Without the truck horns the colourfast fast red dye from German companies in Guatemala would have to come by mule train, and be more costly. Without

the wood smoke from the disappearing oak forests, how would the weaver cook her corn into tortillas? So it is clear that my belt is made of an infinitude of non-belt elements. It has no separate existence from this web of non-belt elements.

Similarly, it expands into a web of non-belt meanings as it takes its place wrapped tightly around a woman's waist, where belts have always held her fast throughout her life, loosened only in her most private moments. In fact this belt is even present in its absence. In 1974, Me7 Mal, my oldest daughter's godmother, who taught me to spin, needed to have the cataracts that were blinding her removed at a clinic in the state capital. I accompanied her both as attendant and as translator. There, as I helped her bathe before putting on her skimpy surgical gown I learned that the flesh of Mal's waist was permanently indented half an inch deep, the width of her belt, all the way around. For me, as I washed her and felt that indentation, the presence of that belt in its absence was profound. But for Mal, the absence of that belt at her waist was deeply felt throughout her stay in the clinic, a part of her estrangement, her weakness, her aloneness among strangers, a lack of support, her body unwrapped, loose and vulnerable.

We live at all times in embedded, contingent ways in our minds and in our physicality. The interactions of our life worlds continuously tweak strands in the web that resonate through nodes and intersections through conditions of geopolitical capital that lie beyond the horizon of direct experience and impinge in constitutive ways on the lifeworld. So we have both the specificity and the embeddedness, the node and the web, the thing and the relatedness. And we have somehow, in order to live and to understand living, to keep both these aspects in view.

How do we help, as anthropologists and as analysts, in the project of validating the plurality of human experience without imposing false separation? How do we keep human understanding open to the possibility of radical difference while tracing out the connections which hold us all in a single woven world?

The self and the other are ideas inseparable from each other. When we encounter the other we are inclined to project onto it those aspects of ourselves that we cannot own or even acknowledge – we make our most elementally frightening desires into the desires of the other. And so the encounter with the other is also the encounter with the self, and to know amid this projection and difference, what is what is perhaps the heart of human difficulty.

Objectivism – the act of the radical separation of the knower from the known, of mind from its object – expunges the self from the scene of encounter and impedes the possibility of distinguishing the self-ness of the ‘other’ from our projection. Only the self-knowing self can withdraw its projections and leave the other free. Self-knowing, which is the condition for truly meeting the other, is not an achievable state, but a process within the acts of knowing, perceiving, receiving - a process that accomplishes itself through encounter with the other. Analysis and anthropology begin with that attitude of openness to self within the conditions of encounter.

We all suffer, in the academy and in training institutes, from the consequences of literacy. Conversation in the academy is mostly contention, and descends institutionally from practices of male ceremonial combat, which does not go on in the courtyard while spinning wool, but in special arenas and lecture halls. And just as today we have the awkwardness of moving into conversation from read monologues like mine, so does our western thought tradition have to recover something of the flow and mutuality of conversation from the fixed and impersonal language of written discourse. Literacy allowed a speaker to speak, as it were, to someone distant in both space and time. It was and is a wondrous thing, but not without its consequences for relationship.³

Literacy is a process whereby the thinker becomes aware of his own thought as an entity, as an abstraction. Writing fixes the idea, transforming the evanescent world of sound to

the quiescent, semi-permanent world of space. It allows analysis to free itself from context and to develop generalizing and universalising tendencies. And print, far more than mere writing, completes the separation of the knower from the known, and created finality and closure and a thought as a commodity in the manufacture and discursive shaping of the text, and in conventions of form. Thus the lifeworld has lost its place in the academy to analytical abstraction. Outside the academy, and in the analytic encounter, we can stick closer to experience.

As all young returning fieldworkers know, in the academy we tend to view human culture as something thought, rather than felt, embodied and experienced. Trying to render their own highly felt experiences into a thesis confronts them with this, painfully and maddeningly. Anthropology has found it difficult to acknowledge that culture is as inscribed in ordinary glance and gesture as it is in spectacle and performance. Cultural meaning is theorised as if suspended between minds, referred to and enacted, rather than renewed and modified with each encounter as it reciprocally modifies each consciousness. This is the work of resorting too quickly to abstraction in search of generalisation rather than sticking close to experience. This is not the same as empiricism; it requires looking closely at one's own experience, even while having it, looking at the process of engaging with social reality, with the uncomfortable and unknowability of the other.

So social science tends to stay with the realm of public behaviour and events. The 'private' is the realm of the idiosyncratic, the disordered, the unaccountable, the inexplicable. That brings us to the practice of analysis, where we have the possibility of sticking very minutely to experience, and contemplating the very private together, and together coming to make something of it, find its order, as it were.

Now I want to offer some clinical material from some very long and detailed work with a young man suffering a terrifying narcissistic uncertainty about being-in-the-world and the

radical impossibility of a two-person relationship. I will track aspects of our clinical work through some of the images that arose in my patient, in me and between us that carried us into the beginnings of a real relationship. What became possible for my patient was to begin to experience himself as a subject and me as a subject at the same time.

This work resonates profoundly with my anthropological experience on many levels. The most obvious, but no less profound for all that, is the work that it takes to open to an encounter with a radically different meaning world, whether that encounter takes place in an exotic geographic location and radically unknown language, or whether it occurs in one's own rooms with a recognisable young person apparently speaking the same language as I do.

It also resonates in the way that both he and I, differently motivated and in different ways both conscious and unconscious, grope toward the other in search of understanding and of being understood. The clinical encounter replicates all the power-laden aspects of the ethnographic encounter, as the jostle between private or sub-cultural meaning worlds and conventionally empowered meaning worlds continually upends itself, with now one, now the other driving the moment. And it turns, like good ethnographic collaboration, on achieving some meta-sense of the relational dynamics we – both as singular, groping minds, and as a couple-like unity of 'we-ness' – must go through, as humans making something of our meeting.

As I speak of this work I will juxtapose some of its vignettes with the poetry and letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, whose psychic dilemmas were similar to both my patient's and, in the narcissistic insecurity of my young ethnographic life, my own. Rilke, I feel, worked through some of his dilemmas by means of his artistic relationships both to the artists he sought out as persons and to their art as their personal explorations of being. Both he and his biographers clearly saw these periods of Rilke's life as conscious apprenticeships in how to live. This is not unlike my own efforts to understand and to discover something of

how to embody myself as a Zinacantec woman. Nor is it unlike the questing and partly mimetic journey my patient Paul took with me to find some way to be himself in the company of another self.

Rilke the child was pathologically accommodated to a narcissistic mother; as a young man he spent years of alienation at a military academy, and as a young precocious poet at age 26 wrote a famous series of mentoring letters to a young man at that same academy, advising him on the path to total devotion to the sensibilities of his art.

My patient Paul came to me as a young man of 24 feeling painfully inadequate and unsure. He also had experienced an acid trip in which he felt a profound, seamless unity with the world. He was confused, now experiencing a self-conscious, agonised state of feeling damaged and worm-like, and also experiencing a state of mind in which all other beings were beneath contempt, and he was, possibly King of the World. What, or whose world did he live in, and how could he know?

He wanted help, and to get it from me he pulled his chair up knee to knee with me, spoke in a monologue, and in each session asked me, 'What do you think of that?' and immediately held up his hand to hush me, and said, 'Don't answer that.' Any of me in the room except the receptive me was potentially annihilating.

This young man Paul lived by rules of extreme eco-purity and self-denial, seeking a perfection of being that might hold him above contempt and keep the world turning on its precarious axis. Each time he felt understood by me, he warded off this contact by questioning my competence and value.

Rilke, too, pursued his art with ascetic purity, abstaining from wine, removing himself from the contaminating influences of ordinary embodied life, eventually living apart from his sculptor wife Clara Westhof and their small daughter. But, like my patient Paul, his

sensibilities were acute, his intelligence extremely fine. Work, for Rilke, was the work of art. The slog of providing a roof and a meal for himself assaulted his sense of entitlement and threw him into despair.

Likewise, Paul abjured physical effort that he feared would damage his body. For a time his preferred posture was lying with his head on the compliant lap of his girl friend. And yet, somewhere within himself he knew that this was deathly, and far from manifesting the seamless sense of being at home in the world which his acid trip had shown him. He needed his girlfriend and her selfless compliance, and therefore he held her in contempt. As he came to need me, contempt jostled with hope that he could make use of me in a way that would open a pathway out of this unfree state.

Attunement is not compliance. For years, what was needed was my quiet effort to get what he was experiencing, to notice the subtle beginnings of despair or contempt, and yet to inject nothing of me that would, in its difference from him, threaten this porous self with shame. At the same time he needed to know that my mind was robust, independent and not compliant.

Like Rilke, Paul's sensibilities missed nothing, felt everything and managed the world by a moralism designed to make as little impact on the universe as possible, and to hold himself safe from its influence on him as well.

At the same time Paul, like Rilke, took as his entitlement being supported by his girlfriend's parents. He felt diminished when he had to have truck with the muck of the world; he tried by his un-related and ghost-like perfections to show God his worthiness of being housed and fed, which for a long time he could not really acknowledge to the people who actually saw to it.

So for Paul to reach a place where he could take from the world what he needs, and to

take it *knowingly*, and even to savour and enjoy what he takes, has been quite an achievement – to find and to own his own necessary aggression, his appetite, his gusto. Gusto has to do with our capacity to bite into life and to savour it. It is an ordinary word that helps to evoke the sense of ordinary, human animal exuberance which I want to place at the centre, in order to reflect upon the constraints on appetite and gusto that were made by Paul's depressive narcissism and obsession.

Animal gusto is carefully shaped in all human cultures and it is what we customarily regard as civilization's hallmark to constrain. And yet, as Freud demonstrated so disconcertingly for the 20th century, an excess of constraint extinguishes the value of a personal existence. Life lacking in gusto is a chore.

Gusto, with its sense of appetite and bite, points to the way in which life makes use of the world for its own temporary purposes: plants thrive as their roots suck up nutrient elements from the soil, molluscs drill holes in the shells of other molluscs and suck out their contents, baby mammals suck milk from the teats of their mothers, humans pluck and hunt and husband other life forms, and we burrow, build and borrow bits of the world to do things with. Gusto is a quality of our being in the world, of our encounters with external reality, with the other. It has to do with the use we make of the not-me and with our ability to survive being made use of, and contemplating it will take us into elements of ordinary creativity.

Here is a description of gusto all but extinguished by depression. It comes from a letter from Rilke to Lou Andreas Salome, while he was in Paris in 1902, living alone, walking the streets, trying to find his art:

...and what people I met almost every day! ...At most one took them in as an impression and looked at them with calm detached curiosity like a new kind of animal in whom want had developed special organs, organs of hunger and death. ... They

*were holding out under the foot of each day that trod on them, like tough beetles, were enduring as if they still had to wait for something, twitching like bits of a big, chopped up fish that is already rotting but still alive.*⁴

That feeling inside of the enormous purposelessness of existence, that finds outside in the world nothing but decay, senseless poverty, pain, want, a kind of useless un-animation. This is the sort of experience of the world Paul also felt much of the time. 'It's shit; they're all shit. They live in shit and don't even know it!' he would cry, of the dullards who drive their cars and attend their jobs, of the druggy and contaminating gothics who rode the bus with him. These times for Paul were full of contempt for the world, a hotter feeling perhaps than Rilke's, but they led him into rigid, hollow despair in which no one had anything to offer, and death was the only inviting condition in which he could preserve his valued parts.

In 1902 Rilke sought out Auguste Rodin, asking him poignantly, desperately, '*How do we live?*' And Rodin had replied, 'By work', and sent him to the Botanic Gardens every day to put himself in touch with the natural world.

Here is one telling poem that emerged from this period:

THE PANTHER

In the Jardin des Plantes, Paris

His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
Has grown so weary that it cannot hold
Anything else. It seems to him there are
A thousand bars, and behind the bars, no world.

As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,
The movement of his soft powerful strides

Is like a ritual dance around a centre
In which a mighty will stands paralysed.

Only at times, the curtain of the pupils
Lifts, quietly – an image enters in,
Rushes down through the tense, arrested muscles,
Plunges into the heart, and is gone.

Trans., Steven Mitchell⁵

Here, surely, is an image of the power of being, constrained, pacing, a caged being whose strides must repeat cramped circles. And Rilke goes further, imagining the impact on the creature's will which is paralysed. Not imprisoned, but paralysed by its imprisonment. The outer bars have become inner bars, rendering the mind's eye too weary to hold an image. Imagination foreclosed.

Here we have a picture of what is alive in us unable, or almost unable, to tolerate hope. There is no possibility of anyone offering anything; the world is sadistic. And, though Rilke may not intend it, we can look at the panther – that beautiful black beast full of its power and its bodily urges to stalk, to lunge, to sink its snout in the hot blood of the deer – as also an image of libidinal urge turned sadistic, hate-filled. The *wild* panther, in its forest and free, is not an image of the sadistic, but of the creative, which includes the capacity for aggression, biting into life. It hunts only when hungry, and freely, with work, makes use of its environment to feed its energies when feeding is necessary. When it is not hungry the panther looks down on its prey species with benign disinterest. But *caged* these potential energies have another quality altogether, ethologically and in our imaginative thoughts about it. Caged panthers hate, through the bars of their captivity, and they give up. Their disinterest is not benign but malign, extinguishing, deadening the world.

Let us juxtapose this with Paul's state of mind, when he had fallen fully into a state of rigid, obsessional thinking, fending off the possibility of I – Thou relatedness by an intricacy of thought that bound him in such painful anxiety that he had not been able to leave his flat for months.

Paul had rung for our session in a very distressed state. His bowl of organic fruit had begun to attract fruit flies. Paul worried intensely that these fruit flies might distract the driver of a vehicle passing by, dazzle someone and cause an accident. Paul felt his fault was in letting the fruit ripen to this point. A plastic bag would be un-ecological. He hoped, wanly, that having made a compost area might relieve him of the responsibility which having the fruit in his flat had made for him.

He is exhausted from living with such minute attention. He obeyed the letter of every law to avoid dangerous catastrophes that a moment's unrighteous carelessness or an ungoverned urge might rain down upon the world, denying Paul access to heaven. The panther in him, hungry, constrained, paced in his flat behind his bars – hateful, lonely, contemptuous, almost without imagination, in despair.

What he thought was the panther in himself at that time was held in the grandiose image of his only experience of feeling at home in the world, and his only mediating image of a masculine differentiated self. It is a two-fold image we called King of The World.

In our first session he described his conversations with his mother by holding one arm wide out, holding an imaginary telephone, his head bent away from it trying not to hear.

Some time later he told me of his acid trip experience two years previously, when he had felt for the first time that he absolutely understood that everything was OK. He often wondered if this experience was unique, that he might be 'king of the world'. As he said this he made a gesture with both arms outstretched at his sides, his head flopped to one

side. I intuited that this was Christ on the cross. He nodded.

I said that it reminded me of his telephone conversation with his mother, and he nodded again, arms still outstretched, and said, 'Yeah...suffering.'

Paul was not enlivened by this exchange, but cast into a pensive silence. When I wondered what had just happened he did not want to say. The next session he told me that he had felt bad when I said that, as if he were a damaged person needing therapy. Later he turned this into a sadistic joke, by saying in broad mimicry of a cartoon therapist, 'That reminds me, Dr Devereaux....' and laughing caustically.

Nonetheless these two images became elements of our vocabulary that Paul used over the years to refer us to the complex quality of a moment of righteous suffering endured. It gave me a potent sense of the dangers of intimacy for Paul, and of the rather desolate hopes he held for communication, let alone dependency. It was being nailed to the tree of life, and of being crucified on the mental body of mother, which needed to be held in mind as I sat, Madonna-like, providing an undemanding mental lap. As we went on together, as Paul began to hope for something from our connection, the more potentially impinging and disappointing I became. 'Don't speak!' he implored me, lest I destroy his idealization; the particular, the actual was too incarnate to yet be borne.

Now let us pair this with another image from Rilke, which articulates a similar unbearableness of the other in an exalted form. Here is the beautiful beginning of Rilke's *First Duino Elegy*⁶, inspired while he wrestled with the banal exigencies of finance as he walked the cliffs of his royal patron's estate.

*Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels'
hierarchies? And even if one of them pressed me
suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed*

*in that overwhelming existence. For beauty is nothing
but the beginning of terror, which we are just able to endure,
And we are so awed because it serenely disdains
to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying.
and do I hold myself back and swallow the call-note
of my dark sobbing? Ah whom can we ever turn to
in our need? Not angels, not humans,
and already the knowing animals are aware
that we are not really at home in
our interpreted world.*

-translated by Steven Mitchell

How do we live?! rings through Rilke's letters even as he opens up most intuitively to the matter of what his art is about and how it works. Truly giving voice to the collective unconscious through his own narcissism and angst he asks: how can I be myself under the pressure of the minds of others? How will I ever know or give voice to what is truly me, if there is anybody else?

Rilke's turbulent apprenticeship to Rodin opened his mind not only to the sculptor's particular robustness, but also to the aim of his art, which mediated between classical ideal perfection and the possibility of appreciating the ordinary, unique human. While Rodin made idealizing images of creative heroes – Balzac, Dante, the Burghers of Calais – he was doing it in a form unrecognisable at the time as idealizing. Rodin was after the spirit of the man *as a man*, and so he worked from the inside out, often sculpting the figure first unclothed in order to know fully the sense of his being in the body itself. He rejected the classical sense of giving ideal form to the hero: his was the celebration of 'This Man'.

In 1907 Rilke began to catch the sense of something in himself and in the culture that had

to do with *living* from the inside out. His wife's friend Paula Modersohn Becker, later known as the first female modernist painter, sold during her short life only a single painting, to Rilke. After her death Rilke's requiem poem for her expressed something of what he had begun to learn from her. Titled *Requiem for a Friend*⁷, it reads in part:

For that is what you understood: ripe fruits.
You set them before the canvas, in white bowls,
And weighed out each one's heaviness with your colours.
Women, too, you saw were ripe fruits; and children, molded
From inside, into the shapes of their existence.
And at last you saw yourself as a fruit. You stepped
Out of your clothes and brought your naked body
Before the mirror. You let yourself inside
Down to your gaze, which stayed in front, immense
And didn't say: I am that. No: this is.
So free of curiosity your gaze
Had become, so unpossessive, of such true
Poverty, it had no desire even for you yourself; it wanted nothing. Holy.

Wilfred Bion calls what arises in this state of mind *unsaturated* and distinguishes it from the saturated elements of dream and myth. It is unsaturated with already existent meanings that are laden with personal or cultural intention.

This began Rilke's resolution of his narcissistic dilemma, and it continued through his deep inquiry into the painting of Paul Cezanne, posthumously displayed in a Paris retrospective. Rilke sat in front of Cezanne's works for many days, later writing his famous critical essay. Rilke saw how Cezanne, too, stood before the object and tried to paint it in its suchness, refusing to cloak it in 'saturated' meanings.

He came to see how Cezanne painted the object from the middle outward, and did not start with the skin, but with the core. Rilke wrote to Clara:

Starting with the darkest colouring, he covered its depth with a layer of colour which he carried a little beyond that and so on and on, extending colour upon colour, he gradually came to another contrasting pictorial element, with which he then proceeded similarly from a new centre.⁸

Four days later on the 13th of October he is back at the gallery again:

...One also notices better each time how necessary it was to go even beyond love; it is of course natural for one to love each of these things when one makes it. But if one shos that, one makes it less well; one judges it instead of saying it.... One painted: ‘I love this’ instead of painting ‘Here it is’.⁹

Let me now put this next to an image that held, over time, the beginnings of a similar resolution for my patient Paul. At one session Paul was talking about watching someone serve a customer while carrying on a conversation with both the customer and a workmate. Paul was envious of this ability to attend to several things in a relaxed way, while he was also horrified and contemptuous of the ‘carelessness’ he attributed to this man about perhaps making a mistake in all this multiplicity and possibility of mix-up.

Just at this point a crimson rosella arrived at the feeder hanging close outside the consulting room window. The rosella called loudly in its crystalline CHNK! Chnk! Chnk!. CHNK! ... Chnk! Chnk!. Over and over it called. Paul was interrupted in his thoughts, and turned to look at the rosella; he then turned back to me, laughing and irritated all at once. He huffed, ‘Did you hear that? Look at it now!’ We watch as the rosella, having cast a glance around it, plunged its head into the feeder and seized a sunflower seed, husked it, swallowed it and plunged its head back into the feeder for

another. Paul laughed, in a form of amazement and admiration. ‘Stupid bird. Not a care in the world! Me! Me!’

Paul was speaking both as the bird in this moment and for himself, since his irritation was at once envious of the bird’s capacity for self-announcement, and a call for us to turn our attention back to him.

This call, ‘Me! Me!’ became iconic for us for a long time, standing for several things. Most often Paul used it in storytelling to indicate a wish for a moment to have included him when he was feeling that it had not: moments when Paul felt like an object, and had wished to feel like a subject – with his mother, with his girl friend’s family, with his sense of the universe, animate and inanimate at any given moment.

During Paul’s months locked obsessively in his flat we conducted our sessions by phone. In our final phone session before Paul was able to resume getting himself to my rooms we talked over all his fears about making the journey: the roadways, the sun, the cars, electricity, doors. We also discussed his feeling that if I really wanted to see him in person “to be nice, I should try to get there. It’s a lot of pressure, really.’ For Paul to see me had, as he said, ‘the positive aspect that you would feel more real, and the negative aspect that you might not find me so appealing.’

At our first session back in my rooms, the following exchange took place:

L: I wonder what it’s like for you to be here?

P: Good. It’s good.

L: Before we were just phone voices, now we’re whole bodies....

P: Hhmmm. I didn’t think of that. More it’s being here in your place. Your cave. I read the Odyssey last year...there’s a character, Circe? Or is it Calypso? Who had the cave? ... So it’s your whole place, not just your physical body. ... Here, coming to your cave I don’t have so much of my own authority. ... But, that’s OK.

So being clasped to the breast of an angel was still daunting, but manageable. And the me-ness of me which raised intimations of being engulfed, taken over, rendered helpless, could be borne, ultimately. There was a two-ness that was beginning to have the quality of 'we', as well as of Paul and Leslie, which is the separateness that is a form of intimacy.

If we think back to Rilke's description of Cezanne painting outward from the centre of each pictorial object, we get a sense of how he replicated in this the meeting of two things phenomenally, and the way that meeting creates what we think we see as the line, or the contour that we think delineates them. This delineation is a reification of an aspect of seeing. This is clearer if imaginally we locate ourselves in the centre of each object, and feel our way outward toward that point of meeting with another object.

Marion Milner, the Middle School analyst, diarist and painter, explored this in her book entitled *On Not Being Able to Paint*.

I found that to draw the line of one object with fully felt awareness of the line of the neighbouring one and of the patterns of space they mutually created between them, seemed as potent an act as laying the wires across the terminals of a battery; and the resulting flash seemed to light a new world of possibilities.¹⁰

There is something important about the achievement in infancy that allows an interplay between separating subject and object, and not separating them, which allows a zone of possibility we call play. It is ruminative, open-ended, not definitively anchored in time or space, and in a non-climactic way it constantly creates the energy Milner speaks of as the flash between two battery terminals.

Milner goes on toward the end of this study to speak about two kinds of thinking: the kind that makes a separation of subject from object, me from not-me, and the kind that

does not. Referring to the kind that does not, in its mature form, and its relation to art, she makes the point that we must think about creativity in its capacity for ‘fusing, of confusing subject and object, seer and seen and then making a new division of these. By suffusing, through giving it form, the not-me objective material with the me – subjective psychic content, it makes the not-me “real”, realizable.’¹¹

What is important about this psychic achievement is that it is mutable; one can move between anchoring in the concreteness of what absolutely is (or seems to be) and the open possibilities of what *may* be. This achievement is made in the intersubjective field of human relationships, which is where our infant selves begin to develop a sense of self and then becomes transferable to the self in the world of infinite objects – things, beings, the elements – where it is elaborated into a personal world of experience and meaning.

For this to be bearable and rich, a part of our infant omnipotent fantasies must remain available to us. The child’s interest, its in-loveness with the world, is full of omnipotence; disillusionment is carefully calibrated in bearable doses by ordinary parents. But when the world is impervious to, or overbearing to a child’s omnipotence, it becomes a dead world, because it cannot be made use of in imagination.

Rilke, wandering in Paris without personal meaning was able only to see human life as enduring being trod upon. He found a resonance with the caged panther, occasionally receiving a live image from a world deadened by his inner paralysis. Paul’s caged life within his flat was barred by obsessional obedience forged of a fear of his own interest; his appetites, his active subjectivity had been trapped in an environment of things he could not make his own, things not subject to inner transformation and personal meaning-making that could be shared.

When things demand we do not transform them by investing them with meanings arising from our own inner lifeworld, however nascent, but require us merely to *abide* by them¹²⁻

to obey the fixed meanings of the lifeworld in which they reside, the world is deadened for us, and like the panther, our vision grows weary. When, however, we can encounter the other –radically different though they may be – with a sensibility in which meaning is not fixed, but endlessly ramified by embedded practices, histories, mythologies and embodied practicalities, as we know our own lifeworld to be, then the encounter, dangerous, potentially maddening, can re-enliven the world and the self, and the concreteness of certainty begins to verge on possibility, as two centres of being and meaning meet from the inside out.

¹ Basho, Matsuo, (1690) *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, Penguin Books, London: 1966.

² Aitken, Robert (2003) *The Morning Star: New and Selected Zen Writings*, Shoemaker Hoard, Washington, D.C., p.32.

³ Ong, Walter (1982) *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*, London, p.92.

⁴ *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke: 1892-1910*, trans., Jane Bannard Greene and M.D. Herter Norton, New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1945, p.109.

⁵ *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans., Stephen Mitchell, Vintage International, New York: 1989, p., 25.

⁶ *ibid.*, 'The First Elegy'.

⁷ *ibid.*, 'Requiem for a Friend'.

⁸ *Letters*, Greene and Norton, eds. P.309.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.311.

¹⁰ Milner, Marion (1969) *On Not Being Able To Paint*, London, Heinemann, p.12.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.161.

¹² Phillips, Adam (1996) *The Beast in the Nursery*, London, Basic Books, *passim*.