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*The Contributions of Literature to Psychological Growth*  
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## Introduction

C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Literature*, **CW**, 15: 161

A great work of art is like a dream; for all its apparent obviousness it does not explain itself and is always ambiguous. . . . It presents an image . . . and it is up to us to draw conclusions. . . . To grasp its meaning, we must allow it to shape us as it shaped [the artist].

Anna Freud (to a 14 year old boy about preparations for becoming a psychoanalyst)

You ought to be a great reader and become acquainted with the literature of many countries and cultures. In the great literary figures you will find people who know at least as much of human nature as the psychiatrists and psychologists try to do. (Heinz Kohut, 1978, *The Evaluation of Applicants for Psychoanalytic Training. The Search for the Self*, vol. 1, 474.)

I dedicate this presentation to the poets, writers, storytellers across the millennia and across the globe who speak of human nature much more eloquently than we analysts do.

The arts stir, exalt, console, agitate, enliven, entertain. Books have been burned and banned; books have been venerated (disrespectful handling of a venerated book recently became a central point in international strife). Whence comes their power? What is it that transpires in the interplay between reader and text? What are the psychological dynamics, personal and archetypal?

I have been a lover of reading, of literature throughout life. My specific interest in the psychological experience of reading was awakened in the course of my personal analysis when I realized that books had a strong effect on me in my early years. I remembered them in the same mode in which I remembered friends; and I realized that they had helped to shape my life. I further realized that books affected me similarly throughout life: a book here or there; a theme in a story; a poem; a fictional character.

In the course of analytic training and doctoral studies, I became intellectually curious about these phenomena: I wanted to understand the psychological dynamics involved in experiences with books alongside my understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal experiences. I began to collect published references related to the effects of books from biographical writing and I gathered reports by patients and friends. I have used my observations and my thinking in teaching about symbolic understanding and about clinical work.

I will present here today (1) observations about the impact of literature on psyche, about the reader's experience of being deeply touched by a story or a literary character. These observations are drawn (a) from published writing and (b) from personal and clinical observations. I will also present (2) theoretical views on the dynamics between reader and book.

### **A. Observations on the Effects of Literature out of Published Writing.**

1. Jung's report about a significant experience

In **Memories, Dreams, Reflections**, Jung speaks at length of the influence which **Faust** had on him in his youth. As is well known, since childhood Jung felt a split in himself between the young boy who lived his daily life as his family and culture expected him to live (# 1 personality) and the inner self (# 2 personality), his dark, introspective side. In his struggle to deal with his turbulent inner life, J read widely, believing that “there must have been people who sought the truth as I was doing and did not wish to deceive themselves.” (MDR, 59) He did not encounter these people amongst the theologians and philosophers in his father’s library but in Goethe’s **Faust**. He says that Faust

Was the living equivalent of No. 2, and I was convinced that **he** was to answer which Goethe had given to his times. This insight was not only comforting to me, it also gave me an increased feeling of inner security and a sense of belonging to the human community. I was no longer isolated and a mere curiosity, a cruel sport of nature. My godfather and authority was the great Goethe himself. (MDR, 87)

Faust’s words “two souls, alas, are housed within my breast” (MDR, 234; “Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach, in meiner Brust” Goethe, **Faust**, Part I, Outside the City Gate, 37) were making it easier for him to face the split in himself. Beyond that he tells us that **Faust**

Awakened in me the problem of opposites, of good and evil, of mind and matter, of light and darkness. . . . My own inner contradictions appeared here in dramatized form; Goethe had written virtually a basic outline and pattern of my own conflicts and solutions. . . . I was directly struck, and recognized that this was my fate. Hence, all crises of the drama affected me personally. (MDR, 235)

The problem of opposites, the necessity to deal with the dark side of life and to integrate one’s shadow, the redemption of the inhumanity of Faustian man through union with the feminine principle – these are themes with which J struggled in his life, which **Faust** helped him to understand in himself, and which permeate his work.

## 2. Freud’s report about experiences with reading

In 1907, a Viennese publisher invited some distinguished citizens, Freud among them, to submit their choice of “ten good books.” In his reply, F focused on the phrase “good books” and says: “it carries the implication as when we speak of ‘good friends,’ books to whom a man owes some of his knowledge and his *Weltanschauung*.” He lists ten of his good book-friends and observes that the request touched on something “about which immeasurably much might be said.” (Ernest Jones, 1957, **The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud**, vol. 3, 422-423.)

## 3. Readers in general

Readers, famous and not so famous, offer many responses to inquiries about the effects of reading. To me, they seem to fall into several groups:

1. The sheer pleasure of reading that leads to playful exploration, that opens imagination and that feeds it.
2. The escape from one’s world combined with finding attraction of another world, the opening of vistas beyond one’s immediate surroundings.
3. The book, character, or author as good friend.
4. The writing that expresses thoughts we dare not acknowledge in ourselves and that helps us to move them from secret existence to acknowledgment.
5. The connection to one’s ancestry, to one’s physical, intellectual, spiritual roots.

What shines brightly through most accounts, is the theme of **pleasure** and **usefulness**. Horace’s dictum that poetry is *dulce et utile*, sweet and useful can usefully be extended to all literature. The literary scholars Wellek and Austin speak of the pleasure of literature as residing in “non-acquisitive contemplation.” (Rene Wellek and Warren Austin, **Theory of Literature**, 31)

## B. Observations on the Effects of Literature from Clinical Practice

In clinical work, I have become observant of analysts' references to works of literature and art that have affected them. I explore their encounters with books as I explore any encounter in life. I do not routinely inquire about such encounters but, when mentioned, I note them and follow up as relevant.

I have found significant experiences with literature to fall into several areas

1. Remembered from early life and reflecting early life dynamics. These experiences are similar to those which Hans Dieckmann describes for the favorite fairytale of childhood. (Hans Dieckmann, *The Favourite Fairy Tale of Childhood*, **JAP** (January 1971), 16: 18-30)
2. Related to dream images. They offer then an additional source for associations and, especially, opportunity for amplification.
3. Highlighting key dynamics of current life.
4. Connecting to cultural heritage, especially in the lives of immigrants.

I see all such experiences as presenting symbolic communication to be experienced, explored, reflected upon; to be understood gradually and over time; and to be integrated into one's knowledge, experience, sense of oneself. It carries, along with all symbolic communication, aspects of personal and archetypal life: residue of experiences, affects, defenses as well as hints of potential along a continuum of constructive to destructive possibilities. It is up to the person, the troubled and afflicted seeker, to see, to reflect upon, to differentiate amongst such experiences as she develops a stance to what is found; as she rejects -- or, as she accepts and integrates, what she sees.

## C. Thinking on the Dynamics between Reader and Book

I want to differentiate as clearly as possible between "dynamics" and "content" of the interplay between reader and text, analogous to the differentiation between, e.g., dynamics of a defense vs. content of what is defended against. -- Psychological dynamics between reader and book (and: any audience and any work of art) are generally considered (a) to be similar to dynamics between writer and book, and (b) to involve co-creation or re-creation by the reader of what was created by the artist.

### 1. Freud, Ernst Kris, Ego Psychology

Dynamically, Freud speaks of creation of "a world . . . [invested] with large amounts of emotion . . . [that is separated] sharply from reality" (1908, *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*, **SE**, 9: 144); Freud views the content as "an activity intended to allay ungratified wishes." (1913, *The Claims of Psychoanalysis to Scientific Interest*, **SE**, 13: 187) Ernst Kris and ego psychologists, dynamically, speak of opening of ego boundaries to energies of the id and reworking of primary process content through secondary process. They see pleasure as arising from the shift in cathexes. (Ernest Kris, **Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art**, 1952)

### 2. Norman Holland

My views on the dynamics between reader and book follow the thinking of Norman Holland, literary scholar and classically trained psychoanalyst (**The Dynamics of Literary Response**, 1968). When we see a play or read fiction, we do not expect factual reality but we enter imaginatively into the sphere of the book; we are then in the state that requires, in Coleridge's words, a "willing suspension of disbelief." (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, **Biographia Literaria**, 2: 6) We participate on the level of the imagination. What is 'out there' in the book enters our experience 'in here.' A certain amount of fusion or merger with the text takes place inside oneself. What facilitates the merger experience? Our knowledge that we are in a fictional world, lets us mark off the experience: we **know** we are reading; we know we will **not** act. This knowledge allows us to sink into the fiction, to connect to less conscious experience, to reach back into less differentiated or undifferentiated levels of psychic life. We never lose our connection with reality (unless one is psychotic): we know we are reading. In one part of psyche, we are in a state of fusion **and**, in another part, we maintain our state of ego integrity: in that state, we can link up with the unconscious fantasies that are the ground from which the text emerged. (Holland speaks of "analogizing" by the reader.)

For Holland, the contents of the unconscious fantasies are those of the id or, in Jungian language, of the personal unconscious. I go beyond Holland and see the contents of the unconscious fantasies as including aspects of personal **and** archetypal domains.

What contributes to the fact that one person is deeply touched by a given work and another not at all, assuming equal openness to imaginative participation? The reader's character structure, conflicts, fantasies, complexes (aspects of the personal unconscious), **and** the archetypal configurations that underlie her life (aspects of the collective unconscious) – they constitute the level which the book touches. To have a deep effect, the literary work has to contain an unconscious conflict, fantasy, complex, archetypal configuration that awakens a similar one in the reader. If, what is contained in the work, has an analogous component in the reader, she will respond strongly and may use the work toward her development (development may include: remembrance; recovery of affect, desire; awareness of deficits, conflicts; awareness of alternative solutions to a conflict; etc). If there is not an analogous level in the reader, she will not be stirred – although she may be interested.

Holland speaks of “introjecting” and “intellecting” readers. The “intellecting reader,” typically, has limited openness to the merger experience and is not deeply affected by the book. The “introjecting reader” has a greater degree of openness. The degree of being deeply affected depends on the extent to which one finds a reflection of analogous inner conflicts, complexes, archetypal configurations.

When we enter the imaginal world of fiction through the “willing suspension of disbelief,” we relax defenses and loosen boundaries between ego and non-ego; inner and outer; past, present, and future; thought and emotion. We can then find additional, different, new ways of transforming inner needs. It is in the loosening of ego boundaries in the experience of literature that the way for a growth process is opened.

In this view, literature presents a possibility for growth. The difference lies in the reader: Openness to the loosening of boundaries can lead to encounters with literature that address the reader's psychological situation and that can present new, additional ways toward development. Such encounters, however, can also lead to regressive or destructive psychic movement. The difference lies in the reader's capacity for differentiation and discernment.

### 3. Gilbert Rose, Rosemary Dinnage, D.W. Winnicott

Loosening of ego boundaries is a characteristic feature of the *transitional process*, Gilbert Rose's concept, that extends thinking about transitional objects into adult life where the transitional process serves continually as bridge between inner experience and outer reality. For Rose, “the creativity of everyday life . . . [resides] in the power of the ego to de-differentiate, abstract, and re-integrate in the service of mastery.” (Gilbert Rose, *The Creativity of Everyday Life, Between Reality and Fantasy*, 355) In relationship with the book and when in the state of “willing suspension of disbelief,” I take apart some aspect of myself, connect to deeper layers, and rebuild differently as I emerge. In words from **Faust: Formation, transformation -- Eternal mind's eternal recreation** (Part II, A Gloomy Gallery, 79; Gestaltung, Umgestaltung – des ewigen Sinnes ewige Unterhaltung, 184)

Rosemary Dinnage, colleague of Winnicott, speaks of *concurrency* as key to all creation. Concurrency refers to the point of intersection between inner need and outer occurrence. Artist and audience fit inner feeling into what arrives from the outside. Each creates in response to and with that which arrives from the outside. Dinnage stresses the active aspect of creation at the point where and when inner and outer meet. (Rosemary Dinnage, *A Bit of Light, Between Reality and Fantasy*, 365-378)

I think that the books that affect us deeply are those which we encounter at moments of concurrency, when that which appears before us meets an inner need. We then create out of the outer reality (the book) something for inner reality. The “out there” in the book and the “in here” in us are two lines that come from opposite sides and meet in one spot: the effect of art, of book on psyche.

Winnicott (*The Location of Cultural Experience*, **Playing and Reality**, 112-113) was fond of a line from Tagore: *On the seashore of endless worlds, children play*. The line had been with him since adolescence and he had given it various interpretations over time. It eventually became for him an image of creative play which was neither inside nor outside but took place in the potential space “on the seashore” where ocean and earth interact and form new ground. It is there that we play and create life. It is there where the work of art touches psyche and becomes impetus for creation of new psychic terrain.

#### 4. Fred Plaut

In a 1966 paper, Fred Plaut, Jungian psychoanalyst in England (*Reflections About Not Being Able to Imagine*, **JAP**, 1966), explores questions about prerequisites to the capacity to imagine – or, in the language of this presentation, to participate in the process of re-creation or co-creation with the artist. He concludes that ego functions of trust, based on experiences in early life and in transferences (and on their analysis) and ego functions of discrimination have to be present so that fruitful (vs. destructive) imaginal engagements can take place. His emphasis on experiences in early life and in transferences and on their analysis is worthy of frequent reflection by any clinician working in the imaginal realm. I will add to Plaut’s view that attachment to and trust in a fictional character or author can supplement attachment and trust in parental figures. However, experience of such attachments calls for analytic exploration similar to those directed to parental or transference attachments.

#### 5. C.G.Jung

Jung’s views on the function of the literary work (and the work of art in general) are contained in **Symbols of Transformation**, in **MDR** where he speaks at length about **Faust** and its impact on him, and in three major essays (1913, *On Psychological Understanding*, **CW**, 3; 1922, *On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry*, **CW** 15; 1930, *Psychology and Literature*, **CW**, 15).

In **Symbols of Transformation**, J speaks directly about the relation of the literary work to the personal life. He refers to the theater as “an institution for working out private complexes in public.” (**CW**, 5: 48). Jung here articulates a view on dynamics (projection) and on contents (complexes). We see our complexes personified by the actors on stage or the characters in a novel. The working through of any complex, as we know, requires that we experience it, see it, understand it, and integrate it into psychic functioning. Holland’s views illuminate the process occurring in the theater: In the state of “willing suspension of disbelief,” (a) we can experience the complex in union with the fictional character **and** (b) we can work with it in the part of us that remains separate from the fictional action.

J’s views on artistic creation and on the reader’s response are elaborated at length in three essays. J sees artistic creation as arising out of the writer’s unconscious, personal and archetypal. A stimulus stirs the writer and touches the archetypal layer behind the personal impetus; archetypal energies become activated, intensify, rise to the surface. The writer opens to the unconscious content, gives shape and form to archetypal images, and releases them in the finished work. The process requires openness and receptivity as well as the giving of form (openness to primary process and reworking in secondary process). J refers to Gerhard Hauptmann’s thinking that “Poetry evokes out of words the resonance of the primordial world.” (**CW**, 15: 124; also **CW**, 5: 460 – “poetry is the art of letting the primordial word resound through the common word;” see also note 72) For Jung, it is the impact of the archetype in the literary work that stirs the reader since it speaks with a voice stronger than personal.

#### A reader participates in the creative process

when we let a work of art act upon us as it acted upon the artist. To grasp its meaning, we must allow it to shape us as it shaped him. Then we also understand the nature of his primordial experience. He has plunged into the healing and redeeming depths of the collective psyche. . .

This re-immersion in the state of *participation mystique* is the secret of artistic creation and of the effect which great art has upon us. (CW, 15: 161-162)

The literary work as symbolic expression of psychic life can function like a dream: it is a symbolic expression of psychic life. We can understand it and participate in it to the extent that we are open to be affected by it. It can bring aspects of personal and of archetypal dimensions into awareness, for both, artist and reader, as compensation for the one-sidedness of the conscious adaptation of the person, society, times.

### Conclusion

In summary: To be affected deeply by the work of art, we have to approach it with openness and receptivity in a state characterized by a "willing suspension of disbelief." In that state, we (a) partly remain observers and thinkers **and** (b) partly loosen ego boundaries toward merger with the work -- Or: we partly maintain ego consciousness and partly lower the threshold of consciousness, entering into *participation mystique* -- Or: we enter into potential space between inner experience and outer reality where we create at the interface of what is presented that which we need.

It is then, and only then, that the work of art begins to affect us in diverse ways: to provide instinctual gratification, to serve defensive functions, to provide the pleasure of joyful exploration, to serve self-object functions as mirror, ideal, twin; to be transitional phenomenon and to facilitate creation of an answer to need; to experience and work through complexes; to connect with the archetypal dimension that is mediated by the artist in the work of art.

Experiences with literature (with any work of art) are experiences that can be explored, understood, and integrated into psychic functioning. Then, they can contribute significantly to psychic development.

The Jungian view makes a significant contribution to the field of depth psychology in its focus on the archetypal dimensions of psyche as source and background to the personal life. Ann Ulanov speaks of Jung as "the psychologist of numinous space . . . (who) stands out among depth psychologists for his insistent emphasis on the space between us and the *mysterium tremendum*." (*A Shared Space*, paper given at the 1984 National Conference of Jungian Analysts, New York; published in **Quadrant** 18, Spring 1985, 65)

The final stanza of **Faust** points eloquently to the relations between personal, archetypal, and transcendent realities. Set to stirring music in Mahler's 8<sup>th</sup> Symphony, it can shake us into renewal of awareness of the numinosum, thus invigorating those essential, transcendent connections that all too often fade in the business of everyday life (Part II, final stanza; translation mine):

All things transitory  
Are but a parable.  
Here insufficiency  
Does find fulfillment.

The indescribable  
Here is accomplished.  
The ever-feminine  
Draws us onward.

Alles Vergaengliche  
Ist nur ein Gleichnis.  
Das Unzulaengliche  
Hier wird 's Ereignis.  
Das Unbeschreibliche

Hier ist 's getan.  
Das Ewigweibliche  
Zieht uns hinan.

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