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Promises, Promises

Essays on Literature and Psychoanalysis

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again and again in both the practice and the theory of psychoanalysis. It is the opposition between the Dreamer and the Pragmatist: the Dreamer who wants only to free-associate and to follow his words wherever they may go; and the Pragmatist who wants to solve his problems. The Pragmatist wants to achieve things, the Dreamer wants to experience them; the Dreamer wants the analyst to help him get back into his own delirium, the Pragmatist wants the analyst to help him sort himself out. The Pragmatist wants to know what to do, the Dreamer wants to see what happens. In order to be this useful profession of improvisers and popularizers, psychoanalytic writing will need to be a place – as indeed, literature has always been – where people can voice both enthusiasms with comparable vigour, where neither the Pragmatist nor the Dreamer can become a refuge from each other. Where, for example, it can be fully acknowledged that one doesn't necessarily say or write something because one believes it, but to find out whether one believes it. At their best both these old-fashioned things, psychoanalysis and literature, can inspire us to live more justly pleasurable, more morally intriguing lives, as complex Dreamers and Pragmatists. The pieces in this book go on making and breaking the links between two figures – and these once discernible 'disciplines' – with this in mind.

I have dedicated this book to the two people who changed my life by the way they taught me literature at school and university; and who taught me more about psychoanalysis, without ever mentioning it, than many of my psychoanalytic teachers did by mentioning nothing else. By teaching me to read they taught me how to listen.

Poetry and Psychoanalysis

*Even if we wish to deny the common man his religion,
we clearly do not have the authority of the poet.*

Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*

1

These days, when we are not being told that psychoanalysis is or is not a science, we are, perhaps unsurprisingly, being told that it is an art. And since, as a talking cure, its medium is mostly language, the arts with which it bears most obvious comparison are the literary arts. In the anxious quest for reassuring analogies – to work out what psychoanalysis is *like*, which has been such an integral part of its history – literature, after science, has seemed the most promising. It has been to writing and not, in some ways perhaps surprisingly, to the more oratorical arts that psychoanalysis has turned. When Freud suggested that his studies in hysteria seemed rather more like short stories, or was writing to Wilhelm Fliess about the inspiration he found in Sophocles and Shakespeare, he was acknowledging right at the beginning of what would become psychoanalysis, something like a divided duty, a splitting of affiliations. The psychoanalytic theory he found himself writing was science that sometimes sounded like literature. The form chosen was the scientific treatise, the genre endorsed by the profession he wrote for; but the so-called content smacked of poetic drama, or fiction. The two cultures of Science and Art

that were to polarize so dramatically during the twentieth century were sufficiently differentiated – understood to be at odds with each other – that Freud couldn't help but be perplexed by the ambiguity of his own work.

It is perhaps an appropriate irony that just now, when the status of literature as a definable discipline is most in question in the universities – when the very description of what literature is, is up for grabs – that those psychotherapists who aren't keen on science should be wanting to place psychoanalysis in the literature department, as it were. Once again, psychoanalysis finds itself aspiring to be like something that may not exist. It has always seemed difficult to accept that there may be neither an abject nor a glamorous sense in which what we loosely call psychoanalysis is peculiarly difficult to place, and the puzzles accruing from this might add rather than detract from its value. We should perhaps be suspicious of professions that are in the business of helping people to locate themselves, being too assured in their location of themselves. (It has always been difficult for psychotherapists to avoid putting the answer before the question.) The uncertain status of psychoanalysis is the point and not the problem. Indeed, psychoanalysis has become one useful site for contesting the relative merits of the arts and the sciences; both what they might be good for, and what we should do with our belief in them. And, of course, the extent to which they might be complementary and not solely antagonistic. Every time psychoanalysis goes over to one side or the other – aspiring stringently to be a science, or eloquently to be an art – it loses its place as a discipline in which the question can remain interestingly undecided. It seems obvious that we need both the so-called sciences and the so-called arts to help us with our predicaments. So in discussing what psychoanalysis uses poetry for – how psychoanalysis and poetics might be related – the other

conversation that would complete the triangle would be between science and poetry (poets have never been by definition hostile to science). When Keats famously said that Newton had destroyed the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to a prism, he was also implicitly acknowledging that Newton had fed him one of his best lines.

What psychoanalysis has done to and with poetry – though not what it has done *for* poetry – has been the subject of endless theorizing and commentary. What I am more interested in is what, it has been assumed by psychoanalysts, poetry might be able to do for psychoanalysis; what poetry seems to offer – or disrupt – in psychoanalytic theory and practice; what the poetic has represented for the psychoanalytic, if one can put it so generically. The poet, in a psychoanalytic context, was initially cast as an inspiring but also irritatingly usurping presence. Psychoanalysis has always been mindful of the poetic pasts that might have preceded it, of the literary influences that might have prefigured its figures of speech. 'At the beginning I was utterly at a loss,' Freud wrote in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, 'and the first clue that I had came from the philosopher-poet Schiller who observed that the mechanism of the world was held together by "hunger and love".' It was from Schiller, Freud says, that he got his first description of what he took, initially, to be the two basic instincts: sex and self-preservation. But as often as Freud refers to what he got from the poets, in a spirit of gratitude and admiration, he refers rather more dispiritedly, even enviously, to the poet's apparent easy access to profound psychological truth. After quoting some lines from Goethe's *Faust*, Freud writes: 'One may well sigh when one realizes that it is nevertheless given to a few to draw the most profound insights, without any real effort, from the maelstrom of their own feelings, while we others have to grope our way restlessly to such insights through agonizing insecurity.'

For the inspired poet it's a breeze, for the analyst it's a slog. The poet doesn't work; though the poet and the psychoanalyst seem to have a shared project. The poet is at once the source of profound insight and a rival in terms of the methods for acquiring such insight. 'The genuine poet', Ella Sharpe, one of the early British analysts wrote, endorsing Freud, 'is an intuitive psychologist.' So which is the best thing to be, and why? If we are in search of profound insight, whatever that is, the question might seem answerable. What is being asserted here is that poets and psychoanalysts have a shared aim (or object of desire), but different means for attaining it. But what makes Freud, or Ella Sharpe, believe that the poets' project – all poets at all times – has been the search for profound insights? One could feel that poets are being recruited, perhaps a bit desperately, as allies. Clearly for those people who like poetry, or who like the idea of poets (which is not the same thing), their transference to poets is a remarkable thing. Indeed, so remarkable is it that it is perhaps the one thing that could be said to unite the increasingly disparate schools of psychoanalysis. Freud, Jung, Lacan, Winnicott, Bion, Meltzer, Milner, Segal, among many others, all agree in their privileging of the poetic. Psychoanalysis may not have mattered quite as much as it would have liked to poetry, but poetry has certainly mattered to psychoanalysis.

Being a good poet makes you a good psychologist, it is suggested, one capable of 'profound insight'; but being a good psychologist doesn't seem to make people good poets. Indeed, it might be in a poetic sense, as it were, that one's reservation about psychoanalysis would be that one didn't like the language in which it was written, and spoken. And this would involve acknowledging that psychoanalysis can be no more and no less than the language in which it is represented. After all, one goes to psychoanalysis, as one might go to poetry,

for better words. So it seems worth noting at the outset that psychoanalysts have claimed an affinity with poets that poets, contemporary with the advent of psychoanalysis, have not always claimed with psychoanalysis. So what does the psychoanalyst think she is affiliating herself with when she asserts a kinship between psychoanalysis and poetry? In what sense are analysts and poets on about or doing the same thing? And what are the consequences, for the actual practice of therapy, of believing that they are?

It is immediately noticeable that something has to be done to poetry to align it with psychoanalysis. In making poetry into a source of 'profound insight' or 'psychology' it usually has to be taken out of its historical context, and depoliticized. In the vexed relationship that the psychoanalytic profession has always had with poetics, it is striking how often, when poetry is invoked – and almost always to be celebrated – it is invoked ahistorically. When, for example, Meltzer proposes in an interview that psychoanalysts should be 'as poetic and precise as we can', we don't tend to wonder whether he means poetic like Chaucer or Donne or Whitman or Elizabeth Bishop, or whether he means the sonnet or the epic – as though the situating of poetic practice was virtually irrelevant; as though the poetic had a known referent beyond history or genre. Poetry seems to mean here something written or said with the most convincing kind of accuracy or insight. Poetry becomes the word for a specific kind of verbal rigour or a hoard of verbal wisdom, the best making of meaning that, at the same time, persuades us of the efficacy of meaning. So, by way of an initial assertion, I want to suggest that the idealizing of poetry in psychoanalysis – and not only there – is, among other things, a way of talking of our doubts about language, a scepticism – inevitable in a profession committed to language as therapy – about words and the value of meaning, about words as therapy.

The privileging of poetry and poets is a counter-force to the fear that language and meaning don't work. Or don't work in quite the ways we might want them to.

As we know, the privileging of poets and poetry in psychoanalysis has been complemented and rivalled by the privileging of sciences and scientists. The analyst has always been able to say that the work of psychoanalysis, despite its evident flaws, aspires to scientific status. Many analysts, beginning with Freud, have been keen to assert, despite their voluble detractors, that they are scientists. It would seem to be a more complicated thing – a more obscure thing – for the analyst to say that she is a kind of poet. So my second assertion here is that the research scientist has always been an easier ego-ideal, or model, for the analyst, than the poet. Obviously the analyst can write poetry, or even make her psychoanalytic writing more poetic (whatever that means), but what would it mean for her to be more like a poet in her psychoanalytic practice? What exactly would she do, or do differently? What, for example, if she were to affiliate her practice with the poets, would count for her as a successful psychoanalytic treatment? We may have some idea of what a psychoanalytic cure might be from a scientific point of view, but what would be a cure for the poet-analyst?

As a prelude to this paper there are, then, two assertions: that the poet and poetry are used to sustain our belief in meaning, our belief, in Yeats's odd phrase that 'words alone are certain good'; and that the poet is a peculiarly difficult – and therefore peculiarly interesting – ego-ideal for the analyst. If the analyst were to aim to be more like a poet than a scientist, what would his work be like? What would he be wanting of and from the patient?

So the sub-title of my lecture might be: can psychoanalysis be anything other than a religion of words. As though psychoanalysis has replaced belief in God not with belief in sexuality,

or belief in emotional development, or belief in the unconscious, or indeed in any of the other core concepts, but rather with belief in language. And something called poetry – or literature – has become, then, the secular Bible for psychoanalysts.

2

Words are everything else in the world.

Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia'

It seems dull to begin at what one might pretend is a beginning. But Freud's early paper, in its very title, 'Creative Writers and Daydreaming' (1908), is an irresistible invitation of sorts. In this paper Freud makes 'the assumption that a piece of creative writing, like a day-dream, is a continuation of, and a substitute for, what was once the play of childhood'. And the play of childhood, in Freud's view by this time, like the dreams and symptoms he had newly described, was a disguised representation of infantile sexual wishes. There is, Freud writes in this paper, 'a path that leads from our discussion of phantasies to the problems of poetic effects'. What distinguishes the creative writer is that – like the dreamer and the playing child – he has found a way of rendering unacceptable desires into shareable form. 'Such phantasies, when we learn them,' Freud writes, 'repel us, or at least leave us cold. But when a creative writer . . . tells us what we are inclined to take to be his personal day-dreams, we experience a great pleasure'. In this imaginative alchemy, pleasure is wrested from aversion. To be a poet is to be able to make the apparently impossible thing, an acceptably pleasurable transgression. 'How the writer accomplishes this is his innermost secret,' Freud writes, 'the essential *ars poetica* lies in the technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion in us

which is undoubtedly connected with the barriers that rise between each single ego and the others'. We disgust each other, Freud suggests, but through poetry we restore a sense of community; we are seduced into not only enjoying each other, but enjoying our hitherto repulsive ideas. It is also of some interest that Freud lapses into Latin to describe the means, the technique for doing this, as though the phrase *ars poetica* was a respectable euphemism for some unspeakable sexual practice. The arts of poetry for Freud are clearly highly charged. Through this 'aesthetic' 'altering and disguising' of his day-dream the creative writer 'enables us thenceforward to enjoy our own day-dreams without self-reproach or shame'. It is quite clear that whether for Oedipal – or what we might now call pre-Oedipal reasons – our day-dreams are guilty and shameful, and poetic techniques are required to perform the morally equivocal act of not merely making our desires acceptable to us, but positively pleasurable. The art of poetry, in other words, is the art of being happily unacceptable in public, of making known one's otherwise forbidden desires. The person referred to in this paper as the creative writer is an extraordinary double agent, a figure who doesn't fit easily into either of Freud's models of the mind. Clearly, the creative writer is not akin to the super-ego or the id; he could be described as the eloquent ambassador of the id, who has to some extent outwitted the moralistic clutches of the super-ego. But the creative writer is not sufficiently realistic in his perceptions, not perhaps sufficiently addicted to safety, to be merely another word for the ego. Or perhaps Freud's figure of the creative writer is the ego in its best, or most satisfied, version. The poet is our last hope for happiness faced with the scarcity of the external world, the depredations of the super-ego and the voraciousness of the id. The poet is the person who can get away with it.

But I think it is also worth considering that Freud is using this

paper to reflect on the profession he had invented. Is the analyst like the creative writer in so far as she too has the work of redescribing what the patient finds unacceptable, with a view to making it at least tolerable, if not also pleasurable? Or, to put it the other way round, is the aim of analysis to enable the patient to be more like this creative writer, able to make known his fantasies, and find them a source of pleasure, to make the patient the good-enough poet of his own life? Or, is the idealization of the artist to which Freud (and so many other analysts) has been prone – with its inevitable concomitants of envy, rivalry and suspicion – simply the consequence of the creative writer representing both an ego-ideal and a picture for Freud of the best possible version of what it is to be a person? After all, if the creative writer is doing what everyone does as a child and when they dream, then 'creative writer' is just another word for a person. The *ars poetica* are the arts of life. In his idealization of the poet Freud might be a late romantic; but by making the art of poetry a synonym for dream-work and children's play Freud was suggesting not that we should aspire to be poets but that poets are what we cannot help but be. Psychoanalysis becomes the science of poetry; or rather the attempt to render the poetry of the human in the language of science. What is *The Interpretation of Dreams* if not a formulation of the laws and logic of poetry? 'The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious,' Freud said on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, 'what I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied.' It is a distinction that has not perhaps been sufficiently remarked upon. Poets and philosophers discover the unconscious; Freud discovers a method for studying it. What exactly is the difference? Did Freud turn *it* into a subject that could be studied? If the artists and philosophers didn't themselves study it, what did they do with it – perform it, enact it, show it? Is the

unconscious, as it were, pure poetry and philosophy, which Freud's scientific method enables him to reflect on, analyse, deconstruct?

There are two forms of practice: there are poets and philosophers, and there are psychoanalysts, with something called the unconscious in the middle, and they have different kinds of relationship to it. On the one hand, there is the poetry of the human – the unconscious in action – and on the other hand there is the scientific study of it. It is not clear – not clear to Freud himself maybe – whether the poet and the psychoanalyst are collaborators, or whether there is a sense in which the poet might aspire, or even evolve, towards the condition of the psychoanalyst, or vice versa. Is the dream better than the interpretation or vice versa? Whichever it is you can't interpret the dream without a dream.

It was Lionel Trilling in his great essay 'Freud and Literature' who most succinctly spelled out that Freud, whatever else he was, was a champion of the poets. 'For, of all mental systems,' he writes, 'the Freudian psychology is the one which makes poetry indigenous to the very constitution of the mind. Indeed the mind, as Freud sees it, is in the greater part of its tendency exactly a poetry-making organ ... it was left to Freud to discover how, in a scientific age, we still feel and think in figurative formations, and to create, what psychoanalysis is, a science of tropes, of metaphor and its variants, synecdoche and metonymy'. In a scientific age we still use language. Trilling's account makes psychoanalysis, as a science of tropes, sound like another word for linguistics; and it was, of course, Lacan, who promoted the consequences of just such a conviction. And yet what Trilling is doing here, in the American context of a burgeoning ego-psychology, in claiming Freud for the poets, is not necessarily a literary appropriation of Freud. Indeed, this may be a more or less sophisticated way of saying that people

are language-using animals, and that these poetic arts, which can be scientifically studied, are just descriptions of how language works. Poetry becomes a description of what the mind does; it is a poetry-making organ. Freud showed us that people, as verbal language-using animals, were more poetic than we had recognized; indeed, people were, essentially, poets. And we are what we call poetic only because what we have to say is so unacceptable to ourselves and others.

The existence of poetic arts, the ubiquity of human poetry, proves just how much work has to be done on the stuff of instinctual life to make it viable. What Freud called the 'biological substrate' required imaginative acts of transformation to make the desires we need to communicate in order to survive, bearable for everyone involved. The demand on the mind for work is a demand on the mind for poetry. And poetry is the smugglers' art, repackaging contraband so it can be available on the open market. Human beings are disreputable poets, but fortunately they are subject to scientific redescription. Is science, then, a higher level of respectability? Certainly one doesn't tend to think that there is anything shameful or embarrassing about a theorem in physics, or a mathematical equation.

The Freudian mind might be a poetry-making organ, but this in itself is not a cause for celebration. Poetry may be our cultured natural medium, but something has to be done to the poetry. Poets, after all, are not famous for their mental health. If we describe the analyst as merely countering the patient's poetry with his own – psychoanalysis effectively as a bardic competition – we could quickly become puzzled. Biology is turned by people into poetry, but poetry clearly needs itself to be turned into something else. The scientific method of studying the unconscious, called psychoanalysis, has a purpose, a project. Poetry, in other words, is not sufficient; something has

to be added to poetry to make a cure. In Freud's view, poetry in and of itself doesn't seem to make us feel better. Or, to put it less medically and more morally, our apparently innate poetry-making talents don't by themselves give us the lives we would prefer. One goes to an analyst to have one's poetry improved, but does this mean that the analyst speaks better poetry than the patient, or that – despite her having, exactly like the patient, a poetry-making organ – she has learned to speak some other language? Clearly, neither the analyst nor the patient can speak at all without using what Freud called the *ars poetica*, metaphor, synecdoche and metonymy. The picture that Freud presents, and that is so eloquently elaborated by Trilling, is that it is taken for granted that we are all poets. The question is, what, if anything, should be done about this?

And yet, of course, we are not all poets (or creative writers) in the more traditional sense of these words. We may all be, as Nietzsche famously wrote, 'artists in our dreams'; dreams and symptoms and children's play may be tropic. But to put it at its most minimal, we don't all *write* poetry even if we supposedly speak it and perform it; and perhaps even more to the point, there are no line endings in dreams, or children's play, or symptoms. Just as Freud is insistently promoting the human subject as essentially and ineradicably a poet, he also won't let us, or himself, forget, in his idealization of artists, that some people are what we call artists and some are not. Before the creative artist, Freud acknowledges ruefully, the analyst throws down his arms. There is apparently no contest; the creative artist is at once essentially human but also has got something the analyst just hasn't got. The artist represents for Freud the limits of psychoanalysis; faced with the artist and her work of art the analyst confronts the terminus of her explanatory ambitions. We see Freud both pitting himself against the so-called creative artist and using the artist as the

exemplary human figure. We are all poets, but some are more poetic than others; and it is the difference that makes all the difference. It is, after all, evidently true that poets rarely seem to be envious of, or rivalrous with, psychoanalysts as a profession. Even in W. H. Auden's great elegy to Freud you never get the sense that Auden would prefer to be a psychoanalyst, or even to be Freud himself, than to be the poet that he was. What has the poet got that the psychoanalyst hasn't, and why is it better?

Psychoanalysis has always had an uneasy relationship to poetry and poets, uneasy, perhaps, in the sense in which Freud (and Strachey) used the word in Freud's great phrase, 'the laughter of unease'. If psychoanalytic writing has been more like incantation than poetry – characterized by the hypnotic repeated use of favourite words such as play, dependence, development, mourning, projective identification, the imaginary, the self, etc – it is perhaps reflective of this unease. We all cannot help but use language poetically, and yet there are people we call poets; we all, one way or another, speak and write, but that there are these discernible cultural objects called poems. It is as though some people are capable of, as we say, expressing themselves better than others and that we have somewhere agreed that this is a good thing to be able to do. Is the aim to be a poet or to be happy? Freud is in that long tradition of people who want to show us how impressed we are by words. And how we can't seem to get away from the idea of happiness.

3

The worse your art is, the easier it is to talk about.

John Ashbury

One of the things that distinguishes the words we call poetry is form; when prose is referred to as poetic we usually mean that

the prose is unusually metaphoric, intensely evocative rather than overtly informative. But poetry – the form of writing that we can distinguish from prose so that we can call some prose poetic – is distinguished by its line endings. Poetry, T. S. Eliot said in a famous pronouncement, is a form of punctuation. Where ordinary prose ends according to the size of the page and the compositors' conventions, poetry adds a different kind of punctuation to the repertoire. What is added to the ordinary human poetry of language are formal constraints. Poets, unlike psychotherapists and their patients during sessions, write; and they impose line endings. Through reading other poets they acquire a sense of the available forms of their own and other poetic traditions.

Now it is, as Lacan has shown, an interesting, literary analogy for the practice of the analyst to say that she punctuates the sessions – with verbal interventions, or their omission, and by the endings of the sessions. 'The punctuation,' Lacan writes, 'once inserted, fixes the meaning'; 'changing the punctuation renews or upsets' the meanings that the patient asserts in his speech. The analyst's repunctuating of the analysand's speech 'shows the subject that he is saying more than he thinks he is'. If, rather absurdly, one was to speak quantitatively, it is as though the point of the punctuation is to increase meaning, not to replace the patient's intended meaning but to add to it. The aim is to upset old meanings with a view to creating new ones. 'Psychoanalysis', Lacan writes, echoing Freud, 'should be the science of language inhabited by the subject. From the Freudian point of view man is the subject captured and tortured by language'. In this Lacanian sado-masochistic relationship with language, it is the function, in part, of the analyst's punctuation to show the patient just how captured and tortured by language he is. But Lacan, like every other psychoanalytic writer, can't get around the problem of hierarchy; the analyst

upsets or renews the patient's meaning with a view to changing the patient for the better. Whether it is called in Lacan's language 'full speech' or becoming the subject of one's desire, there is an attempt to interfere with – for a higher good – the patient's words in the service of the cure. 'Literary art' which, Lacan writes in the Ethics seminar, 'is so close to the domain of ethics', like psychoanalysis, is punctuating for a purpose. The patient tries, consciously and unconsciously, to give his form to the session, and the analyst keeps changing the punctuation; the patient's sonnets are turned into free verse, his limericks are turned into elegies.

It is, of course, part of Lacan's literary art to persuade us of the interest of this analogy; because in actual fact punctuation is only a feature of written language. We can pause and change our intonation when we speak, and when we listen we might think of some hesitation, say, as a comma or a semi-colon; but there is no verbal inscription of punctuation. In psychoanalysis there is interruption and the ending of sessions. We have only to wonder what the equivalent in speech is of a line ending in poetry to find the analogy beginning to complicate. We may all, as it were, speak poetry, but it is that unusual thing, poetry without line endings, something akin to poetic prose. Poetry – at least in a psychoanalytic context – begins to mean something like verbal utterance suffused with meaning. In psychoanalysis there is always the risk that the wish for meaning will be usurped by the will to meaning.

So the poet becomes a figure for that person who can sustain our belief in the meaningfulness of language. And in this sense the poet could be conceived to be akin to the psychoanalyst; the patient coming to analysis to restore his confidence in words. Lacan believes – like every analyst, one way or another, after Freud – that it is worth speaking, and that some ways of speaking are better than others. And what are called the literary

arts are somehow complicit with this belief. There are qualities of literary representation, capacities for symbol-formation, that themselves represent (or carry) the most cherished values of psychoanalysis across the whole range of what is otherwise a very contentious profession. 'The creative artist makes full use of symbols,' Klein writes in 'Some Reflections on the Oresteia', '... the greatness of Aeschylus's tragedies – and this might have a general application as far as other great poets are concerned – derives from his intuitive understanding of the inexhaustible depth of the unconscious...' The unconscious, at its best, is associated with powerful, resonant, full words; and once again in that familiar echoing of Freud, the poet is described as having an 'intuitive' understanding of the unconscious, the source of great poetry. Intuitive must mean here, of no discernible method, as opposed to the psychoanalyst's scientific exploration of the unconscious.

Whatever the differences between them, Lacan and Klein agree that some words are more revealing than others. And the paradigm for this – which, it should be said, could not be more traditional – is poetry, the literary arts. The poet, in some way, gets to in her poetry what the psychoanalyst gets to through his scientific method. At its most abstract it becomes a question of what the consequences are for the analyst of treating the figure of the poet as an ego-ideal. What, after all, does the name 'poet' signify given there are so many of them? If, as Lacan says, the literary arts are 'so close to the domain of ethics', what are the ethics of poets? What, to put it crudely, are poets generically transmitting as a system of ethics? The self-professed ethics of the scientist may be rather different from the self-professed ethics of poets, not to mention, of course, their unprofessed values, but such generalisations are meaningless. What, in short, are we valuing when we claim to value poets, rather than scientists, as our exemplary figures? If both Kleinians and

Lacanian, for quite different reasons, are suspicious of the patient's wish to identify with the analyst, they still have to persuade their patients to identify with their wish that they should not be identified with. For both Lacanians and Kleinians – if we talk about schools of psychoanalysis and not inclinations – the artist is still hero and heroine. Perhaps, above all, the poet. As poets struggle to find a place in contemporary cultural reality, psychoanalysts, implicitly or explicitly, are still promoting the poets as ego-ideals.

Psychoanalysis, the Kleinian Robert Caper writes in a recent book *A Mind of One's Own* – and he is representative in these views rather than exceptional – 'leaves us with a sense of insecurity about whether or not we can even define in words some of our most fundamental scientific notions, let alone communicate them to a broader public, or even among ourselves. I don't believe that the solution to this sense of insecurity lies in trying to make psychoanalysis more expressible in the scientific language we have. I think we would do better to try to change the language of science into something more psychoanalytic. At present only poets and artists are able to capture these kinds of experiences...' In this progress myth, an interesting variant of the common theme, it is suggested that, at the moment, scientific language cannot 'capture' psychoanalytic experience – only poets and artists can do that. But if we change the language of science into something more psychoanalytic, analysts, it is suggested, will at least be on a par with the artists and poets. It is a moot point, in the way Caper phrases it, whether this new psychoanalytic language will eventually supersede the language of poets and artists. What is clear, though, is that, as yet, these poets and artists can do something that psychoanalysts and scientists can't do, and that is, 'capture' certain kinds of experience. It is an odd and telling word – 'capture' them to what end? Or, what are they

imagined to be if they are in need of capture? But nevertheless there is here the valuing, if not the idealization, of language that is neither scientific nor psychoanalytic. What are psychoanalysts valuing when they value poets, and their language; and what are the consequences for psychoanalytic practice of choosing the poet as hero?

4

The organism is determined neither by its genes nor by its environment, nor even by the interaction between them, but bears a significant mark of random processes.

Richard Lewontin, *The Triple Helix*

It is obvious that when we are talking about poets and poetry we are talking about a remarkable diversity of voices. And the psychoanalytic canon of poets – the poets referred to or used by psychoanalysts in their theory-making – is notably restricted. And yet the figure of the poet, and references to something called poetry, do quite a lot of work, one way or another, in the way psychoanalysts theorize their practice. ‘Artists’ and ‘poets’ and ‘poetry’ are as much key words in the ways psychoanalysis reflects on itself, as the words ‘infant’, or ‘mourning’, or ‘sexuality’. So what do psychoanalysts feel themselves or their chosen discipline to lack, by their turning to poets and poetry? What does poetry seem to have or to be that psychoanalysts might want? Just as it is always a notable moment in the psychoanalyst’s text, or indeed in her interpretation when she turns to Buddhism, or biology, or developmental research, it is the same with the quoting of poetry. It is as though, at that moment, there is a gap, an aporia, a space often unnoticed opens up that needs something else. At that moment something is required called poetry to do something specific. And of

course, at these constitutive moments of feeling at a loss – at this moment of deprivation, in Winnicott’s language, when one might, as it were, steal something – the chosen object is of some significance. Whether it is Buddhism, or infant observation or poetry that comes to the rescue it makes a difference. It has consequences. Of course I am melodramatizing an ordinary occurrence into an emergency; we all have recourse to our preferred bits of the cultural field. But the point of making this crisis out of a drama is to suggest that, at these moments, we have recourse to – what we, in one form or another, quote – can always be fetishized.

When we describe psychoanalysis as scientific or artistic we have aligned it with a tradition – with a history – of human practices, aimed, presumably, at producing for us the kinds of lives we would prefer. So when, for example, the Sandler conclude their last book, *Internal Objects Revisited*, with a quote from Byron, what are they doing? ‘A source of severe resistance in analysis, one that often leads to a negative therapeutic reaction’, they write, ‘is our need to cling to the internal objects we have constructed. In this context it is perhaps appropriate to end this book by recalling the words of Byron’s “The Prisoner of Chillon”, relating what he felt when set free’. Here they are invoking, if not actually clinging to, poetry as a form of exceptional accuracy as being the best way of saying something. Analysts, I think, of virtually every persuasion, have some sort of belief in or commitment to poetry as a convincing, truthful, life-enhancing eloquence. The poet, in one kind of psychoanalytic language, is a highly valued internal object, and one who is often linked, I think, in some obscure way, with fantasies of freedom and independence: the poet represents the apotheosis (at least for some people) of self-becoming, of individuality, of difference wrought to a distinctive pitch through style. The poet, the fantasy of the poetic, is, as they say, carrying

a lot for us, and yet poets, it is surely worth repeating, don't tend to be our models for mental health. Byron would not, I think, have been accepted for training at most psychoanalytic institutes.

When psychoanalysts evoke or invoke the poetic – not necessarily formal poems – it is often being intimated that the poetic is closer to the source of something or other; that our essence speaks in poetry. Or to put it in more familiar terms, that what we call the unconscious and what we call poetry are somehow linked. We may not all believe that the unconscious is structured like a language, but I imagine that many of us believe that poetry is a sign of the unconscious (of our knowingly and unknowingly saying more than we intend). When psychoanalysts talk or write of the unconscious they seem to be referring to something like a poet, rather than, say, describing the unconscious as itself a poem that has gone on inspiring more poetry. We should, I think, entertain a fable that Freud wrote a poem called the Unconscious, and like all poets he didn't know where it came from, so he said, as a kind of joke, that his poem 'The Unconscious' came from the unconscious.

But it is the psychoanalyst in the act of invoking the poet or poetry that I want to consider. And I want, by way of conclusion to use two inaugural moments – one explicit and one oblique – to show what might be at stake, what is being recruited and why, when the poets are wheeled on.

When I was training to be a child psychotherapist, about twenty years ago, something called 'not-knowing' was all the rage: a state of mind, at least at first sight, not difficult to achieve, especially as a student. But it became clear to me that 'not-knowing' – the analyst *not* jumping to authoritative conclusions – had become a virtue in psychoanalysis, reactive to what was deemed to have been an assumption of omniscience on the part of some analysts; that there were analysts

who believed in the unconscious, indeed swore by it, but seemed to know their own minds, and the minds of their patients all too well. These were analysts for whom having the strongest convictions was in no discernible sense incompatible with a rigorous psychoanalytic critique of omniscience; and this 'not-knowing' was most prominently theorized, at least then, by Bion and Winnicott.

There were two important references – Bion using Keats's notion of negative capability, and Winnicott's writing of the patient's nonsense – one overt and often quoted, and one more understated but no less influential. What Bion and Winnicott wanted to say (wanted to add to psychoanalytic theory) needed a poet and the poetic to legitimate it, or to crystallize it or just to describe it. What was ironic about these two (linked) excursions into the literary arts was that both Bion and Winnicott were using poets and poetry to dismantle, or reconceive something that had been deemed to be essential, indeed, defining, of the practice of psychoanalysis: the making of sense through interpretation. The poets provided covert criticism of the analysts' will-to-intelligibility, and by doing so they reopened a question that was at the heart of psychoanalysis: *is not making sense good for us? And, what is making sense good for?* Or, to put it another way, is free association the means or the end of psychoanalysis? If, as Ferenczi once suggested, the patient is not cured by free association, but the patient is cured *when he can free associate*, free association itself must be a moral good. What Ferenczi, and virtually everyone after him found rather more difficult to describe was, what is so good about a life in which one is able to free associate. Either free association is in itself a consummate erotic pleasure, or the capacity to do it must be the means to a better life. What can the free associator do now that she couldn't do before, other than free associate?

When Bion and Winnicott started promoting 'not-knowing'

and nonsense – when they introduced, as it were, a bit of poetry into psychoanalytic theory – they were, I think, restoring the moral issue of punctuation to the psychoanalytic agenda. You can tell a psychoanalytic theorist from his bibliography, and there is perhaps an unintended irony in the fact that much psychoanalytic theory that preaches the value of otherness, and the disabilities of omniscience, should so often be quoting the same limited range of people. So it is notable when, in Bion's case, Keats makes it into his index (though interestingly, not under his own name, but under 'negative capability', his phrase).

Bion first gives Keats a place in the final chapter of *Attention and Interpretation*, published in 1970. But there are two interesting references in the selection of his writings published posthumously, and called *Cogitations*. The first one is a notebook entry of 1969, where Bion writes: 'The capacity of the mind depends on the capacity of the unconscious – negative capability. Inability to tolerate empty space limits the amount of space available'. And then later, in 1978, Bion speaks about visiting the Keats and Shelley museum in Rome with his wife. 'These poets and artists', he says, 'have their methods of recording their awareness of some sort of influence, stimuli that comes from without, the unknown that is so terrifying and stimulates such powerful feelings that they cannot be described in ordinary terms'. Once again there are two phenomena: what Bion calls 'ordinary terms' that are insufficiently descriptive, and whatever it is that poets and artists use; which of course are also ordinary words – there is very little specialist jargon in most poetry. But, nevertheless, the poets have their 'methods', which are unusually descriptive, and which are so good at describing the unknown and the potentially overwhelming – what in the eighteenth century might have been called 'the sublime'. It is when Bion needs to

note something enigmatic about the capacity of the mind – about what it can contain – that he uses Keats's phrase as a kind of shorthand. But the notebook entry itself is interestingly constructed. 'The capacity of the mind depends on the capacity of the unconscious – negative capability. Inability to tolerate empty space limits the amount of space available'. Bion depends upon Keats's phrase to fill the theoretical space left by his sentence. And of course Bion made what one was unable to tolerate his special subject. Keats's concept of negative capability enabled him to tolerate something, made more mental space available. Poets become the people who can bear the influence of certain things upon themselves. Poets, Bion suggests, have a fuller language – words that can contain more – than ordinary terms. The poet is here elevated over the scientist and the ordinary language user. Keats is used by Bion, as we shall see, to help him describe his (Bion's) version, of the preconditions for meaningful language. The poet as the sustainer of our confidence in language; and therefore our confidence in psychoanalysis as being of any real value, given, just like poetry, it goes on only in words.

Bion begins his last chapter 'Prelude To or Substitute for Achievement' of his book *Attention and Interpretation* with this excerpt from Keats's 1817 letter to his brothers:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke on various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'

Keats, as he says, is describing the qualities of a man of achievement, 'especially in literature'; and it is Shakespeare who comes to mind, *the* man of achievement. And Keats is not

necessarily objecting to reaching after fact and reason, but to the *irritable* reaching after these things. And Bion wants to translate Keats's elements of literary achievement into psychoanalytically instructive material. 'Any session', Bion writes, 'should be judged by comparison with the Keats formulation.' Keats's formulation, in short, becomes the arbiter, the criteria of judgement for the validity of a psychoanalytic session. What Keats's formulation, as Bion puts it, 'guards against', for the analyst, is his 'failure to observe' what is happening in the session and is, Bion writes, 'intensified by the inability to appreciate the significance of observation'.

The analyst's very impatience, one could say, becomes a kind of attack both on the analyst's own mind – his capacity to think – and on the patient's material. The analyst, Bion states, should aspire to be Keats's version of the man of literary achievement. If the analyst can be something like what Keats thinks Shakespeare was like then something good, or something better than something else, will come of it. Shakespeare wrote his plays, Keats wrote his poems, but what will the analyst produce? And the answer is, a good interpretation, good in Bion's sense of what a psychoanalytic interpretation should be. The analyst will be like a poet and her interpretation will be like poetry. But where is the patient, what is the patient making? The analyst may be wanting to be like Keats's Shakespeare, but what is the patient deemed to be like? If the analyst wants to be a poet, what does that make the so-called patient? Merely a user of ordinary terms, a bad poet?

If psychoanalytic sessions should be judged by comparison with Keats's formulation, that makes the analytic situation at best a school for poets, a 'singing school' in Yeats's phrase, and at worst the place where the aspiring poet/analyst can practise his art. But perhaps the main point here – certainly the one Bion wants to stress – is that of the analyst being like the great poet in

his capacity to wait. And at the end of the waiting, that itself creates the space for attentive observation, there will be his poem, the good interpretation. Eventually all the associating, free or otherwise, will be interrupted; the raw material of the patient will have been contained, metabolized, thought about, and something like a poem will be made. But then of course, we are left with the question of what these great poems or good interpretations are for; what are they supposed to do for us? The aim, Bion writes, is for the analyst to use words to enable the patient to use words that will not be 'a substitute' for action but 'a prelude' to it. The analytic aim is to sponsor what he calls, taking up Keats's terminology, the 'Language of Achievement', which is both 'prelude to action and itself a kind of action'. Keats's negative capability, as the necessary prelude to the writing of great poetry becomes, in Bion's translation, the precondition for the therapeutic efficacy of psychoanalysis. Poetry, like a good interpretation, is language in action. The analyst is like the poet in that she aims for full speech, meaningful words, good language. What Bion calls the 'Language of Achievement'.

Achievement is an interesting word in this context. It is clear that for Keats the Achievement that he capitalizes is the making of great poems. It is not quite so clear, when we follow Bion's analogy through, what the comparable Achievements are in psychoanalysis. And to say the achievement would be the cure would be to beg the question. After all, Keats is only describing in his letter what he realizes makes a great poet; he is not saying anything here about why being a great poet might be a good thing to be (and I doubt Bion would have been enthusiastic about some of Keats's pronouncements about this; like, for example, the aim of poetry being 'to make all disagreeables disappear'). 'I have no faith whatever in poetry,' Keats wrote in another letter, 'sometimes I wonder that people read so much

of it.' It is, I think, to sustain his faith in the possibility of a talking cure – of a cure made only of words – that Bion needed Keats; and that he needs effectively to aestheticize the analyst's work. It is the poet's description of a certain quality of attention that interests Bion; but as a practising analyst he has to add to this a belief in the curative power of such attention. Keats famously gave up medicine and became a poet; and believed most of the time that poetry was a force for good in the world. But the analyst has a more immediate pragmatic responsibility than the poet. The patient's poem called 'Free association' has to be turned into, given form, by the analyst's better poem called 'an interpretation'. But what makes some poems better than others? And is the implication of Bion's analogizing that ideally the patient, too, should aspire to a negative capability of his own? Should the patient become, through internalization, or identification, the poet of himself, the poet of his own life?

The picture is further complicated by the fact that Keats's description of negative capability also sounds like the precondition for free associating. Or rather, to be slightly more accurate, what Keats calls the 'irritable reaching after fact and reason' would be the saboteur of anything approximating to free association. The not-knowing that was to capture the imagination of so many analysts is also necessary for even the possibility of free associating. The patient associates and the analyst interprets; the patient's poem inspires the analyst's poem which inspires the patient's poem, and so on. Irritable reaching after facts and reasons is too impatient; eventually, though, Bion intimates, facts and reasons might emerge. But then again, if one was always capable of 'being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts' what would ever qualify as a reason or a fact? Or indeed, why would facts and reasons be objects of desire? Keats doesn't want facts and reasons, he wants great poems.

Whether we call it free association or interpretation – or whether the analyst enables the patient's most rudimentary capacities for symbolization – the object of desire is full, meaningful words; Bion's Language of Achievement. But are these meaningful words in whatever direction they happen to lead us; or are meaningful words defined by their tropism towards the depressive position, or towards any of the other criteria for cure? Does the Language of Achievement have a known destination called, say, mental health? Once you bring on the poets you have a great diversity, a virtual anarchy of moral values. We know what Klein's definition of mental health is, but what kind of values, what versions of good lives do we find in, say, Blake, or Emily Dickinson, or Auden? By introducing Keats and his negative capability into psychoanalysis Bion inevitably invited us to be in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts about psychoanalysis itself. It is indeed instructive how few analysts seem to have been in a state of negative capability about Keats's formulation of negative capability. It is repeated like a mantra as though the poet's words were themselves beyond interpretation; when it is precisely poetry that invites interpretation. Poetry is words hospitable to interpretation, words wanting to be subject to multiple perspectives. Words that are inspiring because they resist fetishization, because they are not propaganda. What we refer to as the unconscious is any communication, any message to which we cannot remain indifferent. Good interpretations, like the poems that work for us, are at once irresistible and unpredictable in their consequences. Only dogma is a means to a known end. Only propaganda thinks it knows what it wants from us.

What Bion uses Keats to warn the analyst away from is premature or pre-emptive knowing – from propagandising. The poet's artful formulation about his art is used to hone the scientific skills of observation. This not-knowing, this negative

capability, is the precondition for better knowing; whereas for Keats it is the prelude to great poetry. They are not the same thing. Bion's assumptions are clear: poetry is a kind of knowledge, a kind of truth, and this knowledge and truth is good for us. Our lives are better for it. Keats's version of scepticism is being recruited by Bion to protect him and other psychoanalysts from a larger and more daunting scepticism about the power of words, about the value of meaning. What Bion prefers to call, after Keats, the Language of Achievement, is, as it were, rich and earnest with purpose.

In *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott stresses 'a need for differentiation between purposive activity and the alternative of non-purposive being'. He broaches the possibility that for some people, at some times, it is the wish to make meaning, the belief in the value and need for meaning, that is the problem, that is insidiously defensive. 'In terms of free-association this means', he writes, 'that the patient on the couch, or the child patient among the toys on the floor must be allowed to communicate a succession of ideas, thoughts, impulses, sensations that are not linked except in some way that is neurological, or psychological and perhaps beyond detection.' The use of the word 'link' here may be a covert critique of Bion; but the point Winnicott is making is clear: 'There is room for the idea of unrelated thought sequences which the analyst will do well to accept as such, not assuming the existence of a significant thread ... according to this theory, free-association that reveals a coherent theme is already affected by anxiety, and the cohesion of ideas is a defence organisation.' This is not, of course, worlds away from Keats's 'irritable reaching after fact and reason'. But the analyst here is not waiting for meaning, or coherence, or an interpretation to evolve or emerge. And in elaborating his notion Winnicott alludes to that distinctively British genre of poetry that has never assumed the significance

for British analysts that surrealism did for the French. There is, Winnicott suggests, a need for nonsense that is every bit as crucial – and sometimes more so – than our need for sense and meaning. In this scenario free association is an end in itself, and the need for meaning is linked to a kind of vigilant, and despairing self-holding. The need for meaning, the need for coherence, the need for purpose and achievement become desperate measures; traumatizing solutions to trauma. Poetry is alluded to here by Winnicott to warn us of the dangers of our need for meaning.

'Perhaps it is to be accepted', Winnicott writes,

that there are patients who at times need the therapist to note the nonsense that belongs to the mental state of the individual at rest without the need even for the patient to communicate this nonsense, that is to say, without the need for the patient to organize nonsense. Organized nonsense is already a defence, just as organized chaos is a denial of chaos. The therapist who cannot take this communication becomes engaged in a futile attempt to find some organization in the nonsense, as a result of which the patient leaves the nonsense area because of hopelessness about communicating nonsense. An opportunity for rest has been missed because of the therapist's need to find sense where nonsense is. The patient has been unable to rest because of a failure of the environmental provision, which undid the sense of trust.

This is at once a compelling implicit critique of nonsense poetry, which is by definition organized nonsense; and it is also suggestive in implying that there might be a defence against non-meaning, against nonsense, as well as a defence against meaning. This is not an attack on meaningfulness that Winnicott is sponsoring, but allowance of a need for nonsense. Psychoanalytic theory and nonsense poetry come together here to add something to psychoanalytic practice; the 'health', to use Winnicott's word, of acknowledging the need not to mean what we say. That the conferring or construing of meaning could

itself be a trauma, an alienating demand, harmful to development.

I want to put together Winnicott's idea of organized nonsense and Bion's Language of Achievement not because one is right and the other wrong, but because they are complementary, and they both need poetry to say what is at stake for them. If the Language of Achievement and the need for the acceptance of nonsense dramatizes a debate in psychoanalysis, it is a debate about the nature and consequences of meaning, and so of what poetry might be good for in psychoanalysis, and how psychoanalysts might sometimes need poetry, in ways that poetry might not need psychoanalysis. A Freudian, or a Kleinian or a Lacanian poem would be a contradiction in terms.

I think it is worth pressing the crude, pragmatic question of what poetry is good for – or of what might be so good about poetry – because the question, what is so good about science is being answered all the time, and the question what is so good about psychoanalysis is being asked all the time, and not being answered very well. Poetry especially, and literature more generally, runs the risk of being literally shrouded in religious awe, by psychoanalysts in search of new ego-ideals. Once it dawns on people that Freud was a poetic writer – that psychoanalysis bears some intriguing and formative family resemblances to the wider field of poetics – then psychoanalysis ceases to be any kind of supreme fiction and can find a more promising place as one form of poetics among many others. And this is where, I think, that the larger and more daunting scepticism that I referred to earlier comes in. All poets – and Keats is a particularly illuminating example – have a fascinated ambivalence about their own vocation. A profession like psychoanalysis that gives so much responsibility to words, that makes language seem so promising must, by the same

token, have profound doubts about, and obscurer hatreds for, language. And partly, of course, because these doubts and loves and hatreds will be themselves expressed in language. Psychoanalysis, like rhetoric, wants to persuade us that language can be persuasive and improve our lives. Psychoanalysis in all its versions believes that if we know more about how representation operates we will be better off (as though there is nothing else to our lives other than our representations of them). I think the valuing and the idealizing of poets and poetry among psychoanalysts might have a simple source: good poetry – the poetry that happens to work for us – makes words self-evidently compelling, self-evidently good. That is to say, they are an apparently instant cure for our pervasive scepticism about whether language works. Psychoanalysis needs such alluring reassurances.

5

Not-knowing for Bion – and often, though not always, for Winnicott – was in the service of better knowing. Accepting the patient's nonsense as nonsense is not deemed to be the be-all and end-all of analysis. Even though 'Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation', as Stevens wrote in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', becoming increasingly nonsensical is not assumed to be the aim or even among the aims, of psychoanalytic treatment. The analyst, it is implied, like the so-called patient, is not supposed to not-know forever. But the terms themselves signify the essentially epistemological nature of the psychoanalytic project. When Bion and Winnicott promote the suspension or deferral of knowing, they are by the same token reminding us of the extent to which psychoanalysis is bound to a project of knowledge. Something will occur to someone, that can be spoken and will hopefully be of value. Something can be

known about, and right knowing can make better lives. Whether one speaks of emotional experience, or of intellectual enquiry, these are rhetorical ways of describing preferred forms of knowing. Psychoanalysis, in all its versions, is part of those traditions that believe that knowing can do you good: knowing in words.

'Perhaps more shocking, and certainly more important, than any of Freud's or Wittgenstein's particular conclusions', Stanley Cavell writes, 'is their discovery that knowing oneself is something for which there are methods – something therefore that can be taught (though not in obvious ways) and practised'. Psychoanalysis is a method for self-knowledge, and each variant of psychoanalysis produces different versions or genres of self-knowledge. I am pressing this rather obvious point because though psychoanalysis is indisputably a method for self-knowledge, poetry is not. Poetry *can* be in the service of self-knowledge, but psychoanalysis is definitively in the service of self-knowledge, with all that that entails; that there is something we want to call a self (or a human subject), that it can be to some extent known (or known about), and that that knowledge can be good for us. Indeed, the acquiring of that knowledge – both the process of doing so, and the insights achieved – is the key to improving our lives. And each school of psychoanalysis has its distinctive version of the self-knowledge story. Kleinians are able to tell us elaborate, often rueful stories about their destructiveness, their sadness, and their sense of beauty; Lacanians can tell us ironic stories about the vagaries of their desire; Bowlbyans can talk poignantly about the impact of their separations and their attachments; and Winnicottians will probably stress their ruthlessness and spontaneity, or their lack of it. In each case, with the multiple variations produced by the idiosyncracies of personal history, specific forms of knowledge, specific languages are used to account for a life.

The writing and the reading of poetry can be used in the service of so-called self-knowledge, but poetry doesn't need to define itself as doing that – anymore than any other kind of literature does. Poetry can have other uses and inspirations, one of which can be, of course, a questioning of the moral value, or indeed the existence of such knowledge. 'The study of literature', the poet J. V. Cunningham wrote, 'is not in the ordinary sense to further the understanding of ourselves. It is rather to enable us to see how we could think and feel otherwise than as we do.' For psychoanalysis, to think and feel otherwise than as we do is dependent on self-knowledge. From a psychoanalytic point of view they are inextricable. So in talking about poetry and psychoanalysis – in putting them together – we may have to, as it were, disentangle some traditional equations. First, that so-called poetic language is a form of self-knowledge, or is productive of it; and secondly, that self-knowledge is the principal good that we seek.

Of course, it is misleading to talk about what psychoanalysis uses poets and poetry for – as though psychoanalysis was one thing, and psychoanalysts uniform. But it has nevertheless been my impression that when psychoanalysts refer to poets and poetry in their writing they tend to underestimate the great diversity of forms and voices; and their refusal to historicize – to historically situate the poetic – is the consequence of the refusal to historicize the unconscious. Clearly, the available forms of psychoanalytic writing are far more limited than the forms poetry can take; and that it may be easier to generalize about psychoanalytic writing than about poetry may itself be a source of some rivalry. But the rivalry and the collaboration between poetry and psychoanalysis – that is as old as psychoanalysis itself – is a distraction, I think, from something that is integral to the way psychoanalysts refer to the poetic in their writing.

As I have said, I think psychoanalysts invoke poetry and poets wherever their repressed scepticism about language and knowledge begins to come to light. *Knowing people in language is either impossible and/or no good: and knowing people is impossible or no good, or beside the point.* These, understandably, are the two daunting fears of psychoanalysis, the secret thoughts, the unavoidable scepticism that every therapist and every patient must at some times feel. Everyone would probably agree that language does something; but were we to go on from there and ask what it does and how it works we would soon become perplexed. And yet psychoanalysis depends on the workings of language. It has to believe in words, and have fantasies about what they can do. The poet tends to become the cure for that founding scepticism, rather than an additional way of enquiring into it. Psychoanalysis was unconsciously devised, perhaps, to find out something new about what people can do to and for each other with language.

If the relationship of philosophy to knowing is in some sense definitive of the discipline, the relationship of poetry to epistemology is far more ambiguous. Poets who are exclusively interested in epistemology are called philosophers; poets who are interested in words are called poets. And this, I think, is where psychoanalysis is most interestingly poised; not simply between science and poetry, but between poetry and epistemology. What would it be to be interested in words, but not necessarily in knowledge? To think of words as more like music than information? The great American poet James Wright said he wanted to 'say something humanly important instead of just showing off with language'. It should be the project of psychoanalysis to wonder about that distinction. And to wonder whether it is one.

Bombs Away

War cannot be negated. One must live it or die of it.

So it is with the absurd . . .

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

It took bombs to deliver us.

J. B. Priestley, *Margin Released*

The year before war was actually declared – the possibility of war having been in the air, so to speak, for some time – T. S. Eliot had spoken of wanting to participate in some way in the war effort. He had hoped, in Peter Ackroyd's words in his biography of Eliot, 'for occupation in some form of National Service without that official status which might shut his mouth, and that he would be free to take part in any work for the future that was possible'. He ended up becoming an air-raid warden for the area of Kensington in which he lived, which involved watching for air raids and 'rehearsing the procedure for marshalling people in the event of an air raid, and practising his fire-drill by putting out bonfires'. This work, which seems so incongruous with our image of Eliot, did not shut his mouth. Despite being uncertain in September 1939 about whether he would write poetry again, within three or four months of war being declared Eliot started work on 'East Coker', the second of his *Four Quartets* which would eventually be published together in 1944. It is not always easy to remember – given the lack of explicit reference – that the