

FANTASY AND ITS FUNCTIONS:

REFLECTIONS ON JOHN RIKER'S

CRISIS, FANTASY AND CREATIVITY IN VIENNA: FREUD, KOHUT, AND THE WALTZ

By

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

Instead of critically “discussing” John Riker’s rich paper in a conventional fashion, I’ve elected to interpret a few of John’s central claims about fantasy and its functions from my own affect theory perspective and, in the process, express a contention of my own about fantasy, its context-sensitivity, and one of its ubiquitous emotional functions.

PART II

JOHN RIKER’S ILLUMINATIONS FROM AN AFFECT THEORY PERSPECTIVE

“But if we assume that human experience is, by its very nature, in flux, that perpetual motion and change are inherent to our nature, then it is home and security that are generated through an act of imagination.”

Steven Mitchell

Very broadly, John Riker's rich, multi-layered, inter-disciplinary paper is, in his own terms, an inquiry into the "psychological and cultural dynamics of fantasy in human life" (p. 1). He speaks to these dynamics from the points of view of Freud's, Kohut's and implicitly John's own frameworks, respectively, differentiating and synthesizing the functions of fantasy from these perspectives as they operate within both the individual person's emotional life and the life of the larger historical, social, and cultural systems in which the individual exists. Entailed in this ambitious and encompassing inquiry is, I contend, the basis for additional claims regarding the functions of fantasy. The additional claim John's paper stirs in my mind, perhaps partially implicit in John's thinking, emerges in me when, in reading his paper, I hold in mind both the central importance of affect integration to the experience of self (see Socarides & Stolorow, 1985), as well as the context-sensitivity of emotional experience, including especially experiences rich in fantasy and illusion.

Although not exclusively, John zeros in on the Viennese Waltz as epitomizing and encapsulating in its swirling, transcendent, uniquely enchanting choreographic form a multifaceted fantasy function. John writes that in its "three quarters time ... [the waltz] throws us out of our pragmatic gait into a magical space.... [T]he Viennese waltz swirls one into an alternative dream-like world, the fantasy of total union with partner: a floating above all the problems of the world, a sense of exhilaration unlike any other experience" (p. 3). In the waltz as wish-fulfilled way of *being-in-the-world*, "two separate beings" are "[fused] into an eternal unity..."

Similar fantasy-drenched, aesthetically beautiful symbolic human unifications, John contends, characterize the paintings of Kokoschka and Klimpt, Mahler's symphonies, and, in our scientific world, Freud's theory of mind, as evidenced in his conceptualization of condensation wherein "separate realities" are condensed into "singular images" (p. 3). On the socio-cultural level of the Viennese era in question, other forms of romantic human unification were enacted, including, as John details, the Emperor Franz Joseph's attempted unity of "love and power" through his marriage to his beautiful cousin Elizabeth, and the Austrian self-perception of unremitting national and military intactness and greatness.

But fantasy, as John presents it, is a kind of human subjective reality that is in relation to a different form or dimension of reality in which the human subject is embedded. In respect of this "reality", the person's subjectivity --by way of its imagination and creative capacity to craft fantasy-- serves *mediating* functions. Per John, these functions may be escapist, distorting, or expansively artistic. What John calls "reality" would seem to entail what I might call "existential finitude."

Moreover, this "reality" seems, per John's explicit and implicit characterizations, to entail something quite distinct --perhaps even opposite to-- the enchanting, swirling, seamless, temporality-bending unities that the imagination puts before her human subject's eyes, for example in the Viennese Waltz and other brilliant fruits of fantasy process. This reality seems a starker, darker, tragic dimension of the human situation,

perhaps felt in part in awe and aliveness, but also, as John alludes directly and indirectly, in the affectivity of anxiety, grief and human vulnerability at large.

More specifically, John tells us, this level of reality entails the vast uncertainty of human life that is obscured by illusory “old certainties that limit anxiety” (p. 1); it entails personal and socio-cultural “cris[e]s” that emerge in part out of differences and otherness (p. 1), and our fear of them, including the crises implicit in the grotesque caretaker narcissism of the likes of Franz Joseph who assassinated his wife Sisi and prohibited his own son Archduke Rudolf from benefiting from his longed-for “romantic union” (p. 4); it entails the sociological crises that derived from the destructive, factionalized “multifarious ethnic groups” comprising the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as well as the criminal and moral crisis deriving from “a poisonous anti-Semitism” (p. 4); and more generally, this level of reality entails what John alludes to as “all the problems of the world” (p. 3).

John points us towards what Freud and Kohut saw respectively as the contexts --and what I see as ultimately existential contexts-- in which fantasy takes form. Broadly speaking, as I read John, for Freud, fantasy is primary in the context of a fundamental “conflict” within the human person’s existential situation between her needs, desires, and longings, on one hand, and her natural and human environment of limitation, privation, unavailability, as well as civilizing social prohibition, on the other. Fantasy here is centrally mediating the person’s experience of “unfulfillment” (p. 5), or a

form of what Penelope Starr-Karlin calls “limitude.” Per John, for Freud fantasy functions to “ease the tension of ... conflicts”... between the person, her needs and wishes, and the environment in which she is embedded” (p. 5). Fantasy as such arises as one response in human subjectivity to the many faces of pain reflective of existential limitation of all variety, including centrally the pain of unmet or prohibited needs, desires, and longings, and the futility of human resistance to the perpetuity of limitation.

Respecting Kohut, John shows us in rich detail that for him fantasy is primary in the context of the person’s need or “pressure” to establish a “satisfactory relationship to perfection and grandiosity.” John refers to these as “archaic pressures to relate to perfection and grandiosity” (p. 8), or the “narcissistic need for greatness.” John details many features of Kohut’s theory in this regard, but the fundamental “reality” or finitude that I see and hear in reading John’s Kohutian account of narcissism is its terrific vulnerability: an existential vulnerability in the person, and a corresponding psychological vulnerability in the experience of selfhood, that is rooted in the person and her subjectivity’s embeddedness in relationship with other, whether dyadically or socio-culturally.

Kohut recognized and psychoanalytically illuminates this relationality, and the vulnerability of selfhood implicit in it, better than anyone in his selfobject concept, for this concept theoretically captures the inherent relationship-dependency of self-

experience. That is, experiences of selfhood are dependent on relational, selfobject contexts of empathic attunement no less than the body is dependent on oxygen.

From within the Kohutian framework, narcissistic fantasy serves variously to creatively oppose, or re-organize, personal or societal experiences of vulnerability on the level of self-experience, or national/cultural identity, with self-sustaining features of perfection or greatness, thereby protecting against the threatening alternatives of unimportance, indistinctness, dissolution, and other frightening self-percepts.

On the level of contextualism, as John demonstrates, fantasies --and I would include all imagination-drenched enactments and illusions-- serve functions that acquire their specific meaning and form in response to their dyadic as well as historical, social and cultural milieu. In addition, or perhaps as alternative, to John's scholarly illumination of context-sensitive fantasy as functioning in order to escape, distort, or creatively [re-] organize reality (see p. ___), I propose that fantasies acquire meaning and form in response to the *presence, or absence, of dyadic as well as socio-cultural selfobject ties*.

With respect to Kohut's important selfobject concept, in their 1985 article "Affects and Selfobjects" Stolorow and Socarides (1985, p. 67) assimilated it into their own phenomenological-contextualist observations and came to see selfobject experiences as pertaining fundamentally to the *affective* dimension of self-experience. They

viewed any person's need for selfobject ties as relating to her need for specific, requisite relational responsiveness to various affect states throughout development. Caregiver responsiveness, as they viewed it, serves to aid in the person's integration of both expansive and painful affectivity into her sense of *self*.

In this contextualist vein, in reading John's paper I wondered about those selfobject milieus that facilitate the person's integration into her emotional world of the very painful affect that I believe John directly and indirectly associates with "reality", namely, the affectivity reflective of the person's, or her society's, multifaceted vulnerability, whether vulnerability to unfulfillment, dissolution, or otherwise.

In this regard, I reflected on Stolorow's language wherein the question of whether one can turn towards, face, bear, and integrate the affectivity reflective of such vulnerability --for example, the anxiety, sorrows, and powerlessness in which one feels "all the problems of the world" (p. __)-- depends in significant part on whether one finds an emotionally attuned, selfobject home for them. If such a selfobject home is found then a person's pain can be integrated and she may become able to move toward more authentic non-evasive experiencing (see Stolorow, 2007, 2010). If such a selfobject home is not found, such pain may live in dissociative, traumatic states and obstruct the possibility of authentic, owned, and individualized self-experience.

In this reflection, I felt a conviction arise that in relational contexts of selfobject insufficiency, whether dyadic or socio-cultural, or both, wherein painful affect that discloses the tragic aspects of the person's or society's lifeworld have been rendered traumatically unbearable, the imagination's fantasy and illusion-crafting may acquire form that serves to *compensate* for what's missing, or traumatically abusive, in such context. In contrast, in relational contexts of selfobject sufficiency, or "good-enough holding" (see Winnicott), fantasy and illusion may acquire form that serves to *compliment* and creatively extend the emotional expansiveness such context has otherwise already made possible.

PART III

FANTASY AND AFFECT TOLERANCE

In a very broad sense, psychopathology can be seen as a failure of imagination.

Steven Mitchell

In reading John's paper, a conviction apparently already in me was stirred that the human person always already actively and creatively organizes her emotional experiences of existential vulnerability in order that they be articulated, rendered bearable, and further rendered enriching to her sense of being. This articulation, as

I see it, so central to bearability and enrichment, may be pre-verbal, linguistic, or expressed in the sensori-motor terms of concrete time & space imagery and conduct. From the perch of this conviction, even in contexts of selfobject insufficiency that are associated with dissociative flight from painful truth, fantasy --and for that matter illusion-- arguably do not really distance us from truth or so called “reality”, nor the sights and affects that disclose them, but transforms them from the unimaginable, unbearable, and unsayable into the imaginable, owned, and perhaps even painfully enriching.

In this view, and as I believe John may also implicitly see it, the clinical or socio-cultural-historical significance of a person’s or society’s fantasy or illusion-crafting will become intelligible then when understood as complimentary to, or compensatory for, the mix of caring and hospitable, or alternatively hostile and inhospitable, relational contexts in which she lives.

Pulling John and you more into a developmental frame, an example of such a compensatory function within an inhospitable caregiver context is found in Winnicott’s (1971, pp. 20-25) treatment of the child-family system in which a boy experienced “fear of separation” flowing from the mother’s serious depressions and hospitalizations. In these, the boy was exposed to his precarious inter-connection with his mother: existential in-secure attachment! He was understandably drenched in Angst!

What proved most clinically salient to the boy's state of mind, however, was that the mother could not see that his Angst was the issue. He was not just feeling the insecurity of his attachment to mother, he was without a witness in it. Even at Winnicott's suggestion that the mother talk with her boy about his separation anxiety, she was "skeptical." In the boy's reaction to his own Angst, *coupled with* his mother's skeptical blindness to it, he connected everything in his path in images of "string", enacting an illusion of seamless temporally continuous inter-connectedness --the opposite of shocking, repeated separation. In the perceptual string-illusion of continuity of connection over time, a mediating self-reassurance of sustained bondedness functioned to hold his Angst in ways his familial context was failing to do. Arguably, this boy's string was to his separation angst as Vienna's Waltz was originally to the disconnecting pathological narcissism of Franz Joseph and his empire, and as it arguably will forever be to the dis-unifying impact on human lives of loss-fraught unfulfillment and imperfection, as two instances of human finitude. In the boy's case, once the mother, upon Winnicott's recommendation, finally opened dialogue about his Angst, the necessity of the string illusion disappeared as "symptom". Is it possible that the string imagery functioned in part as a dialogue-substitute, a holding witness to his angst, which receded once genuine intersubjective dialogue was opened with the one he loved? Analogously, is it possible that the Viennese Waltz represented and still represents an aesthetically rich sensori-motor alternative to dialogue about existential loss, unfulfillment, imperfection, and human transiency at large, and the painful affectivity in which it is felt?

As I believe is consistent with John's thesis, when viewed from an affect theory perspective, even in "good enough" (Winnicott, 1971, p, 18) developmental contexts, wherein the person has found a sufficient selfobject home, she will engage fantasy and illusion-crafting. In such contexts, the imagination is working in a fashion *complimentary* to good enough relational hospitality towards existential pain. Winnicott speaks to this when he says that "transitional phenomena" --which he characterizes as entailing "illusion"-- persist "throughout life", evolving from the infant's "transitional objects" to "the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts ... religion ... imaginative living, and to creative scientific work" (p. 19). Arguably John sees the Viennese Waltz as one of the great transitional phenomena of Western culture, artistically synthesizing a response to the unfulfillments and narcissistic vulnerabilities that Freud and Kohut, respectively, see as central challenges in human being and psychological life.

In contrast to John's more conspicuous examples of cultural and scientific fantasies, and their socio-historical contexts, I got to thinking about pre-verbal sustaining fantasy-crafting that is so inconspicuous that it eludes recognition. For example, on the level of early psychological development, Schwartz and Stolorow (Stolorow, Atwood, & Orange, 2002) observe that a "primal absolutism" --or what I might characterize as a form of developmental fantasy-- arises in the context of the caregiver's good enough "attuned holding" of the child's body and painful affect (p.

129). A fruit of such holding is the child's pre-symbolic experience of her "physical being as inviolable", or what they term "sensorimotor integrity" (p. 129). Such a developmentally healthy configuration of self-experience is fraught with creative, arguably fantastic, absolutizing, and might be deemed one of many early, pre-verbal, features of a sense of selfhood (see also cohesion, differentiation, agency) the intersubjective-vulnerability (Orange, 2009) rendered bearable by fantasy and illusion. Are not such fantasies and illusions gifts from the imagination to its human subject as she developmentally aspires to hold --versus fall away from-- her existence, and the vulnerabilities it entails?

Pressing further into the inconspicuousness of fantasy, how about those fantastic, illusory pre-reflective absolutisms that support everyday living. Take for example the loving parent's bedtime bid to her child, "*Sweet dreams, Honey, I'll see you in the morning*", or the lover's send-off to his beloved, "*Safe travels my love. I will be here when you return.*" Of these types of decontextualizing colloquialisms, Stolorow (2007, p. 16) writes,

[they] are the basis for a kind of naïve realism and optimism that allow one to function in the world, experienced as stable and predictable ... [because they obscure] the inescapable contingency of existence on a universe that is random and unpredictable and in which no safety or continuity of being can be assured.... (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992, p. 22).

Even more inconspicuous are developmentally sustaining metaphysical fantasies and illusions. I read John's view of the Viennese Waltz as a kind of beautifully

choreographed metaphysical illusion, perhaps especially in its organization of temporality as transgressively ever-flowing, and harmoniously loss-free in its swirling interconnectedness-with-other. In metaphysical fantasies and illusions, the unbearable fragility and transience of all things human are transformed into an enduring, permanent, changeless reality, *an illusory world of eternal truths* (see Stolorow & Atwood, 2013).

Perhaps we are all creative metaphysicians, individually and communally, and cannot help but rely heavily on varieties of metaphysical fantasy and illusion in order to tolerate our vulnerability. In a Facebook post, George Atwood tells the story of a former patient who as a child lived in a “bubble” of “quasi-merger” with her twin brother. Her bubble provided fragile subjective safety from her embeddedness-vulnerability, or existentially insecure attachment. After this bubble burst in young adulthood, plummeting her into an abyss of vulnerability, she took up with one sexually intense boyfriend after another, creating a precarious illusion of (metaphysical) continuity of inter-connection. But the bottom then fell out on this creation too, leaving her imagination demoralized and metaphysics-free. Her imagination reeled in desperation, seeking “a ground” as she “swirl[led] in the abyss.” In a last ditch creative effort, she cut out the soles of her shoes so that her feet had direct contact with the earth, and gnawed on the bark of trees at the local park. Atwood and Klugman contend that this case proves “[i]t is not good to be metaphysics-free. It leaves one gnawing on the bark of trees.”

Arguably the human person is nowhere more engaged, intelligible, and authentic than in her imaginative fantasy and illusion-crafting, right down to her organization and reorganization of the truth of her relationally-embedded being and selfhood. With respect to the experience of self, Samuel Taylor Coleridge asserts, if "[t]he I is not an object but a willed act ... [then] if it cannot believe in itself in what or whom can it believe?"

On yet another level of what John calls the "psychological and cultural dynamics of fantasy in human life," I'm convinced that in addition to the function of the *content* of developmental fantasy and illusion --as found, for example, in images of selfhood as an invulnerable entity in time and space, or in images of an invulnerable, great nation-state of cohesive military and citizenry, or in artistic unities of timeless being as found in the Viennese Waltz-- is the experiencing agent's confidence in her creative capacities and their efficacy. That is, the person's confidence in her imagination, and its efficacy, is as important to affect integration in respect of existential pain --like, anxiety and grief-- as is the content of the particular decontextualizing illusions she crafts.

The phenomenology of trauma demonstrates this point. Life-trauma does not consist only in disillusionment whereby existential vulnerability, and its overwhelming anxiety

and grief, storm into awareness and shatter our absolutes and universals, as occurred socio-politically, per John, in the fall of the Astro-Hungarian Empire. It also consists in injury to the agency behind imagination.

In this view, injury to the imagination occurs along two distinct dimensions, and I wonder what John thinks of this idea. First, again, there is disillusionment as torpedo to the substantive content of the fantasy or illusion. On this dimension, the substantive image of fantastic, illusory invulnerability --e.g., for example Franz Joseph's or his nations's sense of greatness-- is at least temporarily blown to pieces. The person, society and content of their illusions lie in fragments all about, their former pristine assembly shockingly revealed to be utterly subject to existential vulnerability. Stolorow (2007, p. 16) writes:

It is in the essence of emotional trauma that it shatters ... absolutisms, a catastrophic loss of innocence that ... exposes the "unbearable embeddedness of being" (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992, p. 22).

The second dimension of injury to the imagination, in this view, consists in the injury to the person's or society's agency, and in particular their creative agency: a blow to the person or society's sense of efficacy in crafting sustaining or restorative illusion. In this regard, I can't help but wonder whether the interruption in artistic, cultural productivity during the latter part of the Austrian era that John examines reflects such an injury to its individual and collective imaginations and fantasy-crafting agencies.

PART IV

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We can share a respect for illusion [and I would add fantasy] experience, and if we wish we may collect together and form a group on the basis of the similarity of our [fantasy and] illusory experiences. This is a natural root of grouping among human beings.

Donald Winnicott

In this passage, Winnicott (1971, p. 4) suggests indirectly that twinship experiences, including communal twinship in trauma, can be found in identifications among imagining souls. Engaging and reveling together in John's paper, as well as all weekend, I think we all are twins in the creative human self-understanding and holding we call psychoanalysis. It is not that we pride ourselves in, versus shame ourselves or our patients for, the role of the imagination in how we grasp human truth. For example, I feel really good that at the center of my self-psychologically enriched intersubjective-systems perspective is the notion of the intersubjective field, itself a psychoanalytic waltz in which differently organized subjective worlds are indissolubly unified. Moreover, I suggest we cherish the role of imagination, fantasy and illusion in the possibility that we integrate and enrich our sense of self even in human life's most painful aspects. In times of trauma, when creative agency, or the imagination, becomes injured, and our individual or societal confidence in the efficacy of our fantasy and illusion-crafting is in pieces, I hope we --especially we

mental health professionals-- will mutually hold one another's and our patients' anxieties until such confidence is restored, and we can resume our dance --waltzing, that is, into understanding and tolerance of our human being and its intrinsic vulnerabilities.

I thank John for allowing me to engage with his wonderfully creative, erudite paper and to twin in his fascination with human fantasy-crafting and its functions.

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