I suggest that psychoanalysis progresses by explore the presence and the essential tension between clarity and ambiguity as processes within our minds that become prominent in psychoanalysis. We learn from aesthetics and literary criticism that ambiguity can shade from taut disorganization, to tolerating life’s richness; clarity can range from a concrete fixity, to a lucid grasp of one’s state of mind.

This paper responds to Wallerstein’s (1991) challenge to find common ground in psychoanalytic practice: we attempt this by avoiding metapsychological jargon and relying on more experience-near terms, such as clarity and ambiguity. The paper also refers to Sandler’s (1983) concept of implicit theory, -- that psychoanalysts use “preconscious, overlapping but not fully integrated models” (Sandler, 1988, 388) – in this case explicating

1 Presented at the Israel Psychoanalytic Society, March 2009. I thank Andre Green for his gracious and generous meetings with me, which catalyzed this paper. I thank colleagues at the Israel Psychoanalytic who commented on this paper.
how clarity and ambiguity are frequent, but implicit phenomena in clinical work. Identifying these and the essential tension between them permits us to both improve training and identify our clinical efforts. The analyst’s and analysand’s tolerance of the
tension between clarity and ambiguity facilitates increased
structuralization and emotional robustness. Metaphor is one example
of ambiguity.

This paper’s intent is to explore the presence of moments of clarity
and ambiguity in daily practice and learn how there may be an essential
tension between these phenomena that helps propel psychoanalytic
process forward. I use these concepts from aesthetics, including literary
theory, as clarity and ambiguity have been explored in these pre-
psychoanalytic disciplines. In addition, clarity and ambiguity are also more experience-near terms than the usual metapsychological terms of psychoanalysis. Wallerstein (1991) has challenged us to find a common ground in psychoanalytic practice. Sandler has described how we tend to use implicit theories -- those more preconsciously based. He suggests we “look with profit at the dimensions of meaning of specific concepts within the minds of individual psychoanalysts.” I select two phenomena -- clarity and ambiguity -- that I suggest lie both within our minds and within our work. I turn to aesthetics in part because the study of creativity explicates the meaning of clarity and ambiguity. But, following Winnicott, to the degree that symptoms (and dreams) are creative acts, we should find clarity and ambiguity with them also. Further, psychoanalytic practice is a (collaborative) aesthetic process to the extent that we listen, reflect, and transform inner life; in this case, learning about clarity and ambiguity from aesthetics initiates our insights into their presence in our clinical work.

I turn to the presence of ambiguity and clarity in literature (at least from Aristotle’s time onward) to demonstrate how long-standing these phenomena are in humankind, in our heritage, and to show their function in aesthetic enterprise. Then, we can turn to psychoanalysis -- to the extent that it too is an aesthetic enterprise -- to learn how ambiguity and clarity are
prevalent in clinical work, that is in our mental processes, and how to facilitate their development in analytic work.

In 1930, a twenty-two year-old poet wrote the *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Empson, 1930; Kris, 1952) to show how ambiguity is crucial to elegance in literature. Ambiguity creates a tension in the listener/reader, a demand to feel and think, to work to understand the art. Empson’s book challenged developed literary criticism, even as he drew form Aritsotle and others. We begin with Aristotle and Empson, in part, to show how long-standing the concepts of clarity and ambiguity have been in humankind’s thought.

Previously, clarity was a major criterion for judging good art.

Perhaps this was an oversimplification of Aristotle’s structural guidelines in the Poetics: arrangement and length; unity of action, probable and universal stories; and plots that are characterized by peripety, discovery and or suffering. He even suggests, “Perfection of diction is for it to be clear, not mean.”

Yet, in the end, Aristotle insists, “The best thing by far is to be a
master of metaphor… A sign of genius… *intuitive perception of similarities and dissimilarities*” (authors italics). He sets the stage for Empson’s realization – metaphor is the first of his seven types of ambiguity. Borges develops further Aristotle’s “linking two different things together,” insisting “We all feel the difference between a dead and living metaphor.” (Borges, 1978).

Aristotle’s adulation of metaphor also set the stage for Freud’s *Ubertragung*, whose Latin translation is “transference,” which in Greek is “metaphor” (Szajnberg, 1986).

For clarity in literature, one can read Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, which begins with the Chorus pealing clearly from the beginning, “I ask… I wait… I keep… I sing… I cry… I leave… I have forgotten everything.” Yet later, upon greeting the bigamous and future husband-murderer, Clytemnestra, this Chorus refers to her as a “grave man,” capturing in metaphor both “serious” and “one who
buries.”²(1991). Here, using metaphor’s ambiguity permits the Chorus to say something to the Queen that could be treacherous, even traitorous.

Or, the Chorus greets a surviving messenger of the Greek victory over Troy, referring (ambiguously) to the “sickness that brings delight,” to describe the mutual yearning/ailment between a country and a soldier returning home after ten years’ absence.

Another ancient literature, Biblical Hebrew, is succinct. A single word can introduce ambiguity. “Joseph” (“Yoseph”) means simply “and (God) will add another (son),” as he does with Benjamin, whose mother dies in childbirth. After Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery, Judah, the lion, “unwittingly” impregnates his daughter-in-law, Tamar. When he learns she is pregnant, he condemns her to be burned, until she confronts him with evidence of his paternity. Then, in a phrase ironically echoing Adam’s intercourse with Eve, the chapter ends with four Hebrew words: “he did not add (yoseph) to his knowledge of her.” That is, he abstained from intercourse with her. This odd phrase, awkward in Hebrew as it is in

² Lattimore’s translation from the Greek (Lattimore,1947 in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore’s The Complete Greek Tragedies, 1991).
English, uses the word “Yoseph,” from the absent brother’s name. Four words do three things: tells us Judah abstained from Tamar, harkens back to the “knowing” between Adam and Eve, and reminds us of the absent brother. Ambiguity triples meaning and enriches the aesthetics.

In his fourth Harvard Lecture, Leonard Bernstein spoke of ambiguity’s role in music (1974). Ironically, the word “ambiguity” is defined ambiguously: it is either bivalent (ambivalent, ambidextrous) or surrounding, circumventing (ambience). In music, Leonard Bernstein spoke of ambiguity’s role (1974). Chromaticism lends ambiguity, which can be constrained or contained by the diatonic. For instance, the apagiaturra has a leaning quality to it, leading or urging the listener from one place to another. Bernstein gives an historical account of the introduction of ambiguity in music, most starkly in Debussy’s l’aaprès mmidi d’un Ffaun, using a whole tone scale, lending an atonal ambiguous quality. The Ambiguity’s costs price of ambiguity are may be structural clarity and immediacy of meaning; ambiguity’s benefits are expressivity and creating new meanings.

That is, aesthetically, ambiguity can be structured into music or writing to lend a tension, either between to things – as in metaphor – or giving an ambience to the setting. Ambiguity is not vague nor chaotic: it is
structured to have an enigmatic quality, not only bridging two images, but also leading from one to another.

A brief clinical vignette demonstrates how ambiguity can lead to clarity. Prof K (to be discussed below) returned to his former hobby of sleight of hand with cards. He became sufficiently proficient that local magic stores invited him to teach others. He described how card tricks entail distracting the observers’ attention — social patter, waving one’s hands about -- a form of socialized deceit. One session, he arrived excited, sat up on the couch, pulled up the analyst’s coffee table, splayed out a fresh deck of cards and proceeded to demonstrate a new, complex sleight of hand with verbal patter —“ The hand is quicker than the eye!” -- and rapid shuffling. At the end, slapping his forehead, he exclaimed, “Even I didn’t see that!” The analyst responded, “Your sleight of hand is like your sleight of mind in past years, when you didn’t see things what you were doing to yourself, nor your wife’s deceit of you.” Prof. K. with a mixed look of poignance, pain, and dismay lay down on the couch and initiated reflection on this interpretation that continued for the next months: that his “talent” of a sleight of mind had hidden from himself how he had lived his life; that the “socialized deceit” of card tricks could be a form of self-deceit. In the moment of flying hands and cards, the analysand felt a sense of
“clarity”: this is just a card trick, which I can do so well and which has helped lift me from my despair of the past two years. The analyst’s remark transforms the moment of clarity into months of ambiguity: what is sleight of hand (and adaptive) can also be sleight of mind (and defensively hobbling one’s perceptions). More generally, he began to see how aspects of his inner life that had served him well – his intelligence, his creativity, his fascination with magic and entertaining others (even up to the last period of despair, when he withdrew from the social world) can also be used by himself to paralyze his perception of his inner life and those closest to him. This resulted in both a richer appreciation of the ambiguity of life and a different form of clarity about himself. Further clinical examples elaborate this tension between ambiguity and clarity.

In music (and in psychoanalysis, we argue below), ambiguity is sensitive to context: the G Chord heard in a C major composition, “sounds” like it must resolve to the tonic “C.” But the G Chord can also pivot into G Major, sounding like the tonic to which other chords must resolve. For instance, in the previous clinical vignette, the context of transference transforms a card trick into a reflection on one’s life both within treatment and outside. The transference itself is an ambiguous context: we ask, permit, facilitate the analysand to feel “as if” he or she were with significant
others, even as they “know” that this is “only” analysis. Ambiguity “leads to a point of repose” in music (Bernstein, 1974), as we might hope in psychoanalysis, when the repose is a moment of reflection in the analyst’s presence.

In psychoanalysis, clarity and ambiguity are frequent phenomena, challenging us to recognize them overtly when we live with them almost daily over decades of clinical practice. To some degree, this makes this paper easier to write – analysts should find examples in daily practice. In some sense it makes it more difficult: the quotidian may become so mundane, even devalued, as when;

James Joyce lamented the writer’s dilemma that since everyone speaks English, they think they know it. Joyce was contrasting the challenge of the writer/artist with other fine arts, the plastic, the visual, the musical: the latter deal with materials more removed from our daily intercourse; words are the prose we speak all our (sentient) lives. Or, like Moliere’s Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, as we think about clarity and

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3 Joyce, Personal communication from Saul Bellow, 1971.
ambiguity in our daily practice, we may be pleasantly surprised that we have been “speaking prose” these many years and never knew it.\footnote{Mr. Jourdain: But when we talk, what is that, say?  
The Philosopher: Prose.  
Mr. Jourdain: What? When I say “Nicole, bring me my slippers and give me my nightcap,” that’s prose?  
The Philosopher: Yes, sir.  
Mr. Jourdain: On my word. I’ve been speaking prose these forty years and never knew it; I am infinitely obliged to you for having informed me of this.  
Moliere, \textit{Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme}}

Clarity is a fundamental quality of psychoanalysis from its beginnings: Freud emphasized that the function of psychoanalysis is to clarify dreams or symptoms that seem confusing, irrational. Yet, as with many fundamental psychoanalytic concepts, even clarity is called into question. In 2008, Andre Green (Green, 2008) pronounced that when faced with confusing or unclear clinical material, the analyst should “complexify.”\footnote{This remark and subsequent discussions with Andre Green precipitated work on the current paper.}

But psychoanalytic writing on ambiguity, is spare: Freud used “ambiguity” in three papers, either to describe switchwords in dreams or in psychosis (Freud, 1906, p. 174-5; 1907, p. 85; 1915, 196-204). Fenichel
spoke of the Greek oracles intentional use of ambiguity (1942) and Kris (1952), in an essay that reviewed Empson’s book, spoke of ambiguity’s capacity to enrich art, without discussing how this applies to psychoanalytic practice. Isay (1977) returns us to clinical work by describing four types of ambiguity in clinical cases, arguing that each type has specific dynamic meaning. Joseph (1983) touches on ambiguity’s tendency to “take(s) all the meaning out of our commitment and leaves it useless” (p 293). That is, until Isay’s seminal paper, ambiguity remains an orphan. While Isay suggests four types of ambiguity relating them to psychodynamics and Joseph focuses on ambiguity’s tendency to “senselessness,” this paper will explore ambiguity’s presence as it is more broadly defined in aesthetic production, particularly the creative products of our minds, such as symptoms and dreams (Winnicott, 1974). Further, we will present clinical vignettes that suggest that ambiguity and clarity, like twin pulsating stars, are coupled in an essential tension that moves psychoanalytic work forward, once we recognize their presence, power and function.

As noted in the above clinical vignette, transference itself is an exercise in ambiguity: we ask or permit the analysand to tolerate a temporary illness, an artificial neurosis (Freud, 1916) – in which the analyst becomes the significant others populating the analysand’s inner life, even
as intermittently, perhaps simultaneously the analyst and analysand shift into secondary process to reflect upon the course of this temporary ailment. The transference bridges between internal infantile object representations and the analyst being as-if that object: this is metaphor’s definition; this is the structure and function of ambiguity. Ultimately, a sign of resolution of this transference neurosis includes a greater sense of inner clarity of one’s inner life and how one became oneself. This includes a tolerance for ambiguity in life and ambivalence (a cousin of ambiguity), grasping and integrating how negative emotions imbricate positive emotions (Schlesinger, 2003, 2005). Specifically, the analyst becomes less and less a transference figure; there is a direction towards repose as the ambiguity of the transference resolves.

Psychoanalytic practice not so neat. Winnicott, (1974) Knight (1954), Grinker (1968), Kernberg (1975), Giovacchini (2000) among others have shown how the as-if quality of the transference neurosis can meander across boundaries into psychic territory where the psychoanalyst is the significant other; we find this in the broad category of character disorders, including narcissistic and borderline. In borderline disorders, analyses may begin in this torturous and tormenting territory. The clinical examples herein
will demonstrate the presence of both ambiguity and clarity along the range of psychopathology.

We also have a paradox: how can ubiquitous clarity-ambiguity both contribute to the psychoanalytic process and also be an optimal outcome of psychoanalysis? We can see this in the following vignettes from the micro-episodes of a session to the more macro-landscape of phases of analysis.

The intent of this paper is to initiate thought on fundamental principles to guide technique that apply to everyday psychoanalytic work, while not using the argot of various contemporary psychoanalytic schools. By using concepts and more common-place terms—by explicating what may exist in our daily implicit theories (Sandler, 1983)—that do not belong to particular psychoanalytic persuasions, we hope to facilitate recognition and discussion of clinical material on some common ground (Wallerstein, 1991).

We use the terms ambiguity and clarity as they have a long history (recorded at least from the eras of Biblical and Greek literature) and are more experience-near than metapsychological terms. One of the dilemmas of using metapsychological terms is that these become a language that communicates a version of reality or the world (Wittgenstein, 1949). More
nefariously in our psychoanalytic community, metapsychological languages divide us often against ourselves, whether these be the languages of ego psychology, Kleinian, Kohutian, relational and so forth. The purpose of using more familiar terms of clarity and ambiguity, is to permit us to listen more closely to the clinical material without metapsychological frameworks interposing themselves between us and the material. As much as feasible, this paper will attempt to be more experience-near and theoretically neutral.

*Clarity maintaining a teetering equilibrium on psychosis’ edge*

At times, introducing ambiguity (or letting it come to mind) into a clear state of mind will shift work forward; at times, a request for clarification will shift from a confusing ambiguity to transform the analysand’s experience. Here is one example of each from early an late in the same analysis.

Professor K. began his 5 ½ year, five times weekly analysis after a one year depression, requiring four months of hospitalization, unresponsive to either medication nor a course of ECT. In a childless marriage of two decades, he moved to live with his brother’s family in a modest suburban bungalow, sleeping on the couch, to be cared for physically and in order to

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6 A concrete example comes from the author’s experience in the Israel Psychoanalytic Society’s scientific meetings. When a “Kohutian” speaker was scheduled, the non-Kohutians (the majority of members) absented themselves; when a Winnicottian was scheduled, the non-Winnicottians (the majority of members) absented themselves; when a Freudian was scheduled, the non-Freudians (a bigger majority of members) absented themselves and so forth. Scientific meetings became rump gatherings of metapsychological schools.
pursue analysis. His wife stayed in their penthouse thousands of miles away, as she refused to live with him. He came to session dressed in sweats, hair disheveled and beard grizzled. Early in treatment, he had a clear complaint, an *idée fixe*, that he was being robbed blind. He knew – shouted repeatedly, emphatically, finger jabbing into the air – knew that people were stealing from him: his bookkeeper, cooking the books; his accountant, shuffling funds; his stock broker, churning his portfolio, from which he was now eking out his living. When the analyst speculated that perhaps he felt this about his analyst, K. sat up abruptly, turned, pointed to the analyst and with squinting eyes said, “You! You, at least I know how much you’re stealing from me every month. I write the check!”

After four months of this clamor, he added a new complaint: someone had charged $12,000 to his card at Nieman Marcus! The analyst asked who else might have used his card. Furious the analysand shouted, “How dare you accuse my wife of stealing from me! Do you know what it was like for her to put up with me for twenty years!”

Nevertheless, when he called his wife after this session, she insisted that the bill was only $9,000; she had returned the shoes. Over the next few months, Prof. K. learned from his accountant that the wife had
“borrowed” some $60,000 from his business account during his hospitalization; tens of thousands more had been “borrowed” in prior years. To demonstrate his defensive denial against knowing this earlier, Professor admitted that his accountant had reminded him over the phone that he had been cautioning the Professor for some years that his wife was withdrawing substantial funds from their joint account, that she had a separate account and that for the entire marriage, she had filed separate tax returns, which the Professor had not been permitted to see. At first he rationalized that he was trying to “respect” his wife’s professional independence, that she still struggled with her career (she claimed), while he was so successful. But, his attempt at a form of feminism broke down as further details of deceit unfolded, including her having given birth to a daughter prior to their marriage and sent her for adoption. (She had claimed that she couldn’t bear children because of infertility.)

Prof. K. responded with both mourning and despair to this realization (Schlesinger, 2003): it became clear to him that while there was a kernel of truth to his feeling robbed, it was now clear that his wife had been the bandit. That is, embedded within the ambiguous claims of being robbed by many was a crystal of clarity – his wife had been the “thief.” In more
detailed process, he recalled that shortly after the marriage, he saw in her
driver’s license that she was in fact several years older than he (She had
told him that she was younger.); that after she mourned that she could
never have children, her daughter whom she had given up for adoption two
decades earlier appeared at their doorstep; that she was having to sleep in
her lab, when in fact she was carrying on multiple affairs, and so on. These
were painful self-realizations that cascaded after the initial episode of
“learning” about the Nieman Marcus charge. For many of these, the
analysand blamed the analyst for “making him” realize these discoveries.
Only later in the work, did he become aware of his adaptive need to “not
know” what was happening, in order to both protect him from having to
think about leaving her, as well as justification that he deserved to be
treated shabbily and deceptfully in order to atone for childhood wishes and
“sins.” That is, only after years of work, did the analysand recognize the
adaptive meaning of experiencing a muddling ambiguity of what plagued
him for decades: that he needed not to know his persecutor and his need to
feel persecuted. During the later analytic work, he realized that he had
used denial in order to permit her deceit as “reparation” for his unconscious
sense of guilt (Freud, 1916). His guilt was multi-layered: he shared his
father’s guilt for being the only surviving son in the family; he felt guilty for
succeeding well beyond his factor-worker father; he felt guilty as he recalled his father’s dejection for marrying out of the faith.

The reader might object that matters are not so simple: even in the psychotic morass of ambiguous robbers, there was a kernel of clarity: in fact, he was being robbed. That is, we may have here two forms of clarity entangled: a clear idea of “This is my problem!” in this case a delusion of robbers; but also an unconscious kernel of lucidity – “I find something valuable missing in my life; something taken from me.” From this pearl of truthfulness, one can strand a new life.

Perhaps it is more accurate to say that in some cases there may be areas of clarity in the midst of ambiguity; a clarity that can be distilled in analysis, as we will discuss below.

*Missing an ambiguous “something”*

In the termination phase of the same analysis, we can see how a concrete parapraxis becomes the focus of both a state of uncertain ambiguity and a poignant clarity of mind.

This former structural engineer began to think about returning to practice after the fourth year of analysis. One session, he entered breathlessly, barely on time, to explain that he had missed the bus stop and
got off at the “end of the line,” which happened to be at the bridge. The analyst asked what he made of this. The analysand pursued a series of associations: that this bridge was known for “jumpers,” but he denied that he felt like jumping; that he was reluctant to return to medicineengineering, as he might “miss something” – he was renown in the past for his touch”eye”, such as noticing a life-threatening structural defect others had missed. He continued. He felt over decades, he had missed the ailment in himself, his wife’s psychopathic deceits, difficulties in his marriage. He returned to the bridge, saying that he realized when he stepped from the bus, how he had just missed killing himself during the profound depression. He also mourned how much of his life he had missed because he started his treatment so late. He missed sorely having children. This led to his envy of the analyst having children. Much of what he said about “missing something” sounded valid to both the analyst and analysand, although there was a sense of a torrent of eddying material, muddied waters. But, it didn’t feel spot-on to either patient or analyst. The analyst asked more about Professor K.’s envy. There was a long silence, then in a tear-filled voice, he realized that there was some “missing ingredient” that the analyst had in ____________

7 The office was in the first floor of the analyst’s home.
order to have a good life. “I never realized I was so sick,” choked out. After more extended silence and continuing over the course of the following sessions, this moment of clarity was expanded. Professor K. felt something was deficient in him – after all, both he and the analyst were professionals, both came from immigrant families (although from different ethnicities) – why couldn’t the analysand have had a life like the analyst: grand house, family, and sitting up behind recumbent patients. The tone here was less a sense of malignant envy, more the sense of yearning and desire for identification with the analyst. The parapraxis of missing his bus top, getting off at the bridge, the profusion of associations, devolved into the moment of tearful clarity that resulted in an extended period of mourning the life lost, before Professor K. could imagine a better future life (Schlesinger, (2003).

The reader will also note a transformation of mind between the first vignette and the second: from being robbed (associated with anger and blaming) to feeling something missing (associated with mourning and assuming responsibility). Intriguingly, at one level, we can speculate that from the beginning, Prof. K felt he was missing something – money consciously --- later, he realizes more discretely something more valuable

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Readers can recast this in more object relations terms; a shift from paranoid/schizoid to depressive positions (Klein, 1975).
was missing – ingredients in his character that led him to build such a vulnerable life.

In fact, there were at least two realizations (clarifications) in his later work: first, that there were some missing ingredients in his character (looking into the past); second how much he had achieved in psychoanalysis in order to see this more clearly (looking at the present and future); how much had changed within him.

*A penetrating moment of clarity*

The next vignette took place at the end of a lengthy analysis.

Summarizing all too briefly, this woman began treatment with a picture of starvation, cutting, burning and a sophisticated delusional world. For instance, she “explained” the multiple slashes on her left forearm as representing the long grasses of the Serengeti Plain and the cigarette burns amongst them the scars as representing a cheetah escaping. She continued, that she felt she needed to be the fastest animal alive in order to escape from dangers. In childhood, she had “trained” herself to write with her feet in case her arms were amputated. Between sessions, she would attend notorious pick-up bars (popular with Harley
riders), where she would go home with men who would then assault and brutally rape her. She felt that she deserved this, and also this proved that she could “survive.” Her starvation/vomiting resulted in three extended hospitalizations; in the last, the nationally-renown eating disorders specialist predicted that she would die in the near future.\(^9\)

In her analysis, we learned (she remembered and it was confirmed by her cousins) that her Mafia great uncle (a *Capo di Tutti*) had raped her over ten years from age seven, as he had done with three other grand-nieces, “unbeknownst” to the extended family. After many years of analysis, there was no evidence of psychotic episodes, although she still struggled with body image; she married a very decent and bright man and gave birth, marveling in her daughter’s comfort with eating and her own body and finding exciting pleasure in mother’s body, which mother still found unattractive.\(^10\)

\(^9\) To give some sense of the primitivity of her earlier mental state, her first reported dream was, “I see smoothed, ground-green sea glass tumbling about in my stomach.” Her associations included how the sharp edges of glass are ground down by the sea, so that glass cannot cut her stomach (just as the sharp edges of her psychosis had been metabolized in analysis).

\(^10\) While this patient appeared to be mothering sensitively, attentively and thoughtfully, material in session suggested some over concern about disaster that could befall her infant that one finds in Type D4 Adult Attachment Interviews (Main, et. al. 1985; Massie and Szajnberg, 2008).
But, at this point in her married life, weeks of sessions were about her impossible mother-in-law. In addition to other material, she would complain about her intrusive, manipulative, leach-like, untrustworthy mother-in-law. Much of this could have been comedian’s fodder – her dumpy dress, ugly gifts, badly knit baby blankets, nosiness. From a remove, this woman seemed a rather pathetic character, who knew how to be self-defeating – particularly in relating to son and daughter-in-law – but did not seem terribly malignant.\(^\text{11}\)

The patient expressed vague concerns about this woman holding the baby, although by the patient’s description, grandmother handled the child competently. When asked for specifics about the woman’s holding the baby or behavior, the analysand shifted from one ambiguous detail to another; she felt that no detail explained clearly her discomfort. It was more “a feeling.” As she put it, “I know perverse people.” In fact, the analyst suggested that while there was a rather difficult mother-in-law in the external world, there appeared something more insidious threatening to erupt from the analysand’s inner world. In one of these sessions of vague,

\(^{11}\) Unlike her great-Aunt, who seduced the girl with sweets and toys to come next door, stay overnight, then retreated to her bedroom, abandoning the girl to great-Uncle’s “whims.”
multiple complaints about mother-in-law she said, “She triggers something in me.” “What?” the analyst asked. After a long pause, she whispered, “Penetration. ... I didn’t realize until you asked..... Penetration.”

Here an atmosphere of multiple, sometimes vague complaints or innuendo resolves into a moment of clarity as the analysand connects up the contemporary events with a life myth that has not come to rest, has not become one’s history (Kris, 1956). Here, the analysand has a “clear” sense that something is wrong, but in recounting the details, she finds them elusive. As we pursued the feelings, however, what became clear was a sense of how a past supposedly protective figure became malignantly intrusive; how the past was erupting into the present, a ghost in her nursery (Fraiberg, 1959).

Dream: visual clarity; sense ambiguity

Dreams are a paradigm of visual clarity, yet ambiguous meaning. We mostly dream pictures, as Freud realized. These are often experienced and even reported with remarkable detail and clarity, even in children (Freud, 1900; Piaget, 1962). One of Freud’s greatest contributions is how we work avidly to confound the sense of these moving pictures. The dream is like a complex perfume, a complex concentrate of fragrances of clarity.
and ambiguity: we sense its presence; we wonder how it is made; a perfumer’s trained nose can discern the fragances within.

Ms. M., half-Japanese, half-Chinese began her analysis being unable to succeed in a junior college (despite being obviously bright and coming from a well-regarded private boarding school), episodes of binging (including painful abdominal distention, sweating and tachycardia) and being preoccupied with caring for her Korean boyfriends, who were alcoholic and otherwise troubled. While space precludes a detailed case history, aspects are revealed in the material following.

Early in the analysis, she dreamt:

We are on a beach, people, including Keith (her Korean boyfriend). Chinese were invading the Bay massively, filling it; they outweighed (sic) their adversaries. We escape. Over dunes and desert then mountains. In rice paddies, we lie down, grasp grasses.

She associates to having trouble with passing courses in college, in part, so as not to threaten her boyfriend, who is failing miserably. Her (Japanese) mother was much brighter than her (Chinese) father, who nevertheless lorded his intellect over mother. Then she talks about needing to clean the house, spotless, disinfect it. She wears slippers at
home to keep the floors immaculate, unlike her boyfriend who stomps in with filthy shoes. Also in slippers, easier to move in, easier to escape. She describes stylish Japanese women wearing platform shoes to look more sexy. But these are dangerous; some girls have broken ankles falling. The Chinese, in the wars, used intelligence and exhaustion to beat the enemy. The Japanese used rape and attack to defeat. She associates to the rape of Nanking, which her father would cite frequently, accusingly of the Japanese. She wondered if her mother left father because mother felt father debased her – “payback for Nanking,” her father would remark sotto voce. This makes her very uncomfortable, the image of aggressive, retributive sex by father. She recalls that her father was recently cited for sexual harassment of a junior colleague. Anyhow, the Japanese were too power hungry; maybe they would have been successful if they hadn’t been so greedy. She goes on to describe a hierarchy of Asian culture: Japanese the most aristocratic; next Chinese, then Koreans, who are considered grubby; and at the bottom Filipinos. Yes, she knows that her father finds it disgusting that all her boyfriends are Korean. (Years later, she realizes how her Korean boyfriends would parade her to Korean bars to show-off that they had “bagged” a Japanese girl. She realized this was her way both to ‘get back’ at her father and identify with her mother.)
We do not have time nor space to analyze this dream fully; the analysand offers a “programme-dream” which was explored over the course of her analysis (Freud 1911, p 93): the internally divided identity; the need to escape feeling overwhelmed ("outweighed") by the filthy Chinese; the sexuality of platform shoes and the danger of such sexuality; the danger of aggressiveness (both hers and her father’s). These aspects, among others, were clarified over the course of her analysis. This included shifting from an idealized version of her mother, to a more poignantly realistic sense of mother’s shortcomings and human weakness, as well as a sense of the insecurity and pathos within her father. These outcomes will be familiar to analysts. In terms of this paper it means shifting from a simple or “simplistic” (clear) view of her parents, to a more nuanced, complex and richly ambiguous understanding of their humanity.

For this paper, the major focus of this dream report and its associations is to show what Freud and many others have already shown, but in a different conceptual framework. Let us literally picture and reflect on this dream along the lines of Erikson’s (Erikson, 1954; SZAJNBERG, 2010) reconceptualization of the Irma dream, using the manifest material (and biographical) to supplement and enrich the latent. The visual dream is remarkably simple and clear; it is fairly easy to see this patient’s dream.
Paradoxically, as Freud (1900) demonstrated, the meaning within the visual clarity of the dream is only revealed via associations. But, the sense, the meaning, the latent (and even the manifest (Erikson, 1954; Szajnberg, 2010) meanings are confusing, fuzzy, unclear. That is, the dream work builds ambiguity into the sense of the dream. The work of analysis is to uncover the sense, the clarity (including the ambivalence) within the dream, or, rather the mind.

Discussion

We can see in retrospect that Freud built the tension between ambiguity and clarity into his technique. Freud’s early technique searched for clarification in the mélange of hysterical symptoms – making connections, uncovering, making sense (Freud and Breuer, 1898; Freud, 1916; Trilling, 1954). Yet, he ushered in an atmosphere of (productive) ambiguity when he introduced free association and the analyst’s counterpart, evenly hovering attention (Freud, 1913; 1914), even the ambiguity of the bedeviling and necessary transference love (Freud, 1915). By definition, if these two states of mind are done well, there are (occasionally overlapping) meanderings, vagueness, a fogginess, as there is meshing of the primary processes of analyst and analysand. Ambiguities abound.
But, periodically, we stop, notice something, perhaps a break in a pattern, or something out of place, or missing or present. In such moments, we reflect or wonder what’s going on, what are the details (Dewald, 1972)? We sit back into a secondary process in the effort to develop a sense of clarity about what is troubling the analysand, we search for meaning (Ricoeur, 1977).

This paper began with Empson’s masterpiece of literary criticism, demonstrating the elegance, the richness that writers have created by using ambiguity. Literature, as Freud noted, described much of what he was able to systematize into a treatment. Further, Trilling noted that not only can psychoanalysis help elucidate literary meaning, but also literature after Freud is influenced by psychoanalysis. In fact, Empson’s seventh type of ambiguity cites Freud’s work. The intent of this paper is to find fundamental principles to guide technique that apply to everyday psychoanalytic work,

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12 Ellen Handler Spitz in her classic Art and Psyche (1985) draws parallels between the three psychoanalytic approaches to understanding art and approaches that art criticism has used historically.
perhaps along the spectrum of the various schools. One will need to learn from the readers if this is so.

Schlesinger, in his *Texture of Treatment* (2003) refers to technique as “the responsibility ... to conduct a rational treatment.” (p.2). He continues later, that the “psychoanalytic enterprise is not engaged primarily to discover truth, but to relieve pain.. (it is a process) something closer to that of a voyager.. a self-correcting process much like that of a seafarer, who uses … guides ranging from landmarks to celestial navigation…” (p. 10).

How do recognizing the essential tension between tension and ambiguity help us discover a common ground in analysis? One of the challenges to our profession is the proliferation of tongues, the metapsychologies that become battle grounds (certainly not common ground) for our profession. To the degree that we can elucidate mental processes and discuss them using language that is more experience-near (rather than terms such as cathexis, part-object, self-object, intersubjective) we can begin to have professional discussions about clinical material using terms that are also part of our heritage, terms of aesthetics, for instance. Is there ambiguity in an analysand’s remark, and if so, how will it resolve? Is clarity one that is productive, that is leading to a richer inner life, or one that encases the analysand in frozen past? Does an interpretation release the
tension of the moment into both productive clarity and a life richer in ambiguity? These questions we can pose and discuss without having to choose a metapsychological language that limits discussion (Schafer, 1976). As Sandler (1983, 1988) demonstrated, we often work clinically with implicit theories embedded in more conscious explicit theories. By avoiding metapsychological terms as much as feasible, we can begin to move closer to the implicit theories we use in interpretive work.

We can develop Schlesinger’s analogy between psychoanalysis and seafaring navigation, without insisting on the distinction between truth seeking and pain alleviation. Ulysses sought homeward for ten years. Finding his true haven alleviated his pain and returned him to his true self. Like sea navigation, the analysand may “know” clearly where he or she begins --- circling endlessly or stuck in windless doldrums. In the course of analysis, we help him learn the stars and constellations to learn how to navigate. In the course of his voyage, he may find new paths, new ports that were unattainable before. That is, he can make use of a different kind of clarity than he began with, a lucidity; and he may experience ambiguity as a sense of richness of possibilities of life.
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