

Book Reviews

Edited by Ahron L. Friedberg

Willem de Kooning's Women: A Psychoanalytic Exploration, by Graeme J. Taylor. International Psychoanalytic Books, New York, 2022, 285 pp.

In this splendid book, Sigourney Award-winning psychoanalyst Graeme Taylor guides his readers on an exciting, rewarding, applied psychoanalytic trip into the fascinating, disturbing life, world, and art of one of America's greatest modern artists, Willem de Kooning. Although this artist did not like to be constrained by any single art category, he is often considered an abstract expressionist member of the New York School. Utilizing our hermeneutic science to augment understanding of art, artists, and wider cultural matters is often interesting, thought-provoking, and important, and is so in this instance.

The author has immersed himself deeply and passionately in all aspects of his subject. Clear, detailed descriptions of the psychoanalytic concepts he employs make his labor accessible not only to psychoanalysts but also to the wider public. Sixteen photographs of de Kooning and his art bring additional life and substance to Taylor's fine prose. Physically, this book has a hefty, substantial feel, a result of having been printed on high quality paper.

Enriched by references to relevant contributions from art critics, art historians, philosophers, psychoanalysts, and other scholars, Taylor offers multifaceted views on the powerful images de Kooning bequeathed us. Anyone, perhaps especially those less familiar with the insightful observations and reflections of art scholars, will be stimulated and enlightened by their penetrating observations. Many of these specialists have been profoundly influenced by psychoanalytic thinking, finding it eminently useful in their work. Taylor adroitly balances their commentaries with relevant statements of his own and from the artist, addressing the same matters. These rich explorations of process and product will be relevant and useful for psychoanalytic clinicians and researchers seeking to more fully comprehend images and processes they encounter when working with patients' dreams, memories, creative productions, reports, and other representations.

Taylor is respectfully receptive to contributions from diverse schools of psychoanalytic thought (e.g., Freud, Jung, Klein, British Object

Relations Theorists), wisely noting “the danger of becoming wedded to any single school of psychoanalytic thinking” (p. 6), thereby exemplifying the comparative-integrative spirit that I have advocated as being necessary for our discipline (e.g., Willock, *Comparative-Integrative Psychoanalysis* [The Analytic Press, 2007]). Taylor’s multiperspective approach is additionally enhanced by openness to viewpoints beyond psychoanalysis (e.g., feminism, Marxism). Any serious thought collective that can contribute to comprehending the subject at hand is embraced (not uncritically). On rare occasion, I found myself taking a perhaps even more comparative integrative approach to some of the diverse, at times conflicting, thoughts multiple authors have espoused in relation to the *Woman* series. Taylor gave detailed consideration to the views of Marlene Clark, a professor in the Division of Interdisciplinary Studies at the City College of New York. At home with contemporary ideas concerning gender complexity and fluidity, she raised the possibility of de Kooning’s *Woman I* being a portrait of himself “in drag.” For Clark, this series reflects the artist’s personal interest in transvestism and transsexualism—an idea that accords with the artist’s statements that these paintings might reflect the feminine in him and are paintings of him. Taylor cites other statements by de Kooning where the painter asserts these are portrayals of women. The author concludes: “Contrary to Clark’s belief, these statements indicate that de Kooning regarded his subject as a woman, even though he gave her large shoulders and a massive torso” (p. 68).

Regarding this difference of opinion between Clark and Taylor, it may be useful to recall Jung’s tendency to approach every item in a dream, or other creative work, from both subjective and objective levels of interpretation. From the subjective viewpoint, we are every element in our dreams. From the objective perspective, these items are objects to whom we relate.

From the subjective perspective, de Kooning would be the women (or transvestite/transsexual men/women) in his paintings. From the objective point of view, he is his mostly masculine self, observing and phantasizing about these women. A comparative-integrative perspective enables one to find validity in both Clark’s and Taylor’s perspectives. (Later, on p. 36, Taylor shares his understanding, compatible with a comparative-integrative perspective, that the artist was partly identified with his internal representation of his mother.)

Irene Fast characterized preoedipal children as being “overinclusive” in terms of their identities (*International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, 5, 265–273 [1978]). They tend to believe they have the potential to be anything, for example, male or female. A young boy I worked with long ago used to draw a woman’s long, brown hair, cut it out from the paper, then place it on his head, whereupon he clearly felt himself

to be female and found great satisfaction in that role. Research indicates that at a young age, children believe superficial characteristics, such as hair length or wearing dresses versus pants, make one male or female. Eventually, less superficial characteristics, such as genitals, become more important in determining gender. Navigating the oedipal stage, most children relinquish this omnipotentiality. Most settle for a single gender and sexual orientation. Others maintain a more bisexual, bigendered position. Others do not sustain overinclusiveness in their adult sexual behavior, but continue to play with and work on these issues in creative spheres. De Kooning might belong in this latter group.

The comparative-integrative approach looks for ways to transcend either/or thinking characteristic of the thesis/antithesis stage of debate, moving toward the both/and thinking of the subsequent stage, synthesis. We cannot always make equal room for all ideas, but we can strive to include the best of all viewpoints in a richer, more complex, comprehensive understanding. Sometimes this effort, *in statu nascendi*, may look less than seamlessly and harmoniously assembled, like some of de Kooning's paintings.

One chapter focuses on the artist's very difficult early life and its influence on the internal object relationships and defenses he developed. His original family life was replete with neglect, hardship, abuse, and loss. Readers might wonder how de Kooning managed to survive so much adversity—a topic Taylor explores, focusing on his artistic talent and drive, and some important people who provided crucial counterpoint to the more troubled figures in his family of origin. Given this background, it is not surprising that de Kooning left his Old World, mother/fatherland (Holland) in an extremely abrupt manner for the New World (New York) in his early 20s.

In one chapter, Taylor focuses on the Bionian container/contained relational process that involves transforming unbearable, indigestible experience into tolerable, useful material. In this interchange, infants discharge unendurable feelings (tears, cries, vigorous body motions, etc.). If they are fortunate, their outpourings are received by caretakers who contain, process, and return them, in modified form, to the infant who can now accept and manage this material (e.g., "Mmm, baby is hungry. Don't worry, my love. Mummy is coming. All will be well."). In later life, individuals engage in these essential transactions with other significant individuals, such as their psychoanalysts who receive, comprehend, and respond (e.g., interpretation). The canvas provides another site for this necessary process. De Kooning spent much time pondering his paintings as they arose. They spoke to him. He responded, often modifying his efforts, sometimes radically.

This important container/contained process evokes for me James Grotstein's crucial query: Who is the dreamer who dreams the dream, and who is the dreamer who understands it? (*Who Is the Dreamer Who Dreams the Dream? A Study of Psychic Presences* [Analytic Press, 2000]). Modifying that profound question in relation to artists like de Kooning, one might ask: Who is the individual who paints the painting and who is the one who understands it? All viewers, including de Kooning, consciously and unconsciously, are potential members of the latter group. Taylor might respond to this question with the idea that the traumatized part of the personality speaks to the nontraumatized part (a distinction emphasized by Lopez-Corvo in *Traumatized and Non-Traumatized States of the Personality* [Free Association Books, 2014]). This dialogue facilitates shaping "past" (unpast, unformulated) traumatic experience into tentative, present form. The emerging product is contained by the canvas and in the nontraumatized part of the artist's mind. It is revised and elaborated as many times as needed in an ongoing, transformative conversation between the artist and their work. Eventually a "finished" product is shared and discussed more widely. Artist and community may fruitfully continue contemplating the work for years.

Anyone interested in these creative processes will be richly rewarded by Taylor's references to, and integration of, important individuals who have grappled with similar phenomena in diverse artistic domains (painting, poetry, music). Among the seminal figures he values, psychologist Wilma Bucci features prominently with her descriptions of the relationships (or nonrelationships) between subsymbolic, nonverbal symbolic, and verbal symbolic codes.

There is an appealing double entendre in Taylor's title. It can be seen as referring to a particular group of paintings and to the actual women in the artist's life. Perhaps there is even triple entendre, that is, allusion to de Kooning's inner woman and his partial identification with her.

The limits of what may be achieved in "self-analysis," such as de Kooning may have been conducting via art, are suggested in the chapter devoted to his many relationships with women, both long term and brief. This relational life was complicated by his becoming a rageful, destructive alcoholic for a lengthy, tumultuous period. It can be disturbing to glimpse his frustrations, outbursts, and even the quieter, exhausted moments where he ends up sleeping in gutters on bad binge nights.

Finally, his relationship with Emilie seemed to hold some transformative potential. She was only available to him half the year, spending the other half in a distant state. De Kooning was pleased that he maintained his relationship with Emilie in her absence via letter writing. "You're with me all the time even when you're not with me," he wrote

to her (p. 224). He seemed to be increasing his capacity for important object constancy, in contrast to the paranoid-schizoid splitting many perceived in his portraits in the *Woman* series. Taylor believes de Kooning developed an increasing sense of oneness with Emilie, something one often finds in deep love relationships. This phenomenon illustrates the important, allied concept of therapeutic symbiosis that Harold Searles discussed, drawing on Margaret Mahler's significant contributions to psychoanalytic developmental psychology (*Countertransference and Related Subjects* [International Universities Press, 1979]). Michael Balint described a similar, early developmental state of primary, harmonious mix-up between infants and their environments (*The Basic Fault: Therapeutic Aspects of Regression* [Tavistock, 1968]). Readers may perceive this mix-up, harmonious or otherwise, in many of de Kooning's paintings. That struggle on the canvas may have facilitated his being able to find and further this oneness off canvas with Emilie.

Emilie may also have been what Christopher Bollas called a transformative object that is more of an environment, a process, than a clearly defined object. De Kooning's resultant burst of productivity suggested contact and resonance with a good internal/external object. Works of art began flowing out of him like water, he said. One is reminded of Balint's description of primary substances characterizing primary object love. One is also struck by the mutually reinforcing relationship between good external and internal objects. De Kooning now seemed to be working more consistently in the non-traumatized sector of his personality, in Melanie Klein's depressive (ambivalent) position, rather than in the split worlds of good and bad part-objects.

Despite these signs of growth and progress, Taylor's psychobiography is no fairy tale, much as we might like this story to end happily ever after. Alcohol, that self-medication our society (especially certain large corporations) successfully promotes, took its toll on de Kooning's mind, body, and brain.

The first photograph in Taylor's book shows that corporate pushers succeeded similarly in getting Willem to buy into cigarettes, the drug and image many of us are or were encouraged to believe makes us more adult, masculine, and sophisticated. While de Kooning thought his *Woman* paintings were hilarious, and some critics agreed, Taylor and most critics and analysts do not overlook the horror, aggression, and psychological tumult they embody. Even the artist was surprised that such troubling images could come out of him. Besides the tragic and sometimes possibly comedic elements in his art and life, one also clearly perceives prolonged, heroic struggle, akin to what we encounter with many patients.

Born in 1906, Willem was an adolescent during the World War I. He lived through many other dreadful conflagrations, such as World

War II, Korea, and Vietnam. While there is little mention of the impact of these catastrophes on him, Taylor does say that the lack of dental care during World War I caused lifelong dental problems for de Kooning. His *Woman and Bicycle* features a set of dentures peculiarly placed around the woman's neck. Might this feature allude to the lack of oral care he, and others, like his mother, suffered? Making these dentures jewelry-like, might he have been both emphasizing and denying the disruptive, grotesque impact of war? A necklace of dentures might imply that battle's discombobulating impact infects the entire psychosexual continuum, from oral through phallic stages.

While there is no mention by Taylor and the authors he cites of how war may have influenced de Kooning's art, many of these critics do refer to war on de Kooning's canvas. They mean not only the fragmented and reassembled content, but also how aggressively he applied paint and, furthermore, often scraped his images off, eliminating them to recommence. Taylor's focus is on the early developmental/familial factors that are of paramount interest to most psychoanalysts. Contemporary psychoanalysts are increasingly interested in the impact of the socio-cultural/politico/historical relational surround. Great art emerges not only from artists' developmental psychology forged in their families of origin, but also from their openness to, resonance with, and struggle with the issues of their times. Consider in this regard Winnicott's profound statement concerning everyone's lifelong struggle to relate their inner and outer worlds (*Playing and Reality* [Tavistock, 1971]). Future psychoanalytic investigators might want to further explore the impact of war and other (external) relational factors on de Kooning's development and artistic process.

There are many references to the landscape and how it penetrates or merges with the artist's depictions of women/mother. These tend to be idyllic images (again suggesting symbiosis or primary harmonious mix-up). There are no explicit references to these lovely landscapes transmogrifying into horrific scenes of brutal battle featuring dreadful weapons, deadly poisonous gases, and so forth. This ghastliness might be read into, or out of, some of de Kooning's paintings, such as *Woman I*, who could be seen as having an aggressive, masculine, armored aspect.

Another way the war may permeate de Kooning's art is in the violent breaking up of images, subsequently forcing them back together in odd ways in a process that might resemble the psychoanalytic (Kleinian) concept of manic repair. Might this forced, frantic attempt at restoration represent not only the artist's earliest and ongoing traumatic, fragmenting, developmental experiences with his mother but also his view of his motherland, and others, being violently torn apart by war, then crudely patched back together, as if the trauma had been healed when in reality

much of the damage remained? From this perspective, *Woman I* might be seen as a Humpty Dumpty figure, seated on a wall. All the king's horses (like Willem's father's horses that were so important to him) and all the king's men couldn't really put this Humpty back together again.

Some of these paintings have a Folies Bergère, dancing girls element, with shapely, stockinged, gartered legs, suggesting eagerly sought antidote to toxic wartime misery, and/or manic denial and manic repair. (*Laissez les bons temps rouler!* Let the good times roll!) The right arm of *Woman I* is such a Moulin Rouge leg. Its odd location anticipates these attractive limbs more usual placement in subsequent paintings.

Time spent in this powerful, moving odyssey with Taylor and de Kooning is time very well spent. After having immersed oneself deeply in a life, an artistic career, and an aesthetic movement, with wonderful reflections on all that by an eminent psychoanalytic investigator, one emerges enlightened, with new perspectives and questions to apply to other lives, including one's own. This book has been written not just for psychoanalysts but also for anyone wanting to know more about the light that psychoanalytic psychology can shed on art, creativity, relationships, and other crucial matters. Its rich, multifaceted viewpoints may become part of one's good internal object landscape. Those who allow themselves to engage deeply with it may never see painting by de Kooning, or anyone else, or any creative endeavor, in quite the same way as before. They will be, and see, better for having spent serious, playful time with this author and this artist.

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The Sound of the Unconscious by Ludovica Grassi. Routledge, Abingdon, 2021, 141 pp.

Music is such a vitalizing and organizing experience for so many that its relative neglect from psychoanalytic literature leaves much to be added in understanding the musical mind and to the application of music to psychoanalysis. There is a natural overlap between listening to music and listening in therapy. Both encourage developing an active