

# Cultural Therapeutics: The Recovery of Metaphoricity

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*This paper aims to extend Romanyshyn's reading of van den Berg's metabletics as a process of recovering metaphoricity. Drawing upon research in contemporary cognitive linguistics, metabletics can be recast in terms of a process of re-metaphorization that requires a repeated sequence of stages. Initially a collective figuration exists in the culture as a form of negative metonymy, which serves the function of concealing a latent and taken-for-granted cultural meaning. By transforming the figuration from a form of negative metonymy to positive metonymy, the metabletic method reveals how one cultural event has stood for another cultural event. In the final stage of the metabletic process, the researcher shows how the cultural event not only has stood for another cultural event, but can be understood metaphorically in terms of, or through, the other cultural event. This final step recovers the metaphoricity of the cultural meaning, which in turn frees up the possibility for creating new meanings that were previously foreclosed.*

The term *cultural therapeutics* was coined by Robert Romanyshyn (1985) to describe the ethical dimension of J.H. van den Berg's (1961) method of *metabletics*. The method of metabletics is a psychological approach to interpreting historical events. To read a historical event psychologically, one must read one historical event through another historical event in order to discover their previously hidden relationship and significance. The method is an interesting mix of phenomenological, genealogical and depth psychological approaches to addressing cultural-historical events and their impact on our lives. The metabletic method is ethical because it reveals unconscious meanings through a process of making explicit what was implicit or latent. Through this process of historical-cultural revelation, we put ourselves in a better position to own up to our obligations that, even though unconscious, continue to claim us through our everyday engagement in the world (Sipiora, 1999; Robbins, 2005). The retrieval of these latent meanings afford opportunities for discovering a moment of freedom at the heart of historical necessity—and potentially open the door to cultural transformation.

The aim of this paper is to extend Romanyshyn's (2001) reading of van den Berg's metabletics as a process of recovering metaphoricity. I will also borrow liberally from the work of New York analyst Antal F. Borbely (2004), who has developed a sophisticated psychodynamic theory of metaphor and metonymy. Borbely's work applies cognitive linguistic theory of figurative language to psychodynamic theory with an aim to better understand the

unconscious and defense mechanisms. As we'll see, both metabletics, at the socio-cultural level, and the phenomenological approach to the unconscious and language, at the individual level, share a process of uncovering latent metaphors. In particular, the process can be understood as a matter of taking a negative, access-barring metonymy and transforming it into a positive, access-granting metonymy. This shift from negative to positive metonymy will lead to a discovery of an unconscious or latent meaning which can be submitted to a deeper understanding of its related experience through a recovery of metaphoricity—metaphorical understandings that were previously foreclosed to awareness. I will show how this process can be seen both in individual psychodynamic therapy and metabletic analysis of history.

### *The Metaphorical Structure of Psychological Life*

In his book *Mirror and Metaphor*, Romanyshyn (2001) enacts a dialogue between van den Berg's metabletics and Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological approach to metaphor, and shows how metabletics reveals the metaphorical structure of psychological life.

Phenomenology teaches that consciousness has the quality of intentionality. Any moment of conscious awareness contains both a *noesis*, the act of consciousness, and a *noema*, the perception that is the product of that conscious activity discovered as a world. We can think of the *noesis* as the unity of the structures of consciousness—and the activity of these structures of consciousness—which make perception possible. The *noema*, then, is the perceived world as it appears through these structures of conscious activity, so that it shows up as meaningful in the mundane sense of having some kind of significance for the perceiving person.

In describing the intentional structure of consciousness, Romanyshyn (2001) finds it useful to illustrate this structure with an experience we have so often we take it for granted in our everyday lives: the image of one's self in the mirror. I invite you to perform this thought experiment for yourself. Presumably, this morning you brushed your teeth, perhaps shaved, or applied some makeup to your face, as you looked intently into the mirror. What did you see when you gazed into that mirror? To perform this description phenomenologically, you must perform the phenomenological *epoché*. In other words, you should describe the experience of the mirror as it appeared at first glance, prior to any secondary, reflective thematization of the mirror, and before the imposition of your intellectual understanding about the physics of mirror reflections. Doing so, what you probably have come to

identify for yourself, upon recollection of this morning's encounter with your reflection, is that the image in the mirror had depth – not just apparent depth, but real, concrete depth, as if your face on the other side of the mirror were the same distance from the mirror's surface as your own face staring into the mirror from this side of the glass.

The depth of the image in the mirror, described phenomenologically, reveals the self. But who is this self? The self we see is also a reflection of the *who* that is doing the looking. When you were looking at the image in the mirror, who you saw was contingent upon your vantage point as you looked into the mirror. Perhaps upon brushing your teeth, you took on the identity of your younger self, and looking at your face, suddenly found a face that appeared older than you had remembered. And perhaps as a result you found yourself grieving the loss of youthful beauty and vitality. Or maybe you took the perspective of a parental figure, and you chastised yourself for a failure or patted yourself on the back for a recent success. Perhaps you took on the perspective of a fantasy lover and admired your figure in the glass. Whatever the case may be, the glance into the mirror reveals both a *noesis*—the you who is doing the looking—and a *noema*—the you who is being revealed in the depth of the mirror. Phenomenology teaches that all perception has this quality: what we see and who we see, whether it is a reflection in the mirror or another person crossing the street on a rainy day—who we see or what we see, and the narrative we spin around those events—depends largely on who we are in the act of perceiving.

However, the phenomenological description would not be complete if we left with only an insight into the noetic and noematic aspects of intentional consciousness. We must not forget that the mirror itself as a material thing is necessary for the mediation of the noetic and noematic contents of consciousness. The mirror gathers the world of the self's encounter with itself in the mirror. And at the same time, the mirror never presents itself merely as a mirror, but always precisely as this thing which mediates the self's perception of itself. The mirror is unique in this way, because it so clearly throws up the image of one's self. But, if we engage in a moment's reflection, we can also appreciate how the mirror reveals something that is true of all things: whether we speak of trees, or chairs, or automobiles, all things can be understood as serving a similar mediating function for consciousness: they gather a world of significance and allow us to weave around them a story. And that story is who we are, as both the teller in the tale and the actor who is living out that tale. These are basic insights of phenomenological psychology.

Returning to the mirror, but mindful that we are also talking about any kind of thing which can serve a mediating function between the noetic and noematic poles of consciousness, we can say that the mirror, or more broadly, any particular thing we encounter in the world, functions in a way that can be described as metaphorical. Why metaphorical? In language, when we use a metaphor, this means we are understanding one thing by seeing it through another thing. We are, in other words, seeing one thing *in terms of* another thing.

*The Metaphorical and Metonymic Functions of the Mind*

According to Borbely (2004), the mind functions both metaphorically and metonymically. These words, *metaphor* and *metonymy*, therefore are not restricted to descriptions of linguistic phenomena, but can be used to describe mental phenomena, and as descriptive of the psyche, they are applicable to understanding psychodynamics. Mental events can be said to be *metaphorical* to the extent that the mind is able to relate events—both past and present events—in such a way that they inform one another and can be understood *in terms of* each other. Mental events are *metonymic*, however, when events in the mind are related to one another in a different way: rather than understanding one event *in terms of* the other, one event comes to *stand for* another event. When one event stands for another event, and so enacts a metonymic mental relationship between the events, this in effect forecloses the possibility of metaphor. As long as one event *stands for* another event, the events cannot be understood *in terms of* one another. Furthermore, since the metaphorical structure of the mind permits us to understand the past in terms of the present, and vice versa, to understand the present in terms of the past, the metonymic structure of consciousness contrastingly has the present stand for the past, or the past stand for the future.

Let me provide just one example of metonymy from linguistics: If you are ordering off a menu, you might ask the waiter which *dish* he recommends. You would think him quite dim if he replied, “I recommend the Villeroy and Bosh French Garden dinnerware,” because of course you were referring to the food that would be delivered *on* the dishes and not the dishes themselves. But you would not be remiss in your perfectly acceptable use of metonymy: when you used the word *dish*, which is only one aspect of your meal, you are in fact using a conventional metonym as a reference to the entire meal and all of its associated qualities. However, if you were to

see an attractive person at the table next to you, and if you shared with your friend that you find the person to be “quite a dish,” you would be using a different kind of figure: this time, metaphor permits you to appreciate the delicious beauty of your object of admiration *in terms of* a tasty meal. This is quite different than the example of metonymy, in which the dish *stands for* the meal as a whole. In a similar way, consciousness acts by understanding things in terms of other things, including understanding itself in terms of the things we encounter in the world.

When we grasp this idea that the basic structure of consciousness is metaphorical or metonymic, we can formulate new ways to understand how defense mechanisms function, and we can also identify new ways to assist clients in bypassing those defense mechanisms. Specifically, the resolution of a defense in psychoanalysis can be seen to involve “a transformation of a metonymic ‘stands for’ into a metaphoric ‘in terms of’ relationship between defense and defended parts of mentation” (Borbely, 2004, p. 96).

According to Antal Bortleby’s theory, trauma can have the effect of taking events typically registered in a metaphorical way—where two domains are related—and so reduce them into a single domain that has a metonymic structure that serves as a neurotic defense against the past memory of the trauma. When metonymy serves an access-barring function by concealing the source of traumatic anxiety, the result is a neurotic defense. Resolution of the neurotic defense requires that the analysand transform the access-barring metonym into an access-granting metonym, and the access-granting metonym permits conscious awareness of the anxiety-producing event. Recovery of this event permits a re-metaphorization of the event, and thereby allows the analysand mental flexibility in the creative reorganization of the psyche post-trauma. Through this creative reorganization, the traumatic event can be more deeply understood in terms of related experiences.

Let’s take the example of transference, a classic ego defense mechanism. A psychotherapy client—let’s call him Bill—has become resistant to therapy; he arrives late, seems to make great efforts to contradict the therapist, and in general shows evidence of having interpreted the therapist as an authority figure toward which he must rebel. Bill’s family history might reveal a father figure who was authoritarian—a man whose power Bill resisted as a means to discover some sense of autonomy. As a male authority figure, the therapist seems to possess all those qualities he resisted in his father, and through his relationship with the therapist, Bill is reliving all those old

feelings and frustrations that he felt in his struggles for independence as a child and adolescent.

Bill's transference with his therapist has the structure of both metonymy and metaphor, as previously discussed. The transference has a metonymic structure because the therapist "stands for" Bill's father. When Bill becomes aware of this metonymic structure—say, for example, through a well-timed interpretation by the therapist—he may become able to understand and emotionally accept that the therapist is not in fact his father, but has merely stood in for him. Coming to terms with this metonymic structure in his relationship with his father and therapist, Bill would be better prepared to have a metaphorical insight by which he can understand the therapist and his father *in terms of* other kinds of relationships. This re-metaphorization of his past relationship with his father through his current relationship with his therapist may provide Bill with new creative powers to re-imagine his relationship to authority figures in better, more adaptive ways—potentially liberating him from the painful repetition of his failed relationship with his father in every subsequent relationship with authority figures.

According to Borbely (2004), the metaphorical potential or metaphoricity of an experience refers to the optimal vagueness of an experience with respect to its present, past and future meaning—a necessary vagueness or openness that "allows future and past chains of experiences to be meaningfully conveyed to each other" (p. 101). When experiences lack this metaphoricity, they cannot be integrated because they cannot be lived in terms of other experiences. Trauma leads to the dissolution of metaphoricity, because it "leads to rigidly accepting an experience's comprehension as conclusively valid for all contexts and times, rather than flexibly entertaining its comprehension as hypothetical regarding content and context, as provisional regarding time, and thus as not belonging to finite state phenomena" (p. 101). In this state of mind, a person latches onto a specific, concrete meaning for the experience that is ambiguous and inflexible as a means to defend against anxiety and a fear of psychic disintegration. It is this certainty in an event's concreteness that creates the conditions for the type of access-barring metonymic structure in which neurotic defenses flourish. And in the face of this rigidity, the meaning takes on a compulsive character which severs the client from the kind of self-reflection that would afford him new insights, because the client's capacity for playful cognitive activity and metaphorical connections has been vastly diminished.

*Metaphorics and Metabletics*

Now we are in a much better position to appreciate the role of metaphoricity in Romanyshyn's approach to Van den Berg's metabletics. Essentially, Romanyshyn is identifying within the method of metabletics a process that is analogous to Borbely's description of remetaphorization in psychoanalytic dissolution of defense mechanisms. However, whereas Borbely is describing a process of remetaphorization as it unfolds in individual psychodynamic psychotherapy, metabletics performs this same kind of remetaphorization at the cultural-historical level of analysis.

The phenomenological method of metabletics is a matter of appreciating the intentional structure of consciousness and its relation to the phenomenal world. Consequently, how a world comes to appear in a particular historical age is a reflection of changes in the reality of the people of that age. And vice versa, change in the reality of the people in a particular age is a reflection of a mutable, dynamic world. If we want to understand a cultural-historical people, we must look at how the psychological structure of those people is visibly reflected or mirrored in the artifacts of those people: for example, the infrastructure and architecture of the cities and towns, the paintings and sculptures of that time period, the economic realities of those people, the structure of the family and the community, and the religious rituals and traditions that flow from the cosmological beliefs of the period in question.

As Romanyshyn (2001, 1985) has argued, the *principle of mutability* in metabletic phenomenology is the principle which most clearly reveals the metaphorical nature of the method. According to Romanyshyn (1985), "the principle of mutability implies that reality is metaphorical in character, because a metaphor, like this principle, affirms a paradox of sameness and difference by proclaiming a reality which is and is not what it is" (p. 101). Put differently, we can say that metabletics is metaphorical because its method requires the researcher to understand one historical events *in terms of* other historical events – to understand the historical event both *in terms of* other events that occurred at the same point in history and also to explore these events, and their interrelated meanings, whether through contrast or anticipation, *in terms of* events in our present historical world.

For example, we can turn to an example referenced in the work of Van den Berg and Romanyshyn: William Harvey's exclamation that the heart is a pump, which appears in his 1628 manuscript, *An Anatomical Disquisition*

*on the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals*, which was inked in the Latin word. In fact, however, Harvey's perceptual shift, by which he first understood the heart to function as a pump, had actually occurred twelve years earlier, in 1616. And he did not permit English translation of the manuscript until 1653—25 years after publication of the volume in Latin! Why did Harvey wait so long to publish the English translation of the results of his study on the heart? To understand the larger, socio-historical context of Harvey's discovery, we must understand his discovery of the pumping function of the heart *in terms of* his relationship with the monarchy.

In 1630, just two years following the publication of his work on the heart, Harvey was named "Physician in Ordinary" to Charles I, the very same king to whom Harvey's book was dedicated. In Post-Reformation England, Charles I was attempting to unify a divided kingdom, split along religious lines in the Anglican Church between the Protestants and those who sought independence of religious affiliation. The imposition of his policies toward unity only served to stir up further rebellion and set into motion the English Civil War. In 1649, Charles I was beheaded.

So, what happens when we attempt to understand Harvey's discovery in terms of Charles I's reign as king? To appreciate the thematic connection, we need only be reminded that, at the time of Charles I, a common metaphor for the King was the heart: as a heart is the governing center of the body, so the king was thought to be the governing center of his Kingdom. Now, then, we are in a better position to appreciate Harvey's reluctance to publish his discovery as well as the long duration between the publication of his manuscript in Latin and its translation into English: Harvey's manuscript, ironically dedicated to the King, was effectively saying that the heart can no longer maintain its previous status as a governing organ of the body; on the contrary, the heart serves the body merely as a lowly, subservient pump. When understood metaphorically in terms of this event's relationship to the King and the encroaching civil war, Harvey's manuscript was also saying, metaphorically speaking, that the King was no longer the governing body at the center of the Kingdom. Monarchy and the pumping heart belong together in metaphorical relation. This metaphorical connection is lost as long as the statement, "the heart is a pump," is understood only metonymically as a part of the total picture of an emerging medical knowledge-base and technology. But when understood in terms of one another, the heart and the king in Harvey's world of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, reveal something about



this time in history, and calls us to reflect on how the shifting metaphoric relations in our world is analogously unfolding into new meanings and connections that could never be predicted in advance, even if understood in great depth at some later date.

To understand events in this metaphorical way—as a recovery of metaphoricity—is a way to re-imagine history within the internal structure of that worldview, hopefully with little or minimal imposition of modern preconceptions onto the reality of a prior world. Understanding a prior age with such great depth, we cannot help but throw our own age into relief by comparison, and so come to deeper insights into the metaphorical structure of our own culture, as well as potential metaphorical approaches to resolving historical crises—all those many cultural traumas which, however much we hope to avoid it, otherwise have a tendency to ossify into rigid categories that offer little insight nor creativity for resolving identified problems within the culture and amongst individuals operating within that culture. This is the task of cultural therapeutics.

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