

## *Response*

to Dr Jadran Mimica

*Womb = Tomb = House = Body*

*Yagwoia Experience of Blissful Self-dissolution*

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When thinking about how I might respond to Dr Mimica's evocative offering to us, I found myself comparing his descriptions to those of an infant observation. Both, I think, could be seen as aiming to represent detailed, respectful observations of actual people in their lives and experiences. And, certainly, Dr Mimica's descriptions, as we have just heard, are exquisite and thought provoking.

Like a report of an infant observation, this account of the Yagwoia takes us beyond the particular experience of 'the other' and invites us to use these observations to help us to think about ourselves and the intricate states of mind we encounter in our own inner worlds. This requires, I think, that we relate this direct and concrete engagement with life and death to a symbolic perspective; one which arises out of, as well as incubates, ego consciousness.

I think it is fair to suggest that Dr Mimica's observations of the Yagwoia experience of blissful self-dissolution could be seen as observations of ouroboric imagery enacted. He did, however, present this account of what we might call a concrete state of mind, complete with a challenge: that is, for us to look for the 'deeper meaning' which is suggested by the Yagwoia preoccupation with a 'blissful Self-extinction into primal generative liquidity'. That is it really, for me at least. We have here an amplification of a 'primal', i.e. foundational,

element in every person's psychological development. There are links here to psychologically primitive or, in other words, psychotic levels of functioning. Mostly, in our Western context, we meet this territory through profound defences which aim to maintain the states of undifferentiated identity, absorption, or fusion, which we have been hearing about.

So, as a contribution to our collective response to this challenge to look for the deeper meaning, I would say we could view this material as a representation of an ordinary state of mind. A state of mind which, in fact, is not so far away from, at the very least, aspects of our own experience of ourselves. I would also say that Dr Mimica has given us a wonderful amplification of at least one of the antecedents (as Rosemary Gordon refers to them in *Dying and Creating*, p. 113) of a symbolic function. This is a function vital for the development of ego consciousness; for the living of a creative life, and we all inexorably strive to develop, engage and employ it. It may at first appear paradoxical, but this paper, which seems so much an explication of a passionate but concrete and undifferentiated engagement with one's Self and the world, leads us to think about the development of a meaning-engendering, symbolic attitude: what Jung referred to as the transcendent function.

Just briefly, I want to note two ideas which I hope will contribute to your engagement with this material. The first, which is sequentially related to the image of the ouroboros, is the notion of symbolic equation. The second is a belief really, i.e., that we all need to foster a direct and conscious relationship between life and death if we are to develop a symbolic capacity and a life-engendering, life-engaging creativity. It is through this creativity I believe, that we are able to find meaning in the world and our experience within it. I will end this response with a question for Dr Mimica about the role of aggression in the development of a symbolic capacity.

I was not at first conscious of it, but Dr Mimica actually primed the association to symbolic equation with his title, which begins, literally: Womb =

Tomb = House = Body etc. As we've heard, he uses the notion of ouroboric self-containment to account for and describe the archetypal driving forces functioning in the evolution of the Yagwoia self-conception, their relationships and mode of existence in their world. The ouroboros is an image, I would say, which describes an ideal; an ideal, which for the Yagwoia, is rendered into, and lived as a concrete state of being. It is actualised in an 'all-devouring death and bodily self-dissolution' which blissfully transcends death when the liquefied individual is incorporated into the Yagwoia societal field. By being taken into the bodies of its peoples, the individual member is being (blissfully) preserved. With this state of being, there is little drive towards what Neumann (1988, p. 181) calls the separation of the world parents, a process which is a prelude to the development of ego consciousness and a symbolic capacity which is necessary to make use of this consciousness.

As Samuels (1986, p. 158) reminds us, ouroboric self-contentment is a pre-separation, primal state, where love and aggression or life instinct and death instinct are not differentiated; there is no distinction between the feeder and the fed, between self and other, between inside and out, between conscious and unconscious. It is a primary world dominated by sensations and sensory experiences. It is, as Dr Mimica clearly articulates through his engagement with QANG's experience, a world of dialectical unity. A 'unity of the container and the contained whose irreducible prototype for the Yagwoia is the foetus inside the mother's womb'. Psychologically speaking, once born, the objective in this system is to be re-absorbed back into unconsciousness, experienced as the womb or house.

The ouroboric state of mind is often associated with early infancy, partly because it predominates at that stage of life, and partly because early infancy is such an accessible image to represent beginnings. If the development of ego consciousness is to become an objective that is engaged, the primary unity represented by the ouroboros needs to be broken down and rendered into flesh and blood experience.

This necessity leads us to the realm of symbolic equation, the next 'phase' in the development of a symbolic function. Fordham's notion of de-integration, and Neumann's (1973) 'polarisation and separation of the world parents', both describe the psychological necessities which foster a differentiation out of a primary, ouroboric unconsciousness. Symbolic equation is characterised by a powerful denial of difference, but this very denial indicates that differentiations have already begun to occur. The 'Mother' and 'Father' (and all they represent because they are images, of course) have been separated to some extent. The consequence of a denial of this separation is a state which appears to resemble the dialectical unity which Dr Mimica describes. In the situation of symbolic equation, however, it is the result of two separate objects being thought of as one. There is, however, the beginning of an 'as if' implied. The existence and characteristics of one object are *felt* to be subsumed into the other and are *treated* as such.

To illustrate, there is the famous example, noted by Hannah Segal, of a man who had symbolically equated his penis with the neck of his violin to the extent that, when asked why he refused to perform in a concert, he exclaimed he would not masturbate in public. We can extrapolate and say that, although conscious and unconscious, self and other, life and death are defensively equated, it is courtesy of an anxiety about the consequences of an individuation process (i.e. consciousness) that has already been initiated.

The problem becomes, how one relates to these consequences of a developing Self-consciousness. Sensations and experience can no longer be seen as autonomous, and the development of meaning becomes more prominent. So when Dr Mimica uses the equals sign in his title and text, I found myself wondering whether this could be evidence that he was observing an early point in the evolution out of a state of being dominated by ouroboric contentment. I was similarly curious when he described (in endnote 10) that, although the practice of bodily contact (with a corpse) and smearing with the corpse fluids - particularly of young nubile women and children - continues

into the present, smoking corpses and scooping up the dripping fluids has now been abandoned. I would be very interested to hear if he thought that this might be read as indicating that elements of their practices might be being held more symbolically.

Very briefly, the emergence of the symbolic or transcendent function is the next 'phase' of the development I found myself thinking about in response to Dr Mimica's paper. This is an experience characterised by a tolerance of differences but also by an active curiosity about that difference. It is this conscious interest in the divide between oneself and others (or differing aspects of one's world), that fosters an engagement with both what is personal, separate and unique and what is needed for union with others. It would be interesting to think whether the bliss which is available via this symbolic function, can be compared in any way with the bliss Dr Mimica describes QANG feeling when he was imagining his death and absorption into the ideal 'Amerikan-built' house; his 'absorption into a primal cosmic-maternal container'.

Very briefly again, I wanted to relate the living centrality, which the Yagwoia invest in their relationship between life and death, to our own experience. In her evocatively entitled book *Dying and Creating: A Search for Meaning*, Rosemary Gordon takes this up directly. She says:

'...psychological growth, development and the general self-fulfilment of a person seems inconceivable without conscious acknowledgement of the fact of death. In particular the capacity to symbolise – without which all experience is doomed to be without meaning and significance – is likely to remain fallow and undeveloped unless a man lives his life consciously aware of death.'

(p. 4)

Dr Mimica's work challenges us to think about the significance of a consciously held relationship between life and death, and Rosemary Gordon

(formally an anthropologist herself), ensures we recognise that this task is as relevant in the centre of Melbourne, as it is in the highlands of PNG.

I would like to finish with my question to Dr Mimica. At the end of your paper you seem to be saying that the Yagwoia made a very active distinction between the fate of a dead enemy, and that of a dead loved one. Particularly, that liquefaction is essential with a loved one, because it creates the feeling possibility of an ouroboric return to the breast and a life-perpetuating ingestion. Chewing, which is a more aggressive activity, seemed to apply to the bodies of the Yagwoia enemies. From my perspective, this aggression could give rise to the splitting processes which are essential for a movement from an ouroboric state of being to a state of symbolic equation. (It separates the ouroboros into a known and an unknown; a living and a dead; or physical experience and spiritual experience.) I wondered if you thought that the Yagwoia (in their intimate relationships) were in this way 'neutralising' their aggression?

## REFERENCES

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- Neumann, Eric (1973) *The Child: Structure and Dynamics of the Nascent Personality*, Karnac, London
- Samuels, Andrew, et al. (1986) *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis*, Routledge, London