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Thomas Rosbrow Ph.D. ^a

^a San Francisco, CA, USA

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“It All Comes Down to Imagination”: Reply to Commentary

Thomas Rosbrow, Ph.D.
San Francisco, CA

In her generous and full discussion of my paper, Doris Brothers writes about patient’s efforts to restore themselves following trauma and how that runs into walls caused by their “systemically emergent certainties.” She beautifully writes, “Since our capacity to hope depends on being able to tolerate uncertainty we sometimes join our patients in their hopelessness” (p. 231). Brothers emphasizes how Murakami can help us tolerate uncertainty. My emphasis is on how writers like Murakami help us restore our imaginative and empathic capacities. Frozen landscapes, as evoked by Murakami in “UFO in Kushiro,” are depictions of shut-down psychic states. Animated imagery helps to melt the ice, creating living motion in thought and affect. Both Brothers and I are looking at the crucial movement from simplified to complex shared states of mind. We seem at first to differ in our understanding of the function of rage in treatment, though I believe we may be discussing different clinical situations.

I want to thank Doris Brothers for such a generous and close reading and discussion of my paper. Our affinity and excitement for Murakami’s writing and its resonance with our clinical work indeed makes us a pair, and I feel honored by her feeling our kinship and shared sensibility. I’ve learned from her writing since reading *The Shattered Self* (Ulman & Brothers 1988)—one of the very first books in the wave of relational writing on trauma that has so enriched and revitalized psychoanalysis. In this discussion she applies her current conceptualizing about trauma (Brothers, 2007a) and elaborates these themes in Murakami’s oeuvre.

Brothers highlights an essential motif in Murakami’s writing : “Or lives are complexly embedded in overlapping relational systems including the societal and the global. . . . Catastrophic world events powerfully affect the lives of his characters and seem at once to reflect and amplify their experiences and to alter them” (p. 232). The existential interconnectedness that occurs in his stories often operates enigmatically and evocatively. For example, in “UFO in Kushiro” Komura is startled after the fact by how the women greet him familiarly at the airport without having met him. In other stories, characters often live oddly parallel lives without knowing each other. Part of the charm and warmth of his stories is that these connections suggest the ubiquity of underlying bonds and mutual influence among seemingly separate and unrelated individuals. Different from many modernist and postmodernist writers, Murakami tackles alienation and loneliness but affirms a wider humanity that embraces disparate individuals and cultures.

Though we agree in the many ways Brothers describes, I want to play with subtle differences that strike me reading Brothers' discussion. I don't see these as disagreements between us, but as expressing the ways the same phenomena can be, and are inevitably, read from multiple points of view and emphases. Looking at these shades of difference will hopefully clarify some key areas in Murakami's work and in thinking about the psychoanalytic treatment of trauma.

IMAGINATION AND UNCERTAINTY

For example, the surreal or hyperreal qualities of Murakami's writing are janus-like; they point in two directions. They can be clearly read as manifestations of traumatic states—as Brothers does at times in her discussion where she highlights the oddness and dissociative aspects of his imagery and strange narratives. My intention in the paper was to highlight the creative and transformative process in which he takes traumatic experience and then symbolizes and plays with it. This playful metamorphosis occurs in the structure of the stories, in the rich, at times bizarre images (the mysterious box, the UFO), and in the relationships that evolve within the stories. When Murakami, through the character Oshina, says, "Our responsibility begins with power to imagine," he is referring to how he envisions the author's task as using imagination to offer complex stories that transform both the ordinary loneliness and extraordinary trauma of human life.

I want to emphasize how imagination is a crucial element of all creative work, including the analyst's empathy and capacity to picture her patient's inner world (Margulies, 1989). For me, the way Murakami plays with reality in his fiction, restores my capacity for play and fantasy when I feel depleted. Just as impasse is an ever-present shadow in many treatments, so depletion and burnout (or fear of burnout) are dangers for the analyst in these situations. Coincidentally, Brothers' chapter on burnout in her last book addresses this topic in an admirably frank and clear way (Brothers, 2007b).

In her discussion of my paper, Brothers talks about patient's efforts to restore themselves following trauma, and how that runs into walls caused by their "systemically emergent certainties" (p. 230). She beautifully writes, "Since our capacity to hope depends on being able to tolerate uncertainty we sometimes join our patients in their hopelessness" (p. 231). Brothers emphasizes how Murakami can help us tolerate uncertainty. My emphasis is on how writers like Murakami help us restore our imaginative and empathic capacities. Frozen landscapes, as evoked by Murakami in UFO in Kushiro, are depictions of shut-down psychic states. Animated imagery helps to melt the ice, creating living motion in thought and affect. Both Brothers and I are looking at the crucial movement from simplified to complex shared states of mind.

As analysts we each have our own stress points, or areas of primary vulnerability (Elkind, 1992). It strikes me that in what we've written mine are more around depletion while Brothers are more around uncertainty. This comes out in the slightly different emphases we have in our closely connected readings of Murakami and reflections on impasse.

WAKING DREAMS

Brothers writes that Rosbrow "puts his finger on the way Murakami renders the dissociated world of the trauma exile when he says his fiction has the quality of "waking dreams" (p. 230). Living in

a waking dream is very much the way some traumatized people might characterize the haunted, uncanny, surreal quality of dissociated experience.” This is one place where I think we are talking about different phenomena. Brothers is referring to the often surreal quality of dissociative experience, which can seem bizarre and hyperreal at the same time. The person feels she is in a nightmare from which she can’t awaken. From her vast experience studying human trauma, Brothers elucidates a significant, recurrent phenomenological state.

What I was referring to around “waking dreams” is Murakami’s self-description as a waking dreamer, a key aspect of his creative process. He awakens in the middle of the night, and writes in a dreamlike state, where his stories come to life and develop spontaneously and unexpectedly. This unfolding of unconscious imagination—where images move, transform, and animate—is quite the opposite of a dissociative process, which is narrow and static. One thing I wanted to express in this paper is that very contrast and polarity between the static traumatic self-state and the generative creative self-state. This is just exactly where the creative writer becomes my supervisor and muse and inspiration; my antidote to burnout and depletion.

MISSING, LOSING, RAGE, AND HEALING

Brothers and I totally meet in our understanding of the centrality of missing and losing in Murakami’s oeuvre. She picks up on the key image of Komura’s being called a “chunk of air” by his wife in her farewell letter. She conjectures about the effect on his wife of his being missing emotionally. She also can see the effect on Komura of his wife’s note, it becoming a trauma-generated certitude for him that he was nothing more than that, a zero. This then leads to his rage at Shimao for joking that the mysterious box contained what was missing in him. Where we then diverge, from Brothers point of view, is in our understanding of his rage, and its softening in the interaction between Shimao and Komura, the conclusion of the story.

I get to this divergence shortly, but first want to talk about the theme of missing, and the poignant and apt passage from Brothers’ patient. Her patient writes of the deceased father she cannot remember, “Missing is not a lack, it is what I have . . . I’m a pencil shaving of him . . . I try to belong to him: I am colorless” (p. 232). Her patient with poetic precision captures the horrible feelings of connection and identification with someone long gone, mixed with the hurt and emptiness of being left. Holding onto an absence, the person’s very identity is a paradox: substantial, self-defining, and nonexistent. Similar qualities come through in Komura’s branding as a “chunk of air,” and he in turn is then left abruptly and cryptically.

Brothers describes the patient’s anger at her when the patient experiences her analyst’s unavailability or misunderstandings. At these times, the patient’s anger results in withdrawal and isolation. “She hardly comes alive at these times” (p. 232). Through renewed attunement there is a healing and reconnection between them. Brothers uses this as an example to illustrate her earlier comment that

when I have evoked rage in trauma patients, it is because I have inadvertently recreated situations that are all too reminiscent of the traumatic experiences for which they sought my help my help. Often I have done so when I felt that traumatic experiences in my own life threaten to recur. . . In my view, it is not the blasting effect of having their fears of retraumatization evoked that our patients experience as healing, but the efforts we make to restore trust in the aftermath of such disruptions that diminishes their need for dissociation. (p. 232)

She presents these thoughts as a counterpoint to my interpretation of the sequence of Shimao's joking about the what is missing in Komura's being in the box, followed by Komura's murderous rage, Shimao's sweet and immediate apology, and finally Komura's sense of deep relaxation and peace, a long lost feeling which ends the story. Where I see the mutative potential of mutually enacted rage followed by rapprochement, Brothers finds the mutative moment to be in the analyst's understanding following an inadvertent, unfortunate break in empathic contact, often due to the analyst's blocks. There may be some confusion in our discussion, since Brothers is making a general statement about her work with trauma patients while I was using the episode between Komura and Shimao, the conclusion of the story, to understand the working of the story on myself, as reader, and the relevance I find by analogy to clinical work with trauma.

Looking back at my paper with the benefit of Brothers' reactions, I can clarify that I see in Komura's rage at Shimao and his subsequent relaxation and reconnection with himself parallels to clinical work between myself and *some* patients who are working through trauma. I agree with Brothers that for certain patients, like the one who she quotes, rage can be unproductive, deadening, and largely elicited by the analyst's blindspots, insensitivities, or provocations. Trying to elicit rage from them can be iatrogenic and treatment destructive. These patients can undergo serious trauma yet be able to work in treatment creatively and productively with a strong alliance, and without the need to work through negative, rageful transferences.

But there are other patients who, in contrast, carry barely buried rage and feel shame and guilt about being chronically angry and being difficult for others to tolerate. In these situations, I've found that the rage is aching to be expressed and yet the person is stifled from directly expressing itself. Enactments, often triggered by my inadvertent clumsiness or provocativeness, allow a necessary, direct expression and working through of rage and reparation (Klein & Riviere, 1964), disruption and repair (Beebe & Lachman, 2005). These interactions serve as creative repetitions (Loewald, 1980) of past trauma, which allow for new beginnings for analyst and patient.

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CONTRIBUTOR

Thomas Rosbrow is a Training and Supervising Analyst and Faculty at the Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California and the Institute for Contemporary Psychoanalysis. He practices in San Francisco, CA.