

Kissing Georg Groddeck: A Narrative Tribute.



Rachel Newcombe, C.S.W.

Kissing Georg Groddeck

Reading The Wild Analyst, your biography
holding you tight in my hands
frequently placing a finger in between pages
so I could turn to the cover
and look into your eyes
at a gaze of intensity and sadness
of a man who has trust in himself.

You, wild in the best sense,
with your artistry and deep passion
curing the incurables
joining together mental life and organic disease
helping the soul to unfreeze.

What kind of man knows
so tenderly well
the mysterious forces that guide us. . .
it is the kind of man who serves his patients
with his own unconscious.

So,
on the last page
with my heart so full,
rapt by your brilliance
I slowly closed the book
and ever so gently kissed you on the lips.
For me,
you are
It.

INTRODUCTION

In every psychoanalytic written narrative, there is at least one great analyst, a muse, whom we carry along as we write. For me, this person is Georg Groddeck. My hunch is, if he were alive today, he would probably rejoice that there has been a (r)evolution that encourages and celebrates the personal narrative in medicine. After all, Groddeck's (1923/1961) *The Book of the It* (original German title: *Das Buch vom Es*), is a quintessential narrative that creatively combines psychosomatic medicine and psychoanalysis.

In the introduction to *The Book of the It*, Ashley Montagu (1923-1961) describes Groddeck as a thinker who "invites neither belief or disbelief, but active inquiry" (p. x). Courageously following his own experience in all of his interactions with patients and colleagues, Groddeck quietly (and, at times, provocatively) implored them to do the same. I have always wondered: Do we find our psychoanalytic role models or do our role models find us? After pondering this question for many years, I have come to the satisfying conclusion that it is the "It" who guides us where we need to go.

THE TRAIL TO GRODDECK

I don't know if I would have ever discovered the work of Groddeck if I hadn't psychoanalytically lost my way. Groddeck would probably say I was never really lost but was being carried along by the It, whose mysterious forces had its own plan for me. For him, "It" is "life's unknown ruler." In his book, *The Unknown Self*, Groddeck (1951- 1989b) asks: "Is there an 'I'?" (p.35). In posing this question, Groddeck began to examine what, in fact, people meant when they referred to themselves as an "I":

Everyone has the feeling of being an "I," but this is no proof of its existence. If this word which contains the idea of separation, of individual existence, is to accord with this implied idea, then there must be limits to the "I," a beginning in space and time. But if we search, we look in vain for either. At what point is the life of man to begin? (p.35)

In searching for an answer to his own question, Groddeck believed that life begins at fertilization. Because at this point a human is neither man nor woman, he selected the gender-free pronoun "It" to describe what might never be articulable: the experience before time and space. Groddeck believed that an "I" is an invention of man and that in challenging the existence of an "I," we could begin to understand the territories of life that are scientifically indescribable. Having studied both philosophy and literature before being trained in medicine, Groddeck believed that medicine paid much more attention to "'bread-and-butter' questions than to the investigations of the foundations of life" (p.45).

In psychoanalytic history, the details of the relationship between Groddeck and Freud, and Groddeck's "It" and Freud's "Id," are often misunderstood and politically debated. In brief, Groddeck emphatically made the distinction that his concept of "It" was not to be confused with Freud's conception of the unconscious. As Groddeck put it:

The It and the Unconscious, I repeat, are two completely different conceptions; the Unconscious is part of the psyche, the psyche part of the It. The It is man himself in all manifestations of life, and as such it is inaccessible to psycho-analysis as it is to all other methods of investigation; but there are ways to approach which lead one near to the It, and the best of these ways, the one which comes closest to its goal, is psycho-analysis. (p.43).

THE CALL OF THE WILD ANALYST

I cannot pinpoint the first time I heard reference to Groddeck and the term "wild analyst," but having been labeled a "wild child," myself, I was curious to learn about a physician who may have shared a similar characterological heritage. The preface to *The Wild Analyst* (Grossman & Grossman, 1965) begins:

'I am a wild analyst.' Thus did Georg Groddeck introduce himself in 1920 to the Psychoanalytic Congress at The Hague. And then he proceeded to speak, in an informal, unorganized, discursive demonstration of the process of free association. He made few friends that day, and several enemies. (p.13) As the authors

proceed to say, “nobody who knew him in his life was indifferent to him. Nor can anyone be who encounters his work today” (p. 14). After reading this sentence I was captivated and wanted to learn all I could about Groddeck, a man who was able to enthrall and frighten so many people.

In 1926, in honor of Groddeck’s sixtieth birthday, Ernest Simmel, a psychoanalyst from Berlin, gave a lecture in which he thanked Groddeck for his many contributions to the psychoanalytic movement. Simmel made a plea to the members of the International Psychoanalytic Society to re-contextualize Groddeck’s infamous pronouncement: “I am a wild analyst.” In contrast to Groddeck’s harsh critics, Simmel (1926-1989) did not disparage the label “wild analyst”; instead, he provided a different definition of “wild”:

Groddeck may be permitted to style himself “wild” -- in relation to the movement of which he is a supporter -- in the sense that he owes his training to no one but himself. He may also be termed “wild” in virtue of his passionate temperament, which impels him to action where others throw up a case as hopeless or disguise their real helplessness under the cover of “accurate diagnosis.” (p.7)

Simmel, in his heart-felt tribute, praised Groddeck for being a man who “gives an example in himself of what he demands from others -- a special mode of employing his humanity in medicine” (p.12). Imbedded in all of Groddeck’s (1949-1989a) work is a plainly honest, yet complex, theme: “the free are those who have faith in themselves, since they do not burke responsibility” (p. 12).

GRODDECK’S CONTRIBUTION TO NARRATIVE MEDICINE AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

I put forth that a conference on “Narrative Medicine and Psychoanalysis” should find a way, as Simmel did in 1926, to give tribute to Groddeck; for, in writing *The Book of the It*, he created the template for blending psychoanalytic written narrative and organic disease. Rudnytsky (2002) describes *The Book of the It* as “arguably the greatest masterpiece of psychoanalytic literature” (p.163). Groddeck’s ambition in writing this book was to explain psychoanalytic “concepts in terms of personal experience drawing on events from his own life, stories told him by patients, and the experiences of his imaginary correspondences” (Grossman & Grossman, 1965, p. 106).

Groddeck structured his book as a series of letters written between a fictitious doctor, “Patrik Troll,” in answer to a lady friend (we do not know her name) who wanted to learn about psychoanalysis. In full psychoanalytic foresight, Groddeck does not include the lady friend’s letters to Troll; we only read Troll’s responses. Rudnytsky (2002) believes that “*The Book of the It* is a work of self-analysis in which the lady friend serves as a stand-in for the analyst”(p.164-165). The book begins with the following paragraph:

So, my dear, you want me to write to you, and it is to be nothing personal or gossipy. I am not to make fine phrases but to be serious, instructive, and as far as possible, scientific. That’s tiresome! For what has my humble self to do with science? The small amount one needs as a practicing physician I cannot well display to you, or you would see the holes in the gown with which, as qualified physicians, we are officially endowed. Perhaps, however, I shall meet your wishes if I tell you why I became a doctor, and how I was led to reject the claims of science. (p.11).

When Groddeck/Troll suggests that his lady friend could learn more about his ideas if he tells her why he became a doctor, we get the first glimpse that the epistolary form of this book divulges Groddeck’s perspicacious personality. Although the book is undeniably original, Grossman & Grossman (1965) provide a detailed account of the psychic pain that Groddeck suffered in the writing of this book. The pure joy and enthusiasm that propelled Groddeck’s writing at the start of his project soon gave way to grief when he began sending portions of the book to Freud for commentary. Grossman & Grossman(1965) suggest:

When Groddeck/Troll suggests that his lady friend could learn more about his ideas if he tells her why he became a doctor, we get the first glimpse that the epistolary form of this book divulges Groddeck’s perspicacious personality. Although the book is undeniably original, Grossman & Grossman (1965) provide a detailed account of the psychic pain that Groddeck suffered in the writing of this book. The pure joy and enthusiasm that propelled Groddeck’s writing at the start of his project soon gave way to grief when he began sending portions of the book to Freud for commentary. Grossman & Grossman(1965) suggest:

The loss of enthusiasm was the price Groddeck paid for Freud's approval. The letters were no longer entirely his own, but partly Freud's. The price was not too high for him, but having paid it, he wanted approval as his due. (p. 118).

At one point toward the end of the book, in letter 23, Groddeck is able to poke fun at himself when he cleverly describes a patient who had contempt for Patrik Troll. Groddeck/Troll(1923-1961) writes to his lady friend:

Contempt for my person is to be found here, since the patient had been reading, a short while before, a book I had given him, *Der Seelensucher*, by our familiar friend Groddeck. (p. 241).

Der Seelensucher (1921) was Groddeck's "first literary work to be written with the express purpose of promoting Freudian ideas"(Rudnytsky, 2002, p. 174). Groddeck wanted to write an allegorical novel in which the protagonist would personify the unconscious. This book was received with great criticism from the psychoanalytic community, with many psychoanalysts declaring that the book was too bawdy. Both Grossmans point out that Groddeck was disappointed that Freud and Rank tamed some of his most creative letters in the editing process. Despite the edits, Groddeck's childlike wonder was not lost in his written narrative - his *It* was irrepressible.

CONCLUSION

It has been over eighty years since *The Book of the It* was first published. In many ways it is still unsurpassed in originality. However, during the past two decades, there are signs that psychoanalytic writing has begun to redefine itself. Journals from just about every orientation -for example: *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, *Fort da*, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* and *The Psychoanalytic Review*- are including psychoanalytic narrative as a valuable form of scholarship.

Psychoanalytic written narrative requires the reader to suspend expectation and follow along as the writing unfolds. Although reading this way can be anxiety provoking, it is the ability to tolerate and live through anxiety that has the potential to allow new experience to emerge. This style of writing is best evidenced in Groddeck's *The Book of the It*, an example of a psychoanalytic narrative that is timeless. Groddeck tells a tale that enables readers to have a playful experience with psychoanalytic concepts. Transference, countertransference, regression, primary process - they're all there, woven together in a literary masterpiece. One cannot help but have an active inquiry when reading his work.

As this tribute comes to a close, I will conclude with a quote from Groddeck's (1951) *The World of Man*. Toward the end of his life, many colleagues and admirers asked Groddeck to form a society that would promote his ideas. To this request, he would laugh and reply:

Disciples like their master to stay put, whereas I should think anyone a fool who wanted me to say the same thing tomorrow as I said yesterday. If you really want to be my follower, look at life for yourself and tell the world honestly what you see. (1951, p. 10). Disciples like their master to stay put, whereas I should think anyone a fool who wanted me to say the same thing tomorrow as I said yesterday. If you really want to be my follower, look at life for yourself and tell the world honestly what you see. (1951, p. 10)

REFERENCES:

- Fortune, C. (Ed.) (2002).** Ferenczi-Groddeck correspondence 1921-1923. (N. Ruebsaat, E. Petersdorf, & J. Cohen, Trans.). New York: Other Press.
- Groddeck, G. (1921).** *Der seelensucher* [The seeker of souls]. Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag.
- Groddeck, G.(1951).** *The world of man*. (V.M.E. Collins, Trans.). London: Funk & Wagnall's.
- Groddeck, G.(1961).** *The book of the It* [Da buch vom Es]. New York: Mentor Books, The New American Library of World Literature, Inc. (Original work published 1923)
- Groddeck, G.(1989a).** *Exploring the unconscious*. (V.M.E. Collins, Trans.). London: Vision Press. (Original

work published 1949)

Groddeck, G.(1989b). The unknown self. (V.M.E. Collins, Trans.). London: Vision Press. (Original work published 1951)

Grossman, C. & Grossman, S.(1965). The wild analyst. New York: George Braziller.

Montagu, Ashley. (1961). Introduction. In The book of the It (p. x). New York: Mentor Books, The New American Library of World Literature, Inc. (Original work published 1923)

Rudnytsky, P.L. (2002). Reading psychoanalysis. New York: Cornell University Press.

Simmel, E. (1926/1989). Birthday message. In V.M.E. Collins (Trans.), The unknown self. London: Vision Press.

Rachel Newcombe, C.S.W.

Private Practice, Psychoanalyst and Supervisor

145 West 58th Street, #2J

New York, New York, 10019

rachelnewcombe@nyc.rr.com

Volver a Actualizaciones Georg Groddeck

PÁGINAS DEL PORTAL ALSF-CHILE

<http://www.alsf-chile.org> - <http://www.biopsique.cl> - <http://www.indepsi.cl>

Contacto: alsfchile@alsf-chile.org.