

Where are all the bodies?—Defensive representational strategies in a time of cataclysmic change

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Abstract

In this essay, the author addresses the enormous challenge of coming to terms with our mental representations of the impending catastrophe associated with climate change. From the morality tale of the Biblical Flood, in which those who sinned by overindulging their instinctual pleasure were destroyed by water, to the current global crisis in which the excesses of unchecked industrialization and greed threaten the world “again,” the “slow violence” we are living through is sparsely represented in the analytic situation. The overwhelming nature of the changes we are witnessing, from pollution, mass extinction, and shrinking land mass, to massive social upheaval, victimizes us all.

KEYWORDS

impending catastrophe, psychoanalysis analysis, representation, slow violence

I was going to structure this paper by collating my patients' spontaneous references to the natural world. By doing that, I had hoped to gain access to the unconscious fantasies binding these patients to that world. I was expecting words like “flood,” “fire,” “heat,” “wilting,” and “earthy.” When they appeared, I thought, I would have the chance to connect conscious concerns like, “this is too much” with a less conscious reference to “flood,” say. The aim was to expand on Freud's foundational assertion that first and foremost the ego is a body ego. It seemed to me that we could push that further and, find, in effect that perhaps the body of that body ego is itself, first and foremost, a body attached to the natural world.

My planned project came to naught. The references to the natural world never showed up. Patients in analysis seemed quite able to speak of their minds and bodies without employing the language of nature. Metaphor's reach seemed, in fact, as Ella Freeman Sharpe (1940) had famously observed, to plumb the body and, in effect, to stop right

there. For this particular group of city dwellers, at least, the body seemed to mark a kind of “natural limit” to metaphor’s reach; “nature,” as represented in the outside world, remained “outside” my consulting room.

Then, prompted by the associations of a patient whose beloved grandfather was dying, I thought that perhaps the “royal road” to patients’ representations of the natural world lay in their responses to the threats of illness and death. There, in sickness and mortality, I thought, humans are undeniably attached to a world shared by skunks and oak trees.

But despite its apparent obviousness, there seemed significant limitations to pursuing this tactic. I immediately realized that I need not look for dead grandfathers in order to make contact with the psychic consequences of mortality. In maintaining a reliable frame, analysts essentially bring derivative versions of mortality and of nature—limits and loss, including their expressions in illness and death—into continuous focus. The frame—giving explicit representation to law, loss, and limit—assures the presence of “nature” in the psychoanalytic consulting room. To imagine an abolished frame is to fantasize limitlessness. The manic result offers a solution to natural law no less than it does to cultural law.

Realizing that I already have clinical access to representations of “nature” in the very foundations of the psychoanalytic setup, I inverted the terms of my orienting problem. Instead of looking for explicit markers of how nature is imported into my office, I would export psychoanalysis outside of my office and ask, in effect, what does “nature” look like psychoanalytically—that is, how is nature represented here and now in the outside world?

One day my Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Graff, read the Noah’s ark story aloud to our class. When she came to the part about the floodwaters drying up, she held the book open to the sturdy, gleaming ark surrounded after the flood by the lush green trees and colorful plants, all under the beautiful rainbow in the sky.

The entire class was entranced except for Joel, the boy sitting beside me.

Joel stared at the picture our teacher held up and yelled suddenly.

“WHERE ARE ALL THE BODIES?”

Our teacher looked puzzled and annoyed. She put her book down.

“WHAT BODIES, JOEL?”

“THE BODIES!” he cried. “WHERE ARE ALL THE BODIES OF THE PEOPLE AND THE ANIMALS THAT DIED IN THE FLOOD?” (O’Grady, p. 199, in Nixon)

Joel asks a psychoanalytic question. No dead bodies appear in his graphic version of the story of Noah, the indelibly standard theological/pedagogical representation of our—yes, our—founding moment. The narrative of this punitive cleansing by water yields only survivors—Noah, his wife, sons, and their wives—and, of course, the earth’s entire fauna, all coupled, erotically charged, each pair ready to procreate, to go forth and multiply, and refill the Earth with its original animal abundance.

Where are the dead bodies?, Joel wonders. Where have they gone? How have they been erased? Why have they been erased? What forces have led to their erasure? How can it happen that we readily receive and casually transmit a narrative containing such an enormous gap, this unexplained hole in its center, this massive negative hallucination?

We can think of this cluster of urgent questions as addressed exactly and precisely to us: blessed descendants of rescued survivors. In the Biblical story, our planet’s self-regulating mechanisms are befouled as a consequence of “sin,” that is, of human excess, appetites run amok. The same planetary story of appetites run amok could be told today, absent the ark and absent an overseeing divinity. As Oedipus Rex gives narrative shape to the structure of regulated human desire, so the story of Noah and the flood gives narrative shape to the structure of unregulated human appetite.

Now we might be able to at least partially answer Joel, though with little possibility of satisfying him. Yes, we do know where some of those bodies, then and now, were and are. We have done our best to count them, to represent them, to put them in the picture, to graph the impact and implications of where and how many they are. And, of

course, we have become alert these days to the flashing signs of our own flood—here already or soon to come—our own place in yet another worldwide cleansing, with its melancholy prospect of starting all over.

But Joel's question persists: those bodies, he wants to know, where, really, are they? And what might we even mean when we casually use the word "really" here? How do we distinguish between "really" knowing where those bodies are and almost knowing where they are? Might there be an impenetrable border between the two—when it comes to bodies, that is, between what "is" and what we know, and can represent, of what "is"? Even when we do our best to put those bodies back in the picture, to reassure Joel that we are on the case, what do we actually count when we count them? What do we see when we see the bodies? What do we represent when we represent the bodies?

What happens when we try to imagine the bodies, and more generally, the devastation being brought about by "climate change"? Why, by the way, have we tagged the "slow violence" of this catastrophe with such a benign name? What makes both its accurate naming and its effective and real imagining so difficult?

Perhaps the events and the information we have named "climate change" overloads us, presents us with a problem whose collective particulars are "more than mind can endure," a new kind of primal scene, this one Biblical in both scale and implication—"primal" in that we may be unable to actually assimilate it—Mother Earth being ravaged under our watch. In spite of decades of preparatory exposure to fable, tale, and science, we may remain unprepared for the work this scene demands of us. Our capacity to turn information into narrative—our Alpha function—may, in this case, simply be insufficient. The whole might be too much, might, that is, compel us to break up the scene into assimilable parts, to turn unbearable truth into bearable, atomized, and multiple "truths," each one partial, none quite "true." Just as, from our interior, the drives transmit demands for work; just as cultures, from our social surround, transmit demands for work; so, our increasingly inhospitable planet transmits demands for work—to husband our resources and care for the land—to, in effect, turn ourselves from parochial city dwellers into cosmopolitan farmers.

No one can totally fulfill any of these demands—from the interior, from our cultures, and from the planet. Inhibited, symptomatic, and anxious, we can respond only with partial measures aimed, finally, and, I think, sadly, at maintaining our own equilibrium. Thought of as a form of self-maintenance, the work of disavowing potential planetary demands may, in fact, be functionally equivalent to any other stabilizing effort made by any single climate-conscious citizen. To put it bluntly, the work of denial is not necessarily easier than the work of nondenial.

The demand for work is transmitted via representations. We have no direct access to the sources of demand—be they our bodies, our cultures, or our planet. Access to each is mediated through representations. As psychoanalysts, we neither live nor interpret realities directly. Instead, citizen or analyst, we encounter only representations, and those not even of realities themselves, but rather only of the demands those realities are making upon us. To think psychoanalytically, then, about planetary catastrophe entails thinking not of any direct encounter with catastrophe per se but rather of our encounters with representations of the catastrophe. We represent, and affirm, the catastrophe through a wide range of media: by number and image, by anecdote and narrative, by scientific evidence, and by sensuous experience. But we may also represent the catastrophe by denying it, by relying on our direct experience of nature as stable, by investing in suspicion and doubt, by sequestering information, by cultivating disavowal, by idealizing reality's self-regulating powers, by entrusting a benign super-human caretaker, by deferral, by resignation, by bullying, by exporting, or by any and all the means by which humans have always found our way to bear the unbearable.

Singularly and collectively, just like modes of affirmation, these modes of negation powerfully represent the planetary catastrophe. That is, they function not as a failure of representation but as an assertion of one. Regarding the planetary catastrophe, all pertinent representations—both the affirming and the negating—are the outcome of a "demand on the mind for work." This particular category of demand, though, derives not, as Freud writes of the drive, from mind's connection to body but instead from mind's connection to the planet.

Think back to the iconic founding dream from Chapter 7 of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*: "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" The dreamer's son has just died, his body watched over in candlelight by an old man, while the

father sleeps nearby. In the dream, the son comes to the father and says “Father, do not you see I'm burning?” The father awakes and sees that the candle has fallen on his son's body, slightly burnt now. The dream, Freud infers, satisfied a wish—for a moment, the father's son was again alive. A simple wish—the body had vanished, replaced by a living boy (Freud, 1900, p. 509).

The story of Noah and his ark is structurally identical to the story of Freud's iconic dream. The living boy draws the father's attention to the burning candle; the Biblical tale draws our attention to the receded flood. Candle and flood—they occupy the narrative centers. No bodies in either dream. But when the waking father realizes that his dream is, in fact, a dream, he immediately puts out the fire on the body of his dead son. The dream has done its work—provided the father with a few extra minutes.

We can think of ourselves as living our own Noah story, our Noah dream. Our consciousness seems like the father's, as we, like him, use our representational capacities to simultaneously recognize and undermine the dreadful facts before us, find our way to keep dreaming, maybe just a little longer, and like the father, purchase time and defer the unbearable encounter. This notion—that we are, in effect, simultaneously thinking and dreaming as we try to map our place within the planetary catastrophe—gains traction when we realize that representations, even the sum of all of them, waking and dreaming, mediate between us and reality. They will always leave something out, presenting us, that is, with no more than what we are able to receive. As Freud so drily put it, even secondary process, no matter how assiduous and dedicated it may be, necessarily functions as a “roundabout way of wish-fulfillment” (Freud, 1900, p. 567). We are always wishing. Our capacities for representation are therefore always restricted by the unremitting work of maintaining equilibrium and fulfilling wishes.

When we all look at the same image representing the same catastrophe, that image is doing the work of a dream; the image of catastrophe is never only mine but instead always ours, always pleading: “Father/Mother,” it seems to say, “don't you see we're burning?” Images of planetary catastrophe allow us to, in effect, dream in the first-person plural. These images collate discreet elements into a structured narrative, a narrative always located elsewhere—there, not here—with just enough remove to satisfy our ethical need to know while also satisfying our self-preservative need to endure. Like “hating in the first person plural,” dreaming in the first-person plural aims to transform separate and fragile “I's into a joined and mighty “We.”

Think of us dreamers here, for instance, fragile “persons” all, but, for the moment, joined together into a plurality. That plurality, of course, is part of a much larger one—enlightened reason, and from Freud on, a sense of proper posture and place, of interpretation's power, of self-regulation's virtue. And for the moment, here, all of us, say, are thinking of “our crying planet.” When we do that, when we think of our planet, no matter our individual differences—more or less informed, more or less involved—we basically draw from the same reservoir of information and images. We think together; we, in effect, dream together. We “dream” a planet—its vanishing species, its hurricanes and droughts, its victims, its bleached corals, and its stranded polar bears. The reservoir is huge, filled with number and information and passion. And from that reservoir, we each construct narratives. We each insert ourselves into those narratives. The narratives vary, of course, but we can easily imagine all of them joined into a single colossus. I think this colossus, countless singular narratives all drawing from the same wide range of sources—can usefully be conceptualized as our shared planetary dream.

By way of this dream, we function as a self-regulating first-person plurality: concerned people, decent, suffering and thoughtful, doing what we need, protecting what we can, building a kind of ark together, aware of what is to come, and hoping for the best. This colossal dream simultaneously satisfies and punishes us. It affirms our wishes to be engaged, knowledgeable, and loving. And it also satisfies the energetic demands—the imperious accusations of selfishness and insufficiency, say—that originate in our shared conscience. Noah, *c'est nous*.

And like Noah, we can—and do—easily locate pervasive wickedness among us, or, as the dream might have it, among them/not us. Here, for instance, is a manifestly wicked remark from Lawrence Summers—former president of Harvard, treasury secretary of the United States—perhaps one of us, perhaps not:

I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that ... I've always thought that countries in Africa are vastly under-polluted, their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles ... Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries? (Lawrence Summers, confidential World Bank memo, December 12, 1991, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon)

What links Summers' remark to Biblical wickedness, and perhaps even to wickedness in general, is not the logic of its reasoning—number and equivalence, fairness and justice—but instead the logic of its mapping. Its visceral and violent impact comes when we hear of “dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country” and the “migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries.” The wicked move in Summers' remark, then, is a mapping move, an act of division, here to there, Most Developed to Least Developed, us to them. Summers is mapping reality by organizing it hierarchically. He is reimagining the planet, transforming what might be represented as a single unified sphere into, instead, a sectioned vertical line, he and “us” on top, they and them, near the “shithole,” on the bottom.

We immediately recognize this mapping strategy, here applied to the planet. The identical strategy defines and generates all hatreds organized in the first-person plural voice: racism, homophobia, misogyny. Noah's flood, like ours, puts the lie to this mapping strategy and names the “wickedness” that generates it. The rising waters remind us of the arbitrary and contingent status of all of our boundaries. If we then can find a way to draw our own counter-map, spherical and unitary, we will be mapping the planet and all the humans who live on it. Then we can answer Joel: “Here we are, Joel. We are the bodies you're looking for. We are them.” That is when the map works, when, in fact, “we are them.”

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