

## REFLECTIONS

*Editor's Note:* *Reflections* is a new column in which leaders in the field of arts and psychotherapy can express their visions of the aesthetic process from a more philosophical and personal perspective. We are pleased to inaugurate this column with an article by Dr. Jules H. Masserman, a long-time friend and practitioner of the arts in psychotherapy.

### POETRY AS MUSIC\*

JULES H. MASSERMAN, MD†

The title of this address is admittedly tautologic since poetry *is* music. No one can read a poem "silently" without it being accompanied by an internal song. No one can recite a poem in a monotone; inevitably, there will be rhythmic pauses, vocal inflections and interline harmonies as in music. In effect, it is literally impossible not to vary pitch or rhythm while reading or speaking even as simple a quatrain as one from Longfellow's *Psalm of Life*:

Lives of great men all remind us  
We may make our lives sublime  
And departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time

Some time ago, in a whimsical Presidential Address to the American Group Psychotherapy Association, I demonstrated that the words of a children's chant, a school song, a love lyric, a military march or a religious orison could hardly be spoken without an immediate association to its musical setting, which I then played on a borrowed and broken viola.

Consider only the following examples: Can their words be dissociated from their opening musical motifs?

[Pizzacatto on a violin]

"The Farmer in the Dell"  
"Home Sweet Home"  
"Anniversary Waltz"  
"World War II March"  
"O Come All You Faithful"

\*Plenary Address to the National Association for Poetry Therapy

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### POETRY AND MUSIC AS THERAPY

But what has all this to do with our mission in life as therapists? I have elsewhere proposed that poetry and music indissolubly serve (and the Greek word for service is *therapeien*) what I have termed the three fundamental and universal "Ur-" needs of all mankind. In briefest statement, these are:

*Ur I (Physical):* For virility, longevity and skills to master our environment, necessarily supplemented by

*Ur II (Social):* For friendly interpersonal alliances that enhance social securities, and finally

*Urr III (Existential):* For transcendent esthetic and spiritual experiences.

Perhaps in too hurried a kaleidoscopic blur, let me here review how poetry and music may be used therapeutically in all three essential parameters of life.

*First, Physical:* Poetry, as Arthur Lerner has pointed out, can lead not only to enlightening inner reflections but also to salutary actions, while its musical expression not only develops cherished individual skills but also fosters group behavior, ranging from children's games to ethereal ballets, that are rhythmic, harmonious and coordinated with the contrapuntal conduct of others.

*Second, Social:* No one can recite a poem in public, speak the lines in a Greek tragedy or a Shakespearean drama, play viola in a Haydn quartet, rock in a rock band, sing in a chorus or beat the cymbals only twice during a symphony

JULES H. MASSERMAN

**LULLABY**

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*Slowly with expression*

*mf*

*Tranquilly*

O-ver moun-tains to steal the morn-ing ray out of

*Tranquilly*

hea-ven We have climbed, we two. — And thru foun-

tains of wind-driv-en spray I have sailed with

you as crew. — But day is done

*mf*

## (LULLABY-2)

and - your eyes, wea-ry the sun, turn from the skies:

Now that our part-ings ever - Nigh Here for your dreams a

*Dreamily*  
lull - a by

*p* rall. - e - dim. *gradually* *dim.* *dying away*

# SAILING SONG

(Inspiration By The Sea.)

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mf

rit. dim

Scur- ry-in' clouds,

fol- low-in' sea, Trade wind a-blow-in' and call-in' to

me. My ship's in the bay,- trim as can be-

a tempo

## (SAILING SONG-2)

*a trifle spirited*  
 Strains at her an-chor and longs to be free. -- Close-haul her  
 sheet, mates, And fill out her sail, Thrill to the beat of the  
*Tempo I*  
 sea at her rail. Stand to the helm, swing hard a-  
*rit. dim. p. a tempo mf cresc.*  
 lee: Throw care a-loo-'ard and stand out to sea.  
*rit. dim.*

**LIFE IS STRANGE**  
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*Moderato*

Life is strange full of myst - e - ry

In all this world I must walk a - lone

Yet I yearn and seek end - less - ly

To know that I'm more than a roll - ing stone

A - far I see a vis - ion fair

Pro - mis - ing grace bey - ond com - pare

But I find peace nev - er there

Then my dreams de - ny des - pair

Life is strange full of myst - e - ry

I wand - er far yet wand - er all a - lone

Still I yearn and wish - full - y

Roam the earth to find my own.

concert—without accepting a disciplined respect for the talents of other participants in conjoint human seekings for creativity and beauty.

*Third, Existential Esthetic:* No one with even minimal poetic, musical or other sensitivity can fail to be deeply moved by Dante's *Divine Comedy*, entranced by Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam," religiously inspired on hearing "Kol Nidre" or Handel's "Messiah," or transported beyond mundane experiences by a late Beethoven quartet.

### *Retrospections*

Permit me now to illustrate my thesis more intimately by three autobiographical episodes (from the *Green poesia*, aesthetically creative) as expressed in poetry and music: first, in a sentimental lullaby, next in a virile sea chanty, and, finally, in a questioningly introspective tone poem.

The words of the lullaby, originally written for a child, were later changed with new lyrics to a serenade, but the softly cadenced melody can speak only of quiet affection:

[“Lullaby,” played on a violin]

However, my election as Fleet Surgeon of a Yacht Club, another whimsical event, required the celebration of a different life-long love, that of sailing. Here, also, the lyrics alone would sound about as inane as those of most operatic arias if the music itself did not reflect the eternal euphony of wind, water and waves in limitless horizons:

[“Sea Chanty,” played on a viola]

But, as Omar Khayyam (the musical settings of whose *Rubaiyat* would need a second Mo-

zart) poetically sensed it, “Time . . . is on the wing,” and the enthusiasms of youth eventually become tempered by existential questionings. I expressed such introspections in a lyric that would alone sound as strange as its title were it not for the unresolved cadences of its musical obligato.

[“Life Is Strange,” played on a viola]

I have heard it said by poets that a Shakespearean sonnet is an atonal perfection unto itself—yet Shakespeare's plays have been well set to music. Conversely, I once shared a platform with Gunther Schuller and heard him proclaim that a musical composition, if not artificially titled, would convey no meaning other than a succession of chords, whereupon I felt compelled to ask him whether a child could fall asleep listening to the “Ride of the Valkyrie,” or if soldiers could march resolutely off to war to the tune of Schubert's “Serenade.”

### *Coda*

In this little litany I have tried to convey the thesis that poetry and music are not only transcendent esthetic experiences, but can also be invaluable therapeutic modalities—and I may have incidentally also illustrated how I, too, have found surcease in both.

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