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Phenomenology as a Poetic Realism:
Remembering J.H.van den Berg

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INTRODUCTION

For nearly a half century I knew Jan Hendrick van Den Berg, first when I was a graduate student at Duquense University where he was a visiting professor on several occasions. Later, I came to know him as a mentor when I visited him at his home in the Netherlands as I was finishing my first book so deeply inspired by his work. From that time on we corresponded by letter--- always handwritten with a sense of slowness and having paused for a moment as the pen hovered over the paper—and visited each other either when he came to the United States or I was in Europe. In

this context we became colleagues and friends. Four years ago I travelled to his home in Gorinchem in the Netherlands to present to him a volume of *Janus Head* devoted to his work. This journey was the fulfillment of a promise I had made to myself to acknowledge his lasting influence on my life and work and on that of others.

Jan Hendrik van den Berg died September 22, 2012. He was 98 years old. Born in the Netherlands, he studied medicine with a specialization in psychiatry and neurology at the University of Utrecht. Appointed a Professor of Psychology at the University of Leyden in 1954, he had a long and distinguished career until his retirement in 1979. His contributions to phenomenological psychology are insightful in their content and range and inspiring in their style. These qualities are perhaps most evident in his creation of metabletics. His many publications in this field are original and provocative in the ways in which they question anew the unexamined patterns of western culture and history and demonstrate the changing nature of humanity's psychological existence.

My purpose today is to single out one very specific way in which his presence and work informed my psychological work. As I will show, van den Berg's work has consistently argued, especially in the later years, that psychology needs another kind of discourse because its language as a natural

science leaves out those experiences and qualities of life that make us most essentially human. That theme nurtured in me a love of language and its mysteries, which was there ripe and waiting for the teacher who would inspire its development in the places between phenomenology and depth psychology. At the edges of these two disciplines I have been an eavesdropper listening in on a dialogue between phenomenology and depth psychology, and at times a wanderer always feeling like an orphan on the way home while in the company of teachers like van den Berg, Freud, Jung, Hillman, the many poets especially Rilke, and the philosophers especially Merleau-Ponty.

The fruit of that eavesdropping and drifting is a psychology made on the edge, a psychology whose grammar or style of discourse is and has been fashioned from the grammars of phenomenology and depth psychology. It is a psychology of the threshold between psyche and world and between conscious and unconscious, a psychology of lateral and vertical depths responsive to the poetic realism of the world as a psychological reality. It is a psychology that I have applied to psychological theory (1982/2001) and to the practices of psychotherapy (2002, 2011) and research(2007).

A poetic realism is a new grammar for psychology that is already implicit in van den Berg's phenomenology. I begin with a simple example from one of his books.

THE WORLD OF ILLNESS

"I hear that the day has begun out in the street. It makes itself heard; cars pull away and blow their horns, and boys shout to one another. I have not heard the sounds of the street like this for years, from such an enormous distance. The doorbell rings; it is the milkman, the postman, or an acquaintance; whoever it is I have nothing to do with him. The telephone rings; for a moment I try to be interested enough to listen, but again I soon submit to the inevitable, reassuring, but at the same time slightly discouraging, knowledge that I have to relinquish everything. I have ceased to belong; I have no part in it.

The world has shrunk to the size of my
bedroom, or rather my bed" (1966, p.26).

This passage is taken from *The Psychology of the Sickbed*, a small jewel of a book by J.H. van den Berg. It is one of those fine essays where he uses a simple

example to describe how the world of the patient is a different world, a world with another face, which reflects or mirrors the changes in the patient's life that an illness brings. Many years ago I marked that passage when I first read it, especially the last line about the world having shrunk to the size of one's bed. What a curious way to say things, I thought, and what an absolutely accurate way to depict the world of illness. And then when he added that the clothes of the one who is ill tell him of his changed existence, when, for example, one might regard his or her shoes that will not be worn that day as saying, "today you are ill," I knew I had to study with this man.

The example makes the claim that when one is ill the spatiality of one's world changes. In the complete description that van den Berg offers, he also says that the temporality of the world changes as well as one's relations to others, to one's body and to things. The claim itself seems undeniable. When one is ill, one's world does change.

But who has the eyes to see it? No camera would ever record or ruler measure that change in the size of the world. And, who has the ears to hear the words of someone who in his illness might point to those shoes that will not be worn that day and who then might say, 'my illness is in my shoes?' And yet, anyone who has ever awakened to the day

with a fever that cancels the plans one had made knows the truth of what van den Berg is saying here. Indeed, for the sake of this truth there really is no other way to say it. The virus that has been seen under the microscope is one of the causes of the illness, but the changes in the existential qualities of one's life are the meaning of the illness. The language of explanation is not the language of understanding. To understand the world of one's illness one has to look at the world of that person, one has to regard it with a different set of eyes than the eyes that peer through a microscope.

My illness is in my shoes! What is this truth and what is this strange language that speaks it? And, where is psychology's place within this kind of discourse?

In an interview for the special issue of *Janus Head* devoted to his work, van den Berg, reflecting on his eight decades in psychology, said this:

"We need something else, a new grammar. In our modern era of successful science and technology—successful only for a certain range of problems—we lack the words to grasp and to understand the wonder of nature" (2008, p.383).

Van den Berg's psychology is a soil for that different kind of discourse, a way of speaking about the human person from within the landscapes, occasions and experiences of living a human life *in media res*, in the midst of things and others. His work offers a much needed corrective to the one sided development of psychology toward a narrow and reductive view of the human person. This alternative is especially important today when so much of psychology is under the hypnotic sway of the neurosciences because it lacks a foundation in its own philosophical ground. Indeed, the unexamined philosophical foundation of psychology today is blatantly expressed in the call within the American Psychological Association to define psychology as a STEM discipline whose educational practice is modeled on science, technology, engineering and mathematics. It is this kind of thinking that would, for example, describe training in psychotherapy as a matter of teaching students the nuts and bolts of psychotherapy. This kind of discourse, reflexively uttered like some knee jerk response, is barbarous because behind the words lurks the specter of the patient as a machine and the therapist as a mechanic. No wonder, then, that in that special issue devoted to van den Berg's work, he said, " I want to confess that the notion of psychology gets on my nerves," because as he adds, "it fell on its knees before positivism" (p. 375).

POETIC REALISM:
BETWEEN FACT AND IDEA

In *A Different Existence* (1972) van den Berg tells the following story.

“It is winter. Evening is falling and I get up to switch on the light. Looking outside, I see that it has started to snow. Everything is covered by the glittering snow, falling down silently out of an evening sky. People are moving soundlessly past my window. I hear someone stamping the snow from his feet. I rub my hands and look forward to the evening, for a few days ago I telephoned a friend to ask him if he could spend the evening with me. In an hour he will be standing before my door. The snow outside seems to make his visit even more pleasant. Yesterday, I bought a bottle of good wine, which I put at the proper distance from the fire.

I sit down at my desk to answer some mail. After a half-hour the telephone rings. My friend is calling to say that he cannot come. We exchange a few words and make another appointment. When I set down the receiver, the stillness of my room has become slightly

more pronounced. The hours to come seem longer and emptier. I put a log on the fire and return to my desk. A few moments later, I am absorbed in a book. The evening slips away slowly.

When I look up a moment to think over a passage that refuses to become clear, the bottle by the fire catches my eye. Once more, I realize that my friend will not come, and I return to my book" (1972, p.33-34).

Van den Berg's attention to the details of this scene evokes an image of that room that situates us within that scene. His description also evokes a mood. The evening with a friend with whom one was to pass the hours in conversation over some fine wine bought for the occasion has changed. Its quality is different in many subtle ways. But where are the signatures of those changes? Let us jump too quickly to the usual way of thinking about this question in terms of assigning those signatures of change to the interior subjectivity of the person, van den Berg directs our attention to the unopened wine bottle still near the fire. There in that bottle the quality of the mood of the evening is made visible. Let us imagine that at that moment the bottle mirrors a qualitative shift in the mood of the evening. Let us say that if one were that man, he might see in that bottle the loneliness of his evening.

My loneliness is *in* that unopened bottle of wine! My illness is *in* my shoes! What a strange way to speak. To speak in this strange way places us in the world in a different way. It places us in a different world where wine bottles and shoes are not just things in themselves, matters of fact, or screens for our projected ideas. To draw attention to this difference I italicize the little word 'in', a preposition whose grammatical function is one of connecting a noun to some other word in a sentence. For example, I can speak *of* things *with* you, which is a much different connection *between* us than speaking *about* things *behind* your back.

But if alongside its grammatical function, language is also an amplification of our embodied perceptual aesthetic bond with the world, where, for example, as Merleau-Ponty (1968) notes we speak because we see and we see because we speak; if alongside its morphological, semantic, syntactical, phonological and etymological aspects, language opens *the* world as *a* world by carving out within the chiasm between the embodied person and the world a place for and a style of being and speaking, then language is also a psychological expression of the ways we stand out in the world. Psychologically prepositions we might say are about one's standing in the world.

In the example of the wine bottle I said that the quality of the mood of the evening has changed. With mood we are

in the psychological landscapes of verbs. In addition to its qualities of number, person, voice and tense, verbs have the quality of mood. Each of these qualities speaks to subtle shifts in how we are psychologically connected to and present in the world. The quality of tense, for example, speaks to the temporality of human existence. With the passive voice of the verb, the hegemony of the ego conscious mind as the author of experience gives way to the person as an agent who is responsive to being addressed. To be careless with our use of words, to be indifferent to these psychological dimensions of language is to become a man or a woman without qualities. It is to level or flatten out the multiple layers and shadings of a human existence. It is, for example, to arise in the morning and to proclaim, 'I had a dream last night!'

But to speak in that way, to use the active voice reflexively and without reflection is to distance oneself from the neighborhood of the dream. If, however, one is a phenomenologist, if one lingers with its presence, if one does not immediately retreat to the distance of an empirical realism with its explanation in terms of states of REM sleep, then it is not I who had a dream but I who was dreamed last night.

To forget this difference is to forget that dreaming is another form of existence, another style of being in the

world. Not only then is another grammar for psychology lost, but also psychology's normative discourse becomes identified with the singular authorial voice of the ego conscious mind. In fact, this voice of psychology is deeply embedded within the cultural matrix of technology. It is programmed into our computers companions. Try typing a sentence using the passive voice and the computer will prompt you to revise it. When that happens I take great pleasure in refusing its request.

Van den Berg's psychology offers another discourse for psychology, a new grammar, and it is, I would argue, the qualities of voice and mood that inform it. In this essay I will focus on the quality of mood but before doing so I want to make a remark about the issue of voice.

The passive voice is where a fruitful dialogue between phenomenology and depth psychology occurs. It is a place where they converge, because just as the dream in depth psychology emphasizes the passive voice to stay close to the dream as what addresses us and in effect commands us to attend to the dream, phenomenology stays close to the world as what addresses us and in effect commands us to attend to the world. In this regard, depth psychology and phenomenology are psychological ways of being in the world that begin in the ear and not on the tongue. Both are responsive to being addressed. Responsive to being

addressed we could also say that the passive, receptive voice of depth psychology and phenomenology shape a psychology informed by the imperative mood, the former able-to-respond to the dream that claims us, and the latter to the world with its delightful displays and sensuous charms that claim us. Both are psychologies that invite us to be eavesdroppers as it were on the language of the world and the dream.

The subjunctive mood of the verb is also a place where depth psychology and phenomenology converge. This mood of the verb creates a specific atmosphere. It colors the moment and shades the scene. It discloses the world in a particular fashion, where one's illness can be said to be *in* one's shoes, or one's loneliness *in* a bottle of wine. In the subjunctive mood the worlds of dreaming and wakefulness display themselves as a poetic realism. Van den Berg's phenomenology is especially important here because its poetic realism is on display right there before our wakeful eyes. The poetic realism of his phenomenology is on display *in* those shoes and *in* that wine bottle. Soaked in the atmosphere of the subjunctive mood, those things disclose a world that, like the dream, is not the case, a world that is possibility, a world that is contrary to fact. The subjunctive mood of van den Berg's phenomenology is a

recommendation or an invitation to regard the world as otherwise, as what would be the case if it were otherwise.

Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief aptly describes the world as a poetic realism. This willing suspension of disbelief is, he says, a poetic faith that welcomes the epiphanies of imagination "without either denial or affirmation of their real existence by the judgment." He then adds that this kind of receptivity to the epiphanies of the imagination is "rendered impossible by their neighborhood to words and facts of known and absolute truth" (1960, pp.301-302).

Here the poet is making not just an epistemological claim about phenomenological gnosis but also an ontological one about another order of reality. While I do not know if van den Berg himself would go this far, I am saying that this is how I have taken up his work, how he has inspired me to regard psychological life as another kind of reality, as a poetic realism. His own elegant and poetic style leads me to suspect that he would not be unreceptive to it. Indeed, in all the years that I have read him, and in the letters exchanged, I have been very aware that *what* he says cannot be separated from *how* he says it. Van den Berg is an artist of the written and spoken word. In short, he has a good pen!

So, to say that 'my illness is *in* my shoes,' or that 'my loneliness is *in* the unopened bottle of wine', is to describe a world that is contrary to fact and to speak of that world in a way that accords with its reality. But one has to be inclined toward the world in this way. One has to be in the mood to see the loneliness in the unopened bottle of wine or the illness in the shoes. The subjunctive mood of a poetic realism colors the bond between person and world in a specific way that differs, for example, from how the indicative mood does. It brings a different atmosphere to the world.

Grammatically, of course, the two statements are not in the subjunctive, but my claim is that that is the intention in van den Berg's style. He is asking us to regard the world in that other way, as if it were otherwise, as a possibility that is contrary to fact for neither the loneliness nor the illness are contained within their respective vessels. Indeed, if in the depths of his loneliness, perhaps bordering even on despair, the man should attempt to rid himself of that feeling by opening the bottle and pouring it on the snow outside, he would find no relief, any more than the person who is ill would be relieved of his illness if a well meaning but fact minded friend disposed of his shoes. Neither one would find relief because neither the loneliness in the wine bottle nor the illness in the shoes is *in* these things as

matters of fact. The prepositional connection takes place in a different light. No amount of empirical chemical analysis performed in a laboratory would ever find the loneliness in the wine or the illness in the shoes.

Van den Berg's phenomenology as a poetic realism undercuts the dualism of empirical realism and idealism. The two statements, therefore, are not only not matters of fact, but also not only ideas of mind projected onto a neutral world. Although after more than a hundred years of clinical evidence there can be no doubt that projection exists, one has to be careful about imposing the idea of projection onto these two instances. Perception is complex and as such is mediated by unconscious factors, but to explain these two instances without regard for the phenomenology of the two situations, is to reduce the experiences to the outmoded Cartesian dream of a Cogito that still haunts much of depth psychology by splitting an interior psyche from an external world. It is to substitute the theory of a map making mind for the landscape of the experience.

Van den Berg's phenomenology, like all phenomenology, undercuts this dualistic metaphysics and begins with the person being in the world. As such it reframes the issue of projection. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment, especially in his final view regarding the notion of flesh, is perhaps the best articulation

of this view. As he notes, things and others establish within me the carnal formula of their presence. The flesh of body and that of the world of things and others is a field and within this field we impregnate each other with our presence, overlap each other, transgress and come to ourselves through the other (Romanyshyn, 2011). Projection is a special case of this field of flesh. It arises on the condition that either one's complex unconscious idea of the other in the field has replaced one's embodied and immediate presence within the field, or one has given oneself over to the demands of a specific situation, as one does, for example, in a medical examination.

In this regard, the worlds of loneliness and illness display themselves in ways that are different from the worlds of conviviality and well being, and those differences show themselves through things that inform but do not determine my response to their displays. The loneliness and the illness are not ideas in the person's mind. They are there in the things themselves, but as said above not as a fact. They shape the milieu of the world in which each appears, draw its configurations in a specific way, gather the neutral space of measurable dimensions into a place for action and inscribe the carnal formula of their presence in me and as such draw from me a certain style and mood of being in the world with them.

Lingering with van den Berg for forty-seven years, I have come to appreciate that his phenomenology challenges our fixed identification of the real with the empirically measurable by opening the world as a poetic realism. It situates us in a world where wine bottles and shoes mirror where and how we are in the world, amidst things and others that reflect, deepen and transform events into experiences. To be in the world in this way, to dwell poetically in it, is to be in that space between things and thoughts, facts and ideas. It is to be in that third domain of the image, where the image as Edward Casey says is not something to see but is a way of seeing and being present in and to the world.(19XX)

In a poetic realism it is the image that matters, the image as that pivot around which the flesh of the embodied psyche and that of world mirror each other. The image in a poetic realism is a pivotal reality, perhaps not unlike the transitional space that Winnicott (19XX) speaks of in a different context, that space of play that manages the transition between inner and outer, which in Winnicott's work bridges that split of a psychological inner world and unanimated outer one. In this Winnicottian context, wine bottles and shoes play on that edge between psyche and world, transitional objects that in the play of imagination display themselves as neither things nor thoughts.

But if it is the image that matters in a psychology whose foundation is a poetic realism, then the question that follows is what is the grammar of the image? What style of discourse does the image evoke?

Insofar as the image is neither a fact nor an idea, its style of discourse cannot be in the indicative mood of the verb. With regard to facts, the indicative mood asserts that what it claims, for example, 'it is raining,' is indeed the case. With regard to ideas, for example, 'democracy is a better form of government than monarchy', the indicative mood makes a claim about their truth value. In both situations, the indicative mood leaves no real room for doubt. It does not shade the issue in any way. To use an analogy here, in this mood the style of discourse is the language of high noon, where the clarity of language, like the sun at high noon, leaves no shadows. To press the analogy a bit further, the indicative mood is the language of the gunfight at high noon. Psychology as a STEM discipline is a psychology whose grammar is in this mood. Maybe, then, we might imagine such psychologists as gunfighters, or perhaps even gunslingers hired by the pharmaceutical and insurance barons who prefer taking the measure of psychological life to get the quick fix and the big bucks.

In the two statements--my illness is *in* my shoes and my loneliness is *in* the wine bottle—the copulative verb is is

italicized to indicate that as neither matters of fact nor ideas of mind, the illness is and is not in the shoes and the loneliness is and is not in the bottle of wine. Both statements make a claim that *is* and *is not* the case. The case that each makes is otherwise than what one who is in the indicative mood would expect. In both instances the statement inflects the world in another way.

This paradox of *is/is not* is the hallmark of a metaphorical statement and my point here is that metaphorical language is the grammar of a psychology of the image embedded within the soil of a poetic realism. In a poetic realism image and metaphor belong together. Metaphor is the language of the image and image is the reality of a metaphoric sensibility.

The reality of the image and the metaphorical style of discourse that it elicits dwell in the atmosphere of the subjunctive mood. We speak the world in this way because we see it as image and we see it as image because we speak of it in this metaphorical fashion. And to riff on Merleau-Ponty, whom I quoted earlier regarding this link of perception and language, I would add that this link depends upon being in the mood to see and speak in this fashion. In such a mood, a statement like 'my loneliness is in the unopened bottle of wine being warmed by the fire as I await a visit from my friend,' would *in the right mood* be saying, 'if

I were to be present to my experience as I am living it in this moment and in this context, then the loneliness of my evening would be there in that bottle of wine.' And someone, perhaps a stranger lost in the night who knocks on the door would see the same scene if he or she was also in the mood.

Image, a metaphorical style of discourse, and the subjunctive mood are the features of a psychology characterized as a poetic realism. In this ambience psychology is a far from being a STEM science as one's illness in one's shoes is from the virus under the microscope. To stand with and for the reality of the image, for the cultivation of a metaphoric sensibility, and for a psychology in the subjunctive mood as the elements of a new discourse for psychology, psychology as it stands today will have to come to terms with its addiction to the indicative mood that haunts its empirical style of discourse. In its addiction to the empirical realism of the fact that style can only dismiss van den Berg's work as mere poetry, confusing poetry and the poet with a poetic realism that is the province, the landscape of the lived world that is unveiled through imagination. Psychology has to loosen the hold that empirical realism has on it if it is to recover the imagination as a legitimate way of knowing the world and being in it and the heart as the organ of this kind of gnosis. (Romanyshyn, 2007)

But for psychology's mood to change is a difficult matter. Perhaps, it is more difficult than it is for psychology to change its mind. Times are hard for any psychology that would witness and celebrate the full and complex drama of living a human life in a humanly scaled world. It is, therefore, no real surprise to me that this state of affairs has entered my dream life. In this place of the dream, I find myself in the presence of the CEO of an international pharmaceutical company who is showing me a new pill the company has developed. It is intended as a pill to treat psychology's addiction to the indicative mood by chemically inducing the subjunctive mood.

The nightmarish quality of this dream is that it seems not so far fetched. Were it to happen it would defeat the purpose of consciously making a place for a psychology of poetic realism. Imagine a hoard of moody psychologists addicted to poetic realism stalking the halls of the APA convention like some weird zombies saying 'Image, Image, Image!' They would be no less addicted to their ideology than a hoard of psychologists addicted to the grammar of an empirical realism stalking those same halls saying 'STEM, STEM, STEM, STEM, STEM!'

Van den Berg's phenomenology has been for me the primary site where I have been able to carry his work forward toward psychology as a poetic realism. While van

den Berg does not emphasize the themes of image, or metaphor or the subjunctive mood, and while the two statements I used to make a case for such a psychology are not grammatically in the subjunctive mood, the spirit of his work lends itself to this development. His exquisite descriptions do depict a world that is contrary to fact, a world that is otherwise, if, I have said, one is in the mood.

I do not know what a psychology that intentionally writes in the subjunctive would be. I do not know, for example, how an introductory textbook in psychology would be written in this mood. I do know that it would be difficult. But I also know that it would be an interesting and exciting experiment that would give flesh to the bones and joints of this possibility. An actual effort to write a psychology in the subjunctive mood, or to re-write an introductory text in this mood, which would make an excellent doctoral dissertation, would add substance to the philosophical foundations for a psychology of a poetic realism, and might even increase the chances to put psychology as it stands today with its addiction to empirical realism in the mood for dialogue.

CLOSING REMARK

Four years ago in my last visit with Jan as he lay seriously ill and was not expected to survive the night, he said to me with some sadness in his voice that he felt his

work would be forgotten. I have written this essay in the hope that his work is not forgotten, not only for his sake personally but also for the spirit of that work and its importance for psychology today. The amplification of his work in phenomenological psychology as a poetic realism is for me a way in which his work might not only not be forgotten but also continued.

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