

# Whispering at the edges: Engaging ephemeral phenomena<sup>1,2</sup>

Mark Winborn\*

## Abstract

This paper conceptualizes the analyst's capacity to recognize and engage ephemeral phenomena in the analytic setting as an essential pillar of deep analytic engagement. It proposes that the analyst's capacity to engage the ephemeral is an ongoing developmental progression which com-

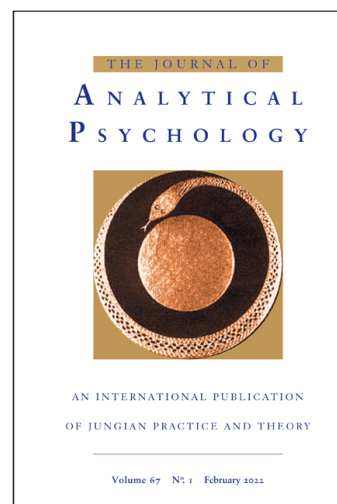
plements and deepens the other areas of analytic knowledge acquired during analytic training, such as theory, technique, archetypal patterns, psychopathology, and development. The paper provides a working definition of the ephemeral and focuses on the phenomenological experience of the ephemeral. It also discusses the use of reverie in ephemeral engagement and the use of poetry to develop the analyst's sensitivity and responsiveness to ephemeral moments. ■

**Keywords**  
ephemeral, reverie, Bion, poetry, Jung, training.

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\* Jungian psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist. Training analyst with the Inter-Regional Society of Jungian Analysts and the C.G. Jung Institute - Küssnacht. His primary areas of interest are analytic technique and the integration of psychoanalytic theories. He has published or edited five books: *Deep Blues: Human Soundscapes for the Archetypal Journey*, *Shared Realities: Participation Mystique and Beyond*, *Interpretation in Jungian Analysis: Art and Technique*, *Beyond Persona: On Individuation and Beginnings with Jungian Analysts* (with Lavinia Tânculescu-Popa), and *Jungian Psychoanalysis: A Contemporary Introduction* (part of the Routledge series - *Introductions to Contemporary Psychoanalysis*), as well as numerous articles and book chapters. Received the Gradiva prize from the National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis for the best article published in 2022 and was a finalist in 2014 for the best edited book in psychoanalysis. Additionally, He has presented papers at the past five Congresses of the International Association for Analytical Psychology (2010, 2013, 2016, 2019, 2022). He lectures widely both in the USA and internationally.



## Whispering at the edges: Engaging ephemeral phenomena

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy  
(William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5).

### Act 1 – Setting the stage

What is it that we know as therapists and analysts? What knowledge do we acquire during our formation? What does our knowledge consist of? Like Faust toiling in his study, we make a valiant attempt to absorb the vast terrain of *Jung's Collected Works and Memories, Dreams, Reflections*; by turns captivated, awed, intimidated, or overwhelmed. A progression of other authors ensues as we turn to Von Franz to grasp the dramatic structuring of dreams and fairy tales, Hillman to delve into the subtleties of soul and image, or Fordham to gather insight into the process of deintegration-integration by which an infant discovers its own pre-existent self. Our bookcases gradually begin to bow under the strain as more and more authors become essential to our journey – Neumann, Kast, Edinger, Dieckmann, Kalsched, Lopez-Pedraza, Giegerich, and so on.

Along the way, we acquire knowledge of various theories, techniques, archetypal patterns, psychopathology, and psychological development. In addition to our books and seminars, there is also our case supervision and personal analyses. All in all, Jungian analytic training is a rather vast undertaking no matter where the candidate begins the journey. These fields of learning are important, useful, and necessary for the conduct of the analytic process.

Perhaps though we should reserve some small degree of doubt about the completeness of our training. Immanuel Kant (2008, p. 50) said,

“Intuitions without concepts are blind, concepts without intuitions are empty.” Along similar lines, Jung said, “Theories in psychology are the very devil. It is true that we need certain points of view for their orienting and heuristic value: but they should always be regarded as mere auxiliary concepts that can be laid aside at any time.” (JUNG, 1938, p. 7). Likewise, Wilfred Bion noted, when faced with uncertainty about a patient, the common therapist will fall back on theory in order to guide him or her; a pitfall Bion cautioned against (AGUAYO, MALIN, 2013).

Therefore, we might wonder what guides our use of acquired knowledge, and what aspects of experience might we be drawn to which do not possess familiar designations such as complex or archetype? We might rely on Jung's theory of typology and advocate for the utilization of our intuitive and sensate functions. Or we might say that attraction, curiosity, and the unfamiliar are encountered initially through the inferior function. Yet perhaps this also leans too heavily on familiar signposts that obstruct our vision of what stands beyond. Do we trust in Blake's (1976) declaration from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite”?

Freud (1912a, p. 320) stated that, “everyone possesses in his own unconscious an instrument with which he can interpret the utterances of the unconscious in other people.” However, Freud did not offer instructions to analysts on the use of their unconscious as an analytic instrument, merely indicating that the analyst, “must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient. He must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone” (1912b, p. 115-116).

Perhaps Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (quoted in BLY, 1975) offers a beginning point when he states, “So many things fail to interest us, simply because they don’t find in us enough surfaces on which to live, and what we have to do then is to increase the number of planes in our mind, so that a much larger number of themes can find a place in it at the same time.”

I am deeply moved by the way Muriel Dimen (2013, p. 61) summarizes the analytic endeavor, “The psychoanalytic session is a chance to say the unspeakable and think the unthinkable. To imagine what does not yet exist.” It is this last phrase, “to imagine what does not yet exist” that speaks so keenly to the heart of this paper – to imagine what does not yet exist, to imagine what does not yet exist in our awareness, to imagine what has not yet emerged in the experiential world of the analysand.

Could there be something vital missing from the formation of an analyst – a missing pillar of knowledge that supports the journey into the deepest encounters with the human soul? In my experience, the deepest and most transformative journeys in analysis have always involved encounters with the ephemeral. Good facility with analytic technique, theory, and archetypal themes is essential in facilitating transformative experience during analysis, but at another level they are mere servants that assist in setting the stage for the emergence of and engagement with the ephemeral.

### **Act 2 - The ephemeral**

The ephemeral can be defined as something lasting only a short time, transitory, elusive, or difficult to capture and hold. The ephemeral does not make its appearance accompanied by trumpet fanfare nor glistening with bold, iridescent color. It is not readily identified as belonging to the community of complexes or archetypes. The ephemeral is glimpsed out of the corner of one’s eye, often hidden behind some psychic veil, or tucked away in some forgotten crevice of memory with only a small thread left

visible. In the analytic session. It makes its subtle appearance in a thousand different guises – often unnoticed by analyst or analysand – vague sensations, barely perceptible gestures, textures of sessions, distortions of time, shivers, hidden codes smuggled in among mundane details, or a gnawing in one’s stomach. The ephemeral bodies forth in the nearly imperceptible weight shouldered as the analysand arises from their seat in the waiting room, in the sigh escaping from slightly parted lips that hints at some seemingly unresolvable but unspoken conflict, in the sudden ruby flush illuminating the pale skin of a woman who does not yet know she is grieving the loss of a mother she never felt she had in the first place, or in the glimmer of intimacy that moves, like quicksilver, in and out of the eyes of the analysand who experiences eros as a deeply desired but dangerous proposition. It is impossible to anticipate when or in what form the ephemeral will come – the ephemeral is a shape shifter, an apparition, a shadow upon the wall.

I am not the first to give name to the ephemeral. Jung would likely classify the ephemeral as a psychoid phenomenon. Various analytic authors and mystics have offered other names for ephemeral experience: the uncanny, the unthought known, unformulated experience,  $\beta$  elements, unrepresented states, moments of meeting, the cloud of unknowing, or the *via negativa*. For the moment, I prefer “the ephemeral.”

The ephemeral entered the room with a patient who ostensibly began therapy to address grief following the death of her mother. She was accompanied by a slight but recurring flutter of her eyelids each time the mention of her father passed her lips. I inquired whether she had noticed this herself, but she had not and offered no associations to the fluttering of her eyelids. Several months elapsed and she journeyed to visit her father in his home for the first time since her mother’s death. On the first evening of her visit, she was flooded with anxiety, felt unsafe, and slept uneasily with the door to her

bedroom locked. A prolonged history of abuse by her father emerged over the next several years – trauma which required several more years to digest, integrate, and transform, and yet it was foreshadowed by a slight flutter of her eyelids months before the memories began to surface.

Sometimes the ephemeral remains cloaked in other garb. For example, another patient would perch on the edge of my couch – leaning forward – elbows on his knees – his body in rigid tension. He did not appear to notice the tension in his posture or was not bothered by it. Yet I found myself experiencing significant physical tension while sitting with this analysand. I adopted a similar posture in an attempt to move further inside his somatic experience. I asked him if he had noticed how he was sitting. He said he was aware of it. I inquired further asking, “Do you have any sense whether there is a purpose in sitting this way?” Without pause he said, “I have these geometric shapes inside of me and I have to sit this way in order to keep them properly aligned. If I don’t keep them aligned, there is friction, and I can’t function.” The ephemeral in this case was not in the transitory quality of the phenomenon, the ephemeral was reflected in how easily it would have been to overlook or misinterpret the analysand’s stiff posture. Providing some invitation for the ephemeral when it makes its appearance often allows us to move towards a fuller understanding of the experience.

Wilfred Bion, perhaps more than any other psychoanalyst, possessed a profound understanding of the reticent nature of the ephemeral, which he made central to his analytic approach. This understanding is reflected in Bion’s fondness for an observation made by Freud about darkness and light: “When conducting an analysis, one must cast a beam of intense darkness so that something which has hitherto been obscured by the glare of the illumination can glitter all the more in the darkness” (Bion, quoted in GROSTSTEIN, 2007, p. 1).

### Act 3 – Edges

Just as the old witch and the shaman most often dwell on the edges of their villages, and as fairies and little people are only found in the forests, the ephemeral does not march boldly in the center of the town square, nor into the center of the analytic experience. It does not dwell in the regions we readily identify as belonging to the mother complex, the father complex, the child complex, or the ego. It inhabits the regions around the edges of our experience, places where our eye is not easily drawn. The ephemeral is more likely to be found dwelling amidst the mists, shadows, crevices, and backwaters that exist on the edges of our awareness.

Bion (1994) has said learning happens at the edge of knowing and not-knowing. Edges are liminal spaces which demarcate the hazy uncertainty of existence between the known and unknown, the betwixt and between. Edges are places of revelation in the movement from one state to another. The Bardo in Tibetan Buddhism exists at the liminal edge between attachment and liberation. Similarly, we might speak of “being on the edge of an abyss” to convey the liminality of the space between life and death.

Naturally, all of us have had numerous encounters with being “on the edge” throughout our lives. For myself, a memorable encounter with edges was the discovery of a poem by Antonio Machado (1982):

Has my heart gone to sleep?  
Have the beehives of my dreams  
stopped working, the waterwheel  
of the mind run dry,  
scoops turning empty,  
only shadow inside?  
No, my heart is not asleep.  
It is awake, wide awake.  
Not asleep, not dreaming—  
its eyes are opened wide  
watching distant signals, listening  
on the rim of vast silence. (p. 93)

It was the last line of this poem “listening on the rim of vast silence” which spoke so deeply for me. What does it mean to listen on the rim of vast silence? How can silence have a rim – an edge? How can silence occupy a vast geographic space? The line defies rational logic but somehow conveys, through metaphorical paradox, an experience beyond our ordinary sensory-perceptual orientation. Just as dreams are able, this poem moves us to an “edge” of experiential understanding which is quite removed from ordinary consciousness.

#### Act 4 – Whispering

Let us consider for a moment, two questions: when do we whisper and why do we whisper? We whisper in art museums, in the vastness of nature, and when are in the arms of a lover when the lights are low. We whisper in libraries, in concert halls, in sanctuaries, and in cemeteries. We whisper in the presence of the numinous, during experiences of grace, when in awe, and as an expression of reverence.

As the title of this paper suggests, we often feel compelled to whisper when the ephemeral makes an appearance on the scene. In the course of the analytic session, we may not literally whisper, yet the feeling tone which motivates the act of whispering is felt in the words we utter or in the silence we keep.

Edwin Ford Piper (1912–1922), in his poem *Whispering Often* (1917), illustrates the necessity of whispering as an acknowledgement of nature and Eros:

When sunlight marries the swaying branches,  
With shadowy dancings the rite is said—  
To the crooning of easeful winds and waters,  
Whispering often, “I love you, I love you.”  
Now in wedded lilies the juices bubble,  
And saps make music about the heart.  
With flower on flower the spring is yearning  
For the Easter of love, the sacrament of love,

The passion of the earth and the passion  
of the sky;  
Whispering often, “I love you, I love you.”

#### Act 5 – Engaging the ephemeral

Engaging the ephemeral cannot be planned but we can prepare ourselves to be receptive when the ephemeral enters the room. It involves reaching beyond the known and familiar to touch something hovering at the edge of our sensory capacities. Theodor Reik (1948) has referred to this as “listening with the third ear.” Others have referred to it as somatic attunement or empathic immersion. It is not an active technique but rather a form of receptivity. Bion (1983) indicates that the analyst’s capacity for “negative capability” is the characteristic which most directly determines the ability to engage the ephemeral. He takes the term, negative capability, from a letter written by the poet John Keats to his brothers in 1817: “Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

In moving to engage the ephemeral we are not moving towards the universal elements of experience, which we refer to as archetypes, nor are we moving towards the specifically personal element of experience. Rather, we are attempting to connect to the spirit that moves between them, uniting both extremes that creates a continuum of experience.

Reading poetry has been my greatest resource in cultivating a capacity to engage the ephemeral. Poets journey daily through the realms of the ephemeral, metaphorical, and imaginal. From an oblique vantage point, the poet infers, implies, and points toward something beyond our habitual perspective. In doing so they bring the ephemeral closer to our awareness, gently coaxing the ephemeral from the mists, without subjecting it to too intense a gaze. Such an attitude is conveyed in this excerpt from the poem *A Morning Offering* by John O’Donohue (2008, p. 9):

May my mind come alive today  
To the invisible geography  
That invites me to new frontiers,  
To break the dead shell of yesterdays,  
To risk being disturbed and changed.

Robert Bly (1975) writes that great poetry has at its center a long floating leap which invokes risk and moves into experience –

A poet who is ‘leaping’ makes a jump from an object soaked in unconscious substance to an object or idea soaked in conscious psychic substance...some arc of association which corresponds to the inner life of the objects; so that anyone sensitive to the inner life of objects can ride with him. The links are not private, but somehow bound in nature (p. 4).

Such a leap is captured by Annie Reiner (2017) in her poem *Who is the Dreamer?*:

We are the dreams of our ancestors  
not yet dreamed,  
we are answers to a question  
no one has asked.  
We wait patiently to be created,  
in empty spaces we wait  
in the night  
till a blinding light expands  
at the speed of chance  
to ask the question  
to which we are  
unwittingly the answer.

We can only prepare to recognize and engage the ephemeral when it arrives, like the Biblical parable of the Ten Bridesmaids (Matthew 25, p. 1-13) who are encouraged to anticipate the arrival of the bridegroom by keeping their oil lamps filled and ready to light the way of the bridegroom. We can prepare ourselves to receive the ephemeral by deepening our receptivity.

Another avenue of engagement is cultivating our capacity for reverie. Reverie is opening to one’s own internal stream of consciousness during the analytic session – to ideas, thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories, images, urges, and fantasies. The subtle flow of conscious and preconscious thought, affect, and sensation associated with reverie is itself ephemeral and ambiguous; appearing on the periphery of experience and often eluding our efforts to hold or shape those fleeting impressions. It includes a sensitivity to the emerging potentiality of the ‘analytic third’, that is, the mutually constellated but indeterminate creation of the analytic dyad which comprises ‘something more’ than the combined individual contributions of the analytic partners. The potential range of reverie stretches from the ordinary to the transcendent.

French philosopher Raphaël Enthoven (2011) offers a beautiful portrait of reverie:

Daughter of consciousness and sleep, reverie blends their realms. Like intoxication, reverie is lucidity without an object, an activity but one that’s passive, a search that begins by giving up and lets itself be dazzled rather than looking. It remains, happily, somewhere between imagination and the ability to put it to use...Reverie is contemplation from within, letting the person who gives way to it feel change.

Born of the desire - and not the need - to be directly involved in our surroundings, reverie strips the world of its utility. It borrows the power of narration from wakefulness and the power of divination from sleep and keeps them vying to suspend the alternation of day and night. Reverie is how one arrives at immediacy.

Between the sweetness of being and the pain of thinking, between sleep that is opaque to itself and the blindness of one who can’t see the stars because of

daylight, lies the talent to glimpse what escapes us, the equivalent of the dawn that threatens at every instant to evaporate into dream or condense into knowing, but in that interval ... replaces something impenetrable with something immaterial and reveals the imaginary foundations of reality. Reverie never rests.

### Act 6 – Domains beyond

You might wonder, where does all of this mus-ing about the ephemeral lead us? Honestly, I don't know and I hope I don't come to a feeling of know-ing. While psyche certainly has recurrent patterns by which it expresses itself, it also remains, thank-fully, a mystery. Ephemeral phenomenon, when it is registered and engaged, is always revealing and leading us somewhere, but that "somewhere" is constantly in flux and unique to each individual. James Grotstein (2009) has offered the phrase, "but at the same time and at another level" to highlight the multiple levels of psychic experience occurring simultaneously at any given moment. The emergence of the ephemeral often signals the existence of one of those other levels and serves as a conduit between levels of experience whether conscious, unconscious, or implicit. The inner dialectic of experiential levels is revealed in the following poem by W.S. Merwin (2009) titled, *One of the Butterflies*:

The trouble with pleasure is the timing  
it can overtake me without warning  
and be gone before I know it is here  
it can stand facing me unrecognized  
while I am remembering somewhere else  
in another age or someone not seen  
for years and never to be seen again  
in this world and it seems that I cherish  
only now a joy I was not aware of  
when it was here although it remains  
out of reach and will not be caught or named  
or called back and if I could make it stay  
as I want to it would turn to pain. (p. 91)

Ultimately, to borrow a phrase from Bion (1994), the ephemeral facilitates "learning from experience." Learning from experience is to the capacity to make linkages between elements of experience – such as thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, or sensory impressions - allowing these elements to be digested, integrated, and imaged by the psyche so that they become part of the fabric of who we are. English poet Samuel Rogers (1792) alludes to this sort of learning and awakening: "Lulled in the countless cham-bers of the brain, our thoughts are linked by many a hidden chain; awake but one, and in, what myriads rise!".

Perhaps the development of this capacity to recognize, engage, and midwife the ephemeral does not belong to the analyst's early formation. Perhaps this capacity is the last to develop, after years or decades in the consulting room and life. Perhaps this is the trajectory of most analysts who have a sufficiently long career; the gradual movement towards nuance, towards increasing tolerance of complexity, the development of the last analytic function. My hope is that my mus-ings on the ephemeral have left you in sufficient doubt about the ephemeral that there remains adequate room for you to move towards your own musings.

I leave you with a final thought from T.S. Eliot (1963, p. 186), an excerpt from his poem *East Coker*:

I said to my soul, be still and wait with-  
out hope, for hope would be hope for the  
wrong thing; wait without love, for love  
would be love of the wrong thing; there is  
yet faith, but the faith and the love are all  
in the waiting. Wait without thought, for  
you are not ready for thought: So the dark-  
ness shall be the light, and the stillness  
the dancing. ■

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## Resumo

### *Sussurrando nas bordas: captando fenômenos efêmeros*

*Este artigo conceitua a capacidade do analista de reconhecer e captar fenômenos efêmeros no setting analítico como um pilar essencial do engajamento analítico profundo. Propõe que a capacidade do analista de se envolver com o efêmero é uma progressão desenvolvimentista contínua que complementa e aprofunda as outras áreas do conhecimento analítico adquiridas durante*

*o treinamento, como teoria, técnica, padrões arquetípicos, psicopatologia e desenvolvimento. O artigo fornece uma definição funcional do efêmero e se concentra na experiência fenomenológica do efêmero. Também discute o uso do devaneio no engajamento com o efêmero e o uso da poesia para desenvolver a sensibilidade e a capacidade de resposta do analista a momentos efêmeros. ■*

Palavras-chave: efêmero, devaneio, Bion, poesia, Jung, treinamento.

## Resumen

### *Susurrando en los bordes: captando fenómenos efímeros*

*Este artículo conceptualiza la capacidad del analista de reconocer y captar fenómenos efímeros en el setting analítico como un pilar esencial del compromiso analítico profundo. Propone que la capacidad del analista de involucrarse con lo efímero es una progresión desarrollista continua que complementa y profundiza las otras áreas del conocimiento analítico adquiridas durante el*

*entrenamiento, como teoría, técnica, patrones arquetípicos, psicopatología y desarrollo. El artículo proporciona una definición funcional de lo efímero y se centra en la experiencia fenomenológica de lo efímero. También discute el uso del ensueño en el compromiso con lo efímero y el uso de la poesía para desarrollar la sensibilidad y la capacidad de respuesta del analista a momentos efímeros. ■*

Palabras clave: efímero, ensueño, Bion, poesía, Jung, entrenamiento.



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