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The Art of Morandi at the Interface of Analysis and Art Criticism*

Born in Bologna, Italy, in 1890, Giorgio Morandi (fig. 1) died there in 1964, leaving a legacy of great art, mostly small still lifes of haunting beauty. In my view, this legacy not only provides aesthetic pleasure, but also contributes to the field of psychoanalysis.

I will describe how I believe Morandi's art contributes to

psychoanalysis from two points of view: first, traditional applied analysis, which explores the link between art and the artist's life experience; and then, the interface of analysis and art criticism, from which, in my opinion and that of a consensus of critics, Morandi's art vividly demonstrates key principles of analytic process.

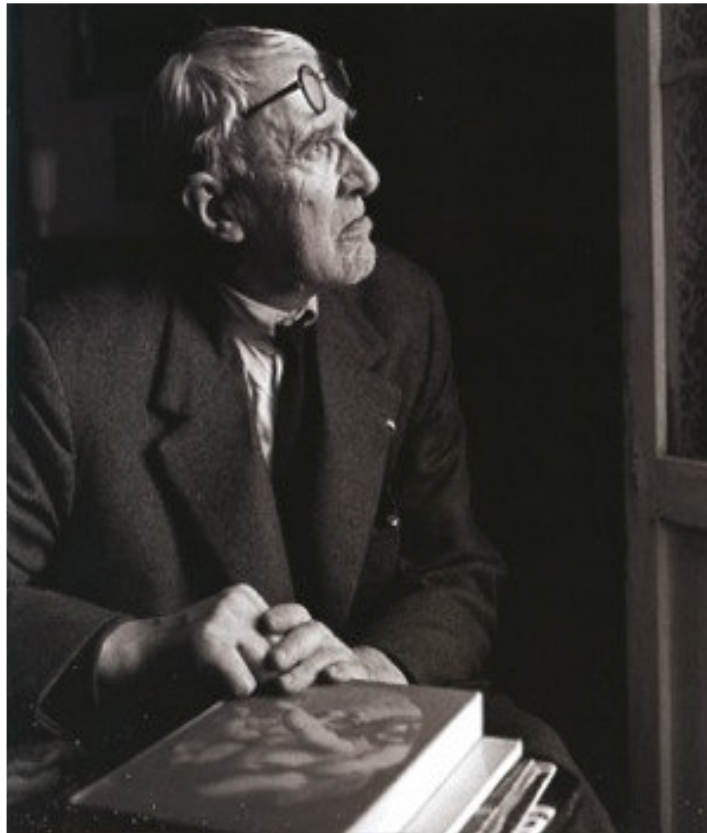


Fig. 1 – Giorgio Morandi's Photo, 1964

Insight Into Morandi

Traditional applied analysis can provide some insight into Morandi's psychology and creative process, but it is limited by a scarcity of biographical data on which to base our speculations. Biographies in English, and a recent major study by the Italian psychoanalyst, Fausto Petrella,¹ have surfaced little about his childhood and youth. As an adult, Morandi was extraordinarily guarded. His written words, his letters and a few published interviews, are detached and unrevealing. And his so-called "Autobiography," written when he had already achieved some fame at age 38, consists of about two terse pages.

In one respect, Morandi would seem to be a natural for applied analysis: at least outwardly, his mode of working seems remarkably similar to analysis. Over many years, he reworked the same subject matter, every day in the same small studio, alone with his canvas (fig. 2). Given

that Morandi's emotional inhibition was extreme, and his art evidently his only major outlet, I would guess that his aim in working so steadily in his studio might have brought another man to the office of an analyst. In some ways I think making art may have *been* his analysis.



Fig. 2 –Morandi's Studio

When Morandi entered the world in 1890, he was the first-born son of a middle-class family in Bologna. During his adolescence, his desire to become an artist put him in conflict with his father. The elder Morandi wanted his son to follow in his footsteps, to earn a stable income in a corporate office. In Morandi's mini-"Autobiography" he writes, my father "spared no efforts to make me submit to his will." However, Morandi states, "every attempt to deter me from my purpose was in vain and suffering from pressure brought to bear by my mother, he finally agreed to allow me to enroll at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna".²

Morandi goes on to say: "This was a source of great joy for me but was sadly soon overshadowed by my father's early death. At the age of 18, I was left alone with my mother and three younger sisters".³ Morandi had joined with his mother in fighting his father, and had triumphed, only to have his father die suddenly. When he was 12 years old,

his brother, Giuseppe, age 11, had died. It is reasonable to imagine that Morandi was guilt-stricken at this second death of a rival.

Perhaps Morandi's artistic drive gained fuel from his guilt: if he became an important painter, that achievement would give meaning to his survival. He could further redeem himself by taking care of his mother and sisters, as his father would have done. Finally, I would guess, he would have to punish himself, and take scrupulous care never again to hurt anyone.

The facts of Morandi's life closely fit this conjecture. He appears to have inhibited all desires, except for his desire to be recognized as a painter. There is no report of his having any romantic relationships. He never once set foot in Paris. In fact, he left Italy only twice, going to Switzerland for Cezanne exhibitions. It has been said that he could not kill a fly. When he was drafted into the army in WWI, he had an emotional breakdown. After a short hospital

stay, he got back to his art.

For financial security, Morandi took a job teaching at the Art Academy. But nearly all day, except for two strolls down to the piazza for coffee, and nearly every day, he remained in his tiny studio and painted. People called Morandi's studio "monastic"⁴ and a myth developed that he lived like an isolated monk. In fact, he did have friends, fellow artists, critics, and dealers, with whom he mostly "talked shop." From magazines and exhibitions, he kept up with artistic trends, but he rarely approved of them. People seemed to find him interesting, but he was not anyone's intimate.

During the Mussolini era, Morandi did what was necessary to maintain his safety. Il Duce, himself, bought a few of his works. If Morandi wanted to keep his art in the limelight, he succeeded magnificently. By the time Fellini filmed *La Dolce Vita*, in the '50's, Morandi's art was in great demand among the wealthy. The director showed

that Marcello Mastroianni's character was really chic by giving him an elegant living room with a Morandi on prominent display.

In cafes and salons, Morandi pursued widespread renown, but in his studio he pursued a deeply personal vision. He completed on average only about a dozen paintings a year. He meditated over each one for a long time, making pencil sketches and studies, and when he was ready, he painted it in one day. As Morandi neared his death, he told a friend that his only regret was that he had ideas for paintings he would never get to realize. From all indications, Morandi painted out of a deep need, and what he put into his pictures was his unique inner vision. Art critic, Matvey Levenstein confirms this view of Morandi's creative process. He writes that Morandi's art is unencumbered by any external "program," ideological or aesthetic: "The object possesses him entirely...He is the work, for the work is himself".⁵ Morandi's view, stated in

his two-page autobiography, is that making art involves "...the need to allow myself to be completely carried away by my instinct."⁶

However, his art does not look like he was "carried away" by his instinct. At first, it seems dispassionate and repetitive. Aside from a few landscapes and floral still lifes, he mostly painted what he called "the usual bottles, vases, and things," variously arranged on a tabletop. If we look at two typical Morandi's, part of a series he painted in 1941 (fig. 3) they appear nearly the same, except the color of the light in one is warm, in the other, cool. Though its repetitiveness makes his art seem lacking in what Morandi calls "my instinct," to some viewers it is incredibly engrossing.

We can see why, if we compare his series paintings to those of Monet. When Monet paints the same group of haystacks multiple times, the pictures are lively and varied, because he records how the motif changes as the sun

crosses the sky. But Morandi shuts out the sun and the sky. For him, the subject is not change in the outer world. He painted in a room whose two small windows he covered with cloth.



Fig. 3 – Still Lifes, 1941

To dull natural reflections, he coated his still life objects in matte paint or glued-on paper. And even the flowers in his still lifes were artificial. The vitality in Morandi's art

he projected onto blank objects from within himself.

This focus on his inner world contrasts sharply not only with Impressionists, like Monet, but with an entire artistic tradition of modern age. Leonardo, for example, painted natural phenomena. As he states in his notebooks, his goal was to probe the mystery of Nature's laws by replicating her effects. This goal remains important in art for the next four centuries. With Symbolism and Post-Impressionism, the emphasis shifts from the natural world to the artist's subjectivity.

Consistent with this shift, Morandi does not probe the mysteries of external reality. His images do not obey the laws of nature that Leonardo so carefully studied. His light and shadow and perspective are unnatural and illogical. What he does is to use mundane objects and artificial light to compose metaphors on canvas that evoke his inner reality, and for patient viewers, perhaps their own. To form these metaphors, Morandi pulled images not

from nature, but out of his imagination. It was well stocked, notably with impressions of the artists he loved, like Piero della Francesca, Chardin, and Cezanne, and the views he cherished. Most importantly, from the analyst's point of view, his imagination, like our own, was stocked with the close relationships he had internalized.

Out of these basic elements, his art generates a wide range of stirring variations. As in Balanchine's abstract ballets, each tiny detail, a glancing touch or a slight shift in position, miraculously elicits a different response. Like a remembered instant in a dance, the objects pose "just so," and the lighting and shadows and textures are "just so." Each painting evokes in the viewer an experience so distinct and vibrant that one senses it must be close to what it evoked for the artist.

That Morandi turned to his canvas to contain his inner world is hardly surprising, given how very private and reticent he was with his friends. In one of his rare published

interviews, with his friend Edouard Roditi, in 1960, four years before his death, Morandi said, "I have always led a very quiet and retiring life...My only ambition is to enjoy the peace and quiet which I require in order to work".⁷ If someone had suggested he get into analysis, I can imagine Morandi saying: "Analysis makes sense to me, but I don't like to talk about personal things. Whatever I have to say, I can say in paint. My canvas is like your analyst. It reflects back what's in my mind, and that makes me feel good."

When Morandi began painting, he seemed timid about saying even in paint what was on his mind. After trying various popular styles, including Cubism, in 1917 he joined a group of artists called the Metaphysical Painters, led by Carra and De Chirico. A few years later he did develop his own style, but if one searches for personal meaning in his art, Morandi's few words on the subject are not encouraging. Looking back at age 70, he insists his

early works are “...pure still-life compositions and never suggest any metaphysical, surrealist, psychological or literary considerations, at all.” Speaking of his entire body of work, he adds, “I never intended to give the objects in my still-life arrangements any particularly familiar meanings”.⁸

Given how much he seems to have put of himself into his art, and given how guarded he was, one would expect Morandi to insist his art had no personal meaning. But on one occasion he did let down his guard. In an interview with Edouard Roditi, he said: “I believe that nothing can be more abstract, more unreal, than what we actually see...Matter exists, of course, but has no intrinsic meaning of its own, (except for) ...the meanings that we attach to it”.⁹

We do, indeed, “attach” many meanings to Morandi’s art. In fact, art critics and scholars, as much as analysts, see in his pictures the vicissitudes of his inner life. Morandi’s

friend, the renowned art scholar Roberto Longhi has said: “Morandi’s masterly development (serves) as a stimulus to go on searching always inside rather than outside of yourself.”¹⁰ Renato Miracco, a noted Morandi expert, curator of the Metropolitan Museum retrospective and Director of New York’s Italian Cultural Institute, says that Morandi shows an “understanding of form that then explodes and lets the feeling in which it is steeped emerge. The object depicted thus becomes knowledge of the self through the ‘manifestation’ of the visible world.”¹¹

Morandi’s “knowledge of the self” manifests itself in “the visible world” of his paintings in part through their general affective tone. As we’ve seen, a work may be warm or cool, and his art touches countless different notes, tender or harsh, placid or agitated, from one end of the emotional scale to the other. His art also evokes mental states that are defined and specific. For example, one of his few floral still lifes, a gift to his friend, Roberto Longhi, evokes

the permanence of his affection for him: the image seems made of marble.

Morandi expresses his love of Bologna by evoking its hues and the rhythm of its arcades. One still life (1951) (fig. 5), viewed next to a photograph of his street, Via Fondazza, shows how he could capture the colors and archways of his city. Morandi's inner world occasionally conjured up a landscape. A painting of his country house (1927) is based on Morandi's memory of a Cezanne painting (1892), conveying his homage to the master, as we see in viewing them together (fig. 4) During the World War II bombing of Bologna, Morandi stayed in the country, but his paintings of that landscape look bleak and skeletal, containing his sense of horror.

Although Morandi's art may contain his inner world to an unusual extent, his work does not lend itself to traditional applied analysis. To explore the psychological origins of his art, how it emerges from his early life experience or

his fantasies and feelings, requires collateral biographical data and personal testimony. But since this material is so meager, the psychoanalyst must take a different route.

The route I have chosen is to focus on Morandi's paintings, themselves, my own response to them, along with the responses of art critics. I believe this approach enables us to see aspects of analytic process in a new way.

Insight Into Analytic Process

My approach to Morandi's work, as a psychoanalyst, and the approach of most art critics appear to be fundamentally analogous. Lacking the data to help decode its imagery, most critics interpret his work through their overall subjective responses and, as an analyst reflecting on a dream, by freely associating to its images. While this method does not reveal specific links between his art and

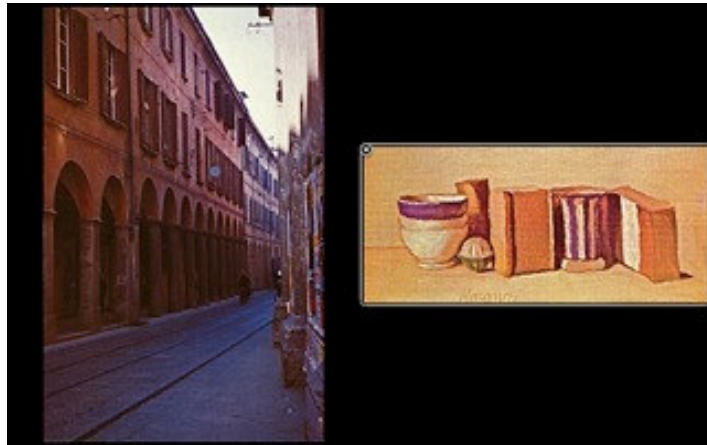


Fig. 4 – Via Fondazza (photo) and *Still Life*, 1951

Morandi's individual psychology, I believe that it does shed light on general principles of analysis. Abstract concepts such as the projection of object relations, conflict and compromise formation, and the elusiveness of subjective reality manifest themselves in Morandi's work as vivid, memorable images.

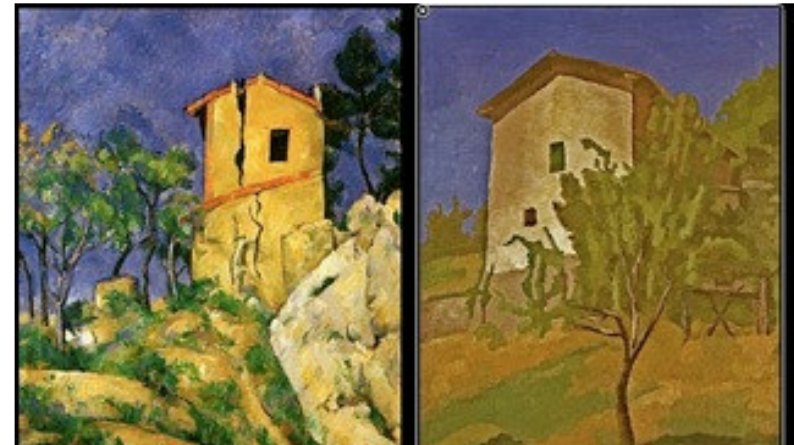


Fig. 5 – P. Cézanne (1892) and G. Morandi (1927)

That Morandi's work seems to demonstrate these concepts, in my view, reflects the basic equivalence of creativity in art or in analysis: both reflect sublimation, a transformation of the instinctual drives as they are redirected toward symbolic gratification through a newly created object.

I believe that sublimation accounts for the common ground shared by analysis and art, and suggests the potential for study at the interface of analysis and art criticism.

Object Relations

In my response to Morandi's art, he evokes not only general emotional states, but also his fantasies and feelings about people. His still lifes suggest a stage populated by the "cast" of a drama, each image capturing another scene. The metaphor of drama links Morandi's art to psychoanalysis: Hans Loewald famously calls the analytic session a fantasy play co-created through the projection of internalized self- and object representations.¹² If we imagine a Morandi image as a symbolic record of such a "session," between artist and canvas, rather than analyst and analyst, then his creative work parallels analytic pro-

cess. From this point of view, Morandi's art gives us freeze-frame images that can help fix in mind aspects of analysis that are often too fleeting or ineffable to grasp clearly. It seems conceivable that in the drama of his paintings, Morandi assigned specific objects to stand in for himself, or for different parts of himself, or for his mother, father, or sisters. We do not know. But surely on an unconscious level, he assigned roles to his still life objects. To illustrate this idea, based on my own associations, here are two examples: the red metal pitcher (1941), seen looming above the others (fig. 6), could be Morandi's father, the man who opposed his going to art school; and the pearly porcelain vase (1942) (fig. 7) could be his mother, graceful and glowing, the woman who admired and protected his artistic ambition.

Morandi says little in words about his internal objects, but in the way the objects appear in his table-top arrangements, as on the stage of an analytic session, he sug-

gests a great deal. Sometimes the objects seem tense, posing stiffly, as if for a photograph, tall in back, short in front. At other times, the objects interact “amicably,” or there may be “hostility,” as in a work in which the spout of a small watering can seems to poke a tall vase. In one dramatic image, the characters seem to cling to each other at the edge of a precipice (fig. 8).

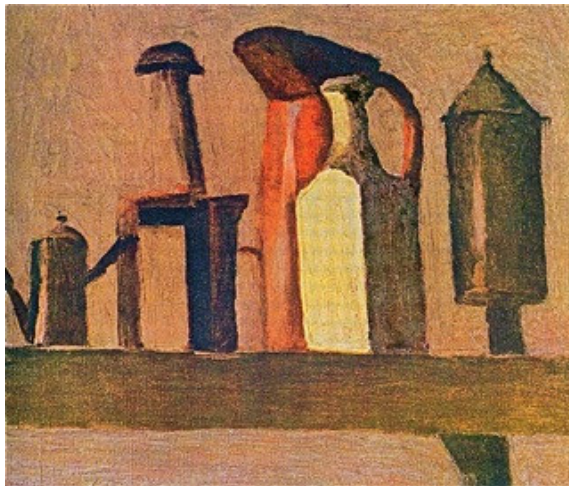


Fig. 6 – *Still Life*, 1941

Although my analytic perspective differs from that of art critics, those who are most knowledgeable about Morandi’s art also view it as an internal drama fixed in paint, his painted objects stand-ins for the people of his inner world.



Fig. 7 – *Still Life*, 1942



Fig. 8 – *Still Life*, 1955

Critic Arnaldo Beccaria, writes that Morandi's objects have a "human quality".¹³ To Sean Scully they are "huddled together in familial dependencies".¹⁴ During a discussion at the Phillips Collection last year, Karen Wilkin

said: "Morandi has been compared to a stage director with a cast of characters. They appear over and over. The hostile father, the ardent lover... (and so on)".¹⁵

Other critics, like Maria Cristina Bandera take up the theatrical metaphor, referring to "figures standing on the same stage."¹⁶ Indeed, in one painting the "characters" seem to be taking a curtain call: with its spots of white, below and in front, the set-up appears lit by footlights. The curator of the recent Morandi exhibition at the Phillips, Gabriella Belli, says: "Like a repertory theater cast, (the objects) emerge and take their places in a seemingly infinite variety of set ups. Nothing distracts our eye from their relationship to each other and to the space they inhabit".¹⁷

With striking consistency, the associations of critics parallel my own, supporting the idea that in Morandi's art we see the projection of his internal object relationships. These associations help us to see in his work a crucial but

evanescent aspect of analytic experience, transformed into a lasting image.

Conflict and Compromise Formation

In associating to Morandi's art I have found that it not only evokes object relations theory, but the analytic theory of conflict and compromise formation, as well. This theory holds that multiple psychic forces, including the affects and instinctual drives, all contribute, as the resultant of multiple vectors, to every form of human expression. When he communicated in words, Morandi's fear far outweighed his instincts, leading to his extreme reticence and reserve. He knew this about himself. In a rare interview at age 65, he said, "I am afraid of words, that's why I paint."¹⁸

This statement would lead one to expect that, unlike his verbal comments, Morandi's paintings might be freed up,

consistent with his claim that in painting he let himself be "completely carried away" by his instincts. But the viewer at first sees the same reserve in his painting as in his words. His careful placement of objects shows an intellect at work. The muted colors suggest he placed a grayish veil over our view. At least initially, emotion comes through as subtle and subdued, if at all.

However, if we pay close attention to Morandi's art, we see not only the muting effects of his intellect, but also his instincts. For analytic clinicians, a Morandi painting metaphorically evokes a "snapshot" of an analytic hour in which the surface content is flat but hints at turbulence below. In a Morandi, we see the flat surface content, but below it, we see emotion expressed in how he paints: his brushwork can be loose and free, or tightly controlled, the painted figures melting into the ground or sharply demarcated, often in the same picture. The objects appear still, and yet the way they are painted conveys animation and

disquiet. And Morandi's exquisite attention to lining up edges and points of contact, itself, generates tension.

Just as critics appear to find object relations theory playing out in Morandi's art, so they mirror my impression that it evokes conflict and compromise. Here is Karen Wilkin on Morandi's brushstrokes: "These authoritative marks contradict Morandi's apparent reticence and self-effacingness."¹⁹ She describes Morandi's brushwork in the last paintings as "fierce, but delicate."²⁰ "Fierce" is not a word most viewers would apply to Morandi's art, and yet his intense scrutiny of objects does suggest a fierceness, an aggressive and sexual probing into the mystery of what he saw. In one image, of the vase I associate with his mother (fig. 9), Morandi counters its gentle swell by his rough handling of the paint.

A viewer finds passion not only in his expressive brushwork, but also in the way Morandi extracts endless potential from objects we would scarcely notice, and in his

working them over throughout his entire career. Engaging with his "models," he stirs up intense feeling by the subtlest moves. Objects, and parts of objects, teasingly hide or come forward, move apart or touch, each shift mysteriously arousing a different mental state. At times, a familiar object is difficult to make out because Morandi has painted one part of it a different color from the rest. He often applies a grayish haze, toning down scenes that otherwise would verge on melodrama, but occasionally, the flattened tonality is shocked awake by an object painted canary yellow, cobalt blue, or a fiery red.

To epitomize her response to Morandi, Wilkin highlights this intensity of his gaze. She says, his art reflects "the sheer power of scrutiny, as though the act of looking were an act of possessing, wresting deep feeling from apparently neutral subject matter."²¹ "An act of possessing": this phrase points to his sexual and aggressive drives, Morandi's passion for the simple objects he looked at so long

and hard. Wilkin is not alone among critics in noting the passion beneath Morandi's calm images. Critic Christopher Banfey sees passion in Morandi's brush work: "The objects [...] look loved [...]. The paint is laid on with the tactile and sensual thickness of clay".²²



Fig. 9 – *Still Life*, 1959

And Mario Naves describes the intensity of his compositions: "Morandi's true subject is love... Pictorial space is searchingly probed, and compositions are brought to exquisite tension".²³

To summarize, while we cannot say what or who each specific object in Morandi's art may represent, my response to his images, mirrored by art critics, is that they reflect both surface calm and passionate intensity. One can speculate that these objects, at least unconsciously, stand for people who were important to Morandi, and toward whom his feelings were deeply conflicted. Morandi's way of life certainly suggests such a conflict.

He lived in tight quarters with his mother, working in a studio he could reach only by passing through his sisters' bedroom, yet by all evidence the family relationships were harmonious and mutually protective. Perhaps Morandi displaced his conflicted feelings to the inanimate objects he painted, what Wilkin calls, his "neutral subject mat-

ter.” He slept close to them in his studio and spent nearly all his waking hours carefully arranging and lighting them. His relationship with the women in his family may have been chaste, but with the objects that he painted, as Wilkin says, he looked so intensely that it made his gaze an “act of possessing.”

It is tempting to speculate that Morandi’s way of life reflects a compromise between his excitement at Oedipal triumph, the sudden death of his father and his continuing bond with the women of his family, and his guilt at this triumph, leading him to avoid all passionate relationships, and to displace his conflicted emotion to the objects he painted.

Though this formulation could explain both the passion and the overall restraint in his art, we do not have confirming data from Morandi, himself. Nonetheless, looking at his art, simply noting my response to it and that of art critics, it does appear to illustrate the analytic principles

of conflict and compromise formation.

The Nature of Reality

There remains one additional aspect of analytic process, and more generally, of life, that Morandi’s art helps to visualize, and that is the complexity and mystery of subjective experience. His art clearly, and I believe intentionally, engages not just the content of subjective reality, but certain questions about the nature of “reality” that are central to therapeutic action. Whereas analysts usually let these questions remain in the background, or struggle with words that do not do them justice, Morandi’s art spotlights them front and center.

A direct source for Morandi’s questioning of reality was his close involvement with the Metaphysical Painters, whose major spokesman, Morandi’s friend, De Chirico, was deeply affected by Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. This

group did not aspire to create a new style, in the narrow sense, but a new way of seeing that would reclaim the Italian heritage of philosophical painting derived from Uccello and Giotto.

Their goal was to evoke a reality that was “meta,” meaning beyond or behind, physical reality. This idea suggests what we would call “subjectivity:” the inner world of psychological reality, with its enigmas and mysteries. *Valori plastici*, the magazine started by the Metaphysical group in 1918, soon became the most influential cultural publication in Italy, including essays on philosophy and aesthetics by many well-known figures, including Clive Bell and Kandinsky. Morandi contributed no words, but he permitted the magazine to reproduce his paintings.

The 1918 painting included here (fig. 10) epitomizes Morandi’s Metaphysical period and shows how he began to explore subjective reality. In this image, planes appear to form the side of the box, until one sees that they actually

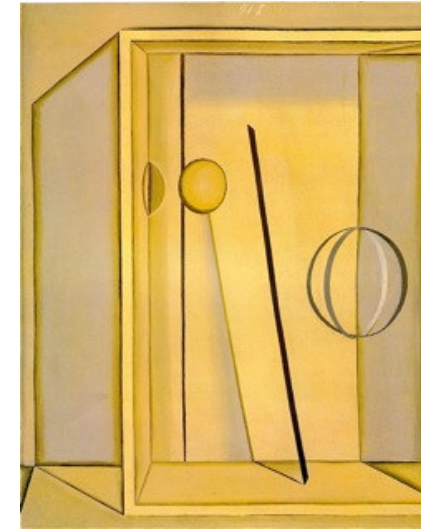


Fig. 10 – *Still Life*, 1918

depict a shadow, and the top edge of the plank dissolves into the light. This edge seems to be there, until one notices that, in fact, it is not really there.

Within a few years, the Metaphysical painters ceased to be a cohesive group. *Valori Plastici* closed down in 1922. Morandi always minimized the impact of the Metaphysi-

cal school, preferring to see himself as independent. But in his art he remained true to their quest, exploring the mysteries of reality for the rest of his life.

One way to understand Morandi's quest is to recall Freud's theory about Leonardo's sexuality: curiosity about the origin of babies gradually shifted toward curiosity about all of Nature, through a process of sublimation. Thinking of sublimation as an evolving cascade of compromise formations, then with Morandi's sublimation, developed while he actually lived with his mother, compromise led beyond Leonardo's probing the laws of Nature, toward a passion to explore, from his tiny corner of the apartment, the very nature of reality.

As I respond to Morandi's art, he evokes three mysterious aspects of subjective reality that are central to clinical analysis, all of which involve concealment. One aspect is that apparent repetition conceals infinite variation. Another is that apparent clarity conceals inevitable ambig-

ity. Finally, his art evokes how conventional reality conceals another reality that may seem *more* real, though it is just "in our heads." With Morandi's art, these abstractions come alive, and his images help the analyst to keep them clearly in mind.

Repetition

No aspect of reality is more crucial to Morandi's art, and to analysis, than repetition. According to Freud's "Remembering, repeating, and working-through"²⁴ we hold onto what we have lost by remembering, and we remember by means of repetition, in analysis, and in all areas of life. Analysis creates an environment that leads to what we call working through. This process occurs by means of repetition, not through harmful action, but instead through the medium of speech. In his art, Morandi remembers by repetition through the medium of paint.

Of course, analysts know that each apparent “repetition” is actually unique, but we train ourselves to spot patterns, and as a result may miss subtle, but important differences. And when a session seems repetitive, we may become bored and detached. In Morandi’s art, repetition is as evident as in analysis. But unlike the fleeting moments of analysis, the painted image is static, so the viewer can stay with it, discovering that against a background of sameness, differences pop out.

Wilkin alludes to this phenomenon by citing Umberto Eco, for whom Morandi “revealed the variety in things that are apparently the same.”²⁵ As Wilkin says, “the experience of seeing a substantial number of Morandi’s paintings makes one acutely sensitive to subtleties – to differences in space, to shifts in light”.²⁶ We can see these subtleties by looking at the series of still lifes from 1951 (fig. 11). They reveal that even when Morandi’s images seem nearly identical, they are actually quite different.



Fig. 11 – Still Lives, 1951

In the one on the upper left, the handle of the pitcher and the edge of the oil can seem to define each other’s form, in a kind of symbiosis. On the upper right, the pitcher has moved away from the oil jug, and it looks as though its handle is now attached to a bottle. By introducing a squat

bottle to the lower right image, Morandi adds weight to the left side of the arrangement, suddenly making it appear to be split into two distinct groups.

Analyst Christopher Bollas suggests the importance of watching for such minute shifts in analytic treatment: “Day after day the material may seem strikingly familiar, the same themes, same devices [...]. Yet often enough, even in the midst of such tenacious certainty the method (free association) springs a surprise”.²⁷ Like Bollas’s freely associating analysand, Morandi repeats himself with “tenacious certainty,” but, as we have seen, he keeps surprising us with small, but significant, changes. He is so free and un-formulaic that, according to one of his biographers,²⁸ Morandi’s pictures are almost never even the same dimensions.

Study of Morandi’s art suggests that, as if it were his analysis, gradual shifts in content reflect shifts in his inner world. In analysis, these shifts reveal themselves not only

in content, but even more through such features as tone of voice, pace, and affect. Morandi replicates these shifts in visual terms. And, as in analysis, the overall sameness heightens our response to subtle changes. But does repetition also generate working through, for Morandi, and perhaps for the viewer?

In psychoanalytic working through, as the patient repeats internalized object relationships, through description and enactment, even a small change may enable us to see these relationships from an entirely new perspective. Gradually, our understanding of the internal objects grows more rounded and complete. As in the process of working through, Morandi’s painted objects evolve over time, and our knowledge of them evolves. Karen Wilkin has said that in Morandi’s art, “one small change changes everything”.²⁹

Italian critic Giulio Carlo Argan speaks of Morandi’s “constant repetition of a few images of insignificant ob-

jects...he chewed and digested them....”³⁰ In the view of Renato Miracco, this repetition “tends toward the construction and definition of a whole, toward the specific intention of testing the full potential of a subject.”³¹

To grasp how Morandi tests the “full potential of a subject,” searching within himself to work it through, let us focus on how he relates to the tall pitcher over a period of time. As he repetitively chews over the same image, Morandi evokes different “meanings,” gradually evolving toward “the construction and definition of a whole.”

We do not actually know what the tall red pitcher represents for Morandi. But to illustrate the artist’s reworking of an internal object representation, let us suppose it represents his father. At least that is my association.

In his early 40’s, Morandi represents the pitcher (1934) (fig. 6) as dominating, its solid mass and prominent spout evoking authority and power. A few years later (1938) (fig. 12), a red container stands before the pitcher, its feverish



Fig. 12 – *Still Life*, 1938

color suggesting a confrontation. When Morandi reaches his 50’s, the pitcher seems to find its resting place, integrated into the “family.” In a work completed when Morandi neared 60, it appears small, and other objects

seem to surround it protectively.

A dramatic shift in the image of this pitcher begins in 1942, when Morandi shows it in a specific pose that he repeats many times over the next eight years, within “family” groups that are otherwise quite different. He keeps re-creating what seems to be a gesture of affection, a “kiss” between the pitcher and one particular urn. The pitcher seems to touch the edge of its lip to the lip of the urn. The example illustrated here (1942) (figs. 14 and 15) shows this gesture, within the group setting and in close-up. This sequence may or may not reflect how Morandi has worked through his conflicted emotions about his father and reintegrated him into a loving relationship. In any case, the transformation of the object is undeniable. Looking closely at Morandi’s art reminds the analyst that repetition need not have a dulling effect at all. In fact, observing the same objects repeatedly, whether the pitcher



Fig. 13 – *Still Life*, 1949

and urn that Morandi placed on a table, or the internal objects our patients tell us about, offers an advantage. When nothing much changes, we more readily pick up subtle changes. We gain a full appreciation of these objects only as our perception of them modulates, bit by bit, over time. In analysis or art, these nuances mark the sta-

ges of working through, or as art critic Miracco calls it, “testing the full potential of a subject.”

Ambiguity

Another aspect of reality that is mysterious and easily ignored, but unavoidable in Morandi’s art, is ambiguity. As analysts we “know” ambiguity is omnipresent, but as human beings we resist it, habitually formulating and categorizing, creating a falsely clear reality. Morandi’s art shows us a world in which, paradoxically, it is crystal clear that ambiguity is everywhere. His art reminds the analyst that in any given moment, our perception of reality may be open to multiple interpretations.

Morandi’s work, especially from the ‘40’s onward, reads like a primer on the countless forms of ambiguity. His images are metaphors for ephemeral aspects of experience that are difficult to evoke in words. In one (fig. 16),



Fig. 14 – *Still Life*, 1942



Fig. 15 – *Still Life*, 1942

a blue bowl stands behind two vases, the inner sides of which seem to define its shape. But does the bowl extend behind either or both of these vases?

This image recalls a patient who tells me in the first session, with great emphasis, that she knows her parents *loved* her, because they were always saying they did. Her two parents define her view of herself, just as the two vases define the blue bowl. Over time, she and I discover parts of her “bowl,” so to speak, that were initially concealed, her sadness and anger at their lack of emotional attunement. Each of Morandi’s pictures metaphorically evokes such ambiguous human situations. They serve as vivid reminders that even the most simple and clear-cut experience will inevitably yield to ambiguity.

Reality, Itself

Morandi’s art evokes not only an exploration of repetition



Fig. 16 – *Still Life*, 1962

and ambiguity, but also an even more basic issue about reality, the question of what we actually *mean* by reality? We know that subjective reality can change over time and with different points of view. But in Morandi’s imagery

subjective reality is inherently unstable. If reality is where we stand, then it is not, as convention would have it, solid ground; subjectively, it shifts like a teeter-totter, on its own. Morandi's art illustrates this phenomenon, helping the clinician to remain mindful of it.

Clinically, this subjective phenomenon occurs in various forms: the analytic pair moves among different interpenetrating realities, such as conventional "reality" (or the analyst as ally), various shifting transferences, unconscious fantasy, and dissociated mental states. Analysands often resist seeing this confusion of realities. And analysts not infrequently minimize the power of transference. Because of our own resistance, we may be drawn into experiencing transference illusion as reality, or may dismiss the reality of intense transference as mere illusion.

Learning to live with a constant vacillation among subjective realities is crucial to achieving analytic change. Typically, analysands gain insight into the transference, but

hold tight to an old, problematic mind-set, despite knowing it to be a relic of the distant past. They cling to the old in order to avoid the uncertainty of the new, but for another reason, as well: as they move toward the new, they find that the old is not eradicated. Struggling with two different views of reality that shift in and out of consciousness, they feel confused and frightened.

I have found that explicitly mentioning to patients that these multiple realities co-exist often can be quite helpful. Patients more fully embrace the new when they realize their anachronistic responses will never disappear completely. They grow to accept that an oscillation among realities *is* subjective reality. They appreciate this iridescence as a reality that is richer, and more real, than its component colorations.

This phenomenon finds a visual equivalent in Morandi's art, where we can see different realities playing off each other. As analysts, we try in vain to pin down such eph-

meral experiences with abstract terminology, but Morandi pictures them for us.

In looking at a Morandi, the viewer may think, “I am looking at objects on a table,” but the paint seems to say, “I’m real. It’s those objects on the table that are not.” As critic Karen Wilkin describes Morandi’s mature work, there’s a “tension between the illusion of solidity and the fact of paint, between reference to intense perceptions of the variousness of the existing world and an equally intense awareness of the unchanging actuality of the painting’s flat surface”.³²

In a characteristic phase of treatment, the patient may see the analyst as a judge, for example, and find it dangerous to speak freely, an effect that could be considered the “illusion.” Yet at the same time, the patient may know that the analyst is at least trying to be accepting; we can consider that the “fact.” Morandi captures this simultaneity: you keep the illusion, but never lose sight of what Wilkin



Fig. 17 – Still Lives, 1964

calls “the fact of paint.” Never “either/or,” with Morandi’s art it is always “both/and.”

Two similar images (1964) (fig. 17) illustrate this phenomenon. Though we never mistake these images for pure abstraction, neither can we forget they consist of just paint, because the brushstrokes go off in all directions, instead of clearly defining the objects. Metaphorically,

what Wilkin calls the “illusion of solidity,” the image of a vase, could stand for the transference illusion, the analyst as judge, say, or as an idealized figure; what she calls “the fact of paint” could represent the analyst as flesh and blood. Morandi fixes this oscillation of realities within a stable image that can serve as a mnemonic device, helping to recall an ephemeral fact of subjective reality.

The interpenetration of transference and conventional reality is pervasive in analytic process, but a somewhat different aspect of subjective reality comes to the fore at times of loss, separation, or termination. For example, patients will say that their analyst is never really gone, but is always there, somehow, in mind or spirit. Especially in his late works, when it may have reflected his sense of mortality, the evanescence of seemingly solid reality and the apparent solidity of fantasy become Morandi’s main interest: objects continually blend into a void, or emerge from it. In one watercolor image (1963) (fig. 18) the nega-

tive space on the left, containing no paint, has the weight of an object; what is absent is also present.

In some of his late paintings, as well, Morandi captures this evanescence. As described by Renato Miracco, “the shapes disappear...and an ‘emotive trace’ is all that appears on the canvas. It is the warmth of the emotions and memory that has been captured”.³³ Consciously or not, as he was dying of cancer, Morandi has created a metaphor that suggests his transformation into a warm memory.

Morandi also evokes another subjective phenomenon that is central to analysis, but difficult to put into words: an ineffable sense of oneness. The analyst may sense a blurring of the boundary with the patient, as in that uncanny feeling when both have the same thought at the same time. Or the patient may describe a sense of oneness with everything, a kind of transcendence. Freud calls this the “oceanic feeling,” and he associates it with the infant’s earliest experience with mother.³⁴



Fig. 18 – *Still Life*, 1963

This mysterious subjective experience may be of great importance to analytic treatment. It may represent the return to a state of merger from which a more healthy differentiation can develop. In addition, Freud, and later, Loewald, consider a return to oneness with the mother of early infancy to be the ultimate aim of sublimation. If, as Loewald says, in his monograph on *Sublimation*,³⁵ art and analysis are each a form of sublimation, then to experience this ineffable sense of oneness would be a basic goal of both.

In his very last watercolors (1963) (fig. 19), Morandi evokes this vision of oneness, almost completely blurring the boundaries of figure and ground. Here is how Renato Miracco describes this period in Morandi's art: "the form is expanded, dilated, indeterminate [...] an attempt to make form coincide with a total embrace of the blank sheet and infinity."³⁶



Fig. 19 – *Still Life*, 1963

Morandi's exploration of the mysteries of reality continued literally to the end. In his very last painting, completed in 1964, (Fig. 20) he seems to question the reality of the oil can that has figured in so many of his paintings. Its left side seems to dissolve into the background, barely distinguishable from it. Since Morandi painted this work when he knew he was close to death, perhaps the image of



Fig. 20 – *Still Life*, 1964

figure and ground embedded in an all-over oneness reflects his vision of what lay ahead.

Some critics have seen in his final painting, done when he was dying of lung cancer, an echo of the Basilica of Santo Stefano, where he worshipped regularly. According to one of his sisters, he went to Mass only to please them, but perhaps celebrating the Eucharist, the transubstantiation

of Catholic ritual, helped sustain Morandi's interest in the transformation of one reality to another. Whether or not his religious observance was a factor, this final painting shows us that exploring the mysteries of reality in terms of paint continued to engage Morandi until the very end.

Summary

As an analytic clinician, I see two key clinical concepts playing out in Morandi's art, the theory of object relations and, intertwined with it, the theory of compromise formation. These impressions seem to be supported by a consensus of art critics, whose writing vividly describes what Morandi's work evokes for them. Since, from all indications, Morandi projected his inner world onto his canvases, and nowhere else, it seems credible to view his paintings as analogous to the words of an analysand, and

to permit them to help us to see our theories in visual terms.

Another aspect of clinical experience that Morandi's art evokes for me, and for art critics, as well, is an engagement with complexities of subjective reality. The task of analysis is to uncover and explore aspects of reality that are typically concealed: repetition conceals minute, and often crucial, variations; whatever seems perfectly clear, in time will seem ambiguous; and ineffable subjective states continually muddle what we take to be real. Morandi's art helps us to keep these concepts clearly in mind, by presenting them as tangible fact.

If Morandi's canvas was, in effect, his analyst, it evidently was not a silent one. Morandi denied he meant his art to "say" anything, but it must have spoken to him, reflecting back the essence of what was in his mind. I've tried to show that his art also speaks to us, to some degree about him, and his creative process, but most eloquently about

analytic process, and more broadly, about being human.

* This paper is a revised version of a talk delivered on January 13, 2010, in New York, at the meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association.

NOTES

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³*Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵M. Levenstein, *The 'Naiveté' of Morandi*, "Art in America", december 2008, p. 140.

⁶K. Wilkin, *Giorgio Morandi, Works, writings, and interviews*, Poligrafica, Barcelona 2007, p. 133.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁸G. Morandi, *Interview*, in M.C. Bandera and R. Miracco, eds., *Morandi: 1890-1964. Catalog of Exhibition at Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna*, Skira Editore, Milan, 2008, p. 352.

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¹⁰R. Longhi, quoted *ibid.*, p. 280.

¹¹R. Miracco, *ibid.*, p. 318.

¹² H. W. Loewald, *Psychoanalysis as an Art and the Fantasy Character of the Psychoanalytic Situation*, "International Journal of Psychoanalysis", vol. 23, pp. 277-299.

¹³ A. Beccaria, in M.C. Bandera and R. Miracco, p. 304.

¹⁴ S. Scully, *Giorgio Morandi's Resistance and Persistence*, arcritical.com blog, september 2006

¹⁵ K. Wilkin, Panel discussion at the Phillips Collection, Washington DC, march 26, 2009

¹⁶ M. C. Bandera, in M.C. Bandera and R. Miracco, p. 43

¹⁷ G. Belli, Wall note at the Phillips Collection Morandi retrospective, Washington DC, 2009

¹⁸ G. Morandi, in M.C. Bandera and R. Miracco, pp. 351-359.

¹⁹ K. Wilkin, *Review* in "New Criterion", october 2008.

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²² C. Banfey, *Review* in "Slate", october 24, 2008.

²³ M. Naves, *The Sight of Silence: Morandi's Enigmatic Vision*, "The New York Observer", october 15, 2006.

²⁴ S. Freud (1912), *Remembering, repeating, and working-through*, *Standard Edition*, vol. 12, pp. 147-156.

²⁵U. Eco (address delivered at the opening of the Museo Morandi, Bologna, october 1993), paraphrased by K. Wilkin, *Giorgio Morandi*, Rizzoli, New York 1997, p. 114.

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²⁷ C. Bollas, *The Goals of Psychoanalysis?*, in *The Mystery of Things*, Routledge, London-New York 1999, p. 70.

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³¹ R. Miracco, in M.C. Bandera and R. Miracco, p. 304.

³² K. Wilkin, *Giorgio Morandi*, Rizzoli, New York 1997, p. 98

³³ R. Miracco, in M. C. Bandera and R. Miracco, p. 326.

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³⁵ H. W. Loewald, *Sublimation*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1988.

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