Ulysses Still Journeying: A creative struggle with the two cultures in psychotherapy and literature.

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Admiration

_The Therapeutic Imagination_, by Professor Jeremy Holmes, is a fine, creative, non-reductive, sensitive, both aesthetically and psycho-dynamically highly literate, work. Focusing on the relationship between relational psychodynamic psychotherapy and literature, it’s also an accessible, comfortable, non-jargon-ridden, read.

The author is deservedly well known, both as prolific writer, particularly on attachment theory and its wider dimensions and as psychodynamic practitioner, who fused his psychodynamic psychotherapy with being a psychiatrist, over several decades. He has also, over the years, been a sane and benign voice of integrity in the crazy, class-and-ethnic-bias-ridden and bureaucratic, politics of Psychotherapy in the UK and Europe. His humanity, honesty and realism, shows through in the many clinical examples he shares, and his commentaries on the literary examples he explores are first hand and express a depth of familiarity with the works to which he refers, that shows how much this book comes from the heart.

He writes (Postscript, p. 181): ‘I remain committed to the four overall themes that shape this work, although, like the shifting sands of the North Devon dunes where I am lucky enough to live, their contours have undoubtedly eroded and re-formed over the years.’ And that sense of long-pounded immersion in the seas and winds of experience, creativity, coal face work in the field and in the depths, expanses, and the marsh inlets, of the literature from which he draws, pervades the book. This immersion clearly included being at Cambridge during the literary critic F.R. Leavis’s _Indian Summer_, and this influence, too, with contrary polarities, has been deeply inwardly assimilated to the point of being at his fingertips.

The four overall themes of the book might be summed up (Postscript, pp. 181–182) as:

* Recognition (returning to Freud) of the affinity between psychotherapy and literature, in terms of the poetic creativity of the unconscious;
The integral connection between reconciled attachment processes and the capacity for narrative, for telling stories about the self and to the self;

* The recognition of the autonomy and integral character of human predicaments, involving transcending whilst assimilating ‘third person objectifications’ of medical diagnoses via ‘mapping’ or analogising, ‘diagnostic categories’ through literature and dramatic art;

* Finally, he attempts to address some dualistic variants on the ‘two cultures’ of brain and mind, science and art, psychiatry and psychodynamics, etc. widening this out, also, to consider issues of class, poverty, and what Williams (1973) called the tension of ‘the country and the city’. He condenses all this (Postscript, p. 182) into a final statement.

‘In view of all this, I stand firm to this book’s basic message. Poetry, an essential hand-holder in time of trouble, is as integral to psychotherapy’s identity as its science, and, as a third leg of the hybrid tripod, literature will continue to be a boundless and continuing resource for its practitioners.’

Some of the names and works of those used creatively and illustratively include: Daniel Deronda: George Eliot; Preoccupations: Seamus Heaney; A la recherche du temps perdu: Marcel Proust; Waking in the Blue: Robert Lowell; Dinner with my Mother: Hugo Williams; Immortality Ode: William Wordsworth; The Ancient Mariner: Samuel Taylor Coleridge; Heart of Darkness: Joseph Conrad; Aunt Julia: Garcia Lhosa; Scoop: Evelyn Waugh; Emma: Jane Austen; Siegfried: Richard Wagner; Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde: Robert Louis Stevenson; Lycidas: John Milton; In Memoriam: Alfred Tennyson; A Valediction forbidding Mourning: John Donne; Metamorphoses: Ovid; The Picture of Dorian Gray: Oscar Wilde; Howard’s End: EM Forster; The Catch: Simon Armitage; and Poems by Dannie Abse, Sharon Olds, Miroslav Holub, Philip Larkin.

Tensions and Paradoxes of Recognition

Previously, he recounts (p. 171) how, meeting for the first time, and extolling the work of, a psychiatrist colleague with a strong commitment to working with CBT methods at the sharp-end in inner city contexts, he got the reply, ‘O but you’re the psychotherapist fellow who writes those nice articles about poetry’, which leads Holmes into a sharp discussion of the ‘toughness’ of poetry, with a well-hewn illustration from Simon Armitage, The Catch (2012). This is a toughness contrary to the usual image proffered by those who have not engaged with it. But, indeed, as this anecdote signals, a partial and acknowledged unease with what he is trying to do, and how it may be perceived – in more than one quarter-pervades the book. And considering this tension, also, has to be at the heart of our response to this work. F.R. Leavis (1962), once more:

‘The common pursuit of true judgment’: that is how the critic should see his business, and what it should be for him. His perceptions and judgments are his, or they are nothing; but, whether or not he has consciously addressed himself to cooperative labour, they are inevitably collaborative. Collaboration may take the form of disagreement, and one is grateful to the critic whom one has found worth disagreeing with.

But it is not so much, or simplistically, disagreement, but, rather, has this been taken far enough? Precisely because it goes so far in recognising the relationship, because of its extraordinary thoughtfulness, sensitivity and goodwill, it also, for this reviewer, constitutes an indexical work in which the predicament of psychotherapy (any psychodynamic psychotherapy embracing transference work, including hu-
manistic and integrative approaches which do that) is presented in all its difficulty. In this difficulty, it definitely remains not fully deconstructed (in a generic sense of that slogan term). I must indeed declare, before I go further, that I have more than one dog in this fight, as one who holds that poetry and aesthetics are the fundamental paradigms for the understanding of the narrative-relational psychotherapies, and secondly as one who holds that there is no primary ‘reality’ truth-frame (no ultimate fact/fiction differentiation, for instance), to which all others may be reduced, in understanding either the human world or science (which are in fact inseparable), and therefore that ‘poesis’, human imagination, is the primary criterion of ‘reality’. Which, I am aware, put just like that, sounds crazy, but it is rather a clumsy formulation of a necessary realisation, to which we now come.

Now, the problem is not even that Jeremy Holmes does not recognise all this; he absolutely does, in an extraordinary passage to which I now turn! Here, then, is this passage (a long quotation is necessary to give the context, but it will also give a very positive sense of the flavour and calibre of the book, and where its sympathies lie) which leads up to an appeal, to, of all people, Vico, the great pioneering eighteenth century philosopher, who, smack in the middle of the positivism of the Enlightenment, astonishingly, still managed to recognise the centrality of poetic-historical understanding (Vico, 1997)

A sense of how radical his vision potentially is, may thus be gleaned from how, at this point, embarking on his comparatory journey, and having earlier started out with the lineage from the Romantics to Bion and Winnicott (p. 4), Holmes ventures into this radical territory (pp. 32–34) as he compares ‘metaphor’, (the word derived from Greek), and ‘transference’ (derived from Latin), first noting that, stripped of translations, they mean much the same and going on, to the applause of the jury, with examples, to draw out vividly how profoundly the ‘analytical’ and ‘projective’ dimensions overlap in the richness of live instances. They lead into mention of the dimension of Ogden’s (1997) ‘th>ird’, and on to T.S. Eliot (1975) on the transmutation process.

There then follows this (the influence of Charles Rycroft on this book is profound – and acknowledged):

‘A consequence of this viewpoint is that analytic theory becomes not so much a body of objective knowledge as a set of rules and guidelines – heuristics – for interpreting transferential metaphors [my emphasis]. Theory and therapy are intimately linked – theory is a language for describing the experience of therapy [my emphasis]. Musical theory and poetic criticism have a similar relationship to their arts. Innovations in analytic theory in understanding narcissistic disorders, for example (Kohut, 1984), are similar to innovations in musical or poetic form: a new language is created which enables new territory to be explored. [my emphasis]

Rycroft (1968) sees symbol formation as a general psychological function. The capacity to respond to poetry – and comprehend transference – depends on the development of “imaginative competence” (Holmes, 1997). This faculty evolves in the course of childhood, starting with the linguistic and imaginative freedom of the toddler and young child in which fantasy and reality are still intermingled and continuing into adolescence with the development of the autonomous imagination, and an increasing sense of the challenges and limitations of “reality”.

In describing this process, Trilling (1950) quotes the eighteenth-century philosopher, Vico:

Poetry is the primary activity of the human mind. Man, before he arrived at the stage of forming universals, forms imaginary ideas; before he can articulate, he
sings; before speaking in prose, he speaks in verse; before using technical terms, he uses metaphors; and the metaphorical use of words is as natural to him as that which we call "natural".

Trilling goes on to suggest that "psychoanalysis is a science of metaphor … it makes poetry indigenous to the very constitution of the mind. Indeed, as Freud sees it, the mind is in the greater part of its tendency exactly a poetry-making organ."

**Creative Comparisons and Radical Vision**

Similar views to Vico’s of poetry, imagination, creativity and the evolution of consciousness, are later articulated by, amongst many others, Shelley, Coleridge, Blake and Keats (‘The imagination may be compared to Adam’s Dream; he awoke and found it truth,’ Keats & Forman, 1947). Despite surface appearances, this is also the position of Kant (1964).

This whole passage leading to the quotation from Vico is extraordinary in its implications. The comparison between the development of psychotherapy, and the evolution of poetic and musical form is extremely apt, and extremely important. It reminds us, indeed, of two very striking paragraphs of Wittgenstein’s, from *Philosophical Investigations* (1967): We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also *in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other* [my emphasis] (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.) In the one case, the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, *something that is expressed only by these words in these positions* [my emphasis] (Understanding a poem.)

And: “So, you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?” It is what human beings *say* that is true or false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions, but in form of life. (*PI*, § 241)

Leavis (Harrison, 2015) has argued this at great length) expresses essentially the same position in his response to C.P. Snow in the *Two Cultures* controversy (Leavis, 1962): But there is a prior human achievement of collaborative creation, a more basic work of the mind of man (and more than the mind), one without which the triumphant erection of the scientific edifice would not have been possible: that is, the *creation of the human world, including language* [my emphasis].

Leavis (1962), like Ogden (1997), talks about ‘the third,’ in his case, ‘the third realm’. And so does Winnicott in talking about Transitional Experience, which occupies the same ‘congruence’ position, although Winnicott does not let go of the representational notion of ‘reality’, which was so deeply embedded in psychoanalytical culture. But the essential position is put forward in such passages as (Winnicott, 1975).

My claim is that if there is a need for this double statement [about ‘inner’ and ‘outer’], there is also need for a triple one: the third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated. It is usual to refer to ‘reality-testing’, and to make a clear distinction between apperception and perception. I am here staking a claim for an intermediate state between a baby’s ‘inability’ and his growing ability to recognize and accept reality.

Winnicott intimates that the whole of culture rests on this.

Philosophically, this type of position,
which is being rejected here by Wittgenstein and the others, is the concept of ‘representation’, a representational or correspondence notion of truth, which leads straight to the dualism Holmes challenges all through the book, and instead of this is offered a conception, an alternative paradigm conception, of congruence. A conception of truth as congruence recognises that there is a continuum between action or volition, and the concept both psychoanalysts and F.R. Leavis use – but with different forces, to which I shall return – of enactment, and so, therefore, of imagination also, so that there is a continuum between discovering truth, by scientific or phenomenological observation, and creating truth, through some variant of congruent conditions. In the artistic or aesthetic sphere, of course – and we must add, in psychodynamic psychotherapy too – this leads to two different concepts of the ancient concept of mimesis, (translated inadequately by ‘imitation’, but nearer to the psychoanalytic concept of radical identification, fusional psychic merger), the first one which is, once again, about accurate representation (for instance, as in: ‘Shakespeare has an accurate socio-political understanding of Ancient Rome in the Roman plays’, as A.D. Nuttall argued, (1983), as opposed to a notion of congruence as something like ‘fitting with our sense of appropriateness or the possibilities of life’, which, above all, allows for the emergence of novelty and originality in people’s own self-development in psychotherapy, and in new forms of creativity in art, music and literature. So we can, on that enactive conception of mimesis truly say that ‘the first movement of Beethoven’s Eroica Symphony opened up radically new truth possibilities for us in art’, which only feels unnatural because we are so totally conditioned by the representational model in life and art, that we can hardly consciously escape it.

All this also closely connects with Daniel Stern’s later conception of implicit knowledge, which is most fully developed by him in The Present Moment: in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life (2004), which rather supersedes the concept of evolution of self-awareness as presupposition for experiencing primary process as outlined in The Interpersonal World of the Infant (1998), a revision of Freud which Holmes appears to support (pp. 165–166), but which takes it out of that indeterminate and implicit realm, where Winnicott – and Coleridge and T.S. Eliot – places it.

There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been. We are only undeceived
Of that which, deceiving, could no longer harm.
In the middle, not only in the middle of the way
But all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble,
On the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold,
And menaced by monsters, fancy lights,
Risking enchantment.

(T.S. Eliot, 1947)

One of the signs of hesitation about this total thesis – which is not being denied by Holmes, I believe – is a certain underplaying of its potential. To be sure, sensitivity to client tolerance remains paramount. But therapist confidence can be relevant as well, and the background of the dominant scientific and representational paradigm makes it very difficult to embrace this dimension. One indication is that Holmes exclusively refers to the restrictive psychoanalytic concept of enactment (pp. 14 and 60), whereas, on the ‘imaginative congruence’ (transitional experience) model, everything we do in psychotherapy is enactment, that is...
the implication, and it is not a concept with
the connotation of 'acting out', but rather a
comprehensive acceptance of the 'dramatic'
and 'frame-based' and 'rite' character of all
human interaction.

Convergence and Revelation

After our excursions into argumentative
epistemology, it is worth quoting one very
touching moment when he overcomes his
cautiousness, puts aside the caveats, and enters
the twilight zone of the Eliot-Coleridgean
realm with a client.

'Oliver went away on holiday for a week
with his wife. On his return, he reported
that the first few days had been pretty bad
and that he had felt pretty cut off from his
wife. They then had a row, in the course of
which he had suddenly seen how awful it
must be to have to live with him. He was
filled with compassion for her and, in his
words, "the barriers suddenly came down"
and they were able to remain close for the
rest of the holiday. As he [sic?] was listening
to this story, I had a vivid image of the fa-
mous passage in Coleridge's Ancient Mar-
iner in which the parched, sleepless and
guilt-ridden mariner, whose companions
are all dead, watches the" water snakes in
the sea and, in a moment of compassion for
his fellow creatures, "blesses" them. At that
time, the albatross falls from his neck,
he is able to sleep at last, wind returns,
rain falls and his companions wake from
the dead. The snakes, symbols of evil, are
suddenly seen as innocent living creatures,
symbolising perhaps the mariner's own
projected evil with which he has suddenly
come to terms. As he forgives himself, so
his depression lifts.

All this seemed to fit Oliver's plight so
well that the therapist risked telling the pa-
tient of the parallel. Fortunately, Oliver was
able to respond, and compared his early
presentation to the ancient mariner who
clutched at anyone who would listen to his
story. As the therapy continued, the phrase
"an ancient mariner situation" became a
shorthand for various states of guilt and
desperation, but also a byword for compas-
sion and the possibility of escape from de-
pression.'

Perhaps the present reviewer is also
clutching his epistemology for anyone who
would listen, and I certainly have not begun
to fully discuss the institutional barriers
and obstacles to embracing a 'language first-
science second' epistemology. However, I
shall end with a brief allusion to a use of
literature of my own. I was working with a
client who was glimpsing a breakthrough
but hesitated to accept her own emerging
capacity for a new kind of creativity. So I
told her the story of how Keats, at the be-
inning of his poetic career, when he had
written nothing that had more than the
glimmerings of promise, was introduced
by his friend Charles Cowden Clark, in
October 1816, when Keats was just short
of 21 years old, to George Chapman's very
robust and non-Pope-like, non-eighteenth
century Elizabethan-Jacobean transla-
tion of Homer, which they read aloud for
several hours into the night – and then
Keats walked home, and, summoned as it
were, by the genius of Homer, entered into
his own poetic genius. His poem is not
only about discovery, the discovery of the
genius of Homer which is compared, in in-
comparable language, to other discoveries,
but it also actually is and enacts the thing it
is about; it is pure enactment because at this
moment Keats is embracing his own genius.
It is pure creation, pure congruence with
emerging life, both testimony to what he
grasped, but likewise, at the second level,
what was actually being enacted in him.

He wrote nothing as good again for over
a year of development afterwards, his accel-
erated development under the shadow of
tuberculosis and early death. But the enact-
ment had been made. His new poem was
delivered in manuscript to Cowden Clark
by 10.00 am, that following morning! I read
this out to my client, myself responding to the prompting of a spontaneous impulse, and it fell on fertile ground with my client, who felt and was delighted, not intimidated, by the arresting ‘call’ embodied in the poem, and who of course ‘got’ the fact that we too, belatedly, were participating in the on-going enactment implicit both in the poem and in the process of psychotherapy.

On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer
Much have I travelled in the realms of gold
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star’d at the Pacific–and all his men
Look’d at each other with a wild surmise–
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

(Keats, 1977)

Superficially, here, in this fragment of creative dialogue, we still have, in variant form, the ancient tension and argument in the narrative psychotherapies between insight and action. But, I believe, that in the force of the responsive upsurge Holmes’ work has called from me, we have something we would both recognise, and which dissolves that antithesis.

Notes on contributor
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References
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This book presents a model of brief therapy for three very common difficulties; anxiety, anger, and depression. As a former teacher in several universities and with his experiences of working in his private clinic, Robert Taibbi has developed his short technique over many years and named it, 'Boot Camp Therapy'. He brings his psychodynamic training to his unique approach, yet here he is also focusing on assessment, time settings and specific goals. The intention is that:

"In some cases, long-term therapy that seeks to assess a client's history and gain insight over the course of many sessions isn't always possible. Immediate behavior change and concrete steps to fix the problem at hand are sometimes more practical and desirable." (see cover).

The book consists of six chapters: starting with the essence of the ‘brief therapy’ model that is central to 'Boot Camp Therapy'. The second chapter concerns itself with the six concepts that are ‘core’ in brief therapy: (a) focusing on a client's immediate behaviour; (b) helping them to do things differently; (c) taking action; (d) concentrating on process; (e) using targeted goals and homework to jump-start and motivate them into … (f) taking risks and breaking patterns. The other chapters present more specific treatment plans for: anxiety (Chapter 3); anger (Chapter 4); and depression (Chapter 5). The last chapter is about integrating his unique model, which is developed in 'Boot Camp Therapy', and how every (any) psychotherapist can use it in their own therapeutic style – it's all pretty basic stuff!1

By introducing the ‘Boot Camp’ model, Taibbi follows in the footsteps of an already well-known approach based on Preston’s (1998, 2006) Integrative Brief Therapy, which examines cognitive, psychodynamic, humanistic, and neurobehav-

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1 ‘Boot Camp’ is American slang for basic training in the Army.