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# Ulysses still journeying: A creative struggle with the two cultures in psychotherapy and literature

Heward Wilkinson

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## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

### **Ulysses still journeying: A creative struggle with the two cultures in psychotherapy and literature**

**The therapeutic imagination: using literature to deepen psychodynamic understanding and enhance empathy**, by Jeremy Holmes, London and New York, Routledge, 2014, 216 pp., £29-99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-318-78949-4; £100 (hardback) ISBN 978-0415819572

#### **Admiration**

*The Therapeutic Imagination*, by Professor Jeremy Holmes, is a fine, creative, non-reductive, sensitive, both aesthetically and psychodynamically 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 FR 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:

- (1) Recognition (returning to Freud) of the affinity between psychotherapy and literature, in terms of the poetic creativity of the unconscious;
- (2) the integral connection between reconciled attachment processes and the capacity for narrative, for telling stories about the self and to the self;
- (3) 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;
- (4) 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; 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. FR 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 humanistic 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 ‘analogical’ and ‘projective’ dimensions overlap in the richness of live instances. They lead into mention of the dimension of Ogden’s (1997) ‘third’, and on to TS 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 transference 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, p. 98) 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, p. 68). 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* (Wittgenstein, 1967, *PI*, §531):

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 CP 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 FR 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 AD 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 TS 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. (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 caution, 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 famous passage in Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* 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 moment, 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 patient 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 compassion and the possibility of escape from depression.'

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 beginning 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 translation 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 incomparable 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 accelerated development under the shadow of tuberculosis and early death. But the enactment had been made. His new poem was delivered in manuscript to Cowden Clark by 1000 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

Heward Wilkinson, BA, MA, MSc Psychotherapy, D Psychotherapy (b. 1945 and married), UKCP fellow, Integrative Psychotherapist, is now a trainer with Scarborough Counselling and Psychotherapy Training Institute, an MO of UKCP and a guest faculty member with the Living Institute, Toronto, Canada. He is the author of *The Muse as Therapist: A New Poetic Paradigm for Psychotherapy*, co-editor of two UKCP book series books and senior editor of *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, from 1994 to 2004. He was board member of UKCP, EAP, vice president of the European Association for Integrative Psychotherapy (EAIP) and editor of the Leavis Society Newsletter. His current field of enquiry is the understanding of Historicity/Historical Consciousness as primary paradigms for human existence.

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Heward Wilkinson  
 Scarborough Counselling and Psychotherapy Training Institute (UKCP)  
<http://hewardwilkinson.co.uk>, [hewardwilkinson@gmail.com](mailto:hewardwilkinson@gmail.com)

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