Goethe’s Delicate Empiricism—What I Wasn’t Taught in Gross Anatomy

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With reference to the poetry of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the prose of John Scott and Michael Ondaatje, the lyrics of Leonard Cohen and Neil Young, and the psychoanalytic contributions of André Green, Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott and Gregorio Kohon, the author addresses ethical and aesthetic dilemmas in the pursuit of empiricism in human relations and medical science. This discourse is developed by the use of examples from the author’s experience and from the life and work of resurrectionist and pioneer surgeon John Hunter. The dual risks of causing harm and experiencing the psychic pain of the consequent loss are emphasised. An active empirical stance is advocated, involving the appropriative use of external sources, rather than one of self-reliant isolation and retreat.

The Academic Advisor

Twenty-six years ago I commenced undergraduate studies in medicine at the University of Queensland. Students who had done well in physics at school were offered an exemption from the physics courses in the first year, but were required to make up the credit with electives. I chose courses in introductory English and German literature, social psychology and human ecology. The academic advisor, who was required to approve my selections, told me not to waste my time studying literature, but to do the full first year course in psychology instead, so that I would still have a paying career ahead of me should I fail the medical course. Starting out as a respectfully compliant seventeen year old boy fresh from provincial Toowoomba, I followed the old man’s advice, graduated in medicine, and completed postgraduate trainings in psychiatry and psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Many years later, I returned to the university’s School of English, Media Studies and Art History to write a Master of Philosophy dissertation – my second collection of poetry and a critical essay on the writings of Australian gothic novelist and poet John Scott. In the absence of any further such sensible advice, I made use of the reparative opportunity to write creatively.

Before I Wake

In John Scott’s prose narrative series Before I Wake, he has taken a detour from the ruthlessly appropriative empirical position that characterises his narrative poetry. The work seems to be driven instead by reparative concerns initially portrayed in a voyeuristic account of the demise of a fragile damaged girl, Danielle. The disclosures made by the central character, Jonathon Ford, as he approaches his own death, reveal these concerns to be arising out of his guilt, as a damaged child, over the withdrawal of emotional investment in a failed and ailing mother. Scott depicts a misanthropic man, terminally ill in late middle age, finding acceptance, devotion and nurturance in

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a polyamorous situation in a rural setting with two sisters, one of whom will give birth to his only child after he has died.

As did the distress that Jonathon Ford awakened in the fragile Danielle, the final situation in Before I Wake reminded me of another literary Madonna, Goethe’s Gretchen. I intend, like Goethe’s Faust, to take advantage of her situation to illustrate the origins of the position I have adopted in my own creative work – one not quite so ruthless as Scott’s, although comparably obsessive – a position learned from Goethe’s delicate empiricism.

The Spindle, the Wheel and the Little Wild Rose

I have placed these lines from “Gretchen am Spinrade” in the original German alongside Leonard Forster’s prose translation:

Meine Ruh’ ist hin
Mein Herz ist schwer;
Ich finde sie nimmer
Und nimmermehr. (203)

My peace is gone, my
heart is heavy. I shall
never find peace again,
ever any more. (203)

Gretchen, discarded, sits at her spinning wheel, rocking to its rhythm to contain her distress, her belly already swelling with the fruit of Goethe’s empiricism. Peace and the comfort of sleep have left her. He has broken into her heart, awakened her longing, left the seed of his spindle inside her and taken with him that thing, regarding the absence of which Leonard Cohen has sung:

In the House of honesty
her father was on trial,
in the House of Mystery
there was no one at all,
there was no one there at all.

In “Heidenröslein”, Goethe warns us that it is not only the young woman who may be left to bear the rough fruit of experience. The boy who reaches to pick her delicate flower may learn that she is powerful beyond his imagination when she speaks and acts:

Röslein sprach: Ich stecke dich,
Daß du ewig denkst an mich,
Und ich will’s nicht leiden. (195)

The rose said: I shall prick you
so that you always remember
me and I will not let you. (195)

I translate Goethe’s “Und ich will’s nicht leiden” more literally as “and I don’t want to suffer it”. For Forster’s editorial prose translation “and I will not let you” to be a better fit, Goethe’s line would need to be closer to “und ich werde es nicht erlauben”. The German verb wollen approximates the English to intend, to desire, to want, rather than indicating future tense, as does the English will chosen by Forster. I experience the little wild rose in Goethe’s poem as determined to make the rapacious boy pay for his impulsivity by suffering her prick. She warns that she will prick him in such a way that he will never forget her, and will always carry an acutely painful indebtedness to her.
The Depressive Position, The Dead Mother And The Fragility Of Empiricism

Melanie Klein, in her essays on the psychogenesis of manic-depressive states and their relation to mourning, depicts concern for the harm that we may cause others through such relentless experiential use as originating from a depressive position. The depressive position is characterised by the painful experience of the possibility of loss arising in the child when the mother withdraws, overwhelmed by the child’s ruthless demands. Thus a civilising process is stimulated. When the mother recovers sufficiently to make herself available to the child again, the experiential ground is laid for the later development of a capacity for tolerance, forgiveness and reparation and the possibility of what Donald Winnicott has described as the playfully empirical exploration of physical and relational environments.

When Goethe’s boy reaches to pick the little wild rose, to take her for himself, to break her stem and appropriate her solely for his own use, she pricks him. As does Neil Young in his song, the boy finds that in grasping the thorny stem, he painfully learns that:

Love is a rose and you just can’t pick it.
It only grows when it’s on the vine.
Handful of thorns and you know you’ve missed it,
You lose your love when you say the word mine.

Goethe’s Gretchen, by contrast, is made to wait too long by the ruthless Faust, who has tasted her, tired of her and moved on, driven by the impossible nature of desire. She sickens and lapses into a persecuted melancholia, perhaps reminiscent of an earlier time when a mother’s incapacity to match her infant daughter’s need for love resulted in the deprived child’s hatred welling up. The child, impotently deprived of an object towards which to direct any protest, turns the hatred against herself in the form of persecutory self reproach, followed eventually by a total turning away from external sources and into an internal black hole represented by the mother’s absence.

Later, when the mother recovers sufficiently to engage again, the child is unable to fully turn to the mother again with an attitude of expectancy. The void of the mother’s absence has become more real to the child than the living mother’s availability, and remains in her mind as the kind of deathly internal object to which André Green has referred in his essay on “The dead mother”. Unlike Goethe’s more resilient Heidenröslein, Gretchen takes the suffering into herself. Faust’s abandonment has reawakened a much older hurt.

Thus is the duality of risk implicit in the practice, and the delicate nature, of radical empiricism in human relations.

The King Of The Elves

In Goethe’s “Erlkönig”, the anxious father rides on horseback through the night with the child in his arms hallucinating, gradually being terrifyingly seduced into the other world by the malign whisperings of the Erlking. Goethe’s Erlkönig does not lend himself readily to literal English translation. Elves in German are die Elfe, not die
Erlen, which are alder trees. Nonetheless, I judge Erlkönig to be culturally equivalent, for the purposes of a poet, to the King of the Elves.

It is in the same state of mind as the boy in “Heidenröslein”, determined to pluck the little wild rose, that Goethe has his predatorial Erlkönig inform the child that:

Ich liebe dich, mich reizt deine schöne Gestalt;
Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch ich Gewalt. (215)

Forster translates the Erlking’s threat as: “I love you, your beautiful shape excites me, and if you won’t come willingly I will use force.” (215)

The child cries out: “Erlkönig hat mir ein Leids getan!” (215). The Erlking has hurt him, done him an irrevocable injury, and the child lies dead in its terrified father’s arms. Is the child the victim of a malignant spirit, or of it’s own acquisitively empiricist nature, of its own desire to have, to own and to experience directly and tacitly, rather than to learn the inherited wisdom by rote? The fear of the father is that the experience, like the thorn of the rose, will bite the child back. It was as such a father of just such a child that I observed this situation and, from it, formed the following sonnet:

**Extortionist**
My darling is writing a ransom note
to the king of the elves, demanding gold in hoards
in surety for the return of his daughter,
the toothfairie, her little prisoner.
The local S.P. bookie is running a tote,
ods on that the note will pluck at his heart, sounding chords
strong enough to make him settle the matter
before the child’s human affection can poison her.

I pray that he will not come in the night
and take my child away in return for his,
that the faerie repents of withholding rewards to tease
my daughter and leaves her the coin that’s her right
in exchange for the tooth in the glass, leaving a kiss
of peace on the lips between worlds, winning release. (10)

Relentless empiricism and caution, inspired both by fear of retaliation and by compassionate concern for other sentient beings, coexist in conflict in the human mind, one at times overshadowing or even obliterating the other. The kind of exchange, in which these conflicting desires can be addressed with a kiss of peace lingering sweetly on the lips of both parties, is indeed precious and rare.

**The Bodysnatcher**
On my first visit to London, after spending some twenty-eight sleepless hours in transit from Brisbane, I arrived at my hotel in the West End. My room was not ready,
so I decided that a long walk through the historical sights of London would be the best way to spend the next couple of hours. I might even tire myself out enough to sleep away the jet lag when my bed was eventually available. I passed under the Marble Arch, skirted Hyde Park and proceeded on towards Westminster. As I had not given Her Majesty prior notice of the opportunity to share high tea, I considered it decorous that I should bypass Buckingham Palace and proceeded directly to Westminster Abbey, where I found myself in awe of its architectural beauty and the richness of its cultural inheritance.

When I looked down at the floor, I found that I was standing on the grave of John Hunter, founding father of modern scientific surgery, and direct ancestor, on her mother’s side, of the child whose empiricism was the subject of my sonnet. At the time when John Hunter began teaching anatomy, Goethe was yet an infant. William Perry, in the *Journal of Vascular Surgery* reminds us that the bodies of criminals executed on the gallows at Tyburn’s Marble Arch were sometimes made available to the fledgling Company of Surgeons for scientific purposes, but there were never enough cadavers available by legal means to meet teaching requirements. John Hunter commenced his surgical career as a teaching assistant to his physician brother William, making himself most useful in his initial years at the school of anatomy by proving himself an undeterred and skilful resurrectionist.

As I stood on John Hunter’s grave, I experienced the eerie sense of having passed some of my own genetic material on to mingle in my children with a little of this man’s. I wondered was it his, their mother’s, or mine that accounted for them showing early signs of the development of a similarly ruthless, albeit as yet delicate, empiricism.

It amused me to learn from the plaque that John Hunter had been interred in the crypt of St Martin in the Fields in 1793, but the Royal College of Surgeons arranged him the honour of removal of his remains to Westminster Abbey in 1859. The bodysnatcher had gotten his comeuppance.

**Lend Me A Hand**

This led to me thinking of the elderly female cadaver that I shared the task of dissecting with five other medical students in 1981. The younger members of the group (myself included) were only eighteen at the time. We nicknamed her “Grimace” after Ronald McDonald’s playmate of similar skin tones and demeanour. This assisted our psychic survival immensely.

Gregorio Kohon has acknowledged the difficulty faced by psychotherapists as creative writers – the tension between the necessary “attentive care required by their practice as therapists” and “the freedom demanded by the vicissitudes of their creativity” (89). Rilke was said to have advised an aspiring younger poet that he should not bother to write unless he felt vitally compelled to do so. For those of us who are both psychotherapists and feel compelled to write creatively, Kohon warns that “there is nothing idyllic in the creative process” (89), even though it provides a place for the psychoanalytic practitioner where the constrictions of professional ethics and personal responsibilities need not inhibit creative expression. In an essay on Stephen King’s *Misery*, Kohon warns us of “the horrors of writing” and of its risks.
He warns us that writing will not relieve suffering, but may actually bring suffering to life and contribute to its being more acutely felt and experienced.

For many years after my participation in the dissection of Grimace, with all of its associated excitations of the strange, manifest in the joinings and estrangements, alliances and rude emotional dismemberments within that small group of my student collaborators, I would wake in the night with the terror that I had borrowed something that I shouldn’t. Like Goethe’s Gretchen, it was not my lot to sleep peacefully. I found myself checking under the bed for the mouldering limbs of my nightmares, half expecting my extended hand to be gripped by a colder one imploring me to take her back to the lab, to allow her to be joined again with all her other parts, to be gathered together and laid to communal rest.

Something in my mind insisted I had stepped over a line, taken what I shouldn’t take, and that it must be acknowledged and returned. I hope that with time, experience and a great deal of help, this persecutory guilt towards a deceased woman, presented to me as a dead thing with no name, has matured into an ethical concern for the acknowledgment of borrowings of all sorts, and of the indebtedness to their original sources.

While engaging in various struggles of conscience over the necessary use of emotional and creative resources made available by others, I have been encouraged by the discovery of the works of John Scott, who engages in his writing in the grip of similarly obsessive struggles over appropriation, damage, guilt and reparation. I have discovered, in the fiction of Michel Houellebecq, a contrasting and fiercely refreshing freedom from such ruminations. There is courage to be taken from this, and some relief in this early passage from Michael Ondaatje’s Coming Through Slaughter. Ondaatje’s modus operandi seemed to be one of snatch and grab, as portrayed in the incident where the jazz musician Bolden pulls back from an angry punch with the realisation that it would be the window that he would be hitting. With the realisation of the window as boundary, the crossing of which portends injury,

  his open palm touched the glass, beginning simultaneously to draw back. The window starred and crumpled slowly two floors down. His hand miraculously unhurt. It had acted exactly like a whip violating the target and still free, retreating from the outline of a star. (16)

Ondaatje’s Bolden leaves his Nora “delighted by the performance” (16). While he is distracted by her admiration, my delicate task as an empiricist is, thus emboldened by the breach as window of opportunity, to reach through and snatch that hand.
References


