

## Emotional problems of thinking with literature<sup>1</sup>

When Milton writes: “Then feed on thoughts that voluntary move/ Harmonious numbers” (*Paradise Lost* III. 37-8), he is expressing a view of thinking which is characteristic of poets and literary artists: that thoughts are the mind’s food, and appear to have a will of their own, not generated by the poet but feeding the poet and in particular feeding the verse – the “harmonious numbers” of poetry. Thoughts have some mysterious autonomous existence outside the poet’s self, and the poet’s job is to let them in – let them find their own expression in the writer’s mind. They are not something to be manipulated by the poet, but something to be caught, placed, digested. They need to find a container for their meaning (which is pre-existent) – a local habitation and a name.

This view of poets corresponds closely to that of the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, who suggests that “thoughts without a thinker” circulate in the individual unconscious or the cultural atmosphere, and from time to time find their place in a thinker or individual mind, or possibly a collective mind. Even though the circumstances of thinking may be extremely strenuous, its dynamism is essentially receptive, rather than being managed by the conscious self. The active aspect of thinking consists in a focusing of attention on shadowy thoughts which already exist and are moving in the unconscious mind waiting to be discovered. As Shakespeare puts it in *Pericles*:

think his pilot thought  
So with his steerage shall your thoughts grow on...  
Like motes and shadows see them move awhile (IV.iv.17-21).

The “pilot” is what Freud would call the organ of attention (one of his definitions of consciousness).

All thinking, then, begins with an emotional disturbance impinging on the mind’s stable status quo, its calm seas. The thought-pilot then focuses on the shadowy shape which flickers across it, creating turbulence, and gradually this clarifies into a symbol which contains the meaning of the disturbance.

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Bion calls this process “alpha-function”; others call it symbol-formation. Again Shakespeare describes it brilliantly for us, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as a quest for “the forms of things unknown” which the poet’s pen “Turns... to shapes, and gives to airy nothing/ A local habitation and a name” (V.i.14-17). The “naming” is

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the last state in the thinking process, not the first. That is the case whether the organ of attention is actually a poet's pen, or simply our own thought-pilot watching the internal drama of our mind unfold.

It can be seen that this view of thinking as a structured unconscious process is very different from – more or less the opposite of – our everyday use of the term “thinking” as a deliberately controlled activity. To clarify the difference, Keats called this “consequitive reasoning”, adding that his friend Dilke who was a “consequitive man” could never “come at a truth because he was always trying at it” (letter to G. Keats, 17-27 September 1819). This type of everyday thinking, which is really a re-arrangement of known facts, was called “mechanical” by Coleridge, as distinct from “organic” or “imaginative”. Its most useful feature is in tidying and presentation, and its danger lies in the temptation to rigidify into what Bion calls “basic assumptions”, or Blake “spectrous Reason”. At worst, “thinking” may be a cynical euphemism for thought-destruction, from the political lie to the lie-in-the-soul.

Blake says, “what is now proved was once only imagined” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). This is why poets and other artistic writers have always laid so much stress on the ultimate authority of the artistic symbol: it is a way of thinking what has not been thought before. Poets regard it as their duty to humanity to image this process of catching or focusing on an emotional conflict so that it can become a thought. Often the content of literature includes a proportion of the author's dogmatic or ideological views, which we can re-name and discuss “consequitively” in the language of our own times. But these are secondary to the creative thinking which is captured within the “local habitation” of the art-symbol, and it is this that appeals to our emotions and ultimately sets our own thought processes in motion. The reason I have called this short essay “thinking with literature” rather than *about* literature, is to orient us towards using the poets as a model for the living phenomenon of thinking. In this way we can get most benefit from literature in terms of enriching our lives and work in other fields.

What is this living phenomenon, the thinking process as imaged in the symbolic form of literature? There is space here to give a brief outline. The pattern follows disorientation and catastrophic change, through to symbol formation.

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To begin with, when some unknown thought first impinges on the mind's orbit and begins to gravitate towards its core, there is a sense of disturbance, often described as a sickness (as in *Hamlet*), or as a type of Fall and disorientation. The usual mental landmarks which support the status quo are obliterated: the familiar place seems foreign, contaminated. In the words of Milton's “lost Archangel” (Satan):

Is this the region, this the soil, the clime...  
That we must change for heav'n, this mournful gloom  
For that celestial light?” (*Paradise Lost* I. 242-45).

Heaven is no longer the place it was, in fact it is hell. The thought traveller who has

left familiar territories is found “in darkness, and with dangers compassed round” (VII. 26).

Emily Bronte opens her poetic novel *Wuthering Heights* along similar lines. Her naïve hero, Lockwood, takes a short walk on the wild moors outside his habitual field of intercourse, and is drawn in to the “penetralium” of dark and fiery passionate relationships which are housed within *Wuthering Heights*. Immediately he is trapped by a snowstorm, indicative of his mental state, and endures a night of bad dreams whose “hieroglyphics” he attempts to “decipher”. But he has a long way to go before he can understand the meaning of his disturbance, and before these hieroglyphics are transformed into a symbol of love. The next morning, when he tries to return home to his previous comfortable state of mind, he finds the moor’s landmarks totally obliterated by new-fallen snow. His previous field of knowledge has been if not wiped out, then at least covered over, and he succumbs to a period of protracted sickness.

This type of loss of customary vision is often described in literature as “blindness” – blindness which needs to be turned into insight. In Milton’s famous invocation to Light, after complaining that wisdom has been “at one entrance quite shut out”, he suddenly realizes that this can be converted into an asset – not by himself but by a “celestial” or internal deity. Everyday thinking can be exchanged for inspired imaginative thinking – there is another “entrance” for knowledge of another kind:

So much the rather thou, celestial Light  
Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers  
Irradiate, there plant eyes, that I may see and sing  
Of things invisible to mortal sight. (*Paradise Lost* III. 49-55)

And always, the rest of the story consists in achieving this insight, like Oedipus with his wanderings.

The poets seem to suggest that probably nobody would embark on a thought-journey of their own volition; it is a more mysterious force which propels them onwards. Keats, in his metaphor of the “Chamber of Maiden Thought”, would say that the door has always been open, leading to the “dark passages” of thinking; but only the “awakening of the thinking principle within us” motivates us to move towards them (letter to Reynolds, 3 May 1818). Only our innate passionate curiosity fuels the “thinking principle” within us, whether we like it or not.

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We remember the picture of Lockwood first trying to gain entry to the Heights, despite the fact that nobody invites him in: though the gate is closed, his “horse’s breast is fairly pushing the barrier” – the horse symbolizing his own awakening passionate curiosity, leading him beyond the bounds of politeness. Thus he discovers the “dark passages” within himself.

Literature shows us, therefore, that thinking begins with a condition of disorientation and unknowing, with emotions flying about like indecipherable hieroglyph-

ics creating a dark snowstorm, a “mournful gloom” or “darkness visible”. The first achievement in a thinking process is finding the strength to tolerate this without disintegrating or taking refuge in false solutions. The language of the poets conveys the sense of being overwhelmed, incapacitated, humiliated. Keats says, “we feel the burden of the Mystery” (letter to Reynolds, *op. cit.*). There is a strong consciousness of death: indeed in Milton’s overarching symbol of the loss of Eden, an intuition of “death and all our woe” is really a precondition for knowledge. Lest this sound overdramatic, it has to be borne in mind that what the poets are imaging for us is the *quality* of a developmental experience – however microscopic may be the scale of its existence. A mental life-event is essentially a “thing invisible to mortal sight” If true thinking is by definition something which changes the shape and structure of the mind, it is bound to be disturbing. This corresponds to Bion’s concept of “catastrophic change” at the heart of personality development – it entails “death to the existing state of mind”.

And of course there are types of mental “death” other than the one which is a metaphor for achievement. For inevitably, disorientation makes the self vulnerable to various forms of tyranny – to seize any passing ideology instead of carrying on the struggle to think independently. Milton called this the temptation to “subscribe slave”. So Lockwood indulges in a whole series of false, conventional fantasies about “romance” before he can face up to the real knowledge of what a “love for life” actually looks like. Yet by the end of the novel-poem he does achieve a vision, a symbol, which expresses this meaning for him; he finds it both astonishing, wildly beyond his preconceptions, and yet with hindsight we can see it has been achieved by a logical inevitability in terms of the emotional crises which have been worked through on his behalf.

The poets show us that it is necessary to endure the humiliating experience of not-knowing if we want to know ourselves better; otherwise we are slaves to fashion and narcissism, “venturing to displease/ God for the fear of man”, as Milton puts it in *Samson Agonistes* (ll. 173-74). This is towards the end of Samson’s story when he realizes that the only thing which is preventing him from using his particular talent (his strength) in God’s service is his own vanity or narcissism – the disgust at appearing “vile, contemptible, ridiculous” in the eyes of others.

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Another example of the crucial role of humiliation may be seen in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. His passive protagonist Theseus has to learn not to ridicule the workman within his mind-city (figured in Bottom), but instead to follow his example. He must likewise wear the Ass’s ears if he is to become a good lover and have his “hallowed house” (his internal sanctuary) blessed by the fairies at the end of the play. Only the humble workman is elevated to direct contact with the mind’s gods. Bottom is Theseus’ role model: his sense of adventure leads him into the bewildering depths of an unfathomable dream. First he becomes an “actor” (Shakespeare’s metaphor for experimental projection into further possibilities or shapes for himself); then,

thrilled by this process of self-extension, he finds the adolescent “acting” becomes a real falling-into-love, a “dream that hath no bottom” (IV. i. 12-15). At first he wishes he had the “wit to get out of this wood”, but then graciously accepts the bondage of his new shape and situation (the ass-head in the court of femininity). Ultimately Bottom’s experience is at the heart of Theseus’ revised ability to think about love and government in the conscious outer world of Athens.

The mental condition of tolerating the anxiety of not-knowing and the pain of humiliation, while rebuffing escapist (doctrinal or sentimental) solutions to a problem, is termed by Keats “Negative Capability” (letter to G. and T. Keats, 17 December 1817). He regards it as the first essential in evolving a “Man of Achievement” – a true thinker. The disturbing thought cannot be said to be truly “had” until the emotional tensions surrounding it realign themselves into a clear symbol, an Idea. Coleridge says that “an Idea cannot be conveyed except by a Symbol” (*Biographia Literaria*, IX); and it is not a case of inventing the symbol for oneself, but of waiting for it to emerge or be discovered. Coleridge quotes Plotinus on this receptive faculty, described as “waiting patiently for the rising sun” (*Biographia Literaria*, XII). The pattern presented in poetic literature, again and again, suggests that if we are sufficiently “negatively capable”, the meaning of our emotional disturbance will present itself in the form of an idea, a thought. The creative poets have discovered for themselves, and demonstrated to us, that this method has its rewards; and it is why their work endures long after it has outgrown its contemporary foliage. They demonstrate the emotional experience itself, and also show to metabolize the experience – how to think it through so that it can become part of our own mental reality.

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