

Literary Idioms of Distress

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Accepted for publication in the Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling, and Psychotherapy

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Pratt, R & Taggart, D. (2021). Literary idioms of distress, *The Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 21 (4), pp. 15-23.

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“They have said that we owe allegiance to Safety, that he is our Red Cross who will provide us with ointment and bandages for our wounds and remove the foreign ideas the glass beads of fantasy the bent hairpins of unreason embedded in our minds”.
(*Faces in the Water*, pg. 3)

“And I am white as any creature ripped down to the self” (*A Girl Is A Half Formed Thing*, pg. 184)

“Literature is a record of human consciousness, the richest and most comprehensive we have...The novel is arguably man’s most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings through space and time.” David Lodge (2000)

Intro

The origin of this article came out of a conversation we had about the capacity of literature (specifically the Modernist novel) to convey human experience, including distress, in a way that no other form of writing is capable. As Clinical Psychologists as well as reading the DSM and ICD before we go to bed we also have an interest in literature and have to a limited extent integrated this interest and the experience of reading into our practice and teaching. In this article we wanted to reflect upon the *distinctive* value of literature in enriching understanding and thinking about human subjectivity, and ask some questions that might help psychologists take what we read and how we write more seriously and treat the “literary” in a less peripheral way. In reflecting upon this, it is fairly evident that outside of psychoanalytic discourse, mainstream Psychology has largely neglected Literature. We assume that this is largely due to the predominance of the scientific-practitioner paradigm, which as applied narrowly results in a reductive and impoverished understanding of human experience (for notable exceptions see Sass, 1993 and Newnes, & Henn, 2005). The purpose of this is not to present literature as an alternative to scientific method but as a necessary corrective. Models are helpful in reducing noise and enabling thought but they are simplified models and harmful if taken as Reality. In one sense certain types of literature, while fictional, can get closer to the real experience of human subjectivity because of the form it takes, and among other things the novel can enable the reader to experience the character’s experience as if it was happening to them. This is in stark contrast to conventional scientific psychological writing, which forbids ambiguity and experimentation and encourages a turgid rendering of methodological and empirical minutiae that often has nothing whatever to do with subjectivity. For the purpose of this paper we use two examples of modernist novels that are in part concerned with extremes of human experience that we often see in mental health services; trauma following on from sexual abuse and coercive treatment in the psychiatric system. By considering what these novels tell us about abuse and coercion, we contrast their subjective richness and particularity with generalised models of distress associated with dominant psychological theory. We conclude by discussing John Keats’ concept of negative capability and how psychology would benefit from engagement with what is unknowable, elliptical or partial.

What literature and why?

In this paper we are focusing upon two novels that could be said to be “about” madness but both in reality are far more and in the far-more-ness offer something beyond anything written about madness from within psychiatric and psychological disciplines. The first novel is *Faces in the Water* by Janet Frame, the second, *A Girl is a Half Formed Thing* by Eimear McBride. These novels provide idiomatic accounts of endangered human experience in a way that no other form of writing could capture and as such books can be seen as an “alternative mode” (Nichter, 1981) of expressing and understanding distress. We find that psychological descriptive accounts are insufficient at capturing the particularity of human “idioms of distress” (Nichter, 1981) and that the novel best conveys lived human experience in time and space and is better equipped to capture the culturally and subjectively bound reality of suffering. Furthermore, by virtue of its very existing, the novel can offer an unsentimental form of redemption by fallibly capturing in the words of Samuel Beckett “how it is” (Beckett, 1964). As can be gleaned from the reference to Beckett, we are not talking about literature in general but rather taking novels that can be placed within a modernist tradition. By literary modernism (see Levenson, 2005) we are referring to a broad school of literature, initiated in the early part of the 20th century, often innovative and interested in exploring human subjectivity through formal experimentation. We are not able to adequately address the complexities and controversies of the field here, however what we specifically interested in is the ways in which these novels disrupt and challenge taken for granted, often psychological, accounts of human experience. In opposition to familiar cliché of narrative forms they can breach our habituated understanding of ourselves and others. As Jacqueline Rose said, “The most important literary modernists- say Joyce, Woolf, Proust, Kafka- robbed us of a double illusion: that the world, that human subjectivity, could ever be fully known.” (2021, p200). It is these illusions about the know-ability of ourselves, other people and the world around us that psychological writing can often inadvertently reinforce and impoverish human experience by the methodological contortions required to meet the ideal of scientific knowledge production. This observation is hardly novel, particularly in the context of this journal, however we wish to contrast literary ways of understanding with psychological modalities in order to illustrate what exactly gets left out and where that leaves us as a discipline. We take two novels in turn, the first concerned with a character diagnosed with schizophrenia and hospitalised, while the second tells the story of a girl’s family relationships. In both cases they are ‘about’ much more than this, and that in part is what makes them difficult to describe but important to experience.

Faces in the Water by Janet Frame (1961)

As a Psychologist you may be expected to say and know and communicate what Psychosis means:

The term “**psychotic experiences**” generally refers to subthreshold forms of hallucinations and delusions. However, this term is used inconsistently, sometimes referring to **psychotic** symptoms (i.e., full threshold positive phenomena), at other times including both sub- and full threshold positive symptoms. (Yung & Lin, 2016)

As an alternative, this account of a particular state of mind that might be understood as psychotic:

“I stayed on my ice floe, not willing to risk the danger of poverty, looking carefully to the left and the right, minding the terrible traffic across the lonely polar desert: until a man with golden hair said, ‘you need a rest from chrysanthemums and cemeteries and tram lines running to the sea. You need to escape from sand and lupins and wardrobes and fences. Mrs Hogg will help you, Mrs Hogg the Berkshire sow who has her goitre out, and you should see the stream of cream that flows from the hole in her throat and hear the satisfactory whistling of her throat’”. (pg. 6)

This beautiful-ugly association of oblique and suggestive words and voices from Frame’s novel both resists and abundantly suggests meaning that cannot be fully grasped, it literally and figuratively is constantly transforming. In David Lodge’s words “a dense specificity of personal experience” that in form of the novel evokes personal heartfelt response in strangers and goes beyond the personal (2000).

“Faces in the water” concerns the experience of the confinement of Istina Mavet, a young woman, in a New Zealand psychiatric hospital over episodes that feel timeless and unending and convey a kind of psychic disintegration, bewildering fragmentation. In conveying the embodied totality of an experience and forming a continuous linguistic fabric, Frame transcends the limits of her protagonist’s experience. At other times, the narrator sees the institution with plain, unsentimental clarity, the degradations and perversions of control that places her subjective suffering in a system that unconsciously displaces its unwanted parts in the least prized subjects and creates a book that is a kind of richer poetic sister to R.D.Laing’s “The Divided Self” (1960). Unlike Psychological discourse, Frame’s novel is free to move through multiple registers and modes of understanding and thus to illuminate and explore more fully the experience of madness as felt and constructed.

Frame conveys the primitive fear evoked in the powerless by those with power describing a Nurse who is married to a butcher and how: “both she and her husband have caught in their faces the red glare of meat” (pg 179). She witnesses the dependence that is both provoked and denied by incarceration. Having escaped from the hospital Istina phones Sister Bridge who evokes her childlike needs: “Who was she? Was she my mother? I wanted to hit her and climb crying onto her lap and plead to be forgiven”(pg. 152). A moment of fantasised maternal respite is then suddenly broken as Sister Bridge’s sarcasm returns and she consigns Istina to the day room as punishment. Istana attacks her and confirms herself as dangerous: “I went white and began to cry. I knew that she would never forgive me, that our contract of enmity was signed and sealed, surprisingly enough, with my love which I had shown by rushing at her and thumping her soft belly, knocking, like a demand to be let in out of the dark, to seek shelter from the special storm cloud which hung over me dispensing a significance of private rain”(pg.154). There are auto-biographical sources to the novel as Frame was institutionalised herself and initially diagnosed as Schizophrenic. In keeping with the practice at the time for “intractable” patients Frame was on the brink of undergoing a lobotomy and was spared when the psychiatrist was informed that she’d been awarded a national literary prize. In the novel she observes the consequences for those less fortunate: “After the operation Louise became more docile, less inclined to fly into a rage if people refused to the fate that most likely awaited her if people refused her ‘story’, she wet her pants and giggled

delightedly...". When at the end the narrator is discharged from hospital she is told to "forget all you have ever seen" in hospital but in fidelity to her own mad parts and fellow inmates such as Louise she chose to disobey. Thus novels, like "mad" testimonies are an embodied and feeling corrective against the technical and detached tone adopted in most medical and academic texts. In some ways more orthodox than some of her other novels, Frame nonetheless uses language to correspond to states of reason and unreason and as with our next novel we need enter into forms of linguistic maelstrom that academic accounts spare us.

A Girl is a Half Formed Thing by Eimear McBride (2013)

Eimear McBride is, as described by Jacqueline Rose, "the undutiful daughter of modernism, who tears language apart in the face of the sexual abuse of women and girls." (2021, p203). As such, the novel takes us deep inside the experience of a child and then young woman as she is shaped, but not limited by, various forms of violence. The story of her early life takes place against a background of a puritanical and hypocritical Catholic Ireland that has less concern for the protection of children than protection of its own delusional self-image. A nasty little scene at the beginning of the novel involving a visit from a self-pitying, pious grandfather illustrates this cultural psychological fault line and is as perfect as depiction of familial shame and religious shaming that you would ever want (or rather not want) to read. It would be a mistake for this harm to be lost in deference to the more explicit forms of violence later on in her life, as the alienation it leads to within the family forms the basis for future violence being rendered mute. It is also a love story, the Girl has a disabled older brother who she is closely bonded to and looks after, until her sexual awakening following rape leads her on a path into adulthood that leaves her sibling tragically behind.

When literature is used at all in psychological texts, it is most often used as illustrative as an example of some symptom or condition. Whilst there are excellent psychoanalytic readings of books in literary criticism as used in clinical papers this often remains the case perhaps more often used to illustrate an abstract phenomenon such as the superego (As in Graham Ingham's interesting account of *Great Expectations* (2007)). In displacing one passage from a larger text to which it is bound we are diffusing its extended and often contradictory achievement. In the context of *A Girl is a Half Formed Thing* to do this as being an exemplar of a traumatised child who engages various forms of risky behaviour is to profoundly underestimate and distort what McBride achieves. McBride's account suspends judgement, containing disavowed pleasures as well as atrocious pains. If willing to accept the writing provides a sustained visceral experience of being behind the eyes and under the skin of a girl in space and time. It is important to note that in no way can reading this book be described as entertainment not educational, for psychologists working with trauma it is much more important and frightening than that. It is the "thing itself" on a page which collapses the space between the reader and the character. It is written in a at first disorientating non-grammatical, almost primitive and childlike language that strips away civilised, habitual forms of expression.

Such novels convey a sense of immanence, of life as it is being lived not yet resolved, the future not known. A corrective to the wise-in-hindsight "case studies" we are taught to write that too easily convey a sense that we knew what was going to happen

or what we were doing rather than entering the “wild woods on uncertainty” (Britton, 2016) like in a fairy tale told for the first time and not sanitised by repetition.

At the door with her uncle who has abused her the girl articulates: “He did not get me after all. Oh but he did. I am lying. I am not I am.” Conveying without resolving the contradictions of her experience and what is happening in her mind, what she uses her mind for to cope with what has happened to her self. The oppositional forces pulling at the girl throughout the remainder of the novel, such as her sexual experiences, can be read as ‘traumatic symptoms’ but that is not all that they are, and could also be understood as an everyday response to the oppressive forces bearing down on girls and women in Catholic Ireland. In this sense McBride and her protagonist challenge simplified causal mechanisms that can populate conventional psychological formulation. To see the girl’s response to the abusive acts as more or less meaningful indicators of trauma is to miss the deeper understanding, that they form a part of who she is in ways that are psychologically contradictory and morally uncomfortable. In her own words; “The inside world had caught alight and what I wanted. To be left alone. To look at it. To swing the torch into every corner of what he’d we’d done.” (pg. 61). Perhaps most importantly of all, it allows the violence inflicted upon her to be mercilessly portrayed without denying her at all times her own mind, her agency and her capacity to think; this is the emancipatory crumb that can be found amidst the detritus.

A final point about this novel is the use of innovative form in order to surprise us and bypass our expectations and rehearsed responses to what we expect from a novel. It does this not as experimentation for its own sake, but to create what art critic Robert Hughes (1991) described as the ‘shock of the new’, in order to inhabit a world that otherwise they would not be able to, that of another person’s reality and what it is like to be them in their world. By contrast the familiarity of much psychological writing, although it deploys esoteric and technical language, serves to deaden and distance us from the lives of other people. In short, in McBride’s novel ‘trauma’ is not mentioned, because it does not need to be.

What does this tell us that psychology does not?

In reading McBride and Frame we necessarily become somewhat ‘mad’ in order to take in the true disorder, and so our minds and experience are changed through disorientating form as well as language. The madness may be linked to entering into the irreducible experience of another mind, that in any other form might have catastrophic consequences, and in encountering unrecognised parts of our own experience. As Winnicott stated and “we are poor indeed if we are only sane” (reference) and yet as professionals we are often cripplingly and unhelpfully sane partly in contrast to the madness of the patient. To read another we must “suspend” disbelief, tolerate uncertainty recognise that they are unwritten. If we can recognise in others aspects of ourselves, including madness and other facets disavowed in the professional role, we may better able to bridge the false binary distinctions between the mad and the sane, the patient and the clinician. It was also Winnicott who recognised (1971) play and imagination to be at the hear of human development. The modernist novel is a sustained and elaborated imaginative account of other minds and lives and requires imaginative engagement from the reader. The frameworks we apply

in standard practice most often eschew the imaginative whereas we would argue that imagination is at the heart of therapeutic practice and psychological insight.

Critique through contrast

An obvious counter to the charge that psychological science is ill equipped in helping us understand the subjective experiences of the people we work with is to focus instead on 'listening to the patient.' While we obviously value this approach in therapeutic settings and recommend reading wide varieties of first person accounts of relating to mental distress and breakdown (Bobby Sand's 1997 *Writing from Prison* being one notable example that addresses restriction of liberty, political oppression and self-starvation), the novel can also offer close reading to complement close therapeutic listening. So, in some ways such an account positions certain texts into realm of phenomenology in terms of the capacious, indiscriminating complexity that characterises human consciousness. At the same time whilst a novel may resemble and impersonate a verbatim account of a person's experience it isn't. It is worked-through, rendered, produced through the mind and the manners of the writer. It exists through formal properties of the work and in this sense the process of writing is (among other things) a form of containment, a reverie, a metabolising of the raw experience to something more symbolic that stands independent from the necessity that bore it. In psychoanalytic terms we might see a first person narrative immersed in distress as a form of symbolic equation, whereby the representation of the distress is indistinguishable from the experience itself (Segal, 1957). Contrast this with the novel as a form of symbolic representation whereby there is some distance between the experience itself and how it is represented in literary form. Both have value in helping psychologists understand distress but they are not imparting the same forms of understanding.

As well as doing justice to subjectivity the Novel can convey a sense of the totality of human life including the particular social conditions that infuse our subjectivities. The engagement with the particular and the idiosyncratic is a necessary component of applied psychological work in therapeutic settings. However the scientific endeavour to categorise, summarise, reduce and flatten varieties of human experience does psychologists a great disservice in this search for the unique in each individual (we would of course exempt William James' 1902 *The Varieties of Religious Experience* from this dichotomy). We suggest the novel as an antidote to this peculiar sickness. As DH Lawrence wrote: "The novel is the highest complex of subtle interrelatedness than man has discovered. Everything is true in its own time, place, circumstance, and untrue outside of its own place, time, circumstance. If you try to nail anything down, in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail." (pg. 172). This impulse of Lawrence to protect the novel from the claws of criticism has a counterpart in the way engagement with literary experience we as Psychologists think about our "clients". Of course, human beings are not books but the "close reading" required by the best novels has the potential to attune us to human realities and complexities including our own. It is perhaps for this reason that some have proposed "scholar-practitioner" as a valid alternative to the predominating paradigm as this recognises the contribution from the humanities as well as science (Jurist, 2018) . Whilst breadth and scope of thinking remains a defining professional characteristic of Clinical Psychology, the narrowing of practice (towards the manualised) and NICE thinking in the apparent interest of rigour and evidence base

seems inexorable taking it further and further from the “rich heritage” (Mollan, 2010) of the early pioneers of Psychology who better understood the interconnected fields of human understanding and so drew from more diverse sources, including that of Literature.

To conclude, one striking feature of the novels we have considered in this paper is that they don't seek to fill in the “half forms” of their protagonists – they do not seek to “remove the foreign ideas the glass beads of fantasy the bent hairpins of unreason embedded in our minds” (Frame, 1961). These novels tolerate the gaps, uncertainties, that need not and perhaps cannot be bridged. The poet John Keats highlighted one of Shakespeare's greatest gifts as “negative capability” (1817): “that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (pg. 43). Such a capacity has been associated with the therapeutic position of “evenly suspended attention” encouraged by Freud in order to take in another person (1984). Such capacity more broadly enables literature to attest to absence as well as presence and the work of Beckett and W G Sebald has potential to illuminate human neglect and the gaps in memory in a way that psychology has not adequately touched upon. We suggest that as a profession we could do worse than cultivate this negative capability through close readings of such novels both for the sake of those who we support and for ourselves.

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