

Magnificent Monsters

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Dedicated to Lou Reed (1942-2013)

Abstract Nietzsche called love and hate 'magnificent monsters'. Proust referred to them as 'upheavals of thought'. Crucial in undermining our craving for mastery over uncertainty, they spur us to overcome mere rationality in favour of 'hyper-reflection' (Merleau-Ponty). What is existential psychotherapy's role in a cultural landscape subject to the wish to reprogram our emotions?

Of Old-fashioned Dentistry

Lou Reed's songs accompanied me for over thirty years, a constant stream of inspiration in an ever-shifting landscape. His songs deal with intense and often difficult emotions, thus they are a fitting presence here. I often refer to Reed as 'Uncle Lou' – a companionable presence alongside someone else whose writings set me alight in an equally compelling manner: Friedrich Nietzsche (whom I privately refer to as 'Fritz').

Even though Nietzsche has been granted official if unsolicited admittance to the pantheon of pre-existential thinkers, with his quotes now embellishing numerous (and rather bland) texts on existential counselling, Nietzsche remains refreshingly unsettling, positively disconcerting, and evermore *irreducible*. Personally, I believe it might well take another full century or so to catch up with the psychological reaches of his philosophy – so prescient and profound are his insights. A good place to start to get to grips with them is perhaps Graham Parkes' pivotal studies on the psychological implications of Nietzsche's thought (Parkes, 1994) and its parallels with eastern philosophies (Parker, 1991).

Some of you may have come across that Frankenstein of a book, shabbily assembled by his anti-Semitic sister, Elizabeth, and arbitrarily titled *Will to Power*. It comprises of a collection

of notes Nietzsche never meant for publication but providing a draft for a major work sadly never brought to light. Fragment 933 of these posthumous notes reads:

The 'great person' is great owing to the free play and scope of her desires and to the yet greater power that knows how to press these magnificent monsters into service (Nietzsche, 1967, p. 521)¹.

At their most elemental level, powerful emotions can weigh us down with their 'stupidity', Nietzsche says, but they can also "marry the spirit, 'spiritualise' themselves" (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 21). Both Platonism and its pop version, Christianity, have waged war to the 'passions' for too long, in a misguided attempt to eradicate them:

The most famous formula for this can be found in the New Testament, in that Sermon on the Mount where, incidentally, things are by no means viewed from on high. Here it is said, for example, with reference to sexuality, 'if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out': fortunately no Christian acts according to this precept. Destroying the passions and desires merely in order to avoid their stupidity and the disagreeable consequences of their stupidity seems to us nowadays to be itself simply an acute form of stupidity. We no longer marvel at the dentists who pull out teeth to stop them hurting (Nietzsche, 1998, p21)

Nietzsche advocates not eradication or censure but instead 'spiritualization' – an alchemic process possible only when one is able to play freely and fearlessly with these 'magnificent monsters,' rather than chastising them as sinful, abnormal or 'inauthentic'. More than *alchemy* (a term dear to Jung, who was to use and misuse at liberty, whilst barely acknowledging it, Nietzsche's thought), Nietzsche's preferred image is that of *gardening*:

One can ... cultivate the shoots of anger, pity, curiosity, vanity as productively and profitably as a beautiful fruit tree on a trellis; one can do it with the good or bad taste of a gardener and, as it were, in the French or English or Dutch or Chinese fashion; one can also let nature rule and only attend to a little embellishment and tidying up here and there; one can, finally, without paying any attention to them all, let the plants grow up and fight their fight out among themselves – indeed, one can take delight in such a wilderness, and desire precisely this delight, though it gives one some trouble, too. All this we are at liberty to do: but how many know we are at liberty to do it? Do the majority not believe in themselves as in complete fully developed facts? Have the great philosophers not put their seal on this prejudice with the doctrine of the exchangeability of character? (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 561)

¹ I have deliberately re-gendered the quote

I am reminded of a parallel example from the Zen tradition, which is integral to my life and practice. A well-known story tells of a spiritual apprentice engaged in the task, assigned to him by a Zen teacher, of attending to the temple's garden. For a whole year, the student works vigorously maintaining the garden utterly spotless. Then one day the teacher comes to appraise the work. To the student's dismay, he walks about looking sourly pissed off; then suddenly begins to shake a few trees wildly until hundreds of leaves scatter on the immaculate path. Now visibly happy, the teacher says: "That's a *lot* better; now the garden looks more alive".

What do you make of the story? In my case, it brings up the following question: do we conceive of our being as something to be retrieved in its innocence and 'authenticity'? Do we think of it *independently* of our passions, of the turmoil and contradictions of life? Or do we rather imagine our existence *in terms of* these passions?

Hatred is Perverse Intimacy

There is a fundamental difference between *anger* and *hatred*. Anger and its gradations – from irritation to rage – is a fire. It rises up in the body/mind, momentarily inflaming us. It is innocent, a wave in the ongoing stream of becoming. Hatred is different. As promised during Luci Moja-Strasser's wonderfully thought-provoking workshop (Moja-Strasser), I will provide a definition of hatred, borrowing it from Knut Løgstrup, an eminent existential theologian in the fierce and unofficial Kierkegaardian lineage. He defines hatred as *perverse intimacy* (Løgstrup, 1997). If I hate someone, I am implicitly admitting my inferiority towards that person. We hate those who would defeat us if we were to openly challenge them in open, honourable combat (Bazzano, 2012). Unlike anger, whose fire is pure, hatred is *simulation* (Løgstrup, 1997). We refuse to own up to our helplessness, so we project it on the other, thus succeeding in maintaining a peculiar proximity with our opponent.

Let me give you a personal example, if I may. Do I get irritated, even angry, when papers and articles I submit to certain journals come back with censorious comments made by reviewers whose anonymity seems to entitle them to proffer scathing remarks? Yes, I do. Do I get irritated when the criteria for publication are narrowly paired down to the tiresome recipe of case study plus theoretical rehashing of accepted formulae, to the exclusion of different views, to the exclusion of crucial aspects of contemporary culture outside the

psychotherapy cocoon? Yes, I do. Do I get irritated, even angry, when bland reductivism and pernicious literalism creeps in an approach that is supposedly based on sophisticated philosophical insights? Yes, I do, especially considering that Freud's prompting (in 1929!) that the analyst's training should comprise of a wide range of disciplines (both in science and the humanities (Freud, 1990), sounds positively far-reaching in our deeply conservative times.

Do I get irritated, even angry, when it finally dawns on me that stooping to the party line is the key criterion for being published in certain journals? You bet. And yet, do I *hate* the anonymous reviewers? No I don't. How can I? For that, two things would be needed: they would have to show their face and come out of their cosy anonymity; more importantly, I would need to feel *inferior* to them – which I do not.

Anger is a *fire*, while hatred is a *poison* – one of the three poisons, according to the Buddha, alongside craving and ignorance. A famous Zen *koan* goes: 'How do you stop the fight at the other side of the street?' A koan (literally 'public law case') is an existential riddle given to the Zen practitioner to study over the course of several months. She then presents her answer to the teacher in a private interview. When answering the above koan, practitioners tend to veer towards the 'love and compassion' angle, invariably spouting some pious platitude or other. I realize that I'm probably about to break a Buddhist vow by saying what I'm going to say next and I might be reborn as a Tory boy canvassing for 'Borisconi' Johnson or as a lizard, or any other unfavourable human rebirth – but I am going to reveal to you how I managed to pass the koan.

'So, how do you stop the fight at the other side of the street?' – my then Zen teacher asked me when I went to the interview. Red in the face, summoning up all the anger I could muster, I shouted insults for five minutes – to no one in particular. I passed.

What is all this Zen stuff supposed to mean? Let me spell it out: when there is anger, be anger. My side of the street, gentrified, integrated and phenomenologically aware, is not purer than the other, rougher side, where a fight just broke out.

Outside the streets were steaming
The crack dealers were dreaming
of an Uzi someone had just scored
I betcha I could hit that light

with my one good arm behind my back

says little Joey Diaz

(Reed, 1989)

I am not 'beyond' anger. I get angry. I get bloody pissed off sometime. But hatred, the poison of hatred, I hesitate to cultivate. I feel I can work with hatred: for instance, by refraining from cultivating rancour, day in, day out and by accepting *becoming*. For hatred is also a *negation of becoming*:

Rancour resists becoming, it freezes the person who has injured us and does not accept alterations or the fact that the other is part of the river of living-and-dying. Forgiveness embraces becoming, dissolves the alleged solidity of self and other, and meets life without unnecessary burdens. One learns to forget, to practice the discipline of dynamic oblivion – thus dispersing the jaded spectre of rancour kept alive by superstitions. By dissipating our rancour, the memory of the injury suffered is also dissipated. By feeding our resentment, we instead fire at the void, for the object we aim at has moved on. And if love for a spectre is by definition bewitched, rancour is doubly bewitched: it is not only outmoded but harmful (Bazzano, 2012, pp. 37-38)

A burning hatred had dominated my client's life during a whole year. 'Joe' felt hatred towards his sibling; it effectively paralyzed his life, an existence lived only when away on holiday, away from his constant torment. Something his brother did had upset him deeply, but he could not bring himself to tell me what it was. He felt more and more isolated. Refusing to speak to his brother had created ripples in the family and even cut him off from close friends. All along, this was accompanied by a feeling that he should not feel hatred but be 'rational' about it. He feared that if he gave it in to this powerful emotion he would come to a place of no return. He considered confronting him many times but was afraid of the fury and rage he felt deep inside. He feared he would end up killing his brother. From therapy he wanted a more sophisticated solution than the one offered by his religion (and the ethics of his religion). From therapy he wanted a validation of his vital need to subjugate this passion. He blocked any invitation to access (and accept) the reality of his experience.

Joe's religious injunctions did not allow him to accept the seething anger he felt for his brother.

When you're lookin' through the eyes of hate

Oh oh oh oh (Reed, 1973)

What kind of hatred is psychotherapy?

There are entire sections in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* – I am thinking of *The Prisoner*, *The Fugitive*, as well as *Sodom and Gomorrah*, which present an unsettling view of human emotions and human sexuality. These sections are usually overlooked, glossed over, neglected or held at tranquillizing distance. Worst of all, they are often 'integrated' and seen as the narrator's obligatory rite of passage and temporary dark exploration through the fallen world of social pretense, lying, cheating and fretful desire – all within a reassuring and edifying spiritual quest with wisdom and virtue as its final aims. This interpretation of Proust's magnum opus is "misleading and absurd" (Bowie, 1987, p 47). Not only there are no plausible signs in Proust's work of the reassuring redemption modern readers accustomed to Hollywood renditions of great novels expect to find (understandably, for a genuinely complex work of art is often unsettling). *In Search of Lost Time* also presents the reader with "parts of [a] narrative discourse [that] *displace* one another" (Bowie, 1987, p47, my emphasis).

What Proust effectively suggests in these easily overlooked passages is outrageous and full of profound philosophical implications. Existential psychotherapy purists (or dogmatists, according to the view one holds) will object to my resorting to a novel as a source of philosophical insights, and particularly to a novel that stubbornly refuses to present a simplistic view of the world and of human nature. Moreover, this particular novel is recalcitrant to systematization; translation of its prickly insights into a set of comforting certainties is very difficult indeed.

It was by reading Richard Rorty (Rorty, 1989), a philosopher in the American pragmatist tradition of William James and John Dewey, that I was made aware of the fluid speculative possibilities open to Proust's novel and to its psychological riches. First of all, a good work of fiction is free of those onerous metaphysical claims that are inevitable in philosophical works. Secondly, *La Recherche* is not only an exhaustive work of fiction, but a lot more. In the words of Malcolm Bowie,

[It is] a fictional kernel surrounded by a commentary; this commentary requires of us the same sort of credence as a work of aesthetics or moral philosophy (Bowie, 1987, p. 47)

Interwoven in the story, Proust is asking us to consider profound questions. In *The Prisoner*, the narrator is painstakingly and obsessively driven by jealousy, here portrayed as a form of compulsive intellectual investigation, parallel, in its methodologies, to the analytical procedures undertaken by philosophers of science, metaphysicians and, yes, psychologists. What Proust is telling us is that *rigorous modalities of inquiry employed by science* (both the inductive and the hypothetico-deductive method) *are akin to spontaneous impulses of a mind under conditions of torment*. Let me state it in plain English: Proust is effectively asking: 'What kind of jealousy is science?' If one adapts this rather scandalous remark to our context, one could legitimately to ask: 'What kind of hatred is psychology?'

Allow me be a little more specific and ask the following question: 'What kind of hatred is existential psychotherapy?' The above questions are not as far-fetched as they might appear at first. To prove it, let me go back to Nietzsche.

Resentment and the Spirit of Revenge

For *Zarathustra* (Nietzsche's literary character who heralds the vision of the overman), there is only one (hypothetical) kind of redemption: transforming every 'it was' into an 'I wanted it thus', ie *to redeem the past by willing it retroactively*. This is, of course, impossible. It is precisely from this impossibility that the *spirit of revenge* (a.k.a. resentment) is born. What is the spirit of revenge? It is our deep aversion to time and its ineluctability; our antipathy to its inexorable and elusive progress – towards change, impermanence and death. How does the human will react? By 'discovering' cause and effect in the flux of becoming; by searching (and finding, or believing to have found) the *origin*, the bedrock; by assigning *responsibility* and *culpability*. The instinct of revenge has dominated, according to Nietzsche, metaphysics, religion, science, psychology, history – above all, it has ruled over our two-thousand years of Christianity and Christian morality:

As far as man has thought, he has introduced the bacillus of revenge into things. He has made even God ill with it, he has deprived existence in general of its

innocence; namely, by tracing back every state of being thus and thus to a will, an intention, a responsible act. (Nietzsche, 1967 p. 430)

For Nietzsche, *every search for a foundation is a form of resentment*. To the customary objection that religion at least teaches gratitude, the answer is: gratitude is simply the *flipside* of revenge. Even the *will to truth* (ie philosophy) is animated by resentment. Earlier I said that Nietzsche is a pre-existential writer. I need to rectify that statement: Nietzsche is a *post-existential* thinker; he is fiercely *post-foundational*, and his stance is at variance with dominant modes of existential psychotherapy that desperately seek (as well as offer to punters) certainties and foundational truths. Which begs the paradoxical question: can we *base* a psychotherapeutic orientation on a *non-foundational* mode of thinking?

Magic Moments...

For Proust, *erotic love* lies at the root of all other emotions (Nussbaum, 2003). It triggers what he calls 'upheavals of thought'. One moment the mind resembles a flat plane, he writes; then suddenly a mountain range thrust itself into view, mountains sculpted and swollen into various combinations: Rage, Envy, Jealousy, Hate, Pride, and Love. The notion that erotic love might constitute the basis for all emotions is an interesting hypothesis. It could provide the practitioner with a healthy antidote to the wave of sentimentality that has taken hold of some sections of humanistic therapy. Examples of this are the notions of 'relational-depth' (Mearns & Cooper, 2005), the interpretations of Buber's 'I-Thou' and the direct emphasis on 'love' (Freire, 2013) as the basis and healing force in therapy. I borrow my definition of sentimentality from Martha Nussbaum (2003): sentimentality is *thinking about sentiment* (and building a notion around it) *rather than simply feeling it*. Quantitative, data-ridden researches measuring love and 'depth' are thus, at least according to the above definition, sentimental. The application of heavy-handed literalism to what is by definition unfathomable is not new. Nearly a century ago Adorno said of occultists "they inveigh against materialism, but they want to weigh the astral body". These perspectives are naive, he went on to say somewhat uncharitably, but useful, for "they supply simpletons with a world outlook" (Adorno, 1978, p 238).

A good example of sentimentality comes from Tolstoy, who writes of those Russian ladies who wept at the theatre and were utterly oblivious of their coachman sitting outside in the

freezing cold (Nussbaum, 2003). It could well be a matter of temperament, but there is something odd in the oversimplified and formulaic interpretation of Buber's rigorous notion of 'I-Thou' – whom I read as *accident*, manifestation of the *numinous* in the everyday, rare and precious and unsolicited occurrence, rather than something that we can manufacture for trainees, say at 3.15pm during a humanistic/existential counselling course. The latter has little to do with Buber and more akin to the refrain in an old, rather schmaltzy, popular song:

Magic moments/ when two hearts are beating...

Of Planting an Oak in a Flower Pot

By sentimentalizing the therapeutic encounter and emphasizing moments of 'relational depth' and 'love' we end up anaesthetizing Eros itself, who (like Hate) is a *daimon*, ie a 'force' (for lack of a better word) entirely *outside* the parameters of Platonism and Christianity. 'Love is a daimon' means: *love is without ascent*. We need not hark back to the pre-Socratic or Dionysian rites to have a taste of that. Great literature is full of these examples. Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* is a manifestation of a love so profound that is "total exposure of self to other from which [others] shrink in fear and shame" (Nussbaum, 2003, p 604). This love is *outside* the sphere of self-protective control and calculation. Heathcliff derides this sort of domesticated, effectively dead 'love' which Cathy's husband, Linton, gives her as: 'planting an oak in a flower pot'.

Rollo May came up with the formidable notion of the *daimonic* (May, 1969) yet he understood it (exemplified in the figure of Socrates whom he saw as having a foot in each camp) as a reconciliation of the imaginative and the dialectic domain. But with Socrates the descent towards the tyranny of reason and pre-Christian virtue had irremediably set in. In this context I found Merleau-Ponty's notion of *hyper-reflection* very useful, for it gives greater scope and range to human reflexivity beyond the narrowly-confined domain of logic. It expands "our conception of the possibilities of scientific explanation" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 3); it "plunges into the world instead of surveying it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p 38); it descends toward it without imposing "upon the world in advance the conditions for our control over it" (ibid)

It has always been the case that philosophers had to wear the mask of the contemplative priest, for their vocation was suspect. The same is perhaps becoming true of those

psychotherapists who are fast filling the gap of moral arbiters and ersatz spiritual guides rather than provide a much-needed space for the exploration and partial expression of what cannot be said and lived in any other place. I am talking of a therapeutic practice free of the notion of redemption, one that respects the dignity of striving and struggling rather than seeking an impossible amelioration of existence. A therapeutic practice that understands *love without ascent*, a notion of love outside the parameters of Platonism and Christianity. Would the term *existential psychotherapy* adequately describe this kind of practice? Or, considering that the existential psychotherapy now in vogue is selling certainties and redemptive formulas by the busload (two for the price of one), would *post-existential psychotherapy* be a better description? Uncle Lou again:

You can't depend on any Churches
Unless there's real estate you want to buy
You can't depend on anything
You need a busload of faith to get by
(Reed, 1989)

I am, perhaps, wrong

Going back to Uncle Lou, he once said that he had always hoped that the very same intelligence at work in novels, poems, cinema and other art forms could be present in rock music, adding wistfully: 'I was, perhaps, wrong'. There may be a parallel here with existential psychotherapy. I am under the impression that at present coarser and more simplistic versions of it are in vogue at the expense of more nuanced and articulate voices which find themselves pushed to the margin. I also feel that our arguably reductive *zeitgeist* forces us to enunciate existential and post-existential ideas and practices in a forcefully upbeat and sing-along mode at variance with its root metaphors.

I am, perhaps, wrong. I fervently hope so. Perhaps there is a chance to be *dizzy together* – to recover the continuity of being through complicit allegiance to an exciting project – as if, learning from love, we were in love with the possibilities still open to existential psychotherapy in these strange times.

Thank you all for joining me on this all-too brief 'walk on the wild side' (with thanks to Derek Bean for the final pun).

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Among his books: *The Speed of Angels* (2013); *Spectre of the Stranger: towards a Phenomenology of Hospitality* (2012); *Buddha is Dead: Nietzsche and the Dawn of European Zen* (2006). He edited the best-selling anthologies *Zen Poems* (2002) and *Haiku for Lovers* (2004), and the forthcoming *After Mindfulness: New Perspectives on Psychology and Meditation* (Palgrave Macmillan) which gathers contributions from leading Buddhist teachers and psychotherapists.

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