

## For Richard Pearce (1944-2021), Existential Therapist.

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... for a charm of powerful trouble  
*Macbeth*, 4.I:18

I met Richard in November 2010 during a SEA conference in King's Cross. Our friendship was born in mutual recognition – both of us resident aliens within the dainty Citadel of Dasein. It was sealed by our shared yearning to sing a different tune from the hallowed refrain ritually chanted within the precincts of this imagined community. Like me, he had precious little time (and greater patience and kindness than I will ever muster) for existential orthodoxies & platitudes, or for the liturgy ratified by chief celebrants Ernie & Emmy, valiant writers and practitioners both, yet irredeemably stuck in the role of fated parents of the Children of Universal Relatedness – their quotes, directions and *bon mots* solemnly chanted by those eager to be anointed with the Holy Water of Authenticity.

I loved Richard's natural gentleness, but it didn't fool me: in him I saw a fiercely *minoritarian* existential practitioner and thinker. There are a few of us around (too few, which makes his loss all the more poignant). To notice, you'd need to avert your gaze from shapely handbooks, bullet points, from the inventory of pieties and banalities currently filed under the label 'existential therapy'. What goes under that name is (merely) *majoritarian*, the stance held by those who make claims of universality, who are coveting consensus and seek approval from the Powers. Any establishment is made up of a majoritarian minority occupying dominant social roles and claiming the authority to speak for everyone else. In contrast, holding a minoritarian stance implies active opposition to dominant ideologies and their corporate interests, as well as refusal to recite the *order words* proclaimed by an imagined community. It entails distaste for using the *passwords* granting access to an imagined inner sanctum – for instance, *Gelassenheit*, *Sorge*, *Sein zum Tode*: rejecting the first as weakness of the will, the second as *worry*, and the third as *hubris* in the face of the enigma of living-and-dying.

Holding a minoritarian stance means opting for a *minor language* ruled by a different notion of power: not the power/dominance of constants but the power/ability of variables. Adherence

to a minoritarian stance will, in short, send traditional existential therapy packing. It will make room for the new.

Richard drew on a decisively minoritarian ancestry: Jean-Paul Sartre and the latter's fierce and unapologetic political commitment towards emancipation, a term worryingly absent in conventional existential therapy. "The voices against [a] fundamentalist view of science are ... a minority – Richard wrote in 2016 – The question remains: are we totally determined beings, both physiologically and ... psychologically, or is there some point where we are able to break out of past conditioning and act as free and conscious agents?"

Compare the above with the stultifying eagerness with which majoritarian existential/humanistic therapy calls for measuring authenticity on an authenticity scale.

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I call Richard during my lunch break at a weekend *butoh* workshop on Macbeth in East London. I'd heard that he was now in palliative care. It's Halloween, and I'm walking a muddy path under the constant drizzle. During our conversation, the sun comes out briefly. He's been sent home from the hospital. He tells me of his desire, in the time he has left, to bring his work to some sort of completion: to reaffirm and rehabilitate Sartre's legacy both within philosophy but more importantly in relation to psychotherapy. Would I help him? His voice is tender and at times hesitant, broken. Has he read my piece on de Beauvoir and Algren? He has. Is he able to read, could I send him something? He's too tired for that, and today of all days is a bad day because he suffered a fall. He laughs at this even though he is in pain. We decide to do regular phone chats, maybe record them, and develop some writing from there.

The rain starts again. I go back to the workshop. Dense white clouds travel fast across the muted sky. 'Listen up. Here's our next experiment/exercise', the teacher says. 'We're struggling to come back to life. We are dead or getting close to being dead. It's irreversible. But damn it, we want to live, no matter what'.

With inexorable winter choking our dreams, we can't help dreaming of spring. We're dying to live, wrenching our frame from the dark earth, struggling to articulate our thirst like a bulb springing up against wind & rain, battered by the same foul weather as Macbeth and on the same island. Where will I get the strength from? But it must be done. Lying on the cold hard floor I struggle to get up, honoured and burdened by Richard's request to take up his work. I'm rising from the dead. Or, caught in between life and death I dig my fingernails into the grimy soil and look up and up at the murky air. Afterwards the teacher, Marie-Gabrielle, has kind words for all, young actors with supple bodies and chiming voices, plus this bald old geezer in

maroon leggings. It's on me, for some reason, that she rests her gaze for a long moment and says: 'everyone did well; but your desperation was real'. I am taken aback, I weep quietly, invisibly. And I know it's because of Richard, this savage yearning to rise from the chthonic soil to complete the work and in the process making existential therapy a little less daft, a little less bland, a little less majoritarian – a little less fixated on power and status, on goals, measurements, and outcomes.

I smile at Marie-Gabrielle in gratitude and say nothing. But now I'm laughing at myself. I'm no *butoh* expert. I haven't a clue. The soft earth will claim me too at some further point. As it claimed Richard, interrupting our conversations, leaving our work incomplete, sending forth shivers of doubt, ripples of agonizing speech and an awful silence. How can I *speak* from this hollow space? At the same time, do I have a choice? Richard's reply would be a resonant *yes*. To choose, to act. To choose (Sartrean) freedom, courage and emancipation was, as I understand it, central to his own personal and political ethos.

How can I say it? From words and sounds we emerge, from the dark earth, mother of ghosts and ghouls we rise from the swarming soil, from the wet muddy *chaosmos* up & up through mist and rain and it will be dawn again, and spring. Again.

*Cool it with a baboon's blood/Then the charm is firm and good:* I'll need all the witchery I can get to fulfil my foolish promise to Richard. But I will do it. Whoever reads this can call me on it. I must do it. Why? Because he was the best existential therapist this country has produced and is ever likely to produce. That's why.