

The other within

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In *Peut-on Appliquer la Littérature à la Psychanalyse?*¹ Pierre Bayard argues that a reader can discover psychological truths from literary works without relying on psychoanalytic theories. He recommends approaching a work of literature inductively, seeking to discover what one can learn from it rather than approaching a work deductively, seeking evidence of an established psychoanalytic theory. Bayard believes that works of literature may reveal truths about the human experience that are not discussed by Freud or other psychiatrists. Bayard's approach to literature is like James Herzog's approach to a patient. Herzog says tries to construct a theoretical structure on the basis of the specifics of the patient, instead of taking a theoretical structure and applying it to a patient.² Despite their enormous scope, Freud and other theorists have surely not told us everything there is to know about being human.

Several years ago, I sought to account for the incredible emotional power of Plath's poetry and discovered that Plath's speakers often demonstrate the same symptoms as institutionalized schizophrenics – desire for oblivion or death, paranoia, split personalities, occasional rages, and the use of schizophrenic imagery, language, logic. But I accessed this understanding of Plath's poetry through the back door, by analyzing her poetry, discovering these symptoms, and then serendipitously stumbling upon psychological theories that accounted for what I had discovered.

I want to explore a phenomenon in four poems and in Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion*. In each of the four poems, the speaker denies a part of him or herself, a part I am calling "the other within." These speakers do not have multiple personalities, nor do they have the kind of external self that protects the internal self that R. D. Laing describes. Rather they perceive of themselves of having an internal other who is ruining their lives, but over whom they have no control. In Sylvia Plath's "Lesbos,"³ the speaker talks to another part her self, treating that more positive side as an other who is destroying her. In Cynthia Macdonald's "The Stained-Glass Woman,"⁴ a bitter, acerbic woman discovers that she can become human, but ends up denying the sensitive side of herself. In two "fat" poems, Delmore Schwartz's "The Heavy Bear"⁵ and Cynthia Mactonald's "Inventory," the speaker treats his or her body as an other

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¹ Paris: Minuit, 2004.

² "The Dead Father," The Dead Father Symposium, Association for Psychoanalytic Medicine, Columbia University, New York, 29 April 2006.

³ *Collected Poems*, New York: Harper & Row, 1981, pp. 227-230.

⁴ *Transplants*, New York: George Brazillier, 1976, pp. 3-4.

⁵ *Amputations*, New York: George Brazillier, 1972, pp. 7-8.

⁶ *Summer Knowledge*, New York: Doubleday, 1959, pp. 74-75.

who is ruling his or her life. In contrast, in *Sometimes a Great Notion*, Ken Kesey portrays the two different sides of his own personality as two rival protagonists who manage to move toward understanding each other.

In “Lesbos” Plath treats two different aspects of her personality as two separate characters. Plath’s poem was probably occasioned by her anger at Assia Wevill for her affair with Ted Hughes and by the visit of a neighbor who brought kittens to her house. Although Plath may have begun “Lesbos” by focusing on the difference between herself and Assia, her neighbor, or both, she quickly modulates into a diatribe spoken by her own angry, paranoid, hating, unhappy self against her mother-, daddy-, and husband-pleasing, good student, optimistic, traditional self.

Plath almost was almost certainly influenced in treating the two selves as two separate people by T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”⁷ Plath’s “I should wear tiger pants” echoes Prufrock’s “I shall wear my trousers rolled,” and Plath’s phrase, “the sea / Where it drives in, white and black” echoes Prufrock’s “the waves blown back/ When the wind blows the water white and black.” Both poems end with the same recognition: that the two selves will never be reconciled and that one will be banished.

In an attempt to protect what R. D. Laing would call her ideal or inner self. Plath’s speaker blames others, her “doggy husband,” whom she announces is “impotent,” her “schizophrenic,” “kicking,” “unstrung puppet” of a daughter, the kittens, and, most of all, her alternate self – the one with the “cute décor” who dotes on her “smil[ing],” “fat snail,” her infant son.

She fails to recognize that she herself may be the source of much of her suffering. By the end of the poem, she insists that she will never reconcile with her alternate ego, saying, “Even in your Zen heaven we shant meet.” Her future looks as bleak as does Prufrock’s when he says of the mermaids, “I do not think that they will sing to me.” Where Prufrock is too filled with self-doubt to accept his more assertive self, Plath’s speaker is too filled with loathing of her more positive self to be able to seek a more integrated and fulfilling life.

Another poem in which the speaker defines herself as bipartite is Cynthia Macdonald’s “The Stained Glass Woman.” In Stanza I, the speaker explains that she is made of stained glass. She is “[g]lowing, refractive, transparent, colorful,” but “[a]lso unbending, fragile, and sharp.” She says that she “fall[s] apart easily” because nothing can hold her together. She explains,

Lead works

In window junction points, but not in joints.
Other metals are too inflexible. Rubber stretches.
Clay crumbles. Plastics
Are cut by the motion of my glass anxiety.

In Stanza II, she falls in love and discovers the human side of herself. She says that only when the weather changes, when she is angry, or when she sees a Tiffany construction does she “ache where the seams once were.” In Stanza III, when her lover leaves her, she returns to again being the acerbic stained-glass woman. In an act of suicide/murder she kills the feeling, sensitive side of herself and says

The woman with the blood
Reddening the water in the tub
Is the one who can be cut.

By rejecting her sensitive self, she is choosing to remain bitter, lonely, and unhappy.

The speakers of two poems, Delmore Schwartz’s “The Heavy Bear” and Cynthia Macdonald’s

⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952, pp. 3-7.

“Inventory,” blame their problems on their fat bodies, as if those bodies are separate, uncontrollable others.

In “The Heavy Bear,” the speaker calls his body “[t]he heavy bear who goes with me,” “[t]hat inescapable animal,” who “[s]tretches to embrace the very dear / [w]ith whom I would walk without him near” and “[t]ouches her grossly.” He says that the heavy bear “[s]tumbles, flounders, and strives to be fed / [d]ragging me with him in his mouthing care.” The speaker also blames his “brutish” body for his aggression, saying it is the bear who “[b]oxed his brother” and who “dishevel[d] all. He even says that it is the bear, who fears death. The speaker never acknowledges that the bear is a part of himself, a part of himself that he might, if he accepted that fact, be able to change.

Macdonald’s “Inventory” is a poem that is reminiscent of the children’s memory game, my grandmother’s trunk. The speaker says of her overweight body, “I carry a suitcase everywhere with me... / It weighs between nineteen and ninety pounds depending on / [w]hat I put inside.” She admits that “[I]t interferes” and that the “suitcase” is what people “remembered best about me.” Like the heavy bear, her suitcase interferes with everything in her life. She admits

At dinner it prevented me, as it always does when
I sit in
a booth, from getting close to the table.

She says, “[w]hen we got into bed it was the same old story: [t]hree of us.” She says “He tried, but got / [s]o tired he fell asleep.” She complains “my case gets between me / [a]nd friends, especially / If they are not agile or are easily bruised.” In both of these poems, the speakers recognize that their obesity gets between them and possible friends and lovers, but they treat their bodies as if they are separate beings over whom they have no control.

The characters in these four poems refuse to accept any connection with or responsibility for the other within them and are therefore doomed to continue to suffer.

More interesting than characters who deny a part of themselves are the two protagonists of Ken Kesey’s very complex novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*,⁸ a familial, cultural, sociological, and geographical description of the Oregon logging town in which he grew up. In the novel the two protagonists are sibling rivals who represent two parts of Kesey’s own personality. When Gordon Lish wrote to Kesey and asked, “Where are you going in *Great Notion*? What is it you’re testing?” Kesey replied, “For one thing, I want to find out which side of me really is: the woodsy, logger side – complete with homespun homilies and crackerbarrel corniness, a valid side of me that I like – or its opposition. The two Stamper brothers in the novel are each one of the ways that I think I am.”⁹

Someone who has read only *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and Tom Wolfe’s *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* might imagine Kesey to be just a well-read, well-educated, anti-establishment, marijuana-, peyote-, LSD-ingesting hippy, like Leeland Stamper in the novel. But another important part of Kesey is the man who is devoted to his family of origin and to his own nuclear family, who grew up in the logging country of the Pacific north west, who played football and went to college on a scholarship, not an academic or creative-writing scholarship, but a wrestling scholarship, a man like Leeland’s elder half-brother, Hank Stamper.

The sibling rivalry demonstrated in the early parts of the novel dramatize the antagonism between these two sides of Kesey’s character. The conflict explodes when the child Leeland discovers that his older half-brother, Hank, is having sex with Leeland’s mother (Hank’s stepmother). Hank is a superb athlete and logger, serves as the patriarch of his immediate family and logging business, is admired

⁸ New York: Viking, 1964.

⁹ Lish, “What the Hell You Looking in Here for, Daisy Mae?” An interview with Ken Kesey,” *Genesis West* 2 (5), (1963), p. 26.

by his male friends, and is adored by women. He is happy as a logger and at home in the harsh climate of the Pacific Northwest. In contrast, Leeland is a bookish nerd who is sickly, inept at physical activities, and unable to defend himself from bullies. He despises the logging community, but feels at home at Princeton.

When Leeland finally returns home to try to take revenge on Hank, they are at odds over everything. Hank flourishes as a logger. Leeland hates and is inept at logging. Leeland thinks of Hank and his peers as uneducated boors. Hank thinks his little brother is a sissy who needs to grow up. At Hank's prodding, Leeland gradually gets physically stronger. He also comes to realize that his older brother is far more educated and more well-read than he imagined.

Leeland is invested with only hate for and a yearning to get revenge on his older brother for sleeping with his own mother. He becomes one of the precipitating causes to the family's sequence of catastrophes, when he pretends to be ill in order to stay home and try to seduce his older brother's wife. As a result, the loggers must work with an inadequate man power, there is an accident, a beloved cousin drowns, and the brothers' father loses an arm and eventually dies from his injuries. But Leeland gets his revenge. Because of the accident, Hank returns home early and discovers his brother and his wife in bed together. But, unknowingly, Hank gets his own revenge, when Leeland later discovers that his mother wrote love letters to Hank and sent poems Leeland had written to Hank. Most painful of all, Leeland discovers that he had been able to attend prep school and Princeton only because Hank had been supporting him and his mother.

At the novel's climax, the brothers confront one another in a fistfight that they fight to an exhausted draw. Throughout the novel they faced each other openly, and, in so doing, came to understand and to acknowledge each other. That acknowledgement lets them begin – just barely begin – but begin, nevertheless – to understand each other and to move toward a reconciliation when Leeland volunteers to assist Hank in the very dangerous task of running a raft of logs down a churning, flood-swollen river, an attempt in which they may both die. But they are attempting it together. Although the novel ends as they begin the run, a rapprochement has begun because the brothers recognized and acknowledged each other.

This novel seems to me to suggest that we cannot choose to eradicate a part of our personality, but we can work to understand and come to terms with it and begin, thereby, to evolve. The unwanted side of one's self may have some value, and even if it does not, one needs to examine and learn about it in order to deal with it. I think the implication is that to struggle to come to terms with and cooperate with various parts of one's self is the only way a person can grow and become a more integrated human being.