THERAPY THROUGH LOOKING BACK

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Abstract

Therapy, a novel by David Lodge is discussed from the point of view of myth (Orpheus, Lot) but also through the characters' need to access their inner void so as to advance in the future. Relations that are established between the individual and religion and the religious side of things are also taken in view.

The contemporary reality portrays a show of a conglomerate of events that put pressure on the individual, rendering the outside more visible, at the same time, giving personal life the shakes of peril through invasion and corruption of the private dimension and providing one with the means of escape through coming to terms with words, with myth and with acknowledging one's identity.

Looking Back

There is only so much one can oppose the forever intrusive "real" and engaging in alternatives becomes the end of a process of cleansing a guilty conscience. Looking back is one of the techniques through which the unredeemed Tubby offers himself the chance of solving the wander through the darkening labyrinth, a medley of his making , a place of horrors to remain unnamed as they might come to life, yet providing the one lodging them with chills of fear , choking him from the life he feels he deserves to enjoy and sending him the shivers of 'Internal Derangement of the Knee' as they make him wander from therapist to therapist in a useless chase for escape from what he did.

As he starts to become preoccupied with whatever is causing his pain, Tubby Passmore is more and more aware of past events which he commemorates by writing a personal diary as a means of curing himself. Thus he internalises and orders, by submitting to the laws of narration, that which causes him unexpected physical suffering. He remembers not always the facts as they were but by making great effort so as to conceive of the not-present. His approach is through words, they are the ones which best contain the grain of his salvation. Not only them but the act that they entail: having someone avert one's eyes from *now* and focus them on *then*. Belonging to an "activity" that centres the eyes on the past one can associate this act to that identifiable in myths, be they of the Greeks or of the Christians.

According to this, there is the myth of Orpheus and that of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra, more precisely the fleeing from the doomed city by Lot and his family. In both cases a flaw is involved, somehow the world of the characters involved in the story is shaken by a destructive or disruptive event. With Orpheus there is the loss of the one he loves: Eurydice, with Lot's wife the deprivation is of one's own life as seen through what one has lived and where one had an identity which singled him/her out from the crowd. Suffering binds the two

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myths together in moments of torment that relive the past for the ones who experience it in pangs that prompt the refuge of the mind in former bits of remembering that do not heal the suffering individual but provide him with a re-enactment of the affliction and cause his /her final fall.

A present inner structuring narration that defines an individual of real manifestation or one belonging to the world of imagination bears the traces of myth, an originator of speculation but also of alternative stories that cure the individual through an undertaking of mimicry of it. With Orpheus and with Lot's wife there is the ancient manifestation of fatalism, of the impossibility of the individual to escape that which was written on his behalf in the "records" of the gods. Hence the shifting of time trying to relieve that which can no longer be with Orpheus going as far as descending in Tartar, displacing himself from the world of the living through temporarily cheating destiny and conquering death through words and music only to lose his beloved by a manifestation of his impatience. The same happens with Lot's spouse who is unable to shake off the past, thus turning her eyes for the last time on the tormenting destruction of her life, an act that turns her into the stillness of the pillar of salt.

Not accepting defeat or the will of higher powers that impose themselves onto the humans, causes a painful process of rebellion similar in action to that of the fallen angel, yet successful through the mere undertaking. Though losing the object of their desire and their life in defying the set destiny, Orpheus and Lot's wife are winners through the mere attempt at turning the facts around (in the myth of Lot there is further evidence that the living, the rest of the Lot family, though not being transformed into salt as a result of disobedience had an even more tormenting experience of re-enacting the acts that led to the fall of the befallen cities).

The two mythical characters stand for two stances. Regarded from the point of view of return to the past, there are two acts that they both perform although to a certain extent in a different manner. Thus, there is the cause that prompts their return: the *inner* void that requests a journey in the realm of memory, a recourse to the suffering of the spirit and there is also the need to make perceptible to the senses the object that prompts the mental return to the past. Remembering is allowed as it makes use of one's imagination and experience in the reconstruction of the event. Visualisation through creative processes of the mind is also possible without causing damage to the one involved in re-creating a perception till the individual seeks to make vivid, as in viewing in real time, as if being the re-creator of it, a position flawed in itself being able to cause nothing more than the complete fall of the subject. It is not memory that destroys Orpheus or Lot's wife, but the impatience and the disobedience that makes their eyes feel the need to perceive the once lost. Therefore, return through memory or imagination is permitted as a way of the spirit, Maurice Blanchot stating that "le regard d'Orphée" is pre-eminently interior. The opposite, enacting, is a mistake as it implies involvement on an impossible level, one which may bring affliction.

The main sufferer of *Therapy* is one captured by both these variants and is enraptured with the temptation not only of looking back as Orpheus did, but by mimicking also Christian beliefs, engaging in a kind of behaviour that he began while a young boy, as a means of achieving his goals. Encouraged from home to adopt a religious identity that was not his, to benefit from it, he did so and used it to get closer to others. His preoccupation with religion comes also from a need to approach women. Hence his strong Sunday school commitment due

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to the presence there of his most admired Miss Willow or later on his infatuation with Maureen Kavanagh.

It is precisely this inner contemplation that allows him to discover and thus recover his own path, acknowledge the wrong doings that he performed and gain control over his life. As a very much entangled 'narrative structure', Tubby is focused only on himself, the others not being taken into account, what he comes to realise is that his own structure is part of a greater entanglement that influenced his own course of actions and that his actions have influenced in their turn the lives of the others. There is no such thing as lack of intention, and if he seems to have forgotten the tearing away from a blissful moment, the pains of the body remind of the past, of hurting someone he had cared about. The many types of therapy he makes himself subject to give in to the state of spiritual void that pains him, and at the same time the postmodern being as one needing to access the spiritual side of things beside focusing on matter. Alternatives there are, as surely as one can be faced with thousands of probable possibilities that provide one only with temporary solutions. The final solution resides in the individual and in one's own restoring of stories, in inner contemplation and confrontation with the self. Tubby is another Orpheus descending in a Tartar of his own making , confronted with an anxiety created by his own fears and needing to perform a *peregrinatio* to the beginnings of his tormented situation.

Religion and redemption

Tubby Passmore is a combination of pagan impulses and religious behaviour. His attraction to religion is through the feminine side of the world. At the same time, one has to bear in mind the connotations of the names involved. 'Willow' speaks of suffering, of the crying of the Madonna and 'Maureen', which stands also for 'Mary', is the name of the one whom all Christians seek first, regarding her as an intercessor with the divine power on behalf of the ones praying. His fall from the state of "grace" is not due to the corruption to the way of the flesh of the most Catholic Maureen, but to the acting in the manner of the corrupting serpent. Their being together in childhood refers back to the first couple and their living in an idyllic place. Much like the former couple betrayal manifests itself only this time the man is the one to provoke it.

Consequently, this childhood episode became his original sin that will follow him throughout his life, making him unable to enjoy his life, but causing him to live with his choice, at the same time, rendering him unable to perform choices. Whenever he has to decide for his own life, whenever there are life-changing choices to be made, he is overcome with the feebleness of the body that springs from the initial feebleness of the spirit. When he has to make a choice regarding his career or when simply deciding to buy a car, he rushes into it and then is tormented with second thoughts that blacken the future as he sees it, although he is later proved wrong in his apocalyptic visions.

Finding himself wandering through the desert of fragmented recollections and deriving no real support from his therapists of many talents, he undertakes a journey of re-discovery of his self through writing, a process that sets him thinking and voicing that which lies hidden below the eerie line of the horizon, lingering in a preverbal state of non-aggressiveness that does not pose any immediately perceivable threat. Only the inside knows the secrets he buried

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long ago yet there is remorse and a return to the crime scene. The spirit rebels against the insensitivity of the body giving him food for thought as to why should he be constantly suffering from pain without a cause.

As of young when he was trying to be accepted by falsely adopting a behaviour that was not his, the egotistic hypochondriac nature of his leads, after discovering Kierkegaard, to identifying his life with his. Mistrust in himself sets him moulding his self on the life or customs of others. What shaped him in his youth were the experiences he had as a false Catholic: the beliefs that he pretended to have in order to be accepted by the group, but mainly by Maureen, the football he played as a member of the Catholic teams and the theatre he became involved with, again starting from religious reasons, all of them are what directed further his life without him consciously knowing that. His present wife: Sally is herself deeply religious and was raised in a family in which her father was a clergyman and his career as an actor and as a scriptwriter owes much to that forgotten childhood experience. Not being aware of it, Tubby has tried throughout his life to abide by the rules of the ones he pretended to imitate. As it appears, mimicry of behaviour can lead to its assumption on a profound level, guiding one's life without one being aware of the happening.

In his state of a tormented adult lost in his life, unhappy for unknown reasons and seeking solutions even in odd places and also through obscure endeavours, when faced with the possibility of breaking free from the veil of anxiety that seems to have wrapped his existence, he adopts most willingly Kierkegaard. This leads him to reading his books to better understand him. Just as before, instead of allowing himself not to be conquered by fragments but by the whole idea, Tubby Passmore approaches the writer in a personal way and mistakenly tries to associate his writing with his life. He seeks to find proofs of Kierkegaard's writing in Kierkegaard's life. Though a professional, he finds himself unable to separate between fact and fiction much as he does in his professional life where his sitcom is based on his own life, the gags that he produces being derived from the everyday experiences, blending too much fact into the figment he proposes to his viewers weekly.

His creative block, based also on his blocking of real life ever since he departed from Mary, leads him to search for elements that approach Kierkegaard's life to his. Finding similarities, he sickly compares the events that he experiences to the words already written. All he needs actually is someone to understand him. He gives up his twisted life and finds such a confessor not in his behaviour therapist, nor in his platonic Amy-affair, but in blending his suffering with one that had consumed itself long ago, although the two were not prompted by the same reasons.

Till then, he had lived in a carefully determined universe in which he had made the rules or at least he had the impression that he had. All of a sudden, when uncovering the dark from the past and sensing problems in his marriage he departs to the land of the famous dead to get a closer perspective at the one who, it seemed to him, understood him. Once again, he reads things from his perspective not being able to dissociate the fact that as Kiekegaard had himself stated, the events of his life were largely influenced not by his relationship with the living but with The Higher Power. That was what prompted his own writing and the decisions that he made. At the opposite, there is Tubby, one who shapes his relation with divinity according to

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his relation with the humans he comes in contact with, a perspective that is forcefully changed in the end and which finally allows him to find his own redemption.

By approaching Kiekegaard justly, he arrives at the core of his belief (Christianity) and this allows him to explore rightly his self and find the solution to his crisis. What he had blocked long ago surfaces in moments of remembrance that provide him with safe contemplation of his past deeds. It is the human being facing one's own angst, trying to comply with it and continue living. Experiencing the writer, he also experienced his beliefs, a thing that permitted him to reconsider his choices and acknowledge the real source of his pain in the knee. Self redemption can be achieved through forgiveness of himself, of his acts and of his former "victim" whom he starts searching in an attempt at restoring relations and the course of one's life. What could a sinner do than embark on pilgrimage towards the one whom he had wronged. His penance is performed through following the tracks of the one he used to love and performing together in an act of humbleness the "road to" Santiago de Compostela.

For him it is a new experience, although a religious one, it is one that he chooses to perform not only to escape loss of soul, but also to regain Maureen which he finally does. The 'Richmobil' is of no use on the way to reaching the end point of the pilgrimage, the underlying strength of belief is identifying oneself with the lowest of human conditions: the poor 'who shall inherit the heavens', a sort of play, the putting on of a mask that allows one to be transformed into any character one chooses to become on the way to redemption. The two, as wearing the masks of humility, could also be wearing the identities of Adam and Eve after the Fall, embarked on a journey to wash their sins not awaiting for a Saviour to show himself but challenging fate and harsh conditions to be blessed with the long sought forgiveness.

The journey is one of the aching spirit and the ailments of the body cannot prevent it from happening. Matter is suspended and so the acts performed before. What continues to exist is only the path and the repenting travellers, their spirits measuring in their footstep a rosary of prayers. It is to no one that they have to account for at the end of it, only in front of themselves. The two castaways find themselves newly-born beings at the end of the pilgrimage, truly lucky in being granted a second chance at Paradise in a conciliatory medley of Christian blended with pagan elements. The essential is that they forgave each other and themselves thus accomplishing the purpose of the *peregrinatio.* As in a fairy tale, after defeating the evil monsters ('Internal Derangement of the Knee', his anxiety), the hero (Tubby) is granted the princess (Maureen), the kingdom (his job) and fertility is restored to the land (he overcomes his writer's block and his biological problem). There is also restoration of order as Tubby re-arranges his puzzling relationships with women: Maureen, his wife and Amy.

Image vs. word or defeating anxiety

In terms of probable associations, the orphic looking back at inner level belongs to the written word (the book) while the conceptualisation of the thing missing is that of the image (television). According to Baudrillard, the image as used by the cinema or television for that matter is a surface without depth that kills. The 'obscenity' of the multiplication of the image leads to "a real" more real than the real one, in a proliferation of depthless images that saturate while leaving unsatisfied the customer. Engulfing virtual reality models that become surrogates for the perceptible to the senses, the human being who has renounced all human contact,

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engages in false relationships of obedience to the one, leader on the market: fizzy alternatives that create addiction and the thirst for real experiences all the while demanding true-to-life shows.

While the cinematic industry has already been accused on various occasions of providing the viewers with nothing more than visual rubbish, a 'pornographied image' of life and to altering it to negative ends, the last battlefield maybe where life could have been recuperated, that of the documentary, is renouncing its rights, turning commercial and much like the artistic shifting of 'pelicule', allows no room for imagination. Nothing appears to be hidden, in the vortex of blank pictures there seems to be no more room for interpretation as it may lead to the fall of empires (be they of the press or of political "extraction"). No message lies beneath the looming lighted coloured bulb. The screen is not a gate to the whole world but a gateway to the realm of an inferno of tormenting meaningless actions: depravity, wars, soul-breaking news that invade one's home in ghastly procession of invading the private and annihilating it to the benefit of the public and if possible making a muck of it by exhibiting it on the public stage and taking pride in such-like action.

It seems then no wonder that a resourceless scriptwriter, who admits himself that he had lived his life without too much reading, becomes entangled in the job he chose and mingles it with his own life by basing a sitcom on his own life. Tubby confesses to have been so taken with the project from the very beginning that he would spend countless hours to view his creation come to life. It is the same inner spring that renders him unable to provide an ending for the series. The problem is not the maiming of his artistic integrity; it had been bought long ago, but the too much blending of fact with fiction. His feeling is that the "art" he is producing has come to rule life as it was. Therefore if he accepted a rupture in the family portrayed in the movie that would mean that he would have to accept a rupture in his real life.

Tubby is poisoned with his crawling into the realms of the VR for too long as a false antidote to feeling life as it really is. Too much time lost in the woodlands of meaninglessness sets him in a wandering state from which he is constantly awakened by the pain in the knee.

> Et si la réalité, sous nos yeux se dissolvait? Non dans le néant, mais dans le plus réel que le réel (le triomphe des simulacres)? Si l'univers moderne de la communication, de l'hyper communication nous avait plonges, non dans l'insensé, mais dans une énorme saturation de sens, se consumant de son succès - sans jeu, sans secret, sans distance? (…) S'il n'y avait plus de fractures, de lignes de fuite et de ruptures, mais une surface pleine et continue, sans profondeur, ininterrompue? Et si tout cela n'était ni enthousiasmant, ni désespérant, mais fatal?[1]

It is with this that Tubby is at battle with. On the one hand he can continue his life in pain never attempting to find out that which prompts it, in other words to remain dedicated to his profession of the image or start recovering the meaning of his life, turn towards the word he had renounced decades ago with the betrayal of religion and of Maureen. The pictured reality he has veiled himself in lacks the primordial characteristics of the image itself that was that of the icon which blended image and message, all the images created after by lay hands lacking its original depth. By returning to the word, Passmore revives this connection in his own self and saves it. The diary he produces structures itself on the established pillars of the

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ordering narration that casts away the dark and strengthens the inner structuring narration of the individual itself but it also marks a return to the saving word. His first overt reaction after experiencing the mysterious pain is of producing a somehow understandable utter:

> The first time I felt the pain was about a year ago. (…) when I felt it: a sharp, piercing pain, like a red-hot needle thrust into the inside of the right knee and then withdrawn, leaving a quickly fading afterburn. I uttered a sharp, surprised cry and keeled over on the bed (I was in the bedroom at the time). "Christ!" I said, aloud, although I was alone.[2]

That time is the only stance that he allows himself say it. Though an officially not practising Catholic, for that matter not belonging to any declared religion, though having deeply interiorised that of youth, it is most surprising that the first reference he makes when in agony is to a higher power that he openly disdained. True that the aforementioned remarks are followed by words of less Christian provenance but the first one as caught in the quotation is the one that speaks of his nature, what is more, one has to contextualise it, if we think of the place and situation one might say there is no surprise in his first happening exactly in the bedroom because the pain originated from hiding something belonging to the intimacy of his life. The saying of the word, although nobody and no one appeared to be present there, is just a proof of his religious side of the subconscious coming back to life.

When suffering deeply, the first reference one makes in uttering a name surfaces that individual's true allegiance and though he would not admit to being a Catholic or a believer in anything else but himself, the words betray him. The operation he undertakes in trying to overcome his supposed illness makes him subject to wandering through the subterranean part of the hospital. For him, the experience is one of continuous descent into the machinery that makes one well again that is the hospital. At the same time, this bleak and temporary journey equals also the beginning of the descent in his own psyche in sudden memories of the past. It is such a vivid enterprise that he is no longer able to cope with the present. Focusing on undoing a past mistake, his inability to face the reality of the divorce, or the challenges sprung from his job etc. speak of the inability of living in a present felt as wrong after the admission that he should have acted differently with Maureen. The present appears itself a mistake. Still, one that needs to be confronted but only after settling matters with his past conscience.

Apparently there could be no healing or understanding of his pain, but if he discovers remorse and then redemption it is because he has discovered them by means of the written word: that of Kierkegaard or of himself. And if he writes a diary on paper but mostly in and with his mind as he re-arranges past events, it is because he is on the path to confession. Though there seems to be no reader of the text he produces, his first and almost perfect reader is in himself. Much like the pilgrimage, the action he performs is that considered as needed to be undertaken by himself and it becomes complete probably because it is first and foremost in him that lie the answers to his choices and to his deeds.

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[1] J. Baudrillard, *L'autre par lui-même*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987, p. 90
[2] D. Lodge, *Therapy*, London: Penguin Books, 1996, p.3-4

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