

Nick Totton: An Appreciative Afterword

ANDREW SAMUELS, University of Essex, UK

ABSTRACT *This afterword appreciates Nick Totton's work in a number of fields by addressing a number of questions that the author asks or poses about Nick Totton. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: Nick Totton; Jungian; Trickster; Embodied-Relational Therapy

APPRECIATION

How amazing it is for an “outsider”, a maverick even, to emerge from the margins as the agenda-setter for counselling and psychotherapy. For this is what Nick Totton has done in the past few years! His work on making body therapy relational, on politics and (and in) therapy, on ecopsychology, and on confronting our growth-restricting fears about boundaries is, by now, required reading for all practitioners. I think I learn more from him than from anyone. . . . [Nick shows us] where today's excellence in practice lies.

This was the puff or blurb I wrote for the back cover of Nick's most recent book, *Not a Tame Lion* (Totton, 2012), which is reviewed elsewhere in this issue (Tudor, 2012). I use it as a starting point for an attempt to answer some questions I have often posed to myself and others – and to Nick himself – about our not-so-tame Lion.

NINE FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT NICK TOTTON

1. Why is Nick not a Jungian?

If you think a bit, it is surprising that Nick is not a Jungian. His interests embrace synchronicity, the occult, spirituality and meaningfulness, all of which are classical Jungian themes. I know that Nick will have his own answers to this question that will completely settle the matter – but, reader, humour me please, while I draw Nick's attention to Jung's (1947/1969) notion of the psychoid unconscious. This is a space or place or level where, Jung says, body and psyche are one: two sides of the same thing. It is the most explicit attempt in depth

Correspondence to: Andrew Samuels, University of Essex, 12 MiHo Apartments, 565 Caledonian Road, London N7 9RB, UK.
E-mail: andrew@andrewsamuels.net

psychology to heal the mind–emotion–body splits that Western civilization depended on for centuries but that now contributes to its decline.

These days, it is widely recognized that Jung is one of the pioneers of ecopsychology. I mention this here because the idea of the psychoid layer explicitly embraces both the organic and non-organic realms: humans, animals, trees and plants, rivers and rocks are all held in this conception – or is it an image? – of the psychoid.

I think Nick may go on eschewing the Jungian thing in order to retain his independence – from Jung, and perhaps from me, and/or from Mary-Jayne Rust (see Rust & Totton, 2011) but I want to challenge it.

2. Is Nick secretly Jewish?

This is of course put quite offensively. Be that as it may, Nick's fusion of earthy attention to social reality with keen moral sensibility is something with which many Jewish thinkers and writers would want to identify. It feels familiar. It may even be a *Weltanschauung* to which Jewish thought has been crucial.

In a sense, Nick is an heir to what used to be called the Marx–Freud project, an attempt to link the identification of an economic substrate to all social and cultural manifestations with the questioning of human autonomy in the psychological sphere via the explication of the unconscious. Otto Gross was the first one to pose the problematic to which this type of world view leads. How can an individual change in analysis or therapy if the world in which they live is so crazy, skewed and unfair – and how can we think about changing that world if we do not also consider how to change the nature of the people living within it?

3. Is Nick really a Trickster?

I have got irritated with Nick being described as a Trickster. There are several reasons for this. One is that Tricksters do not have any sense of embodiment at all. Rather, they utterly lack a body schema – which is why the Winnebago Trickster can send his penis off into a tree to steal fruit. This denial of bodily reality is part of a wider denial of the exigencies of time, space and place. Tricksters are not only about creativity and ingenuity. They are also cruel, deceitful, criminal and completely unrelational. They are not authentic – which is why I think it is a mistake to call Nick a Trickster. In fact, he is an anti-Trickster, for he is all about embodiment and relatedness. If, from time to time, he draws on Trickster-like energies, perhaps (as I've suggested is possible) in the political arena, that is not the same.

4. Why does Nick have such a problem with the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)?

I want to interrogate Nick's opposition to regulatory bodies like the UKCP. Of course, having been its Chair, I am now rather biased. I completely agree that I am an example of a poacher turned gamekeeper, yet, before we happily accept that righteous indignation and speaking truth to power are in and of themselves actual reasons to dislike organisations such as the UKCP, maybe we should think it through a bit.

The Shadow side of idealism is contempt for the less than perfect, and often an impatience with labyrinths, hierarchies and the delicate (and not so delicate) interplays of power that

constitute the political. Engaging with people who are not like-minded is what you have to do in politics – or in the family, come to that.

Is UKCP fine as it is? No. Is it evil? Again, no. Is the Independent Practitioners' Network (IPN) the solution? Well, while I won't answer that here in any substantial way, I will just say that I see a lot in IPN that is terrific and a lot of which I am critical.

Returning to the UKCP, I'd like it to be on record that I would never have run for the position of Chair if Nick had not said it might be a fun thing to do and turn out to be useful. His support was crucial as the dirtiest election campaign in the UKCP's history unfolded. After being elected, I asked Nick to Chair a UKCP Working Party to prepare a critique of the Health Professions Council's (2012) Fitness to Practice system. It was great work and the new UKCP complaints set-up does incorporate some of Nick's work and thinking.

5. How can Nick be both the consummate individual and the consummate communitarian?

I've often admired the way Nick manages to be, and to be seen, as the person alone and also as the group-minded one. Of course, the balancing act affects every citizen, but it is a conundrum that many therapists falsely solve by moving to one end or other of the spectrum. Recently, I've been rereading Camus's (1951/1971) book *The Rebel* and understanding his deep aphorism: "I rebel, we exist". At his best, Nick exemplifies this. Sometimes the balance slips, as I think he'll admit. Therapists of the Left need to develop much more theorising about "the individual" and not leave it to sociologists whose lack of understanding of the unconscious makes it seem as if, for them, identity and individuality are just matters of deliberate choices.

I recall once that we were discussing my evolving ideas about the individual in politics and about whether it was possible to lay the academic and political obsession with context on one side for a moment. Nick knew what I was getting at but said that the problem was that, for many people, especially in the therapy world, understanding that individuals exist in contexts was something not yet accepted – and here was I trying to get back to the notion of the individual from that of context!

Another *aperçu* he gave me, which shows how deeply he engages with this individual–community thing, was spoken in a workshop on this theme I gave to a conference of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility. In the workshop, in order to introduce, somewhat ironically, the workshop's valorisation of the individual, I played the theme music from Leone's (1966) film, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, whose central character (played by Clint Eastwood) is the man with no name. Nick pointed out that the "the man with no name" was so much the individual that he didn't need a name.

6. Why is Nick misunderstood? Part 1: Boundaries

Let's strip away a few things. Nick is often misunderstood. This is not because he has frizzy hair or wears hippy clothes, though these things are used against him. However, if you accuse the whole field of therapy and counselling of having become over-boundaried and, thereby, losing the essence of the work, then you do get heard as advocating sexual licence and dual relationships. Now, the profession is united, spuriously and suspiciously, in a massive condemnation of these things. Such unanimity and universality means that there must be an equally universal impulse to commit sexual misconduct and engage in dual relationships.

This gets denied and that is when, as Nick and others (including me) have suggested, the work goes cold, sterile, dry, and overly “safe”.

Walking the tightrope in therapy, as sexual as necessary but not as sexual as possible, is not easy. Nor should we forget that other “drive”, the one that often dare not speak its name. This brings us to aggression and, here too, Nick is right to question whether the therapy consensus has closed down prematurely and self-interestedly on the expression and management of aggression in therapy. I think that when people are frightened to hear a body psychotherapist questioning the always already “rightness” of boundaries, they think of aggression as readily as sex.

7. Why is Nick misunderstood? Part 2: Scholarship

I want to comment very briefly on Nick’s level of scholarship and his academic-mindedness. People often don’t see the years of study and research, the intimate knowledge of several fields of endeavour, and the stick-at-it tendency that marks Nick as a writer and editor. They see him as coming out of Left field, of winging it, of being ignorant of how the rules have developed over time – whereas, in fact, Nick, more than most of us, knows his stuff. This may seem a small point but I know that when Nick reads this he will be pleased I have made it.

8. Why start a separate training, i.e. Embodied-Relational Therapy?

Of all of my frequently asked questions, this is the one that causes me the greatest discomfort. In part, I don’t want to upset Nick too much. In part, I am justifying my own refusal to set up a training school of my own (although I could have done).

I am sure that there are unique and innovative features in Embodied-Relational Therapy (ERT), but are these so unique and so innovative that a completely new school or organization was needed? Isn’t a major criticism of the UKCP that it’s a club to preserve the economic and power status of training organizations – and, if so, wouldn’t that make Nick’s desire to establish another, separate training, hypocritical and him just as into status and power (and economic self-interest) as the “old” organizations? I think this needs to be put to Nick, and I think he can answer it – although, if the answer rests too much on the question of his own personal creativity, then I think we’d have to push him a bit more.

To be honest, and judged by results, on balance I think Nick made the right decision to set up his own shop, but this is only one way to move the world, and not the only way. The relations between ERT and the rest of the body psychotherapy world are themselves complicated. Is it naïve to wonder if some kind of rapprochement would be useful and productive?

9. Do you have to be “wild” to be “Nick”?

I guess what I want to say bluntly is that Nick isn’t really that wild! Moreover, the ideogram of “wild” is too monolithic: just as nature is a construct, so, too, is wildness. The problem here, of course, is essentialism.

Rather than pursue this in fine academic style, I want to tell a story. In 2009, Michael Soth had organized ecopsychology conference near Oxford, at which I gave a workshop entitled “Against Nature”. In it, I put a point I’d first made in 1993 in *The Political Psyche*: if environmentalists (as we called them then) want to be effective, then they need to stop blaming

people for ruining the world or turning a blind eye to its ruination. Fantasies of being destructive and of destroying that which one loves and needs lie at the heart of depressive anxiety, and depressive anxiety involves paralysis of action and will; ergo, we need to find other ways to get the political result.

I think that ecopsychology fails to celebrate the urban and the cosmopolitan, fails to understand that artifice is “natural” for humans. In order to deepen this thought experientially, in the workshop, I distributed sample phials of many perfumes that Selfridges very kindly gave me. In pairs and threes, participants used the perfumes, applied them to each other, and compared notes. It was a smelly old exercise – and a lot of fun. Before the exercise, I had asked who in the audience (of around 75) wore perfume or its male equivalents. One person said yes. Who read fashion magazines in which perfumes are widely advertised? None, though one person said guiltily that she did in the dentist’s waiting room! I suggested that this showed why environmentalism would fail and why ecopsychology had truncated itself. Those in the room (I excepted myself!) had got completely cut off from ordinary life.

How much of this anecdote do I intend to be heard as critiquing Nick’s evolution of ecopsychology? Quite a bit. I don’t think this particular question is personally driven, I think I am as frightened of the destruction of the planet as many people in the ecopsychology world, but I am also convinced that, if you look in the right way, there is much of value in the fripperies of fashion and consumerism, and it is elitist to deny that. Depth lies hidden on the surface. Nevertheless, to say that Nick is caught between wanting to set up a movement to draw attention to the planetary dilemma on the one hand, and being a bit of an elitist on the other, is really only to state the habitual dilemma of those involved in progressive politics.

ENDING

I will close with a few lines from a Kris Kristofferson song, famously sung by one of the two country music “Outlaws”, Waylon Jennings, to his partner in crime Willie Nelson:

If we ever get to heaven boys
 It ain’t because we ain’t done nothing wrong,
 We’re in this gig together
 So let’s settle down and steal each other’s songs.

REFERENCES

- Camus, A. (1971). *The rebel* (A. Bower, Trans.). Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin. (Original work published 1951)
- Health Professions Council (2012). *Further information about fitness to practice*. Retrieved December 23, 2012, from <http://www.hpc-uk.org/complaints/fitnesstopractise/furtherinfo/>
- Jung, C. G. (1969). On the nature of the psyche. In *The collected works of C. G. Jung* (Vol. 8, pp. 159–234; R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1947)
- Leone, S. (1966). *The good, the bad and the ugly* [Film]. Italy: Produzioni Europee Associati.
- Rust, M.-J., & Totton, N. (Eds.), (2011). *Vital signs: Psychological responses to Ecological crisis*. London, UK: Karnac.
- Samuels, A. (1993). *The plural psyche*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Totton, N. (2012). *Not a tame lion: Writings on therapy in its social and political context*. Ross-on-Wye, UK: PCCS Books.
- Tudor, K. (2012). [Review of a book, Not a tame lion: Writings on therapy in its social and political context by Nick Totton] *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 11(1), 76–77.



Andrew Samuels is a psychotherapist, professor, activist and political consultant. Co-founder of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility and the Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy. Former chair, United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy. His many books have been translated into 19 languages.