

## Fragments of the past

Jon Sutton talks to clinical neuropsychologist and poet **Seán Haldane**

**You have said 'I now think poetry has more capacity to change people than psychotherapy'. Lack of faith in psychotherapy, or faith in poetry?**

I was thinking of my own experience of psychotherapy. I had started off as a poet and publisher but wanted not only to record the world around me but to change it for the better. I went through a training analysis in Canada with a Lacanian who had turned Reichian, then through Reichian training in the US with a former trainee of Wilhelm Reich's. This involved work on body movement and emotions as well as the mind, and behind it was the agenda of changing people so that they could then change society. All very radical and 1970s.

After practising as a psychotherapist in private practice along these lines for some years I became disillusioned and emotionally drained. I couldn't change people, and hadn't changed very much myself either. I completed more training and became a proper clinical psychologist and learned to do the more modest therapies we do now. In publicly funded health services, including the NHS, we no longer think of changing people or society. Our goals are time-limited, negotiated, to an extent measurable, and focused on practical outcomes. And when I think of changes in myself, I don't think of therapy but of spontaneous experiences. Some of the most intense spontaneous experiences for me are in writing or reading poems. They change my mind. I have certainly lost faith in psychotherapy in its grandiose aim of changing people, and regained my faith in poetry's capacity to change minds and therefore people. But I still have faith in psychotherapy at its best, which is when I would define it as realistic.

**You were in the running for the Oxford Professor of Poetry position. In the run up to the election, you told me: 'I still hope the crossover appeal of explaining the phenomenon of poetry, though not individual poems,**

**scientifically will come through.' Can you explain?**

As poetry becomes more and more associated with school-work and academic study it is becoming more and more seen as a conscious artefact – a work of verbal art, a sort of word picture written on a whim or at will or for a creative writing course. But over thousands of years and in many societies it has been considered mysterious and magical – something out of human control that occurs in moments of inspiration or trance. It is a distinct phenomenon. Quite a few people have experienced it occasionally, and some people who may eventually be called poets experience it more often. It is a voice talking inside one's head – it spontaneously utters, in a rhythmic or musical way, a message which is out of one's control.

**Almost like psychosis?**

But heard as one's own voice. When it first happened to me at the age of 17 I thought I was mad though. Or more precisely, I wondered – since I'd had a minor head injury a couple of years before which had left me with occasional 'Jacksonian march' minor seizures – whether my poems were due to brain damage. I gave a paper in my school literary society on 'mad poets'. (One of them was John Clare, the early 19th-century 'peasant' poet who ended up in a lunatic asylum. He is usually considered to have been bipolar, but I wrote a recent essay about him in which I propose he was suffering from neurosyphilis). Then I was reassured by reading essays by Robert Graves on his experience of inspiration that whatever inspiration was I wasn't mad.

**Has working as a neuropsychologist for the last 20 years helped you to understand inspiration better?**

I understand something of how neuroscience can explain it. In the 1960s a Princeton psychologist Julian Jaynes in

*The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* explained poetry in terms of the right hemisphere of the brain speaking to the left: the 'voice' from the right is perceived by the left as 'other'. At the time this theory was considered rather wacky. It was inconsistent with the prevailing modular view of the hemispheres in which the left, not the right, dealt exclusively with language. But recently neuropsychology has caught up with Jaynes's intuition. Elkhonon Goldberg, for instance, in *The Executive Brain*, tips his hat to Jaynes when proposing that the right hemisphere processes new experience which is passed through a gradient to the

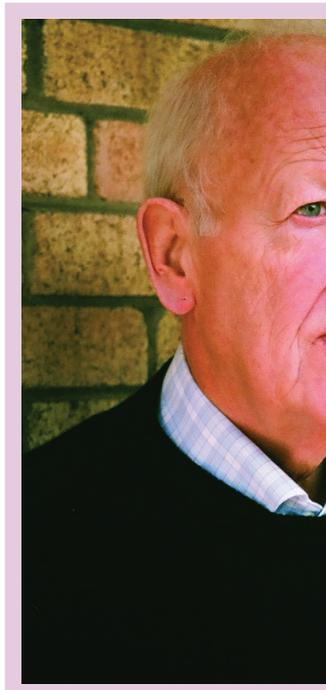
left to be stored. Jaak Panksepp in *Affective Neuroscience* discusses what he calls the 'chills' – feeling shivers down the spine when moved by music or poetry – in terms of activation of the emotional operating circuit that mediates separation distress and longing.

In other words, it's becoming possible to explain the phenomenon of poetry as a voice in the head in neuroscientific terms. I intend to do some work and writing on this. I think people may find such explanations interesting. The 'cross-over' is talking to literary audiences about science.

**But isn't the business of the poet to talk in poetry, rather than about poetry?**

Yes, but since the Enlightenment, around 1800, poets, being part of intellectual tradition, have often felt the compulsion to explain what they are up to. Think of Goethe and Coleridge.

**You have also written that poems need to be worked over again and again, looking for the blurring of the truth**



**that the poet might find hard to face. So that can change the author?**

Graves said that working over a poem was like doing an operation on one's own brain. Since the experience of writing a poem is rather like taking dictation under extreme emotional stress, it can falter and contain errors. Revising the poem spots the errors and corrects them by making the utterance more clear. My friend the poet Martin Seymour-Smith, who had read widely in psychoanalysis, used to warn me that poems often told one what one did not want to hear. It's tempting to change this and make the poem more acceptable to oneself and others. If one doggedly avoids changing the poem towards

acceptability, one ends up facing what it really says.

All this is like in psychotherapy where the therapist helps the client face him- or herself. So the poem can be psychotherapeutic for the poet, and by extension perhaps the reader who identifies with the poet. Which can lead to change. But I don't mean by this that a poem should be consciously written or read as therapy. Poems are spontaneous. As the German poet Wilhelm Lehmann emphasised, poems originate ('*sie entstehen*').

**Didn't Seymour-Smith write that your later poems express your sense of evil?**

Again it's about facing oneself, including the evil in oneself. Evil is not a very politically correct concept, but we all have the capacity for it, and psychology can explain at least some of it. I recommend Barbara Oakley's book *Evil Genes*. She is not a psychologist, but she summarises borderline and narcissistic personality very accurately.

**Tell me about how you write. In the foreword to your collection, you say 'I don't trust a poem unless it is written straight out in a state of something like shock'. Is your frame of mind at the time vital?**

The voice in the head is usually a

surprise. It doesn't choose the convenient moment. I must confess that I once 'wrote' a short but intricate love poem ('This and That') towards the end of a rather dull psychotherapy session and went through the motions until the client left while concentrating on remembering the poem so that I could write it down. I've also had poems spring themselves on me in the middle of the experience they describe. Others may suddenly out of the blue describe something that occurred years ago. As Thomas Hardy advised a fellow poet, 'Never go anywhere without a paper and pencil in your pocket.'

**And has that voice stayed with you throughout your life, or does your passion for it wax and wane?**

I go for long periods without thinking about it, then it surprises me in the form of a new poem of my own or a sudden memory of a poem by someone else. Normally, though, my memory for poems is poor. I sometimes sit down and write a note about poetry or a poet, and I've written several essays on poets, cramming them in between long periods of NHS work. Poetry is not ever-present but it's still the centre of my life.

**Your website describes you as 'something of a human compass' by ancestry – a quarter each English, German, Scottish and Irish. Has this affected either your psychological practice or your poetry?**

It has opened me to different ways of looking at things, to different varieties of English, and to other languages. I sometimes translate poems in other languages, and I enjoy working with patients in their own languages if I can.

**Robert Graves, a former Professor of Poetry at Oxford, wrote in 1968: 'I like Sean's poems: clean, accurate and no nonsense...they make sense, which is rare these days.' Around the same time he called my dad, David Sutton, 'the best young poet in England'. My dad says that far too much poetry now is manufactured stuff and there's not much of the real article around. Would you agree? How has poetry changed over the years?**

Not much. There is a lot of manufactured poetry around, and there is a poetry industry, centred on universities and a few journals, which produces poems that are really acts of criticism – they are written self-consciously with the potentially critical reader in mind. So they end up very safe. Real poems are quite disturbing. Nevertheless people write them and, yes, they make sense – they are

not clever-clever or wilfully obscure so that academics can have something to deconstruct. They may even be naive. The naive poems that people sometimes write under emotional pressure are often never published. In times of war, which quicken people's emotions in general, these poems do often get published. An example is Marian Allen (1892–1953) who wrote very moving poems about her fiancé who died in the First World War, then wrote nothing more. The poems are now out of print and have fallen into obscurity now, but some of them are wonderful.

**You work in the NHS in east London, developing memory clinics. Do you share poems of yours such as 'The Memory Tree' with your colleagues and patients? How do they respond?**

No I don't. My colleagues mostly know I write poems, but we don't talk about them, and I don't share them with patients. Poems are very personal. I share them with a very few friends and then they get published after a delay.

**I see echoes of William Blake in one of your early poems, 'Ember Days'. I personally felt that writing about love felt uncomfortably adolescent as I grew... did you?**

I think that's why so many young people stop writing poetry – meaning they stop listening to poetry's voice – as they get older. It's too embarrassing. And even more so if one has a family. I suspect a lot of bad poetry is a result of fudging personal emotion, or disguising the subjective as the objective. This used to be easier when people had a classical education – a poem about your love life or about wishing to murder someone could become a little piece about Mars and Venus or Hercules. Now there is less escape. The old Irish idea of the *dán díreach* – the direct poem – is difficult to maintain. I'm not very open, in general, about my private life, because some of it is out there in poems and I don't want people to make the links.

**Psychologist Dean Simonton has assembled historiometric data to suggest that poets tend to peak in creativity around the age of 20, and then fade fast. Would you agree?**

Who are 'poets' in this study? I can think of almost no poets who wrote anything memorable before the age of 20. One was Charles Sorley who was killed at that age in the First World War and was writing literally under the gun: he wrote 'When I see millions of the mouthless dead...' At the other end of the spectrum, think of Thomas Hardy who wrote many of his most moving poems after the age of 80.