

## Dramas of existential inquiry

Mallory Wober reflects on two novels by Sebastian Faulks

The vaulting ambition of modern science is to achieve mastery through total explanation, but in three realms it continues to be frustrated by mystery: the macro, the micro and inner consciousness. Physicists hope their Large Hadron Collider might help to 'solve' conundrums about the universe, its dark clouds, black holes and minutest particles – yet it is a daring optimist who will really believe that these mega mysteries and their connection with the micro world will truly be unravelled. Human understanding of the atom seems to remain a set of equations that explain just some of the terrain, and the realm of consciousness is similarly daunting. Is it a question out of place to ask why 'scientific' theorists have not tried to integrate accounts of all three realms of mystery? Einstein did not try to unite Newton's, Planck's and his own thoughts with those of neuropsychologists or of explorers of the spirit. Why not?

It falls to a novelist, Sebastian Faulks, to grapple with thoughts of a three-fold synthesis, while also writing two truly substantial works of description and drama. As psychologists we should be interested in his explorations of the mind at the very least – and it may not be pretentious to point to greater ambitions on his part.

The book with which we can start is Faulks' novel *Engleby* (Vintage Books, 2008). The story is of a youth who is educationally 'upwardly mobile' and arrives in Cambridge. Engleby is troubled, having been in a brutal boarding school; he is not at ease with the educators, his own family background, his co-students and the culture within which he lives. He is clever and uses the flexibility that Cambridge offered (in the 1950s in which his undergraduate years were set) to attend lectures not just in English but in sciences. Faulks thus defies the 'two worlds' theory of C.P. Snow in which science and the arts lead separate lives. By exploring the inner mental world in dysfunction the novelist seemingly comes upon possible connections with the

physical realms of the macro and micro universes.

One may read the book just as an intriguing 'psycho-thriller'; but it does seem that Faulks intends more for it than that. Early in Engleby's downward spiral Faulks introduces an episode of disorientation (appropriately on the borders of the Orient) when the young man goes backpacking:

...in Izmir...I had started to pay too much attention to things. It was almost as though I could see right through them into the molecules that made them... I had the strong impression that I was really outside time or place, that the hostile otherness of my surroundings was such that my own personality was starting to disintegrate. I was vanishing. My character, my identity, had unraveled. I was a particle of fear. (p.38)

Notice the elision of the psychological level of exploration – of the damaged evolution of Engleby's ego – with the realm of microphysics; the term 'particle' is not an accident. Is the author trying to draw back a curtain which for centuries we have artificially allowed to separate realms that, if opened to each other, might provide better understanding of both?

Not long after in the text we have the human mind presented as the appropriate device with which to explore something that physicists might otherwise have claimed for their own. Engleby 'speaks' from within an institution called 'Longdale' – which psychologists will be tempted to identify as Broadmoor:

It's now 6.30... I like these details of time... I live on the forward atoms of the wave of time. It's now 6.32... What is this present, then? It's an illusion; it's not reality if it can't be held. What therefore is there to fear in it? (pp.64-65)

The connection – if it is not too pretentious to posit this – with

exploration of an outer physical realm, is made in a subsequent description of mental disintegration. Engleby had been interviewed by police; he was a friend of an undergraduate who had disappeared, and was spoken to as a possible crime suspect:

[having finished his first police interview] I went to the Kestrel [pub], but my headache was so bad I couldn't enjoy it... I felt detached from what was going on. I began to inspect the surfaces of the room closely, though I felt alienated by their texture. Wood, cloth, Formica, carpet, enamel. It was a little like that time in Izmir. I felt I was beginning to unravel. It was as though all the molecules that made the entity known as 'Mike Engleby' had been kept in place by some weird centripetal force – which had unaccountably failed. Now these particles were flying outward into chaos... It's unusual to feel oneself come apart in such a molecular way... (p.129)

Psychologists who are interested in the 'psyche' part of our inquiry will surely be interested in Faulks' descriptions of what some might call a psychopathic condition, and critical reviewers of the novel have discussed the notion that the character is shown as not really caring for any other person – as though care may be a kind of cement that holds psyches intact – especially for those subject to substantial erosive forces. Many elements can be pointed out to refute such analysis, in which Faulks has provided his character with declarations and experiences of enduring care for others (even though there is also splendidly scathing commentary on the feeble foibles of the culture in which Engleby lives). The notion that Engleby is not 'out of his mind' and can care is reinforced by his theory that it is grief that has unhinged him:

I think I'm capable of having two or more thoughts simultaneously... It's as though the auditorium of my conscious brain has a split screen. ...they don't depend for their existence on the relative point of view of the observer or any of that stuff... Occasionally, my screen redivides... more than that, however, is troublesome...then all the thoughts tumble, like the batons of a juggler who has become self-conscious... Grief is a peculiar emotion...the removal of a partner seems to precipitate a sort of top-to-bottom crisis in the way the survivor sees herself...grief,...doesn't look like a

deep feeling that symmetrically mourns the absent shape, it looks like a disintegration of the acquired personality... It looks like going mad. (pp.167–168)

Is Faulks merely playing, here, with fashionable notions in the theory of systems? This is acceptable in a novel that harnesses several different modes of inquiry, including the ideas of physics, psychology, and literary criticism; but this is surely not trivial or inadmissible play:

One day in my first year at university I woke up in a psychiatric hospital. This was (after Chatfield, obviously) the most unpleasant experience of my life up to that point... Are you familiar with catastrophe theory? The relationship between [Engleby's temperament and degree of anger]...stops being constant because a new element comes into being: rage... What's frightening about this third dimension is that at some stage...the rage becomes not only separate, but independent and self-sufficient. Catastrophe indeed. (pp.182–184)

and, on getting angry with a record shop assistant in Basingstoke:

...the town centre was all coming down or going up... Earth movers... digging and redrilling was ploughing up the past and furrowing my brain... I walked slowly between the counters... and felt nylon, wool, silk and cotton ...these molecules...ran slick and synthetic against the pores...of my skin... The jackhammer in my temples, the enlarged molecules in my hand. It was like that time in Izmir when the centripetal force of Engleby had failed and I began to fly apart, into my atomic pieces...in addition to that disintegration, there was rage... my disintegrating particles had become a wave. I had reappeared without apparently having travelled the intervening distance. Human beings, as atomic matter, must conform to the laws of quantum mechanics – even their thoughts, which are but electrical functions of brain. Perhaps I had solved the mysteries of human behaviour and motivation. (pp.185–187).

Some would say that, in this thought, Faulks has given his character a crucially psychopathic feature of departure from reality. However, this is one of many elements of the plot that should intrigue psychologists; these include the social dynamics of the discussions between lawyers, psychologists and a client who

may be arraigned for murder. Few of us have been present through such discussions in real life, but Faulks seems to have 'done his research' diligently and dramatises the dilemmas that confront these 'professionals' with skill and seeming validity.

It is not pretentious for a reader to imagine that Faulks has ambitions to chronicle scientific work towards a grand theory not only of the 'physical' but of the mental or spiritual realms too. This is again evident in another of Faulks' novels: *Human Traces* (Vintage Books, 2006). In this, two characters Jacques Rebiere and

Thomas Midwinter, meet as young men in 1880 and become partners as 'mind doctors'. Rebiere has a mentally disturbed brother, which spurred him into the field of mind medicine.

Faulks most interestingly evokes the French pioneers of analysis and treatment of mental aberration from Mesmer, through Charcot and foreshadows Freud; through his education in this Parisian school Rebiere becomes convinced that mental problems are caused by childhood trauma. Midwinter, whose sister marries Rebiere, believes there's a genetic component to mental illnesses. Their two lives continue to intersect, and their stories span decades and continents.

Faulks has Midwinter visit East Africa, where he anticipates later discoveries in palaeontology (including finding hominid footprints similar to those found by Mary Leakey in 1976). Faulks' thoughts here are with Darwin, but his character's interest is in the mind, and above all in what can be inferred from the very existence – apparently to a constant extent in all societies – of aberrant behaviour, of madness. He refuses to see such people as 'degenerates', rather as evolutionary necessities – the price we pay for being human, distinct from other animals, including proto-hominids. He identifies the hearing of 'voices' as an ancient phenomenon attributed to biblical figures, to primitive man.

Faulks eventually strikes down his character Midwinter with Alzheimer's, tragically hard for a person whose life's

work has been to explore these rims of human consciousness, to try to alleviate them – now he cannot help himself. In creating this drama Faulks brings together other elements of scientific inquiry in the (seemingly) 'physical' world, with those of the mental realm. He gives to Midwinter a theory positing an 'original human' condition in which cerebral asymmetry is connected with hearing voices; this earlier structure is replaced, via a mutation, by further asymmetric development; this brings about an abatement of heard voices and their replacement by a self-consciousness.

This theory contains at least two points of interest. One is that it reflects much of the thought of Marshall McLuhan; and it may go some way toward explaining why the current human consciousness is preoccupied with oneself rather than being more open to 'the outside'. There is also a single passage presaging those I've quoted from *Engleby*, in a momentous lecture given by Midwinter, more

daringly reducing the human condition to a collection of 'thinking atoms':

...to think of ourselves as atoms in an infinite universe is in fact not really possible; it is just not how we experience life – which we feel as something linear and driven to an end. So either we have the science wrong, or we are merely encountering the limits of our toy consciousness. I believe the latter, and I hope I have shown you what a small, simplified and metaphorical sample of reality our consciousness exactly offers us, with its one-dimensional time and shadow 'I' in its tiny inward theatre... (p.660)

Faulks is not so explicit in *Human Traces* as he is with *Engleby*, that the physical and psychological realms may be interconnected, but these two novels of existential inquiry are surely of joint and profound interest – and entertainment – especially for psychologists.

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