



David Holt

was a highly original Jungian thinker. He was born into a Liverpool Shipping family in 1926. After war service on Atlantic and Russian convoys in 1944, and in the Pacific in 1945, he read Modern History at Oxford, with the study of St. Augustine his special subject. Following on eleven years in book and newspaper publishing, he

graduated from the C.G.Jung Institute in Zurich (1962-1966) with a thesis on 'Persona and Actor'. From 1971 to 1982 he taught and supervised at the Westminster Pastoral Foundation, where he introduced the Counselling and Ontology course. He led the interdisciplinary theatrical weekends on Jung and Hermeneutics at Hawkwood College in Gloucestershire, from 1978 – 1991. His rendering of Wall in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is particularly remembered. He was passionately interested in the work of the Guild of Pastoral Psychology, Chair in 1970 and from 1988 – 1992 he was Chair of the C.G.Jung Analytical Psychology Club in London. He died on Easter Sunday, 2002.

His thinking about the importance of the Guild is well-recorded both in the pamphlet *Idolatry and Work in Psychology*, in the 1970 Annual report (also published in the format of a Guild pamphlet) and in the 1990 *History of the Guild* by Ann Shearer and Michael Anderton. David resigned after one year but his apparent 'failure' can be seen partially

as a 'success' since the Council moved from being a self-appointing oligarchy to a body at least partially elected by the membership. But David raised deeper issues about the potential work of the Guild, particularly as a meeting place for 'professionals' (clergy and those engaged in psychology), which, he says, crystallise around the word 'anxiety'. The issues deserve further exploration, since they expose fundamental questions of religion, psychology, organisation and 'the urgent needs of the world around us'.

David's sense of urgency made great demands but, as the two papers in this pamphlet show, he leaves a rich legacy and the www.davidholtonline.com group was set up to provide continuing access to his work. The very great interest and sense of participation at the Guild afternoon when these two papers were presented testify to the continuing interest in and value of David Holt's work. A list of his publications follows the papers.

PSYCHOLOGY, SURPRISE AND THE WORK AGAINST NATURE IN THE WRITINGS OF DAVID HOLT

By Michael W. Whan

Let the gods
Take from me
By their high and secretly wrought will
All glory, love and wealth.

All I ask
Is that they leave
My lucid and solemn consciousness
Of beings and things...

...Other things pass
And fear death,
But the clear and useless vision of the Universe
Fears and suffers nothing.

Self-sufficing,
It desires nothing
But the pride of always seeing clearly
Until it no longer sees.

Fernando Pessoa: 'Let the gods'

The world of nature or physical world as a whole, on any such view, must ultimately depend for its existence on something other than itself... no one can understand natural science unless he understands history: and ... no one can answer the question what nature is unless he knows what history is.

R. G. Collingwood: *The Idea Of Nature*

On the opening page of his recently collected alchemy papers, James Hillman writes:

Jung's alchemical work has been relevant for analytical psychology in two main ways. I shall be suggesting a third way.

The first way has been excellently presented by David Holt in his

lecture on “Jung and Marx.” There Holt shows that Jung imagined his work to be theoretically and historically substantiated by alchemy, and Jung spent a great part of his mature years working out, in his own words, “an alchemical basis for depth psychology” ... As Holt indicates, it is to alchemy we must turn to gain the proper placing of Jung’s entire endeavour. We need alchemy to understand our theory.¹

A notable testimony by James Hillman, speaking as ever from the edge. Then this second testimony, not from a psychotherapist but a poet, a ‘therapist’ of the English language. It’s from Ted Hughes to whom David Holt had sent a copy of his essays *Theatre and Behaviour: Hawkwood Papers 1979 to 1986*²:

Dear David Holt,

Somehow your note to me, and your ‘Theatre and Behaviour’, slipped through a crevasse in the mountain of paper on which I live. I found it only a couple of days ago. Thank you for your words and your lectures. They are so full of things emerging from real work, insight grappling with Proteus, not riffling through the card index. Reading them is putting me through a surprising process. I am seeing all kinds of things afresh. Thank you again.

Sincerely,
Ted Hughes

Two ‘thank yous’ in Hughes’s letter and implicitly in Hillman’s acknowledgement. In German, the word ‘to thank’ (*danken*) is cognate with ‘to think’ (*denken*) as Heidegger in his *What Is Called Thinking* reminds us. David Holt’s work is full of ‘insight grappling with Proteus’, that is to say, his writings are full of *thought*: they honour thinking; they remember what it is to think. To thank, in its turn, implies remembrance. As Heidegger wrote:

Memory – from the Latin *memor*, mindful – has in mind something that is in the mind, thought ... Memory is the gathering of

¹ ‘The Therapeutic Value of Alchemical Language: A Heated Introduction’, in Hillman, James, *Alchemical Psychology*, Uniform Edition Of the Writings of James Hillman, Volume 5, Putnam: Spring Publications, Inc., 2010, p.9)

recollection, thinking back. It safely keeps and keeps concealed within it that to which at each given time thought must be given before all else, in everything that essentially is, everything that appeals to us as what has being and has been in being.³

Hence, in thinking of David and his writings, as we remember and recall him with gratitude, we are engaged in an act of thanking both for the gift of his presence, friendship and teaching in our lives and also for the legacy of his work, his thought to grapple with. I say grapple, for David is not easy to read: he was such a thinker (not, note, a 'thinking type'; I'm not using here Jung's typology), a difficult thinker who thought *from* the psyche itself. As Hughes observes, to read his writings is to be put 'through a surprising process'. To read him, to process his thought, is to be processed by it. You have to let it find you, which it may or not do as the case may be. One reads him with both an active and passive mind, or what used to be called 'the middle voice'.

Surprise: that is a key word in David's thinking. The following passages represent, I feel, the essential spirit, the attitude within which he worked, wrote and lived:

Psyche is not to be got hold of unless it can get hold of us. Every attempt to comprehend psyche fails unless psyche is allowed to comprehend us. If I reach out to seize psyche, it eludes me, always. Only in myself being seized by psyche can I begin to make sense of what I am after. But, even if I recognize this reciprocal movement in being seized of psyche, it will still elude me if I do not allow for surprise. Psyche is surprising, and it is surprising in a very special sense. I am seized of psyche only in so far as I allow myself to be surprised that what is, is. Psyche is surprising because it is about the commonest of all our verbs, the verb which we take so completely for granted as to remain unconscious of its presence, the verb to be.

This idea that psyche has to do with Being, spelt with a big B, the Being of Metaphysics or ontology, is one of my central

² privately published, 1987

³ Heidegger M, *What Is Called Thinking?* New York: Harper & Row, 1972, p.11

convictions. It means that my approach to my work is essentially religious. It means that I believe something which many analysts find repugnant; that the energies of the psyche, the energies with which we must engage if we analyse psyche, are energies that *let the world be*.⁴

With these passages, we hear how psyche touches us with the elemental surprise of being, the experience of our own, others', and the world's existence: 'that what is, is'. Surprise is one of the ways psyche seizes us. I understand that in the following way: that for David Holt psychology entails a form of seizure. Hence, when I am thinking psychologically about psyche, psyche is already speaking about itself through itself; psyche's thought has seized hold of me. Recalling the passage from Heidegger, one could say that David is a thinker because of his concern for the surprise of being, a concern that belongs primordially to the task of thinking as a fundamental way of *letting the world be*. This is what Meister Eckhart spoke of in German as *Galassenheit*, translated variously as 'releasement' or 'letting go', 'letting be'.

The passages also show how much David understood and could live the meaning of *theory* (Greek, *theoria*) in his work and writings. For his words show that thinking is not separate from feeling, as some in their animosity towards thinking, intellect, or mind often accuse, misreading the essential intention behind Jung's psychological typology, which was, as Jung himself warned, not about labelling parts of the personality but for the purpose of creating a *self-reflective psychology* capable of reflecting *critically* upon itself. As Jung wrote: 'The *sacrificium intellectus* is a sweet drug for man's all-embracing spiritual laziness and inertia.'⁵ David's description of psychological thought as coming out of seizure,

⁴ Holt D, *The Psychology of Carl Jung: Essays in Application and Deconstruction*, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992, p.176

⁵ Jung C.G. *CW* 18, para. 1643

out of surprise, out of 'grappling with Proteus', shows how well he understood that psychology requires the 'total' person; it seizes his or her whole being. Thinking psychologically means to be grasped by psyche's *logos*, its *theoria*, which is a living thing, not an abstraction, even where its language has undergone an alchemical *sublimatio*, a distillation into an airy Mercurius. Heraclitus affirmed in what is probably the earliest psychological statement in the history of western thought: 'You would not find out the boundaries of soul, even by travelling along every path: so deep a measure does it have.'⁶ The original Greek word *logos* is here translated as 'measure'. What is significant is that it is the soul's *logos* that is deep ('so deep a measure') not, as is often wrongly stated, the soul.⁷ David's writings and work are full of that Heraclitean *logos*.

Inherent in David's words is that other quality of his writings: the to and fro between the 'personal equation' – that intensely autobiographical dimension – and what he referred to as the 'Being of metaphysics or ontology'. By 'metaphysics or ontology' he means more than a reference to 'the collective unconscious'; he means the 'energies that *let the world be*'. To be seized by psyche, by surprise, implies the *someone* who is seized, grasped, taken hold of, lifelong. To echo a question that Giegerich has asked in his *The Soul's Logical Life: Towards a Rigorous Notion of Psychology*⁸: *Who* is it in us that does psychology? That is, who is it that is seized by psyche, enabling that seizure to be expressed in the form of psychology? Giegerich's own answer is that it is *that* within us which realizes our self-division, that which has broken with the old identity. Giegerich's words for me point towards an essential *polemos*, a dialectical *strife* at the heart of being

⁶ Fragment 45, in Kirk G. S. and Raven J. E., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p.205

⁷ Giegerich W, *The Soul Always Thinks*, Collected English Papers, Volume Four, New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2011, pp. 131-163

⁸ Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 1998, pp. 17-25

psychological. And isn't surprise, seizure, just such a rupture in the fabric of expectations? Once in a supervision session, David used the expression 'ontological hazard', by which he meant the accident, the hazardous moment, into which one is born; a fateful 'thrownness' into existence. He was referring to the subjective impact of our sense of being alive, the impact of aliveness (which of course, also means, non-being, death, nothingness). Part of that impact has to do with what we *make of*, do with, what we have been *given*. That is where the 'personal equation' comes in. Jung spoke of every psychological statement being a *subjective confession*. Surprise and seizure point not only to what has happened to us, but also to *what we have made of it*. David's phrase 'ontological hazard', then, points to a difference that makes all the difference between a making of experience that turns into pathology and a making that lets '*the world be*', that can become the making of a psychology, as a response to 'being-in-the-world': it is psychology as a response to the surprise of being.

There is something of this feeling at the end of *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, when Jung writes:

Yet there is so much that fills me: plants, animals, clouds, day and night, and the eternal in man. The more uncertain I have felt about myself, the more there has grown up in me a feeling of kinship with all things. In fact it seems to me as if that alienation which so long separated me from the world has become transformed into my own inner world, and has revealed to me an unexpected unfamiliarity with myself.⁹

Jung's words are wholly objective, elemental; he isn't wrapped up in his sentiment or emotions about nature, though the whole statement carries with his mood. He states simply his kinship with things, with the world, but he does not, even here at the end of the life of a great psychologist, deny the

⁹ New York: Pantheon Books, 1963, p. 359

sense of alienation now moved from between himself and the world to within himself. Could we hear Jung's 'unexpected unfamiliarity' (the English translation) as near to David Holt's 'surprise' that 'what is, is'? The statement, though steeped with the sense of the natural world and a feeling of kinship, retains a kind of standing apart, a re-flection or standing back. It still allows for the 'unnatural'. Or, better said, perhaps, when we speak of the psyche as surprised by the verb to be, could we relate this notion to what the alchemists spoke of as the 'work against nature', the *opus contra naturam*? For Jung's relation to nature here is not that of a simple *participation mystique*: it has already undergone a rupture. The connection has occurred already through a dissociation, or rather, belongs paradoxically, dialectically, through a negation of this simple, naïve, participation; for we can be connected through negation, in the unity of identity and difference. Is then what David speaks of as the psyche's surprise of being, related to the alchemical 'work against nature'? How we understand this in these times of enormous ecological difficulties, in terms of our relationship to nature at this historical juncture, could be critical to how we respond to these selfsame difficulties.

Two of David's essays address this question of the *opus contra*: 'Jung and Marx: Alchemy, Christianity and the Work Against Nature' (1974); and 'Riddley Walker and Greenham Common: Further Thoughts on Alchemy, Christianity and the Work Against Nature' (1983). Writing of Russell Hoban's novel *Riddley Walker*, with its post-atomic apocalyptic language, in David's words 'a broken-up and worn-down vernacular', he observes:

It plays the reading eye and the listening ear against each other in such a way as to remind us constantly how *surprising* words are. Being surprised at words is the beginning of realizing what the gulf between humanity and nature is like.¹⁰ [my italics]

¹⁰ Holt D, *The Psychology of Carl Jung: Essays in Application and Deconstruction*, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992, p. 256

Being surprised by words, the discord between eye and ear, then, points to a rupture between humankind and nature. It speaks to and from a diremption, which, I think, David is addressing with the notion of being seized by psyche in the work of psychology – at least psychology in the spirit of which Jung worked. To be surprised by being alive, by aliveness, in this ontological sense, points to what the alchemists were talking of when they described their labours in terms of the ‘work against nature’. It is that reflective stepping back, that movement of thinking, a dialectical spirit that discovers itself inherently through its ownmost *otherness*, namely *nature*, through the work of negation in thinking dialectically. Our sense of aliveness is caught in that gulf between nature and humanity; our words echo in its abyss, awakening a necessary but abysmal thought. There is a danger, I feel, in seeking to overcome this alienation, to set aside the notion of the ‘work against nature’, to assume too easily and superficially a ‘connection with nature’, and further to assume the soul is right there alongside us in this ‘connectivity’, when it may well be what has brought the rupture upon us. It seeks to deny *the negativity of the soul’s thinking in its dialectical process of self-recognition and self-relation*, in which it pushes off from an identification, or *participation mystique*, with nature. Perhaps when we seek this overcoming of ‘the gulf between humanity and nature’, we enact our panic in which surprise has turned to shock and anxiety; we take flight from these difficult experiences of the unhomeliness, the *unheimlichkeit*, of our present condition, namely, the soul’s differentiation from or rupture with nature itself. Somewhere Jung has suggested that we should seek not to overcome dissociation but to learn from it. David’s essays, I believe, are trying to stay with this consciousness of our ‘gulf’ with nature, to learn from it. Are we too easily seduced by the rhetoric of the word ‘natural’: ‘It’s not natural!’ we say, implying something pathological, deviant, unethical. Does ‘unnatural’, used thus, conflate nature with a ‘moral order’?

In a typically cryptic way, David picks this up in the earlier 1974 essay on 'Jung and Marx: Alchemy, Christianity, and the Work Against Nature'. In the opening passages he writes: 'I shall limit myself to try to describe a *space* between creator and virgin, for it is in this space that I believe the work against nature is being done.'¹¹ In this essay David Holt seeks to link psychology with economics. He points to the Marxian notion of 'the idea of man as involved in nature's coming-to-consciousness', to a self-consciousness that emerges from the diremption of human being and nature. By way of this, he quotes a passage from Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, in which Jung writes of the significance of his late work, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*

...The main problem of medical psychotherapy is the *transference*...I was able to demonstrate that alchemy, too, had something that corresponded to the transference, namely the concept of the *coniunctio*...

This investigation was rounded out by the *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, in which I once again took up the problem of the transference, but primarily followed my original intention of representing the whole range of alchemy as a kind of psychology of alchemy, or as an alchemical basis for depth psychology. In *Mysterium Coniunctionis* my psychology was at last given its place in reality and established upon its historic foundation.¹²

David then makes this audacious claim:

What is this 'psychology of alchemy' which Jung has left behind him? My thesis is that it belongs in the world of extraversion as well as introversion, and that its extraverted mode is expressed in the intercourse between man and nature which we call economics. I want to try to establish some links between psychology and economics, in the belief that Jung's psychology of alchemy contains resources of imagination, humour and will, which could help us deal with the economic problems of today

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 139

¹² New York: Pantheon Books, 1963, pp. 211-213, p.221

and tomorrow but to make this link between psychology, alchemy and economics, we need 'space' of an unusual kind.¹³

Hear those words today! Don't they reach a depth utterly missing in much of what is said in these times of late capitalism's financial meltdown! The 'space' that David mysteriously refers to is, of course, that 'gulf', the rupture with nature, the 'space' between the 'creator' and 'virgin'. He goes on, then, to provide a brief but brilliant historical account, which is worth quoting at length:

Up to about the year 1400 the economic life of Europe was essentially agricultural...taken as a whole, economic activity constituted a closed circle between man and nature, with nothing left over. Between 1400 and 1700 this closed circle broke open and began spiralling, both 'out' and 'in', to include within the economic process a wider and ever increasing number of commodities and desires. From 1700 onwards this spiral became more like an explosion, until today we have a situation in which on one hand the whole system can be kept going only by the creation of new needs out of luxuries that were themselves unheard of a generation earlier, while on the other hand it is becoming more widely accepted that this stimulation of new needs is destroying an essential balance within the natural environment.

Within the closed system that prevailed – with significant exceptions – up to about 1400, money was essentially the medium of exchange, something to facilitate the barter of the market place. It served to lubricate a process of exchange whose driving energy was the natural cycle of agricultural seasons, supplemented by the skills and muscular energy of man. Since 1700, although it retains its old function of lubricating the economic system, money has also become the fuel which fires the engine which drives the whole system along. It is this change in the nature of money that Karl Marx described as the emergence of capitalism.

David goes on to identify the key factor:

Marx insisted that something unprecedented was happening, and

¹³ *The Psychology of Carl Jung*, p. 141

that the split in our experience of money, of which the power of capital was the outward and visible manifestation, was only one aspect of a much more pervasive and radical alteration in the whole balance between man and nature.

And, then, David crystallizes his idea of the relationship between psychology, economics, and the 'work against nature' in these radical, suggestive and illuminating sentences:

It is here that Marx touches the central idea with which I am concerned in placing his work alongside Jung's psychology of alchemy. He is defining a split, what he called an 'alienation', of a new kind: an alienation of man from nature, where nature is to be thought of both as man's own nature and also as the natural world in which man makes his living. *The peculiar quality of this alienation emerges from his description of how money has succeeded in breaking the circle of man's intercourse with nature.* [my italics]

...It is as if when things are exchanged in the market place a new power is born, a power that breaks out of the circle of man's intercourse with nature. This power has no existence in nature, yet manages to establish itself in its own right as existing over against both man and nature.¹⁴

To repeat: 'money has succeeded in breaking the circle of man's intercourse with nature...[and]...manages to establish itself in its own right as existing over against both man and nature.' Doesn't that catch exactly where we are in this historical moment, that Marxian sense of alienation as intimately connected to the alchemical *opus contra naturam*? The way that money breaks the circular intercourse between nature and man allows for the link between psychology, that is, Jung's alchemical psychology, and economics; a link in which can be found a correspondence between Marx's notion of alienation and the 'work against nature', central to the psychology of alchemy. Recall Jung's last words in *Memories*,

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 141-143

Dreams, Reflections when he spoke of both an alienation between himself and the world and its transforming into an alienation, an 'unexpected unfamiliarity', within his inner world.

* * *

David's essays on alchemy and psychology, as we have heard, weave together a knot of psychology, economics and the 'work against nature'. To draw to an ending, I want to take up one thread of this knot, that of *time*. It was one of David's passionate concerns, though we can today touch upon it only briefly: time and alchemy, time and money (late capitalism, modernity), and time and psyche. For his writings were utterly faithful to the notion of *historical consciousness*: it was central to his psychological thought. As for St Augustine and as for Jung, for David Holt soul and time were inextricable. David was able to relate the psychological and alchemical, these two historical forms of life and practice, because he did not collapse historical time. Time appears in many of his essay titles: 'The Timing of Analysis' (1971); 'The Cost of Health: Payment, Treatment, Time' (1974); 'Sex and the Wound of Time' (1983); 'Alchemy: Jung and the Historians of Science' (1987); 'Alchemy and Psychosis: Curiosity and the Metaphysics of Time' (1988); and 'History and Holocaust: How can Feeling Respond to Images of Annihilation?' (1990/1987).

How does time link with alchemy, psychology and money: namely, with the 'work against nature'? Time in Jung is pivotal: in his focus on the Chinese Book of Changes, synchronicity and the aetiological significance of the actual present. For David, time works in analysis through the distinctions of time in terms of biography, history and myth. What we refer to as myth arises out of a primordial surprise at being; surprise at being is about how we experience time. He describes two different kinds of memory at work as we

analyse childhood: 'There is memory of what has happened to me in my lifetime, and there is the memory of a "once upon a time", which is always 'upon' us; a linear and cyclical temporality, *chronos* and *kairos*.'¹⁵ Part of the work of analysis, David indicates, and a very important part, and much stressed here, is the surprise of being, the impact of aliveness, inherent in that process Jung called *individuation*, and which David spoke of as helping a person to find their 'personal equation', that is, through the memory of a lifetime played across that of history ('ontological hazard') and mythical narrative, the 'once upon a time' that is already and always upon us.¹⁶

And how does time and money come into analytic work: through the recognition that time is money? What is the cost of time? How long does analytic work take? How long do we need or, rather, does psyche need? The temporal logic of money enters the psychotherapeutic and counselling discourse in the context of long-term and short-term work. How much time do I have to spend working on the psyche? Or better said, do we allow for psyche to work upon itself? For that is what Jung means by analysis and psychotherapy. The development of brief therapies stems from a cultural logic that links to the way money breaks the circle between man and nature, and hence between nature's modalities of time, its lengths and rhythms, and the economy. Again, the alchemical 'work against nature' shows itself deeply influencing what allowance we make in time for the surprise of being in our analytic work. Fast food, fast therapy, is one way of speaking of how this touches our work: the 'MacDonaldization' of psychotherapy and counselling. Yet, it is not to be so dismissed; the logic of brief therapy raises questions about our assumptions of time, just as does the question of the

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 183

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 176

frequency of analytic sessions. As David puts it in his essay 'The Cost of Health: Payment, Treatment, Time': 'However we manage the money side, questioning the costliness of time belongs *within* our understanding of symptoms, *within* our judgement as to the right kind of treatment.'¹⁷ We have, as David often said, to take responsibility for the 'time given into our keeping'. The way we relate to time, how we 'keep time', comes to us, in part, from alchemy through science and technology, as a latter-day working out of the logic of the *opus contra*. Writing on the history of alchemy and chemistry, David observes:

One important strand linking alchemy with modern technology is woven out of the human ability to speed up the time of mineral change. What does this imply for our responsibility for history, and in particular for the history of the scientific revolution...the 'invention of the method of invention'?¹⁸

Here lies our responsibility or otherwise for the 'work against nature' and the relationship with nature. David's observation on *speed* shows how the psychology of alchemy connects to the very essence of modernity: the valorisation of speed. This valorisation also finds expression in the linkage between money and time. As Wolfgang Giegerich observes: money is

sheer motion: continual flow of capital, unending transaction. It constantly circles around the globe at the *speed of light*, electronically controlled...The world of finance is a self-regulating and self-regenerating system, a system in which compulsion to move at an ever increasing speed is built in.¹⁹ [my italics]

To be responsible for the keeping of time is one of the important legacies David Holt left us. At his funeral, he had

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 108

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 408

¹⁹ 'The Occidental Soul's Self-Immurement' in Giegerich, Wolfgang *Technology and the Soul: From Nuclear Bomb to the World Wide Web*, Collected English Papers, Vol. III, 2007, New Orleans, Spring Journal Books, p. 276

prepared a 'personal reading' for those gathered there. He asked this question, which remains for us still today. The question was and is: 'What have the living and the dead to celebrate together when we meet like this at a funeral?' And the response he gave was and is: 'We meet together to keep time'. Keeping time is what draws us into 'a surprising process': the psyche's surprise at being.

Someone once said to me that if you are not living at the edge you are taking up too much room. So, I would like to finish on that note. In an essay on alchemy, James Hillman describes the alchemists as follows, a description, which I feel well points to the uniqueness of the psychological edge or margin from which David Holt lived, thought, worked and wrote:

Alchemy is a profession of marginals; those at the edge. Those who live from their own fires, sweating it out, self-sustaining their own temperatures which may be at variance with the collective climate.²⁰

²⁰ Hillman, 2010, p. 21

SURPRISED BY LIFE: PRAYER AND PRACTICE

By Jessica Rose

The work of David Holt as a therapist, teacher and supervisor is perhaps better known than his written work. His lectures and writings, though immensely rich, are often opaque, and Michael Whan's paper gives them clarity while bringing together many of his ideas in a quite extraordinary way. For this paper, however, I am taking the phrase 'in the work of' to mean not so much the published *oeuvre* as the day-to-day work of David Holt: how he worked with clients, with his many supervisees and students, and with colleagues.

My own relationship with David began in 1991 when I asked him if he would act as my supervisor for my private practice. He agreed and we worked together for ten years. During that time we were also involved in various groups and projects. David had not only a great passion but also a great gift for bringing people together to talk about the untalkable, whether it be sex, religion, economics or what actually goes on between two people in the therapeutic encounter. In 2000 when I stopped working as a counsellor for a few years because of family illness, David remained an interested friend and colleague. My book, *Sharing Spaces? Prayer and the Counselling Relationship*, owes much to our conversations.¹

Since his death, the 'David Holt Online' group has been meeting regularly to explore ways of propagating David's thought and we were delighted when the Guild invited us to contribute an afternoon to its programme. As we sat with Edith in Oxford, thinking about what we would like to do, the titles emerged: *Surprised by words: psyche and symbol in the work*

¹ Rose, Jessica, *Sharing Spaces? Prayer and the Counselling Relationship*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 2002

of David Holt – and for this paper, 'Surprised by life: prayer and practice'. For in the context of David's work and thought, being 'surprised by words' and being 'surprised by life' go together. Although he was a remarkable and deep thinker, he constantly related his thought to experience – experience in the consulting room certainly but also our general experience as human beings. Once he wrote a reference for me in which he said, 'She has a way of being on committees which makes things happen.' Perhaps I could say about David, 'He had a way of *thinking* which made things happen.'

His work as a supervisor was alive, creative and risky, as well as nourishing, enabling and containing. If you are in supervision with anyone for ten years you will begin to have some idea of what they might say in response to a particular situation – but I found I still wanted to hear him say it. In preparing this talk, I have been able to talk with some of his colleagues and also with some of his clients; David being David, there is considerable overlap.

In discussing his work, I will touch on three inter-related aspects which I hope will enable us to think a bit about psyche and symbol as they emerge from it: first, David's use of words; secondly, his passion for the relationship between the 'I' and the 'we' and, thirdly, his interest in the relationship between therapy and prayer.

David's use of words

You could say that all his life David was surprised by words because he suffered from a stammer. Like many stammerers he developed strategies to avoid surprise, having alternatives at the ready to prevent an ambush by some word that would hang up his speech. In later life after a stroke, he embraced the surprise of advice given to him by a speech therapist: 'Don't avoid the difficult words.' You could say that this was a *leitmotif* of David's approach to psychotherapy and

its complicated relationship with religion, politics, philosophy and the is-ness of life itself. Anyone who worked with David will tell you he loved words. He would draw attention to the history, the geography of a word as a meeting place of experience and ideas. His handling of words had a poetic quality: you came away with a sense of originality and a feeling that what had been simply familiar once more felt fresh.

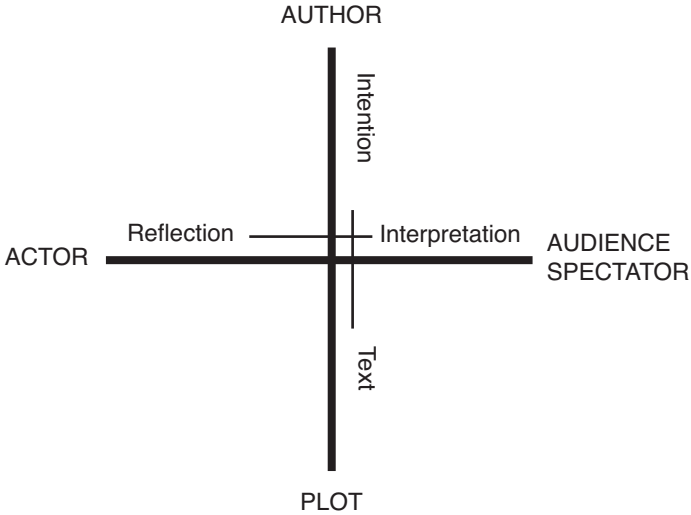
Part of this was a great ability to play with words. The word 'responsibility', for example, was extremely important to him. It is a word heavy with the sense of duty, of irksomeness, of things that must be done. Writing about it in *The Clermont Story*, David says that it is a word that turns on time:

Onto past, onto future. We say "You are responsible for it", meaning that it is your doing, perhaps with a sense of fault, perhaps with a sense of achievement. And we say "You are responsible for it", meaning that you have to do something about it, it is up to you to respond, to make a response, with a hint that it had better be effective or you'll be in trouble. I want to keep reminding us of both timings.²

In this way, David made the word come alive: he talked of responsibility as 'response-ability': our ability to respond or not, our ability to respond creatively, whether in the consulting room or as a society in crisis. Again, he made much of the word '*reminding*'. In his hands it became re-minding, not just bringing to mind but activating the mind, bringing the mind itself into play. He was also given to the use of particular words to bind levels of experience. A favourite was 'thrumming'. Thrumming expressed something of the pulse, the beat of life. 'Why does the heart beat? What makes you tick? There is something thrumming here – what is it?'

² Holt, David, *The Clermont Story*, Validthod Press, 2001, p. 14

David loved semantic tension and one model he worked on over many years was this one:



Two axes, one vertical and one horizontal, cross each other. The vertical axis runs between author and text/plot, and is crossed by the horizontal axis of actor and audience/spectator, the one in tension with the other. Between author and text is the will to let be – to leave alone, not to interfere, but also to bring into being, to help something be. While between actor and audience, running across the relationship between author and text is the will to make believe: to make something up, to enact, to ritualise, to come to believe through making something together. We will return to this.

Another part of David's skill with words was an ability to place a word unexpectedly, to make a statement that surprised, just where it was needed, and here I will use an account of him as a therapist in a memoir published by one of his clients a year or two after David died:

I don't like older men I don't like their smell, I don't like their politics, I don't like their crustiness, I don't like their clothes. ... So I of course chose a man with precisely all the characteristics I didn't like. ... David Holt was chairman of the Zurich Jungian Society and a figure of some note in the therapeutic community of Oxford. He was a dry ageing academic, I don't like dry old academic men. But he took me on as a client or patient and I got into twice a week therapy.

He was very proper and precise ... Early in our meetings I pushed David Holt hard to tell me about life, the universe and everything – as all recovering Catholics constantly search for meaning – and in a rare show of irritation he said, 'All you'll get out of me is whether something joins you to the community or separates you from it.' ... he had no answers for me, or so he said.

Where David Holt livened up his image for me is that he worked with dreams. He found my dreams and my interpretation of my dreams interesting. I went to David about six months after mother died and she started haunting me. Many of my dreams were about mother. After some six months David was moved to say (he rarely offered an interpretation or view), 'You do know that your mother was mad, don't you?'³

The 'I' and the 'We'

Hodson quotes David as saying, 'All you'll get out of me is whether something joins you to the community or separates you from it.' This brings us to his great passion for relationship between the 'I' and the 'we', for the 'I' becoming 'we'. He put this into practice in a number of different ways: in supervision, for example, where something troubling had happened, he would often tell a story from his own work where he felt he had failed to handle something as well as he might. He insisted on a kind of to and fro in supervision; not only did the supervisee write a brief report on the session (half a page of A4) and send it to him but David responded by completing the other half of

³ Hodson, Noel, *The Haunting of a Favourite Son: The True Life Story of a Very Shy Man*, PublishAmerica, Baltimore, 2003, pp. 172-3

the sheet with his reactions to the report and sending it back. This was an added enrichment to the supervision process. Similarly, in therapy, clients have told me he would often begin by talking about himself, building intimacy by using his own experience to help the client get at theirs. The therapeutic alliance was a 'we' looking at the 'it' of one's life and at the 'it' of life in general. Therapy was never allowed to become a simply individual affair.

Somehow for David the therapy room was never enough. He had a great longing for people to meet and openly share what the experience of therapy was like. It meant taking risks but they were fruitful risks. He was a founder member of the Oxford Psychotherapy Society whose only requirement for membership was an interest in psychotherapy. He also held groups to discuss particular books or biblical stories or events, broadening out personal experience into what was going on in society, in thought, in literature. In cooperation with others he held annual 'Jung and Hermeneutics' weekends at Hawkwood College in Gloucestershire. I was fortunate to go to two of these, heady mixtures of therapists, supervisors and overlapping supervisees and even clients. Together we would study a Shakespeare play and then divide into groups, each group working with an actor or drama therapist to prepare a scene from the play entirely without words. The whole play would be performed by the sequence of groups on the Saturday night. These weekends were life changing. They were an experience of 'doing' a text rather than understanding it, of coming to understand it in a new way through enactment. David was a great believer in enactment as a way of trying out his model with vertical and horizontal lines that I have already described. Enactment takes us beyond the proliferation of texts designed to explain the meaning of the original text and into a personal and communal relationship with it.

This, of course, is at the heart not only of drama but also of liturgy and it brings us to the third aspect of David's work that I want to discuss.

Prayer

David could surprise other people with words but a formative experience for him was being surprised *by* words one day when he was supervising some counsellors at the Westminster Pastoral Foundation. He had just listened to a supervisee's account of a session when the counsellor startled him by remarking, 'So then we prayed together.' David was thrown and he covered his confusion by what he called a 'skirmishing remark'. He found himself deeply embarrassed. 'Embarrassment' was an important word for David. He described it as an awareness of a particular kind, signalling something that should be attended to, something one did not want to meet or did not know how to meet. Embarrassment produces a shiver of discomfort, a signal that here is something one should explore. In this particular instance, within the counselling framework, he was the wise man, the expert, hired by the institution to keep the counsellors within certain ways of doing things, observing the rituals and boundaries of the counselling relationship, containing, facilitating, teaching. He could do that and do it very well. Yet here was someone apparently working within that framework, suddenly introducing an activity which seemed to belong to some other realm altogether. Reflecting on his embarrassment he asked himself what he was entitled to say about this. It was not that the counsellor had necessarily done something inappropriate. That would not have been embarrassing but simply something to be worked with in the session. This counsellor had somehow introduced another framework of thought, of activity, not quite cricket, perhaps, and not a simple thing to respond to. David asked himself, 'What authority in matters of prayer does a supervisor have?'

David had a religious calling. He had been brought up a Unitarian but was baptised in 1960 and received his first communion in 1962 at the age of 36. You can read about this journey, which involved marriage and the birth of his children but also an understanding of history, in *The Clermont Story*. David remained a member of the Anglican Church until his death. He was willing to admit that he prayed and also that he did not know how to pray. As he once expressed it, it was hard to see how speaking – praying – to a Creator, as he understood it, could be expected to make a difference in the world as it is. So, when he found himself embarrassed by the counsellor in the WPF supervision session, 'being the grandson of a preacher and the son of a successful entrepreneur, I made it my business to take an interest – though not a controlling interest – in prayer.'⁴

His diagrammatic model of author and text in tension, crossing the tension between actor and audience illumines his reflections on prayer. Imagine, David says in this same talk to the Guild, the difference between the discussions of a lot of people trying to understand Shakespeare, where they all agree the author is dead, and discussions about the interpretation of the Bible, where it might not be so easy to agree whether the author is dead or not. He goes on to say that, whether the author of a text is alive or dead, it is also possible that he has simply lost interest. If that is the case, what happens if you have a public – a 'we' – committed to that text, because it is all there is. Can public and author meet? It may seem a hopeless case, yet perhaps if there is a movement in the mind of the author, something may happen. 'My creation,' the author may say, 'speaks to me with a meaning I had not intended.' The author's attitude may shift from loss of interest, from 'Let it be', in the sense of 'Leave my text alone', to 'So be it': 'Let my text speak

⁴ Holt, David and Robinson, Wendy, *Dreamwork and Prayer* Guild Paper No. 194, Guild of Pastoral Psychology, 1978

in its own voice'; 'Let it be what it is'. In this shift, perhaps, we find a living relationship. It is a relationship that binds the 'we' in relation to the author, and might provide a shared space where, to use another of David's wordplays which he used in describing his own experience of speech therapy: 'the Body is trying itself *on* to see if it fits – and trying itself *out* to see if it works.'

'The Body is trying itself on to see if it fits, and trying itself out to see if it works.' This is a marvellous David phrase that can be applied personally and, of course, corporately to the body as 'we'. It can be applied to the religious institution struggling to make sense of ritual, of religious symbols that may seem to have lost their meaning, fallen away from us, rather like transitional objects that we have outgrown. So much of contemporary religious life finds the body as 'we' uncomfortable, unsure whether it either fits or works. We are tempted to look for new religious frameworks but perhaps there is something in the old ones if we will only try them on and try them out.

I would like to end with a story that seems to me to speak of just this: of the body trying itself on and trying itself out and being surprised by life. In this instance the body is the Anglican Church and the story arises from a conversation with a friend who is a retired Anglican priest. She struggles with the impoverishment of liturgy in the place where she lives and with how to keep the 'we' alive in her religious life. A few weeks ago she was asked to baptise her granddaughter and was troubled about it. She was troubled because so much of church life seemed to have lost its meaning and her daughter, the mother of the child, had said that she herself had had enough of church and would be leaving the church as soon as the baptism was done. What, then, was my friend doing in baptising the grandchild? Was it some kind of magical and therefore meaningless ritual or could she find meaning in it?

She talked for a while about how she normally approached baptism and its symbols: water, light, the welcome of a community and, as she spoke, we both found ourselves surprised by life. These three simple things – water, light and welcome into a community – came alive for us. The body, represented by these shared symbols and by the person of my priest friend, tried itself on and found that it fitted, and found itself able to try itself out to see if it worked. This, I think, is one example of prayer and practice coming together in a fertile relationship: a relationship of a kind that David would appreciate.

It does not, of course, always happen like this and David's work leaves us with many important questions about how the 'we' and the 'I' can enable each other to thrive, about how we create and maintain a shared space, whether in the consulting room or the theatre or in religious ritual, that does not degenerate into individual egos. He prompts us to ask how we remain open, as he did constantly, to surprise, to difference and to reverence for the gap between objective and subjective experience. Above all, it reminds us to ask ourselves how we know when to try to understand the thrumming of our life and when simply to let it be in order that it can be what it is.

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