

He Had Two Lives

He had two lives; one obvious, which every one could see and know, ... a life full of conventional truth and conventional fraud, exactly like the lives of his friends and acquaintances; and another, which moved underground...¹

I was always of two minds about my profession, at least the profession that I finally settled into. But then I am usually of two or more minds about everything. It took me a while to finally settle on graduate school in psychology, after tinkering with law, philosophy, and taking flight to an island in the tropics. But from the beginning of my studies, a vague feeling of dissatisfaction settled over me. What was it? I always sensed that my true life lay elsewhere, although I had no clear idea where that might be or if I would ever chance upon it.

Eventually I came to understand that it was the limited ability of the field to capture the emotional truths of ordinary experience, of my ordinary experiences that so troubled me. Yes there were the Freudian and other clinical insights but even they were vague, largely untestable, and remote from my much of my life. While I have great respect for its application of the experimental method and have observed its success in some areas, I have to confess that much of what passes for psychological research today seems trivial and of little consequence to me.

I have come to this view after a lifetime of schooling that has continued almost without a break since I was five years old and, for almost forty years was primarily devoted to the study of psychology. In the beginning I was student, then a

¹ Anton Chekhov, *The Lady with the Toy Dog*

researcher, after that a teacher, and then sometimes all three. Now I do a little of each but they have little to do with psychology.

At this point in my life, I have more or less given up on psychology, at least its current versions and preoccupations. I try to keep up with the literature and maintain subscriptions to a few of the leading journals. But I rarely find much of anything that I care to read, as each new issue brings yet another batch of quantitative analyses of esoteric processes that, in most instances, are remote from ordinary life. Instead my interests have turned to literature, for that is where I find the truths that I do not find in psychology or anywhere else for that matter.

Before I went to college, I hadn't given much thought to what I would do afterwards. I had no childhood dreams, no long-term goals. When I think about that now, it is with a sense of total bafflement. Aren't young men and women supposed to give a lot of thought how they would like to spend their future? Didn't undergraduates do that then? No matter, after my first year at Stanford, I was absolutely certain that I didn't want to stray far from the academy.

In those days Stanford freshmen took a full-year course in the history of Western Civilization and then often followed it with another in the Humanities that was devoted to literature and the arts. Those courses introduced me to the world of culture and I've never recovered from the experience or found an alternative that comes close. Critics who decry the "narrow" Western focus of courses like this would deny undergraduates an incomparable educational experience, one that has little to do with their content and much more with a way of thinking. At least it was a way of thinking that was completely foreign to me at that time, as I suspect it still is for most students today.

Those courses led me to the study of philosophy, which soon became my major, although I was far from well prepared for its rigors. However, I did understand the

questions and was much taken by its quest for clarity that was the dominant concern of the Analytic Philosophers of the day. The students also impressed me. They were bright, intense, so unlike those I had known before and I naively hoped that by associating with them, some of their intelligence would rub off on me.

However, when it was time to enter graduate school, I began to have my doubts about philosophy. It was plainly not making much headway in answering questions that it had been considering for centuries. Frankly, I was not entirely convinced it was even a goal. It was enough to simply clarify their meaning. Psychology seemed more promising. It had a method for investigating the questions and procedures for deciding between competing answers. I was also attracted by its experimental method that seemed to hold out the hope that, at long last, some progress could be made in resolving those perennial philosophical issues

I did most of my graduate work in the experimental psychology of learning and motivation, where I sought to test Freudian ideas in the laboratory. Like many beginning psychology students, Freud's analysis of mental processes appealed to me, as did the importance he attached to the role of early experience in shaping adult behavior. Anxiety also played a central role in his theory of the neuroses and because I was young and beset with all the anxieties of youth, I was often preoccupied with the strenuous and usually unsuccessful effort to deal with it. What an excellent topic to study, I thought.

So, in the manner of a clinician, I set about to try to find a way to overcome anxiety. However, my studies were carried out in the laboratory, rather than the clinic. The research employed an animal model of human anxiety, an approach that was well respected at the time. Through a series of experiments, I eventually developed a technique that successfully reduced anxiety responses in animals, one that was not unlike a closely related clinical procedure later adopted by behavior therapists. In those days there was a good deal of interest on the part of clinicians

in applying findings derived from animal models in therapeutic settings, a practice that has all but disappeared today.

I continued to pursue learning theory once I began teaching, primarily within the conditioning framework developed by B. F. Skinner. I was always attracted to Skinner's views and research methods, which stressed the study of individual behavior in tightly controlled experimental conditions. Using this technique, Skinner sought to develop a set of laws that could predict and control human and animal behavior. While his *deterministic behavioral* model received considerable support at the time, most psychologists eventually came to believe that it could not adequately deal with mental processes and, in due course, it was supplanted by the so-called cognitive revolution, which continues to dominate the field to this day. Meanwhile the study of behavior, actual behavior not self-reports of behavior or behavioral intentions, has all but vanished from the field.

However, I was content working within the Skinnerian framework. I welcomed its emphasis on the environmental control, which I felt was consistent with the weight Freud gave to early experience. I had no trouble employing rigorous laboratory methods or focusing on the behavior of single subjects. However, during the energy crises of the seventies, I began to appreciate the shortcomings of the behavioral approach. I thought profligate energy consumption on the part of individual consumers played a large role in bringing on this crisis and that, while the behavioral approach worked well in producing short-term reductions in energy consumption, the research demonstrated over and over again that these changes never lasted very long. The behavioral account was severely limited in this respect.

About this time, I read some remarkable experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram that set me on the path of understanding this shortcoming. Milgram's classic experiments on obedience and disobedience to authority stunned me. They revealed, in a way the behavioral approach never did the enormous power of the

social situation in controlling behavior. They also did this in a compelling laboratory situation of deep personal consequence to the participants. Finally, their relevance to the Holocaust moved me deeply. Countless other students and scholars to this day have been similarly affected by the force of these experiments.

Milgram's program of research turned my interests sharply in the direction of social psychology, a subject that I had never studied before. There I found a provocative body of knowledge on techniques for changing behavior, techniques that relied more on internal rather than external control (rewards and punishments) advocated by behavioral analysts. In turn, this suggested a number of applications for promoting energy conservation, as well as other resource conserving behaviors. As a result, my students and I carried out a program of research within this framework during the next several years.

Naturally, all this eventually came to an end. Younger people came into the department. Their views were new and more in line with the current direction that psychology was taking. Animal conditioning became a thing of the past, indeed, subject to considerable objection on the part of critics. The energy crisis faded away. My lectures became stale. I wasn't learning anything new so my interest in the subject matter flagged and the students no longer seemed interested in my methodical analysis of psychological problems. And so, gradually, I withdrew from the academic fray.

As the years went by, I also lost confidence that psychology could ever become a science of human behavior, at least a science that could speak with any degree of precision about the richness of human experience, at least my experience, not that it was very rich. Perhaps that was too much to ask of the discipline, too much to ask at this time in its development. Yet, I never accepted the claim that psychology was still a young science and that as it matured, some of these limitations would be overcome. In my lifetime, I really didn't see anything to indicate that this was

happening. Quite to the contrary, all I could see was growing conflict between theoretical accounts, increasing physiologizing of the field, and continuing contradictions between empirical investigations.

In his essay *Medicine and Literature*, Robert Coles puts the matter eloquently.

I am constantly impressed with mystery, and maybe even feel that there are certain things that cannot be understood or clarified through generalizations, that resolve themselves into matters of individuality, and again, are part of the mystery of the world that one celebrates as a writer, rather than tries to solve and undo as a social scientist.....As physicians we also know, or ought to know, that each person is different, each patient reacts in his or her special way to any illness, and indeed to life itself. A sense of complexity of human affairs, a respect for human particularity, ...these are the stuff of the humanities at their best ...²

During all the time I was engaged in psychology, I never stopped reading literature, mostly contemporary fiction. That was probably a mistake. It was such a different world than I found in psychology, far more appealing, far more truthful it seemed to me. I did not have the time to read widely, but the literature I did read always seemed to be telling me things about myself and others that I never heard expressed in psychology. With rare exceptions, I rarely saw individuals in psychology as clearly or as deeply as I did in the novels and short stories that I read. I felt much like Schopenhauer

² Robert Coles, *Times of Surrender*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 1988.

who is reported to have said: *“that he learned more psychology from Dostoyevsky than from all the books he had read on the subject.”*³

The other day I remembered a plan I had early in my career. I would teach a course on psychology and literature. I went to the library to find books on the topic. There were none that made any sense and those that I did find had more to do with incomprehensible literary theories or psychoanalytic mumbo jumbo than the effects of the literary experience on the reader. That is what I wanted to know about. How does literature influence the reader? And why does it often mean so much to those who read works of fiction?

At least why did it have such a hold on me? Why did literature seem so much more real, so much more truthful than the human sciences that I had devoted my earlier days to? Yet, I was never able to bring literary accounts to my professional activities. They never seemed appropriate. And whenever I tried to sneak some literary works in my lectures, they usually fell on deaf ears. But now I know differently. They were not only appropriate, they were every bit as illuminating, if not more so than those general propositions that purported to explain human thought and action. Obviously, I didn't do a very good job of making that clear.

Literature illuminates who “we” are: the repertory of selves we harbor within, the countless feelings we experience but never express or perhaps even acknowledge, the innumerable other lives we could but do not live, all those “inside” lives that are not on show, or included in our resumes.

Arnold Weinstein

³ Interviewer's comment during interview with Julian Barnes, *Paris Review* #157, Winter 2000-2001.

In the beginning of my adult reading years, I know it was literature's other-worldliness that drew me to it. It was a world so very different than the worlds of perception, learning, and social influence that occupied my working day. The writing was fresh. It was alive. The people were so much more amusing and provocative than those I usually encountered. It never seemed to matter that they lived on the page. In fact, I soon came to realize I preferred it that way.

There was and remains that special mood of literature, a feeling that this is the place I belong, the place where I am more myself than anywhere else. It isn't so much an escape from daily life, but that it is so much better than daily life. The colors are brighter, the rhythms are more surprising, the dialogue is richer. As Maureen Corrigan summed it up in her recent book, *Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading*, "It's not that I don't like people. It's just that when I'm in the company of others—even my nearest and dearest—there always comes a moment when I'd rather be reading a book." Corrigan implies that other people take her away from herself, whereas in returning to her books, she is at the same time returning to herself, at least the self that she isn't able to be in the presence of others. I know that is how I sometimes feel in rushing back to a book I am reading. It has entered my life and I don't want it to leave.

Fiction, at least some fiction, can also confront us with truths we might otherwise never have encountered. It can provide us with insights we would never have gained elsewhere.

Elliot Perlman

But there is also another reason I'd rather be reading literature, one that in the final analysis is far more important. Literature seems to get me closer to the truth of things, to the truth about other people and above all to the truth about myself more than anything else I encounter. In a way, literature has given me some degree of

clarity about who I am, more exactly clarity about the several selves I have become. The discovery of these truths is the heart of my reading experience and I wouldn't continue reading literature if I didn't come across one every once in a while. To be sure, I never know when I will chance upon such a truth or what writers and in what books they have written they will appear. Their discovery is unpredictable, unexpected, surprising. The experience is compelling. And I have come to believe as Noam Chomsky that "It is quite possible—overwhelmingly probably, one might guess—that we will always learn more about human life and personality from novels than from scientific psychology."⁴

I respect the effort of psychologists to understand the world and render it in some lawful fashion. I am grateful for the chance that I was given to study the discipline and for those times when it set me to thinking. But this work has taught me to be wary of generalizations about human beings and to value instead the truths of individual experience.

This is why, as I come to the last leg of my life, I have decided to make a turn to literature and to the pleasure of putting words, instead of numbers, on the page. I have no expectations of being able to achieve any distinction as a writer. But there are times when nothing can hold a candle to it to say nothing of the way it helps get me through the day.

⁴ As quote in *Misreading the Mind* by Jonah Lehrer, Los Angeles Times January 20, 2008