

— Torsten Petterson, »Shared Experience – Shared Consolation? Fictional Perspective-Taking and Existential Stances in Literature«

— A B S T R A C T —

This paper suggests some ways in which the concerns of existential psychotherapy may be combined with the practice of poetry therapy. It emphasizes the capacity of literature for inducing perspective-taking, i.e. the reader's opportunity of experiencing the ongoing here and now of a fictional character, including the speaker of a poem. It goes on to show this process in action in four poems exemplifying, respectively, four different attitudes to the existential question of meaning and purpose in life: transcendental-optimistic (Erik Gustaf Geijer's »Natthimmelen« / »The Night Sky«); transcendental-pessimistic (A.E. Housman's »The Laws of God«); immanent-optimistic (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's »A Hymn to the Night«); and immanent-pessimistic (Tennyson's »Oh Yet We Trust«). Whatever the stance of the poems, the reader grappling with existential questions may take the perspective of the speakers of the poems, thereby finding solace in a shared experience of the human condition.

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■—SHARED EXPERIENCE – SHARED

CONSOLATION? Fictional Perspective-Taking

and Existential Stances in Literature —■

■—ANXIETY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY—■

Why do human beings need consolation? For specific individual reasons such as bereavement, serious illness, divorce, long-term unemployment, indigence, or the failure of major life projects. But also for general existential reasons arising from the human condition – the distress we may feel when contemplating the apparent lack of meaning in life; the mortality and finitude which seems to negate the value of our life projects; and the incorrigible propensity for brutality and violence manifest in human behaviour.

Such existential anxiety is no doubt a luxury from the viewpoint of people struggling to survive in the face of poverty or persecution. But in relatively well-to-do and peaceful Western countries its impact on mental health is considerable. According to Carl Gustav Jung a third of his patients suffered from the meaninglessness of their lives rather than any clinically definable neurosis, while Viktor Frankl put that figure at 20 per cent.<sup>1</sup> In Sweden a study of over 30 000 subjects determined that, while in 1989 12 per cent of the population suffered from anxiety and distress, that figure had risen to 22 per cent in 2005.<sup>2</sup> In other words, in years of rising standards of living and before retractions in the welfare state, at a time when Swedes had never had it so good, they were feeling more and more miserable. Similar tendencies have been observed in other countries together with their characteristic concomitant, the steeply escalating medical use of antidepressants and mood enhancers.

The reasons for this development can partly be traced to secularization and individualization undermining earlier patterns of existential and social security and coherence.<sup>3</sup> Mounting stress at work, as well as an increasing distance between doing one's job and seeing any positive outcome of it, also plays a part. However, since such large-scale forces are beyond our influence, and partly beyond our ken, we can take existential anxiety in the contemporary Western world as a given – a phenomenon that is timeless in itself but seems to have intensified in recent decades.

Quite rightly the connection between existential questions and mental health is a growing field of psychotherapy and

interdisciplinary research<sup>4</sup> taking its cue from Karl Jaspers, Ludwig Binswanger, Viktor Frankl,<sup>5</sup> Irvin Yalom and generally speaking, Aaron Antonovsky's observations on the correlation between health and »a sense of coherence«.<sup>6</sup> A separate but related development is the growth of »bibliotherapy«, also known as »poetry therapy«, practiced individually as the reading of books related to the patient's condition or in groups such as hospice patients, divorcees or the recently bereaved.<sup>7</sup> In this presentation I shall attempt to marry the two by bringing out the value of literature in dealing with general existential questions. I first emphasize the strength peculiar to literature in that process and then go on to discuss four poems which thematize markedly existential concerns.

#### — FICTIONALITY AND PERSPECTIVE-TAKING IN LITERATURE —

Existential questions are partly questions of ideas. And literature can convey ideas, but in the abstract, regarded as moral or epistemological pronouncements, they are usually less specific and less original than they are in philosophy or theology. Literature's strong suit lies elsewhere, in »perspective-taking«, i.e. the ability to place readers in the position of human subjects experiencing life here and now. As Edith Kern once put it, comparing philosophical texts with a novel: »if we are carried away by the passionate pace and feeling of Nietzsche's writing, Sartre's fictional hero Roquentin [in *La Nausée / Nausea*] involves us in a more immediate manner because he *lives* absurdity«.<sup>8</sup> In this way, literature invites readers to live for a while in a concrete external and emotional internal situation, regardless of how much it corresponds to their own experience of life. This is an advantage over discursive presentation which tends to be both more narrowly intellectual and more exclusive towards those who reject its standpoint. Discourse makes truth claims forcing us to »take it or leave it«; literature draws us into a fictional world.

This kind of experiential perspective-taking may also be found in memoirs, case studies and other stories about individual human beings. Literature, however, has an advantage over them deriving from its fictionality.

Fictionality clearly is not a *sine qua non* of literature since within the purview of that phenomenon there are documentary novels and aphorisms that purport to describe reality in a directly referential manner. Nevertheless, fictionality is a dominant literary quality. It is obviously found in the vast majority of novels, plays and short stories which do not purport to be documentary, but equally in poems. We say »the speaker of the poem« rather than »the author« precisely in recognition of the fact that the subject is a fictional character and not the author as a real-life person.

The advantage of this for perspective-taking is that we never have to second-guess the author about whether the account of past events is really true, or misremembered, or embellished, or downright mendacious, as we may need to do in documentary presentations. In fiction, what is authorized by the work as real (rather than a figment of a character's imagination) is indisputably given and true of the fictional word.

This also means that literature is not limited to what is available in memory or historical documents. An external situation, a long sequence of dialogue rendered verbatim, the thought processes of a character – they can all be recounted in just as much detail as the case requires. This may go vastly beyond what any historian or even autobiographer could persuasively present as correctly rendered, as witness, respectively, the overflowing Parisian provision market in Zola's *Le Ventre de Paris / The Belly of Paris*, the conversations filling the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett, and Isabel Archer's nocturnal musings before the fireplace in the forty-second chapter of Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*. This license allowed by fictionality does wonders for perspective-taking because when we are invited in such vicarious detail to see, to hear, to touch, to smell, to taste, or to immerse ourselves in an ongoing conversation or in a character's mind, we feel we are really *there*, experiencing the fictional world from within.

The same is true of fictional narratives presented as films or plays, but only in the case of external sensory detail and dialogue. Characters may of course speak of their feelings, perhaps in long soliloquies reminiscent of how minds are focalized in fiction or poetry. For the most part, however, the human mind in films and plays is not presented from the inside as it regularly is in fiction and poetry. Thus film and theatre offer excellent arenas for practicing »Theory of Mind«, the ability to understand other people based on external signs like their speech and body language.<sup>9</sup> Fiction does the same when a character – who may or may not be a first-person narrator – observes and tries to understand other characters. But in addition both fiction and poetry provide us with the perspective from inside a mind which resembles our own sense of self and our experience of life.<sup>10</sup>

That inside perspective may sometimes be unpleasant and potentially hurtful, as in the case of a murderer like Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, an oddball like the rambling speaker of Camus's *La Chute / The Fall*, or a person in the throes of existential absurdity like Sartre's Roquentin mentioned above. This can be unsettling. What comes to our aid, however, is the aesthetic distance, the make-believe ludic and contemplative perspective of art. It tempers identification and lessens the risk of being engulfed in a potentially noxious experience of life.

Thus in literature, more than in documentary accounts of

traumatic experiences, the reader's perspective-taking may be intimate and intense but remains controlled. The aesthetic distance conducive to that control obtains automatically by virtue of the literary work's status as a work of art. In addition, it is often emphasized by the use of artistic devices such as rhythm and rhyme in poetry. This is of some importance now that we turn to literary experiences of existential positions.

#### —FOUR EXISTENTIAL POSITIONS IN POETRY—

Strictly speaking and considering all details, there are probably as many existential positions as there are individuals. The study of literature, for instance, has never detected a complete isomorphism of outlook between two writers, and in-depth interviews of respondents quickly unearth many varieties behind labels like »atheist«, »agnostic« or »Christian«. <sup>11</sup> Even so, some existential questions are more important than others: the meaning of life, the existence of God, the possibility of an afterlife, the freedom of the will, the ground of morality, the origin of evil, and the good or evil nature of man. They are all embodied in literature and could be exemplified at length. I concentrate on the question characteristic of existential psychotherapy: that of meaning and purpose in the face of certain death, looming emptiness and ineluctable suffering.

I have chosen four poems which, respectively, illustrate a transcendental-optimistic, a transcendental-pessimistic, an immanent-optimistic, and an immanent-pessimistic attitude to the question of meaning and purpose. This provides intellectual and emotional variety and allows some comparison between the four stances. Nevertheless, they should be seen as four locations among many in an extensive and multiform landscape, rather than an attempt at a comprehensive taxonomy of logically possible positions. <sup>12</sup>

Even this clarification of the principle behind the choice of the poems belongs to the academic metalevel; in an actual session of existential bibliotherapy, the facilitator would probably just say: »here are four poems about how human beings may deal with stressful existential situations; let's read them and see what we make of them«. Furthermore, the group would probably spend an hour or so on each poem in a number of sessions rather than telescoping them into a single condensed presentation.

For the sake of brevity, my examples are drawn from poetry rather than fiction. More specifically, as it turned out, the examples I found most useful all represent nineteenth-century poetry. This is probably because that century, introduced by Romantic despair à la Hölderlin, Leopardi, Stagnelius and Coleridge's »Dejection: An Ode«, was the first to display a great variety of fundamental existential soul-searching in literature. And, as distinct from twentieth-century poetry by writers such

as Dylan Thomas, Rainer Maria Rilke and René Char, the nineteenth-century style of presentation remained direct and lucid enough to permit concise analysis.

The poems in question all embody an experience of existential hardship as well as an effort to make some kind of human sense of it. As readers we are offered the opportunity of trying out a variety of stances by taking the perspective of a fictional speaker. To highlight this special feature of literature, my comments will be confined to textual interpretation.<sup>13</sup>

— UNIVERSAL LOVE: ERIK GUSTAF GEIJER'S  
»THE NIGHT SKY«

The first example is »Natthimmelen« / »The Night Sky«,<sup>14</sup> a well-known Swedish poem by Erik Gustaf Geijer dating back to 1840. I have translated it, preserving the original quadruple trochaic-dactylic metre – a task facilitated by the fact that, unusually for its period, the poem is not in rhyme:

— Ensam jag skrider fram på min bana,  
Längre och längre sträcker sig vägen.  
Ack! uti fjärran döljes mitt mål.  
Dagen sig sänker. Nattlig blir rymden.  
Snart blott de eviga stjärnor jag ser.

Men jag ej klagar flyende dagen.  
Ej mig förfärrar stundande natten.  
Ty av den kärlek, som går genom världen,  
Föll ock en strimma in i min själ.

I am walking alone on this journey,  
Farther and farther stretches the road.  
Shrouded and distant, alas, is my goal!  
Daylight is waning. Night fills the sky.  
Soon I shall see but the stars everlasting.

Yet I lament not the day that is passing  
Nor do I dread the night that is falling,  
For in my soul there glimmers a light beam  
Cast by the love which flows through the world.

On one level, this is a simple poem. It draws on and develops the well-worn metaphor of life as a journey along a road, emphasizing the constant passage of time. The waning of light, we realize, symbolizes the transience of life, while the night blotting out everything but the stars may be seen as an uncertain future which eventually comprises death as well as the hidden goal of the journey. Night and darkness are negatively charged – the departure point of the second stanza is the assumption that, given their advent, lamentation and dread would be

natural reactions. Indeed, the thought of the goal being distant and hidden has already triggered a gesture of despair: »alas« / »ack!«. Nevertheless, the »Yet« / »Men« signals a turn in the opposite direction based on the speaker's experience of great love filling the world. The Swedish text does not contain the word for »light«, but the word »strimma« very clearly connotes a beam of light, and so the turn towards optimism is again enacted in terms of the symbolism of darkness and light. Concomitantly, the connotations of darkness are enriched. Darkness stands for everything that is the opposite of love: loneliness, uncertainty, death. These dark forces are strongly present in the speaker's life but they become manageable because universal love is also present.

Less obvious than this general structure is the preparation, throughout the poem, for its hopeful resolution. Even in the first stanza, when the words spoke of loneliness, insecurity and night drawing near, the rhythm remained unperturbed in its steady lilt:

— *Ensam jag skrider fram på min bana,  
Längre och längre sträcker sig vägen.*

*I am walking alone on this journey,  
Farther and farther stretches the road.*

And from beginning to end, the syntax imparts a sense of security by fitting effortlessly, without enjambment, into the calm regular lines comprising four stresses and nine to eleven syllables. From this point of view, the poem starts with a tension between metre and meaning, the composure of one and the agitation of the other. In the last two lines that tension is resolved; metre has tirelessly suggested that all shall be well and now meaning comes round and concurs:

— *Ty av den kärlek, som går genom världen,  
Föll ock en strimma in i min själ.*

*For in my soul there glimmers a light beam  
Cast by the love which flows through the world.*

Our aesthetic satisfaction at this concurrence of metre and meaning bolsters our acceptance, in the world of the poem, of the speaker's conviction.

The universal love which inspires that conviction is not particularized but it is obviously transcendental in nature since empirically there is no evidence of love permeating existence. In a Western culture one would conventionally see the Christian God as the source of love; one may even make a connection to *The First Letter of St. John*: »God is love« (ch. 4,

v. 8). Yet it is a first characteristic of the poem – and of literature in general – that both the intimation of God and the allusion to the Bible remain implied and nebulous. The poem presses no dogmatic »take-it-or-leave-it« creed. Instead it offers a choice between specifically Christian consolation and a more unspecified sense of a benevolent force in existence. It is even accessible to readers who have no sympathy for either of the two by allowing them to appreciate a persuasive and affectionate psychological portrayal of how a person might experience being in touch with universal love.

A second characteristic of the poem – and of literature in general – is the fact that the purely philosophical content is conventional, even trite: life may be uncertain, menacing and transient but you can trust in God. However, the point of the poem is not to convey that stripped-down intellectual »content«. Instead the poem primarily places the reader in a symbolic, yet clearly visualized landscape under the sky, and in the mind of the speaker. The point is for the reader to live through a process of anxiety and consolation in that spatial and emotional here and now.

— BITTER RESIGNATION: A. E. HOUSMAN'S  
»THE LAWS OF GOD«

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Moving from an optimistic to a pessimistic transcendental stance, we consider A. E. Housman's »The Laws of God«,<sup>15</sup> poem XII in his collection *Last Poems* published in 1922 but written c. 1900:<sup>16</sup>

— The laws of God, the laws of man,  
He may keep that will and can;  
Not I: let God and man decree  
Laws for themselves and not for me;  
And if my ways are not as theirs  
Let them mind their own affairs.  
Their deeds I judge and much condemn,  
Yet when did I make laws for them?  
Please yourselves, say I, and they  
Need only look the other way.  
But no, they will not; they must still  
Wrest their neighbour to their will,  
And make me dance as they desire  
With jail and gallows and hell-fire.  
And how am I to face the odds  
Of man's bedevilment and God's?  
I, a stranger and afraid  
In a world I never made.  
They will be master, right or wrong;  
Though both are foolish, both are strong.  
And since, my soul, we cannot fly



To Saturn nor to Mercury,  
Keep we must, if keep we can,  
These foreign laws of God and man.

The poem expresses a transcendental stance because the existence of God is a given, but, unusually enough, that conviction inspires no sense of security. On the contrary, along with society God is considered responsible for the »bedevilment«, the malicious harassment, experienced by the speaker. He rails against it, wanting to be free, but is forced to acquiesce since with their »jail and gallows and hell-fire« society and God are so much stronger than he is.

Considering the state of the world, such a pessimistic transcendental stance is intellectually possible, and perhaps no less plausible than its optimistic counterpart enshrined in many religions. However, the human function of religion is apparently to offer consolation as much as, or even more than, a viable world view. From that emotional point of view, the idea of a malevolent transcendental order is odd and unsatisfactory, hence rare. True, a world ruled by a malevolent demiurge is in a sense meaningful, purposeful, but it is not meaningful in the usual, heartening sense of the word. The stance in Housman's poem can thus be described as pessimistic but it goes against the grain of the categories »meaningful« and »meaningless«. Because of that it is a position of some originality, and the poem allows us to spend time with an engaging character who makes a persuasive and moving point: even if there is a God, who is he to decree how life is to be led by a poor soul who never asked to be born under his rule?

— A SOOTHING PRESENCE: HENRY WADSWORTH  
LONGFELLOW'S »HYMN TO THE NIGHT« —

Proceeding to the immanent stances we first turn to »Hymn to the Night«,<sup>17</sup> a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published in 1839 in *Voices of the Night*:

— Ασπασία, τρίλλιστος

**Hymn to the Night**

I heard the trailing garments of the Night  
Sweep through her marble halls!  
I saw her sable skirts all fringed with light  
From the celestial walls!

I felt her presence, by its spell of might,  
Stoop o'er me from above;  
The calm, majestic presence of the Night,  
As of the one I love.

I heard the sounds of sorrow and delight,  
 The manifold, soft chimes,  
 That fill the haunted chambers of the Night  
 Like some old poet's rhymes.

From the cool cisterns of the midnight air  
 My spirit drank repose;  
 The fountain of perpetual peace flows there, –  
 From those deep cisterns flows.

O holy Night! from thee I learn to bear  
 What man has borne before!  
 Thou layest thy finger on the lips of Care,  
 And they complain no more.

Peace! Peace! Orestes-like I breathe this prayer!  
 Descend with broad-winged flight,  
 The welcome, the thrice-prayed for, the most fair,  
 The best-beloved Night!

Here the speaker is impressed by the majesty of the night and its reserves of cool air which strike him as a fountain of peace. This inspires such reverence that he calls it »holy« and such gratitude that he describes it as »thrice-prayed for«. However, at no point does he present the night as being transcendental in origin; instead the religiously tinged words form one set of metaphors reflecting his feelings. The other set is that of encountering night as a beloved woman trailing »her« black skirts and stooping over him. The soothing presence of the night is thus doubly delectable, prompting feelings like – but only *like* – those inspired by a deity or a lover.

What is it that needs soothing? Part of the answer is given explicitly as »Care«, the unspecified troubles of human life. The other part is intimated by the epigraph – »Aspasie, trillistos« in transliterated form – drawn from book VIII, line 488, of *The Iliad*.<sup>18</sup> These words, »welcome, three times prayed for«, are underlined by their repetition in the last two lines of the poem as »welcome, the thrice-prayed for [...] Night!«. Their context in *The Iliad* is the sentence: »Sorely against the will of the Trojans sank the daylight, but over the Achaeans welcome, aye, thrice-prayed-for, came the darkness of night.«<sup>19</sup> This refers to a stage in the Trojan war at which the Trojans have temporarily gained the upper hand over the Greeks (also known as Achaeans), and it is preceded by a long account of fruitless back-and-forth fighting and killing between the two parties.

In »Hymn to the Night« that allusion to continual human violence is reinforced by the word »Orestes-like«. That figure of Greek mythology came from a long family line of death and destruction. His ancestor Atreus, having discovered his wife's

infidelity with his brother, killed their children and fed their flesh to the adulterous parents. This heinous crime drew a curse on his descendants. One of them, King Agamemnon, felt compelled to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to be able to go to Troy. On his return he was killed in retaliation by his wife Clytemnestra, who in turn was killed in retaliation by her son Orestes. He was then pursued by furies of vengeance but in the end found peace when he was acquitted by the court of the Areopagus.<sup>20</sup>

In what respect, then, is the speaker of the poem »Orestes-like«? Presumably not as a murderer, individually speaking, but as a descendant of murderous mankind displaying a horrible history of wars and violence comparable to that of the house of Atreus. The poem offers no hope of remedying this state of affairs but it does offer consolation. Speaker and reader alike may experience respite from »Care« and the burden of human history. The nocturnal darkness can apparently offer that »peace« because it extends far into space and the luminous »celestial walls« of the stars. As such, because it lies outside the orbit of human affairs, the night may host »[t]he fountain of perpetual peace [which] flows there«. And because it nevertheless descends on earth it can bring us that peace.

Arguably this is a weaker form of consolation than the one proffered by Geijer's poem. After all Longfellow basically creates a mood of perceiving the physical advent of night philosophically, without any foundation in a benevolent transcendental sphere. On the other hand, within an immanent conception of the world, this is really all we can hope for in the face of human incorrigibility: an alluring perception of soothing calm, well supported by the regular metre and stately imagery of the poem. A telling mark of the success of this mood-creation is the rendering of distressing reality. Enamoured of the night, the speaker has succeeded in almost banishing from his mind both his personal troubles and the horrors of human history. What remains of those battlefields is only a vague sense of »Care« that no longer complains, and the erudite circumlocutory allusions to *The Iliad* and to Orestes.

— A LOOK INTO THE ABYSS: ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON'S »OH YET WE TRUST« —————

By contrast, Tennyson's »Oh Yet We Trust«<sup>21</sup> applies no such mute to the jarring woes of existence. This is poem LIV in the author's *In Memoriam H. H. H.*, a sequence of poems published in 1850. Relatively discontinuous, it moves from personal grief to general reflections on the meaning and purpose of life as well as speculations about God and the afterlife. I halt its long progression close to its midpoint to look at poem LIV in isolation:

— Oh yet we trust that somehow good  
 Will be the final goal of ill,  
 To pangs of nature, sins of will,  
 Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;

That nothing walks with aimless feet;  
 That not one life shall be destroyed,  
 Or cast as rubbish to the void,  
 When God has made the pile complete;

That not a worm is cloven in vain;  
 That not a moth with vain desire  
 Is shrivelled in a fruitless fire,  
 Or but subserves another's gain.

Behold, we know not anything;  
 I can but trust that good shall fall  
 At last – far off – at last, to all,  
 And every winter change to spring.

So runs my dream: but what am I?  
 An infant crying in the night:  
 An infant crying for the light:  
 And with no language but a cry.

As in the case of Geijer, we again find the pervasive cultural contrast between darkness and light. But this time, rather than seeing or sensing such symbolic light, the speaker is merely crying for it in darkness like a helpless infant. This places the poem in the pessimistic immanent category. The last two stanzas undercut the tentative transcendental optimism of the first three: it is exposed as just a »dream«, for in fact we »know not anything« of God setting everything right in the end. Indeed, it makes the pessimism all the more poignant that its antidote, the optimistic belief in a meaningful transcendental order, has been considered and rejected.

What is more, in the course of that reflection the bleakness of existence has been illustrated more forcefully and explicitly than in the Longfellow poem. It consists in the fear that life is meaningless, a walk »with aimless feet«; the related fear that death is a mere expulsion »as rubbish to the void«; the cognizance of human recklessness and cruelty denoted by »sins of will« and »taints of blood«; and the observation, Darwinian *avant la lettre*, of the wasteful suffering of animals such as the worm and the moth. That is what we know. The idea that some good will miraculously come of all that devastation is exposed by the poem as nothing but a dream.

»Oh Yet We Trust« thus uses powerful imagery to epitomize in a mere 135 words the emptiness of existence, the cruelty of

man, and the suffering of all living creatures. This look into the abyss has, it seems to me, considerable value in itself. It represents in stark and uncompromising compression one possible position among philosophies of life. Thereby it makes conceptually and visually palpable a despair that is rarely articulated with such clarity but underpins many forms of malaise and depression. Again, as in the case of Geijer and Longfellow, the ideas are not remarkable as such. Their power derives not from »content«, but from our immersion in the speaker's earnestness and psychological development from hope through sober realization to despair.

Some readers will feel that this is all there is to say in positive terms, that surely the poem offers no consolation for the ills it exposes. Let me nevertheless suggest two ways of deriving solace from it. Firstly, this kind of extreme and all-embracing despair is something which we usually experience alone, and there is a social taboo against voicing it in an everyday non-medical context. By contrast, we are here invited to share it with the speaker. In that literary perspective-taking there is a comforting sense of human solidarity in the face of a common plight, a shared affliction. Secondly, though someone might call the poem a *cri de cœur*, it really is not, in the literal sense of an inarticulate scream rising from the wounded heart. The speaker may in conclusion claim to have »no language but a cry«, but he is manifestly proved wrong by the whole poem, its rhythm and rhymes, its graphic imagery and aptness of phrasing. Thus, if anything, the concluding statement draws our attention to such aesthetic qualities. And what they convey, indirectly but tellingly, is the point that the human spirit can remain indomitable even when the human condition presents itself at its bleakest. In the light of this, Tennyson's »Oh Yet We Trust« is not a crippled outpouring of despair; it is a controlled articulation which rises above despair. To its reader, it conveys a confrontation with the void but, equally, the fortitude of bearing it.<sup>22</sup>

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#### — CONCLUSION —

To sum up, as human beings we crave meaning in a world that may lack meaning. We long for peace and security but are apt to be violent and disruptive. That plight seems irremediable, but it is a shared plight offering possibilities of fellowship and communication in many forms. One of them is literature. Whether poetry or fiction, it can suggest philosophical options but, more characteristically, it invites us to take the perspective of a character engaged in an existential struggle. However, it does so in an aesthetically fashioned and psychologically safe habitat. Thereby literature, whether poetry or fiction, can surmount loneliness and prevail over the social embarrassment of discussing existential anxiety. On the level of »content« the work in question may emanate in solace à la Geijer or

Longfellow or in despair à la Housman and Tennyson. But in both cases its reader grappling with existential questions may find consolation in a shared experience of the human condition. In Longfellow's words, we may »learn to bear / What man has borne before«.

#### ■ — ENDNOTES — ■

1 Both figures are taken from Irvin D. Yalom: *Existential Psychotherapy* ([New York], 1980), 420–21.

2 See Gunilla Ringbäck Weitoft & Måns Rosén: »Is Perceived Nervousness and Anxiety a Predictor of Premature Mortality and Severe Morbidity? A Longitudinal Follow Up of the Swedish Survey of Living Conditions« in *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 59:9 (2005), 794–98. Cf. Anna-Lena Haverdahl: »Ångest har blivit största hotet mot svensk folkhälsa« in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 13 August 2005, and Elisabeth Breitholtz: »Vart tionde barn har ångest« in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 3 September 2005.

3 See further Torsten Pettersson: »Drömmar om verkligheten – skönlitteraturens potential för existentiell psykoterapi« in Dan Stiwne (ed.): *Bara detta liv. Texter i existentiell psykologi och psykoterapi* (Stockholm, 2008), 104–14.

4 Cf. Emmy van Deurzen: *Det existentiella samtalet. Ett perspektiv för psykoterapin*, trans. Margareta Wentz Edgardh (Stockholm, 1998 [1988]); Bo Jacobsen: *Existensens psykologi. En introduktion*, trans. Margareta Wentz Edgardh (Stockholm, 2000 [1998]); Hans Stifoss-Hanssen & Kjell Kallenberg: *Existential Questions and Health. Research Frontlines and Challenges* (Stockholm, 1996); Kjell Kallenberg & Gerry Larsson: *Människans hälsa. Livsåskådning och personlighet*. Andra utgåvan. (Stockholm, 2004 [2000]); Håkan Jenner: *Som livet gestaltas – livsberättande som existentiellt projekt*. Med bidrag av Ulla Hoppe Jakobsson och Dan Stiwne (Kristianstad, 2005); and Dan Stiwne: »Den existentiella terapin och utmattningen – den moderna livskrisen« in *Insikten* 11:5 (2002), 11–19.

5 See Viktor E. Frankl: *Viljan till mening. Logoterapins grunder och tillämpning*, trans. Claës Gripenberg (Stockholm, 1986 [1969]) and *Gud och det omedvetna. Psykoterapi och religion*, trans. Margareta Edgardh (Stockholm, 1987 [1949]).

6 See Aaron Antonovsky: *Hälsans mysterium*. Ny utgåva, trans. Magnus Elfstadius (Stockholm, 2005 [1991]).

7 Two good extensive presentations of the field are Nicholas Mazza: *Poetry Therapy: Theory and Practice* (New York, 2003) and Juhani Ihanus (ed.): *Att tiga eller att tala: litteraturterapi – ett sätt att växa* (Helsinki, 2004).

8 Edith Kern: *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beckett* (New Haven & London, 1970), 95, original emphasis.

9 For this concept, cf. Lisa Zunshine: *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus, Ohio, 2006).

10 For the role of fictionality, see further Torsten Pettersson: »Components of Literariness: Readings of Capote's *In Cold Blood*« in Stein Haugom Olsen & Anders Pettersson (eds.): *From Text to Literature: New Analytic and Pragmatic Approaches* (Houndsmill, Basingstoke, 2005), 84–88, 98–99, and »Lånade drömmar – fiktion och verklighet: Den första Fredrik Cygnaeus-föreläsningen vid Helsingfors universitet« in *Historiska och litteraturhistoriska studier* 82 (2007), 139–48.

11 See Tage Kurtén: *Tillit, verklighet och värde: Begreppsliga reflexioner kring livsåskådningar hos fyrtioen finska författare* (Nora, 1995).

12 Such a taxonomy, if at all viable, would, firstly, have to include at least a further, neutral position of both a transcendental and an immanent kind; secondly, it would have to be combined with the question of human agency – supportive, passive, or rebellious – within the four (or now six) positions. Even beyond those  $3 \times 6 = 18$  categories, additions would be necessary. For instance, there are at least two kinds of rebellion, realistic (with a chance of success) and tragic (without such a chance). And what about individual vs. collective action ... Categories could easily pullulate beyond practical utility.

13 This is not to deny that biographical and other contextual comments may open up useful additional dimensions such as the reader's sense of rapport with the author. However, it is a moot point, and one that should be subjected to empirical research, whether extensive biographical and historical contextualization strengthens or weakens intratextual perspective-taking.

14 Quoted from Erik Gustaf Geijer: *Dikter*, ed. Carina & Lars Burman (Stockholm, 1999), 203.

15 Quoted from A.E. Housman: *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Christopher Ricks (London, 1988), 109.

16 According to Christopher Ricks: »The Composition of the Poems« in Housman: *Collected Poems*, 487.

17 Quoted from *The Poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, The Modern Library (New York, s.a.), 369–70.

18 See Homer: *The Iliad*. With an English Translation by A. T. Murray, The Loeb Classical Library (London & Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971 [1924]), I, 374.

19 *Ibid.*, 375.

20 The history of the house of Atreus has been compiled from the articles on each of the relevant figures in John Warrington: *Everyman's Classical Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London & New York, 1969).

21 Quoted from *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London, 1969), 909.

22 In literary scholarship one could say that, while *the speaker* of Tennyson's poem is in the throes of despair, *the implied author* responsible for the poem as an aesthetic artifact conveys the attitude of being in command of that despair. In a session of bibliotherapy, that distinction may grow out of the discussion even without the use of these terms.

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