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Transformative words: writing otherness and identities

by Juhani Ihanus. New York, Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2019, 330 pp., \$230 (sb), ISBN: 1536149659

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BOOK REVIEW

Transformative words: writing otherness and identities, by Juhani Ihanus.

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Juhani Ihanus is a Finnish pioneer of biblio/poetry therapy in Europe. His new insightful and broad-minded work *Transformative words: Writing otherness and identities* depicts literature, biblio/poetry therapy, and narratives in a wide cultural-historical context. The work, running 330 pages, is divided into three main sections: “Letters and Writing,” “Biblio/Poetry Therapy,” and “Narratives.” The main argument is that humans can recreate themselves through narratives time after time, because the coherent and stable ego is an illusion, “a psychological prejudice.” Although the past events of personal history remain unchangeable, new stories can enlighten them: the narrator can change and develop new perspectives on things.

Topics and diction

The book brings together different scientific disciplines, psychotherapies, and discourses of philosophy and poetry. It invites the reader to experience an exciting time travel from the ancient Semitic and Greek writing systems to the digital writing systems of the Internet in the current media culture. The book shows that it is not necessary to stay in strict genre boundaries, for example in a conventional academic scientific discourse. Many quotations from poets, literary scholars, philosophers, and psychotherapists – as well as the story of a person diagnosed with cancer – illustrate the force of narration. Ihanus assists the reader by defining concepts, their contexts, and the etymologies of words.

The author’s knowledge of psychology and literature as well as his deep scholarship give a convincing basis for his views on the transformative resources of words and narratives. The following list encompasses only a selection of the topics in the book: the development of children’s language with preverbal stages and “proto-conversations,” the “free” and “compelling” passions of writing, the destiny of the book as an artifact, and the new possibilities of the book in the media culture era. Ihanus proceeds to write of virtualization of memories and identities and digital literature as the Other of conventional literature. The author also elucidates the differences between quickly skipping “hyper attention” and long-lasting and deep learning about literature, the logocentric systems of religion and metaphysics, and the psychological prejudices concerning the idea of the stable ego. Furthermore, the author describes media violence, narcissistic cultures, the life drive and the death drive, expressive theater, and positive psychology. Jacques Derrida’s and Jacques Lacan’s conceptions are internalized in the text. The author often quotes Maurice Blanchot and Friedrich Nietzsche. The old names get a new role on the stage of media culture: the Nietzschean subject is a process that is also found in digital forms of writing (p. 187).

The perspectives of the book include different points of view that are sometimes allowed to be in contradiction to each other. For example, Ihanus shows how media culture can cause restlessness and end up in the voids of meaning, but equally the technological revolution can

*Editor’s Note: The Journal of Poetry Therapy includes reviews of books of interest to poetry therapists. Of special interest are thematic poetry anthologies that deal with personal issues and experiences, as well as books about any aspect of the therapeutic use of literature and writing. Please note, however, that chapbooks and self-published poetry books will not be considered. To be considered for review, books should be sent to: Karen vanMeenen, MA, CAPF, Book Review Editor, Journal of Poetry Therapy, 38 Cloverland Drive, Rochester, NY, 14610, USA. E-mail: naptpublications@yahoo.com.

create new spaces and unexpected possibilities and perspectives, as well as new connections between people. Literature is open minded and it must recognize, accept, and reflect on its own metamorphosis. "Literature, know thyself," as Ihanus advises.

Thus, the book seems to express flexible *adaptation*: it does not deny that digitalization has come to stay, but it encourages us to study it in order to learn from it. Polyphony flourishes, sometimes perhaps too much. However, it is the same polyphony that people can acquire in regard to their own identities through literature and writing. The form of the book – *how* the things are told – seems to illustrate *what* is told: one can narrate stories from different perspectives, and in every story, the voices of others and other narratives can be heard.

The book challenges the conventional scientific discourse. For example, the author describes his own dream of the apocalypse (p. xii), and sometimes passionate diction resembles fiction in its usage of tropes: "The breath (psyche, 'a butterfly') of a poem flies further than the poet's desire, conflicts, and passions" (p. 64). Ihanus states that theories are not totally separate from storytelling, since both try to find meanings and attach words to experiences. Interestingly, the book also relates humanism to physics: the (psychoanalytic) truth according to which there is much more within us than we can know is paralleled by the existence of "dark matter" in the universe. Human beings and space are widely unexplored.

One of the central ideas of the book is that also in science the logical and tropistic uses of language fuse (p. 59). Ihanus writes, "The journey through the process of narrativization of the unconscious is not science fiction, but it may concern fictions of science and scientific fictions of the intrapsychic world" (p. 164). The polyphonic and, from time to time, literary diction illustrates the claim that the scientific discourse is also inhabited by the tropes of fiction: "Memory, let us speak together the language – the many languages – of the silenced (the victims of genocides, terroristic acts, murders, rapes), let us give words to faces that have no words, give faces to words that have no faces" (p. 37). However, at the same time, the psychological view is present: "Human memory is not something separate from the body, which is itself a form of memory" (p. 139).

The book is bustling with interesting details that extend to concern the main themes. For example, in the Hebrew writing system, there are no vowels, but the reader supplements them in the reading process, as if the spirit transferred itself through the reading body into the writing and made it breathe. This leads the author to refer to some interpretations of the Bible and the Tower of Babel, which illustrates to Ihanus the human desire for the search of knowledge. The desire has accelerated the writing and reading skills and they have both helped people to come closer to meanings and alienated them from meanings. Meanings and pasts are always to be retold, because – as Ihanus quotes Karl Lachmann – "the memory of a text is its intertextuality" (p. 20).

Biblio/poetry therapy and narrative understanding

The second part of the book addresses the conditions, research, and effects of biblio/poetry therapy. As is well known, the early history of bibliotherapy relates to the history of hospital libraries. In France, England, and Italy, there were libraries in hospitals at the end of the eighteenth century, and patients read and sometimes even wrote in them. In 1914, the term "bibliotherapy" was coined by Samuel McChord Crothers (in his talk on "The therapeutic value of the books"¹), as Ihanus shows, thus changing the earlier conception that the first instance of the term would have been in 1916 (p. 81). The first association for poetry therapy outside the United States was founded in Finland in 1981 by Ihanus, with psychologist Heli Mertanen and librarian Leena Sippola. Now, there are also biblio/poetry therapy associations in many countries including Germany, Great Britain, Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, Italy, Israel, and Japan (p. 86).

In academic psychology and in professional psychology, narrative approaches emerged as late as the 1980s. Biblio/poetry therapy does not have to lean on “evidence-based research,” which is the dominant paradigm of contemporary psychiatry, but on narration-based research. An experiential case history should be told by the patient, not by the psychiatrist. The person is what s/he describes s/he is, and insofar as s/he does not create narratives, silence threatens the person. The nature of the narrative is twofold: on the one hand, the collapse of a narrative may derail a person into a crisis from which new points of view toward life may develop; on the other hand, the obstinate repetition of an old life story may cause suffering and the sense of uncontrollable destiny. Further, Ihanus reminds us that people tend to notice only the contents of a story, not the way the story is told – the form and the act of narration. He also adds an interesting point of view to the debate on the importance of narration: some people live an “anti-narrative” life happily, as if the narrative understanding would not be necessary to them; perhaps it can be even harmful and restrictive.

The stories are understood in the book not only as individual multilayered creations but also as grand narratives in cultural history. It is said that the grand narratives, for example the ones of humanism and capitalism, are dead, but Ihanus offers a new narrative according to which the conventional grand narratives are in a metonymical relation with each other:

We are living the grand narrative of information: the super-historical moment of implosion and explosion brings about an unforeseen ecstatic fantasy, a self-fulfilling Theory, the deletion of nature, the enchantment of terminals (terminal states), the control of tech and info spaces. It is carnival time, the Middle Ages, the space age, whatever age (p. 48).

The book also presents in detail new meta-analyses of the effects of biblio/poetry therapy. Expressive writing has both long-lasting and short-term effects on the behavioral, cognitive, emotional, social, and neurobiological levels (p. 115). In the therapeutic conversations between meanings, transferences and counter-transferences take place both in a person’s relation to art objects and to other members of the group. In his book, Ihanus also presents his own theoretical model of the biblio/poetry therapy process.

Stories of the unconscious

Ihanus shows that Sigmund Freud’s theories are on a continuum of a long cultural tradition. The chapter “Stories of the unconscious” presents different ways of narrating the unconscious in fiction, philosophy, and psychology. Since “no one has seen the unconscious,” one must *tell* about it. Ihanus presents different stories told about the unconscious by different discourses, for example, the animistic, natural philosophic, physiological, Freudian (dynamic), Jungian (collective), Lacanian (linguistic), behavioristic, adaptive, cognitive, neuro-evolutionary, social-cultural, and dialogical or polylogical unconscious.

By presenting different stories of the unconscious Ihanus makes the concept move within cultural history. Ihanus also presents critical points of view on Freud’s model of the unconscious. The model has been regarded as a too-rational construction that attacks “the enemy of rationality” (Whyte, 1960, p. 151). However, Freud himself wrote that what he invented was a scientific method to research the unconscious. Freud wanted to adhere to rationality in order to open the way to the scientific research of the unconscious, unlike, for example, the surrealist movement, the methods of which were even life threatening. Ihanus also speaks up for Freud as a scientist. Rationality, as I see it, does not mean reduction or underestimation of the emotions and experiences; on the contrary, in the light of rationality, one can see them more clearly – from the analytic distance, one can at the same time experience them and learn from experience.

Surprisingly little explicit attention gets the following conventional psychoanalytic view whose voice I connect here to the polyphony of the book. According to this view, a person's core self develops in an early interaction with the caretakers. It is present, yet without form and comprehension, since it develops before the child enters the language. We can assume that the core self is *waiting its narration*. The difficulty is what kind of story is the best – or a good enough – narrative to reach it. Both poetic language and psychotherapeutic conversations can create form to understand the hidden past. If one does not get too tired to narrate repeatedly, perhaps finally – through repetition, idealizations, and frustrations (that is, by working through) – one can experience that s/he has now developed a life story that serves as a window to the past. The contents of that story have been there before the act of narration, yet now, for the first time, they will get form. They do not change, but the ways they are told may change, as also Ihanus emphasizes; and then, paradoxically, one confronts the old important question: what is the relationship between the story and the discourse? For example, a transference story may become a true metaphor of one's past, a story of the unconscious. It is *a* truth, but not *the* only truth. By admitting that metaphorical truth, one can *also* have new truths, since the psychic sphere becomes larger.

Thus, as I see it, one can, to a certain extent, become aware of the personal past; "behind" the boundary, there is the unknown. The unknown has gained different names throughout cultural history, for example "the soul," "the unconscious," and "the god." Ihanus's book shows that humans have always tried to reach that unknown with words that both serve knowledge and are means to conceive the limits of human understanding, as the author states. There is something that resists its revelation while it seduces people to achieve it. Ihanus uses the concept "surplus" to describe this "something," following the intellectual traditions of both psychoanalysis and deconstruction. According to Ihanus, a surplus, an excess of meaning, resists the pleasure principle, but beyond the pleasure principle, surplus produces even stranger enjoyment. I like to consider surplus as something that one can, as Stephen Booth (1969) wrote about the hidden truth of Shakespeare's sonnets, "almost but never quite hear," and whose condition is the affirmation of the limits of knowledge. Surplus is the non-existent essence of literature, like a trope. Ihanus shows that it does not vanish in the era of media culture and digitalization. "It is hard for us to admit that truths of different kinds can be thought, that there are co-existing realities," he writes (p. 52). Literature and psychotherapies help us in this endeavor, as *Transformative words: Writing otherness and identities* explicates.

Note

1. Keystone State Library Association. [Report on Samuel McChord Crothers's talk on "The therapeutic value of the books."] *Pennsylvania Library Notes* Vol. 7, no. 4, October 1914, pp. 107–108.

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