

CHANGING YOUNG HEADS WITH HENRI**C J MOORE**

When we first met at a Goethean gathering some years ago, Henri Bortoft told me, in his quiet chuckling way, of the time when he was being interviewed for a teaching post at Tonbridge School, and they asked him something challenging like, 'What would you most look forward to if you came to teach here?' Henri's reply, it seems, was along the lines of, 'I really look forward to exploring new ideas in science with the boys.' To which came the observation, 'We don't think you'll find much time for that here, Mr Bortoft.'

To be fair, it seems Henri did find support from his first headmaster for some of his extra-curricular activities, and also opportunities for sharing his enthusiasms with pupils, mainly in the context of one of those (lame) General Studies courses where teachers have free rein beyond the constraints of A-level exam preparation.

Not surprisingly, though, we know from his own comments in *The Wholeness of Nature* that Henri found much to criticise in science education as he was obliged to teach it.

If we are to have people who are educated to understand what science is, it surely makes more sense to introduce them to science as a cultural-historical enterprise than it does to subject them to the present approach of facts, experiments, and calculations torn out of their real context. On its own the current approach to science education gives a distorted image of science which results in a pseudo-understanding ... Without the historical perspective, science is too easily reduced to scientism, and knowledge ceases to be such and becomes an idol. (Bortoft, 1996: p.399, note 280)

The story above is typical of Henri's low key but delightful sense of humour. And we can easily imagine how fascinating a sixth form science course based on Henri's 'new approach' would have been, as so many of us have been privileged to learn from him during courses or seminars. In a brief tribute to him, I wrote recently, *'I was bowled over by the lucidity and enthusiasm of his teaching. As we know, these two qualities do not always go together.'*

But when they do, they can change the way that you 'understand' things for the rest of your life. We remember this from those of our own childhood teachers whom we literally cherished, those who opened doors and windows for us - in my case, Mr Norton with his history of the nineteenth century, forever a land of vivid political storytelling for me; Mr Browncroft without whose clarity of exposition I would never have got the obligatory O-level in Maths to get into university; Mr Crawford and my first glimpses into the songlike poetry of Yeats. Each of us has a roll call of such memorable educators with whom we can echo the statement: 'Understanding is an event.'

This is my strong recollection of sitting through a Bortoft lecture: you felt as you listened that a new panorama of understanding was opening up and being transferred to your own awareness. As long as Henri spoke, you could see and participate in what he was describing. When he fell silent at the end, the challenge arose of taking those insights away and making them truly one's own, and that in turn means embracing a process of profound change.

In his last work, *Taking Appearance Seriously*, the keynote quote from Bergson sums it up: 'Philosopher consiste à invertir la direction habituelle du travail de la pensée.' This is indeed the call, to reverse one's habits, to venture beyond 'the logic of solid bodies' (Bergson again) and to begin to experience and see differently. Henri himself states in the Preface: *'this book is more "practical" than it looks. I have tried to write it in such a way that anyone who reads it slowly enough to follow the movement of thinking in the language, should find they begin to experience the dynamic way of seeing for themselves.'* (Bortoft, 2012)

That aim in itself would make the book rather special. What is even more special is that it succeeds in its purpose. As Philip Franses observes in his review: 'Bortoft provides us with a guide into a totally changed landscape of perception ...' (Franses, 2013)

We know that this change of perception doesn't happen overnight, that such an engagement involves reading and re-reading, along with practice and conscious effort, all the more so for having to overcome the entrenched nature of our customary thought. For we cling to the security of what we take to be known - reinforced and apparently given confirmation by cultural sharing. Our tendency through habit, custom, received ideas, and wanting to 'belong', is to let our views, attitudes, responses, endure in petrified forms, in

increasingly deep attractor basins, out of which, left to themselves, they might never climb. 'Without chaos,' as Sally Goerner expresses it neatly in *The Web World*, 'one might lie endlessly in the basin of some thought, unable to leap to something new.'

In an article on 'The Transformative Potential of Paradox', Henri talks of this task of confronting the polar and static nature of our thinking, and of how in the 1960's J G Bennett introduced him to 'the attempt to hold opposites together at the same time' (Bortoft, 2010). Instead of seeing things as defined, separate objects, we can work to apprehend their 'multiplicity in unity' in an intensive rather than extensive kind of perception. He describes how later in the 1970's, when engaged often in the practice of switching from one kind of perception to the other – which following Gadamer he calls 'philosophical work' – 'I used to feel as if my head had been taken off and another one put in its place, and sometimes this would happen spontaneously while walking down the street, doing the washing up, or whatever.'

'What do you think about when you're peeling potatoes,' a friend of mine remembers asking a favourite aunt when he was a boy, watching her about her tasks. 'I think about the potatiness of potatoes,' was the unexpected reply. At that moment, a door or window opened for my friend, on to a landscape of 'potatiness'. You could wander in that landscape (active) and simultaneously allow it to inform you (passive). This is where true imagination, in the sense of Goethe or Coleridge, comes into play. This landscape is not a Walt Disney fantasy in which potatoes talk, wear trousers or ride motorcycles. No, here potatoes 'do' and 'be' potato. My friend did not need to have read Gadamer to grasp the idea. The imaginative mind of the child 'got' it instantly. As Henri writes: 'Imagination is the kind of seeing which is also a kind of understanding (a kind of thinking). For imagination, seeing and understanding are one.' (Bortoft, 1996, p.304)

We find an instance here where, in the awareness of the child, the language became reality. '...Reality happens precisely within language,' in Gadamer's terms (see Bortoft, 1996, p.405, note 307). And this allows us to see, too, how successful Henri was in opening up new ways of seeing through a carefully constructed and lucid style of exposition. He stuck closely to his chosen philosophical discourse because he wished, especially in his last book, to walk with the reader along the path and go through the process together. The fifty pages of endnotes were the warp to the weft of the text itself, equally important in their own way but, as he said, 'not to get in the way'. This aim of avoiding distractions in the text itself made him shun a lot of modernisms, fashionable references to oriental thinking and even some quite major and familiar terms. I asked him on one occasion as we went through the chapter on language, why he didn't ever refer to the Logos. 'It comes too burdened with associations,' he replied.

As it happens, my friend's potato-peeling aunt was a lifelong teacher, and I think her gifted way of addressing the child reveals this. Like the best Steiner/Waldorf teachers, Henri also had this gift of illuminating within language. You never felt, listening to him, or reading him, that he was asking you to understand something beyond your capacity. Great teachers have this quality. It is as if they want to share with you their own moment of illumination. As an instance of this greatness, I invite you to read again and again pages 17–18 of *Taking Appearance Seriously* where he gives the account of how he first 'grasped' the upstream/downstream concept which becomes so important an image in his exposition. In using the image so powerfully and poetically, he is of course, only following his own advice from *The Wholeness of Nature*, where he again castigates the educational approach of our time:

"Typically, modern education is grounded in the intellectual faculty, whose analytical capacity alone is developed, mostly through verbal reasoning. One notes, for example, that science students are often not interested in observing phenomena of nature; if asked to do so, they become easily bored. Their observations often bear little resemblance to the phenomenon itself. These students are much happier with textbook descriptions and explanations ...

The experience of authentic wholeness is impossible in this mode of consciousness, and a complementary style of understanding could usefully be developed. This can be done, first by learning to work with mental images in a way emulating Goethe - i.e. forming images from sensory experiences". (Bortoft, 1996: p.24)

As an editor, my first advice to authors is always: 'Begin from what your reader knows, and then take them where you want to go.' The examples above show that Henri knew superlatively well how to do this. So wearing my other hat, as an author myself, I am really obliged to follow my own advice, too. One of my self-imposed tasks as author has been to write a story, or series of stories, for young people in such a way that they

could begin to question the idols and dogmas presented to them in our established modern culture, and to allow their last vestiges of childhood to grasp intuitively another way of seeing and thinking.

Since my very first encounter with Henri, he has accompanied me in this task, though until last year he was largely unaware of it. More on that below. My notes and files for this work, and my well thumbed and pencil annotated copy of *The Wholeness of Nature*, are full of 'Questions for Henri'. To keep it simple, all the questions came down to one: 'How do you go about educating young people into holistic awareness?' E-ducere here in the 'leading out' sense of the word.

Mostly, time and his own writings provided answers, but all of the scenarios had to allow for two realities.

First, accepting the intuitive capacity of the young uninformed mind to seize new ideas without thinking.

Second, as Henri points out above, overcoming the inability of the same mind trained only in verbal reasoning to see beyond 'textbook descriptions and explanations', in other words to experience the limits of reason.

My need to start from the familiar meant that the medium of the writing had to be story, and more specifically fantasy, a genre which is popular and readable for all age groups. I called the book *King Abba: A Philosophical Fantasy*, the subtitle created as a working label for my own convenience, then which, as time passed, I found to be a known and growing category of writing.

My heroes and heroines had to be teenage children, but with a Merlin father-figure, King Abba himself, to oversee and allow for events to become stages on hero journeys rather than just a series of misfortunes. And, while starting with my heroes and heroines living comfortably and securely in the world that they have known all their lives, supported by the twin pillars of Reason and Science, I had to allow for a total collapse of that world in order to oblige them to face up to radical change. At this point, the rational scientific certainties would cease to be certain, and the challenge would be to find other sustainable worlds in which to survive. Out of chaos, opportunity.

Along the way with my characters, we would explore adventure, fairy tale, satire, philosophy, science fiction, and a certain sense of the ridiculous, reflecting the absurdity of the world that children are so often asked to accept without question.

So, with the book written at last, the next step was to seek out reader comments, above all from youngsters: 'Eighty, no, ninety out of a hundred. I kept coming back to it because I've never read anything like it.' (Tom, aged 12.)

'I really like the story ... I read it in one afternoon, couldn't put it down. Please write the other stories. I want to know what happens to the characters, especially Emerald.' (Alice, aged 14)

'Original and fascinating, written with evident delight in exploring ideas ... I found it a. absorbing, b. fascinating and c. beautifully written.' (Kate)

And then the final test, for me. What would Henri make of it? There was, after all, a good dose of Henri in the book. Last year, after we had finished the editorial work on *Taking Appearance Seriously*, I asked if he would like to read it, and then sent it to him. This was his generous reply in due course:

"I have read King Abba with much enjoyment. I think it is beautifully written, and therefore a joy to read, but also it kept me wanting to know what was going to happen next. I liked the way that ... it gradually begins to dawn on the reader just what a difference there is between the artificial environment which is ultimately a product of intellectual reason - but is mistaken for reality - and the genuine reality of the living world that we encounter through the life of the senses, and we cannot help but see this reflected in the way we are living/not living today. For this reason alone, apart from its sheer enjoyment value, I think it would be very good if this work were to be published today. So when can I have the next volume please?"

I was already working on the sequel and sent him the opening section. Sadly, his health was deteriorating fast at that time, and it was only a matter of weeks before he was brought down by his final illness. However, just before that, *King Abba* had been published as an e-book with the plan to create a print edition in 2013. I don't think even then he realised quite how much of an influence he had been on my own long journey.

There must be many similar individual stories of how the genius of Henri Bortoft touched and illuminated the way we see and do, the way we are. Working with Henri was both a privilege and, especially for me, an inspiration. Vale, magister.

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