IN MEMORIAM

The Centrifugal Mind
Requiem for Eugene Taylor (1946–2013) and Joseph Roth (1894–1939)

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These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1893, p. 46)
“Self-Reliance”

I had the excellent fortune of becoming good friends with Eugene Taylor, historian and scholar of the third force, during the last five years of Eugene’s life. There was much that impressed me about this oddly charming and episodically brusque man, a man who in so many ways seemed rather larger than life. His uncommon directness and candor were one thing, his passion-infused vision another, his honoring of the sanctity of relationship yet one more. I am hopeful, now that he is gone, that it will be the brilliance and scope of his very best work for which he will one day be remembered most of all.

Emerging from patently inauspicious beginnings, Eugene eventually became one of the true visionaries of our field. Indeed, the stateside “visionary tradition” (Taylor, 1993) in psychology was the axis around which this ardent and erudite life pervasively spun. In contradistinction to a dominant culture typified as “outward, rational, reductionist, dominated by the senses, and driven by the letter of the law,” Taylor spoke insistently and eloquently for an alternative tradition, one that is “inner, contemplative, ascetic, and mystical” in “believing itself to be the true aristocracy of the spirit from which the letter of the law was derived” (ibid., p. 7). Eugene was, like William James before him, drawn from the start beyond the confines of quotidian consciousness toward the mind’s margins and what James (2010, p. 80) had called the “unclassified residuum.” It was these psychic hinterlands toward which he steadfastly cast his gaze. Encountering the Jamesean “residuum,” Taylor argued, could lead to states deemed psychopathic; successfully integrated, however, this was precisely the

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doorway to evolution of character, spiritual epiphany and self-transcendence. Ultimately, Taylor pointed—like the Indian Swami Vivekanand who had so captivated the minds of James and others—to a psychology connoting the “spiritual evolution of consciousness” (Taylor, 1996, p. 63). “The possibility of the transcendent”—that consciousness could be guided into “something higher, purer, better” (Taylor, 1993, p. 8)—was the ideal that was forever on his mind.

Concurrent with my recent immersion in some of Taylor’s seminal works (William James on Consciousness Beyond the Margin [1996], William James on Exceptional Mental States [1986], Shadow Culture [1999]), I have been reading the novels and feuilletons of Austrian writer Joseph Roth. Amid a gathering resurrection of interest in Roth’s work since his death in 1939, Roth is now considered one the finest European writers of the 20th century. The commonalities and crosscurrents between these two penetrating and turbulent souls came to me as I read, unbidden, as a revelation. Both are writers of astonishing capabilities, both point relentlessly to what we may call a “centrifugal” awareness to be found at the limits of cartography and consciousness, both die prematurely in less than dignified circumstances and states of mind. The work of each, furthermore, illumines that of the other in unanticipated ways. Roth, in relentlessly documenting Austria’s decline after the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy, articulates, obsessively, a now harshly circumscribed, indeed shrunk, cultural milieu limited in reach and breathing room. “Austria’s essence,” pronounces a character in his last novel, The Emperor’s Tomb (Roth, 2013, p. 15), was not “central” but rather “peripheral.” As it lost touch with its borderlands, suggests Roth-enthusiast Dennis Marks (2011, p. 118-119), “Austria abandoned its essence—the multicultural equilibrium which underpinned its whole purpose.”

Even in his heartrendingly poignant The Wandering Jews, in which Roth (2001) traverses Europe documenting what will soon become a brutally vanquished world, Roth (who nowhere in this elegiac work mentions that he is himself a Jew!), voices kinship and sympathies that are, decidedly, with the diaspora and Eastern Europe’s disenfranchised—those who suffer, persevere and ultimately perish in the Shoah—rather than with those more sanguine and strategizing souls who wend their ways (severing, inevitably, huge parts of themselves in so doing) westward to the beckoning metropolises of modern Europe or southeast to the purportedly promised lands of the Middle East. “The substance of Austria,” writes Roth (James, 1909, p. 105) in his novel, “is drawn and replenished from the Crown Lands.” Cut off from these untamed, yet life-sustaining frontiers, Roth’s writing becomes a literature of entropy, his characters tragic embodiments of the radically uprooted and dispossessed.

Just as assiduously as Roth documents the “peripheral world” of the Habsburg Empire, so did our own Reb Taylor (as I, recognizing his essentially spiritual proclivities and core, soon took to calling him with a commingling of respect and affection) guide us, obediently, to James’s “margins of consciousness” where reside, simultaneously, the potentials for breakdown, renewal, transcendence and change. Taylor (1982) painstakingly reconstructs William James’s 1896 Lowell Lectures on “Exceptional Mental States” from James’s own notes and books (an accomplishment of staggering dedication and significance constituting, in effect, a sort of “William James, the middle years” between a more conventionally-grounded Principles of Psychology (1950) and the further-reaching Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) and beyond. “The Middle Years,” it is interesting to note, is an important short story written by William’s younger brother Henry (James, 1909, p. 105) in which the writer-protagonist utters these fateful words on his deathbed: “We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.” Evocative words appropriate to our theme, which sound like the discerning thoughts of a kindred spirit indeed.

It is precisely at the fringes of awareness—the mind’s penumbrae, we might say—that we encounter those aspects of consciousness that offer both risk of breakdown (“the best of us,”
observes James [1908, p. 47], “are of one clay with lunatics and prison inmates”) and possibility of breakthrough and psycho-spiritual advance. “James’s main thesis,” writes Taylor (1996, p. 85), “centers around the subconscious and its exploration as a doorway to the awakening of mystical religious experience.” Not only this but the enlargement of the self more generally and, by extension, the potential enhancement of a life. Spotlight consciousness, intently capable and self-impressed though it may be, misses precisely that which makes life subtly nuanced and imaginatively rich. “The mass of our thinking vanishes forever, beyond the hope of recovery,” admonishes James (1950, p. 276), “and psychology only gathers up a few of the crumbs that fall from the feast.” And thus do we overlook, echoes Taylor (1996, p. 32), “almost all the whole.”

We must admire lofty, if broken, spirits like Taylor and Roth who suffer at times social and professional ostracization precisely in order to cultivate the peripheral mind and centrifugal consciousness that convention steadfastly disallows. “To be obsolete among the living means something like being extra-territorial,” observes Trotta, narrator and protagonist in Roth’s (2013, pp. 178–179) book; “I was an extra-territorial among the living.” The relentless Jamesean espousal of “the larger view,” suggests Taylor (1991, p. 68) in life-affirming contrast, may yet rescue psychology from what he perceived to be its ongoing “drift into mediocrity and irrelevance.” Ultimately, it was an “intuitive psychology of character formation” (Taylor, 1993, p. 14)—a notion he traced through the transcendentalists and James to the very best of the third force—and the prospects for a “literary psychology” (ibid., p. 13) coexistent with science by which Eugene was inspired and to which he persistently pointed and about which he doggedly lectured, even preached.

“We bathe,” writes Henri Bergson (cited in Taylor, 1996, p. 136) in his introduction to the French translation of William James’s Pragmatism, “in an atmosphere traversed by spiritual currents. Many resist, but others open themselves wide and thus allow themselves to be influenced by these beneficent breezes.” Bergson alludes here to what James had called the “infinite Mother-Sea of Consciousness” (ibid., p. 83) that envelops and beckons to all. Even as a child, Taylor was a conquistador of hidden places, unknown passageways and spaces in the home in which he grew up on the outskirts of Philadelphia. He left the family homestead with a bongo drum and sawed-off shotgun in tow and a vacant thumb for hitchhiking. He was bound for Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX where he would become the first in the family clan to complete an undergraduate degree while playing rock and roll on the side in order, partly, to pay his way. He drank heavily in those collegiate days, then moved to San Francisco at the height of the counterculture movement where his interests segued into acid rock and, briefly, hallucinogens; alcohol was foreworn forever. It was in the midst of a single LSD trip during which he hiked in Mount Tamalpais, he told me, that he had his vocational epiphany: that his life would be henceforth devoted to the study of the psychology of religious experience. He claimed to have sold his drum kit the very next day, heading straightaway for Cambridge and the Harvard School of Divinity. There he quickly discovered James and, as fellow Jamesean David Leary (personal communication, Feb. 11, 2013) put it upon hearing news of his passing, “never turned back.” (“The karma of William James,” muses psychiatrist and compatriot Nassir Ghaemi [2013] in his moving tribute, “Eugene Taylor in Memoriam.”) When the time came for that final frontier and departure, Eugene was light years away from the orthodox mind and world where it had once all begun.

And it strikes me that Eugene’s message and work ought to be given its rightful place in the liturgy by those who presently toil in the vineyards of the third force. A phone call by an aged and frail Rollo May shortly before his own death was received reverently by our scholar/drummer still laboring mostly in isolation, hypomaniacally at times, in the remotest corners of Cambridge. “You are right in what you are doing,” May said in response to an essay Eugene had sent him some
months before; “You are going to receive a lot of criticism, but you must do it anyway. I cannot help you because I am too old.” This endorsement, coming as it did from such a hallowed place, meant a lot to Eugene as he in turn aged and faced his own end. It was the ideal of a psychology at once “visionary” and “literary” (one hitting upon all the notes along the spectrum of being and honoring the broader humanities) that both sage and scholar/historian cherished and shared.

Joseph Roth died destitute, alcoholic, and bereft of solace in his adopted city of Paris. Eugene Taylor died on January 30, 2013 in a small, disheveled apartment in the northern-most tip of Cambridge. Both lives wound down in considerable dissolution and disarray. (“Where can I go now, I, a Trotta?” is the concluding line in Roth’s [2013, p. 183] concluding novel.) Today, Roth’s books are widely regarded as comprising one of the very high water marks in European literature, inspiring a startling film adaptation of his novella, Rebellion, by no less an auteur than Austrian-born Michael Haneke and another of Roth’s final fictional piece, The Legend of the Holy Drinker (2001), by Italian filmmaker Ermanno Olmi; Roth has been restored to life, as it were, out of the ashes of European aesthetic and ethical sensibility. It is too soon to know what Reb Taylor’s fate and legacy will be, though here, too, discerning eyes await discovery of a rarified body of work, one warranting rapt attention and praise. Both men, Taylor and Roth, provide moving and profound reportages from their respective outposts, centrifugal beacons from the margins of consciousness and beyond.

REFERENCES


AUTHOR NOTE

Ed Mendelowitz completed his doctoral studies at the California School of Professional Psychology where he worked closely with Rollo May. He is on the board of editors for The Humanistic Psychologist and The Journal of Humanistic Psychology and a contributor to some of the major compendiums of existential-humanistic psychotherapy. Dr. Mendelowitz is on the faculty of Saybrook University and a lecturer at Tufts Medical Center. He writes a quarterly online column, Humanitas, for the Society of Humanistic Psychology and lives with his wife, Khanh, and daughter, Miryam, on the Squantum tip of North Quincy just south of Boston.