Efficacious Acts of Mind

Reflective awareness can free us from the grip of our impulses.

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“I have lived through an eventful year, yet understand no more of it than a babe in arms,” the narrator of J.M. Coetzee’s novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, tells us. “There has been something staring me in the face and still I do not see it.”

In Coetzee’s novel, that “something” is an external force: “blatant cruel injustice” at the edge of a colonial empire at the beginning of the twentieth century. But “something” can also come from within, as the non-rational will seeks to break through into consciousness, with the potential to affect psychic integration.

Albeit in different ways, Jonathan Lear, a practicing psychoanalyst and professor in the Committee of Social Thought at the University of Chicago, points out, literature, psychology, and philosophy aspire to “make life more human and human life more worthwhile” through “self-conscious appropriation” that, in essence, renders the unconscious conscious.

In *Wisdom Won from Illness*, Lear advances his claim that “reflective awareness” (that develops its own inner momentum) can free us “from the grip of our impulses” in fifteen sophisticated, insightful, and soul-stirring essays on a wide range of topics, including ancient Greek
philosophy; Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, Freud’s “Rat Man”; Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*; Marilyne Robinson’s *Home*; psychoanalytic techniques; and the capacity of eros, irony, and mourning to stimulate positive experiences.

In *Wisdom Won from Illness*, Lear does not draw on the recent work of cognitive and behavioral social scientists and scientists, assess the methods of his philosophers, psychoanalysts, and novelists, or the impact of their work. Instead, Lear reflects on the practical (as well as the theoretical) importance of humanistic insights about enhancing rational autonomy by “creating an environment, a force field that facilitates a person’s ability genuinely to change his sense of possibilities – and thereby change the possibilities, and thereby change himself.”

Psychoanalysis, according to Lear, is both a process and an activity. Psychoanalysis seeks, at first, to address problems the analysand is facing. Over time (and at its best), psychoanalysis promotes a capacity to put the unconscious aspects of the psyche (which are by no means limited to forbidden desires, and about which, Lear acknowledges, the analyst often does not know all that much at any given moment) in harmonious and productive relations with self-conscious understanding. The ultimate goal, then, is to enhance “the analysand’s ability to observe her own mental states and processes as they are emerging in the here-and-now and assess for herself how she wants to live with them.”

Defined as a longing that arises from the gap between what one professes to believe or be and an aspiration that threatens to “blow it apart,” irony, Lear suggests, is a fundamental mode of human existence that can help us reflect on our impulses, our current situation, “and the realm of thought that puts itself forward as true.” If it avoids the excesses of alienation from established social practice and an appropriate disruption of behavioral norms, he maintains, an ironic perspective is “compatible with passionate engagement in social life.”

Even more significant is Lear’s claim that mourning can help us use a trauma “to break out of repetition and create a new future.” In the paradigm trauma, the death of a loved one, Lear points out, we mourn as it were through the deceased, “a form of life that threatens to entangle us with ghosts,” leaving us at a loss about what to think, feel, and do. Faced with any kind of loss, however, we can enlist our emotional, not entirely rational faculties; set up a “relation of sympathy and distance;” recreate the past by making it present; transform a ghost into an ancestor; and in the process change ourselves.

If psychic integration is to occur through mourning, Lear maintains, “it must be promoted.” He identifies three primary agents: parents; cultural customs and rituals; and the caring direction of psychoanalytic technique (in which the analyst becomes a “companion” to the bereaved, helping him or her face a loss, in all its complexity and emotional intensity, and “reorganize it”).

There may well be other agents – and some, no doubt, will contest the prominence Lear bestows on psychoanalysis. But his assertion that mourning lies “at the center of our being” should command our attention. When, through “efficacious acts of mind,” we know ourselves as mourners, Lear concludes, “we constitute ourselves by our own activity of self-understanding. This is a form of truthfulness – and it is difficult to see how one could come by it in any other way.”