



## special articles

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### When language weakens<sup>†</sup>

To work in a mental health system you need to be a kind of translator. Our rich English language moves at a lot of different speeds, works through different moods and modes, at different levels of sound, boldly some of it, hesitantly some of it, and so on, for different purposes. Medical talk is impenetrable to most other people, senior administrative people speak whatever is the current jargon, there's everyday language modified for the variety of situations and all these means will be adapted according to who is speaking to whom. It is routine to move between them and, as it were, to translate.

If you are a patient you, too, need to learn the art of translation; to work out what is really being said, to decode, to notice what happens when someone speaks in this way or that way, to pick up the cues and clues and byways and knots of the language.

We take language for granted, use it in whatever ways we are able, avoid situations where our language might feel awkward or out of place. And we seem, most of us, for most of our lives to have plenty of it. Some people contribute a huge quantity of talk and/or writing to the world, some people very little.

Then gradually or suddenly our language can become frail, fragmented, reduced, hard to use or to understand; it can seem to be going haywire, we feel one thing and what we say comes out as something else. What an isolation we can be in then, and how hard, too, for the people who want to communicate with us. I've never been so aware of how we take language for granted and how lost we are if we start to lose it, as I've been in my short time in the wards with the 'older adults'.

And, working as a poet, I've been wondering again what the language of poetry is, what it means, what it's for; and where it is here in this place. I reckon poetry is there potentially in any of the language we use all the time; sometimes it's there if we simply notice it is there. And our brains seem to delight in having fun with language, with shaping it, with finding unexpected twists and turns in it, in setting this word against that in a surprising and curious and stimulating way. But all these facilities can fail.

With the 'older adults' I've been learning again the importance for poetry (and perhaps for life) of being hesitant, of not assuming I know, of being patient with

language, of working with its fragmentation, its open-endedness, lack of closure.

I wrote this poem knowingly influenced by someone in a small group I've been sharing time with the past couple of weeks, someone in her 70s who has for most of her life been blind. These are my words but, I hope, representing her:

Except that to keep saying it,  
how it folded and that sort of thing,  
where the saying it wasn't very,  
wasn't very going that way, I suppose,  
to do with the way it went,  
with a second one or a name,  
how it goes with winter,  
well or not so well, afterwards,  
when the evening, you know, silver,  
a kind of winking sound.

No sentence here, no thought is ever quite completed, yet it seems to me there is plenty of suggestiveness, of warm life. In another small group, in the space of about 90 minutes, a man said hardly more than these few words. I had taken in various objects – some flowers, leaves, a clothes peg, a film can, some mother-of-pearl shells, etc:

'What's this for, then?' (sitting in a group)

*Wild Woodbine!*

It's a waste of time.  
I *could* tell you.  
Your turn.  
You've got to tell us a tale now.

It cost about a penny to send a letter.

I was aware . . .  
Have you heard that one?  
Just wondered.'

In a 'continuing care' ward I heard very few words. People mostly moved about or sat in silence. One woman followed a man around, holding his arm, sitting with him, in silence, and I wondered whether she had words 'speaking' inside her. I wrote this as if from inside her:

If I hold your arm  
I'll know who I am,  
if I follow you around  
holding your arm  
and if we sit together on the sofa  
I'll know who I am  
and why I am. Where you go

<sup>†</sup>See editorial on pp. 121–122 and pp. 138–140 and pp. 140–143.



I'll go, holding your arm,  
where you sit I'll sit,  
I'll know who I am then  
and why I am.

Someone told me the medical term for what I started calling 'talking on and on', when someone seems to have become stuck in repetition. I have transcribed a number of these, and I have been struck by how rhythmic they tend to be, how controlled as to grammar and content. Repetition is an under used poetic form in our culture, and here it is:

She didn't know what to do so she left it,  
she never bothered about it so that's all she knew,  
she used to say, write for a fifteen,  
we used to say give her fifteen and that way all we knew,  
fifteen it was all right and they knew,  
we used to pull this end, that's all,  
that's all we knew, she didn't know so she talked,  
so she just denied it, that's all I knew,

This continued with variations for a long time. A therapist I met outside the hospital said she thought in terms of this language being a 'talking in and in'. This is a different spatial notion than 'on and on', and it worries me that it might be taken to mean no one needs to listen: it's an internal monologue and that's all. So I've been wondering about 'talking out and out'. Here's another short extract from someone else:

She's got some tea, has she?  
No, she's got no tea at all.  
Have you got any tea?  
I'm dying for a cup of tea, my mouth's really dry. . . .

What are they playing at this morning?  
They don't know, they don't know,  
they don't know what they're doing.  
Waiting now for each other.  
Yes, she's gotta wait now, she's waiting now,  
where she went I don't know,  
I don't know, terrible, terrible!  
She's got to wait now, she's got to wait now,  
but you can't find her. Well, I've been  
waiting for ages and I've got nobody. . . .  
You try that, you try that, try one of them. . . .  
That's why she had to get a new pair of socks,  
she should have socks. What am I going to do now?  
I'm going to the police station.

I have transcribed these as poems, and they make most sense, it seems to me, when transcribed that way. If they make sense at all. That's to say, we might conjecture, if they are asking for a response, if a response is possible. It is a question then whether or not people talking like this should be listened to.

I want to say that if listening goes, *then* meaning goes, if listening goes, poetry is no longer possible. Poetry is essentially a speaking and a hearing. I'm suggesting poetry as in some sense essential, not a luxury, not an add-on, but a way of reminding us to hear truth and beauty in everything that is said, hard though that can seem.

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## JEREMY HOLMES

# Are poetry and psychotherapy too 'wet' for serious psychiatrists?†

Not long ago I met for the first time a psychiatrist colleague whose articles I had enjoyed reading. I introduced myself, saying how impressed I was by his account of introducing cognitive–behavioural approaches in a tough inner-city general psychiatry setting. He responded graciously, saying 'Oh, but you're the psychotherapist fellow who writes those nice articles about poetry in the *Bulletin*' (Holmes, 1996). Feeling slightly put down by this male banter, implying that there was something vaguely 'wet' and irrelevant about both poetry and psychotherapy, and keen as always to establish psychotherapy as a vigorous equal player with social and psychical treatment approaches, I was reminded of how easy it is to see psychotherapy as a frivolous luxury when compared with the rock face of general adult psychiatry – and how to view it as 'poetic' might merely reinforce that view. But poetry *can* be extremely tough – Kipling, Graves and Hughes would be obvious 20th century examples – as can psychotherapy, which often outmatches other psychiatric disciplines in the rigour of its research

methods (Roth & Fonagy, 1996) and strictness of its boundaries.

Nevertheless, in considering links between poetry and psychotherapy I run the risk of confirming my new friend's prejudices. In order to confound the idea that psychotherapy and poetry are essentially 'wet' (to use a favourite word from my public school past) I have deliberately chosen to consider a poem by one of these rather 'masculine' poets, Simon Armitage (1992), who spent many years working in a related field to ours, the probation service. See Box 1 for the poem in full.

It is hard to describe why I find this seemingly simple poem so moving. It is essentially an action replay of a tiny yet significant moment in a cricket match. Like an action replay it plays with time, slowing it down to a freeze-frame where the powerful feelings aroused by a batsman's dismissal can be examined and absorbed. The event described takes place in a fraction of a second, yet the tone of the poem is languorous and sleepy – a typical afternoon in early summer, evoking nostalgic memories

†See editorial, pp. 121–122 and pp. 137–138 and pp. 140–143.