

Book Review: William Cornell “Somatic Experience in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy” by Morit Heitzler & Michael Soth

Towards a re-integration of the body-oriented and psychoanalytic traditions

Over the decades, William Cornell has developed a profoundly engaging *experience-near* writing style, that weaves together deeply personal elements with evocative and precise clinical vignettes, as well as clear and clarifying theoretical elaborations. It seems to us he writes like he works and works as he writes; and this book is perhaps the clearest expression yet of his evolving thinking, placing him at the forefront of the movement to integrate the Reichian body-oriented tradition with modern psychoanalysis.

It is possible to find therapists who have trained in both traditions, capable of flexibly switching paradigms from one extreme to the other. However, being able to understand, access and practice both paradigms and thus switch between them is not quite the same as *holding the tension and full conflict* between them, let alone *integrating* them or *finding a third position of synthesis*.

Cornell is the person we know through his writing who has gone furthest in terms of appreciating both traditions from within, valuing the sensibilities of each, speaking to their respective preciousness *from within the polarisation between them*. He holds the tension between the paradigms, not as theoretical or philosophical perspectives and positions, but as lived, felt opposites; and this creates the possibility of profound synergy.

The Radical and Tragic Vision of Wilhelm Reich

Cornell shows deep and scholarly understanding of Reich's work, writing and development, and an appreciation of his genius. But he pulls no punches in linking Reich's own character wounding to the flawed and fraught catalogue of relationships that followed Reich throughout his development and career, with intimate partners, colleagues and students; summed up with devastating simplicity in the following quote: "Reich's absolute confidence in his own thinking, at whatever phase in whatever style, tended to create loyal, rather mindless acolytes who were not able to critique his ideas or techniques. By the time of his orgone theories, Reich had largely forsaken the subtleties and complexities of transference dynamics and unconscious functioning; he never developed a theory of countertransference, as he had always conceived of himself as an objective observer and 'natural scientist'." (Page 29)

Cornell's analysis of Reich's character and shadow aspects overlaps in many ways with our own process of questioning Reich and his legacy, which, together with our colleagues at Chiron, we went through in the 1990s. Having been fairly zealous believers, this process of deconstructing our cherished assumptions and idealisations was painful, but it allowed us to transcend the characterological blind-spots of our Founding Father as they lived on unconsciously in our therapeutic position, presence, theorising and orientation. However, Cornell's analysis is better informed and

researched, more comprehensive and detailed, and at the same time more naked and exposing, making the need for psychoanalytic containment very glaring and obvious, whilst concurrently holding onto the benefits of a body-oriented modality.

Struggling with and learning from psychoanalysis

Through Cornell's encounters, clashes and collaborations with various psychoanalysts, the book shows how he is both challenged in his 'habitual therapeutic position', acquired through his training, and ultimately enriched. Along this journey, he increasingly establishes the gifts and shadow aspects of *both* traditions, and how much they in fact *need* each other in order to create a new synthesis, which he is beginning to forge.

Cornell offers a revealing account of his creative and mutually enriching cross-modality dialogue with Jim McLaughlin, a psychoanalyst. He recounts a moving story when they together attend a CPD event with Angela Klopstech, a Bioenergetics trainer, where eventually Jim exclaims: "I spent 50 years nailed to my seat, like a good little analyst, with my patients glued to the couch. God forbid anyone *moved!* 50 years. I never got out of my chair in a session, I never moved, but I watch you move all around this room. And I have no question of your competence. I hardly imagine that you are acting out. I'm so angry with myself." Angela listened, and she *watched*. "Actually, Jim," she said, "you are in your chair, true, but you are not still. Hardly. You are moving." ... She had him actually repeat his physically shifting back and forth between the two modes of expression, using her own movements to both mirror and lead his, intensifying his affective experience of this conflict between the vitality of his fury and the depressiveness of his compliant adaptation to norms. "Thank you," said Jim, "that was wonderful, competent and about 30 years too late." (Page 41)

Through McLaughlin's openness and self-critique, Cornell - and the rest of us - are given access to the shadow aspects, rigidities and conflicted underbelly of the psychoanalytic tradition, in a very personal way. It would be easy to use this delicate information simply to validate our humanistic criticisms and prejudices against psychoanalysis (but as we find in the rest of the book, that is the furthest thing from Cornell's mind).

The psychoanalytic caution against 'action'

However, it is one thing to engage with a psychoanalyst such as McLaughlin, who at a late stage in his career began struggling with and probing into the non-verbal territory of the therapeutic relationship, and found himself considered unorthodox and on the periphery of his own community.

It is quite another thing to then also lay oneself open to the reverse process, which Cornell charts in the subsequent chapter, where he exposes himself and his work to psychoanalytic critique, dialoguing with Sue A. Shapiro, a relational supervising analyst from New York, who calls her discussant paper: 'A Rush to Action: Embodiment, the Analyst's Subjectivity, and the Interpersonal Experience'.

In many ways, this exchange is the most substantial and controversial in the whole book, demonstrating and addressing the gulf that exists between the paradigms, even with a sympathetic relational analyst whose professed interest is in somatic processes.

It is around the notion of enactment (i.e. how the therapeutic relationship replicates and re-enacts the client's woundings) that the different paradigms clash most intensely, and thus also most clearly reveal their differences.

It is at this point that Cornell and Shapiro start missing each other and the dialogue becomes more fraught: Shapiro, being a relational analyst, takes it for granted that enactment *can* constitute a turning point in the treatment: "it is this kind of rupture and repair that is familiar to all clinicians in deep work with patients. ... I think it was the critical interpersonal exchange over Cornell's feelings for [the client], rather than any body-based experience, that was mutative."

Cornell sees it differently: "I find it ironic that Shapiro identifies my un-thought-out disclosure of my affection for (the client) as a 'key mutative moment' which I considered then (and still now) to be an error on my part, although one that we were able to take up very productively." (Page 48)

The notion of enactment as the linchpin of the paradigm clash

Although they are effectively agreeing about the productive outcome of Cornell's 'error', this is a manifestation of not understanding each other regarding that crucial paradigm-dividing question of enactment and whether it is ...

- a) the therapist's mistake,
- b) an unfortunate inevitability (the dangers of which the therapist needs to work hard to minimise),
- c) an unavoidable rupture that – with diligence and thoughtfulness - might be repaired productively, or
- d) the very principle by which therapeutic transformation occurs (dangerously and paradoxically).

Because they do not see eye to eye on this, the irony here goes even further than Cornell implies, as it is the analyst who thinks of his "un-thought-out" spontaneity as a key ingredient in the transformation, whereas Cornell thinks of it - in fairly humanistic style - as an error on his part. He seems to largely take the analytic accusation on board, by restrictively equating enactment with blind, unconscious, dangerous countertransference which it is the therapist's duty and responsibility to avoid, even whilst Shapiro *doesn't* think of it like that.

Because he doesn't embrace enactment as *both* dangerous *and* potentially transformative, he remains on the back-foot vis-à-vis this analytic accusation which privileges thoughtfulness and caution against the dangers of enactment. He thus doesn't - in our opinion - sufficiently establish the need for bodymind spontaneity, both the client's and the therapist's, in pursuit of an embodied position that can be truly integrative of the two conflicting traditions and the bodymind itself. From our perspective, the uncontrollable nature of enactment, and the fact that it occurs subliminally, anyway, both intra-psychically and interpersonally, is one of the best arguments we have for including explicit and direct work with somatic experience in psychotherapeutic process.

We have found that the more we pay attention to pre- and non-verbal experience in the therapeutic relationship, the more we recognise that our own embodied unconscious is always already subliminally caught in layers of multiple enactment and responding to

being thus caught. This prepares a bodymind understanding of countertransference and enactment which does not privilege mind over body nor body over mind, not reflection over action, nor expression over inhibition, or impulsiveness over mindfulness, through surrendering to the paradoxical nature of enactment.

Cornell's book is a sophisticated gift to all of us on that journey of re-integration between the traditions, bringing together the analytic sensibilities needed to co-create the relational container of the therapeutic space with the passionate holistic and post-Cartesian intuitions and established powerful practices of the Reichian tradition.