

A paper given at the ENASTE Conference 2015:  
'Transformations: Education in a Rapidly-Changing World'

**'When the old becomes new: supporting the development of human individuality.'**

**Argument:**

The paper makes two related points:

1. To exemplify how traditional European literary texts model a path of inner development that supports the idea of the emerging individual.
2. To outline some current challenges to the idea of the individual as the basis of social organisation.

**Outline:**

1. Educators refer to the journey through the adolescent years as a transformative process or 'sacred passage' [Staley], whereby the adolescent moves from definition by the family network, as in childhood, towards adult independence as a free, rational and moral individual agent.

Steiner teachers have considerable expertise in enabling this process, through a professional understanding of the stages of human development and through specialist subject knowledge.

**Examples:** age-appropriate use of texts with students (Eschenbach's *Parzival* and Shakespeare's sonnet 18) showing:

**a)** how the original writers designed them to work as transformative mechanisms, when set in motion by performance.

**b)** how the 'pilgrimage' of the soul, modelled by medieval and early modern texts, has remarkably universal application as a model for the transformative journey of today's adolescent towards achieving individuality.

Siedentop [*Inventing the Individual; The Origins of Western Liberalism*, 2014] argues that this is because we still share essential ideas about the individual; but these ideas, that rest on the universal equality and reciprocal care of individuals, are now at risk:

2. In a starkly Darwinian history of *Sapiens* [2011] Harari tells us

"What we should take seriously is the idea that the next stage of history will include not only technological and organisational transformations, but also fundamental transformations in human consciousness and identity. And these could be transformations so fundamental that they will call the very term 'human' into question." [Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*; Israel 2011]

Dr Harari's starkly Darwinian approach prompts a vital question for educators: unless I can answer the question of what it is to be human now, how can I enter into the work of education with any sense of integrity? Educators work with whole human beings and without a lively sense for the nature of 'human being' we have lost our bearings. Educational theories generally do not take us to the root question of our humanity; indeed it seems that we have not yet understood the ancient Greek exhortation, 'Know thyself!', let alone the current transformations of the world around us and within us.- 'Are we teachers strong enough in our thinking, in our epistemology of being human, to answer?'

Siedentop argues that - out of touch with the roots of our tradition - westerners often seem to underestimate its moral content and to lack conviction. We unthinkingly reduce liberalism to a

crude form of utilitarianism; or retreat into our private lives. Either way we sacrifice the emphasis on equality and reciprocity - of seeing ourselves in others and others in ourselves - which gives liberalism its lasting value.

- 'If we in the West do not understand the moral depth of our own tradition, how can we hope to shape the conversation of humankind?'

### Talk:

- **Theme: the literary text as a device for the transformation of consciousness.**
- Some texts have such transformative power locked into them that they can work as an antidote to the forces of the present-day that are destructive of developing individuality.
- This talk aims to briefly demonstrate how this works in 2 exemplary texts from medieval and early modern times.
- First, an explanation of the idea of the text as a transformative device:
- Neuropsychologists call the literary text an 'intermediate object', which is brought into being by the creative process of the writer. The reader/audience member then takes hold of this intermediate object (by reading it or attending a performance of it) and, in simultaneous response, runs their own inwardly-active mental simulation of it.
- Using a phenomenological approach will enable us to shift our attention from the static aspects of this 'world of objects' approach to experience texts as 'processes-in-time' and thus to experience their transformative effects.
- Rudolf Steiner offers a model for this approach in the way we can analyse our own dreams: use imaginative thinking, he says [*Anthroposophy and the Inner Life Dornach, 1924*], to look as if we were behind dreaming and apprehend its dramatic course and qualities - its tensions, resolutions, catastrophes - rather than its detailed content.
- Our keynote lecturer, Herr Patzlaff, yesterday morning gave us the example of a phenomenological approach to the living plant as a transformative process of growth; by extension, constriction and intensification, extension etc.
- The dance we've experienced unfolding, over three performances on each of the conference days, is a third example of transformative processes-in-time. As members of the audience we would probably all agree, although probably we would each verbalise it differently, that the experience has been of a process, a transformative journey into and through the physical and middle realms of experience and towards the spirit: an engagement in a harmonising process. At the time of this talk the dance has been completed, and it is irrecoverably gone, disappeared - the rods (props) that still remain on the platform stir our memory, but it is doubtful if any one of us could reproduce the dance as it was performed.
- But with literature that is different:
- With a text, the creative performance of the writer has left a trace. It is not alive, it is locked into a pattern of alphabetic marks on a page or screen - like musical notation or choreographic notes, or a pattern of footprints that have fossilised.
- In this picture, the text offers an invitation to the reader to join the dance that the writer has composed. If we read the text we accept the invitation to join that dance and to go along on the transformative journey that it offers - round about, up and down, faster, slower, changing partners in a complex choreographic pattern that changes our sensory perceptions of our surroundings and each other; and, depending on the power of the dance, at the end we find ourselves standing in a new place with a new point of view.

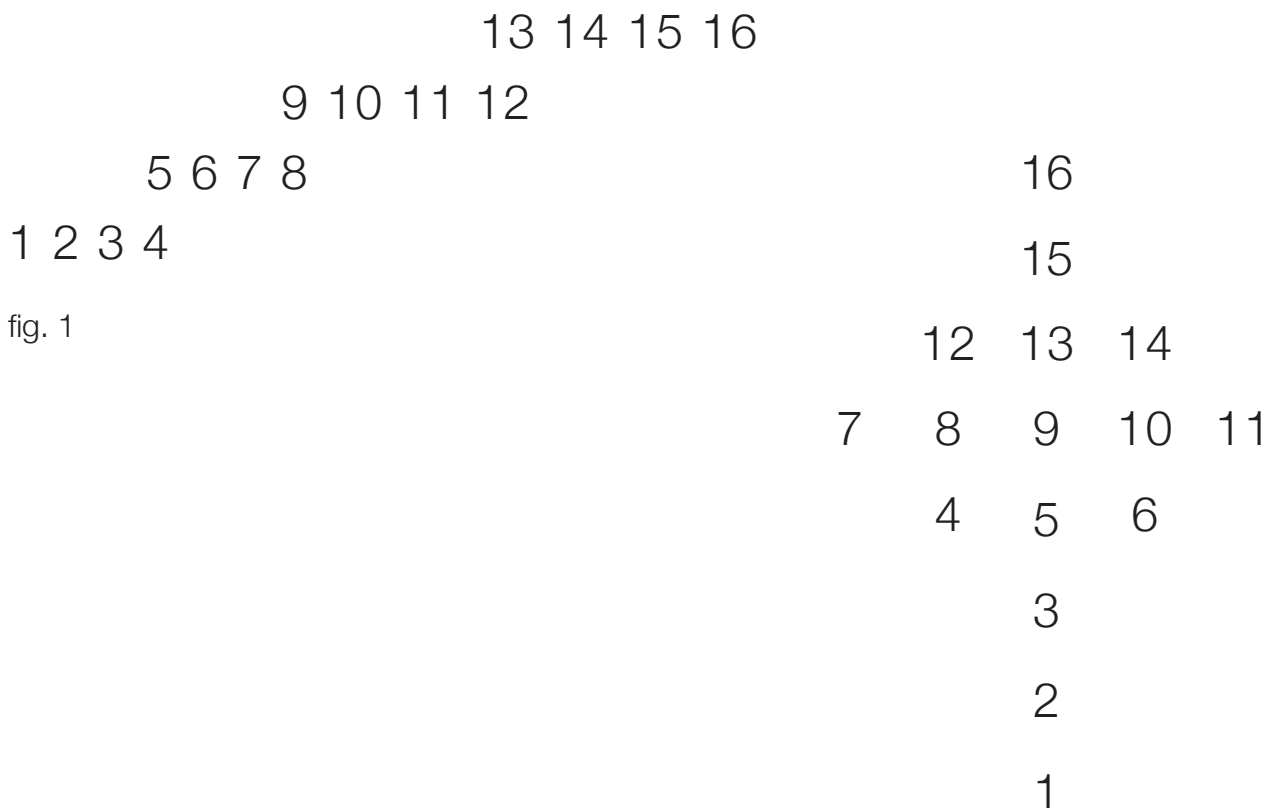
- Medieval and Early Modern writers worked consciously with this understanding of texts as transformative devices. Through the work of St Paul, St Augustine and St Francis, for example, there are numerous texts written for monastic communities to enable the individual to make the transformative journey of the soul to inner sovereignty. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is one extra-monastic example, Eschenbach's *Parzival* is another.
- Teachers **working with *Parzival* with 17-year-old Waldorf students** find how readily this age-group engages with the narrative journey on which Eschenbach takes the reader.
- The characters of Parzival, Gawain and Fierrefis can be seen to model, by emphasis, one of the three soul-qualities (Thinking:Parzival;Feeling:Gawain;Willing:Feirefis) more than the others; and the characters' respective journeys through the narrative models how to transform, develop and harmonise those soul-qualities, with the ability to heal others through one's presence of mind and attain sovereignty of the Grail as Parzival does by the end.
- *Parzival* has 16 chapters and we can see how Eschenbach has arranged the chapters in a pattern of ascending steps (see Figure 1). Each step is four chapters long and each step up occurs at a 'step-up' in Parzival's inner-development. These correspond to an anthroposophical understanding of life-processes and how they relate to learning-processes.
- There is another underlying pattern, a metonymic structure, that makes the text's invisible architecture that of a church and Parzival's underlying journey through the text one of travelling through the transformative process of a communion service:
- Eschenbach has patterned his chapters in the shape of a cross (see Figure 2), with the chapters carrying the narrative of Parzival's spiritual journey of transformation as the upright of the cross (piercing straight through the centre) and the chapters carrying the narrative of Gawain's and Parzival's transformative journeys in the realm of relationships as the horizontal arm of the cross. Note that Parzival's most significant spiritual turning point/transformation occurs at Chapter 9, at the heart of the cross/ the meeting point of the horizontal and vertical axes.
- Here we see Eschenbach's underlying textual design revealed, as the 'intermediate object'; but if we take it further, as an invitation to a transformative process, we experience something more:
- Church architecture is based on the shape of a cross. So, we can look with imaginative thinking at Eschenbach's cross-pattern of 16 chapters as at the floor-plan of a church: the West Door situated at the foot of the cross (at the entry to chapter 1); the High Altar at the East (at the end of chapter 16); the side chapels reaching out on either side of chapter 9.
- The communion service leads the congregation through a ritual journey of ever-increasing inwardness and spirituality: entering from the outer world through the West Door to the body of the church where, through an intensifying process of prayer, music and incense, for the purifying of the senses, through confession and forgiveness one is prepared to process through the crossing place (at chapter 9 in *Parzival*) to approach the high altar and communion.
- The story of *Parzival* is remarkable in being set outside the medieval world of the Church, modelling for readers the potential for creating a harmony between East and West. Perhaps by anchoring his story, of individual human development towards inner sovereignty, in church architecture which is based on the universal symbol of the cross, Eschenbach implicitly enables us to experience transforming a universal understanding from a particular expression of it.

- **My second example is Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 (see Figure 3)**, which takes the reader on a very different kind of dance.
- The sonnet is a miniature transformative device created according to a tight set of rules: 14 lines of iambic pentameter with a turn of thought after the 8th line. Shakespeare adapted the Italian sonnet's traditional rhyme scheme to 3 quatrains of alternate rhyming couplets and a closing couplet; and that made a significant difference to the effect on the reader.
- Shakespeare begins with a playful question that invites us to take up the invitation to read on. The first 8 lines take us on a journey through the senses experiencing the ways in which an English summer's day is a disappointment compared to 'thee'. The first 8 lines are exposition.
- The 9th line begins with 'But': the turning point of the sonnet and takes us into a mystery: we find, rather like Parzival on his first visit to the Grail Castle, that we are not in a summer's day that we can understand anymore but in 'thy eternal Summer". For 4 lines we struggle to understand this mysterious turn of events that has taken us into the 'eternal' world.
- Then we arrive at the last couplet and a further riddle - whatever 'this' is, that we probably haven't yet understood, it will last for ever/as long as humanity and will give life to 'thee'.
- It was a neuropsychologist (Keith Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams; The Psychology of Fiction, 2011*) who showed me the way Shakespeare's sonnets work energetically; and it is a process rather like that of plant growth and transformation: Shakespeare's exposition of a theme occupies the first 8 lines. After the turn, his transformation of the theme occupies exactly half that number (4 lines). His final couplet/conclusion is half again: 2 lines.
- The intensification of energy that is produced by halving the length and then halving it again, works with Shakespeare's use of linguistic devices, such as repetition for emphasis (e.g. 'And... and...and') to pressurise the reader's thinking towards a spiritual transformation and the delight of an epiphany of understanding. The fact that we are still reading this sonnet with pleasure after more than 400 years is surely testament to its transformative power and to Shakespeare's boast.
- With Oatley's suggestion that we approach literary texts as we approach dreams, we are brought back to Steiner's advice to approach the understanding of our dreams by looking behind the details of their content, with imaginative thinking, to the 'behind the scenes' qualities of their dramatic processes: their inner life.

I am currently pursuing this approach to literary texts, as deliberate devices for the transformation of consciousness, through Shakespeare's plays; with the aim of making research outcomes available at the Shakespeare anniversary celebrations London, April 2016.

Josie Alwyn, May/June 2015

'PARZIVAL' by WOLFRAM VON ESCHENBACH (EARLY 13th CENTURY)



SONNET 18 by WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (LATE 16th CENTURY)

**S**hall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimmed,  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,  
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.  
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

fig. 3