

# Book Reviews

*Curtis Steele, Editor*

**Explorations in Transactional Analysis:**

**The Meech Lake Papers**

by William F. Cornell

TA Press, 2008

314 pages, \$30.00

*Reviewed by Gianpiero Petriglieri*

There is a pivotal moment described early in *Explorations in Transactional Analysis*, although it takes place about halfway through the years encompassed by the papers collected in this book. It occurs, in author Cornell's recollection, during the first meeting of what would become a rich professional collaboration and warm personal relationship with the prominent American psychoanalyst Jim McLaughlin: "The closer something is to your heart, the quieter you become," McLaughlin quipped. This comment, Cornell tells us, had a profound impact on his development as an author. It is neither coincidental nor insignificant that this exchange, featured on page three of this book, lingers in the reader's mind long afterward.

McLaughlin's statement reads like one of those fabled bull's-eye transactions so celebrated in transactional analysis, and as one of those gentle, ironic interpolations in the Winnicottian style so dear to psychodynamic clinicians. It is both a synthesis and an opening, a place, so to speak, to go from. And it is also a hint of a more universal struggle to give voice and imagery, to put words and symbols to what is, by nature or trauma, unspeakable or not yet speakable. This endeavor is central to all of Cornell's work, including his work with, and of, the body. And, as such, it is a recurrent theme in this book, a must-read for anyone who wants to learn about those essential aspects of the talking cure that have precious little to do with talk.

Writing about psychotherapy is often moved by instrumental or expressive necessities. The former responds to the professional community's need to develop, advance, and transfer theory and practice in the field. The latter reflects the more personal need to articulate and share accounts of a most private experience—what goes on within and between minds, hearts, and bodies engaged in therapy. Some chapters in Cornell's book privilege one or the other aim. Others endeavor to reconcile them by developing theory from, or alongside, accounts of unique therapeutic encounters. This is the case, for example, in the chapters on impasse and intimacy and those on the somatic foundations of the Child ego state. Here Cornell's writing combines scholarly referencing, theoretical clarity, and practical usefulness while simultaneously conveying in an honest, personal voice the story of a therapeutic relationship. Over and over again, we witness Cornell as therapist striving to be fully present while removing himself enough so that the client's psyche can take the lead; working to establish a therapeutic contract and plan while remaining open to emerging possibilities and avenues for exploration; trying to stay sane while being willing to get in touch with the most

disturbing or puzzling areas of the therapeutic relationship; and staying anchored in a theoretical framework while exploring, dialoguing, and experimenting with ideas and methods from other traditions. In portraying such dilemmas with clarity and force, Cornell invites us to face the paradox at the core of the clinical professions, forever cast between the necessity of general theories and the uniqueness of everyday practice. I found the way the volume is organized particularly useful. Rather than being presented in chronological order by date of publication, the papers are grouped in terms of five themes: the experience of psychotherapy, questions of theory, the body in psychotherapy, supervision in practice, and perspectives in ethics. This shows a concern for the reader and, at the same time, allows the voice of Cornell and his coauthors to emerge all the more clearly. The Bill Cornell who is revealed in this book is an author with the gifts to reassure and wreak havoc. He dazzles us with his own contributions to the theory and practice of psychotherapy, moves us with his accounts of psychotherapy encounters, stirs us up with challenging ethical questions, and reminds us of the inevitability of political engagement. The combination of theoretical acumen, personal presence, ethical grounding, and political stance that characterizes these articles is as instructive as it is inspirational. Cornell, who also trained in body-centered psychotherapy and gained extensive experience with contemporary psychoanalysis, has been one of the most influential thinkers and sought-after trainers in the global transactional analysis community for a while now. His writing—clear, creative, and authoritative—is a fine example of the vital, developing edge of transactional analysis. And yet, while building strong interdisciplinary bridges with other psychological frames of references with which he is deeply acquainted, Cornell does not abide by the custom of adding an adjective before the words "transactional analysis" to create a label for his own enterprise. His work is no less extensive, coherent, or original, and it makes no smaller a contribution to theory and practice, for this choice. Rather, he maintains a constructive, playful independence and makes sure that his body of work does not stiffen up, that it continues to move with grace in his explorations. Whether these explorations involve understanding a puzzling relationship with a client, reflecting with his son on violence in the aftermath of the Columbine High School shootings, or integrating insights from neurobiology, postmodernism, and relational psychoanalysis with transactional analysis theory and practice, they are far from solitary journeys. Past and present scholars, clients, colleagues, friends, and family feature prominently in Cornell's writing—as fellow travelers or sparring partners. He takes them seriously and engages them vigorously. This book is, most obviously, a treasure trove of ideas on theory and technique, on training and ethics that every psychotherapist will find interesting and useful, regardless of his or her theoretical orientation and degree of experience. It is also a vivid portrait of the development of a master clinician who is eager to find, use, and articulate his own perspective and style. There is

more for the reader here than instruction and inspiration, however, more than the collected output of a prolific scholar and the vivid account of a gifted therapist's effort to voice what is close to his heart. Looking at this book from a sociological, rather than a psychological perspective, one finds in Cornell an articulate spokesperson for the dilemmas and opportunities of the contemporary psychotherapist, someone who seeks to navigate the complexity of a fragmented, if not balkanized, theoretical landscape, to continue to learn from experience and incorporate insights from both into an effective and meaningful clinical practice. In taking up McLaughlin's exhortation, therefore, Cornell gives as much voice to his own heart as he does to the efforts of many contemporary psychotherapists for whom he is, deservedly, a leading voice.

*Gianpiero Petriglieri, M.D., is an affiliate professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD in Fontainebleau, France, and a former president of the ITAA.*

---