

III. B. W. Powe – Marshall Soules Dialog

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Volume 3, numéro 2, automne 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1107771ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1107771ar>

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Éditeur(s)

New Explorations Association

ISSN

2563-3198 (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Powe, B. & Soules, M. (2023). III. B. W. Powe – Marshall Soules Dialog. *New Explorations*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1107771ar>

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III. B. W. Powe – Marshall Soules Dialog

Re: On empathy

B.W. Powe

Oct 5, 2023

To MS

Dear Marshall,

Mulling over what you said about empathy in your fine, big-hearted piece.

Are there several kinds?

One—sympathy for others... kindness towards others... tolerance, patience, receptivity, generosity...

Two... intense receptivity to experiences of others, awareness of otherness and challenges of pain and suffering... a kind of internal DEW line... that is, sensitivity becomes a form of empathy because of the intensity of communications...the crush and warp of images and sounds...

Making the distinction, because I'm not sure the first fits me much... I can be difficult, and these days deeply anxious about what's going on (inside my home and outside) ... I'm just another struggling pilgrim on a cracked path making grievous errors in judgment... Depression and paranoia are part of my life...

The second—yes; that seems right—I find it hard to shut out shut off the unease of what's happening, what's transmitting, what's coming in, what I'm receiving, what I'm thinking. Origins, no doubt, of asthma and fatigue. Rise of psychosomatic illnesses since the pandemic isolations... and paranoia, intensified anxieties, seem to me part of these...

You're a generous soul, Marshall. And it's your piece. You're saying truly what you see.

Still can't help mentioning the above.

The poems in Ladders embody the second point I'm making here.

And no doubt this explains to me why some responses to earlier incarnations of Mysteria were so conflicted... since there's almost no prose in it... now and then, yes, but cast in spare letters and meditations and notes and reports—and the rest, lyrics, songs, dreams, fragments, splinters, art pieces, a manuscript coming apart at the seams...

BW

PS

My James Joyce Riverrun Talk, from last June, does talk directly about cocreating, displacement with publications, ready-mades, and Lucia Joyce's schizophrenia.

Marshall Soules

Oct 7, 2023

to B.W.

"Are there several kinds? One—sympathy for others... kindness towards others... tolerance, patience, receptivity, generosity..."

Your distinction between two types of empathy is spot on in my experience. I tend to think of myself as an empathetic mediator and was in fact tested on my empathy levels in a Los Angeles workshop I took with Paul Zak in 2010. (See his *The Moral Molecule* where he reviews his research on oxytocin). But in my private world, I am frequently judgmental, impatient, maybe not so tolerant and receptive. In the tribute, I wasn't thinking of this option so much since you're the judge of that experience. I was thinking more of

"Two... intense receptivity to experiences of others, awareness of otherness and challenges of pain and suffering... a kind of internal DEW line... that is, sensitivity becomes a form of empathy because of intensity of communications..."

...which closely describes how I see your empathy expressed in your written works.

"Making the distinction, because I'm not sure the first fits me much... "

Your self-reflection below is truly moving and confessional (in the best possible way). You've expressed the differences in empathy beautifully, if somewhat painfully, and these differences were something I was aiming for in the juxtapositions of the tribute. My experiences in Southeast Asia: amazing beauty and soaring spirituality hard against deep pain and tragic loss. One hardly knows what to feel much of the time. *Ladders* seems to plumb those same heights and depths.

"The second—yes; that seems right—I find it hard to shut out shut off the unease of what's happening, what's transmitting, what's coming in, what I'm receiving, what I'm thinking...."

"You're a generous soul, Marshall. And it's your piece. You're saying truly what you see."

"Still can't help mentioning the above.

The poems in *Ladders* embody the second point I'm making here."

Ladders also makes me think of mosaics, where your individual pieces seem like fragments

carefully chosen and set into a composition that aspires to be whole and true. Perhaps some of your readers of *Mysteria* are not so comfortable with this mosaic approach, having to assemble the fragments into a larger picture, at which you're a master.

Thank you, my friend, for this powerful reflection on another of our collaborations.

Marshall

B.W. Powe
Oct 10, 2023
to MS

Dear Marshall,

The news from Israel and Gaza too horrific for words—

My apologies for not responding earlier to your note--
Shocked and depressed by the brutality...

(Have a friend in Israel who's been keeping me updated. A Canadian, she's there visiting her grandchildren. She says they've been shuddering in a basement.)

But wanted to take a moment this morning to say thank you for your thoughtful and often beautiful response...

This would make—with some judicious editing--a good Addendum to your essay for Bob. It illuminates some crucial points about empathy (its many kinds, expressions) and fragments and conflicts and splintering and incomprehension. "One hardly knows what to feel much of the time." Very exact, Marshall; and truer today than last week. Our letters seem to me another form of cocreation, in a time of blur and horror and vulnerability and suffering.

You know, Anna Veprinska, another former student—now teaching at University of Calgary; a fine poet and author—wrote a pivotal book on *Empathy in Contemporary Poetry After Crisis* (2020; Palgrave). I highly recommend it.

...

Empathy can have its downsides—I'd suggested. Feeling too much, with no place to turn with this experience. Wearing. Your insides out your outsides in.

Appreciate your candor about yourself, too, Marshall. None of us are saints—except maybe for Patti Smith—and the sense of human complexity seems to me always worth remembering and knowing about our friends and family members, fellow-journeymen, acquaintances.

BW

B.W. Powe
Oct 10, 2023
To MS

PS

...my friend—maybe it's the sentence near the end of your generous piece, where you say I cultivate friendships and allies... if I may say gently—some maybe many wouldn't agree with that (I'm not sure I would either...)

Maybe say I try to do so?

Or drawing on our discussion of empathy... that in my work I try to speak to hope?

Your letter to me, from Saturday, is eloquent and evocative. Lines from it could be exported to the essay. Still time. Bob would accept revisions, I'm sure.

Well. Thinking out loud.

BW