

February 2022

SEBASTIAN FAULK'S' HUMAN TRACES:A JOURNEY INTO THE DEPTHS OF THE HUMAN PSYCHE

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Recommended Citation

Fattouh, Essam (2022) "SEBASTIAN FAULK'S' HUMAN TRACES:A JOURNEY INTO THE DEPTHS OF THE HUMAN PSYCHE," *BAU Journal - Society, Culture and Human Behavior*. Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.54729/WLFU4758>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.bau.edu.lb/schbjournal/vol3/iss2/8>

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SEBASTIAN FAULKS' HUMAN TRACES: A JOURNEY INTO THE DEPTHS OF THE HUMAN PSYCHE

Abstract

Sebastian Faulk's novel, *Human Traces* (2006), embarks on a new trend in contemporary English fiction. Through its representations of two main protagonists, pioneers in the field of psychology between the 1870s and 1918, Faulks traces the formative years of the development of the young discipline of psychiatry. Even though Faulks works in the realist traditions of Charles Dickens and George Eliot, yet he delves into such major questions as the role of unconscious motivations in human individual behaviour, the causes of mental illness, and the very attempt to understand the nature of the human being. The time frame of the novel expands from the portrayal of the struggles and relationships of a handful of individuals, to encompass the entire sweep of human evolution. Thus, Faulks in *Human Traces* introduces a radically new dimension in the development of the novel. This paper offers an attempt at evaluating the innovative thematic and technical achievement of a major work of modern fiction.

Keywords

Sebastian Faulks, contemporary fiction, historical fiction, history of psychiatry, mental illness, human evolution.

Today's fiction market has annually witnessed the publication of dozens of novels that compete with one another in depth, in message, and in entertainment value. Very few of these works actually attempt an original contribution to the genre, whether in terms of form or content.

In this regard, Sebastian Faulks' *Human Traces* (2006) stands out from the run of the mill. It represents a serious, and highly original, attempt at an innovative contribution to the genre. In form, it may be seen as an extension, on the one hand of the classic English novel, as it flourished in the nineteenth century in the hands of Dickens and George Eliot; and on the other, of the New Journalism developed by Thomas Wolfe, Norman Mailer and Joan Didion. What it does, in appropriating these pre-existent forms, makes of it, however, something challenging and utterly new.

Sebastian Faulks, born in 1953 into a well-to-do English family, majored in English literature at Cambridge before going on to work in journalism, and eventually becoming Literary Editor at *The Independent*. Faulks has won several awards for his fiction – from British Book Awards Author of the Year (1994), to honorary doctorates, to the CBE. His seventh novel, *Human Traces* has been described as 'A masterpiece, one of the great novels of this or any other century'¹.

Human Traces combines the genres of biography, intellectual history, and the psychological novel, in a single literary work. As previously mentioned, it is also a traditional historical novel, its events described as taking place between the 1870s and the years after the end of the First World War. It centres on the lives and relationship of two main fictional characters, both of whom pursue careers as medical men. The two of them devote their working lives to a quest to understand the riddle of human consciousness, in its relationship to mental illness. Jacques Rebière, a Frenchman from a fairly humble rural background, and Thomas Midwinter, the son of a minor landowning English family, are brought together in a quest to answer the most profound question facing humanity – the essence of the human psyche. Their attempts to define the nature and causes of psychosis, and to find a cure for mental illness, will bring them into relationship with distressed psychiatric patients, and into explorations in anatomy, hypnosis, and early theories on psychoanalysis.

The novel takes us on a journey in time and space, from a mental asylum in the English countryside, where Thomas finds his first employment as a medical practitioner, to the lecture halls of Paris; from the operating theatres and dissecting labs of various medical establishments, to the depths of the unexplored forests of East Africa. Later, the plans developed by Jacques and Thomas for the founding of a model psychiatric institution will involve them in travels to Austria and to California.

Faulks devoted no less than five years to preparing for this novel. Even though his two protagonists are imaginary, yet all the pioneers in the competing fields of early psychology get a mention in this erudite and comprehensively researched work of historical fiction. Scientists who lived, lectured and wrote during the period are constantly present, either by naming, or by implication; in descriptions of psychiatric method – or, as in the case of the figure of Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893), actually as characters in the novel. The author has researched intensively to gain the fullest possible knowledge of the scientific world of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His vivid representations of the historical context have been achieved through voluminous reading, but also through personal consultations with anatomists, physiologists, brain surgeons and historians of science.

Born into a rural family of small landowners, Jacques begins life in a remote corner of Brittany, where much of his day is spent in routine drudgery, helping to maintain the family farm. In spite of his absorption in practical tasks, he early on develops as an introvert and a would-be scientist, conducting experiments in his room, dissecting small animals to understand their anatomy. Through the help of the local priest, Abbé Henri, who furnishes him with books and equipment, Jacques is encouraged to work to gain a scientific education.

Jacques yearns to remember his mother who died when he was small. He is haunted by his inability to recall the features of her face, or anything about her character. He finds himself ever more drawn to this question by the mental illness of his brother Olivier, whose distressed condition he strives to understand. Olivier, before he became psychotic, had been the younger brother's

¹ In a review by former Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre, Trevor Nunn. ('A Week in December by Sebastian Faulks', *The Guardian*, August 23, 2009.)

mentor and guide, and Jacques would press his brother for information about their mother. Jacques' father, Old Rebière, is a practical and hard-hearted man, of limited imagination. Faulks describes this character as 'a man who had not lifted his gaze from the landscape of his birth; his existence had been that of the crab under the rock, while before him the sea lay unregarded'.² Before his illness, Olivier was gifted and intelligent. Jacques, witnessing the deterioration of this older brother, his sole childhood companion, reflects, 'I want my brother back.'³

Old Rebière has Olivier chained up in the stable, and eventually sent away to an insane asylum, after Olivier's behaviour became threatening and destructive. The impulse to understand what has become of Olivier, and to find a means of curing the derangement of all the Oliviers of the world, becomes a driving motivation for Jacques' choice to train in medicine (and later, to explore the young field of psychiatry).

Thomas, the novel's second protagonist, the favoured child of a small landowner and businessman, grows up in a wealthier household, one that employs servants. The young man at first hopes to study literature, pursuing an interest that began in childhood. He finds himself drawn to the works of Shakespeare, particularly the playwright's interest in madness, and unusual mental states generally. Shakespeare, the young Thomas says, 'tells you things that he's discovered, like a great inventor'.⁴ With encouragement from his sister Sonia, he moves from literature to the study of philosophy and intellectual history. When he becomes a student at Cambridge, he finds himself drawn towards a career in medicine. Like Jacques, he begins to seek to understand human psychology, and the origins of psychosis.

The two men get to know one another while Thomas is on holiday in France, visiting his sister Sonia. Even from their very first meeting – before either can be fluent in the other's language – they experience a mutual admiration and sense a compatibility between them. Both the young men are only at the beginning of their medical studies. All the same, they vow, there and then, that once qualified, they will work together to understand mental illness: 'It is the project of a lifetime'.⁵ Their relationship is consolidated after Jacques marries Thomas' much-loved sister Sonia.

The later relationship between Jacques and Thomas, however, proves to be not entirely without conflict. Just as the First World War created a rift between European nations, the friendship between the two protagonists becomes strained, as a degree of competition develops between them, that seems destined to end in a conclusive rupture. The suicide of Jacques' brother Olivier, whose mental condition was the main motivation in Jacques' choice of the psychiatric profession, compounds the hostility, since Olivier was under the care of Jacques' colleague Thomas.

The other cause of the falling out between the two friends and colleagues is Jacques' misdiagnosis of the illness of a woman named Katharina, who will later become Thomas' wife. In his eagerness to apply early psychoanalytic methods to Katharina's case, focused as he is on her alleged 'hysteria',⁶ Jacques fails to recognise that his patient suffers from a life-threatening *physical* complaint—that large cysts have developed in one of her ovaries, threatening her life.

Jacques' misguided interpretive approach, both in theory and application, here evokes the methodology of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), and of his colleague Josef Breuer (1842-1925). The case of Breuer's patient 'Anna O', whom Breuer treated in the early 1880s, fascinated Freud. A co-authored work with Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria* (1895)⁷, deals with this and similar cases, in which early sexual and other traumas are viewed as leading the patient to develop emotional and also physical disorders. When such memories are forgotten – repressed by a mind which finds them too painful to confront – neurosis and/or psychosis are said to develop. The purpose of the psychoanalytic 'talking cure' is to enable the repressed memories to be brought into conscious awareness, thus freeing the sufferer from their spell. Freud was to make of such early case studies the foundation of his entire psychiatric method.⁸ As in the case of the historical Anna, the fictional

² Sebastian Faulks, *Human Traces*. 2005. London: Vintage, 2006, p.11.

³ p.216.

⁴ p. 38.

⁵ p.56.

⁶ pp. 294-309, 311.

⁷ *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) is generally regarded as the founding document of psychoanalysis.

⁸ See, Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, 'Fraulein Anna O', in the Standard Edition of the *Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol.2, ed. J. Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1955. Incidentally, it was 'Anna' – her real

Katharina of *Human Traces* is said to have been affected by the illness and death of her father. And like 'Anna O.', she suffers from physical symptoms that Jacques erroneously ascribes to psychological causes.

The other case to which Faulks implicitly refers is that of Freud's tragic young patient, fourteen-year-old 'M'. The young girl, according to Freud, suffered from 'an unmistakable hysteria, which quickly and thoroughly improved' under his treatment. But the patient 'still complained' of pain in her abdomen – pain, which in Freud's view, was merely one more psychosomatic symptom, a manifestation of hysteria. For a reason not explained, the girl's parents decided to end her treatment with Freud. Two months later, she died of 'sarcoma of the abdominal glands.' Being exclusively focused on the allegedly psychosomatic nature of the patient's illness – although trained as a medical physician, supposedly competent to diagnose and treat physical disorders – Freud had failed to detect his patient's abdominal cancer. Even after the patient died, he continued to insist that the cancer had been induced in the first place as a psychosomatic outcome of the girl's psychological 'hysteria'.⁹

The fictional Jacques, captivated by the methods of early psychoanalysis, falls into a similar error. In a lengthy analysis of the alleged causes of Katharina's illness, he concludes that his patient entertained a repressed desire for an older man, and hence she regarded her mother as a sexual rival for this man's attentions. It was, Jacques mistakenly contends, the death of Katharina's father, leaving her mother free to marry the object of her desire, that triggered the younger woman's (hysterical) physical symptoms:

I felt that the preconditions for the onset of her hysteria were now established beyond doubt: namely that a traumatic incident had been deliberately suppressed by her conscious mind because she found the implications of it intolerable. This sum of psychological excitation, being denied proper release, had converted itself ... into the distressing symptoms – the abdominal discomfort, the joint pains in arms and fingers.¹⁰

When Thomas comes across this commentary of Jacques, Thomas is moved to take swift action. By referring Katharina to a surgeon for an operation, he saves her life – shortly after which the two people fall in love and marry. This outcome further widens the rift between Thomas and Jacques. Thomas also offends Jacques by a public lecture in which Thomas very explicitly and publicly mocks Freudian psychoanalytic theory, including Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex. Jacques takes his colleague's debunking of Freud as a deliberate attack on himself.¹¹

Another key concern of Faulks in *Human Traces* involves him in an ambitious undertaking – nothing less than to understand the nature of human beings, and how evolution over tens of thousands of years has made of them what they are today. At one point in the novel, the author takes us to the Great Rift Valley in what is now Tanzania in East Africa, where Thomas is powerfully moved by confronting footprints fossilised in the hardened volcanic ash. The prints give conclusive evidence of the former presence in this place of proto humans: a male and female with their child. As Thomas gazes down on these traces of the beginning of human evolution, he has a vision of all the griefs and suffering of contemporary human beings – the predicament that evolution has brought them to – their terrible vulnerability to mental illness, with the cruelty and negligence the world

name Bertha Pappenheim – who first gave the name 'the talking cure' to the early psychoanalytic approach to work with patients. See also, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Remembering Anna O: A century of mystification*. London: Routledge, 1996.

⁹ Freud reports on this case in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901): 'The hysteria, to which she was greatly predisposed, took the tumour-formation as a provocative agent ...' (p.142). This, and similar errors encountered in Freud's psychoanalytic approach, are critically examined in a sceptical account of Freud's practice and legacy by Richard Webster: *Why Freud Was Wrong: Sin, Science and Psychoanalysis*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995.)

¹⁰ pp. 303-4.

¹¹ Thomas describes the observable competition of young boys with their fathers for the mother's attention as 'a sort of commonplace, a fireside truth, quite interesting in its way'; but adds that 'by no stretch of the imagination' could this rivalry 'form part of the basis of a treatment for the biologically insane' (pp.495-6). (His discourse, during the lecture, on human evolution and its relationship to mental illness, also offends and fails to convince his audience. pp. 512-13.)

inflicts on the mentally ill. Thomas was to write later to his wife, describing how he bemoaned the brevity of life and how, with a howling scream, he had lowered his face into the earth.

From here, the author asks us to speculate, how do we come to be the creatures of today? Other questions present themselves for Faulks: Is it possible, that the human race in the past commonly experienced hearing voices – a phenomenon it seems now largely, but not entirely, confined to people suffering with mental illness? Has the actual physiology of the human brain changed over time? Hearing voices, Thomas speculates, was once a useful faculty, enabling people to communicate with their world and each other. Psychosis, as in schizophrenia (formerly known as ‘dementia praecox’), is, he believes, a wrong turning in human development, an evolutionary dead end to what was once a powerful capacity of the normal human mind. It was once an essential tool for human survival; but as the capacity to remember and communicate through words had slowly developed, humans had lost the need for it.

The novelist Virginia Woolf was among the first, through stream of consciousness, to represent the workings of the human mind in a state of psychosis. Woolf herself had direct experience of nervous breakdown, with bouts of severe depression, acute anxiety and psychotic episodes, that in the end drove her to take her own life. Faulks, no doubt, in his portrayal of the mental confusion and distress suffered by Olivier, implicitly evokes an association with this tragic literary figure, and her creation of the character of Septimus in her novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).

Like Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway*, Faulks deploys a stream-of-consciousness technique to represent the inner monologue of Olivier in his psychotic state. In the final encounter between Olivier and Thomas, who is acting as his doctor, and who does his best to understand and communicate with his patient, Thomas, with all his good intentions, his kindness and sympathy, is shown as failing to comprehend Olivier’s intense panic and confusion. Part of the content of Olivier’s psychotic imaginings involves a preoccupation with themes to do with France and Germany, that seem to presage the impending war. In fact, it seems that Faulks attributes to some individuals, including the mentally deranged, a capacity to intuit impending catastrophe. He would have been aware of the apparently clairvoyant faculties of the psychiatrist Carl Jung, who experienced several disturbing visions in the year before the First World War, and that he would later identify as premonitions of the war.¹²

Olivier in his mental confusion, as the knowledge of the impending war grows within his deranged psyche, attempts to sacrifice himself, in the erroneous belief that his own death might atone and prevent the threatening doom about to be unleashed by the ‘sane’ people of this world:

‘A great war is coming to the world.’

‘And it’s his fault. It is Olivier’s fault.’

‘The mother-killer carries the sins of the world.’

‘In his name ten million will die.’

‘I will take the special book and stop the war if I can shade the letters of my name again and again. Take my pen here and shade out the ‘o’ every time I see it in every line of the book

...’¹³

Shortly after this, believing that his death will atone for the sins of humanity, Olivier rushes to his own self-destruction by throwing himself over a precipice.

With the coming of the war the dream the two men shared, of finding a cause and a cure for mental illness, is shattered and evaporates – each of them bitterly disillusioned by the impossibility of realising the bright hopes of their youth. Each concludes that he has spent his life in pursuit of a mirage.

In the attempt through medical practice and theory to realise their ambitious goal, they have, moreover, failed to take account of the unconscious motivations that have all along been driving their separate professional lives, and their quests for knowledge. These unconscious drives prove to

¹² In 1913, he began to have intuitions of an impending terrible event: ‘I realised that a frightful catastrophe was in progress. I saw the mighty yellow waves, the floating rubble of civilisation, and the drowned bodies of uncounted thousands. Then the whole sea turned to blood ... An inner voice spoke: “Look at it well; it is wholly real and it will be so. You cannot doubt it”.’ C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. 1961. (London: Collins and Routledge Kegan Paul, 1963), pp.169-70

¹³ pp. 410-11.

be far more complex and powerful than either man ever fully understands. Thomas, for instance, is shocked and surprised, by the realisation that the voices he has heard at different times in his life are no different from those experienced by his psychotic patients. Furthermore, he experiences a state of panic while his wife is giving birth, when he realises clearly the possibility of losing her forever, and that he would miss her for the rest of his days. At this point, the rationalistic medical doctor finds himself on his knees, praying to a God he had never acknowledged:

He knelt down ... and offered an awkward prayer to whatever deity might be allowed to exist in the interstices of Mr Darwin's theory ... and in his own child-memory of the Bible ... He began with many scientific qualifications and apologies to the deity whose existence he had not logically conceded, but ended with a tearful plea to the God of his fathers: please spare my wife and our children and I will always believe in You.¹⁴

Jacques' affair, on the other hand, with a woman named Roya, whom he has encountered several times before in the novel without acting on the attraction he felt towards her then, takes him totally off guard, and releases formerly repressed passionate impulses of which his conscious mind had been largely unaware. The sheer intensity of this new obsession, at a stroke, banishes his obedient compliance with principles of marital fidelity and ideas of social obligation and duty. In his relationship to Sonia, his desires had been legitimized by marriage, and by the respect he felt towards her and his firm belief that his 'instincts were pure and honourable'. When at last he gives in to his attraction to Roya, and has sex with her, these instincts, we are told, 'had moved over in his mind and left vacant an area of ground where the furtive desires of his unmarried youth, 'the old weeds of lust' have taken root.¹⁵ Sonia's understanding and tolerance of her husband's unfaithfulness at this juncture, is nothing less than heroic.

When Jacques loses his only son on the Italian front in the First World War, he conclusively abandons his logical and sceptical attitude to life. We see him in his bereavement almost hypnotically drawn to consult a medium, in the hope of contacting his lost Daniel. The medium he seeks out is clearly a fraud, who employs cheap tricks to dupe her clients. Yet, confusingly, she talks of a death in snow-covered mountains, amid gunfire, of a man whose name begins with D – a description that seems to evoke Daniel, and the likely circumstances of his death. After Jacques decamps from the séance in a rage, accusing the medium of being a charlatan, his paternal feelings express themselves in helpless weeping that fails to bring him any relief. The rational man of science finds himself wholly at the mercy of his overwhelming grief. In this crisis, Sonia plays a crucial role, both as Jacques' wife and as Thomas' sister. She is the only character in the novel capable of bringing a degree of consolation to the two male protagonists – if such consolation could ever be possible.

Faulks' novel is not free of flaws – the most significant of which is the author's parade of erudition, in his cataloguing of the names of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientific and medical authors; not to mention his lovingly detailed accounts of dissections and surgical operations, as his characters examine the structure of the human brain. Many readers have found the latter somewhat off-putting.

The process whereby the non-rational workings of the unconscious mind are capable of subverting and disrupting the rational, supposedly objective approach favoured by science, expose, as Faulks' novel dramatically demonstrates, the illusion of the powerful and controlling, almost

¹⁴ p.393.

¹⁵ p. 534

godlike, role of the psychiatrist vis-a-vis the patient as passive, receptive subject of therapy. In *Human Traces*, as we see towards the novel's conclusion, while Jacques succumbs to a helpless yearning for his dead son, Thomas develops dementia, and the all-knowing medical authority and the vulnerable patient are not so distinct from one another after all. As it turns out, they share a common predicament, a common humanity. The healer and the patient are one.

In the twenty-first century, modern medicine has revealed many of the physiological causes for human mental illnesses. Yet the external causes of mental illness – anxiety and depression generated by the pressures of contemporary life, such as the break-up of families, social isolation and financial strains, along with uncertainty about the future – are sources of genuine suffering. The predicaments generated by the human condition itself have meant that the psychiatrist and therapist remain an essential resource – in our own times, possibly more than ever. The psychiatrist or therapeutic counsellor may be able to relieve suffering to some degree, either through the prescription of medication, or through an approach based on listening and empathic engagement.

Yet the big questions raised by the two protagonists of *Human Traces*, as they embark upon their journey, seem unlikely ever to find satisfactory resolution. Science and philosophy begin with the injunction of the Delphic oracle, 'Know Thyself'. You may seek knowledge with all the resources you possess – but finding it, as this novel demonstrates, is another matter. No definitive answer, one is forced to conclude, is ever likely to be found.

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