

At the Heart of Gestalt

Cathy Birch

*Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming
question,
To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you
all' –
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: 'That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all.'*

T.S. Eliot,
The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock



The ghost of Professor Yacov Muller leaned back against the curtains of the four-poster and took a drag of his cigar.

'So . . .' Half a smoke-ring formed, hung in the air. 'So Ernie – what, for you, is the heart of Gestalt?' Hearing the voice of his late mentor, Ernie Schwarz MA (Psych), rose on one forearm, reached for the clock and fell back with a groan.

'Chrissake, Jack – it's 2a.m. Go haunt your mother.'

'That's some reversal!' Yacov wiggled his eyebrows Groucho-style, and took another drag. A second croissant of smoke hovered silently above his head for several minutes. 'I have a sense of incomplete-

ness,' he said eventually.

Ernie groaned again and hunched himself over towards the wall. 'Too right!' he grunted. 'I've got my viva with the Board tomorrow – and no final paragraph to my paper. No conclusion.'

'The great Doctorial Thesis.' Yacov indicated the hefty sheaf of papers on Ernie's bed table. 'May I?' He lifted the top sheet and read aloud, 'The Relationship Between Electrical and Mechanical Activity in Parietal Cortex/Occipital Lobe Exchanges During Gestalt Therapy . . . Oyyy!' He gave a deep sigh.

Ernie opened one eye. 'What do you think of the title?' he asked.

'It's long,' Yacov said.

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Ernie rose to his elbows defensively. 'Jack – my future in hospital practice depends on this. Haven't you heard the latest ruling? All therapists have to be called "Doctor" to put them on a par with the psychiatrists?'

'I've heard,' Yacov said.

'They'll accept any kind of Doctorate if you've got one already. One of the Crisis team is a metallurgist, for chrissake . . .'

'But you don't have one already.' Yacov inhaled briefly and squinted at Ernie through the smoke. 'So your thesis must be vetted by the Trustees – and it must be relevant.'

'Right,' Ernie said. 'So – what do you think of it?'

Yacov exhaled a row of C's, then said with a heavy Bronx inflection, 'It's long – it's learned . . .'

Ernie shot upright, brandishing a forefinger. 'Now don't give me *loyn*-ed. Don't give me that 'I don't know nothin' 'bout research, Miss Scarlett'-shit'

Yacov continued, unperturbed. 'It's head-stuff, Ernie. Not Gestalt. No heart.'

'It's what they want,' Ernie said.

Yacov shrugged. 'Adam wanted an apple.'

Ernie let his hand fall to the bed. His jaw receded sulkily. 'Eve stayed around,' he said.

'Whereas your – partner in crime – bowed out with a heart attack,' Yacov said. 'I apologise.' He put the papers back on the bed table.

Ernie wiped a hand across his eyes. 'I'm fighting for my corner,' he said. 'The others have turned behaviorist to keep their jobs. Wilbur's stopped listening to clients, and taken to studying the muscular workings of their mouths. Fred's redesigned his

therapy room as a Skinner box and Walt's taken a sabbatical – to compile a Taxonomy of Mental Disorder.'

'Uh-huh. And Dr Isaac's?' Yacov asked. 'The woman who replaced me?'

There was silence. A tic developed beneath Ernie's right eye. 'Blanche bloody Isaac's!' he muttered eventually. 'The blonde-headed bigot who's orchestrating it all. May her computed tomography read-outs rot in Hell. If ever there was a political appointment . . . Can you believe it? The woman majored in Information Processing and Systems Theory!'

'They have their place,' Yacov said.

'Not when you're bleeding,' Ernie said. 'She visits this guy in Intensive Care and quotes Wundt and Ebbinghaus, for crissake . . . And she's chairing the panel tomorrow.' He flung his palms outwards in despair. Yacov did not react. After a moment Ernie's shoulders slumped. 'You see what I'm up against?' he said huskily. 'The head stuff is all she understands.'

'So educate her,' Yacov said. 'Scrap this.' He lifted the papers, let them fall again. 'This isn't Gestalt – it's just "talking about". There's no energy. No contact.'

'Scrap it?' Ernie said. 'That's almost two year's work.'

'Work, schmerk,' Yacov said. 'Show something real. Show them a group.'

Ernie shook his head. 'I wouldn't have the balls,' he said.

'No balls eh?' Yacov pulled aside the bed curtains and pointed his cigar at a television in the corner of the room. 'Zap!' he said and the screen flicked into life. Ernie saw himself, seated among a group of about eight youths, sprawled on chairs in a sort of circle. The setting was institutional.

'The GTA persistent offenders' programme,' he murmured to Yacov. 'The pits. They don't want to be there. They sure as hell don't want to work on themselves.'

'Don't be so sure,' Yacov said. 'There are shifts – but they're not going to let you see them. Ah . . .' On screen, a tall lad, with impressive biceps and a leer, suddenly sprang from his chair and moved towards Ernie with an open flick-knife.

'Jesus,' Ernie said from the bed. 'I remember this.'

They watched as the lad stopped in front of Ernie's chair and began to circle it, making practice passes at Ernie's neck as he did so. Everything else in the room was still. The lad came round in front of Ernie again and pressed the point of the knife against his throat.

'Carlos,' Ernie said. 'I'd really like you to put that knife away – because you're scaring hell out of me.'

There was a pause. Carlos' leer became a mocking grin. He retracted the blade, slid the knife into the pocket of his jeans and sauntered back to his seat.

Yacov tapped his cigar twice and the screen darkened.

'See?' Ernie said. 'No balls.'

But Yacov was applauding. 'Perfect,' he said. 'Contact throughout. Authenticity – a different kind of balls.'

Ernie gave a little grin. 'Okay. But it won't impress Ms Isaacs. She'd probably sabotage the rest of the work by cuffing everyone to the chairs.'

'Show her some outreach work, then – she can't touch that. Hey – how about your first Art Therapy session at Stanridge Secure Unit?' Yacov aimed his cigar at the screen again. A dark, grey-walled room

with heavily barred windows appeared on the screen. A group of young to middle-aged men in prison denims sat in various disaffected postures around a large table. Some had their feet on it. Ernie, entering the room with a tray of paints and brushes, was greeted with whistles and cat-calls. He placed the tray on the table and leaned forward to speak. A man of about twenty-five, with a heavily scarred face and a blonde crew-cut, picked up a brush, thrust it into the red paint and drew a line down the centre of Ernie's nose.

Nobody moved for several seconds. Then Ernie, keeping eye-contact with the man, took another brush, dipped it into the yellow and returned the compliment. The two men held each other's gaze, paint dripping from the ends of their noses onto the table. Then the blonde man took another brush, dipped it into the green, and painted a large circle on each of Ernie's cheeks. Ernie responded with a pair of blue eyebrows. Within minutes, pots and brushes were distributed and the men, in pairs, were drawing faces on each other – clowns, Indians, animals, voluptuous women.

At first there were raucous comments, loud protests, laughter, but the room gradually quietened as the men – Ernie included – became more and more absorbed. Shirts came off. Backs, arms and chests gradually became covered with fantastic designs. The room became silent as raw aggression was magically transformed to total absorption in each other. The silence lengthened and deepened until – suddenly – the spell was broken by warders, announcing the evening meal.

The picture faded. Ernie blinked and

gave his head a shake. 'I was really into that,' he said. 'At the time – and just now, watching it.'

'That's why it worked,' Yacov said. 'I, Thou. Relationship. Balls *and* Heart.'

'Didn't they write musicals?' Ernie said. Then he sighed and shook his head. 'It still wouldn't satisfy you-know-who. She'd want to know what they were learning – what it was doing for their *brains*.'

'Okay,' Yacov said. 'Then try her with this . . . Zap!' He pointed his cigar at the screen for the third time. They were back at the hospital, this time in the day room of the Adolescent Psychiatric Unit. Three young girls sat in armchairs, eyes closed, faces and bodies relaxed, listening to Ernie. A tape of gentle music played in the background. 'You are amœbae,' Ernie was saying. 'Simple, single-celled creatures, floating in the timeless sea of life. No pressures, no responsibilities. No timetables. Time has not been invented . . .'

'Oyyy!' Yacov sighed. 'That'll be the day!'

Ernie nodded, still looking at the screen. The exercise was ending. The girls were beginning to sit forward and rub their eyes. Suddenly one of them got the giggles. 'This really weird thought just came into my head,' she said. 'Millions of years of evolution. Learning to walk upright, then run – so that we could invent the time and not be late.'

'What a piece of insight,' Yacov cried as the screen darkened. 'What a Gestalt! Eat your heart out Ms Icehouse.'

'Yeah,' Ernie said excitedly – then, 'No. It's too right-brain. She's totally left-brain. She wouldn't get it.' His shoulders sagged again. 'In fact, she wouldn't get any of my work.'

'Okay – forget the work,' Yacov said, closing the bed curtains. 'Write up this discussion. Make it into a play – a dialogue between two therapists, one of whom is dead. Now that's Gestalt.'

'She wouldn't buy it,' Ernie said. 'She'd just stare coldly at me over the top of those damned horn-rimmed glasses and say, 'This is not the task you were set.'

'That's what she would say?'

Ernie looked puzzled. 'No. It's what my Tenth Grade teacher used to say.'

'Uh-huh.'

'Miss Thorncroft her name was. She'd take a short story I'd worked on for days – something I'd really put my heart into – and score it through. The whole thing. Then she'd write, "This is not the task you were set. This is not an essay."'

Yacov nodded. 'C'est magnifique,' would have been nice.

Ernie shrugged. 'I had that later – with my Master's. Tutors used to write stuff like "Thank you for the best read I've had in years" "Points very well made." Then "Please resubmit, giving three contemporary references to support each of your statements . . ." No. I've been here before, Jack. It's got to be this.' He tapped the pile of papers beside him.

Another silence Yacov sucked at his cigar, but it had gone out. He sighed deeply. 'Voids, voids, voids – noddings . . .'

'Barry Stevens.' Ernie's energy rose immediately. 'Now there's a woman with heart. If she were on the panel tomorrow . . .'

Yacov nodded. 'And if she were here now?'

'I wish,' Ernie said.

Yacov snapped his fingers. Barry appeared on the bed beside him.

'It's about the heart of Gestalt,' Yacov

said.

Barry drew her bare feet up under her caftan, and hugged her knees. 'Sounds like you need the Ghost of Christmas Past,' she said. Then she grinned. 'No – Hanukkah Here-and-Then. So – stand on the bed!' She jumped up and began to bounce gently. The two men hesitated. 'Come on – live a little!' she said, increasing her speed. Yacov and Ernie stood slowly, supporting themselves on the curtains. Barry bounced harder, forcing them to join in or lose their balance. They began to grin. They jumped higher – higher, giggling, falling against each other, shrieking – roaring with laughter. 'Now,' Barry shouted. 'Click your heels together twice and repeat "there's no such place as home . . ."'

'There's no such place as home . . .'

They were in a small, dimly lit living room. Paper chains hung from the ceiling. A coal fire flickered in the tiled fireplace. Children in paper hats were seated on the floor and somehow Barry was among them. A dark-haired woman stood smiling, a large parcel in her hands. 'Mom,' Ernie whispered – and reddened as he watched himself, aged four or five, run and bury his face in her skirt.

A chord sounded on the piano. Ernie's mother gave the parcel to the nearest child and the game began. The parcel flew from hand to hand. The music stopped. The outer wrapping was removed. 'First layer!' Barry cried, flinging it away. She produced a bag of candy. 'I'm coming round,' she told the children. 'I want you to take a handful of these without asking, or saying thank you.'

The children clearly found this a strange game, but most of them managed

it, some more readily than others. The round completed, they were off again.

The music started, stopped. 'Second layer', Barry announced, holding it aloft and discarding it. 'Now – everybody tells the person on their left what they think of them – good or bad. Like their hair? Say so. Think they stink? Say so. Okay?'

Some children thought this a great idea. Some cried and ran to their mothers. Some merely looked uncomfortable. The music started again, and stopped. 'Third Layer' Barry pointed to the young Ernie, still hiding in his mother's skirt. 'This little boy is stuck,' she said. 'He's afraid to leave his mother in case he loses her – but it's stopping him from joining in the fun. So – pull!'

She grabbed young Ernie round the waist. Children came to her assistance. Ernie's mother held on, horrified. She pulled, they pulled. Ernie screamed and screamed, but held his ground. Suddenly his mother and the children telescoped into each other and disappeared. A piece of wrapping paper fluttered gently to the floor. Yacov, Barry and the adult Ernie were alone in the room.

'One more layer,' Barry said, handing Ernie the parcel.

Ernie began to tremble. 'No – I know what's in it. I don't want it.'

'A present from your father,' Barry said, tearing off the fifth wrapping and handing him – an onion. Ernie flung it at the wall and sank to his knees, weeping.

'He betrayed me,' he said, through his sobs. 'He went to see Miss Thorncroft about the stories. I thought he was on my side, but when he came home he didn't say a word – just handed me this onion.'

'So – speak as the onion,' Barry said.

'What does it say?'

'What is there to say? It says "I am a prize onion." Some message!'

'Uh-huh. Say it again. What kind of onion?'

'A prize onion.'

'What did your father do for a living?'

'He was a market gardener . . . Oh god . . .'

'He gave you a prize onion. Something he was really proud of.'

'He was telling me I should be proud of what I had done,' Ernie whispered. 'He was telling me "she doesn't understand your gifts" and – oh god – I didn't understand him.'

'Can you say that to your father?' Barry said, offering a cushion.

Ernie glared at her, the tic beneath his eye reappearing and gathering momentum. 'No!' he exploded. 'I bloody well can't because he's not here. This is not my father – this is a cushion. See?' He ripped off the cover. 'First layer' he shouted, flinging it away. He ripped the inner casing apart. 'Second layer.' Feathers flew. 'Third – fourth – fifth . . .' He hurled handfuls of feathers around the room. 'And what's at the centre? Nothing! Nothing at the heart of it at all' He grabbed the onion and started tearing off the layers. 'This too – see? Nothing in the middle. Nothing. It's all a sham.'

Barry winked at Yacov, tapped the side of her nose twice and was gone. Ernie found himself back in bed, amid a sea of paper and feathers. Clutched in his hands were the last remnants of his shredded thesis.

Yacov, half spectacles poised on his nose, was reading from *Knots*.

' . . . while one is on the inside

even the inside of the outside is outside

and inside oneself there is still nothing
There has never been anything else
and there never will be.'

'Great,' Ernie said. 'I've discovered nothing. I've got nothing to show for it. Excuse me while I blow my brains out.'

'Then we'll both be dead,' Yacov said. 'Maybe both dead is better. We can leave two cushions talking to each other while we go have a beer . . .'

'Shut up, Jack,' Ernie said.

'Okay – but let me just read you one more thing.' Yacov produced a dictionary. "'Essay", he read. "Literary Composition, usually in prose and short, on any subject". Miss Thorncroft was wrong,' he said.

Ernie stared. 'Sonofabitch!' he said.

'That's it?' Yacov said. 'You swallow a hefty chunk of introject and spend the next twenty years trying to spit it out – constantly re-running the battle with another's unacceptable truth – then you find it wasn't even the truth in their terms – and all you can say is "sonofabitch"?''

'Sorry,' Ernie said. He picked up his remaining pillow. 'Sonofabitch sonofabitch sonofabitch! SHE WAS WRONG. I WAS RIGHT. THEY WERE ESSAYS. THEY WERE ESSAYS. THEY – WERE – ALL – GODDAMMED – ESSAYS!' Feathers flew as he punched the pillow to kingdom come. Finally, breathless, he lay back on the wrecked bed and closed his eyes.

'How does that feel?' Yacov asked after a while.

'It feels good.'

'What feels good.'

'The quiet. The emptiness. It's over.'

'Remember Eliot?' Yacov said. 'After the kingfisher's wing has answered light to light and is silent, the light is still . . .'

‘. . . At the still point of the turning world.’ Ernie said.

‘Remember that supervision you had with me – way back – the experiment with sitting in silence?’

‘I remember,’ Ernie said. ‘I hated it – couldn’t look at you. But the stuff that came up!’

‘So – maybe this is what you should offer Dr Isaacs and her panel. Tell them talking about Gestalt is no good. You have to be it – and to be it, you have to make room for it to come in.

‘Like the space between the knife being pulled and me saying ‘you’re scaring hell out of me . . .’

‘And the pause just before you covered that guy’s nose with paint – it reminded me of the line from that English poet – Roger McGough – “The stillness of Van Gogh before he painted the yellow vortex of his last sun . . .”.’

‘The moment before God forgot his lines.’ Ernie said.

Yacov nodded. ‘Or maybe just after. That thing about inventing the time and being late. It came in the silence after the music stopped.’ He paused. ‘What was it Joan Swallow said? There’s Cosmos – order – and Chaos – a gap. If you have just Cosmos, you have something – however beautiful – that is static. In order to have development, you have to have Chaos. You have to have that gap – however small, that allows something to happen . . .’

‘And that’s the heart of Gestalt,’ Ernie said.

Yacov leaned back against the bed curtains, relit his cigar and drew deeply on it. After a while he exhaled deeply, producing a perfect smoke ring. He wiggled his eyebrows, Groucho-style, and stood.

‘So long, kid,’ he said. ‘Good luck.’

He bent his knees, moving across the floor in a fair imitation of a Groucho walk, leaned forward, became a bowling hoop and disappeared.

After an hour’s silence in the Conference room the following day, Blanche Isaacs peered at Ernie over the top of her horn-rimmed glasses. Then she took them off. She removed the pins from her long blonde hair and allowed it to cascade onto her shoulders.

‘Mr Schwarz’ she said. ‘Doctor Schwarz – will you marry me?’

And then . . .

