John Shotter, uniqueness and poetics: parallels with Ernst Cassirer

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In the opening chapter of *Conversational realities*, John Shotter wrote that "each new approach in psychology has to struggle in from the margins to a place in the centre" (1993a, p. 5). Those in the centre of the discipline, he continued, can draw upon "an order of meanings" in order to exclude all those who do not fit their "orderly, tranquil world with everything in its expected place" (p. 5). He was, of course, speaking from personal experience. Throughout his time as an academic, Shotter has criticised orthodox, experimental psychology, not because he objected to a specific theory or to a particular study, but because he was deeply dissatisfied with the underlying assumptions and the routine practices of experimental psychology as a whole. Shotter has wanted to uproot the basis of mainstream psychological thinking and to replace it with new, more humane ways of thinking about psychological issues. Unsurprisingly the psychological establishment did not look kindly upon John Shotter's project, especially in the early days.

Today, it is hard to appreciate just how narrow the psychological establishment was in the 1970s. 'Proper' psychologists, who held the senior positions within the discipline, did not treat Shotter as if he was producing an interesting new approach, with which they might not agree but which deserved attention. He was considered a shameful renegade, a heretic beyond the bounds of decent psychological society – someone who had no right to be employed in a department of psychology. Shotter's scholarship, far from being a saving grace, only made matters worse. Orthodox experimentalists viewed his deep knowledge of Wittgenstein and of philosophy generally with great suspicion. They believed that Shotter was trying to hand back their discipline to unscientific philosophers, as if he were plotting to reverse a century of scientific advance so that psychology would once again be a mere adjunct to philosophy. It was little wonder that Shotter felt the full force of a disciplinary centre protecting its privileged position.

I want to suggest in this chapter that those psychologists, who rejected everything that Shotter stood for, were correct at least by their own lights: Shotter was indeed threatening their ways of doing psychology and he did not offer the possibility of intellectual rapprochement with the mainstream. Over the years, Shotter's language has been uncompromising, criticising orthodox psychology for upholding a mechanistic model of humans which is derived from

Cartesian philosophy (e.g. Shotter, 1975 and 1984). In his view, such a model is not just empirically unsuited for studying the complexities of human life but, worse still, it has "pernicious moral effects" (Shotter, 2005a, p. 157).

Moreover, Shotter's project was blurring the distinction between empirical psychology and non-empirical philosophy, as was Rom Harré's parallel move from philosophy towards creating an ethnographic social psychology (e.g, Harré, 1979). Most mainstream psychologists believe that historically psychologists had to struggle free from the hold of philosophy in order to create an independent, scientific discipline. Their self-image as scientists demands that they maintain the boundary between psychology and the unscientific humanities, in which they class philosophy. Shotter threatens this boundary and accordingly his ideas needed to be ignored or curtly rejected: for example, Tetlock (1986) dismissed Shotter's *Social accountability and selfhood*, as "unpersuasive", "frustrating" and "neither novel nor particularly compelling" (p. 75). As we shall see, the critics are not entirely wrong: those that Shotter calls his "textual friends" tend to be philosophers from the past rather than experimental psychologists of today (1993b, p. 232). Indeed, the very notion of "textual friends", it will be suggested, reveals much about Shotter and his ideas.

Nowadays, Shotter is no longer the lone voice that he once might have appeared to be. The past fifteen years have seen a growth of approaches which would have angered experimentalists back in the 1970s: social constructionism, discursive psychology, critical psychology, Dialogical Self Theory and so on. These approaches have been slowly edging towards the centre. Experimentalism no longer holds the absolute sway that it once did. Psychologists following critical approaches can be found in many departments of psychology, especially in the United Kingdom. The British Psychological Society now recommends that undergraduate students of psychology should be taught qualitative methods and the Society particularly mentions discursive psychology as something that undergraduates should know about.

Even so, Shotter remains a long-term outsider. Rather than throwing in his lot with one or other of the new forms of psychology, he has kept himself somewhat apart. Although his book *Conversational realities* bears the sub-title *Constructing life through language,* Shotter has not associated himself with discursive psychology, which investigates in detail how the social world is constructed through language and how we engage conversationally with others. I will be suggesting that Shotter has not stood apart out of a perverse desire to inhabit the margins no matter what or who is positioned within the centre. Shotter's vision of how we should seek to understand psychological matters depends upon not having a fixed theory and/or methodology, even if that theory and/or methodology were developed in opposition to the Cartesian tradition.

I will illustrate this point in relation to two important features of Shotter's thinking. He emphasises that each psychological event is unique and also that human acts are not performed in isolation but are properly speaking joint acts. However, as I shall argue, these two aspects of Shotter's thinking, important though they might be, are not in themselves sufficient to account for Shotter's distinctive view of psychology. What is crucial is the

character of his textual friends. These scholarly 'friendships' demonstrate Shotter's commitment to a deeply philosophical view of psychological issues.

In this regard, Shotter resembles one of his philosophical textual acquaintances – Ernst Cassirer. Just as Cassirer took issue with the aim of producing a detached, technical philosophy, so Shotter rejects a 'pure' psychology, detached from philosophical understanding. Most importantly, the parallels between Shotter and Cassirer enable us to appreciate the intellectual community to which Shotter has attached himself and why writing practices, as contrasted with theory and/or methodology, continue to be so important to his project for a different form of psychology.

Uniquely Occurring Events

At the heart of Shotter's vision of what it is to be human lies a belief in the uniqueness of each moment in our lives. As he writes in the opening pages of *Wittgenstein in practice*, the idea of life being composed of "once occurrent, never to be repeated novel events" is central to his thinking (Shotter, 2012, p. 2). According to Shotter, we all live on the edge of "unrepeatable, irreversible time" and because we always live in the present moment, "we are always, to an extent, living with novelty, with the unique and particular, the unrepeated and unrepeatable" (p. 3). By contrast, conventional psychological theories aim to classify behaviour or states of mind, as if they are to all intents and purposes just like other behaviours or states of mind. For example, a psychologist might say that a particular person is suffering from 'status anxiety' or is 'deindividuated' or is feeling 'learned helplessness'. In so doing, the psychologist is assimilating the person to a general category and the unique aspects of that person, their experiences and their situation are ignored. In this way, conventional psychological categories cannot but simplify experience.

Shotter's aim is to escape from general theories and categories, in order to construct a way of looking at human life that is capable of recapturing the uniqueness of each moment. For many years, Shotter has been attracted to Wittgenstein, his very best textual friend, not least because Wittgenstein tells us to observe the particularities of language and thereby of life. Wittgenstein, in his later philosophy, abandoned all technical concepts, believing that philosophers have continually misused language to create pseudo-problems. In order to break free of pseudo-problems, he urged again and again in *Philosophical investigations* (1953) that we should look at ordinary moments in life without preconceptions. As Shotter puts it, Wittgenstein does not proceed by "seeking generalities, universal laws or principles couched in special terms"; instead Wittgenstein discusses "the particular details of events occurring within especially selected interpersonal episodes in the ordinary everyday terms that, spontaneously, make sense to us" (2012, p. 3).

By examining how we use language, we can begin to notice the little things that we generally overlook. This is just what Shotter wants to do with his psychological inquiries. We might notice an aspect of Shotter's own style of writing that seems so obvious that it is easy to overlook: his continual quoting from the writing of his textual friends. In this respect, he

differs from Wittgenstein, who hardly ever quoted other writers. When discussing the novel aspects of human life, Shotter frequently uses the phrase "once occurrent", referring for example to "once occurrent events of being" (Shotter and van Lawick, 2014, p. 28). The phrase is apt, but Shotter never claims it as his own. Most properly, he attributes it to Bakhtin and particularly to Bakhtin's book *Toward a philosophy of the act*, often quoting from page 93 of that book.

One might think that there is nothing remarkable in this for it is only right that scholars should attribute correctly what they take from other scholars. Only spectacular failures of scholarly etiquette need be noted. But, in the present case, that would be to miss the point. Shotter may be discussing novelty, and may be claiming that the vast majority of psychologists slavishly fail to notice the novelty of ordinary moments. However, even when he argues in this way, he is keen not to claim novelty for his own ideas. He presents his own thinking in relation to the works of those past thinkers who have inspired him and whose words he constantly quotes.

It might seem supremely arrogant to declare that modern psychology is empirically and morally wrong-headed, but Shotter is not advancing himself, as if he is the sole prophet who can put his psychological colleagues on the road to intellectual redemption. He is not merely criticising present thinking but, as he cites the works of others, Shotter links himself to an unbroken chain of past thinkers. More than this, he ensures that his own readers must read his textual friends, for to read Shotter is always to read selected passages from others, especially Wittgenstein and Bakhtin. In effect, he is saying to his readers 'read this bit of Bakhtin, read this bit of Wittgenstein; and then think.'

It is not just Bakhtin, who asserts the uniqueness of every moment of life. Henri Bergson and William James, both textual friends of Shotter, argued for a similar point. William James is famous for his metaphor of the stream of consciousness (1890, chapter nine). Just as a stream continually flows downwards to the sea or to a bigger river, never to return in its present state, so a person's mind continues onward through time. We may think we have had the same thought before and we may think we see the same object that we saw earlier, but, according to James, we are failing to notice minute differences between then and now. We are ready to assimilate what is a unique experience to a general category – to say 'I am seeing my pencil' or 'I am feeling sad', as if all views of my pencil are absolutely identical or as if all feelings of sadness are the same. In the same way, Bergson, claimed that language, especially the technical language of psychologists, blunts the psychological uniqueness of the moment (see, for instance, *Time and free will*, 1913/2001, pp. 160ff).

The very methodology of experimental psychology, as it is currently practised and taught, is designed to eliminate this sort of uniqueness. The modern experiment needs sufficient participants so that averaged group data, rather than data from individual participants, can be computed and compared. In this way, high and low scorers on any test will become averaged out, with their unique reactions becoming part of an overall group score. As Gerd Gigerenzer (2004 and 2006) has argued, this method protects the researcher from examining what actual

people do in the experimental situation, and the mean score may not represent the reactions of any individual participant.

Moreover, in claiming that variable X has significantly affected the behaviour of participants, researchers typically do not have an idea how many of the participants were affected by variable X. Statistically significant differences can be obtained even if only a minority of participants have been affected, but researchers often use a rhetoric which implies that it is the majority without having any idea how many actually were (Billig, 2013). Of course, defenders of orthodox experimental methods are likely to claim that this is the inevitable consequence of being scientific. The argument is that being scientific means being experimental and this means comparing groups of data in ways which treat individual variations as 'noise': only by using statistical procedures, which cancel out this random 'noise', can we detect whether variable X has or has not affected responses in the experimental situation.

However, psychological experiments need not involve either multiple participants or statistical procedures that average out differences in response. As Kurt Danziger (1990) has demonstrated, the early experiments of Wilhelm Wundt tended to involve single, high-status subjects, who were called 'observers', because they observed stimuli and their own reactions to those stimuli. According to Danziger, Wundt's style of experimentation, with its close analysis of the single participant, fell out of fashion from about 1912 onwards without ever having been shown to be erroneous or unscientific.

Moreover, one of the most important figures in the history of modern social psychology advocated the use of experiments to examine what happens in a particular situation on a particular occasion. Kurt Lewin is often referred to as 'the father of modern social psychology' and those who use the phrase assume that Lewin pioneered the sort of controlled, statistically analysed experiment that has become widespread within social psychology (Billig, in press a and b; Delouvée, Kalampalikis and Pétard, 2011). Lewin (1938a) argued strongly that the purpose of experiments was to provide opportunities for the researcher to observe how patterns of behaviour developed in concrete situations. According to Lewin, it was better scientific practice to observe the particular, unique case than to average out multiple cases. In fact, Lewin claimed that the use of statistical analysis was retrograde within psychology, encouraging an old-fashioned Aristotelian mentality rather than a genuinely scientific Galileian outlook (Lewin, 1931/1999). Thus, the so-called 'father of modern social psychology' criticised the sort of artificial experiment, which uses multiple occurrences of the same situation and whose results are statistically analysed in ways designed to reduce the variations of unique occurrences.

The reason for mentioning this is not that either Kurt Lewin or Wilhelm Wundt conducted the sort of psychological inquiry that John Shotter has been arguing for. That would be completely mistaken. The reason for mentioning Wundt and Lewin's commitment to studying the single case is simpler: it suggests that Shotter's psychological vision does not rest solely upon the assumption of the uniqueness of each psychological event. Such an assumption may be a necessary feature of his vision but it is not a sufficient one: it is still

possible to believe in uniqueness and yet conduct psychological experiments, albeit of a different character than the grouped-based, variable-upon-variable design that has become standard in psychology. Shotter's vision encompasses other assumptions which take him beyond an experimental approach.

The importance of joint action

According to Shotter, one of the biggest mistakes that Cartesian psychology makes is that it looks for the origins of action within the head of the actor. In *Conversational realities* he writes that Cartesianism was based on the "ambition to locate a world beyond the historical and social, and to attempts to discover this world in the depths of the supposed organic or psychic nature of the individual, or, perhaps, in larger abstract systems or principles to which the individual was supposedly subject" (1993a, p. 7). He went on to quote Ernst Cassirer (1951), who claimed that the "systematising spirit" of the Enlightenment has continued to persist despite the failure of its systems. Shotter commented that this systematising spirit remains "implicit in modern psychology" (1993a, p. 24). Again drawing on Cassirer, Shotter suggested in *Cultural politics of everyday life* that the emphasis upon analysis and the desire to use analysis to produce systematic representation "still characterise much of our thinking in the 'human sciences' today" (1993b, p. 10). This systematising sort of psychology is highly individualistic: when it comes to explaining the roots of action, it looks no further than the motives and cognitions of the individual actor. The assumption is that action is an outward representation of psychological processes which are located within the mind. If these inner mental processes can be systematically represented then psychologists will have solved the riddle of action.

Drawing upon a number of textual friends, most principally Bakhtin, Volosinov and Wittgenstein, Shotter argues that action is not the product of the individual considered in isolation. Our actions are socially situated and this means that we act in relation to others, being responsive to their actions. Thus, Shotter uses the concept of 'joint action'. We should not seek to understand why people say what they do in terms of the speaker's prior psychological state. Shotter follows Bakhtin in placing utterances within a dialogical context, taking on board Bakhtin's principle that each utterance is responsive to other utterances. Shotter quotes Bakhtin's remark (1986, p. 91) that "any concrete utterance is a link in a chain of communication…utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another". Shotter comments on this quotation from Bakhtin: "Indeed, even as we speak, as we formulate our utterances, we must take account of the 'voices' of others" (Shotter, 1993b, p. 120; see also Shotter and Billig, 1998).

This even applies to brief exclamations which appear at first sight to express inner feelings. Shotter (1999) pays particular attention to an episode which Volosinov (1986) describes in *Marxism and the philosophy of language*. Two Russian friends are sitting together in late May after a long, exhausting winter. One turns to the other and simply exclaims "Well!" In that one word is expressed all the tiredness that the speaker feels. According to Shotter, the

word is not merely addressed to the friend, but it is responsively addressed to the conditions that they both have endured. The word expresses so much more than an individual emotion; it is the sharing of a world that is almost unbearably difficult.

In emphasising the dialogical nature of talk, Shotter is again insisting on a moral dimension that runs parallel to the psychological dimension. He is not just saying that as a matter of fact we are social beings, creating joint realities with our deeds and utterances. He is asserting that it is morally correct that we should be social in our outlook. This is where Cartesianism falls down both ethically and analytically. Shotter (2011) writes that "those within a 'situation' feel required to conform to the 'things' within it, not because of their material shape, but because we all call upon each other, ethically, to recognize and respect what exists 'between' us". In this way, the situation which we create with another is neither "mine" nor "yours", but it is something "to which we can both contribute: it is 'ours'" (2011, p. 2). By contrast the Cartesian seeks both a monological understanding and practice; the person who speaks monologically "is saying in effect: 'Instead of us all living in a reality of *our own* making, all the rest of you must live in *my* reality!'" (p.2, emphasis in original).

Shotter connects the notion of joint action with the idea that psychological events are unique and thereby unpredictable. We are constantly creating new situations with others. Even if we could formulate a description of an individual's inner state, we would be unable to predict accurately how that person would react in relation to another and what joint responses the two would produce. As Shotter (2011) puts it, "when someone acts, their activity cannot be accounted as wholly their own activity – for a person's acts are, among other influences, partly 'shaped' by the acts of the others around them" (p. 2). This is what makes joint actions, so special: "they are continuously creative of new responses" (p. 2).

The analyst might think probabilistically and claim that each new situation resembles other situations and in many of those other situations people react in an identifiable sort of way. But we cannot know in advance that these particular persons will react in the particular way that they do. Volosinov could not have known in advance that the particular Russian, and not his friend, would at that precise moment say 'Well!' with the exact intonation that he did. Only after the event has occurred is it possible to try to understand the shared moment of the two friends.

Another example might help to illustrate the intrinsically unpredictable nature of shared action and how probabilistic thinking only underlines this unpredictability. The example comes from the world of professional cycling. It concerns a former French professional cyclist, who was well known for his daring but typically unsuccessful attempts to win races by launching an early breakaway from the 'peloton', or the main body of cyclists. Normally the leaders of the peloton would catch and overtake him before the end of the race. That did not deter him from trying again and again because there was always the remote chance that he might be lucky. The cyclist referred to what he called les aléas or those unforeseen possibilities that might fortuitously combine to favour him every now and again. When he won a notable race, les aléas had combined in his favour: just as the advancing peloton

approached a level crossing, the gates closed to allow a train to pass. All predictions based on riders' training patterns, their internal physiological states, their present form and the strategies of their teams would be unable to predict that particular outcome. One might predict that ninety-nine times out of a hundred his breakaway would fail, but statistical knowledge would be incapable of predicting when that hundredth time would occur, when the level-crossing gates would fortuitously close at just the right moment. As the French cyclist remarked: "In cycling nothing is ever set in stone, there's always un élément perturbateur and I take advantage of it" (Leonard, 2014, p. 174).

Les aléas are not confined to the world of cycle racing but they attend all social life, restricting prediction to probabilistic guesswork. As Gigerenzer (2008) has demonstrated, psychological theories are poor at predicting real-life outcomes in advance – indeed lay persons typically do better than specialist theories, which are much better equipped to offer explanations after the event. The example of the cyclist and his aléas is particularly appropriate in relation to Shotter's understanding of the world. The young John Shotter was himself a talented and successful competitive cyclist. Racing for the Fareham Wheelers, Shotter won the junior British Southern Counties championship in 1952. Many years later, he still knows that the whole race has to be run – the world has to be jointly lived moment by moment – in order to know the outcomes. Afterwards the outcomes will need to be understood in terms of the unique conjunction of circumstances that occurred on that occasion. If sports journalists know that they cannot file their reports in advance of the race, so psychologists should not believe that one day they will be able to do so.

Dialogue and uniqueness
The insistence that action is joint and dialogical, together with the assumption of the uniqueness of events, is still not sufficient to give Shotter's work its distinctive colouring. Even Lewin could, at a pinch, be interpreted as accepting the jointness of action: after all, he insisted on the importance of understanding the individual's 'life-space' in terms of the group's 'life-space' (Lewin, 1948 and 1951; see also Billig, in press a). Yet Lewin's psychology represent the antithesis of Shotter's. Lewin was deeply influenced by the model of physics, proposing that psychology should be written in the highly mathematized language of field theory, in which geometric representations of the life-space, as well as mathematical formulae depicting underlying psychological valences, were to be accepted as accurate representations of the mind (see, for instance, Lewin, 1938b). Nothing could be further from Shotter's descriptions of what he calls the dialogically structured mind (Shotter, 1999).

By the same token Shotter does not associate his project with approaches that advocate rigorous, detailed examination of dialogical interaction. This is illustrated by his attitude towards conversation analysis and to discursive psychology which has taken up the conversation analytic approach (see, inter alia, Edwards, 2012; Edwards and Potter, 1993; Potter, 2012). At first sight one might suppose that Shotter would approve of this move towards a conversation analytic psychology, for he shares a number of its assumptions: namely, an opposition to conventional cognitive psychology which looks to the internal mind

of the individual; a sense that psychological phenomena are produced though dialogical interaction; a commitment to search for the construction of meaning within interaction between people. Yet, Shotter makes few comments about conversation analysis and he does not see his own project as leading to the sorts of detailed studies of conversational interaction, which distinguish conversation analysis generally and discursive psychology in particular.

Shotter (2008) briefly referred to conversation analysis when discussing the indefiniteness of language and Bakhtin's view that utterances are responses. He supports this view by referring to Schegloff (1995) as having shown how in conversational interaction we set up expectant relationships with others about what is yet come. However, Shotter does not then go into the sort of details that characterise Schegloff's analyses of conversations. Similarly, in a recent article Shotter (in press) dismisses most social scientific disciplines, or what he characterises as "ologies", as being monological. He does not then contrast these "ologies" with dialogical disciplines such as conversation analysis or discursive psychology which are devoted to analysing in detail how participants construct meaning within their joint conversational interaction.

We might ask why Shotter should stand back from projects such as conversation analysis or discursive psychology, which are dialogical in their outlook and methodology. There are two factors which might help to explain Shotter's caution. The first relates to his approach towards the uniqueness of events and the second to the sort of language that he advocates that we as investigators should try to use.

It is possible to recognize the uniqueness of events but to consider it as an obstacle to theorising. This essentially is the statistical approach within psychology: by collecting and statistically analysing data from multiple cases, the researcher disposes of particularities. Arguably, it could be said that many conversation analysts approach their data in a way that aspires to go beyond the particularities of the individual extracts of conversation that they study so closely. Typically conversation analysts seek to identify common patterns of conversational interaction, such as adjacency pairs, transition relevance places, extreme case formulations etc, which can be found in many different contexts. In this way, one aim is to produce general statements about the mechanics of such phenomena and then understand individual episodes in terms of these general mechanics (see Billig, 2013, chapter seven). As such, much conversation analysis possesses a methodological dynamic which moves from the intensive study of particular episodes to discovering more general features of conversational interaction. In this dynamic, the unique features of the examples give way to features which are common to instances, such that the analyst moves from studying this particular transition relevance place or adjacency pair to transition relevance places or adjacency pairs in general.

Although Shotter might appreciate the intensive study of particular dialogical examples, he does not treat particular examples as a step towards formulating general theoretical statements. By contrast, he seeks to draw out the particularities of the example. His use of Volosinov's example of the two Russian speakers is a case in point. Shotter does not regret the absence of a transcribed recording of the occasion. He is not seeking to discover the

implicit codes of interaction that the two were following, speculating on the gap between the previous remark, whatever it might have been, and the expressed 'Well!' Nor is he greatly concerned about how the second person reacted to that single word. He is concerned to draw out the special nature of that shared moment – how that single word, uttered at that particular moment, could convey so much.

Similarly, Shotter (2013) in his characteristic style begins a paper with several quotations. Four of them come from intellectual books. The fifth comes from a conversation between a psychiatric patient in a secure unit and the unit's Nurse Manager. The dialogue begins with the patient saying:

> "Can I talk with you Cherrie (Nurse Manager of a Secure Unit)"?
> "Yes, but Dr Ashong is your psychiatrist, why don't you talk with her?"
> "I can't find my words when I'm with Dr. Ashong."

This example carries more than an echo of Kurt Goldstein, another of Shotter's textual friends (Shotter and van Lawik, 2014). Goldstein, who was Cassirer's cousin, studied the aphasia of patients suffering from brain damage (Goldstein, 1948). In his analyses, Goldstein warned against linking the symptom of seemingly being unable to speak with specific brain injuries, as if the latter automatically produced the former. Instead, Goldstein argued for a holisitic approach, seeking to understand the whole person as being more than the sum of their cognitive and physiological parts.

Goldstein (1939 and 1951) used the Gestaltist metaphor of figure-ground to illustrate the complex links between outward behaviour and physiological deficit. The physiological pattern is itself a figure which must always appear against a wider background. However, neuro-psychologists tend to overlook the background and treat the figure as if it had objective characteristics in its own right. The inability to speak is not necessarily absolute despite the physiological injury but the person may have difficulties with speaking in particular situations (Goldstein, 1951). Shotter resonated to Goldstein's holism: we can understand the patient who loses their words on a particular occasion, when speaking with a particular person. At other moments they may recover some of their words. The general term 'aphasia' does injustice to this complexity (see Ludwig, 2012, for an extended discussion of Goldstein's holism).

A conversation analyst might treat the example of Cherrie talking to Dr Ashong's patient as an instance of a more general conversational gambit, such as formulating a request, which is not met with an outright refusal but with a counter-request. Shotter, by contrast, is not asking us to compare the exchange with other exchanges where the speakers use similar conversational forms. Instead, he is asking his readers to listen to what the patient was saying on this particular occasion and how the patient's words contain specific insights about themselves. If we do this we can see, along with Goldstein, why the patient's loss of words was not a simple symptom but a dialogical reaction. We are to listen - just as Shotter and Volosinov ask us to listen to what the one Russian said to the other and what in consequence

both could share. For Shotter these are special moments, to be appreciated in their particularity, not to be absorbed into a wider category.

Poetics as Methodology

Even if we assume that it is important to recognise the particularity of events, there is still the problem of how we might express this understanding of the unique moment. The earlier quotation from Bergson illustrates how difficult the problem is. Most psychological terms are general categories and psychologists often act as if the prime purpose of psychological investigation is to categorise psychological phenomena. Whenever psychologists categorise in this way – no matter what the psychological phenomenon that they are categorising – they are treating the various different instances of what they are categorising as if they were all functionally the same.

For this reason, Shotter argues psychology needs more than just a change of theoretical concepts or methodological procedures. It requires new ways of writing, or to use Shotter's term, new 'poetics'. Shotter's earlier work was not concerned with the issue of poetics, as he was concentrating on understanding what was going wrong with conventional psychology. However, as he has turned his attention to the implications of seeking to understand uniquely occurring events as shared actions, so he has seen it as vital to create new rhetorical forms of understanding (Shotter, 2005a).

The interest in rhetoric, however, was always there. When Shotter (1993a) described his approach as "social constructionist", he added that his was "a rhetorical-responsive version" of social constructionism (pp. 12f). Not only was he implying that the concept "social constructionist" was too broad to fit his particular vision, but also that his vision was itself deeply rhetorical. This means that psychology itself cannot be treated as something apart from the rest of human activity: it must recognize itself as being a rhetorical, responsive activity. This, of course, applies just as much to the construction of a counter-psychology as it does to the continuation of mainstream psychology.

The term 'poetics' is itself highly rhetorical and critical. Shotter is trying to shift psychological writing from using heavy scientific categories to a lighter, more literary style which is able to capture the feel of the moment. When Shotter (2005a) writes of the need to create "methods of social poetics" (p. 160), he is not using the term "methods" in its normal sense of ordered procedures for gathering and assessing data. He has in mind styles of writing which will draw out the uniqueness of events. Following the lead of Wittgenstein, he envisages that this way of writing will emphasise description rather than explanation (Shotter 2005a and 2005b). Just as Wittgenstein recommended, we will need to find ways of writing that attract our attention to those aspects of the world that are so familiar that we routinely fail to notice them.

Shotter (2005b) has taken the idea of poetics from Goethe, who envisaged constructing a "delicate empiricism". In contrast to most empiricists from the Enlightenment tradition,

Goethe did not seek to isolate objects and then treat them as if they were static self-contained entities that could be categorised according to their enduring intrinsic properties. Instead, Goethe insisted on the delicate task of seeking to discover "the relations between the different aspects exhibited in a dynamic world of internally inter-related, continuously changing activities" (Shotter, 2005b, p. 135). Interestingly, Shotter quotes from Cassirer who suggested that Goethe invented the term 'morphology' to describe the study of objects which themselves continually change while constantly interacting with other objects (Cassirer, 1963). Goethe's delicate empiricism requires a delicate morphology which itself must be rhetorical and responsive, for we must describe processes that are constantly changing rather than applying a single category to a supposedly enduring object. It is not as if we need a new methodological instrument to examine humans, for, as Goethe stressed, the human is the most precise scientific instrument that has ever been invented. Rather, the new methodology that we need is a rhetorical practice so that we can learn to write with sensitivity and delicacy as we describe the complex, interrelated uniqueness of what we are observing.

A conventional psychologist might then respond to Shotter 'Well, that is all very well but what sort of theoretical concepts will your method of poetics require in order to create satisfactory theories?' The question, however, would be misplaced. We can understand just how misplaced by referring to Cassirer's contrast between traditional scientific language and Goethe's morphological thinking. In *Language and myth*, Cassirer suggested that the concepts of physics have been designed to transform the world of perceptions into a coherent "epitome of laws" (1953, p. 27). Goethe's morphological thinking, on the other hand, sought to find "pregnant moments", or focal points in the course of events, culling these "high moments" from the "uniform stream of time" (1953, pp. 27-8). For Shotter, the exchange between Cherrie and Dr Ashong's patient is one such high moment, filled with meaning.

In his *Essay on man*, Cassirer distinguished between scientific thinking and the sort of thinking which holds a moment in time, directing attention to that moment. According to Cassirer, most scientific thinking is dependent upon categorization. Because science absorbs the particular into general categories "science means abstraction and abstraction is always an impoverishment of reality" (Cassirer, p. 143). Cassirer contrasts scientific thinking with artistic thinking. Whereas science abstracts and impoverishes, art intensifies and enriches. Unlike science which abbreviates reality, art "is an intensification of reality" and, according to Cassirer, it "may be described as a continuous process of concretion" (p. 143). Thus, Goethe's delicate empiricism involves the use of language that artistically intensifies reality.

Cassirer's purpose is not merely to contrast artistic, morphological thinking with theoretical, categorical thinking. His deeper purpose is to show that the latter involves the former. A number of years ago, I argued a somewhat similar point (Billig, 1987) when suggesting that categorizing is not just the rhetorical opposite of particularizing but that categorizing cannot be performed rhetorically without the opposing skills of particularizing. However, Cassirer goes much further than arguing that categorization cannot be the basic conceptual skill on which language and human thinking must be based. Indeed he reverses the conventional philosophical balance between categorization and particularization or between theoretical and

mythic thinking, and thereby between science and art. For Cassirer, science does not transcend myth, but rests upon it. Without the artistic and mythic skills of intensifying reality there could be no science for it is the mythic skills, rather than the skills of formulating general categories, that are fundamental both historically and psychologically. Moreover, Cassirer used Goldstein's psychological work with brain damaged patients to illustrate that human perception is always more than perception: we perceive objects in ways that permit us to isolate the particular from the stream of time (Cassirer, 1962; see also Cassirer, 1999, for two letters on this topic to Goldstein).

From this perspective, Goethe, as well as Shotter, are not being anti-scientific when they advocate a poetics of writing: they are showing the importance of morphological thinking, not just within human activity, but also for understanding that activity. Using Cassirer's distinctions, this means that we should avoid ways of writing that lock up the high moments of human life within concepts that simplify and deaden; instead, we should attempt to write in delicate ways that intensify and make concrete the special moments of life.

Shotter and Cassirer
Shotter recounts that the late Basil Bernstein introduced him to Cassirer's work (Shotter, 2005a). It was a felicitous introduction for there are a number of parallels between Cassirer and Shotter. Both of them are deeply philosophical in their thinking but neither sees philosophy as a self-contained technical discipline. Cassirer believed that the proper study of philosophy was the nature of humankind. To this end, philosophers should not just be philosophers but they should concern themselves with science, psychology, anthropology etc. This is why Cassirer called his work, 'anthropological philosophy'. Despite being ignored by mainstream psychologists, Shotter remains committed to studying psychological matters, but not to promoting psychology as a formal academic discipline. His way of writing psychology illustrates that conventional psychology on its own is insufficient for understanding psychological questions. Shotter is continually quoting from his philosophical textual friends, supporting in rhetorical practice Goldstein's comment that there is no valid demarcation between philosophy and physiological psychology (Goldstein, 1951, p. 9).

This is where the notion of a 'textual friend' becomes important. Shotter used the concept in the penultimate footnote of *Cultural politics* (1993b, p. 232). He recounted that his actual friends, Ken and Mary Gergen, often wondered why his writing contained so many quotations: "When are you going to write in your own words?" they would ask him. Shotter's reply is that he was conversing with writers, who are his "textual friends", adding that "I need to sense their words" (p. 232). The Gergens' question could have been addressed to Cassirer. His books are rich in quotations, as Cassirer presented his own views through considering the works of others. Indeed, in some of his more historical works of philosophy, it is sometimes hard to detect Cassirer's view of the philosophers whom he discusses at scholarly length. His readers, too, may have often wondered when he was going to write in his own words. However, Cassirer's style of writing was more than just a rhetorical quirk: it reflected his

deep philosophical commitment to the humanist tradition (see Lofts, 2000, for a discussion of Cassirer's style).

Apparently Cassirer could quote by heart whole pages of philosophical writing. Anyone talking at length with John Shotter would be aware of his remarkable ability to summon up apt quotations during the course of a conversation. Such abilities are not party tricks, either for Cassirer or for Shotter, but they represent essential aspects of their intellectual stance. Robert Skidelsky (2011), in his brilliant analysis of Cassirer, calls Cassirer the last philosopher of culture. According to Skidelsky, Cassirer's philosophical position constitutes a defence of scholarly, humane culture – a defence which can only be mounted from being positioned firmly within that cultural tradition. So, too, Shotter defends the philosophical, humanistic culture: a technical proficiency within a discipline, whether that discipline be psychology or philosophy, must always be insufficient on its own for it needs to be allied to a deeper intellectual humanity and a commitment to scholarly values. Wittgenstein may have wanted to free his readers from the philosophical tradition and, in consequence, avoided citing authors from that tradition. By contrast, both Cassirer and Shotter are themselves immersed within the traditions from which they copiously and generously quote.

I can personally testify to John Shotter's generosity with quotations. Most scholars are rather secretive about the notes which they make when reading important books. That is not, and never has been, John's way: he has often sent me his notes, sharing the quotations that he has worked so long and hard to extract from difficult books and that exemplify the book from which come. In this respect, John personifies the cooperative, humanistic tradition that the best of his textual friends inhabited. He lives within the world of ideas and for him that is a world to be shared with others. As such, he does not belong to the competitive world of modern academia, in which individuals compete with each other to be noticed. John has always valued intellectual ideas for their own sake, not as a commodity to enhance reputation, career and citations.

I do not know whether Cassirer was similarly generous with his scholarly notes. I suspect he might have been. There is, however, a crucial difference between Cassirer and Shotter. Cassirer's intellectual reaction was always to try to incorporate philosophical opponents within his vision of culture. By trying to incorporate Heidegger's thinking during the period when Heidegger was using his philosophy to support Nazism, Cassirer disastrously left himself little room for analysing how the cultural tradition, which he valued so much, could result in demonic politics. Shotter, educated in a later, more cynical age, has no such illusions. He remains fierce in rejecting those sorts of Cartesianism which in his view are at root illiberal and inhumane. He feels no obligation to pursue textual friendships indiscriminately or to incorporate all philosophies within the cultural traditions that he cannot help but personify.

There is a continuing mystery: why should mainstream psychologists have treated Shotter so dismissively, even aggressively? When Cassirer famously debated in 1929 with Heidegger at Davos, students loudly mocked the former as they cheered the latter. It was as if Cassirer, the

old-fashioned, scholarly and gentle academic, constituted the dangerous threat. Maybe the idea is not so outlandish after all. Scholarship remains a threat to those who want to constrain thinking. John Shotter should take pride in the fact that even today, after all those years of reading, writing and sharing ideas, he remains firmly on the margins, not tempted by the comforts of the centre.

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