The Borderline Personality

Laura Donington

Nathan Schwartz-Salant's *The Borderline Personality — Healing and Vision* (Chiron Publications, 1989, £12.95) is an interesting and challenging book, well worth reading both as an illuminating account of borderline personality, and for the opportunity it presents for finding common ground within very different psychotherapeutic traditions.

Schwartz-Salant's *The Borderline Personality* is written from an archetypal, Jungian perspective, but is also coloured by a developmental perspective which the author acknowledges is crucial to an understanding of the roots of borderline behaviour. He locates these roots in the child's developmental task of relating 'inner' and 'outer' realities, and in the process the child has to go through at around 18 months–2 years of separating from the mother and building up a sense of self. In Winnicottian terms, mother and child achieve this mutually through 'good enough mothering' and the mother's gradual withdrawal from immediately meeting the child's needs — a process which allows the child to increase its tolerance of separation through the gradual internalisation of the good mother.

Where there is not good enough mothering or fathering, and particularly when the child experiences abrupt abandonment or withdrawal, he or she reacts with bewilderment and rage, and the gradual task of separation remains incomplete. The child fails to develop a functioning sense of self, and cannot believe that anything good for him or her can exist — the beginnings of the borderline personality.

The author emphasises the role of the child's imagination in the creation of a sense of self. With good enough parenting, the infant's experience is validated. The infant continuously destroys its fantasy 'parent object' and learns that the real parent is not destroyed by its rage. Where the parent withdraws physically or psychologically, the infant experiences its own feelings as overwhelming, intolerable, and dangerous.

The Inner Eye

Schwartz-Salant gives a vivid account of the impact of borderline behaviour on the therapist, and of the peculiar sensitivity of these clients which they use to attempt to 'get into' the therapist, and which can generate in the therapist powerful feelings of being undermined and attacked. Many other authors have also described the acute ability of these clients to spot

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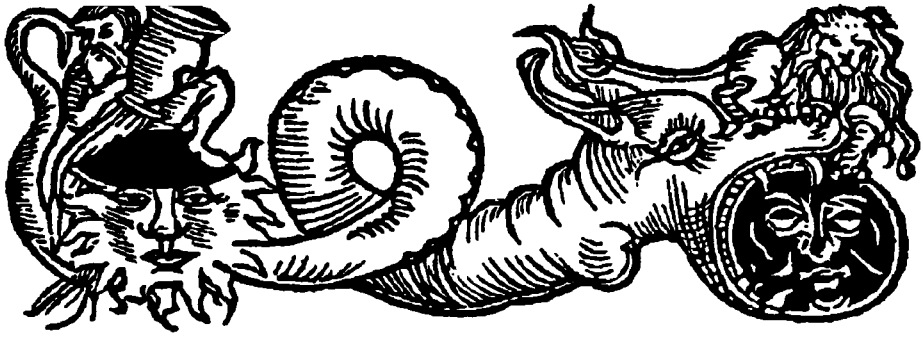

the therapist's weak spots.

Schwartz-Salant gives particular emphasis to what he calls the 'inner eye' of the borderline person, which is the perceptive and naked eye of the child seeing things as they truly are, but split off from the client's normal consciousness or feelings. This 'vision' gives an acute sensitivity to any lack of authenticity in the therapist, but is too 'dangerous' for the client to experience directly. It is therefore suppressed and emerges as projections into the therapist. This provides a true testing ground for the therapist, and demands that the therapist work with equally acute awareness of his or her own process.

Schwartz-Salant's descriptions of his work with borderline clients include some powerful accounts of how he works with transference and countertransference, which suggest a highly developed ability to work with his own process. I was especially struck by his emphasis on the use of 'bodily awareness' — using the felt sense with a very physical location in bodily sensation. This brings into focus for me the role of the body in the therapeutic encounter, and the role of bodywork in therapy. Though direct work on the body is unlikely to be right or tolerable for clients working on borderline issues, at least to start with, bodily awareness is a vital source of information for the therapist about what is happening for them and between them, and — presumably — can also be so for the client.

Psychotherapists working within an analytic framework (see, for example, Samuels, 1989) are increasingly acknowledging the role of bodily awareness, but there still seems to be a resistance to following this through to the point of accepting the value of direct work with the body. Thus Hillman seems to say that working directly with the body leads only to primitive and cathartic 'pre-conceptual' expression, as distinct from the 'soul-making' work of the imaginal process.

I would argue that the imaginal process also is bound up inextricably with bodily sense, that it is not possible to work directly with the body without working imaginally (Mindell's 'dream-body'), and that it can be a potent means of access, especially to the preverbal, perinatal or prenatal experience which so deeply

colours a person's experience of being in the world. The effect of touching a client or otherwise working with their awareness of bodily process, if done skilfully and with full awareness, is a powerful adjunct to working with words and surely no more dangerous than the laying on of interpretations or cognitive 'hands'.

Schwartz-Salant discusses the relationship between developmental and archetypal ways of working, and how these can be integrated. His own emphasis is on the need to work with the archetypal imagination, which entails working with a particular understanding of what is happening between client and therapist which is very different from the usual psychoanalytic stance. This requires the therapist to move away from understanding and interpretation, and to move into the imaginal world of the client. It means becoming in some sense fused with the client, experiencing his or her madness, sharing it and validating it, while at the same time retaining a belief in the separateness of the therapist's own being. The author describes this imaginal work as happening at the level of the subtle body, a concept that he describes as having much in common with Winnicott's idea of the transitional space.

Winnicott (1971) described what he called the transitional space or intermediate space as the arena within which the child builds the ability to relate to the world through play. This is an area which lies somewhere in between inner experiencing, and being and doing in the world. The essence of this space is that it is 'a neutral area of experience which shall not be challenged', and exists simply as 'a resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated'. This sense of space is something created between the mother and child, as part of a fundamental developmental process, but Winnicott also suggested that it is retained in later life 'in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts, and to religion and to imaginative living' and offers it as a model for the psychotherapeutic encounter. My sense is that what indeed has its roots in the maternal bond can become more than just a setting for reparative work, but also a pyschospiritual dimension for a more transpersonal encounter, which is an important part of the healing process. (It is important to avoid confusing the prepersonal world and transpersonal (Wilbur 1980), but this does not preclude the possibility that the work is happening at several levels simultaneously.)

Psychospiritual Space

Schwartz-Salant describes the process in terms of the alchemical symbolism of the 'conjunctio' and the imaginary couple, representing the deep innate potential for integration and individuation. He describes the numinous quality of an encounter with the client at this level, and emphasises the healing power of this, especially for those with 'borderline' characteristics. Samuels (1989), also within a Jungian framework, refers to the healing space of the 'shared mundus imaginalis'. His discussion of the 'image of the parents in bed' amplifies and develops the idea of conjunction and differentiation. He explores the idea that the process of developing an image of 'parents as separate' out of a merged parental image is some-

thing that goes on at the same time as the process of separation from the mother.

This metaphorical language gives a flavour of the powerful process of working with images and the archetypal imagination, which is one of the great strengths of the Jungian tradition, though it isn't easy reading for one unfamiliar with the Jungian framework and the use of alchemical symbolism. However, I think that the processes described, and even more importantly their implications for the psychotherapeutic encounter, can also be understood and described in terms of other psychotherapeutic frameworks, especially those which are seeking to develop a language for transpersonal work.

For example, James and Savary, using the language of transactional analysis, talk about the 'together-awareness' of the third self, created out of the merging of the inner core energies of the dialoguing partners (as distinct from the self-awareness of the individual self, and the other-awareness, of the relating self).

I am particularly interested in the resemblance between the processes described by Schwartz-Salant and aspects of core process work, with its emphasis on the quality of the therapeutic presence. This is manifested through the skills of empathy, resonance, following and reflecting, but the essence of it lies in the ability to be there for the client in such a way as to create the space for the client to bring awareness to their own process — what is happening for them and how it is, in the moment. This requires the therapist to be aware also of their own process, and to remain in contact with the client not only through the cognitive mind, but also through what is happening at subtle levels of feeling and sensation. It is at these levels at which the therapist may be able to make contact with the client's imaginal world.

In core process work the emphasis is on the role of awareness and the therapeutic encounter as a joint exploration of process (Donington, 1988). Awareness of process allows greater access to the underlying sense of space that is the energetic core. The deeply spiritual quality of the 'conjunctio' might be recognised as the experience of meeting the client from the core. This is the deeper level of awareness which underlies the work and makes it possible for the therapist, and eventually the client, to know, whatever else is happening, that 'this is not all there is' when working in this difficult arena. Contact at this level requires a very special sort of silence. (In another book, Schwartz-Salant (1982) recalls Winnicott's concern with the dangers of interpretation, and stresses the importance of archetypal awareness, and the analyst's ability to be silent in a very special way which 'requires a respect for the mystery of the patient's soul and a special awareness of when it isn't being revealed'.)

The distinction between working with transferential and counter-transferential material on the one hand, and with a more 'merged' consciousness on the other, is important and needs to be recognised. The point is that the work is happening at several levels simultaneously. The work demands from the therapist an acute engagement at the level of transference and counter-transference and boundary testing,

setting the limits and working towards a more realistic expectation of relationship while staying in touch with the client's underlying need, terror and depression.

At the same time, holding the deeper level of awareness for the client is an act of faith which provides the safe space within which the healing work can happen, and within which the client can begin to tolerate the experience of his or her separateness. Paradoxically, it is the opportunity of working within a space in which duality is diminished that provides the arena for exploring the task of separation, and the ordinary business of being in the world.

With core process work, the emphasis on joint practice and the integration of different levels of awareness means there is a strong sense of a continuity in the therapeutic presence required. Maybe more of a shift in therapeutic stance is necessary for those coming from an analytic tradition with a strong focus on transference issues and interpretation. This book certainly offers a sense of the richness of ways of working that this

opens up, and the possibilities of finding common understanding between psychotherapies based on very different traditions.

Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock, 1971

James Hillman, *Re-visioning Psychology*, Harper and Row, 1975

Ken Wilbur, *The Atman Project*, Quest, 1980

Andrew Samuels, *The Plural Psyche*, Routledge, 1989

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Arnold Mindell, *Working with the Dream Body*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985

Nathan Schwartz-Salant, *Narcissism and Character Transformation*, Inner City Books, 1982