Breaking down the Wall of Silence

Alice Miller
Virago, 1991, £13.99, 224pp

Making Sense of Suffering

J. Konrad Stettbacher
Dutton, 1991, £9.99, 143pp

Throughout her book, Alice Miller repeats that the only therapy of any value is the Primal Therapy developed by J. Konrad Stettbacher and set out in his book *Making Sense of Suffering*. Because she is so enthusiastic about his method I thought 'I must get this book, surely I will learn something new and exciting from it, the key to releasing my own pain'. Stettbacher says that in the womb our first level of perception is sensation, hot/cold, soft/hard, loud/soft, light/dark, and these sensations give rise to our second level of perception, feeling. Pleasure produces the feeling 'good' and displeasure, caused by pain or fear (constriction) produces the feeling, 'bad'. The foetus cannot understand what is happening to it, so if it could speak it might say 'I'm incapable of making myself feel more comfortable. I am too weak. I can't manage it. I am doing something wrong. I must keep still; otherwise it will hurt me even more.' The psyche of the child then develops a defense to protect itself from the life-threatening pain of this helpless position, and thus the child's primal integrity is damaged.

All the pain and trauma we subsequently experience including, and very importantly, the experience of birth, serve to further damage this primal integrity and to cement our defenses against experiencing this life-threatening pain. The re-experiencing of feelings that are similar to or the same as those experienced at the primal stage, serve as 'alarms' which, in TA terms, can rubber-band us back to that primal position of pain and helplessness. Stettbacher describes a four-stage therapy which begins by following this primal progression of experience. The stages are Perception, Feelings, Understanding and Demands. These four stages are repeated endlessly in the therapy.

In the first Perception stage the client is asked to notice her physical sensations, what she senses, notices, sees, hears, smells; then, in the second Feelings stage, to describe her sensations and the feelings they generate, how they affect her and what they mean to her. In the Understanding stage she is asked to critically examine the situation and those involved (including herself), demanding an explanation and a justification. Finally in the Demands stage, she formulates her demands: 'I don't need this; I need that! . . to live'.

Stettbacher sets out very specific conditions under which the therapy should be undertaken, including abstinence from alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, and sex — both

for 24 hours before the therapy starts and, it appears (he is not totally clear on this point) throughout the therapy. The therapy consists of a sequence of 20-25 full days within a period of 45 weeks, made up of daily sessions lasting 3 hours. This is followed by group therapy once a week for 5 hours, for a period varying from several months to several years.

The therapy should take place in a dark-coloured, soundproofed and padded room with a constant moderate temperature and equipped with adjustable lighting and a tape recorder. Clients must write a detailed life story before beginning therapy. The therapist reads this to enable him or her to be of maximum assistance to the client. (There is much more detail in the book about how the therapy is conducted and what the clients can achieve by following it, which I will leave out for lack of space).

I can go along quite happily with Stettbacher's understanding of how defenses are formed, and how current experiences can reawaken the pain caused by the damage to our primal integrity. I can also see that his four-step method is as good a way as any to process our childhood traumas. And I am sure that if you can afford it, this is likely to be an effective therapy. But how many people can afford an intensive therapy of this kind? My guess is not many. And Alice Miller is saying that this is the only effective therapy available, and she wants the whole world to listen to her, follow the Stettbacher path and change their ways — it just doesn't add up.

'OK', you might say, 'but Stettbacher maintains that, with the guidance of this book, this therapy can be conducted alone, without a therapist'. This would of course make matters much easier, however my response, having read the book, is that the book is in no way sufficiently detailed to facilitate therapy undertaken alone, and that as a result the process could be highly dangerous. Yet a quote from a section near the end of the book, written by a staff member, says: 'Every symptom, fear, or pain demands from us that we stop for a moment and become conscious of what we are doing and why we are doing it. Reviewing one's immediate actions and behaviour in the four steps of the therapy is a life-saving process. It can never be dangerous. Children who were once traumatised and unloved, tormented and made to feel insecure, find it difficult to differentiate between what is good for them and what is not, what is dangerous and what is helpful. So it does not surprise me that you have your doubts about what is essentially a simple, logical means of self-help in the four steps described by Stettbacher.'

What do you think? I can see that solitary therapy would deal with Alice Miller's assertion that (nearly) all therapists are pedagogic and thus abusive, depriving their clients of true autonomy, that there is always a power issue between client and therapist that can easily be abused, and that it is people who have a subconscious desire to be abusive in this way who would be particularly drawn to this profession — and I include myself in

this number. Yet my own experience of client-centred counselling and therapy does not lead me to the conclusion that all therapy apart from that offered by Stettbacher is abusive — quite the opposite. And surely if we as counsellors are aware and constantly vigilant with regard to these issues we can, with time and good supervision, offer our clients a good-enough ally, a caring-enough witness to the reality of their suffering and to their ability to be healed and work towards wholeness.

I have used the words 'good-enough' and 'caring-enough' intentionally, as this is the aspect I found most signally missing from Alice Miller's book. Freud, Klein and Winnicott all talk of bad-breast experiences as essential for healthy development but nowhere does Alice Miller acknowledge this. Stettbacher says that a child, given sufficient patient love and care, can recover from injuries to its primal integrity, if the need is recognised soon enough. How much love and care? How soon is soon enough? Freud, Klein and Winnicott may be wrong, but we live in a real world. We cannot be perfect mothers and fathers, however hard we try, and this is a fact that neither Alice Miller nor Stettbacher touch upon at all.

I am left confused. I believe wholeheartedly, as Alice Miller says, that brutalisation of children causes them to grow up and brutalise in their turn, and this is a fact that is deeply denied by our society, witness the recent murder of Jamie Bulger — the public cries out for the perpetrators to be locked up, punished, for the re-establishment of family values (whatever that means — regular beatings?). I have not heard one news item that asks what those boys suffered that they needed to expiate their feelings by torturing a two-year-old. I cannot accept that only J. Konrad Stettbacher has the answer for those brutalised by their past. I could talk about the ways in which I have abused my son as a result of what I experienced as a child. For me, the struggle for personal awareness is the only way forward, and the more people who undertake this struggle the better. There are many paths to the top of the mountain. Finally, reading Alice Miller's book enabled me to get in touch with some of the anger I feel about my own past, and how difficult it is for me to express that anger. This is a poem I wrote about these feelings.

Anger

In my fantasy I let it go
pounding the walls
flailing my arms
yelling so loud the fury
the unfairness of it all
the pain.
Unpack it all from inside of me
push it out screaming into the world
tearing and ripping like a terrible wind
leaving chaos behind.
Enormous straining rage
to make my veins stand out and my body shake
with the size of it
the force of it.
But to do it,
to do it,
is like standing on the edge of a cliff
daring myself to jump.
So it stays packed up
like millions of cigarette papers
carefully folded.
On each page
in small compacted script
the story of my outrage
repeated endlessly.

Camilla Clark

Art Therapy the Person-Centred Way

Liesl Silverstone
Autonomy Books, 17 Cranbourne Gardens, London NW11 OHN, £12.95

'Working with art is . . . a creative spontaneous process, as the counsellor moves from words to image, to feelings, to body language, to wider reflections . . . Counsellor and client proceed on a journey into the unknown.'

Thus Liesl Silverstone describes her vision of person-centred art therapy; an approach that combines Rogers' core conditions with expressive arts media. This view seems very much in keeping with Rogers' own sense of the closeness between creativity and self-actualisation. Although many person-centred practitioners are experimenting with new media, few write about their work. This book will therefore be welcomed as a first.

The book attempts a radically person-centred format. Not an exposition of theory, nor simply one person's viewpoint, it takes the reader through a year long person-centred art therapy course which Liesl leads. It is a collection of writings: course notes, details of exercises used, transcripts of interactions, accounts of discussions, and comments from the women involved and Liesl herself. These are left to speak for themselves.

As readers, we experience the course with an immediacy which books rarely convey. We share the group's excitement over the project; its members' struggles, encounterlng each other, dealing with differences and assessment, overcoming their blocks to self-awareness and empathy, and taking on power and responsibility. It is a courageous book which, in its direct portrayal of all that happens, comfortable and uncomfortable, demonstrates its author's own belief in congruence and authenticity.

Because of the material's raw presentation, the book's value will probably be different for different readers. Liesl suggests its use as a manual. Certainly it offers many exercises that group-workers can use, but if this were its only purpose, I would have preferred more explanation of context, uses and pitfalls. More valuable is the glimpse into the course leader's private notebook, and the thinking behind session structures. Some will appreciate the focus on person-centred learning and assessment as practised in this course. Others, the account of a group's development, the personal dramas of participants, and Liesl's own exuberance. The book's weaknesses are probably also its strengths. Its format as a collection of material makes it feel unconnected in places. There is little discussion of what is presented, and although the introduction and tutor's comments provide some theoretical background, the reader is often left to draw conclusions for herself. Above all this book challenges the reader to discover his own learnings within what is presented. Such a challenge must surely be in the spirit of Rogers!

Caroline Beech

We've Had 100 Years of Psychotherapy — and the World's Getting Worse

James Hillman and Michael Ventura
Harper Collins, 1993, £7.99, 242pp

As the title suggests, this is both an iconoclastic and streetwise book. Those familiar with Hillman's generally erudite style may well be surprised by how accessible and direct much of this volume is. He has teamed up with Los Angeles journalist Michael Ventura to produce a book of conversational dialogues and an exchange of letters in which both men explore a range of ideas, reflections, imaginings and speculations mainly about the state of psychotherapy in the world today. They examine where in their view the movement has come from and imagine where it might be going.

It is a personal book of strong feelings, personal associations and anecdotes. Hillman and Ventura raise doubts and question some of the basic assumptions common to most non-behavioural forms of psychotherapy today. Among these is the developmental model of psychology. Hillman says: 'Psychology starts with an upside-down premise, that childhood is primary and determining, that development is cumulative, a kind of organic evolution, reaching a peak and declining. The early scars become suppurating wounds or healed-over strengths, but not necessary prunings for the shape of the tree, a shape ordained by the seed itself. Not only is childhood thus overvalued, but ageing is trapped in an organic, and melancholy, model.'

This of course is a common thread in the humanistic 'growth' movement and in analytically based therapies. Hillman suggests that we might with equal or more validity base a psychology on the notion of a pre-existing personal daemon or 'ghost' which manifests itself through our experiences of childhood and comes to its fullness in adulthood. The infant is then no longer an innocent blank slate waiting for its psychological destiny to be written upon it by familial and social influences. As Ventura puts it: 'the child isn't Alice Miller's child, isn't blankly innocent and passive, isn't passive at all, is disruptive in a profound sense, a far more profound sense than just screaming in the middle of the night. The disruption people feel at the entrance of a child into their lives is that they're feeling the pull and influence of its own momentum, its own destiny, which may in the long run have very little to do with theirs.'

In addition to criticising psychotherapy for the emphasis it places on development, Hillman criticises the importance it generally gives to 'balance', to holding the middle ground, the 'cool green consulting rooms, the soothing images and framed diplomas'. He sees this as another form of repression, as a way of smoothing over the madness and the extremes. What Hillman prefers is to form madness — to give form and expression to the rich interior life of

the psyche. In this respect he sees psychotherapy as more of an art form than a science.

He longs for psychotherapy to again become a 'cell of revolution' — a force which upsets and disturbs the status quo rather than becomes the latest addition to a new status quo. He points out how much the world has changed in the last 100 years, to some extent as a consequence of psychotherapy's influence. Clients of today are quite unlikely to present with the symptoms of conversion hysteria that preoccupied Freud in his early work. Ideas about the influence of the family and 'getting in touch with feelings', or that relationships might need to be 'worked on', are hardly the stuff of radical change in the 1990s but are instead the staple fare of popular TV and magazine articles. It has perhaps even become something approaching a new popular creed. But where is the 'shadow' of this movement? As we move towards more regulation and stricter qualifications is there perhaps a danger of slipping into mediocrity? Is psychotherapy growingly inclined to stay with the safe and the known? And if so, how is it going to make an adequate response to the very extreme and pressing demands of the world today?

They criticise psychotherapy's tendency to draw attention away from the world — to interpret the social dimension in terms of the personal. Our concern about the atom bomb perhaps then becomes a personal issue about how we deal with our anger, and the energy is then removed from the social sphere where there is still a real and urgent need for a practical response. The end result of this seems to be the world 'getting worse' as the title says. In our era perhaps the world gives expression to the unconscious even as did the sexual conversion hysterias when Freud and the early analysts were writing. Hillman suggests that the outer forms of our life, our harshly lit, badly designed and constructed office spaces, our form-filling bureaucracies, traffic jams, polluted rivers and lakes and so on, may in themselves symptomise the unconscious pathology of our time.

This is a visionary book with its eyes looking forward into the next century, even as it overviews the ground the movement has covered in the last one hundred years.

Guy Dargert

The Way Men Think: Intellect, Intimacy and the Erotic Imagination

Liam Hudson and Bernardine Jacot
Yale University Press, 1993, £8.95, 219pp

This book came out last year in hardback, and this now is the paperback edition. Its thesis can be stated quite succinctly. Early in childhood the male sepa-

rates psychologically from the mother. For the male, this splitting off creates a source of unease which the authors call the male wound. The special interest of this wound is that it introduces a permanent element of dislocation into the lives of one sex, but not the other. Once experienced, this wound generates needs and tensions in the male mind for which there is no direct female equivalent. This first step, the one that the little boy takes in order to free himself from his symbiotic connection to his mother, is called dis-identification. The subsequent step, independent of the first, and which enables him positively to identify with his father, is called counter-identification. The first establishes the boy's separateness; the second, his maleness. It is these two developmental processes in combination which the authors call the male wound.

It is the effort to heal this wound, the book maintains, which produces art, literature, music and the rest, by various forms of compensation. But more importantly and more characteristically, a man can pursue ideas quite unrelated to his mother, with the kind of passion he had previously felt towards her. He has a driven need to use his intelligence on impersonal problems and in doing so he can display remorseless powers of application. So what we get is this:

- segregations of the personal from the impersonal
- a preoccupation with issues of intellectual control, and
- the conjunction of that control with partisan and aggressive sentiment.

All this is worked out with a full complement of biographies, drawings, diagrams and stories, which makes for a very readable book.

John Rowan

Being and Belonging: Group, Intergroup and Gestalt

Gaie Houston
Wiley, 1993, £16.95, 222pp

This has been a difficult book for me to review, because it is original. There is no book I can compare it with. It is a fictionalised account of a training group organized by a gestalt therapist, taking place over five days in a country-house setting. One of the participants is a Foulkesian, one a Kleinian, one a family therapist using systems theory, one is an art therapist, one is a Jungian, one is a psychodramatist, two are gestaltists. One is fat and one thin. One comes from Greece, one from France, one from Sri Lanka, one from America, one from Sweden, one from the Caribbean, one from Ireland. During the five days there are two intergroup meetings, one with a small counselling course in another part of the same premises, and one with a large ecology course which arrived later.

The intended leader (the organiser of the whole thing in the first place) is stranded in Greece throughout the entire five days, and so the group has to lead itself, making tape recordings of some parts of the work, and getting a volunteer each time to write up the whole session. Usually there is a morning, an afternoon and an evening session. The intended leader finally read all the contributions, added introductions and conclusions, and wrote up a follow-up meeting.

To write a book like this is obviously very hard to do, and if it succeeded it would be useful to group leaders and members of all persuasions. So how well has it succeeded?

The development of the group is not very convincing. It just goes from strength to strength, getting better all the time. My experience of five-day groups is there is always a dip somewhere about the middle, where the whole thing seems to be not working, where people lose faith and lose trust in the group. This would be even more likely with a leaderless group.

The issue of the intergroup is largely ducked and avoided. The first intergroup is so briefly described that it is quite mysterious as to what actually happened. And the second one is so carefully structured that nothing bad happens, and again peace and harmony prevails at once. Having the group members represent different theories of group work is of course a huge limitation when it comes to personal development. The participants can change and develop as the week goes on, but only within the four walls of their theory — otherwise the didactic content of the book would be lost. So there are various personal developments in the book, but only at the level of interpersonal relations — in particular the emergence of various pairings of a sexual nature. In terms of theory, everyone gets converted to gestalt: no, that is an exaggeration, but they do end up with a greater understanding and appreciation of gestalt.

So I think in the end this is a propagandist work, which says between the lines: 'If you only used gestalt in your group work, your groups would run much more smoothly and a lot more positive results would ensue.' At the beginning of the book the author says: 'Most people want to know more about themselves, and what makes them feel and behave the way they do with other people. That is the only prerequisite for reading this book.' Yet the whole book is peppered with academic references, which would only be of interest to professionals. In fact, I think this is rather badly done, interrupting the flow of what reads mostly like a novel or a play. For the professional, there are in fact a goodly number of useful insights and good quotes.

My main response is that I feel disappointed, as if I had been offered a banquet and actually been given a box of chocolates. In the end my feeling is that gestaltists will love this book — how could they not? But I wonder whether anyone else will?

John Rowan