

Loopiness without end

Psychoanalysis is an antiphilosophy, by Justin Clemens, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2013, 188 pp., £24.99 (paperback) ISBN 978 0 7486 8577 6

Reviewed by Manu Bazzano

The term ‘antiphilosophy’ was coined by Jacques Lacan in 1975 and later codified/trendified by a swarm of imitators led by Alain Badiou. It describes a host of protestations from several quarters. Ethico-religious objections to philosophy are essentially variations of Pascal’s celebrated dictum ‘the heart has its reasons which reason cannot know’. Scientists characteristically complain that philosophy retains ‘too much revelation, too much disavowed unreason’ (p. 2). Other members of the antiphilosophy bloc include literary critics and writers for whom philosophers are guilty of being weak on language, of sitting smugly within their ontological fortifications while gorging on ‘cultural automatisms with pretensions’ (p. 3). Then there is the antiphilosophy of philosophers like Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Benjamin and Arendt; we are only allowed a glimpse of these writers, however, as the author relegating them to the role of exotic extras alongside the post-structuralists.

True antiphilosophy is the province of psychoanalysis alone, we are told, and on occasion the author’s argument is annoyingly persuasive: philosophy, he maintains, traditionally aims at curtailing the pathos of living with the aloofness of logos (i.e., with sole reliance on logical/rational discourse). Psychoanalysis’s response has been ‘tear[ing] the mask from logos and testify[ing] to the deranging suffering of the animal subjected to language’ (p. 13). Clemens idealizes psychoanalysis, portrayed as a mercurial entity able to fill the void left by the demise of art, science, religion. Certainly, none of these great stimulants can reach where psychology can – and by ‘psychology’ here I mean ‘the road to the fundamental problems’ (Nietzsche, 1978, p. 36). Psychoanalysis tried to do just that, but the way this is presented here is one-sided. In line with orthodox psychoanalytic literature, the author brushes off other approaches as immaterial. As I read on, I see psychoanalysis slowly turning into the character in *Pinocchio*, Jiminy Cricket: he says all the deep, shrewd and cutting-edge things while changing absolutely nothing – much like ‘poetry’ in W. H. Auden’s acceptance. The author also sees psychoanalysis as an ‘anomalous anti-institutional institution’ (p. 5), forgetting that in the majority of its incarnations it has been a thoroughly bourgeois profession addressing thoroughly bourgeois forms of discontent, and that it joined psychiatry in policing individuals, as famously articulated by Deleuze and Guattari – authors routinely sidestepped by psychoanalysts or (as with Adam Phillips) astutely sublated.

When it comes to philosophy itself, Clemens goes out of his way to reconfigure Plato as heir to Aesop and Aesopic ‘slave speech’. Hegel too is invoked in a chapter dedicated to Aesop and his famous fables. Aesop, *aka* ‘Aethiop’, is the foreign, ugly, deformed slave who heralds the birth of prose. Prose begins with the slaves, Hegel wrote, and this was an important departure from alleged divinely inspired poetry; it was also the beginning of a relationship with things as natural, hence finite and

perishable. Is there a modern discourse which can claim a link to Aesop's prose? The question posed in the book raised my expectations. What will this be, I wondered – the modern realist novel, perhaps? After all, this is a medium capable of depicting *affect* (Jameson, 2013), and all the more relevant, given that repression was, for Freud, flight from affect, as Clemens himself reminds us. Slim chance. 'The modern discourse ... that bears the closest relationship to the Aesopic is psychoanalysis' (p. 103), the author opines. The route from Aesop to psychoanalysis is tortuous and the proposition of a link between the two controversial, yet Clemens sees it as an unbroken lineage which includes Socratism and Plato's philosophy. Is Plato an heir of Aesop? This sounds like a captivating idea, substantiated by scholars such as Leslie Kurke, though Clemens does not mention Bakhtin's or Nietzsche's view on the matter. The latter saw Platonic philosophy as an infinitely enhanced Aesopian fable but for reasons which are at variance with the gratuitous notion of Plato as a proto-socialist presented here.

The writing is at its best when unshackled from Badiou's holy grip and tackling the unholy grit, namely 'to reconstruct Lacan's own use of the [antiphilosophy's] term' (p. 6). The author invites us, among other things, to reassess the canonical view that places Big Pharma, the DSM-V et al. historically *after* the now 'archaic' talking therapies. Freud effectively emerges as one of the founders of psycho-pharmacology. He sponsored drugs long before the 'listening-to-Prozac' craze began, and this was because he was *on* drugs. Influenced by Aschenbrand's studies on the effects of cocaine on the human body, after completing his medical studies in 1884 he became interested in cocaine, and came to believe that it could be effective in the treatment of morphine addiction and alcoholism. He recommended it to his friend Ernst Fleischl-Marxow, who was addicted to morphine. 'Within a few days Ernst couldn't stop using the substance and he eventually died as Europe's first official cocaine addict' (p. 31). Freud's research on cocaine was exposed 'as outrageously unscientific ... and the Viennese medical establishment heaped opprobrium upon Freud's name and work' (ibid.). The debacle proved valuable in the long run for it made possible Freud's turn from neurology to psychology, 'from explanations that presume that pathologies have a material, organic basis to explanations based on the primacy of "sex" as available through interlocution' (p. 40).

Elsewhere, echoing Jonathan Lear, Clemens spells out the unspoken manifesto of the contemporary neuroscientific/cognitive quest to solve the mysteries of consciousness. This makes for an entertaining read:

- That we can find out all we need to know about human behaviour and motivation by conducting polls, examining democratic votes, choices made in the market place, and changing fashions. In short, human motivation is essentially transparent.
- That all human disagreements are in principle resolvable through rational conversation and mutual understanding.
- That we have reached the 'end of history'.
- That all serious psychological problems will soon be treatable either by drugs or neurosurgery.
- The only form of psychotherapy that is needed is rational conversation. ...
- 'Freud is dead': his account of a 'talking cure' – psychoanalysis – has about as much validity as invoking Zeus. (p. 21)

In articulating a shrewd critique of the above ethos, psychoanalysis has a valid ally/ interlocutor in Humanistic Psychology – what a pity, though, that parochialism and claims of VIP access to the theatre of *psyché* hinder a potentially fruitful dialogue.

If traditional philosophy has been forever busy with the histrionic question of being vs non-being and its compulsively repetitive ontological variations, psychoanalysis chose to bypass ontology and focus instead on the *unrealized*. It did so through a sensibility open to science *and* literature. This was true in the heady Freudian days of a pre-ontological unconscious as in the times of Lacan, who succeeded (with the aid of structuralism and de Saussure's linguistics) in bending the unconscious to the task of providing a temporary ontology. Clemens wants us to believe that this is somehow still true today – that psychoanalysis is still relevant in spite of the concerted assault of pop psychology, new age spirituality, the pseudo-empirical sciences and the pharmaceutical industry. The argument is expressed in such a thoroughgoing and wide-ranging manner that makes this reader want to acquiesce. I want to believe, with the author, that the assault is not a real threat, that psychoanalysis hasn't been relegated to the museum of archaic curiosities. I want to believe that it has much to offer other than providing deep-sounding commentaries on cinema and politics. I want to believe that there is more to the psychoanalytic legacy than a psychodynamic counselling manual for sticking the tags 'transference' and 'counter-transference' over any therapeutic interaction. If I sound gloomy, this may be because I report from the clinical trenches and the anguished voices of a medicalized public and an overly regulated profession, rather than from the clean mountain peaks of Badiouian eternalism.

Clemens underplays the influence that philosophers (particularly Nietzsche and Schopenhauer) exerted on Freud, but he correctly emphasizes that the very emergence of psychoanalysis is linked to the irruption of literature within science. He quotes a truly important passage in Freud's *Studies in Hysteria*:

The fact is that local diagnosis and electrical reactions lead nowhere in the study of hysteria, whereas a detailed description of mental processes such as we are accustomed to find in the works of poets enables me, with the use of a few psychological formulas, to obtain at least some kind of insight into the course of that affection. (p. 6)

But what is philosophy if not literature? I have never thought of philosophy as a monolith inextricably wedded to reason and automatically excluding unreason. There is a sound line of thought, running from Nietzsche's early writings and later articulated by Giorgio Colli (1975), which sees philosophy born in Dionysian 'madness', ecstatic pre-Euripidean drama, Heraclitean fragment rather than Socratism. If this view is too outlandish and 'romantic', one could then be reminded of American pragmatist Richard Rorty's notion of philosophy as literature (Rorty, 1989). It is puzzling that an imaginative and erudite scholar such as Clemens would accept so conventional a view of philosophy and shun, for instance, Deleuze's confutation of traditional philosophy's three fundamental misconceptions: truth, error and method (Deleuze, 1983), and ignore the existence, within philosophy, of a *counter-tradition* that has been, and is, informed by art, non-reductive science and psychotherapy.

One of the author's main concerns is our ability to listen, capture and treat the trauma of suffering. Science cannot do it. Philosophy cannot do it. Literature cannot do it, either; 'at least, literature cannot do it alone' (p. 7). We need 'a new discourse that interrupts science with literature' (ibid.). So far, so good; but the solution offered is 'a theory of mind that takes the problem of language as fundamental' (ibid.). Language here resembles the ghost of a forsaken deity coming to collect sacrificial offerings. Ontology itself is for Lacan secondary to language, merely 'the tributary of a poorly posed question, itself dependent upon an incompetent comprehension of language' (p. 55) – a view in turn wholly dependent on the linguistics of de Saussure, Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss but one that admittedly rewrote the unconscious as a language, declaring that to be human is to be a *slave to the signifier*: 'Ultimately, man is a slave to the signifier. To be a speaking being for Lacan is thus not to be free, but to be enslaved; and the very act of speaking is itself not freedom but evidence of coercion' (p. 83).

Needless to say, the lessons of post-structuralism, a cultural event contemporaneous to Lacan, are ignored. Equally overlooked is Merleau-Ponty's important distinction between *spoken speech* and *speaking speech*: we are born into language (spoken speech), yet in striving to articulate our ambivalent human situation we formulate language anew (speaking speech). Therapist and client stumble and stutter, trying to find the words for an experience – if we have a word for it, that means it is already dead.

Clemens' point is nonetheless significant – language and coercion *are* incestuous bedfellows: think of torture, judicial torture, the 'elicitation of speech from a resisting body' (p. 124). Think of the regimentation of certain types of speech and the 'elicitation of language from the infant, the one-who-is-not-yet-speaking but whose destiny is always already to be caught in the chains of language' (p. 125). Language has a sacramental value, too: think of the role of the oath in the creation of political communities. The oath is, for Giorgio Agamben (an important philosopher discussed by Clemens in two chapters, one on melancholy, the other on torture), 'an affirmation, an invocation, and a profanation' (pp. 132–33), preceding divisions between magic, religion and law. If the essence of the human being is 'to be the animal with language' (p. 138), a man or a woman can become a *Muselmann*, a slang word literally meaning 'a Muslim man', a figure discussed by Agamben (1998, 1999) and barely named in the studies on the destruction of European Jewry. The *Muselmänner* were those in the camps who had reached such a state of physical decrepitude and existential disregard that anyone around them hesitated to call them human. Clemens explains:

As survivors such as [Primo] Levi testify, if the Nazis perpetrated mass industrial genocide in the death camps, another kind of personage emerged as an unintended, unexpected by-product. Often denominated the *Muselmann* – although there were regional variations in the jargons of different camps – this personage is crucial for Agamben in so far as what philosophy had always maintained was the essence of the human (its capacity for language) had been fully stripped from the *Muselmänner*. The *Muselmann* survived as a biological organism, but could no longer be tolerated as human not only by the Nazis, but by fellow camp inmates themselves. The classical figure that Levi invokes in this regard is that of the Gorgon, the creature that to look on

directly entails one's own paralysis and destruction, and he defines the *Muselmann* as 'he who has seen the gorgon'. (p. 138)

Going back to the book's central claim of psychoanalysis as an antiphilosophy: (Lacanian) antiphilosophy relies on philosophy, particularly Hegel. This is welcome news, in a way, if one considers that Hegel (the Hegel Lacan knew, Kojève's Hegel) is blatantly ignored in contemporary psychotherapeutic discourse. Chapter 2, 'Revolution or Subversion?', reinstates the importance of Kojève's 1933–1939 Parisian lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* which were attended by Bataille, Merleau-Ponty and Lacan, among others. They represented a pivotal moment in the development of French existential phenomenology: Kojève's take on Hegel was to have a lasting influence on Sartre, de Beauvoir et al. which begs the question: why is Hegel conspicuously absent from all existential/phenomenological/humanistic psychotherapy and counselling trainings and writings? Kojève's lectures were pivotal: they 'identified Hegel as the crucial philosopher of modernity' (p. 70); they identified anthropology, temporality, the master–slave dialectic and recognition/acknowledgement (*Anerkennung*) as crucial to his philosophy. 'Recognition' is in turn crucial to the birth of self-consciousness and inter-subjectivity, as we understand it – it *precedes* the 'philosophy of encounter' epitomized by Buber's I–Thou's on which much contemporary dialogical therapy is based. It also stresses 'the importance of conflict in human affairs and how essential it is in shaping an understanding of self and kinship' (Bazzano, 2014, p. 204) beyond the raptures of encounter. Even a cursory study of passages from Hegel's *Phenomenology* in contemporary psychotherapy and counselling trainings would provide a healthy antidote to the sentimentality that currently dominates dialogical therapy. We need to know Hegel first and then critique him: Lacan develops his position alongside as much as *against* Hegel, and ultimately finds error in the latter's philosophical rigour. There is much we can learn from this Lacanian position. The notion of a positive, liberating, 'absolute' *knowledge* is undermined in favour of what Clemens wonderfully calls 'the loopiness-without-end of subjectivity' (p. 73). What is under fire here is Hegel's hyper-systematization as much as his dialectical teleology that envisions our emancipation one day in the future. Lacan won't have any of this: 'slavery will always be with us – and it is us' (ibid.).

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