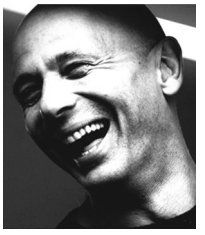
SELF & SOCIETY, 2017
VOL. 45, NOS. 3–4, 366–382

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group



BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by Manu Bazzano

When the sun bursts: the enigma of schizophrenia, by Christopher Bollas, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2015, 224 pp., £7.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0300214734. Reviewed by Julie Webb, Psychotherapist

I open a theater in myself
where a false slumber plays
a pointless trick
a disgrace that makes me sweat
(Bataille, 1998, p. 92)

I have been thinking for a while now that therapy is an accident waiting to happen. In researching to write something about that idea, I stumbled upon *When the Sun Bursts* by Christopher Bollas. Bollas writes in such a way that warmth and compassion drip off the page with unassuming strength, courage, and a genuine thirst for understanding and communication. I wept upon reading his delicate yet candid descriptions of his encounters and subsequent learning from those experiencing schizophrenia, and yes in perhaps a cringeworthy and clichéd way, I left tears upon the page; tears not only for the wondrous descriptions of compassionate encounter, but also for the illumination upon my own thoughts, and so creating a kind of meeting point too. In a strange and poetic way, I felt met.

This book is not about modality or diagnosis; this is a book about humanity and is therefore pertinent to all those engaged in the mental health field, as well as being informative for any person interested in what it is to be human per se. As readers, we are implicitly and sometimes explicitly asked to accept the author's language game and frame, and he often tells us how he is using the terms he uses, sometimes pitched against the way the terms may have been used by others before him. In this way, I noticed there was no need for me to 'fight' his narrative or pick it apart as though trying to solve a puzzle. All I needed to do was just follow his description and accept the terms of his language like that of a poem, perhaps echoing the way that he accepts such terms in order to follow the schizophrenic patients whom he works with, and subsequently describes for us. The text of course is also about the psychotic and schizophrenic process: a narrative that tells how schizophrenics find ways to both hide the self and house the self.

The narrative reveals human availability from the open stance of the therapist, in a way that those opposed to being open to the *other* demonstrate a significant human lack. It is therefore also relevant in the wider macro-context of our social and political culture whereby there are calls to remove the *other* or else build walls to ensure separation. This feeds my own concern that calls such as these contribute to our inability to integrate, assimilate or at the very least accommodate at the micro level those more intimate parts of our own psychic lives. Bollas does make comment on the cultural and socio-political impact upon those experiencing psychotic break and schizophrenia too, thus demonstrating our inextricable ties to the wider world even in our perceived and often experienced isolation. So make no mistake, this text is also about relationship and relatedness:

> There is one thing that at the beginning of schizophrenia – one crucial factor – that is vital to whether the person has a chance to survive and reverse the problem. It is crucial that there is

> someone for the person to talk to for long periods of time, perhaps several times a day, for days and possibly weeks. (p. 9)

As Bollas points out, the above statement is nothing new. We know that talking through disturbances with an 'empathic other is curative' (p. 9), and yet it still feels quite radical to be stating this in a culture that predominantly promotes short-term, quick-fix, technique-based cognitive talking therapy, medication and sometimes incarceration and that insists that the mind *is* the brain. All of which leave the schizophrenic in relational isolation and meeting 'with a process parallel to schizophrenia itself: radical incarceration, mind-alerting actions, dehumanization, isolation' (p. 9).

While the author offers up descriptions about the process of schizophrenia – its birth often in teenage years, development, and the sometimes agonizing shift into adulthood – he does not (refreshingly) attempt to offer up a cause for such a condition, stating transparently that he does not know what causes it and that attempting to answer such a question would be to ask 'what causes the being of human being' (p. 8), a statement relevant to other mental disturbances and even the everyday existential challenges of human life generally, a statement that offers up humility against a backdrop of twenty-first-century hubris. As a person-centred therapist, it is also gratifying to have my own position confirmed, in what is fast becoming the *radical* person-centred paradigm set against the mainstream backdrop of the cognitive and corporate approaches to a person in trouble.

Bollas writes from a wealth of experience and knowledge, utilizing ideas from a rich source of practitioners, writers, poets and thinkers that punctuate this piece of work with intelligent and cohesive presentation. This is not a textbook. You will not find statistics or any evidence-based claims to theory here; in fact, the author states quite categorically that his evidence, such as it is, is gleaned from his relationships with his patients during therapeutic process. Although the book is divided into three parts – autobiographical early learning; the heart of theory; psychotherapy of schizophrenia – the book is descriptively and poetically written and seamlessly flows as though reading a novel. You have to start at the beginning and read to the end. Try and dip in and out, and you will find that you are compelled to read what came first and what comes after and how phrases such as the *schizophrenic gaze*, *schizophrenic fetish*, *schizophrenic emptiness* and *schizophrenic atmosphere* truly fit.

The autobiographical punctuations charting the development of the author's own professional career highlight the significance of the patients with whom he worked as part of that autobiographical development. Bollas describes for us his own humble source of learning, and creates for the reader a source of learning too: this book is a gift to all of us. A significant aspect of the text is the account of personal encounters with the author's patients. I notice that I am loath to call them 'professional encounters' as it seems to be counter to the spirit of what is communicated here as the *enigma of schizophrenia*, and in an important sense the enigma of being human at all. These personal stories aid an articulation that schizophrenia is a perfectly understandable reaction to our often judgemental and precarious world into which we are thrown at birth and even pre-birth. Those of us without schizophrenia manage to stay fairly steady in the world and are able to acknowledge and integrate unconscious process when it reveals itself. We can converse with it, steady it if need be, make a change if required, make an autonomous choice, and perhaps deny it too, without the level of psychotic rupture that the schizophrenic may endure. Somehow, most of us are able to 'make use of denial in order to live within the illusion' (p. 163) that existence is safe, and in turn create a self-narrative that by and large catastrophic things won't happen and that they are extremely 'inhuman' if they do. We are very adept at creating a steady sense of self in order to exist within our metaphorical *Disneyland*. We all create our little fictions, a narrative that will provide us with some safety and sense of knowing, even if somewhere deep down we sense this is not quite the truth

of things. It is not just that all selves are in a way 'mythical', but that the purpose of the myth we create communicates what we value to the world. At every moment of encounter with another, we have a chance to confirm, edit or rewrite the myth and alter our values. On some level, we can accept that there is no real or fixed self to cling to, so we adapt and live our lives in a constant state of existential creativity as our own way of living in an illusory safe and ordered world.

Drawing upon the work of Maurice Blanchot, Bollas presents a description of the human need for the unconscious 'I' to aid living as a kind of anonymity, crucial to being able to bear existence. This appears to be an ability the schizophrenic does not embody as he is unable to

> forget his authorship and is weighed down by a world that seems constantly to demand from him some form of understanding, enlisting his anxieties, keeping him always on the edge of a precipice over which he might fall into the stream of unconscious thinking. (p. 121)

It is from this scene that we are left with an idea that by the time the unconscious is conscious, it is in a very important sense an afterthought, used by (I use the term loosely) the steady-self (those of us without schizophrenia) to assimilate ourselves of, and into, the world. By and large, we will create our 'steady' self-myths and take part in a variety of accepted social norms:

> In order to be normal we must lessen our conscious realization of the complexity, both of our own minds – how they shift in the internal representation of our moods and views of others – and of participation in group life. By joining in with this collective diminishment of intrapsychic and group reality, most people get along adequately within their lifespan, even enduring profound hardships without breaking down. (p. 163)

The schizophrenic creates a mythic world often projecting unacceptable or vulnerable aspects of herself through inanimate objects such as the examples given on page 126, where a vacuum cleaner is used to represent aggression, and the cleaver represents a violent part of the self. These patients know where to find their aggression or violence, which in turn creates a kind of safety in knowing their place. Bollas describes for us the process of *thingness* and a redressing of symbolic order via language as part of the psychotic process. Existence becomes an 'encrypted representational world' (p. 126) in order to keep us safe and free from the paranoia of accusation, responsibility and punishment, keeping history and minds located in the world of objects as 'their own projected universe' (p. 135). This is an example of what Bollas describes as 'private poesis … private expression' (p. 122) that makes sense to the patient but is often senseless to others and is often the agonizing poetics of the human spirit trying to find a way to survive in this bittersweet world.

Bollas praises highly the creativity of the schizophrenic, claiming that it can be 'in its own right, a kind of art form' (p. 125). Relating the process to writers of inner experience such as Georges Bataille, it is a kind of cutting through that destabilizes symbolic order in a type of necessary death of the *assumed* symbolic self, to reveal the impossibility of a raw truth of inner experience, 'what can't be grasped in any way, what we can't reach without dissolving ourselves' (Bataille, 2014, p. xii).

It may be crass to say that by the end of the book, despite the agony of the patients described here, I also felt a little envy. It is testament to the artistic offering from this author, to be left with a feeling of lack in my own human experience; that I keep myself this side of the schizoid line, even if sometimes only just.

References

Bataille, G. (1998). *The collected poems*. (Mark Spitzer, Trans.). Chester Springs, PA: Dalfour Editions.
Bataille, G. (2014). *Inner experience*. (Stuart Kendall, Trans.). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Julie Webb
Psychotherapist
jwebb.tlc48@yahoo.co.uk

https://doi.org/10.1080/03060497.2017.1374648

The power of negative thinking

Grand Hotel Abyss: the lives of the Frankfurt School, by Stuart Jeffries, London, Verso, 2016, 448 pp., £10.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1784785680. Reviewed by John Mackessy, Psychotherapist

The Frankfurt School (FS), the subject of Stuart Jeffries' impressive history, has been regarded by many on the left as a group of passive, self-indulgent, hyper-intellectuals. According to Lukács, the sort who might reside in the *Grand Hotel Abyss*. They gaze upon benighted humanity, sigh deeply and return to the Alban Berg violin concerto. Another of their contemporaries, Brecht, wasn't fond of them either.

If one thing is made abundantly clear in Jeffries' account, it is that if, as Lukács, Brecht and others assert, the Frankfurt School had an aversion to revolutionary action, they had an even stronger commitment to revolutionary thinking.

The members of the Institute for Social Research, to give the FS its proper name, likely to be familiar include Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse. Adorno, Horkheimer and Habermas were other leading lights. Notably, Walter Benjamin, though not formally a member, was intimately connected with the School. Theirs was an ambitious trans-disciplinary enterprise, and their writings range across politics, political economy, social theory, psychology, psychoanalysis and what has come to be known as cultural theory, which they pretty much founded. Thankfully, Jeffries presents the results of his extensive research in a very readable, though not excessively simplified manner. Repressive desublimation … is not shirked, but not made impenetrable either.

The first two generations of the FS were mostly Jewish, frequently from wealthy 'capitalist' families, and indeed this initially Marxist institute was itself established on funds from a wealthy Jewish industrialist. However, if of somewhat bourgeois origin, these Frankfurt scholars also suffered at first hand Hitler's Germany, the failures and inhumanities of revolutionary communism and the impact of authoritarianism, both of the left and right. They knew the meaning of destruction, disillusionment and dreams betrayed.

While reading, I was frequently put in mind of Gramsci, who wrote of the need for 'an optimism of the will' and 'pessimism of the intellect', and who saw 'the challenge of modernity' as being 'to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned.'

Well, on those grounds, the FS must be counted largely as a failure. Apart from the rare flare-up of transgressive optimism, such as in Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, they were a pretty