

Steiner Meets Bollas: Destruction and Birth in Therapy and the Healing Power of Breakdown

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In a series of previous articles in *Self & Society*, I attempted to bridge several of Rudolf Steiner's ideas with mainstream psychology by relating Steiner to Winnicott (Kuttner, 2020), intersubjective psychology (Kuttner, 2021), and Daniel Stern and Christopher Bollas (Kuttner, 2022). I see this article as one such further attempt – taking excerpts from several of Steiner's more elusive and complex lectures, especially for first-time readers, combining them with psychoanalytical ideas, and attempting to integrate them in the therapy room. Specifically, I will introduce Steiner's notions of the elemental forces of birth and death in relation to the experiences of breakdown and healing as detailed in Christopher Bollas' work.

Part I: Pathology Arising through Avoidance of Destruction and Birth

Consciously encountering destruction and birth

Destruction in the psychological sense is not a destruction of material objects, but a process that involves some kind of disharmony, mis-attunement, miscommunication, disturbance or trauma. Destruction can also be positive: through something not going according to plan, through hardship, one can discover something about oneself and be strengthened, and reparation can take place (Winnicott, 1969). One example is the experience of insight that often occurs in therapy. An insight is a type of 'destruction' in the positive sense: when we wake up to a truth about ourselves, it can 'destroy' or render meaningless all previous insights or narratives we had held about

ourselves. This destruction allows something new to be born.

Rudolf Steiner notes that 'the processes of birth and death happen every day and every hour here on earth'. Similar to Erich Fromm who notes that modern freedom involves inner work that was in the past more the responsibility of one's immediate community or religion, so Steiner notes that processes of birth and destruction must now be taken hold of consciously if we are to progress and not fall prey to these processes.

Pathology as avoiding destruction and birth

One can experience the avoidance of taking hold of these processes of destruction and birth with patients who cling to illusory narratives that are often defences that distance them from waking up to painful insights about themselves. This avoidance of truth – or -K, as Wilfred Bion would call it – is an attack on or destruction of the healthy connection that we can create with ourselves and those around us.

The patient who is unable to make decisions, and who constantly avoids making decisions, is avoiding a destructive process because by making a decision, the patient must face the unbearable reality that other possibilities would be seemingly 'destroyed'. Such a patient says to himself: 'It is far better to not make a decision because then nothing "bad" can happen' – not realising that the avoidance of a decision (i.e. destruction) is perpetuating a cycle of pathological repetitiveness and destruction.

A man may avoid proposing to his partner after ten years of living together with her, paralysed by the fear of something 'changing' if a

decision is made, but in so doing, his relationship to his partner sours and becomes embittered. Paradoxically, the avoidance of consciously allowing oneself to experience a destructive process brings about long-term destruction (illness).

Many adolescents often seem stuck in a place of indecision, even unable to decide in the therapy hour which game they want to play, preferring the therapist to choose. Such teenagers often think of all the things they could or might do, they are often in anguish over something they may think they have said to someone that was embarrassing, frightened they have created some ‘ripple in the water’, always trying to do ‘nothing’ in case something will be ‘destroyed’ or be created.

A patient who obsessively uses an online dating app, keeping up a correspondence with a ‘partner’ for weeks and possibly months on end without ever meeting the potential partner, is in an illusory birthing process or coming-into-being process. Such a woman may live with the illusory belief that something is coming into being, deluded by her emotions and feelings based on a virtual correspondence. She is left in a state of limbo, not meeting the virtual partner in person. In such an experience, often the initial excitement will slowly peter out or be met with ultimate disappointment, only to be followed by a new online dating correspondence. Real encounters are avoided by means of illusory encounters, and thus nothing new can ultimately be born.

In these small examples, which we encounter often with patients today, we can see how avoidance of destructive and birth processes allows the patient to be with a certain feeling of comfort that ultimately imprisons him in a pathological pattern of thinking, feeling and behaviour.

A child playing incessantly on the computer is experiencing a completely virtual world. In this world he experiences a certain degree of omnipotence in the sense that he never really

‘dies’ – he always has more ‘lives’ or can play again. No true responsibility for his actions is felt – there is a certain comfort and illusory phantasy world being experienced. The child is stuck in Winnicott’s object-relating stage, in which the infant is not truly separate as a subjective being. Many children today come to therapy in this state. They will hold on to the belief that they can meet friends in a much more fun and constructive manner online than through physical meetings, where arguments and disagreements can occur.

Online, the child avoids having to face an organic, living and dynamic sense world consisting of uncertainty, imperfection, and the possibility of loss and coherence (and thus destruction), and thus the child cannot experience true loss and repair. The child actively avoids destructive processes, and thus avoids the capacity for true love to develop. As Winnicott notes (1969), for example, in the experience of an infant who upon the disappearance of the mother says ‘I have destroyed you’, upon the mother’s return, the infant experiences reparation and can now also say: ‘I have destroyed you, I love you’. Children growing up addicted to computer games are stuck in the object-relating stage that perpetuates a symbiotic experience with the environment, avoiding the destruction process that ultimately fosters object use and separation from the other – thus allowing true intersubjective experiences to develop.

Part II: Breakdown and its Healing Power

The winter experience of breakdown

Meeting prematurely the experiences of destruction and birth can lead to what many patients experience as a breakdown. We can examine this breakdown through descriptions by Steiner (1998), who presents two polar experiences that take place beyond our normal waking consciousness: the realisation surrounding the limitations of one’s knowledge, and the realisation surrounding the

meaninglessness of one's pleasures in life that relate to destructive and birth processes, respectively.

The narratives that have been part of one's identity that are now felt as hollow and illusory bring home to the patient the limitations of his knowledge. With this realisation, one experiences the gaping abyss between one's knowledge and true reality. Steiner describes this as an experience of 'knowledge without being', a realisation that all one's knowledge that has given coherency to one's life has been founded on the past and does not fit with present reality. Knowing or knowledge, as McGilchrist (2019) explains it, 'is already in the past, no longer "alive" but re-presented' (p. 164). Thus, what we already know is part of a death or destructive process. This breakdown of knowledge is further described by Steiner as a shock that can lead to disassociation, an experience that is cold and death-like. Steiner describes pupils of ancient spiritual paths having this unconscious experience in this way:

I have experienced in my Mystery Winter-wandering that which in the Cosmos is actually past. The snow and ice-masses of my magic winter have shown me what destructive forces work in the Cosmos. I have learned to know the impulses of destruction in the Cosmos, and my numbness on the way to my Mystery Winter-wandering was indeed the announcement that I should see into that which was present in the Cosmos as forces which come over out of the past into the present, but arrive in the present as dead Cosmic forces. [Steiner quotations from online]

We can find in Bollas' (2013) descriptions possible parallels to this experience, when he notes the beginnings of breakdown in the patient's

inability to focus on work tasks or the demands of ordinary life... thoughts that seem odd and off-centre... an inability to hear what other people are saying or to recollect words into coherent sentences. In this state, the self... is losing its way of being. (ibid., p. 27)

Further, Bollas describes the

apparent loss of affect. It has, in fact, not been lost; it has been cast off in order not to be experienced. Another common defence is stilted or rhetorically mannered speaking, as if the person is reading from a telephone book.

The summer experience of breakdown

Steiner (1998) describes the realisation of the limitations and insignificance of one's joys and pleasures in life as an experience of 'phantasy without truth'. All one's hobbies or interests or transient pleasures seem insignificant, and one comes to realise that one has been distracting oneself to death in order to avoid facing life as it truly is. It is the realisation that one's daily distractions have not been allowing a desired future to manifest in the present, and that one must connect to a deeper purpose if one wants to allow one's future plans to unfold. This brings with it an upsurging of emotions that can bring physical discomfort that can overwhelm the patient. Steiner describes it thus:

One is in a fever condition of the soul, a fever condition of such a nature that things which have power, because of their inner nature, to work on the soul, manifested themselves first as bodily symptom-complexes. The pupil felt as if he were being inwardly pressed, as if everything were pressing hard, his breath were pressing hard, his blood in every direction were pressing too hard. The pupil experienced a great anxiety, even to a deep inner distress of soul.

Further, Steiner describes:

The pupil now knew that that which was there as magic Summer before his consciousness in continuous change may be likened to the impulses from the vast Future of the Cosmos. But now he did not feel himself as he did before, dismembered into his senses as a multiplicity; he felt himself now truly drawn together as into a unity. He felt himself as drawn together into his heart. And following on, the pupil said to himself, 'In that which the dream of Summer gives, which I inwardly

experience in my human being, in that lies the future’.

At this pole, an emotional experience of great force rises up and is felt acutely in the body. This may be similar to what Bollas (2013) describes when he says that:

the mental pain of the individual’s suffering is now being released through memory, understanding, and evoked emotional experience (p. 82). ...it is an inner experience like ‘a poem without words; the wind moving through a landscape and animating the natural world. It allows the analysand’s emotional life to become the force of cure.’ (p. 83)

Bollas further describes that there is also ‘elemental pain...people cry, scream, yell, thrash about’, (ibid.) and that:

what is projected is the elemental: the ‘thingness’ of being a living being... one patient said she felt that all aspects of being herself were pushing up, through her, into her mind.... It was as if she (was)... watching herself as a mutative being, forming and transforming before her senses. (p. 84)

A breakdown can be seen as the experience of these two polarities, the breakdown of knowledge, a cold, numbing destructive experience related to the past overwhelming the patient, and the breakdown relating to the feeling that all pleasure and joy have been meaningless, a bodily experience of heat, of something rushing up and flooding the patient, an experience of a longing from the future seeking manifestation in the present. Steiner (1998) describes the confluence of these two experiences thus:

When the pupil had gone through this experience there came to him the experience that these two conditions followed each other. He looked, let us say, upon a landscape consisting of meadows, ponds and small lakes. He looked upon ice and snow. This changed into whirling, falling snow, like a mist of snowflakes. This prospect gradually grew dimmer, and finally vanished into

nothing. In the moment when it vanished into nothing, when he felt himself to a certain extent in empty space, in that moment the summer-dreams rose on the threshold. And the pupil had the consciousness: ‘Now Past and Future meet in my own soul-life.’

Dangers in encountering the limitations of experience

When we realise the limits of our knowledge and pleasure, we come to an unconscious place within us that is the experience of breakdown, or what Steiner calls the ‘centre of destruction’. Steiner (1985) notes how this centre of destruction has a tendency today to be projected out into society. He describes how

this centre which is isolated in man, and should work only within him, at the one single spot within, where matter is thrown back into chaos, now breaks out and penetrates into human instincts... this is evidenced by the destructive forces appearing today... it is a fury of destruction thrust out of the inner being of man into the outer world... into the social sphere.

We can understand these destructive processes as the beta elements of Bion, undigested and unintegrated experiences beyond the limits of our normal knowledge and daily pleasures. Steiner’s description of ‘thrusting out’ destruction into the outer world bears similarities to what was later developed as object introjection and projection by psychoanalysts such as Klein (1946) and Fairbairn (1954), who describe the destructive and unbearable anger, sadness or pain that is intolerable and that is ‘thrust out of the inner being of man’ into other human beings, where they exert their control and bring about ‘destruction’.

Steiner (1985) notes that delving down into unconscious memory, beyond our limited awake consciousness, will bring about illness, when he says that

if, therefore, a person ventures into this inner being of man with the same frame of mind with which he penetrates as far as memory, then he enters a realm where the being of man has an impulse to destroy, to blot out, that which exists there in material form.

Steiner is implying that going beyond our daily waking consciousness can literally destroy us; and as Bollas (2013) notes, more often than not, it has been the norm for patients who experience a breakdown to be hospitalised and medicated to help them manage their breakdown. According to Bollas (ibid.), this is an avoidance of the breakdown resolution, and often a missed opportunity to bring about true healing. Patients are then left with a ‘broken self’. He means by ‘broken self’ people we would call ‘normal’ but ‘that have a breakdown, often in early adulthood, during which they were left without adequate therapeutic care... it is this breakdown in adult life that has left a distinguishing scar upon their being’ (p. 14).

Transforming the ‘character armour’ or ‘hardened Ego’ in a breakdown

Steiner (1985) implores us to not avoid meeting this destructive place deep within us. He notes that ‘if the centre of destruction is there without any awareness of it, this is much worse than if man takes full cognizance of it, and from this conscious standpoint enters into the development of modern civilization’.

But how does one become cognisant of this ‘centre of destruction’ or what Bollas (1987) would call ‘the unthought known’, and learn to transform it without the need for hospitalisation or medication? How does one ‘catch the patients before they fall’ into a breakdown?

Bollas (2013) describes how, through many years of experience, he has developed a method of holding and containment that allows the patient to break down without the need for hospitalisation or medication. He describes the need to dedicate longer periods of time to these patients, often seeing them daily for at least 90 minutes for periods of several weeks, allowing a

holding and containing environment for the patient to break down safely, a place where the therapist brings clarity of thought, empathy and listening to the patient’s breakdown experience. In this process, ‘the character armor established by the person would dissolve...(p. 13)... and through analysis, his defenses and character positions can be analyzed and transformed’. Bollas notes that he has developed this technique over more than 30 years, and has managed to help all his patients through breakdown without the need for hospitalisation.

Steiner describes a ‘hardened Ego’ – we could understand it as hardened with defences, and that the relinquishing of these ‘hardened’ parts of ourselves comes about when one develops the capacity of ‘devotion for the world, when one has the desire and the urge to surrender oneself entirely to the world’. He further notes that ‘love must permeate the act of cognition if one desires to penetrate beyond the sense perceptions. This devotion, unconditional acceptance, and love for the truth are part of the containment process (Bion, 1962) between therapist and patient that allows the destructive forces to be transformed, instead of being thrust out into the social sphere.

A new therapeutic faith

Steiner brings two verses that relate to the experience on the one hand of cold, winter, destruction, the past, the breakdown of knowledge; and the experience of heat, summer, the future, the breakdown of pleasure.

In the verse relating to the experience of winter, Steiner writes:

I am the Image of the World
Behold, I lack Being
I live in thy knowledge
I become now in thee Consecration.

How are we to understand this verse in relation to therapy? With ‘I am the Image of the World’, the patient is expressing a certain narrative or understanding or image of himself that he tells himself and the therapist – a narrative that in

therapy may fall apart. With ‘Behold, I Lack Being’, the patient is stating the reason for being in therapy – the insight that his life narrative lacks any real connection to reality. His knowledge is rendered false. In the third line, we could imagine the therapist replying, ‘I Live in thy Knowledge’. Living in the patient’s knowledge, the therapist begins to deconstruct the patient’s biography, deconstructing it in this sense being the process of interpretation. The therapist comes to understand the reasons for the patient’s narratives and beliefs.

In the verse relating to the experience of summer, Steiner writes:

I am the Image of the World
Behold, I lack Truth,
If thou wilt dare to live with me
I will be thy Consolation.

The first line is the same as in the winter verse as so needs no further elaboration. In the second line, ‘Behold I Lack Truth’, we can imagine the patient realising that all his actions that had brought him joy in the past are now seen as illusory, and are distractions from meeting his true self. In the third line, ‘If thou wilt dare to live with me’, we can hear the therapist asking the patient to allow himself the experience of devotion and trust in a therapeutic process, despite the fear and possible pain involved in such a process.

Faith and embodiment

In the last lines of the winter verse and summer verse, we read, ‘I Become now in thee Consecration’ and ‘I Will Be Thy Consolation’, respectively. The word for Consecration in the original German is *Bekanntnis*, which means something like ‘an avowal of faith’. The word for consolation in the original German is *Behagen*, meaning something like a deep inner bodily contentment or comfort. What these two lines may express is what, in psychological terms, is often termed the therapeutic alliance. Steiner here is, however, pointing to a deeper meaning of this alliance, to a faith, not in the religious sense but in the sense of trust in the

capacities of the patient to survive and recover from a breakdown. In this process, the patient can also recover and experience themselves anew, right down into their bodily organism, so that they will feel this new sense of *Behagen* – a deep inner sense of contentment.

These descriptions by Steiner find echoes in Bion’s negative capability – the ability to have faith in not knowing, and in Bollas’ (2013) descriptions of faith and trust in the individual’s ability to eventually heal. As Bollas describes it, the patient has in a way kept faith that one day, his or her unremembered and indigestible experiences will be met by a trusted adult who will be able to help him properly digest and integrate this past experience.

Bollas (2013) notes that ‘a breakdown is a paradoxical gestalt; a moment of self-fragmentation is, at the same time, a moment of coming together inside the self. In the end it is formative more than it is fracturing’ (p. 69). He goes on to beautifully describe the act of faith an individual unconsciously places in himself to one day be able to ‘redeem’ those early destructive experiences that took place beyond our limited awake consciousness and memory (Steiner), in the realm of *the unthought known*. Bollas (2013) describes how:

in the world of therapy, many adults will seek people who have designated themselves as ready to receive, contain and process these stored self states. By this time, however, although some people will remember the event that originally disturbed them, many do not. It may be present as a feeling of something they know to be inside them, but it cannot be thought. (p. 72)

Thus:

before a breakdown people may seek psychotherapy because they have a feeling, from within the unthought known, that something disturbing is on its way to some form of representation. The emotional experience that constitutes the release of the unthought known in the therapeutic

environment is the fulfillment of an unconscious promise that the child makes to the self. When there is finally somebody there to receive the inexplicably painful, the confusing, the horrifying, most people who are occupied by deeply disturbing self-states will break down. (p. 73)

Bollas (2013) continues:

As the analyst indicates their appreciation of their ego's capacities, the person can see they have attributes and ways of dealing with life that are sources of strength. This allows self and ego to operate under the kind of negative capability that we might term ego faith. (p. 78)

By having faith in the patient's ability to meet destructive processes consciously, and faith in the patient's ability to take hold of new insights that are based in true reality, instead of 'knowledge without being' 'knowledge is imbued with reality, and the 'wintery and dying past' can be overcome in the sense that Steiner describes. In this process, the patient can start to feel a new relation to his body. Many of us can have the experience that the more authentic we are, the more will we feel this authenticity resonating in our body. A new inner bodily contentment is experienced, full of soul warmth, warmth being a force that Steiner describes as facilitating embodiment – the warmth of enthusiasm that connects us to our deepest longings in life. Instead of 'phantasy without truth', the patient can envision a life of 'phantasy imbued with meaning', a life of authentic pleasure and activity that is imbued with meaning purpose, a future coming into being not consumed by a 'feverish summer heat', but instilled with the warmth of hope.

Thus, therapy is a place where we can practise what Steiner emphasised so strongly in his lecture series on the Fall of the Spirits of Darkness as the task of our time: the practice of actively encountering the elemental forces of death and birth that relate to the conscious limitations of our knowledge and pleasures in life. In such a manner, we can break down

safely, and healing can begin. New possibilities begin to appear – we can find a balanced middle between summer and winter, thinking and volition, knowledge and phantasy, and inner isolation and being lost in the world. We can begin to feel in our heart a new faith and trust in ourselves and the world, and to experience a new-found authenticity and embodiment in our actions. As Steiner describes it, 'something new arises. Then in this very source of destruction the seeds of future worlds arise. Then we, as human beings, take part in the coming into being of worlds'. (Steiner, 1995: lecture 2)

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SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

“One does not become fully human painlessly.”

Rollo May (1909–1994)