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Book Review

Manu Bazzano (ed.) (2021) *Re-Visioning Existential Therapy: Counter-Traditional Perspectives*, Abingdon, Oxon, 360 pp, ISBN 978-0367365615, price (paperback) £28.99 , index.

Reviewed by **Alex Gooch**

Themes of home, renunciation of home and nostalgia for home resound through the essays collected in *Re-Visioning Existential Therapy.* In editor Manu Bazzano's introduction, and in the subsequent fiery essay co-written with John Mackessy, the charge is laid out: existential therapy has become too domesticated, too 'homely'. It has become staid, predictable in its habits, no longer as unsettled, or as unsettling, as an existential therapy worthy of the name should be. Politically, it has made itself too complacently at home in the status quo, when it should be throwing its weight into progressive and radical political programmes. For many of the writers here the trouble goes deeper than this, though, to the very philosophical sub-structure of existential therapy, and specifically to the problematic figure of Martin Heidegger, who looms much too large over current thinking in this area.

Albert Camus understood the absurd as the irreconcilable contradiction between 'my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle' (Camus, 2005, p. 49). As Greg Madison puts it in his contribution to this collection, 'existential philosophy depicts us as homeless, thrown into a world that cannot meet the claims of the human spirit' (Madison, 2021, p. 142). The worthy response to this situation, Camus teaches, is not to shirk the burden of this impossible contradiction, but to bear the full weight of it.

One way to shirk the burden of the absurd is to claim that there *is* a final, rational, reasonable principle to be discovered; we convince ourselves that it is possible, 'to escape the transient phenomenal world by emigrating to eternity', as Ross Crisp puts it in this volume (Crisp, 2021, p. 185). The charge levelled by Bazzano and at least some of the other writers here is that Heidegger dangles before us the false promise of the final, the eternal, the absolute, in the form of his concept of Being. Heidegger tempts us to believe that we, and our clients, might someday 'come home' to Being once and for all – or, what may be even worse, to convince ourselves of the pernicious falsehood that we have already attained this blessed state of Being, that we have already arrived 'home'. Similarly, Heidegger's 'authenticity' looks suspiciously like a 'true self', another version of that final and absolutely redemptive destination which we might be tempted to believe that our clients, or we ourselves, can someday come home to.

This disavowal of 'home' and commitment to untrammelled openness is most unanimous and uncompromising when it comes to the issue of therapeutic method. The contributors to this volume seem generally to be committed to a strictly method-less approach to the practice of therapy; hence there is relatively little to be said here about practice. It is at the level of theory and conceptualisation that this collection primarily engages.

Contemporary thinking about and in existential therapy, according to many of the writers here, has been too much seduced by Heideggerian wishful thinking. One of the central concerns of this collection, therefore, is to warn us against the reification of Being and authenticity, and against the metaphysical lotus-eating to which they tempt us. The essays collected in *Re-Visioning Existential Therapy* instantiate various strategies for revivifying and politicising the thought of existential therapy, and getting out from under the long shadow of Heidegger. Some do this by looking back at other seminal writers within the existential tradition: Merleau-Ponty is invoked frequently, with his call back to the body informing Diana Mitchell's piece on ballet and that of Gabriella Ricciardi Otty on striptease; and the book's editor Manu Bazzano's own essay in appreciation of Merleau-Ponty is one of the collection's centrepieces. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are also revisited, and Mo Mandic extends a welcome invitation to engage with the thought of Lev Shestov, a writer who has received far less attention in the English-speaking world than he deserves.

Other writers look outwards, to other movements and traditions beyond existentialism. Psychoanalysis is frequently present as an interlocutor for existential therapy, and inspiration is sought from a range of individual writers and thinkers from Eugene Gendlin (in a piece by Tatiana Karyagina), to B.R. Ambedkar (Michael R. Montgomery), to Judith Butler (Rebecca Greenslade), also touching on psychedelics (Niklas Serning and Nina Lyon) and Buddhism (Jeff Harrison). Some even seek to shake the existential therapy establishment out of its torpor by challenging expectations around the formal structure of discourse; Pavlos Zarogiannis in particular presents his reflections in a challengingly Joycean form.

Much of the thought presented here is committed to 'the difficult realisation that there will be no final homecoming' (Mackessy & Bazzano, 2021, p. 21), neither to Being, nor to a 'true self' discovered in authenticity, nor to any kind of definitive narrative of oneself or of the world. We are urged to think, rather, in terms of renouncing such final homecomings; thereby we might 'become receptive to exteriority and the unknown' (ibid., p. 22), and perhaps we might even 'delight, as a Buddhist might, in the centrifugal emptiness of self-nature' (Harrison, 2021, p. 204).

And yet, and yet. If one way to shirk the burden of the absurd is to cling to the possibility of finding a final home, the other way is to deny that we are subject to the desire for a final home, to deny our susceptibility to the siren appeal of ultimate destinations and our liability to fall into absolute beliefs despite ourselves. As Mark Edmundson puts it in *The Death of Sigmund Freud*, 'The sane, or relatively sane, self is constantly being duped by this Truth or that…. His life is one of constant self-criticism, and even then he's perpetually surprised at how often he falls for another idol' (Edmundson, p. 242).This dynamic of ever-frustrated nostalgia for a home resurfaces in Gabriella Ricciardi Otty's complex paean to striptease; stripping, for her, is a release from constrictive truths and an emergence into 'embodied consciousness' (Ricciardi Otty, 2021, p. 68), understood in Merleau-Ponty's terms; and yet she recounts coming to recognise that she is seeking and expecting a 'homecoming to the body', a homecoming which itself is of course never fully achieved. The ineluctability of the longing for home, and the tantalising impossibility of attaining it, re-echo through her piece.

In fact, several writers here show no interest in the life of the homeless happy wanderer, and straightforwardly concern themselves with the establishment of a narrative 'home'. Tellingly, these tend to be the writers most explicitly allying themselves with concrete political projects; after all, if one declines to endorse any

narrative at all and remains indefinitely in a state of open, receptive unknowing, one thereby exempts oneself from involvement in political programmes, as Socrates would argue. In Rebecca Greenslade's chapter, she affirms the value and importance of narrative understanding – the important question is *which* narrative. She writes of helping clients to reinterpret their 'interior', 'introspective' experiences critically, as occurring within larger socio-political narratives which merit socio-political rather than merely introspective responses. Yana Gololob writes powerfully of the place and role of therapy in the modern history of Ukraine, dominated by the national trauma of the Holodomor famine, and the re-traumatisations which have followed in its wake. For Gololob, the work of therapy is explicitly understood as contributing to the reparation of Ukraine as a home, and far from overturning the foundations in the name of openness to the new, 'the urgent task [of therapy] is to rebuild the sense forming foundations that have been violated' (Gololob, 2021, p. 154)

How, then, does one acknowledge the need for narrative, the longing to make a permanent home in a narrative, and the impossibility of such a homecoming, without illegitimately denying any of these experiences? We are urged to accept 'the difficult realisation that there will be no *final* homecoming' (Bazzano & Mackessy, 2021, p. 21, emphasis added), but two of the strongest pieces in this collection eventually concede the need for, and the inevitability of, temporary, tentative homecomings. Grand understandings of ourselves and the world may be unable to provide us with permanent homes, but our and our clients' need for 'a night's lodging' in one narrative or another is with us to stay. In one of the collection's most articulate and compelling essays, Jeff Harrison articulates this with laudable modesty: the therapist can listen to the client, and bring to light inconsistencies and problems in her story; nevertheless, 'the client may need another narrative, another partially conceptualized sense of self and possibility on which to string the pearls (and pains) of existence, but hopefully she will find a less restrictive one, one with more "play" in it' (Harrison 2021, p. 208). Bazzano likewise concedes that we need more than unstructured openness; we need narratives of emancipation; though when these narratives do their job too well, when they start to look too much like solid eternal structures where one might dwell for ever, that's when the trouble starts. He makes this point in the context of his luminous closing essay, meditating on the 'failures' of Simone de Beauvoir and novelist Nelson Algren. If all our homecomings will eventually fail, Bazzano suggests, then perhaps we should look more generously on failure.

The attitude towards narratives eventually taken by Bazzano and Harrison bears some striking similarities to the notion of a tradition as advanced by Alastair MacIntyre (1988): a set of ideas and practices which can constitute a home of a sort, but which are always changeable and always changing over time, as the tradition encounters either intolerable inconsistencies within itself or new situations which require adaptation. In these moments when its dominant stories prove inadequate, the tradition might look back to its roots for resources with which to tackle the present crisis, or it might look outwards and seek renewal and a new vision through dialogue with other traditions. Admittedly, MacIntyre may be a rather uncomfortable ally here, given his rejection of Nietzsche as well as the conservatism which he blends with his Marxian radicalism; nevertheless, from this perspective, we can see existential therapy itself as a tradition, and in *Re-Visioning Existential Therapy* we see that tradition hearteningly alive, vigorously contending with its inner contradictions and seeking to re-imagine itself, as every healthy tradition periodically must.

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