
BACKGROUND BOOKS

PSYCHIATRY IN AMERICA

All societies, not just 20th-century America, confront the mysteries of the deranged, disturbed, or eccentric mind. In the past, they have variously responded by elevating the "touched" to positions of considerable influence or mystical significance, by ostracizing or killing them, or by subjecting them to harsh physical or psychological ordeals in the hope of effecting a cure.

The crucial question is: Who is really deranged?

"Every culture, to my knowledge, has some category that can be called 'madness', but madness is not always clearly distinguished from other categories of thought and behavior. At what point do we draw the line between innovative and insane, between visionary and psychotic?"

So writes Bennett Simon in **Mind and Madness in Ancient Greece** (Cornell, 1978, cloth; 1980, paper). Among the Greeks, "deviance" was often a relative matter. Plato, for example, assumed that any political dissident was by definition disturbed; he therefore proposed in his *Laws* that atheists, as dissidents, be placed for five years in a *sophonistērion*, or "house of sanity."

Whether symbolically in their myths, or explicitly in their medical and philosophical treatises, the ancient Greeks seem to have anticipated everything from psychotherapy and the interpretation of dreams to biological explanations of melancholy and hysteria.

Not surprisingly, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and other early European psychoanalysts felt the tug of Greek antiquity. As Simon observes,

Freud "saw Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* not merely as a convenient illustration of his newly discovered 'complex' but as an almost close-to-conscious attempt at analysis of the inner workings of the mind."

The influence of Freud on the practice of psychiatry is difficult to overestimate, and the Freudian literature is consequently immense.

The man's own work—beginning with a "Report on my Studies in Paris and Berlin" (1885) and ending with "Anti-Semitism in England" (1938)—is available in the 24-volume **Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud** (Norton, 1976). Most of the better known monographs (e.g., **The Interpretation of Dreams**, 1900; **Totem and Taboo**, 1913; **Civilization and its Discontents**, 1930; **Moses and Monotheism**, 1939) are also available individually in paperback from W. W. Norton. Freud was a superb writer, whose prose style drew high praise from authors as diverse as Thomas Mann and Herman Hesse.

Freud was fortunate in his first biographer, Ernest Jones, whose hagiographical **The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud** (Basic, 1961, cloth & paper) helped place the Viennese psychoanalyst on the high pedestal he still occupies. Two recent biographies provide a more balanced perspective—Ronald W. Clark's **Freud: The Man and the Cause** (Cape and Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1980) and Frank J. Sulloway's **Freud: Biologist of the Mind** (Basic, 1979).

One of the better overviews of Freud's ideas and their impact in the United States is **Psychiatry in Ameri-**

can Life (Little, Brown, 1963), a highly readable, though dated, collection of 15 essays edited by Charles Rolo. The book, whose contents originally appeared in the *Atlantic*, includes chapters by Brock Brower (on "The Contemporary Scene"), John Seeley (on "The Americanization of the Unconscious"), and Alfred Kazin (on "The Language of Pundits").

Kazin blames "Freudianism" for a deterioration in the quality of modern American fiction. "It is impossible," he writes, "for the haunted, the isolated, the increasingly self-absorbed and self-referring self to transcend itself sufficiently to create works of literature."

David Stannard has a different bone to pick. In **Shrinking History** (Oxford, 1980, cloth; 1982, paper), he looks askance at the influence of psychoanalysis on historiography. Among the gems he culls from the prose of the new psychohistorians is this one: "Bosch, of course, is just a more finicky da Vinci. And da Vinci is just [Martin] Luther with a talent for drawing."

Ironically, contends psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim in his latest book, **Freud and Man's Soul** (Knopf, 1983), the conventional interpretation of some of Freud's ideas may be the product in part of faulty translation. For instance, translators have customarily rendered Freud's *die Seele* into English as the coldly impersonal "mental apparatus," rather than as "the soul," as Freud intended.

Examples of such heavy-handedness are numerous. The inevitable result, in Bettelheim's view: Few readers of Freud in English appreciate that "he was a humanist in the best sense of the word."

Freud's ideas penetrated the United States in the years before World War I. But there was psychia-

try in the United States long before there was Freud, and a mental health "establishment" was in existence by the mid-1800s. David Rothman, in **The Discovery of the Asylum** (Little, Brown, 1971, cloth; 1972, paper), and Gerald Grob, in **Mental Institutions in America** (Free Press, 1973), cover the period from colonial times to the beginning of the 20th century. Though bureaucratic histories in some respects, both books are clearly written and easily accessible to the lay reader.

The Psychiatric Society (Columbia, 1982), by Robert Castel, Françoise Castel, and Anne Lovell, brings the story up to the late 1970s, with particular emphasis on the evolving role of state and federal governments, and of organized psychiatry as a professional guild. The volume concludes with a critical survey of the broad array of "psy services," from gestalt therapy to primal scream to bioenergetics, now available in the United States.

What makes this book especially interesting is that it is written from an outsider's perspective (two of the authors are French) and with a European audience in mind (the book was first published in France). Noting that the United States is the country where psychiatry "has penetrated most deeply into the social fabric," the authors warn that "the American dream of mental health is not just a curiosity. . . . If we can learn to see it as in some ways a model of what is in store for us in Europe, perhaps we can keep it from becoming the nightmare of our tomorrows."

Among U.S. critics of psychiatry, the most prominent has long been Thomas Szasz. Szasz's argument is aptly summarized in the title of his first book, **The Myth of Mental Illness** (Harper, rev. ed., 1974). He con-

tends that, strictly speaking, the term "illness" refers to an abnormal biological condition; it should not, therefore, be applied to most forms of psychiatric distress.

Szasz attributes the "mental illness" notion partly to a tacit compact between the public and the psychiatrists, sealed during the 19th century. The latter agreed to regard certain types of individuals as "sick"—thereby providing a justification for putting these people away. The former agreed to regard the latter as "doctors." The compact was ratified by many patients, since it relieved them of personal responsibility for ethical or spiritual dilemmas.

Psychiatry is often viewed only in the abstract. Two staff writers for the *New Yorker* provide chapter and verse in a pair of recent books.

Janet Malcolm, in **Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession** (Knopf, 1981, cloth; Vintage, 1982, paper), profiles a pseudonymous New York analyst, Aaron Green, "a slight man with a vivid, impatient, unsmiling face." Green talked with Malcolm for weeks on end about his patients, himself, his colleagues, and the nature of his vocation.

Green compares psychoanalysis,

when it works, to the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "when the human characters wake up and rub their eyes and aren't sure what has happened to them. They have the feeling that a great deal has occurred—that things have somehow changed for the better, but they don't know what caused the change."

There are no magical Pucks and Oberons in Susan Sheehan's **Is There No Place on Earth for Me?** (Houghton, 1982, cloth; Vintage, 1983, paper). Sheehan chronicles the life of a paranoid schizophrenic named Sylvia Frumkin, from grade school through adulthood in New York, in and out of mental hospitals, from one examining psychiatrist and round of drugs to the next. Sheehan was given complete access to Frumkin's psychiatric records and did most of her reporting on the scene.

The result is a solid indictment of contemporary mental health care in the United States. *No Place* is also a profoundly depressing story. One comes away from the book hoping only that psychotherapy and drugs, despite their current inadequacies, will one day be able to help the Frumkins of the earth.