

DESIRE-DELIRIUM

On Deleuze and Therapy

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Every delirium invests History before investing some ridiculous mommy-daddy
(Deleuze, 2004, p 235)

Broken Paths

My route to Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) has been labyrinthine: I found him, lost him and found him again several times. My first, incandescent contact with his writings happened in the 1970s, the heady days post-May '68 when he published with Felix Guattari a dynamite of a book, *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983). Too busy being alive and with little time for systematic reading, I nonetheless remember surfing excitedly through its puns, *double-entendres*, and dizzy new concepts. The gleeful onslaught on academic decorum was thrilling – with Freud depicted as “a masked Al Capone” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p 118) – and I was overjoyed by the unorthodox inspirations behind the book. One of these is the work of the great playwright and certified ‘paranoid schizophrenic’ Antonin Artaud. He was the man who practically invented what came to be known as physical theatre and who transported Nietzsche’s insights on Greek tragedy onto the stage. Artaud saw writing as “a process that ploughs the crap of being and its language” (Ibid, p 134). At the time I understood *Anti-Oedipus* to be providing a sophisticated philosophical backdrop to RD Laing’s ‘anti-psychiatry’ when in fact it went much further.

Anyhow, the 1970s went by in a jiffy; other anti-intellectual escapades ensued, and yours truly forgot all about Deleuze – until recently.

Learning from Disappointment

The basis of my current mode of life and practice are Zen, existential psychotherapy, and the person-centred approach (PCA). I learned and continue to learn from all three. I am also disappointed by the ways in which all three are being assimilated in contemporary culture, their critique of the Tradition conveniently adjusted to fit the *neo-positivist* view. In relation to Zen, the fashionable thing is to create links with psychotherapy in ways that bypass the Dharma's otherness. But Zen cannot be reduced to a set of 'mindfulness' techniques for wellbeing. This is a popular misapprehension that merely replaces techniques of hard science for 'techniques of the soul' without disputing the dominance of *techné* in human life – arguably, the very root of the problem. The ineffability of Zen teachings, their ambivalent and non-utilitarian nature simply cannot be reduced to a quantifiable and sellable finished product (Batchelor, 2007). It cannot be categorized as 'trans-personal' either, for Zen as I understand it is a somatic practice straddling spirituality and materiality, transcendence and immanence, its inspired ambiguity declining to commit to an existing metaphysics.

In the case of the PCA, Rogers's legacy of far-reaching egalitarianism and quiet, compassionate radicalism is seemingly undergoing a conservative turn, one that is obsequious to the dictates of the market. And I am under the impression that a similar development is well underway within existential psychotherapy, which is increasingly dominated by an *onto-theological* approach which pushes to the margins embodied experience and situatedness.

I am not of course dismissing altogether the directions taken by mindfulness, person-centred or existential therapy at present, but registering my disenchantment with this state of affairs. The embracing of neo-positivism by many is perhaps motivated by the wish to be seen as

serious professionals with respectable posts in reputable institutions, or out of a legitimate aspiration to be no longer pushed to the principled and colourful margins. Some may have made this choice strategically, genuinely believing that the master's tool can be used in dismantling the master's house, and out of an aspiration to offer empathic presence to a pathologized/medicalized public. Some among us attempt to quantify the unquantifiable, speak of right brain via left-brain lingo, and produce evidence that all boxes are ticked and moments of genuine meeting duly measured.

A Traitor's Quest

At this very juncture, sickened to hear what, to my sensibility, were beginning to sound like grovelling noises, it became tempting to look elsewhere.

I respectfully discarded CBT and the neuro-scientific, neo-essentialist groupings. One option was psychoanalysis. Feeling like a traitor, and going against the endemic tribalism of my person-centred training, I began to look into the 'enemy's camp'. Already during my philosophy years I had admired Freud's agility when dealing with notoriously slippery thinkers such as Goethe, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer, and had been in awe of psychoanalysis' ability to comment on bourgeois culture (of which it is an integral part), widening the view from the analyst's room to cinema, literature and the everyday. I had also noted how hopelessly naive its humanistic counterparts had been, clutching at notions borrowed from Heidegger, Buber, Levinas and presenting them as if they belonged to a matrix altogether different from psychoanalysis. At times, copious humanistic borrowing extended to writers within the psychoanalytic tradition, especially John Bowlby, Melanie Klein and the Object Relations theorists – with mixed results.

I began to wonder whether seeds could be found within psychoanalysis of a convincing anti-positivist stance that could temper the present makeover of psychotherapy into psychotechnics. Two notions stood out: *free association* and the *unconscious*. But what had happened to these key psychoanalytic ideas? Have they not been disowned by contemporary psychoanalysis and psychodynamic therapy? Free association robs the analyst of her claim to authority, reshuffling the cards in favour of *process*: is that why free association has almost vanished? As for the unconscious, if it is mentioned at all, it is to emphasize that its contents need to be made conscious, which in itself is a worryingly one-sided interpretation of Freud's poetic dictum *wo Es war soll Ich werden* (*where it is, I shall be*). In this interpretation, it (*id*) is playground for the all-conquering 'I' rather than a bewildering locus of learning and transformation. The above position – making the unconscious conscious – is a concise description of the neo-positivist stance and of its fantasy of bending the ineffable to the almighty human will.

The Ghost of Anti-Oedipus

Say it's Oedipus, or you'll get a slap on your face
(Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p 45)

Does psychodynamic practice too dance to the neo-positivist tune? When it dawned on me that all orientations had virtually accepted neo-positivism, I felt really and truly stuck. Now I had nowhere to turn. It did cheer me up somewhat to think that all I could do now was to meditate, focus on clinical work, and get on with living-and-learning.

Then one summer night I found online an interview with Deleuze, 'D is for Desire' (Boutang, 1996); it brought it all back in a flash: the 1970s, anti-psychiatry, anti-Oedipus, the phantasmagorical derision of psychoanalytic expertise, the denunciation of our societies of

control, the wild, generous vagaries of a turbulent decade and above all the joyful pledge to overthrow capitalism and its ideology of greed.

In the interview, Deleuze comments on *Anti-Oedipus* and defends its main tenets. He expresses the wish that the book may be rediscovered in years to come. At the end of the twenty minute interview I sat mesmerized, gazing at the blank screen, feeling as if I had been reminded of something I had lost. How on earth had I managed to forget it in the first place?

In the interview, Deleuze summarizes the three (still eminently valid) tenets present in the book:

- 1) *The unconscious is not a theatre*, the place of representation where Hamlet and Oedipus and Ophelia go on and on playing their scenes but, crucially, *a factory*, a place of incessant production. Deleuze's tangential inspiration here is Artaud who referred to the body (and especially the sick body) as an overheated factory. From Artaud, Deleuze also borrowed the notion of the 'body without organs', which is a way of saying the body is an assemblage *with no underlying organizational principles*. The notion of the unconscious sketched above is aligned with what Deleuze (2004) calls "desiring-machine" (p 232), a notion at variance with the biological theory of mechanism which underpins psychoanalysis and associated with a view of desire seen as a continuous chain of flow, withdrawal, interruption and flow again – crucially, one which is entirely devoid of meaning.
- 2) *Delirium* (madness, profound mental distress, including schizophrenia) is not solely about the small familial scenario of our childhood. It is closely linked to desire: desiring means to a degree becoming delirious. What we rave about when we rave is the world – as well as history, geography, tribes, deserts, peoples, races, climates (Stivale, 2011).

- 3) *Desire* (in itself a kind of delirium) *is creative*; it is highly imaginative, it constructs *assemblages*, ie things in the plural, the collective and the multiple. It cannot be reduced to one thing such as mother, father, phallus and so forth. When we desire something, we set out creating a new assemblage or aggregate:

We said something really simple: You never desire someone or something; you always desire an aggregate” (Deleuze in Boutang, 1996).

The three tenets highlighted above are at variance with psychoanalysis, a practice that Deleuze and Guattari set out to demolish with the same vigour and panache with which Laing & Co. attacked psychiatry. Similarly, in other texts Deleuze (2004) outlines the contours of an “anti-psychoanalytical analysis” (p. 276). He sees analysts act like priests and policemen in relation to desire. Not only they find rigid explanations for it, tracing narrow origins and an equally constricted set of interpretations. They also police desire’s natural tendency to create new assemblages, and this for very good reasons: assemblages have a highly *subversive* and transformative potential. The uprisings of May 1968 in Paris and elsewhere in Europe was one such example – the creation of a collective assemblage, an affirmative delirium aimed at uprooting a world that had become repressive and rotten to the core.

The notion of *desire* presented here is not that of the perennially unsatisfied craving manufactured by our consumerist society. It is also different from the hungry-ghost covetousness the Buddha warns us about. Both of these are closely linked and grounded in the self’s fundamental sense of *lack*. But in Deleuze’s conception, there is no self behind the production of desire: desire is another name for the persistent movement of living-and-dying. Like Spinoza’s *natura naturans* and Nietzsche’s *will to power*, desiring-production is autonomous and impersonal. We have a choice, one that is relevant, I believe, in the therapy

room: we can say *yes* to the incessant movement of becoming, and this may in turn open our experience to joy *and* sorrow. We can also say *no* to the innocence of becoming and choose instead the static consolations provided by systems of life-denigration. We can affirm desire or subject it to a reductive interpretation, which eventually turns itself into pantomime:

Desire does not depend on lack, it's not a lack of something, and it doesn't refer to any Law. Desire produces. So it's the opposite of a theatre. An idea like Oedipus, the theatrical representation of Oedipus, mutilates the unconscious and gives no expression to desire. Oedipus is the effect of social repression on desiring production. Even with a child, desire is not Oedipal, it functions like a mechanism, produces little machines, establishing connections among things. What this means in different terms, perhaps, is that desire is revolutionary. This doesn't mean it wants revolution. It's even better. Desire is revolutionary by nature because it builds desiring-machines which, when they are inserted into the social field, are capable of derailing something, displacing the social fabric. Traditional psychoanalysis, however, has turned everything upside down in its little theatre. It's exactly as if something that really belongs to humanity, to a factory, to production, were translated by means of representation at the *Comédie Française* (Deleuze, 2004, p 233)

Beyond Familialism

Desire or delirium (or rather desire-delirium) is “a libidinal investment of an entire historical milieu, of an entire social environment” (Deleuze, 2004, p 275). It cannot be understood solely in terms of the family. Mum & Dad are important to some degree. After all, we come into the world via a dwelling. At the same time the home, “the dwelling of stone and clay and abode of primary relations” is embedded into a larger context; it is “open to a wide world into which we are thrown” (Bazzano, 2014, p 205). In Deleuze's words:

We say that the problem of delirium is not related to the family, that it concerns mommy and daddy only secondarily if it concerns them at all (Deleuze, 2004, p 235).

Passing Notes on Longing

What Joanna liked about Akio was, among other things, how radically different he was from her: he belonged to another ethnic and social group, one that is as far removed from her own

upbringing as it is imaginable. His temperament too is very different from what she had been used to before with her previous partners. They met when she was travelling in the Far East; their love affair had been short-lived and intense, and she still thinks and dreams of him. Her desire for him is visceral, overwhelming, and all-consuming, but their current circumstances are in the way: the long distance, their individual work commitments as well as familial and affective attachments all create great obstacles to establishing a more 'real' relationship.

My initial understanding to this client's dilemma veered towards configurations of *lack*. Before I knew it, I was thinking of how we could trace the genealogy of her longing back to attachment issues, early familial scenarios, not least the important occurrence of her father's early death. I also mulled over more textbook-style responses: issues of self-worth and the likes, perhaps her inability to build 'realistic' relationship with people where she lives and works, plus her tendency to look for what is unreachable and even impossible. Yet there was no way of explaining away the longing she often talked about. It was vividly present in the room: the way she sighed from time to time, the way her gaze took on a remote quality whenever she talked about Akio.

She did not accept the impositions that circumstances enjoined on their love. She envisioned a life of constant travel; it was travel that brought her love and it was travel, an existence lived outside the constraints of job and family, that made her more alert and open to her experience. I felt secretly annoyed by what I saw as a pointless rebellion and an adolescent need for a fuzzy notion of freedom and idealistic 'nomadism'.

All the same, with issues of self-worth lingering in the back of my mind, I found myself praising her sincerely, being more accurate in my interventions, offering from time to time

descriptive challenges, trying to highlight the sheer impracticality of her predicament. But I also felt that I needed to bring the longing itself to the centre of our exploration. One evening after she left, I sat by myself musing over this. I felt that there was something ‘poetic’ about her longing. I was dissatisfied with the word ‘poetic’ and discarded it right away. Then I remembered a poem quoted somewhere – or was it a quote with two poems in them? – that I had read months ago. From what I remembered, it *praised* longing itself; it didn’t see it as need. I could not find the quote but managed to bring back to mind their contents and their authors, their meaning and resonance indelible. The first was by Ibn al-‘Arabi, a thirteenth-century Sufi poet quoted at times by Ted Hughes. It said something like *O Lord, /nourish me not with love/but with the longing of love*. The second quote was by the poet René Char; in speaking of poetry, Char defines it as (I paraphrase it) *the realized love of desire which has remained desire*.

Could I *be* with that longing and not be enticed to somehow pathologize it? Could I refrain from trying to bridge it with intimations of ‘realistic solutions’? Could I meet Joanna’s deep desire as longing for otherness, as desire for the impossible, as aching symptom of the tragic poetry of human life? Could I be with her nomadic spirit and put aside the notion that ‘psychological integration’ has to mean a sedentary life with a steady job and a family? Could it be that our loves and deeds, our thoughts and dreams are conditioned by the hold of a static view of existence? On nomadism in general, on nomadism as an exciting philosophical stimulant, Deleuze had very interesting things to say. For him, nomadism is a way of life outside of the organizational State; it is movement across space and in contrast to the rigid confines of the State. In *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deleuze and Guattari (2004) write:

The nomad has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points (water points, dwelling points, assembly points, etc.). But the question is what in nomad life is a principle and what is only a consequence. To begin with, although the points determine paths, they are strictly

subordinated to the paths they determine, the reverse happens with the sedentary. The water point is reached only in order to be left behind; every point is a relay and exists only as a relay. A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the *intermezzo* (p 380).

There are too many implications deriving from the notion of nomadism, particularly if we consider that mainstream eastern and western cultures (including biblical narratives) have opted for more reassuring notions of territory and identity instead. I have discussed some of these implications in a book which also tackles the other difficult notion closely linked to nomadism, ie *exile* (Bazzano, 2012). What I want to propose here is that desire, delirium and longing naturally go beyond the familial boundaries within which western psychology has chosen to inscribe its study of psyche. If so, the picture of psyche we been painting over the last one hundred plus years will have to be modified.

From the Family to the World

Foucault has shown us how nineteenth-century psychiatry connected madness to the family. Psychoanalysis has maintained this link, and, in spite of its ground-breaking potential, ‘anti-psychiatry’ did the same. The greatest majority of therapeutic orientations, including those stating fundamental disagreements with psychoanalysis, emphasize the central role of the family. And even when father and mother “are interpreted in a symbolic way – the father symbolic function, the mother symbolic function – [this] doesn’t change a thing” (Deleuze, 2004, p 235).

Prevailing contemporary interpretations have imploded further, towards genetic explanations of schizophrenia and other forms of acute mental suffering, making familial and systemic readings look positively leftfield by comparison. I believe our task, however, lies in

expanding the vision further: rather than from the family to the brain and our genes, the movement needs to expand: *from the family to the world*.

There is a parallel here with the historical neglect of Hegel in phenomenological and humanistic psychotherapy (Bazzano, 2014) and the consequent upholding of “the mother-infant dyad into which psychoanalytic understandings of intersubjectivity are normally cocooned” (Ibid, p 206). This has perhaps prevented a contextualization of that very dyad within the “wider matrixes of history, society and culture” (Ibid).

The above can be rendered in a very different way. Here is Deleuze again:

All you have to do is listen to someone in a state of delirium: the Russians worry him, and the Chinese; I've got no saliva left. I was sodomized in the subway, there are microbes and spermatozoa everywhere; it's Franco's fault, the Jews' fault, the Maoists' fault. Their delirium covers the whole social field. Why couldn't this be about the sexuality of a subject, the relation it has to the ideas of Chinese, Whites, Blacks? Or to whole civilizations, the crusades, the subway? Psychiatrists and psychoanalysts have never heard a word of it, and they are on the defensive because their position is indefensible. They crush the contents of the unconscious with pre-fabricated statements like: “You keep saying Chinese, but what about your father? – he's not Chinese. – so your lover is Chinese?” It's like the repressive work by the judge in the Angela Davis case, who assured us: “Her behaviour is explicable only by the fact that she was in love”. But what if, on the contrary, Angela Davis's libido was a revolutionary, social libido? What if she was in love because she was a revolutionary? (Deleuze, 2004, p 273)

The task of a counter-traditional mode of thinking and practice is to actively resist dominant cultural narratives and go back to the original purpose and aspiration: serving people in distress, meeting them compassionately, practising *epoché*, ie the suspension of prejudices and assumptions but also the suspension of pre-established ontologies. A practice inspired by the fluid parameters of the counter-tradition will suspend the axioms and signposts of the tradition in the service of the client.

Expanding on the notion of desire-delirium as something that belongs to the world rather than to a de-contextualized family-unit, Deleuze differentiates between two poles of delirium:

The real problem of delirium is the extraordinary transitions between two poles: the one is a reactionary pole, so to speak, a fascist pole of the type: 'I am a superior race' which shows up in every paranoid delirium; and the other is a revolutionary pole: like Rimbaud, when he says: 'I am an inferior race, always and forever'. Every delirium invests History before investing some ridiculous mommy-daddy. And so, even where therapy or a cure is concerned – provided this is indeed a mental illness – if the historical references of the delirium are ignored, if you just go round and round between a symbolic father and an imaginary father, you never escape familialism and you remain locked within the framework of the most traditional psychiatry (Deleuze, 2004, p 235).

Creative Delirium

Priests, professors and doctors, you are mistaken in delivering me into the hands of the law. I have never been one of you; I have never been a Christian; I belong to the race that sang on the scaffold (Arthur Rimbaud, 1986, *Bad Blood*).

Anti-Oedipus, a post-May '68 text, reflected the assemblages of that period, a way to summarize the creative delirium of '68 and the ethos behind it, to clear the air from the oppression of a political, academic and psychoanalytic establishment who, as Deleuze saw it, had blocked off and repressed desire. Many misunderstood desire as a chance to have a party, or as mere 'spontaneity', but this misunderstanding mattered little, Deleuze says, since creative assemblages were nevertheless formed (with inevitably mixed results). Critics thought *Anti-Oedipus* an infamous legitimization of permissive behaviour. Deleuze's response was that he didn't see his task as that of a policeman or a parent; he was saddened in seeing some fellow travellers taking the road of excess and failing to reach the palace of wisdom, laying themselves open instead, through the indiscriminate use of drugs and drink, to the lethal intervention of state psychiatry which turned innocent people into a pulp state, the clinically schizo-state (Stivale, 2011). Deleuze did not actively prevent anyone from

doing what they wanted but felt nevertheless responsible for young people who got into trouble; he did what he could to help them.

Rather than ‘party all the time’, the message at the heart of the book is: don’t get psychoanalyzed; don’t become a victim of psychiatry; instead, “stop interpreting, go construct and experience/ experiment with assemblages, search out the assemblages that suit you” (cited in Stivale, 2011, Internet file).

Creation of assemblages is concurrent to a reframing of the notion of the unconscious and essential antidote in a psychotherapeutic landscape that has either reified it or dismissed it. Desire-delirium is an agent of impersonal change and collective transformation, and it can be aided rather than hindered by a psychotherapeutic practice able to recognize its emancipatory power, its ability to create the genuinely new outside the greenhouses of academia and institutions.

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