

# Do not Eat Soup with Chopsticks

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A review of **China on the Mind by Christopher Bollas**

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Bollas premises his exploration of the Chinese mind by saying that Eastern and Western modes of thinking are not 'different minds' but 'different parts of the mind'. Echoing a line of reasoning unbroken in his work, he sees Eastern thinking as leaning towards the maternal order and Western thinking as dependent on the paternal order. Sensitive to the dangers of oversimplification, he admittedly approaches the challenge with trepidation and is aware, one assumes, of how exposed the book's central claim is to the charge of championing a belief in a 'universal mind' which in a time of imaginative fragmentation is at best archaic. But then Bollas never shied away from regarding psychoanalysis itself (a practice he single-handedly brought back to vivid life from the mechanistic clutches and the knee-jerk interpretative compulsions of the transference/counter-transference brigade) as archaic, albeit in a positive sense, i.e. at variance with a *Zeitgeist* dominated by academic psychology, cognitivism and neuroscientism.

After a brief foray into Hinduism, the author focuses on the Far East and China. This part of the Eastern mind is founded on five 'mother texts', the intellectual foundation of the writings and sayings of the great sages and thinkers Lao Tzu, Confucius, Mo Tzu, Mencius, Zhuangzi. Echoing Winnicott's transitional objects, he sees the 'long periods of source-based interpretation' that followed as 'transitional moments' (p. 3). I wonder, however, whether reliance on classic books reveals a dependence on 'the paternal order' rather than the 'maternal'. Surely a 'classic' is part of the canon and as such inscribed in an order of discourse belonging to the solar, paternal *logos*. And how does Lao Tzu's anarchic celebration of spontaneity and naturalness fit the picture? The answer may lie in a fundamental split that Bollas imagines between spiritual cultivation and the ways of the world: 'The imaginings of Lao Tzu are passionate testimonies to the infantile epoch in human beings' (55), incompatible with societal and political life. This division is highly problematic and even mystifying. One of these two separate worlds is described, bafflingly, as a 'very private realm, cocooned by the self-hypnotic trance of meditation ... a derivative of the maternal order' and placed in stark contrast with the social and political dimension, in turn belonging to the paternal order. Strangely, Bollas seems to understand *Zen* univocally, as retreat from the world when the reverse is true: both *Ch'an* and *Zen* strongly emphasize *communal* practice, *sangha*; they emphasize ordinary life, ordinary mind, and the *bodhisattva* path of social and ethical commitment.

In stark contrast with Daoist spontaneity are the rules of behaviour spelled out in the Confucian *Book of Rites*, including not attempting to eat soup with chopsticks and refraining from singing when seeing at a distance a coffin with the corpse in it (p 43).

When comparing Western and Eastern thought, Bollas understandably relies on the Western 'tradition', but this sort of comparison does not come off in the long run. The ancient Greeks were interested, according to the author, in the radical opposition between the sensible world and the intelligible, 'a distinction which the Chinese would have rejected emphatically as artificial' (p. 8). But the above only applies to mainstream Greek thought. One only needs to think of Heraclitus and Pyrrho to find a much more nuanced position, strongly at variance with mainstream Platonism and the rationalism of Socrates. What Bollas forgets or chooses to ignore in his eastern journeying is the presence, alongside dominant western discourse, of a *counter-tradition*. The latter appreciates chance without the need to systematize it or to dress it in Platonic garb. It values fragmentation as well as what Blanchot, an author Bollas often quotes approvingly in his work, calls the *limit experience*. This oversight on the author's part is perhaps to be attributed to a matter of style. I see Bollas as a classicist who greatly values the intelligence of form. He is to Freud what Valéry was to Mallarmé – weaving a dazzling thread around the core teachings. In many ways Valéry and Bollas are the ideal disciples, composing their own web of precious dream-work, bringing to the edge of awareness what was latent, and even redirecting the primary thought along more audacious lines.

There may be another rationale to Bollas' classicism beyond matters of style and form, one of psychoanalytic cultural resistance, a need to shelter psychoanalysis under the umbrella of dominant western thought. Our relentlessly reductive *Zeitgeist* has exerted an indirect influence on psychoanalysis and large sections of humanistic therapy, pushing our difficult craft off into a tight corner, bullying practitioners into mechanistic formulae variously obsessed by *Sudoku*-style interpretations of transference and counter-transference, by M.O.T. therapy and lapses into the byzantinism of academic psychology, often relegating creative, hands-on practice to the sphere of literary criticism and social commentary. Yet one does not need to rely sheepishly on the 'tradition': formidable affinities and elective associations may be found within our own rich western counter-tradition and of course within eastern thought, provided, I hasten to add, that we allow ourselves to become exposed to its otherness.

A term Bollas often uses in his work is *aleatory*, which means 'dependent of the throw of a die', from the Latin *alea*, the dice. *Aleator* is the dice player. Human life is aleatory, made up of chance moments and this is mirrored in one of the key texts examined here, *The Book of Changes (I Ching)*. Already perceived by Jung as an exemplar of the Chinese mind 'less interested in causal logic than in the overdeterminations of life', the *I Ching* is a collective work, nothing less than 'the effort of a civilization to conceive its view of mankind' (p. 19).

In a revealingly Platonist move, Jung conceived synchronicity as something *more than mere chance*: '[Synchronicity] formulates a point of view diametrically opposed to that of causality [in that it] ... takes the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning

something more than mere chance, namely, a peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers' (cited p. 22). Surprisingly for an author well-versed in post-structuralism and aware of phenomenology, Bollas quotes Jung approvingly, not giving a second thought to that disparaging phrase, '*mere chance*'. Where Jung just *had* to dress chance in metaphysical garb, Nietzsche wrote of the *player* who plays well insofar as he is free from the 'spirit of revenge', accepting chance in a purposeless universe, refraining from relying on metaphysics of hope and consolation (Bazzano, 2006). This is not the 'tragic view', the calamitous reverse of the hero's quest recounted in the ur-texts of the West, but true playing, nonchalantly skirting the non-utilitarian realm of the sacred – what Merleau-Ponty called 'the emergent phenomenon' what Bollas himself, wonderfully re-visioning Freud, calls the unconscious or, in a particularly inspiring passage on Eastern poetry and Western poems, 'the matrix of unconscious affinities' (p. 38).

We do not know *what* is thought but we are taken up in the thinking of it, drawn into the matrix of unconscious affinities that have met with experiences in the real' (ibid)

The little Bollas wrote on Nietzsche is disparaging and often misleading, bafflingly associating him, in spite of one hundred years of sophisticated Nietzschean scholarship, with 'the fascist mind' (Bollas, 1992). In spite of the fact, one must add, that without Nietzsche there would have been no Freud or Jung or Adler. If invoking Nietzsche's spectre is too daunting a proposition, surely one cannot say the same for Blanchot. To a true sailor, Blanchot says, 'no allusion can be made to a goal or a destination' (1999, p. 445). The sailor loses himself in the dangerous voyage; he is the opposite of Ulysses and won't be tied to the mast but wants full exposure to the dangerous stirrings of diversion and *se-duction*, of being led astray. Bollas is right: with the herdsman, the sailor is the prototype of the Western hero (the gardener being the equivalent in the East). It is also true that for every Ulysses there is an anti-Ulysses; for every Oedipus, an anti-Oedipus.

The true 'fascist mind', which elsewhere (Bollas, 1992) he helped unmask, resurfaces unchecked in this book under spiritual guise. Given that 'contemplation may aim at the destruction of delusion, but the deluded mind engaged in contemplation will continue to delude itself' (p. 91), he goes on to quote the Korean commentator Wōnhyo's (617-686) stern advice to '*annihilate* all productions of mind' (ibid, my italics). The author associates this martial approach to psychic life with Winnicott's 'theory of the elimination of the mind-as-false-self' (ibid). I am no authority on Winnicott, but it is disappointing that there is very little mention in this book of the *Ch'an* masters, of *Zen* and of Dōgen in particular, for his nuanced perspective goes beyond the Manichean opposition between awakening and delusion portrayed above. The opposite of the 'fascist mind' would then be a mind that is curious about itself, open to all its manifestations. For example, in his discourse 'This mind itself is Buddha' (*Sokushin-zebutsu*), Dōgen gives a new twist to the meaning of *kuge*

('flowers in the sky', customarily understood as delusional thoughts distracting the meditator from contemplation). He re-translated *kuge* as 'flowers of *space*', as phenomena to be embraced and appreciated by the mind's thusness (*shinshō*), instead of being hurriedly and nervously rejected as distractions in a practice erroneously identified with quietism. It would be naive, Dōgen says, to identify the discriminating activities of the mind or consciousness itself with Buddha. In fact, Dōgen's point is strikingly similar to Bollas' (2007) own critique of formulaic ways of practicing psychoanalysis leading to a 'hypertrophied consciousness' (p. 81). It is also similar to what Blanchot says of Valéry's poetry: it is not only that a poem *houses* individual experience; the poem is the mind; to write a poem is to think, to inhabit the space of thought (p. 88): not a way of exercising the mind but the mind itself. The ways in which both Buddhism and psychotherapy are assimilated in current discourse bypass the subtlety of the unconscious and the more latent, mysterious aspect of psychic and poetic exploration. Bollas' work has been decisive in clarifying this very aspect for psychoanalysis and in opening up exciting new avenues of psychic exploration. What a pity then that instead of an encounter with the otherness of the Chinese mind across the centuries, the book uses the interpretative axioms of psychoanalysis to seemingly incorporate that very otherness.

#### References

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