

IRREGULARS

Abstract. This article, by a nonclinician, raises in a largely personal way questions about class and the pursuit of justice from a psychoanalytic perspective. It considers some of the channels that may have been opened—regardless of intent, or ideological leaning—by the interpersonal and relational schools and, more specifically, by Philip Bromberg's work on shame, dissociation, and self-states. The point here is not to fault Bromberg's psychoanalytic work for being insufficiently directed at social justice movements, but, rather, to make clear that the political project of psychoanalysis generally may find its more just future partly through unexpected channels of clinical thought and clinical practice.

Keywords: class, dissociation, justice, literature, politics, self-states, shame

GROWING UP, AS I DID, in the economically depressed 1970s, shopping for clothes meant periodic foraging among racks of not-quite-good-enough garments under low fluorescent ceilings in out-of-the-way stores. "Irregular" meant there was something wrong with the stitching, or the dye, or the cut. There might be a label missing, or a small hole. The flaw was not always evident, so sometimes you really had to hunt for it. But you knew the flaw was there, however minor and unobtrusive. Something not as it was meant to be, not conforming to the proper pattern or design. Etymologically, "irregular" means "against the king," the root coming from the Latin *rex*. But there was no frisson of transgression, no mighty sense of Oedipal overcoming to be found in wearing a pair of trousers with uneven legs or a sweater with stripes that didn't line up at the seam. Just a sense of being generally unfitted.

That sense of being unfitted for life with others, once acquired, is hard to shake, whatever deep store of early traumatic experience it comes from. Indeed, one's irregularities tend to expand with time, like the tiny hole that widens or the poorly hemmed cuff that frays. How shabby we imagine we appear, and often do! "Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes," Thoreau (1854/1985, p. 341) warns. But our old togs feel

conspicuous in new scenes, including the scene of psychoanalysis, which remains, for the most part, a very particular and exclusive kind of social scene for those who can practice it as a profession and for those who can avail themselves of its possible benefits as patients. And sometimes the old togs—the political subjectivity in which we have grown vested—are conspicuous, marking us out for a skeptical reception, or worse, even from those from whom we desperately seek help to handle our sense of the world's disconfirmations of us. To venture to face, with an analyst's help, what Philip Bromberg (2011) has recently called "the shadow of the tsunami," can be a difficult and even terrifying proposition. We have to find ways of coping in the psychoanalytic scene, as in so many other with certain kinds of shame, including the kinds of shame psychoanalysis itself engenders.

I myself head in and out of the consulting room, not as a clinician, but as both an economically precarious patient and as a largely self-tutored critic of the clinical and theoretical literature, which still has very little to say about class. It's hard for me to shake the sense of being always unfitted, too shabbily decked out, for the things I want most to champion—things for myself *and* for the world, as each might otherwise be, in the fantasies I carry with me wherever I go. These include fantasies of intimate subjective life more in keeping with the practical and speculative daring of that root meaning of "irregular": "against the king." More in keeping with that is, with the social radicalism I find at the heart, not only of Siegfried Bernfeld, Herbert Marcuse, D. W. Winnicott, Juliet Mitchell, Jessica Benjamin, Lynne Layton, Kimberlyn Leary, and others, but also in all of the best psychoanalytic writing, even where there is little or no reference to economics, history, institutional life, or the state's oppressive and marginalizing disposition toward the vast majority of persons.

In some of the Sherlock Holmes stories by Arthur Conan Doyle, there is a gang of scruffy, untutored, poorly mannered urchins that Holmes calls his Baker Street Irregulars. (Attentive readers of Philip's book, *Awakening the Dreamer* [2006] will recall—and perhaps at some point, I hope, I will have shared—his penchant for these stories and their milieu [p. 5].) These young homeless boys are loud, dirty, and only minimally corrigible in their rags. Yet, Holmes finds them invaluable allies, because what unfits them for the parlor enables them to go where Holmes can't, and remain unobserved, inconspicuous, unrecognized. They can get at what is out of Holmes's reach and get away with doing things he wouldn't do. They're capable, that is, of a kind of circumscribed impunity, scamb

anywhere and everywhere throughout the vastness of London, Doyle's proto-modernist symbol for the unconscious. And, with some guidance and encouragement from Holmes, the Baker Street Irregulars make the most of it, putting the maladaptations of childhood trauma and loss to work in the interest of social justice: they help Holmes solve crimes.

Yet, one wants to ask, what does outsmarting Scotland Yard or restoring some meek heiress's fortune have, fundamentally, to do with justice, whether social or psychic? What, after all, does the frequently tyrannical, generally infallible, master of ratiocination (i.e., Holmes) have to do with bringing into being a world in which, say, homeless exploited children wouldn't have to rely on the largesse of such well-meaning megalomaniacs as Holmes? Fastidious in many ways, Holmes is actually quite averse to having more than one of these urchins in his own parlor at any given time. When, on one occasion, all of them rowdily pile in, Holmes admonishes them to wait outside next time for their leader, who will come up on his own and then rejoin them on the street and assign them their duties—the same leader who will subsequently, by himself, be readmitted to Holmes with the group's reports.

One can push the metaphor of the Baker Street Irregulars further (until, like all metaphors, it breaks down) and ask: Who does the urchin leader represent? The patient? The organizing ego? The relational subject whose mental functioning exceeds that of his more or less dissociated parts or self-states? Or perhaps he represents the West 74th Street Irregular that young Philip became in those vital, weird, changeful, early 1970s (while I was discovering the political nature of subjectivity at the outlet stores): the intellectually scrappy, not-quite-suited-for-the-conventional-consulting-room supervisee of Edgar Levenson.

From Levenson and the other great interpersonalists, Philip learned that Holmes's homeless urchins had something *they* could show *him* about the ways of the parlor; that they brought the street (and not just its dust and noise) in with them when they came; and that, ultimately, the whole chaotic gang of them had to be admitted together, even if the presence of one or more was aloof, or undetectable, or even unfathomably hostile or destructive. This—to keep stretching our metaphor—is the lesson Philip now characterizes as “emphasis on the normal multiplicity of self-states that we all live with day to day—a multiplicity that is there to be experienced in all aspects of living and phases of life—in dreams, in literature, in childhood and adulthood—not only in the aftermath of trauma” (Interview, p. 337).

Unlike Holmes's consulting room, which is for the decorously managed exchange of information and the scrubbing clean of repressed filth, Bromberg's consulting room is a place for *collisions*. Collisions between analyst and patient, Philip insists, “are intrinsic to the process of enactment. Such collisions reflect self-state differences in what is experienced as reality, and there is no way to avoid these clashes of subjectivity without stifling the emergence, in both patient and analyst, of dissociated self-states that need to find a voice” (Interview, p. 338). Bromberg continues:

Because these collisions reduce the level of interpersonal harmony, they also disrupt the felt context that organizes safety. But the analyst's ability to provide a safe environment is not in itself the source of therapeutic action. While the analyst must indeed try not to go beyond the patient's capacity to feel safe in the room, it is inevitably impossible for him to succeed, and it is because of this impossibility that therapeutic change can take place. The analyst is always to some extent experienced as going “too far,” and it is this inevitability that allows him the chance to recognize first-hand what “going too far” means, subjectively to his patient. The relational process through which that recognition takes place is what *negotiating collisions* is all about, and I emphasize different aspects of this process, most importantly, the therapeutic use of the analyst's own dissociative reactions and the powerful role of shame. (Interview, p. 338; emphasis in original)

The question of one such dissociative reaction on the part of the analyst is the final push I'll give the metaphor of the Baker Street Irregulars in order to watch it break down—along with the scene of psychoanalysis as most of us continue to imagine and experience it. What if the Baker Street Irregulars—not as parts or self-states, but as a tiny fraction of the actual poor by whom Doyle and his fellow well-to-do Londoners were surrounded—massed upon the consulting room to the point of rendering it incapable of sustaining the psychoanalytic scene as it continues, for the most part, to be practiced to this day? To what extent might we dissociate this thought—because it is, of course, a very costly thought—of what would nevertheless be a more just world?

Some readers of Philip's work will be surprised at the extent to which the clinical conceptions developed there have, in their way, helped inspire my political imaginings. Others will more readily recall the periodic surfacings of analytically astute political nonconformism in his writings—for example, his reflections in the 1983 essay “On Narcissism and Psycho-

analytic Growth" on one of the psychic costs of neoliberalism's valorization of sovereignty: namely, that the attendant political and economic prizing of nondependency ruinously fosters fantasies (whether archaic legacies of infancy or freshly generated in adulthood) of a predictably secure world and a reliably stable identity (1998, p. 96). Neoliberalism is attractive to certain grandiose personalities for the same reason that it threatens psychoanalytic growth: because it makes identities rigid and inhibits the relational redeployment of subjectivity. In other words, neoliberal policies of economic marginalization produce a lot of shamed, and shaming, subjects.

How to step out of this shame and into a leftist democratic future is far, indeed, from being the explicit concern of Philip's work. But the practical and speculative daring of his clinical approach is anything but "for the king." Philip, too, is an irregular: a modest critic of power arrangements and advocate of resistance to them. He repeatedly chides those who, in any and all spheres of life, maliciously seek to shame others for not doing things the "right" way. And, although he is well known for his work on affect *regulation*, it would clearly be an error to identify his work with the normative emphasis some of his fellow clinicians place on adjustment to the world as it is. Socioaffective life is risky at best, and to live our lives in a way that *feels* like living requires feats of maladjustment as well as adjustment, of precarity as well as balance, of impersonality as well as sociality. Optimally, the clinical setting provides a rare and beneficent opportunity for approaching a style of relatedness well-suited to guide the patient beyond the impasses of his or her particular experience of disabling self-protectiveness. But Philip knows that in the clinical setting, as in the rest of life's scenes, proffers of safety often shade into normalizing imperatives. Thus, his mantra: "Safe but not too safe" (2006, p. 4; 2011, pp. 17, 33, 104, 106).

This mantra is for the analyst as well as for the patient. The analyst, too, must open him- or herself up to shame. For example, Bromberg (2011, p. 41) writes of doing what a bulimic patient of his says she will not do herself, namely "spill the beans," about his *own* dissociated shame—"shame about hurting her"—in an attempt to repair a failure or breach of his emotionally experienced, felt recognition of *her* shame. Shame permeates the analytic encounter, which is one of the chief facts about it that leads Bromberg (pp. 3, 80) to call it, not without fondness, a "mess." To indulge in a fondness for messes sounds infantile, and that's the point; at the very least, stipulating that the analytic encounter will always be some-

thing of a "mess" reminds us not to evade or to lose touch with, psychologically, what gets socially coded from the time of infancy as the body's most shameful of gifts and pleasures, i.e., shit. I would push this a bit further to note that a dissociated experience of intense pleasure in making a "mess" is one of our earliest lessons in shame as part of the operations of justice and its violation, not least because excrement (Freud's *shit/gold* [1917/1950]) continues to be fundamental to the dynamic relation between life's material and psychic dimensions.

Shame goes on, to one degree or another, for all of us, as does the hunger for recognition of the thwarted desire for its acknowledgment (Bromberg, Interview, p. 338). But that doesn't mean that we know exactly what it's going to feel like each time it floods some hitherto dissociated part of us. Or what the clinical *or* social consequences are going to be. Or whether, as Lynn Layton and others have asked, there are certain clinical enactments "in which therapist and patient unconsciously collude in upholding the very [social] norms that might in fact contribute to ongoing psychic pain" (Layton, 2006, p. 107).

We tend to find Philip standing in the spaces beside such debates, and when he wants to approach them more closely he does so, not through the clinical and theoretical literature, but, rather, through imaginative literature. He and I (Bromberg, 2007; Cavitch, 2007) have had colloquies before on Emily Dickinson. Indeed, you could say that Dickinson (1998, vol. 2, p. 675) opened the door to our friendship—"Just the Door ajar / That Oceans are," we both might quote with a good-natured smirk. On any given day, the poem from which these lines come ("I cannot live with You—it would be Life") might hold Philip's attention as a kind of memorial to the speaker's multiplicity of self-states, whereas it might hold mine as a meditation on 19th-century women's collective oppression. But, neither one of us would want to experience the poem in an environment where the possibility of either reading was excluded.

Some prominent Dickinson scholars have insisted that her poems have little to do with the actual world: "Verbal presence involves concomitant loss of objects and events. This dissociation from outer reality accounts for the indefiniteness of her subjects. . . . [W]e can see language passing momentarily from its instrumental connection with the world to its self-enclosure removed from experience" (Porter, 1982, pp. 119–120, 121–122). It's one thing to encounter such a claim made about an individual writer's work; Dickinson's, in particular, because its extraordinary linguistic and cognitive difficulty lends itself in many ways to this sort of ideo-

logical reading. And it is not unusual for readers of poems and other fictional works to consider such works and their reading of them to be in some meaningful sense ahistorical, apart from the actual world.

Yet, however one feels about this ideological characterization of imaginative literature, it is nevertheless remarkable to find, in an article published in *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, analyst Steven Botticelli (2004) characterizing in nearly identical terms a large and diverse cohort of key texts and writers of modern psychoanalysis: "one could read all the articles published in *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* since its inception and come away with very little idea of the kind of world in which they were written" (p. 637). Botticelli's claim is hard to refute, and it would, I think, be almost as difficult to refute today—much of relational analysis, as represented in *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* and other major journals, still bearing what Botticelli calls "the mark of political displacement" (p. 639).

Class, in particular, and its relation to the formation of analytic identity (both the patient's and the analyst's) remains an especially difficult problem, and the unconscious motivations for conformity to social oppression continue to be strong. Analyst Rachael Peltz cites a patient whose statement could be a verbatim quote from economist Richard Wolff's (2012) latest study, *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism*: "We live in a democracy, yet work is coercive and isolating" (Peltz, 2005, p. 362). How does one play with a statement like this in the consulting room—especially, not incidentally, because it is such a profoundly accurate, and so very commonly dissociated, characterization of the daily lives of most working people? Analyst Elizabeth Corpt (2013) and others express deep concern that such conditions are too easily attributed to "forms of neurosis or minimized as extra-analytic, that is, as life's givens which lie outside the frame of the analysis" (p. 54).

I bring, inevitably, a version of this concern with me to a reading of my friend Philip's work. For example, in his latest piece for *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, he writes of his hope that the nature of the patient-therapist relationship will be enriched by "great interpersonal spontaneity and creative self-expression that is carried by an expanded sense of selfhood into the world 'out there'" (Bromberg, 2013, p. 1). Philip's hope, I have not a shred of doubt, is sincerely expressed. But the quotation marks—of the type commonly referred to as "scare quotes"—placed around the phrase "out there" . . . well, they scare me a bit. That is, they mark a locus of dissatisfaction with available language corresponding to a theoretical and clinical irresolution. We see it expressed in *The Shadow of the Tsu-*

nami (Bromberg, 2011) as well. In the chapter called "Shrinking the Tsunami," Philip writes:

. . . when I speak of "safe but not too safe" I am aware of a part of me that holds an unspoken sense of apology that is not dissimilar to what I felt when I came up with the title "Shrinking the Tsunami." I am pretty sure that if I had personally experienced an actual tsunami, close up, I would not have been able to use that word figuratively. . . ." (p. 17)

The tsunami implicitly referred to in this chapter (originally published as an article in 2008) is the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that killed well over a quarter of a million people. Since the book's publication in 2011, the Tohoku tsunami, which caused the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Disaster, is even more freshly on many of our minds. Yet, not a single explicit reference to either event—or to any specific tsunami the world over—exists anywhere in the pages of either the 2008 article or the 2011 book.

When I mull over what Philip might mean by the "unspoken sense of apology" that part of him holds, I think less of the limits of his own experience (i.e., not having "personally experienced an actual tsunami") and more of the vast populations that inhabit the regions of the world most violently and lastingly affected by the 2004 tsunami. I think of the minute fraction of the millions of traumatized survivors of that particular historical catastrophe who will ever have access to psychotherapeutic treatment. I think of the complicity of the privileged—that is, people like Philip and myself—in the ravaging of the global environment that has caused so many of the "natural" disasters that continue with wild disproportionality to afflict the world's poor. And while I keep trying to think, from every possible angle, of the presupposition of the social and historical neutrality of the analytic situation, I find that I keep saying to myself: safe, just too safe.

For there is also, in the corrupt and brutal system of global capitalism we all inhabit, the fatal undertow of austerity, of sequestration, of new paradigms of permanent war, of the degradation of constitutional protections in the United States and elsewhere, of inequalities of wealth that are literally unprecedented in the history of human civilization. A shamed or shaming relation to the analytic importance of shrinking the shadows of the tsunamis in the world "out there" would seem pretty clearly to partake to some degree in what Corpt (2013) identifies as a "disavowal and dissociation from the awareness of class and related issues," the conse-

quence of which, she writes, is "a premature foreclosing of the deeper meanings of indebtedness, shame, gratitude, and the complex economic ecology of intersubjective interdependence" (p. 54).

Can social class be, for psychoanalysis, only an experience-near perspective on the question as to whether the ontology of self-experience is social or relational? How meaningful does the distinction between social and relational remain, not least in the aftermath of the field-transforming discoveries of Philip Bromberg and his relational cohort? Psychoanalysis has always been implicated in certain class ideals. But what will its relation be to class warfare after so-called late capitalism has collapsed? And, finally, is this a question in the shrunken shadow of which new psychoanalytic theories and clinical practices will be ready to emerge?

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