

A Review by Julie Webb of *Spectre of the Stranger: Towards a Phenomenology of Hospitality* by Manu Bazzano (2012) Brighton: Sussex Academic Press. Published in *Self & Society* Spring. 2014.

What is Manu Bazzano upto in *Spectre of the Stranger*? Far too much to do justice to in a review of this size, but here goes: radical ethics, otherness, culture, philosophy, politics, subjectivity, art, poetry, love, and psychotherapy. On the one hand it feels fast paced as it moves through a vast range of topics and yet on the other it alerts us to the fact that all of these topics are connected, what's more they're connected to us, by us, through us, as we are inextricably entwined within them: the topics are nothing without us. In addition to this he manages to flavour this work with his belief, understanding, and commitment to Buddhism. I am not a Buddhist and yet the ethics presented here might be enough to turn my head, maybe even embrace my heart, and I have read a lot of Buddhist literature in the last dozen years or so that had not managed to do that.

My interest in this text is that of the radical ethic in encountering the other, particularly in the field of counselling and psychotherapy. Bazzano poetically illustrates the value of Philosophy and Art in articulating such an ethic via the work of Nietzsche, Genet, Levinas, Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, Marx, Hölderlin to name but a few.

The value of Philosophy and Art in the field of Psychotherapy training seems to be greatly lacking in my opinion, and yet the rich descriptions from Philosophy and Art used by the author to illustrate his point, demonstrate their value and contribution if we as trainers can dare to be more radical in our teaching and presentation of therapy, its models, arguments and applications. Implicitly throughout the text is the begging question 'what do we think we are upto as therapists?' – a question in my mind that doesn't seem to be asked as frequently as it should be. In attempting to answer that question the poetics contained within *Spectre of the Stranger* has to ask other questions: who is this "I" at all that thinks it is asking? What is the nature of this "I" sitting in the therapist's chair, and what is it to speak of my "I" as a known quantity?

In his answer Bazzano presents us with the non pre-determined ethic, his 'goddess in continuous flight, a goddess who exists [only] in flight' (p.34): encounter in the immediacy of the moment, not as a sentimental artificial nod to authenticity as is sometimes presented in the psychotherapeutic field, but rather as an honest acknowledgement of the fluidity of all our capacities and capabilities as human beings: our darkness, our decay, our ability to bring about change through the experience of the full spectrum of who we are, and without 'guilty conscience' too:

It is essential to free ethical and political commitment from conscience, liberal guilt and masochism. Nietzsche reminds us of that peculiar plant, bad conscience, growing in the psyche's foliage. We cannot ascribe ethics to guilty conscience. Western thought after Kierkegaard

promoted a vision of interiority as atonement: one looks at one's soul in order to purify it of its mistakes. This is itself a radical shift from the view of self as a solid entity whose only way of pacifying anxiety is by subduing the non-self. But there is a small problem: interiority does not intrinsically exist; the subject is born when adequately responding to the other.

Response to alterity is loyalty to the event...such response is made possible by our recognition of the non-intrinsic existence of the self and the exceptionality of this embodied subject within the sea of phenomena.' (p.90).

How easy it is to be disloyal and disingenuous and slip into the inauthentic stance of believing to 'know my fixed self' when in the Counsellor's seat, and what a missed opportunity to take flight with Bazzano's goddess and greet the stranger unreified. What a commitment it takes to be open, vulnerable, fluid and free in the moment with the 'other', creating the space for the possibility to poetically create between us a chance and a dance for meeting.

For all its assertions, claims and poetry, this text creates lots of questions: What does it mean to speak of other, ethics, autonomy, authenticity, or identity in the psychotherapeutic world? How can we speak of such matters without an understanding of the wider issues of culture, difference, and otherness? Not otherness as diversity but as a radical address of the otherness within me as well as you, the stranger in me and the stranger that is you: If I am other, you are the radical other. What might that mean and how do we address that? Having an understanding of the radical other as a radical ethic serves to 'open' minds, doors, communities, and countries. More importantly, as Bazzano articulates, the ethic of that openness may not be about 'goodness' as it may necessarily need to defy the party line, the bourgeois slumber, and the capitalist coffers:

Good and evil live together in the organism as generative forces, as vagabond and winged energies threatening to overwhelm the person. One can use morality as a method for taming those energies or resort instead to ethics in order to realize their power...Art and Ethics are two creative outlets for these vital, impersonal forces, and the task of the of therapeutic work is their integration. (p.116)

What does it mean to be bad in a psychotherapeutic field dominated by rationalism and positive thinking? Where does this good girl go to be bad? When are we as therapists going to sit in the chair and declare our capacity for evil, our inconsistency, our dilemma? When are we going to shift out of the smugness of our 'personally developed selves' and into the open-handed space of nothingness with a conviction of blind faith in the very process of life itself as we encounter the stranger in crisis: a crisis that we are not exempt from?

A repudiation of the daimonic is on the other hand equivalent to narcissism, to wanting to believe that we are always delightful and upright, a stance which makes us project the daimonic outside ourselves (p.116).

In my favourite chapter 'Dwelling Poetically on this Earth' (pp105–126) the author finds ethics and rebellion in the act of poetry:

Ethics originates within the observation of phenomena, hence it is inscribed within the practice of phenomenology, which teaches us that perception and appreciation of contingency is a poetic act (105).

In a climate when the humanities are being dumbed down or erased completely because of the incredulous capitalist tenet that it lacks economic value, forgetting at once that we are human beings and not human resources as our sales tag indicates, the author reminds us that it is only in the Arts that we find those perspicuous descriptions of what it is to be human, phenomenologically, in all our glory and all our disappointing horror, which in turn defies reification:

It is again to art that we must turn, rather than psychology or sociology,...the prose of Virginia Woolf escapes solidification, affirms the ephemeral beauty of existence, dewdrops on the morning grass. Art shows the fundamental principles of phenomenology. Awareness of phenomena liberates us from the Cartesian/Freudian psychic apparatus; it alerts us to the fluidity of the self and the presence of the other (p105).

Bazzano describes poetry as rebellion:

...as living presence, as disappearance of the subject (user, listener and consumer) within the events of the world, as refusal of the cult of information and of the compulsory acquisition of data, of fragments of lived life acquired as goods – a process which in turn transforms the subject into an item to be purchased. Poetry thus understood resists the objectification of humans and their sinister metamorphosis into news items. Poetic rupture reminds us of our immanent presence within phenomena and eposes us to the ineffable, to a poetic understanding of existence (p.117).

My feelings are that whilst the text is rich as a source of reference for further reading of other important voices in the cultural, political, personal and psychotherapeutic debate represented here, the voice of this author has the power, the poetics, and the political commitment to stand-alone. The well-woven references offer us a well-crafted text that sets it apart from other dry academic texts only because of the fluid poetical song of Bazzano and his commitment to his own radical voice.

This text may be slim in stature but it belies the layer upon layer of rich flavours that work beautifully upon the palate, and just as you lick your lips and clean the palate ready for the next bite, there is a burst on the tongue reminding you of a poetry that lingers: a poetry that is committed to housing rebellion.