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Two Against Freud: Pinsky's 'Essay on Psychiatrists' in a Philosophical Context

Brian Glaser

Chapman University, bglaser@chapman.edu

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Introduction

In the 1970s the Freudian orthodoxy in Europe and the U.S. encountered a number of challenges from outside the psychiatric establishment. Two such challenges appeared in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972/1977) and Robert Pinsky's 1975 "Essay on Psychiatrists" (1996). The two texts not only presented a critical reaction to Freud but also, either explicitly or implicitly, articulated alternatives to Freudian views on the self and its relation to society. Deleuze and Guattari sketched out a perspective they called "schizoanalysis" and Pinsky, as a number of critics have suggested, implicitly offered the poet as a rival to the psychiatrist.¹ This article places Pinsky's "Essay on Psychiatrists" in a contextual relation with schizoanalysis, assessing how the poem reveals the respective strengths of poetry and philosophy in a previous historical period of reaction against Freudian orthodoxy.

It should be noted that Deleuze has not often appeared as a partner in dialogue amongst critics and scholars of poetry, despite his popularity in the related field of film studies. One exception is Jon Clay's *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze* (2010), which applies Deleuzian terminology—such as "univocal ontology," the simulacrum, the "order-word," and "deterritorialization" (pp. 7–9)—to the study of British avant-garde poetry. Interpreting works that resist facile understanding, Clay uses philosophy to make sense out of the sometimes bewilderingly rich textures of British experimental poetry. In

this article, however, I apply the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari to a reading of Pinsky's poem so as to locate areas where the poetry—as a critical response to psychoanalysis and psychiatry—either affirms, supplements, questions, or opposes the philosophic insights of *Anti-Oedipus*. Part of my intention in taking this approach is to show the value of Freud as a cultural interlocutor even, or perhaps especially, at a time like today when his worth is often strenuously doubted and his work comfortably disparaged. I see Freud not so much as a source of unquestioned authority—as he was and, in some circles, remains—in psychology, but rather as a provocative thinker whose range of insights reaches well outside his field of expertise and challenges both poetry and philosophy to incisive, useful discoveries about their own potential powers.

Deleuze, Guattari, and Anti-Oedipal Philosophy

The arguments of *Anti-Oedipus* traverse political science, anthropology, and psychology as well as philosophy, and both the ambition of the book and its style resist a concise summary.² Nevertheless, I think it necessary and possible to examine three key ideas as context for a discussion of Pinsky's poem. The ideas of production, desiring-machines, and schizoanalysis are central to *Anti-Oedipus* and to what the authors object to so forcefully about the concept of the Oedipal nature of desire in Freud's work.

Production is a key term for Deleuze and Guattari. Indeed their most concise critique of the Freudian hermeneutic is put in these terms: "When we relate desire to Oedipus, we are condemned to ignore the productive nature of desire" (1972/1977, p. 107). Productive nature is substantially materialist, even in a somewhat perversely sentimental way:

The fact is, from the moment that we are placed within the framework of Oedipus . . . the cards are stacked against us, and the only real relationship, that of production, has been done away with. The great discovery of psychoanalysis was that of the production of desire, of the productions of the unconscious. But once Oedi-

pus entered the picture, this discovery was soon buried beneath a new brand of idealism: a classical theater was substituted for the unconscious as a factory. (p. 24)

But lest readers think that the factory is intended merely as a provocative metaphor, Deleuze and Guattari return to it as a privileged, concrete site for desiring and, more broadly, for human agency in general:

schizoanalysis must devote itself to the necessary destructions. Destroying beliefs and representations, theatrical scenes. And when engaged in this task no activity will be too malevolent. Causing Oedipus and castration to explode, brutally intervening each time the subject strikes up the song of myth or intones tragic lines, carrying him back *to the factory*. (p. 314; emphasis in original)

The unconscious should be understood as a factory that creates and directs production and whose productivity mediates or creates relations with others. Instead of a theater in which drives take expressive shape or a space where conflicts are figuratively played out, the unconscious is continuous with the materials of our existence and the industrial economy of contemporary capitalism. Here productive power takes the form allowed to it by the relations of production in society. In turn, we are bound to participate in the social field in ways determined by the productions of the unconscious.

In tension with Lacanian ideas of subjectivity, Deleuze and Guattari insist that the desiring nature of the unconscious should not be seen as a manifestation of a lack. Nor should incestuous desires that put the subject into conflict with the law of the father be seen as constitutive of the unconscious. Rather, the materially productive unconscious invests the subject's creations with desire, leading to a potentially revolutionary flooding of the field of social production with desire's liberating power:

A truly materialist psychiatry can be defined, on the contrary, by the twofold task it sets itself: introducing desire into the mechanism, and introducing production into desire. (p. 22)

This conception of the unconscious might sound somewhat dreary, at least to those who have been accustomed to seeing it in Freudian terms as a space that is filled with figures, passionate forces, and drives. For Deleuze and Guattari, however, a potentially revolutionary consequence follows from seeing the unconscious as a space given shape by the elements and processes of material production. Once desire has been liberated from its conflict with the law or from its merely allegorical role in an Oedipal drama, it can revolutionize society or what Deleuze and Guattari call "the *socius*":

Despite what some revolutionaries think about this, desire is revolutionary in its essence—desire, not left-wing holidays!—and no society can tolerate a position of real desire without its structures of exploitation, servitude, and hierarchy being compromised. (p. 116)

So important to their argument is the imbrication of social production in the desiring unconscious that Deleuze and Guattari coin a definition of human beings that takes their celebration of materialism to its extreme: humans are "desiring-machines" (p. 183). Any conception of the individual as a private mind or sensibility is rendered deeply problematic. The introspective theater of the psychoanalytic consulting room becomes, as the authors note, an inert and death-haunted space, supplemented by the energetic alternative of the machine. The human becomes a kind of a process, one in which its constituent parts take on a complexity that makes simple declarations of intention or assertions of identity difficult to sustain:

Once the structural unity of the machine has been undone, once the personal and specific unity of the living has been laid to rest, a direct link is perceived between the machine and desire, the machine passes to the heart of desire, the machine is desiring and desire, machined. (p. 285)

The machine-like quality of desire makes Deleuze and Guattari's consideration of the subject compatible with a poststruc-

turalist dismantling of the individual, removing any space for sentimentality about desire's arguable independence from the material base and industrial economy of capitalism.

What is the role of philosophy, then, if humans are desiring-machines whose complexity and material constitution eludes the theatrical metaphors of Freudian thought and whose revolutionary desire could be liberated to challenge the hierarchies and exploitations of capitalist society? Deleuze and Guattari point to an answer in their concept of "schizoanalysis":

It is not the purpose of schizoanalysis to resolve Oedipus, it does not intend to resolve it better than Oedipal psychoanalysis does. Its aim is to de-oedipalize the unconscious in order to reach the real problems. (p. 81)

And what are these real problems?

The practical problem of schizoanalysis is, then, to ensure the contrasting *reversion*: restoring the syntheses of the unconscious to their immanent use. De-oedipalizing, undoing the mommy-daddy spider web, undoing the beliefs so as to attain the production of desiring-machines, and to reach the level of economic and social investments where the militant analysis comes into play. (p. 112)

Schizoanalysis liberates desiring machines from their confining fascination with the familial dynamics of control and announces a militant philosophy that will undo the hierarchies of capitalist societies. By telling the subject a new story about its motivations—its impulses to create, to fabricate, to produce, not in the service of a wage but of its own irrepressibly productive nature—schizoanalysis prepares the way for a utopian social movement. A desiring-machine need not be alienated from its productive labor but can understand it as a part of the essence of the self. It can then transform alienated labor by setting free desire to claim its own productivity.

Schizoanalysis has what Deleuze and Guattari call a "positive task" (p. 322). Indeed, it has a number of them. The first and probably most important is "discovering in a subject the

nature, the formation, or the functioning of *his* desiring machines, independent of any interpretations. What are your desiring-machines, what do you put into these machines, what is the output, how does it work, what are your nonhuman sexes?" (p. 322) This type of analysis sets *eros* free from the theater of desire to which Freudian thought would consign it and opens up a kind of creative freedom: alienated labor can be returned to the self through philosophical liberation. Desire is no longer interpreted in relation to a primal, determining set of early relations but is understood as a vital and compelling power in the productive tasks that each person undertakes in the vast matrix of potentially liberated, nonhierarchical creativities of a capitalist society.

Pinsky, Psychiatry, and Desiring-Machines

Pinsky's poem "Essay on Psychiatrists" is contemporary with Deleuze and Guattari's book and, like the book, is arguably anti-Oedipal.³ Unlike Deleuze and Guattari, however, Pinsky from the start acknowledges the diversity of psychiatry and points to a number of telling comparisons with poets:

It's crazy to think one could describe them—
Calling on reason, fantasy, memory, eyes and ears—
As though they were all alike any more

Than sweeps, opticians, poets or masseurs. (1996, p. 265)

In the context of schizoanalysis this passage has two remarkable aspects. The first is the speaker's implicit assertion of sanity. This poet has checked his procedure against the criteria of madness and found it to be safe. He claims to know what is crazy and what is not—and he is decidedly, by implication, on the side of sanity. Thus, a bit of the cultural authority of psychiatry is borrowed from the outset and the insane is othered, in contrast with schizoanalysis, which finds in insanity a conceptually liberating possibility. As Deleuze and Guattari write, "We are all schizos! We are all perverts! We are all libidos that

are too viscous and too fluid—and not by preference, but by wherever we have been carried by the deterritorialized flows” (1972/1977, p. 67). Openness to madness makes possible access to the intensities that could revolutionize—“deterritorialize”—capitalist societies. For Pinsky, however, madness is a threatening occasion of inhibition.

While acknowledging the empirical diversity of psychiatrists, Pinsky includes a non-descript list of comparable professions. “Sweeps, opticians, poets or masseurs” are just as dangerous to describe as psychiatrists. Seen as agents of desiring-production, the professions here are distinctive only as service occupations, as lines of work participating in the transformation of contemporary economies from industrial to service paradigms.

Among these professions, however, poets provide both a service and a product. They are service professionals but they are also the producers that Deleuze and Guattari celebrate: they are desiring-machines *par excellence*, who in response to a felt desire, create a searching. Thus, Pinsky’s list of diverse professions implicitly frames the poet as a worker whose labors could invest the producing field with creative energies in a way similar to the schizoanalyzed agent in the factory. At a time when economies were becoming transformed so that many more workers were providing services rather than manufacturing commodities, Pinsky joins Deleuze and Guattari in imagining producers of materials as endowed with a particular social worth and counts poetry among them.

Though he is hesitant to essentialize psychiatrists, Pinsky does give them a kind of collective identity and function that are, like madness, defensively othered:

And I have never (even this is difficult to say
Plainly, without foolishness or irony)
Consulted one for professional help, though it happens

Many or most of my friends have—and that,
Perhaps, is why it seems so urgent to try to speak
Sensibly about them, about the psychiatrists. (1996,
p. 265)

What makes for this urgency is the experience of being subject to a psychiatric discourse—a discourse from which Pinsky senses he has been excluded and which he feels compelled to address and to redress. His writing of the poem will be a substitute therapy, giving him the kind of understanding of psychiatric treatment that many of his friends have had in an unmediated way. But this therapeutic function will be conducted from outside the psychiatric establishment and so will reflect critically on the field rather than adopting its theories and terms. Instead of the psychiatrist interpreting his unconscious, he will interpret the social phenomenon of psychiatrists. Instead of the poet having a therapeutic experience, he will have created a poem about therapy. In this way, Pinsky approaches the ideal of the schizoanalyzed desiring-machine, rejecting analysis of the unconscious and choosing material production over internalized psychological allegories.

Thus, by the end of the short, first section of the poem, Pinsky has articulated that his essay is to be conducted in the name of creative production, he has posited a tentatively analogous relation between poet and analyst, and he has taken up a position outside of that Oedipal theater which Deleuze and Guattari abjure. In the second section, he suggests some of the ways that poetry works like psychiatry:

In a way I suspect that even the terms “doctor”
And “therapist” are misnomers; the patient

Is not necessarily “sick.” And one assumes
That no small part of the psychiatrist’s
Role is just that: to point out misnomers. (p. 265)

Pinsky here seems interested to deepen the analogies between poet and psychiatrist by noting implicitly that both work carefully with words. The poet and psychiatrist stand together in guarding the use of language in a careful, cautious, correct way. By contrast, Deleuze and Guattari might see such cautiousness as inhibition and defeat: “How odd the psychoanalytic venture is. Psychoanalysis ought to be a song of life, or else it be worth nothing at all. It ought, *practically*, to teach us to sing life. And

see how the most defeated, sad song of death emanates from it" (1972/1977, p. 331). Exploring the ways in which psychiatry is continuous with art, Pinsky approaches the psychiatric project as something more multi-faceted than simply and slavishly applying Oedipal interpretations to the unconscious—something even to celebrate as a social practice.

If the careful attention to choice of words is something that Pinsky offers as common ground and grounds for appreciation, it follows that he invites readers to think about his own choices as particularly deliberate. For instance his description of a woman at a beach party:

one of the few townfolk there,
With no faculty status—a matter-of-fact, competent,

Catholic woman of twenty-seven with five children
And a first-rate body [...] (1996, p. 266)

Pinsky moves from the discussion of this contemporary woman to an ancient set of threatening women—Euripides' *Bacchae*—with which to think about the values and limits of psychiatry. Spending four sections—six through ten—of his poem reflecting on Euripides' drama, he asks which of the two characters from the tragedy can be considered as analogous to the psychiatrist: Pentheus—who is ripped apart by a crowd of delirious women, including his mother—or Dionysius, who drives the group of women, the Bacchae, insane and leads Pentheus to his fate as a punishment for banning worship of and tribute to him. Pentheus appears as a credible surrogate for the psychiatrist because he "hears everything" and, while he listens to what Pinsky calls a "middle-class fantasy of release," he nevertheless "raises his voice in the name of dignity" (pp. 269–270). Yet, Dionysius is also a candidate for that role from a "more hostile view": although he knowingly orchestrates the scene of violent death, he still plays a positive role in that he "cures // Pentheus of the grand delusion that the dark / Urgencies can be governed simply by the mind, / And the mind's will" (p. 270).

Madness and Liberation

From the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari, we lose much by turning to literature as a vehicle for interpretive thought. For them, the interpretive faculty is less significant or even trustworthy than the faculty of desiring-production: in their words, "literature is like schizophrenia: a process and not a goal" (1972/1977, p. 133). To see a work of literature as a text that can be interrogated for layers of meanings is to lose or fail to grasp a sense of the flows and intensities that artistic production can manifest. For Pinsky, however, both his own poem and Euripides' tragic drama are vehicles for a combined hermeneutic and therapeutic process: one reaches greater self-understanding by making interpretive choices and following their consequences.

While Deleuze and Guattari seek the liberation of desire, Pinsky seeks an understanding of madness. His question as to which character in Euripides is a figure for the psychiatrist would be anathema to Deleuze and Guattari. The question, however, that underlies this rumination is: What can I learn about myself by interpreting these characters through a fantasized figure of the psychiatrist? This deeper question leads to a therapeutic reflection. The necessity of "dark / Urgencies" that Pentheus learns echo the "urgent" project he has set himself at the beginning of the poem. This is the more true because of the sad and ominous irony in his assertion that Dionysius has taught this lesson to Pentheus: the only way Pentheus learned this lesson was by being destroyed. It is through Pentheus that Pinsky envisions the irrepressibility of madness in the social field and the inability to keep it from overtaking the subject, from threatening the sense of identity, and from insinuating itself into imaginative life. In interpreting the tragedy he is interpreting himself, learning about the kinds of madness that he is intent on keeping at bay, making a kind of negotiation with madness through a sense of proximity that his investment in the figure of the psychiatrist helps to enable.

Pinsky's poem ranges across a variety of subjects, including the philistinism of psychiatrists, the death of one at the hands of a patient, and the representation of them in the comics

of a newspaper. He returns, however, to his central theme of madness in the eighteenth section of the poem, discovering that he has at least as much difficulty generalizing about the mad as he does about psychiatrists:

Other patients are ill otherwise, and do
Scream and pace and kill or worse; and that
Should be recalled. Kit Smart, Hitler,

The contemporary poets of lunacy—none of them
Helps me to think of the mad otherwise
Than in clichés too broad, the maenads

And wild-eyed killers of the movies . . .
But perhaps lunacy feels something like a cliché,
A desperate or sweet yielding to some broad,

Mechanical simplification, a dispersal
Of the unbearable into its crude fragments,
The distraction of a repeated gesture

Or a compulsively hummed tune. Maybe
It is not utterly different from chewing
At one's fingernails. (1996, p. 276)

Barbara Lefcowitz (1981) has noted the tendency of Pinsky in this poem to qualify his assertions, arguing that this tendency displays a kind of ambivalence toward psychiatrists. I would argue, however, that Pinsky's uncertainty has to do with his ambivalence toward madness. He tarries with closeness to madness only finally to reassure himself that he has found nothing.

And it is this nothingness that becomes an insight. The crucial development comes when Pinsky suggests that the characteristic of the cliché—its emptiness—is of the nature of insanity itself. There is an implication here—I think that it is one that is not itself clichéd—that in some cases an essential emptiness lies at the source of madness, that madness can be the quality of missing something in one's psyche, something that those people, considered to be well, have enough of. He develops this thought at the end of the section:

When my friend
Went in, we both tried to joke: "Karen," I said,

"You must be crazy to spend money and time
In this place"—she gained weight,
Made a chess-board, had a roommate

Who introduced herself as the Virgin Mary,
Referred to another patient: "Well, she must
Be an interesting person, if she's in here." (1996, p. 277)

Unimaginative activities—eating and making chessboards—seem to characterize the asylum. Earlier, Pinsky has suggested that madness might be as ordinary as chewing one's fingernails. Thus, the blank feeling that comes over one when confronted by clichés becomes a model for what madness is or can be: an emptiness, a vacuity.

At this point, Pinsky's text suggests a direct challenge to the valorization of the schizo in *Anti-Oedipus*. What if schizophrenia is simply a kind of inner absence? Deleuze and Guattari would surely object to the positing of an inwardness in which there can be something missing, a lack. And what they have to say about the schizo and his or her various forms of escape from the fetters of capitalism goes beyond cliché. But Pinsky's example of Karen contrasts tellingly with the textualized version of the schizo that Deleuze and Guattari discuss in Judge Schreber. Pinsky offers a contemporary, familiar counter-example and a reflective context in which madness as emptiness can take on a haunting quality. Though hidden behind the threat of cliché, the experience of saying nothing becomes an unsettling interpretive clue to the nature of madness that has fascinated him throughout the text.

Conclusion

This haunting emptiness returns at the end of the poem. Undertaking again his characteristic self-interrogation about what generalizations he can offer—a reflection that sometimes

allows him at the same time to advance a compelling picture of the poet—Pinsky finds that he does have closing comments about psychiatrists:

Essaying to distinguish these men and women,
Who try to give medicine for misery,
From the rest of us, I find I have failed

To discover what essential statement could be made
About psychiatrists that would not apply
To all human beings, or what statement

About all human beings would not apply
Equally to psychiatrists. They, too,
Consult psychiatrists. They try tentatively

To understand, to find healing speech. They work
For truth and for money. They are contingent . . .
They talk and talk . . . they are, in the words

Of a lute-player I met once who despised them,
“Into machines”...(pp. 279–280)

What does it mean to be “into machines”? Pinsky clearly endorses the description, implying that the process of psychiatric treatment can be devitalizing. The fact that a musician makes the assertion is not irrelevant. His or her artistic creativity lends power to the criticism of the lifeless products of psychiatry. The originality and provocativeness of Deleuze and Guattari’s desiring-machines is visible by contrast: they seek in the idea of the machine a path to rehabilitate a culture that Pinsky represents as lacking in vitality. But this assertion about psychiatrists—while it furthers Pinsky’s aim of valorizing the arts as an alternative to psychiatry for wisdom and cultural energy—raises a last question. Could it not be that the aim of some psychoanalysts is indeed to transcend the Oedipal scenario, to work through it so thoroughly that it is less deeply internalized, even purged? If Pinsky’s psychiatrists are “into machines” and schizoanalysts are “into desiring-machines,” there thus remains the possibility

that Freudians can be into the transformative and liberating power of self-knowledge.

Notes

1. Both Neil Scheurich (2001) and Barbara F. Lefcowitz (1981) make this claim about Pinsky’s poem.
2. In this respect, consider the provocative interpretation of the style of the book offered by Lyat Friedman (2010): “An Oedipal reader who attempts to find meaning in the machine offered in *Anti-Oedipus* is resisted by the text and is thus forced to divert his or her drives away from Oedipus and discover other means of expressing the ids” (p. 97). I disagree with the implication of this quote that to read for a sense of comprehension of an argument or arguments makes one an “Oedipal reader,” though I am not quite sure what the term means. I disagree thus with the similar interpretation by Fadi Abou-Rihan (2008) that “the style of *Anti-Oedipus* is inextricably tied to the theory it advocates” (p. 33).
3. The writers whom Deleuze and Guattari cite most often are Samuel Beckett, Henry Miller, and D.H. Lawrence, but they use them to articulate mostly modernist clichés of fragmentation and dispersal.

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